

A QUEEN OF THE PADDOCK

A ROMANCE OF THE RACE COURSE

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BESIEGED," "THE EYES OF ALICIA," "STIRRING
DEEDS OF THE GREAT WAR," ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I
ON THE SEAMY SIDE

“Madame’s coffee is ready.”

A smothered response from the picture-bed, with its silken hangings and lace pillows, an impatient movement of the round shoulders. Silence, broken by the whisking of Fifine’s skirts as she turned to open the window, and the persiennes outside.

Five minutes of silence and blazing sunlight, and Fifine spoke again.

“Madame’s coffee is getting cold.”

Madame probably found the sunlight somewhat trying. The long, dark lashes slowly parted and disclosed a pair of large blue Irish eyes—beautiful eyes undoubtedly, innocent-looking or wicked just as the owner pleased. At this moment they were languid and slightly weary. The corners of the handsome audacious mouth were curved a little downwards. Mdme. Violetta Vaughan, generally known as Mdme. Violetta, and not infrequently as “Violetta” alone, had had a restless night.

“Chartreuse, Fifine, and the eau de Cologne spray,” said she in a tired voice.

The first was dropped into the coffee, the second was

showered on the lady's forehead.

Under these stimulating and refreshing influences Mdme. Violetta revived somewhat and asked for the English papers.

The season at Monte Carlo was almost over; all the gamblers, or nearly all, had departed, the hotels were rapidly discharging their waiters, the sun was gaining power, the air was becoming stifling, and the heat unbearable.

Mdme. Violetta had stayed on simply because she had no plans; but she would have to do something, and so she had sent for the English papers to gain inspiration.

Her eyes went listlessly over the columns. She saw nothing that interested her or that suggested a welcome change from the aridity and dullness of the Riviera in the summer months. Besides, the paper was nearly a year old!

She was about to throw it aside with an impatient little *moue* when her attitude, her expression of lassitude, suddenly changed. She had caught sight of a paragraph which had taken her memory back a few years.

The paragraph which had brought about such a magical transformation was in a column of "Society pars," and ran thus:—"Sir John Norman, whose health after his recent bereavement has caused great anxiety to his numerous friends, has left town with his sister Miss Ella Norman, for Normanhurst, his picturesque mansion in Sussex. We understand he intends presenting a stained-glass window to Normanhurst Church in memory of the late Lady Norman."

The deep blue eyes sparkled, the red lips curved mockingly.

“Bereavement — ill health — stained glass window! How funny,” laughed the lady. “Why, the woman had for ten years been what the world is pleased to term mentally afflicted.”

Then amusement departed from the beautiful face and thought took its place.

Five years before Violetta Vaughan was a pupil teacher at a fashionable boarding-school in Eastbourne. She had been admitted on what is called “mutual terms.” In return for her intimate acquaintance with French and German, to be available, for the school in general, she had received instruction in music, drawing, and other “extras” which go to make up a “finishing education.”

But it was not solely for these accomplishments that Violetta had been sent to Montpellier House. Captain Vaughan, her father, who if he never seemed to be blest with this world’s coin, had plenty of the world’s wisdom and experience, told his daughter to make advantageous acquaintances among the aristocratic pupils, and she had not failed to take the parental advice.

Ella Norman, one of these aristocratic young ladies, at the end of her last term invited Violetta to spend the summer vacation at Normanhurst. Violetta accepted the invitation gratefully, and as part of her vocation was to make herself agreeable and as she had in addition a great capacity for getting all the enjoyment out of life that came in her way, she thoroughly ingratiated herself with the whole household, and especially with Sir John Norman.

She had not been twenty-four hours in the old mansion before her quick brain had summed up the character of the baronet.

“Easy-going — good-natured — susceptible — could be fooled by any pretty woman who likes to take the trouble to flatter him,” was her summary, and she was not far out.

But what was the use of her wasting her blandishments when they were likely to lead to nothing? To begin with, Sir John was married. He was also a grass widower, but in his case a loosening of the marriage tie made no difference, and Violetta had not been long at Normanhurst before she discovered this. Not that it mattered very much to her. She was by no means anxious for married life.

Lady Norman was then a patient in a doctor’s house and likely to remain one. Her brain was affected. She had delusions and among them was an intense jealousy of her husband. She had been pronounced incurable.

The baronet, poor man, had never given his wife the slightest cause for uneasiness. He had been brought up strictly and he had naturally a profound respect for the proprieties, and a hatred of scandal. He was not blessed (or cursed) with strong passions, and no one was less likely than he to figure in the divorce court.

At this time Violetta was a young woman of twenty-two and of fascinating manners. Though she had not long since arrived at years of discretion she had acquired an intimate acquaintance with the underworld of civilised life, which few to look at her would have suspected. During her teens and until her father elected to prepare her for another sphere in which to exercise her talents, she had had few acquaintances outside the “horsey” circle of which Capt. Vaughan was the moving spirit. Some of the members were very shady individuals

and it was doubtful whether the gallant captain himself could be said to reach a high standard of respectability.

The extraordinary thing was that Violetta never betrayed that she had once rubbed shoulders with a stratum of society represented by men and women whose only occupation appeared to be to haunt race courses and restaurants.

Violetta Vaughan and Ella Norman got on fairly well together. There was only three years difference between their ages, and Violetta never made the mistake of presuming upon her seniority. Besides, she had infinite tact and was really clever and amusing. She had had some years' experience of Paris, and could sing little French songs with all the verve and gesture of a café chantant star. But she was always very discreet in her selection and performance when Sir John was present.

Violetta enjoyed herself immensely at Normanhurst. She was passionately fond of horses and rode as one to the manner born. Sir John Norman had a stable of fine hunters, and when he showed her his stud he was amazed at her knowledge of horseflesh, and her shrewdness in pointing out the good qualities and the defects of the various animals.

He was still more amazed at her boldness and dexterity in the hunting field. But her father had been a cavalry officer, and after he left the army had, among other speculations, started a riding school, and from her earliest years Violetta had been used to the saddle.

Violetta left Normanhurst with the promise made both to Ella and Sir John (who showed great warmth in his invitation) to repeat her visit at no distant date.

She intended to keep her word, but the unexpected

happened. A crisis came in her life, and she turned her back on respectability—at least, what is so termed in England. Abroad, manners and ideas are more elastic.

It was all through that ne'er-do-well father of hers. He had been thriftless, and unscrupulous, and when in the army he had gone through the Boer War with credit so far as mere fighting was concerned, but on his return to England, it had been found necessary for him to throw up his commission to prevent awkward consequences. It was suspected that at cards his luck was more than phenomenal.

After many vicissitudes he ran a sort of gambling and betting club. This was soon after Violetta's visit to Normanhurst. She had had enough of pupil teaching, she had acquired the smart society air, and Capt. Vaughan saw how useful she could be to him.

He gauged her determination and business capacity correctly, and he had no hesitation in placing her in charge of the buffet at the club. He knew she could take care of herself without losing any of her fascination. She had the power of keeping the rather rowdy members in their place. Sometimes a new man attracted by her striking appearance endeavoured to pay her obtrusive attention. He soon found out his mistake.

Apart from her management of the buffet she took a great interest in the race course. She was as well up in betting mysteries as the most expert turfite, and if she cared she would have been a most successful bookmaker. The same with cards. There was not a game which she did not know from A to Z. Few could beat her at "poker" or "bridge," if she held the cards, but she was nearly always unlucky.

She was a puzzle to men. When she was in the mood, she could flirt as few women could, but with her it was much the same as playing a game of cards. She would lead a man on, only to treat him with indifference.

Was she capable of love? No one could tell. She was an enigma. Yet there were moments when a light flashed in the mystic eyes which served to say that deep in her nature were the elements of a fire which if kindled might blaze up with irresistible force.

One morning before the members began to drop in and when Violetta was making preparations for the day's business, Captain Vaughan sauntered in smoking a cigar. Said he in a casual way:

"This show's cracked up, Vi."

"I'm not surprised," she rejoined, quite as cool as her father. "What are you going to do?"

"Scoot. Paris. How does that suit you?"

"It's what you should have done long ago. I told you the club was not swell enough to bring you in any money. It's too low down and always will be."

"You've hit the right nail on the head, my girl, as you generally do. No chance of airing your graces and accomplishments. They're wasted here. A pity, too, after laying in a stock of 'high tone' at that Eastbourne place."

Violetta shrugged her shapely shoulders, and a gleam shot into her eyes as much as to say that there was still plenty of time to show what talent she possessed.

She was glad the club had come to an end. She hated the men with whom she had to mix. They were most of them "bookies" and hangers-on of the turf in various capacities. Many of them were somewhat mysterious in their ways, and what they did for a living in the off

season when racing was over was only known to themselves.

Occasionally men of a different character found their way into the club, or, to speak correctly, were introduced. They were chiefly young fools who, with more money than brains, were "seeing life," often at bitter cost to their pockets and health. Some of them were of the vulgar rich variety, and these Violetta effectually kept at a distance, and left them to fool themselves to the top of their bent. Others were of good birth and sowed their wild oats out of a superabundance of high spirits. They had no vice; they were simply reckless, and when Violetta took sufficient interest in any of them she whispered warnings against certain members of the club — warnings which somehow got known to the riffraff, whose deadly hatred she incurred accordingly.

Violetta held her own and was indifferent to what these disreputable personages thought of her, but the life was not pleasant, and she was heartily tired of it. So she gladly went off with her father to Paris that Paris she knew so well and loved as a child and where she felt more at home than in London.

The journey was a secret and a hurried one. Captain Vaughan scraped together all the money he could lay hold of and established himself in Paris as a "prophet." He was possessed of a list of the names and addresses of English patrons of the turf, and he got together a number of subscribers to his weekly racing sheet. He might have done well, but he chose to buy a steeplechaser and pose as a gentleman rider. He broke his neck at Auteuil.

Violetta backed horses and systematically disregarded her father's tips. Perhaps that was why she frequently

won. After Captain Vaughan's death, she took a dislike to the betting fraternity, but the gambling spirit was strong within her and she went off to Monte Carlo to try her luck at the Casino.

But the good fortune that attended her on the turf deserted her at the gaming table. She struggled half way through the season and came to the end of her resources.

Then in some curious way it got whispered about that though she had, to use her own words, "infernally bad luck," yet she brought luck to others.

With her usual shrewdness she utilised this reputation of hers—she became a "Mascotte" and she found it pay. Of course, she could not always win, but certain it was that when she staked for other people her luck was amazing, and at times she was loaded with presents. "La Mascotte, Violetta," became the rage.

The paper dropped from her hand as the serious look came into her eyes, and she rang the bell impatiently.

"Fifine," she cried, "pack up at once. I leave to-day for Paris."

"Madame!" exclaimed the startled maid.

"I spoke plainly, didn't I? I'm tired of posing as a 'mascotte' for other people. I am going to play the part for myself. Make haste. To-day I bid farewell for ever to Monte Carlo. No more rouge-et-noir—no more Russian Princes with Tartar faces and French Counts with tigerish eyes. England, Fifine, England!"

"Madame will kill herself with ennui and the fog," said Fifine, with a shrug of her pretty round shoulders.

But she packed Madame's trunks nevertheless.

Violetta went through her hotel account and her exchequer. The first was larger and the second was smaller

than she expected. She had enough to leave Monaco with a clear conscience and to pay her fare to England, but this by itself did not suffice. She must have funds when she arrived in London.

All that day she was in a dozen different moods. She was angry with Fifine about nothing at all one moment and was almost apologetic the next. The girl understood perfectly well what was the matter. Madame (Violetta by the way, always termed herself "Madame," and though she never said precisely that she had been married she allowed people to think so—the assumption she found gave her more freedom) was suffering from "nerves."

The emotional Fifine was considerate and sympathetic. Who would not be in a bad temper at the thought of exchanging the sunny skies and the gaiety of the Riviera for the smoke and drabness of London? The girl was not a bit surprised when her mistress suddenly announced that she intended to defer her departure until the next day.

"I shall go to the Casino to-night" she declared.

The step was a desperate one, but what other way was there?

CHAPTER II

THE MAGIC OF A "MASCOTTE"

The opalescent sky was unflecked by a single cloud. The moon shone so brightly that everything was revealed as distinctly as though it were day. The shadows where ever they were cast were as black as ink, and their very blackness seemed to accentuate the light elsewhere.

Violetta hurried through the Casino gardens indifferent to everything save her resolve to "plunge," whatever might be the outcome. The flamboyant nondescript architecture of the Casino with its elaborate ornamented front and dual towers did not appeal to her, picturesque though it looked now that its vulgarities were subdued by the pale light of the moon. The trim garden where European and Eastern shrubs grew with equal luxuriance might have been a wilderness for any thought she bestowed upon it.

Signs of the waning season were evident in the small numbers of visitors strolling towards the Casino and promenading the terrace overlooking the mirror-like sea. There was hardly a breath of wind to disturb the heated air. The refreshing coolness of the night was gone. Before many days had passed Monte Carlo so de-

lightful in the winter, would be unendurable.

As Violetta drew near the portals of the Casino she heard the faint sound of music. It came from the opera house; part of the attractions of the famous gambling resort. "Carmen" was being played. The opera was a favourite with Violetta but it did not detain her now. Within a minute or two she had entered the gambling salon.

There were not many punters, the usual tourists had had their fling, had spent their available cash and had departed, some back to the decorum and monotony of the warehouse, the counting house, and the stock exchange; others to make up their losses at rouge-et-noir, with the opening of flat racing—or to increase them.

Violetta cast a rapid glance round the table. Had she chosen to assume her old role of "Mascotte" she would have had small opportunities. The princes and grand dukes, Russian, Rumanian and Bulgarian had departed. A few fat Belgian manufacturers and merchants remained, but they had no imagination, they did not believe in "mascottes." As for the women, Violetta had never found them patronise her. To begin with, she was too good looking, and apart from this, the women gamblers generally looked upon each other with hatred and jealousy. Had it been otherwise these ladies who were seated at the table had far too profound a belief in their own judgment to trust to that of others.

There they were now, old painted harridans with the faces of hawks and the necks of vultures; middle-aged matrons, most of them running to fat, and young women, outrageously *décolleté*, worn, haggard, and old before their time.

But whatever might be their faces and figures, they all had the same look in their eyes—the strained, eager, glassy concentrated stare of the inveterate gambler. The excitement of play had become part of their lives—it might also be said of their deaths.

It was, Violetta considered, a most uninteresting crowd. She knew the types by heart. Nor were the visitors wandering about or standing gazing at the revolving, fateful little ball, and the rakes of the croupiers like the extended claws of some gigantic carrion bird, less so. She took a vacant seat and watched the fluctuations of the game before she chanced her luck.

The room big as it was, was intensely hot. The silence, broken only by the monotonous voice of the croupier with his eternal "*Rien ne va plus*," followed by the proclamation of the winning colour, was oppressive. Both were getting on her nerves, she would not be able to retain her impatience much longer.

She had no belief in systems, she had seen too many come to grief in horse racing circles, but she could not help counting the number of times red had won. A sequence of six had brought luck to a few. Would it be maintained to the next round, the mystic number of seven? She was strongly tempted, but she who hesitates is lost, she delayed and was half a second too late. The decisive "*Rien ne va plus*" had beaten her, again red was declared.

It could go on no longer she told herself, and when the time came for placing the stakes she threw down a 100 franc note on the black. She saw it swept away. It was no consolation to her that a man standing behind her chair had lost ten times more than she had.

She was angered but not discouraged. She ventured another 100 francs again on the black. The man behind her did not stake.

“Much wiser to cut your losses at once” she heard him whisper.

And so it would have been. Once more she lost. She was the poorer by 200 francs, and she wanted to make at least a thousand.

Violetta had brought with her 400 francs. It was inconceivable that red should be eternally the winning colour. Already eight times! She had never seen the like of it, surely this monotony could not go on. If she plunged with all she had got and won, she would get all she wished for and more. Some mysterious tempter was urging her on, She would not allow herself to think, but swiftly dragged out her small parcel of notes and adhered to the black which had hitherto played her false.

“I warned you,” said the voice behind.

She made a gesture of impatience; this stranger who persisted in interfering with his superfluous warnings was a nuisance. Had she not been so absorbed in the game she would have administered a sharp rebuke. But she remained silent, under a strain upon her nerves which was almost too much for her powers of endurance. She sat with tightly compressed lips and slowly paling cheeks watching the revolution of the fiendish little ball. It moved slower and slower, then seemed to tremble and be uncertain what to do. It hovered between red and black. It stopped. Red! Violetta pushed her chair a few inches from the table, and remained motionless. She felt as if her heart had ceased to beat.

Then she rose. The nerve tension and the conse-

quent re-action had become unbearable. While within the scene of her disaster and with the mechanical chant of the croupier in her ears she could not think. And she had so much to think about!

She wheeled swiftly round to fly from the hateful place and came face to face with the man behind her chair. She had forgotten him, but his presence there reminded her of his warning. She took a dislike to him because his warnings had been justified.

"My chair is at your service," said she coldly. "Perhaps you would like to play according to your judgment. It seems to have been quite accurate as far as I'm concerned."

She spoke to him in English for he had all the Anglo-Saxon characteristics.

"I'm sorry," said he. "Have you lost heavily?"

"No; I dare say you saw what I staked."

"That isn't the point. The stake doesn't count. It's what you can afford to lose that matters."

"Then if you care to know, I can afford to lose nothing."

Violetta had not intended to talk so much to a perfect stranger, especially as when she was gone he would probably chuckle at her obstinacy in disregarding his advice. She was about to walk away, but he detained her.

"I understand. Pardon me for making the suggestion, but can I help you? My purse is at your disposal."

"No," she flashed.

"Don't be angry. I mean nothing but a desire to be of use."

"You can be of no use," she retorted.

A cold, incredulous smile went over his narrow face. He was a tall, thin wiry man, slightly bent in the shoul-

ders. His complexion was of an even brownish tinge—the complexion of one who lived much in the open air. The narrowness of his features was accentuated by his long straight nose, his thin lips, and slightly pointed chin. His eyes were grey and quite expressionless. There was something about him and his figure which seemed familiar to her. His whole appearance took her mind back to the days at her father's club, and to the race courses at Auteuil and Chantilly. She knew the cut of a racing man. No one better.

Again she made a movement to escape his attentions, but he waved his hand with a gesture of dissent.

"It might be as well if I told you why you were wrong in staking a second time. May I?"

"For my future benefit, I suppose?"

"Yes, though I doubt if it will make much difference. I guess you're a woman who will always go her own way. You noticed I dare say that I also lost and then ceased to play."

"Yes, you hadn't the courage to go on, I presume," she rejoined a little contemptuously.

"Not at all. I was simply acting on a system that's fairly safe. It was laid down by the founder of the casino, M. Blanc."

"An excellent authority since he made a fortune out of the losses of his patrons," she replied still more scornfully.

"And therefore he was likely to know. Anyhow, his advice is worth remembering, and so far as my experience has gone it is well founded. Of course the real safe system is never to play, but short of that, said M. Blanc, the game is to stake once and once only each night. I've

always adhered to that rule, and I've generally found myself on the winning side in the long run."

"Thank you. I'll not forget," she returned ironically. "But I fear I shan't be able to test your admirable method. This is probably my last visit to the tables. The casino closes next week. I wish you good evening."

"Wait one moment. I've noticed you here many times but I've never before to-night seen you play. I'm told you are a wonderful 'mascotte.' Is it true?"

"That I'm wonderful? I can't say. I've never thought about it."

"You said just now I'd no courage. I should like to show you that you're wrong."

"Oh, you can easily do that, but you must excuse me if I do not remain to see you prove your assertion. I'm not interested one way or the other."

"I don't mean that. I wanted to test my courage with your assistance. I should like you to act as my 'mascotte.'"

"Thank you, but I must refuse. I'm retiring from the profession."

In spite of her words she was interested, not perhaps in the man himself as in his quiet pertinacity.

"I congratulate you. At the same time I observe that you did not say you *had* retired. Please oblige me once."

She hesitated. The talk had done her good. Her nervous system was recovering its tone. A reckless indifference had seized her—a not uncommon frame of mind, as most gamblers who see themselves "stony broke" will probably admit.

"Oh, as you please," she returned carelessly.

“Thanks. Will you resume your seat? Luck is with us. There are now two vacant chairs side by side.”

Violetta shrugged her shoulders and without another word sat herself down in one seat and her companion took the other.

“Which colour is it to be?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Wait. I never look at the table while the mood’s on me. It hasn’t come yet.”

She closed her eyes. Five minutes went over. The man appeared to take as little interest in the table’s fluctuations as she did. His eyes were fixed on her face. The resting of her eyelids on the smooth cheek gave a sort of madonna aspect to her face. His eyes seemed to lose their coldness as he gazed upon her.

Suddenly she spoke.

“Red,” he heard her whisper. Her eyes remained closed.

Swiftly he threw a couple of notes on the table. Red won.

“Marvellous,” said he, as he gathered up his winnings. “Try again. I’m done with my system for to-night at any rate.”

Once more a long pause. “Black” was her next pronouncement. Black it was. The third time she was wrong. The fourth and fifth attempts were correct.

“That’s enough. I’m satisfied. We won’t tempt fortune any further. Your winnings amount to £500.”

“My winnings?”

“Certainly. I’ve lost nothing. It all belongs to you.”

“Indeed it doesn’t. I shall be quite contented with ten per cent.”

“You’re very business-like. It is not often that women

reckon by percentages. But this isn't a business transaction. I look upon it as a challenge, and you've won. You're entitled to the stakes."

He tried to force a bundle of notes upon her, but she rejected it.

"If you won a race through a tip you wouldn't hand over all your gains to the tipster."

"What do you know about racing tips and tipsters?" he enquired, with a note of surprise in his voice.

"As much as I care to."

He would have liked to study her face to read in it her character but her eyes were wide open and directed upon him, and he could not be so rude as to stare at her.

"You're a woman worth knowing. For that reason you must take this £500. I insist upon it."

"Insist as much as you like. Business is business."

He was impressed by her decisive, emphatic manner. He took her at her word.

"Very well. Let us come to terms. Ten per cent. is absurd. Nothing less than half will be fair. Even so, I'm £250 richer than I was half an hour ago. How does that strike you?"

Violetta reflected for a few moments. The sum was not a penny more than she could do with. After all, she had earned it. And as he reminded her, he also had done very well. She consented to the arrangement.

"Do we part in this formal fashion?" he asked, as she rose after accepting the notes.

"Yes. There's nothing more to be said."

"Probably, so far as you're concerned. But what about me?"

"I cannot help you. We've finished our business I take it."

He made no reply and they walked silently to the vestibule. He continued by her side to the terrace. A slight mist was rising and the evergreens and the feathery palms looked fairylike, unreal.

"How do you work—your mascotte magic, I mean? How does it come to you?"

"I don't know. After sitting quietly I have an impulse—an inspiration, I suppose some people would call it. That's all I can tell you."

"Strange. Would your inspiration be of any use in other things—the running at a horse race, for instance?"

"No."

"Why not? The result's the same in both—luck."

"Is it? A dozen things may affect a horse and decide whether he wins or loses. It's only one thing with the ball in *rouge et noir* or roulette. I can't think of a horse as an inanimate block of wood or ivory. Besides, I must look at a horse race—I can't help it—and looking is fatal to my power—if I *have* a power."

Violetta had suddenly changed her tone and manner. Both had lost their coldness. Her natural vivacity had asserted itself as it always did when she talked about horses.

"I see. So you're fond of racing."

"I love it."

"And horses too. I've seen you riding at Mentone. You're a splendid horsewoman."

"Am I? You're a good judge, I suppose?"

"I'm called one, anyhow."

Insensibly they fell into horsey talk. It was the one

subject that Violetta loved to discuss, but only with those who understood. Soon reminiscences of famous races at Epsom, Newmarket, Doncaster, in the years prior to Captain Vaughan's sudden flight to Paris crept in, and they discovered their recollections coincided.

"Do you remember Plymouth Rock's running in the St. Leger four years ago?" suddenly asked Violetta.

The man's face darkened and his straight brows contracted.

"Yes, too well."

"A jockey named Loram was up. He pulled that race."

"Did he? How do you know?"

"It doesn't matter how. I only say he did."

"I won't contradict you because I can't. Had Loram not run on the cross Plymouth Rock would have won hands down. No one can speak with better authority than I for I took odds on the horse."

"You did? What's your name?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me yours."

"No. I don't wish to."

"Right; then I'll keep mine to myself."

Violetta laughed lightly. She really did not care who he was. She had only asked the question out of idle curiosity.

"I'd better say good-night," she went on after a pause. "Thank you for employing me and for your liberal commission."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Every word."

She held out her hand, and he could not choose but take it.

"I've a favour to ask. Will you dine with me to-morrow?"

"I shall be miles away by then."

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes. What's the use of staying here any longer?"

"Not much. I thought perhaps to-morrow you'd like to repeat your success of to-night."

"No. I've had enough."

"Where are you going? London?"

"I haven't made up my mind. May be and may be not."

"If you do I hope to see something of you. We might meet at Epsom or Ascot."

"We might. Ever so many things might happen. I don't pretend to see into the future."

"I believe you can do much more that way than you imagine."

"That's possible, too."

He was silent for a moment and fingered his chin reflectively.

"You wouldn't care to go into partnership?" said he at last.

"With you?"

"That was in my mind."

"In what way?"

"Purely business."

"You are still on the turf then?"

"Yes."

Violetta's eyes went over his hard face.

"No," said she with decision. "Good-night."

He did not attempt to persuade her to remain with him, and for this she was grateful. She was anxious to return to her rooms and give Fifine her final instructions.

So they parted, and he watched her glide away until her graceful figure was lost in the black shadows.

CHAPTER III

“VI. VAUGHAN OR HER GHOST, AND HANDSOMER THAN EVER”

Violetta knew her Paris. She did not bother about the expensive hotels, but made straight for the Hotel Provence, an old-world establishment south of the Seine and not far from the Boulevard St. Michel and its cafés, dear to the hearts of Bohemian students.

She had stayed at the hotel more than once and was practically an old friend of M. Octave Lange, the fat good-humoured bald-headed proprietor. He welcomed her with effusion. She had on several occasions proved highly useful to him in acting as an interpreter when English or American tourists found their way to the Hotel Provence. Whether through disinclination or incapacity Octave Lange had not been able to acquire more than one or two English phrases, and these were so tinged with a Gallic pronunciation as to be almost unintelligible. So he had found the services of “Mees Vown” exceedingly valuable, and he showed his gratitude by the smallness of his charges.

By good luck her old room on the ground floor was free. It opened into a quaint stone-paved courtyard

flanked by high ivy covered walls on two sides, and with a solitary plane tree which did its best to flourish under adverse circumstances in the centre. In the days of Louis Quatorze the Hotel Provence had been a stately mansion, and some remains of its former grandeur yet remained in the size of the rooms, the queer way in which they opened one into the other, and in the carvings and decorations of the walls and ceilings.

“Would Mademoiselle be having her piano?” was M. Lange’s enquiry the day after she had taken up her quarters. “Mees Vown’s” playing, he had discovered, added to the attractions of his establishment. He liked to hear some of his *pensionats* ask who was the brilliant pianist whose music was looked forward to with so much pleasure.

Mademoiselle considered. So much depended upon how long she intended to stay. For the moment she had formulated no plans. But she would want some kind of occupation on those evenings when she was not in the mood for theatre going, and she decided to hire an instrument week by week. M. Lange beamed with satisfaction.

The life at the Hotel Provence was placid and uneventful, but not monotonous. The homely table d’hote was grateful to her after the feverish excitement of the Monte Carlo banquets. The visitors amused her—some of them—those from the provinces especially, with their quaint *patois*, the mixture of caution and simplicity of their ideas, and the women’s antiquated dresses. Everything was such a contrast to what she had been accustomed to during the winter at the Riviera.

The weeks flew by and she had not made up her mind

what should be her next step. One thing was certain. She could not live for ever on what she had brought from Monte Carlo. Still her expenses were now so small, it would last a considerable time.

Sir John Norman was constantly in her thoughts, but was it worth while troubling about him? She liked the easy-going baronet and she knew perfectly well that if he were free she had but to give him the slightest encouragement and he would ask her to be his wife. His sister would probably not like it, but would that matter very much? Violetta could not see that it would. The point was, could she tie herself up to a man she only liked?

There was, she owned, one strong inducement for a marriage with Sir John Norman—the splendid stabling equipment at Normanhurst, its paddocks and training grounds. Sir John had bred hunters; why shouldn't he turn his attention to breeding racers? Horses were quite a passion with her, and she cared for no sport as she cared for horse racing. It was her ambition to be a successful owner, and above all to be the proud possessor of the Blue Riband of the turf!

Sir John might be cajoled into the idea. Violetta believed she could cajole him into anything. Ella would most likely be the obstacle. She was dreamy, sentimental, fond of poring over poetry of the extreme modern school, of sketching, and went mad over artists. Ella always belonged to a "cult" of some kind—of what kind Violetta never cared to enquire, and it might have been theosophy, spiritualism, the abolition of marriage as the only way of reforming the iniquitous laws of divorce, or the worship of Omar Khayam for anything she knew. At all events, Ella took not the slightest interest in horses

and hated races.

But supposing Sir John was not to be talked into racing? If this should prove to be the case the card house of her ambition would be shattered. She certainly did not care for the baronet sufficiently to marry him for his own sake. Their temperaments were wholly antagonistic. Violetta was restless and fiery, Sir John was placid and rather inclined to laze. His brain was sluggish compared with hers. Besides—and perhaps this secretly weighed with her more than anything—she was not drawn towards matrimony. She revelled in her independence.

After a time she tired of Paris and she tired of her irresolution. Whatever might come of it, she would renew her acquaintance with Sir John Norman. At the worst he might serve as a stepping stone into the world of well-to-do and maybe aristocratic turf enthusiasts. Never would she drift back into the ranks of her father's shady associates. Before her determination vanished, she sat down and wrote:

“Dearest Ella,—I wonder if you’ve forgotten your old friend? So much happens in this little world in a short time that it wouldn’t surprise me if much more important things than our old friendship had driven me from your mind. Have you found the man who loves you? Are you married? I’ve often wondered. As for me, I’m much the same—a rolling stone that’s gathered very little moss. Since my poor father died—he was thrown when riding in a steeple chase—I’ve had all kinds of posts and the only result is a little more experience of the world, which I don’t know that I particularly wanted. Anyhow, I feel strongly tempted to try my luck in London, and I should love dearly to see you again. Do drop me a line

here to say that I may hope to do so. I shall be in Paris for quite a fortnight and indeed would wait there for your reply. Otherwise your letter might go wandering about and never be forwarded to me in London, where at present I've no address. How is Sir John? I often think of the pleasant time I had at Normanhurst. With love, I am, yours sincerely, your old chum, Violetta Vaughan."

She read the letter over twice and was satisfied. She meant it simply as a diplomatic feeler. She purposely omitted mentioning the paragraph which told her of Lady Norman's death. Not on any account would she have Ella suspect her plans, and less still let her know what she had been doing during the last five years. She posted the letter, addressing it to Normanhurst, and for the next few days was in a fever of impatience for an answer.

The fortnight she had given herself went over, but no letter came from Ella.

"What does it mean?" Violetta asked herself angrily. "I suppose she intends to drop me. If she does she'd have a good excuse. I ought to have written at once on the death of poor old dad. But I thought she might have looked upon it as an attempt to sponge upon her. She knew perfectly well I was always more or less hard up."

She wondered if the letter would reach her friend. Ella might be travelling abroad with her brother. Naturally, the death of Lady Norman would make a difference, if not so much to her, certainly to Sir John.

"Perhaps she'll consider it her duty to watch over him and protect him from designing women. He'll need it. He's one of the men who are lost without a wife, and drawing a blank in his first plunge in the marriage

sweepstakes wouldn't prevent him trying again. I won't bother any more about him. There'll be Kempton Park at Easter, and I ought to be in London. With £200 one might do something. I see nothing else in view."

But the next day changed her opinion. She received Ella Norman's answer. Her face grew grave as she read:

"Dearest Violetta,—It was a delightful surprise to see your handwriting again. As you say, much has happened since we last met, and so much that was, and still is, miserable, that I can hardly bear to write about it. The death of poor Alice in the doctor's house where she has dragged out her miserable existence for so long can scarcely be considered a misfortune. Indeed, it was a happy release, but it came too late to be of any relief to poor John. Of course, while she was alive she was a source of constant anxiety to him, but for some time previous to her death he could not have thought much about her. He had too many other worries on his mind. And yet in a way Alice was at the bottom of the trouble. Soon after you went I noticed a change in him. He moped horribly. He seemed to crave for excitement, and this was so strange, for he always appeared to be happy with his horses and dogs and pottering about with his farming stock. Then he suddenly changed again. He had alternate fits of melancholy and buoyancy, and I don't know which troubled me most. The explanation came eventually. He had taken to betting, and lost over and over again, and was heavily in debt. I can't go into particulars now, but I shall be only too thankful to pour my troubles into your sympathetic ears. When are you coming to England? Yours very sincerely, Ella."

"P.S.—Your letter was forwarded here from Norman-

hurst, or of course I should have replied long ago. About the man—I don't know."

"That means she *is* engaged or about to be," thought Violetta.

She tossed the letter on the table impatiently. Ella's engagement was of no importance, but Sir John Norman with his recklessness, his ill luck, was a different matter. She was sorry for him, and angry with herself for not accepting five years before his pressing invitation to stay.

"I daresay things would have turned out differently," she told herself. "But it wouldn't have done while his wife was alive. I believe I hate scandal as much as he does—at any rate, I've come to hate it."

And this was true. Her experience at Monte Carlo in this direction was a bitter one. She knew very well she was hated by all the neurotic lady gamblers, old, young, and middle-aged, and that she was a perennial subject of venomous gossip. Her luck for others had raised up hosts of enemies. It would not have mattered so much had the luck been for the benefit of her own pocket.

"It's no consolation, I suppose, that I've nothing to reproach myself with. I went into the 'mascotte' business with my eyes open, so I can't be surprised at the lies told about me."

Violetta shrugged her shoulders and her straight brows wrinkled slightly as was their wont when her mind was disturbed.

She took the letter up again. Ella had written from the Willows, Thameside, up the river, not far from Bray.

"Shall I go? Not much good now that the poor man has anticipated my plans. I wonder if he ran his own horses?"

She could not decide offhand what to do, and she went out to collect her thoughts. She wandered along the southern bank of the Seine gazing absently at the book-stalls, at the gaily painted little steamers, at the patient anglers increasing in numbers as she drew near Charenton, waiting for fish that never came.

When she returned to the Hotel Provence she looked in at the proprietor's little room.

"My stay here, Monsieur Lange, has come to an end. I want to leave to-morrow. I'm going to London."

Monsieur was desolated and almost pitying. He was a born Parisian and rooted to his native city. He could not conceive existence out of Paris, and in England, of all places in the world.

But he raised no difficulty and the next morning Violetta received a neatly written bill of her expenses. The amount was moderate. Violetta paid it with many thanks, tipped the garcon, the femme de chambre and the chef liberally, and departed from the hotel the best of friends with everybody.

Arrived at Charing Cross, she had her luggage deposited at the cloak room while she engaged a room at one of the private hotels abounding in the streets on the south side of the Strand. She wandered into Trafalgar Square. Despite its reputation as being the finest site in Europe, it was just as bare and ugly as she remembered it and the National Gallery as squat and contemptible as ever. London here had not changed a bit. She turned eastwards. The Strand seemed strangely narrow after the Paris Boulevards, the people were apparently wholly intent on business and without the air of abandon and interest in the surroundings which marks a continen-

tal crowd. A feeling of solitude and friendlessness crept over her. She was beginning to wish she had not left Paris.

Then she roused herself and in a business-like manner went through the tiresome task of selecting rooms, impressing managers and manageresses with the conviction that she was a young lady who knew her way about and was not to be imposed upon. Finally, she settled upon her hotel and had her luggage conveyed thither. Then after a rest and sleep (she had crossed from Dieppe by the night boat and was dead tired), she made a careful toilette, wrote to Ella to say she would run down to The Willows very shortly, and sallied forth to lunch.

She went as if by instinct to a restaurant hardly a stone's throw from Piccadilly Circus. It was her father's favourite haunt when he was in funds. She glanced round. She might have lunched there yesterday. Nothing had altered. The same crimson velvet couches and marble-topped tables. The same little bar at the end, presided over by the same impassive, quietly-dressed lady, the same waiters. She recognised at least half a dozen. The men and women lunching might have been the same. The type of patrons was monotonous in its characteristics. The only innovation was the number of women with cigarettes in their lips. Five years ago such luxuries were not visible until late in the evening.

She sat down on a velvet couch and took up the menu. The same dishes. She was almost disappointed, but why should she have been? It was all good of its kind. She made her selection talking to the waiter in French, at which his face lightened and he at once interested himself in her choice. She leisurely went through the meal

and fell in at once with the new fashion of a cigarette after it. She had not taken very many whiffs before a man a couple of tables away who had, unseen by her, been occasionally glancing at her, rose, strode towards her table and sat down opposite.

He was a tall, loosely-built fellow, with an aggressive swagger of the shoulders, yet with an air which seemed to suggest that he was not unused to good society. In his youth he had probably been good-looking, but all that had survived at middle age was a certain devil-may-care expression in his deepset dark eyes. His square, resolute jaw indicated pugnacity and stubbornness; his lips were puffy and the lower one moist and of a disagreeable redness.

He learned his elbows upon the table and pushed forward his head, his pugnacious chin more prominent than ever. His bold, insolent eyes were fixed on her face a few seconds before he spoke.

“Vi Vaughan or her ghost, and, by Jove, handsomer than ever.” His strident voice was as unpleasant as his face. Violetta sat perfectly unmoved though inwardly she felt as though she could have struck him.

“I’m sorry I can’t say the same of you, Gentleman George—I presume you still answer to that name.”

“It’s good enough I guess,” he retorted, with an ugly glint in his eyes. “Anyhow, I feel honoured to think you haven’t forgotten it or myself either.”

“One doesn’t easily bury disagreeable experiences.”

“The evil that men do, etcetera, etcetera. What? Now my experience of you was of the most agreeable kind, though I’m bound to say we were always at loggerheads and we never once had the pleasure of kissing away our

differences.”

Her answer was to call the waiter.

“My bill, please,” said she, and coldly ignored the man opposite.

“You’re not ratty, are you, Violetta? I didn’t mean anything.”

“It’s a matter of indifference to me what you meant. You’d better understand straight away, Mr. Godfree, that you and I are strangers. I shall take any attempt to talk to me or to claim me as an acquaintance of yours as an insult.”

He laughed, but the laugh was not one of merriment. It was obviously forced.

“You can regard my talk in any way you choose, but you can’t get out of the plain fact that you *are* an acquaintance and that you *know* it. I’m not likely to forget the Beak Street Club’s charming cantineer.”

Violetta still ignored him. She was holding the little slip of paper handed to her by the waiter and was studying the contents. Then she opened her wrist bag, drew out her purse and paid the bill, not forgetting a liberal *douceur*. The waiter smilingly thanked her in the politest French and she rose.

“You’re a fool to fall out with me,” snarled the man in a grating voice. “I could have put you on to ever so many good things. Dead certs at thundering long odds.”

“I daresay. I’ll do without your tips and yourself as well.”

Mr. George Godfrey’s eyes followed her to the door. He was biting his nails and his distended lips were uglier than ever.

“She’s changed. If ever there was a woman of breeding

Violetta looks like one now.”

George Godfree was no mean judge. Though he was now low down in the world and had been submerged some years there was a time when he mixed with the best. He had aristocratic connections but he had long since tired their patience and exhausted their doles, and he was looked upon as an irreclaimable “bad lot.”

He had always been “bitten” to use his own word, by Violetta. To him she was as a dash of tarragon vinegar is to a salad. She gave a new spice to life—certainly to *his* life. He had missed her, and to see her again so unexpectedly and so transformed had revived his old feelings. Violetta’s studied contempt had angered him intensely, but its chief effect was to fan the fire of his passion.

“Where the deuce has she got her style from?” he muttered. “She hadn’t it in the old days when she acted as the Hebe of that queer show of her father’s. Rum devil, old Vaughan. Not a bad sort. Always right for a meal on the nod provided you hadn’t rubbed him the wrong way, and then he was as hard as nails. Guess Violetta takes after him there. I wonder what her game here is and what she’s been doing? Anyhow, she must have tumbled on her feet. There wasn’t a better dressed woman in the room, much less one who knows how to wear her toggery so well.”

This judgment was well founded. Violetta had brought with her a good stock of Paris fashions and she had acquired the air of distinction and individuality which makes the French woman noticeable, no matter where she may be. Among English, Violetta was always taken to be French, but the French themselves rarely were deceived. Still, if not the rose, she was extremely near it.

Godfree swaggered back to his friends and accepted their chaff with equanimity. His evasive replies conveyed the impression that he knew Violetta well, but he would not give her away. Among the group of raffish horsey men were two or three who had been members of Captain Vaughan's Club, but they had not recognised her, and he did not intend that they should.

"Your swell chicken didn't seem to make good with you," remarked one man in a Yankee twang that one could cut with a knife.

"That was because she saw I came from your table, old bean."

A laugh at the American's expense followed Godfree's retort, and the talk drifted into the prospects of the flat racing season.

Before he left the café Godfree took the opportunity to question the waiter who had served Violetta as to what he knew about the lady but he could get no information. Nevertheless, he made up his mind he would "ferret" her out.

CHAPTER IV
ON THE A.P. COURSE

It took Violetta quite a day to get over the unlucky encounter at the Café Nice. "Gentleman George" was about the last man she wanted to see. She disliked the man in the old days, she positively hated him now. She remembered him as one of the most objectionable of the crowd known as "The Boys." His manner was presumptuous and he had a tendency to patronise her which always roused her wrath. She had snubbed him as she had never snubbed the rest who were vulgar and were rude because they were ignorant. But George Godfree knew better or ought to have known better.

She was intensely angry with herself that she had yielded to an impulse to go to the Café Nice just because she had known it. She might just as well have selected another.

The episode of Gentleman George had upset her more than she would have thought possible. She wanted to forget her father's club, its habituées and all that belonged to it, yet her very first day in London had brought it all back as though it were but yesterday!

But had Violetta thought for a moment she must have

realised that her recollections of the turf would be revived if she were to carry out the plans which were floating in her mind. Though fortunes had been lost at horse racing, fortunes had, on the other hand, been won. It was the cool, level-headed bookmaker who was most successful. She did not suppose she would ever earn the title of a lady "leviathan" of the turf, but there was something very fascinating in the idea. Anyhow, whatever might be the outcome of her efforts, capital must be the starting point. She had some £200. It might be increased if she were lucky.

That was the crux of the whole matter—luck. Judgment, experience, could do much, but after all the winning of a race depended upon a score of little things impossible to be foreseen. "Dead certs" had times out of number proved illusory. "Dark horses" had always had a chance in the gamble, and anybody who went in for betting must be prepared to take a risk. Calculations and "systems" were not to be depended upon. Even skilful "hedging" sometimes broke down.

Violetta had seen so much of the vicissitudes of racing that she had come to regard luck as the most potent factor. And this opinion had been backed up by her experience at Monte Carlo and by her ventures when she was the "cantineer" of her father's sporting club. But she had never had a free hand. Her father disliked her backing horses and as for making a "book" he would not hear of it.

The question of luck closely concerned her. She often wondered whether there was a mystic influence behind which determined its goodness or badness as applied to the person affected. Her strange power at Monte Carlo

puzzled her as much as it impressed those who witnessed it. If she could be so successful as mascotte at *rouge et noir*, why not at racing? She did not think it would work out the same way, for the reason she had given the man who had halved his winnings with her, but as she had never tested the thing who could say?

"It's all nonsense," she at last exclaimed impatiently. "I'd better come down from the clouds and fix myself on something practical."

Violetta had arrived in London on the Saturday after Good Friday, too late to think about the Kempton Park Spring meeting, which on Easter Monday opened the racing season. The next fixture was Alexandra Park, four days later. She was rather inclined towards the minor races. There was less chance of horses being scratched.

As she sauntered from Piccadilly Circus to Arundel Street, where her hotel was, she purchased all the sporting papers she was able to procure, and even invested a few shillings in the "special" tips sent out by the "prophets." It wasn't that she believed in the prophets but she liked to compare the various selections. Then she retired to her bedroom and studied the list of entries and the predictions.

"I hardly know one of the horses," she muttered. "I haven't followed English racing since poor dad's death. I guess I'll have to go to school again."

But the names of some of the jockeys and of the owners were familiar, and so also were the pedigrees of a few of the horses, and she turned to the latest bettings. Prince Edward, the favourite, was evidently looked upon as a safe winner, the odds, 3 to 2, were so short. The majority of the prophets gave "Prince Edward," and she

found that he had advanced rapidly in favour, as in a trial with a stable companion, supposed to be a faster animal, he had beaten the latter by a couple of lengths. But at 3 to 2, he was not worth backing.

Nor was the second favourite "Marcus" a much better spec. Of the outsiders she rather fancied "Daughter of the Mist" chiefly because the filly was one of the progeny of the famous "Stockwell." But only one of the papers mentioned her. She was quite ignored by all the professional tipsters. Another horse, "Belphegor," was spoken well of if he could be depended upon, but he had the reputation of being most uncertain in his temper. The odds on "Daughter of the Mist" were quoted at 30 to 1, and "Belphegor" at 10 to 1.

Violetta determined not to make a leap in the dark but to wait until she was on the course and had the opportunity of seeing the animals, and she consumed her soul in patience until the day of the fixture.

A thunderstorm—an unusual thing at Easter time—broke over London the morning of the race day. This, with the clayey, heavy soil of the A. P. course would make the running a little difficult. It was on the cards that a slow horse, if a stayer, would have a good chance.

"I was right in waiting till I saw the horses," thought Violetta.

She mingled with the crowd that hurried from the train, and plodded through the yellow mud churned up to the consistency of thick cream to the entrance. Outside was the usual gathering of peripatetic vendors of refreshments. Small "bookies," itinerant tipsters, touts and what not gathered round the stewed eel stalls and swallowed the steaming dainty with great gusto. The

fondness of horsey men for stewed eels has yet to be explained. There is always a big demand outside Aldridges on the occasion of a horse sale, and the consumers are just as avid for the delicacy as they are on a race day. Maybe it gives a greater relish to the beer which follows –when it can be got. Jellied eels, Violetta noticed, on this particular morning were slow of sale, and cold fried fish an absolute drug in the market. Possibly the keen air of the Northern Heights following the storm made the hot fish stew more comforting.

Violetta paid the entrance money and passed through the turnstile. The mud of the road leading to the course was worse than that of the public thoroughfares. It was glutinous in some parts, slushy in others, but no one cared. The string of motor cars was never ending, and did their best to distribute the yellow sticky mixture over the foot passengers. In these days of short skirts the women were much better off than in Victorian times, and Violetta trudged along not much the worse save for the mud on her boots and gaiters.

A man came up to her selling racing cards. She bought one and glanced at the vendor. He was a red-nosed, watery-eyed, loose lipped individual of middle age, shabbily dressed but with something about his manner which did not suggest the ordinary turf hanger-on.

“Isn’t your name Alf Bartlett? It was ‘Doctor’ some four years ago, if I remember rightly,” said Violetta.

“Alf Bartlett it is. Not much of the ‘Doctor’ about me left, I reckon. I seem to know *you*.” He stared at her fixedly. “By the lord! Miss Vaughan!” he exclaimed. “And you’re not too proud to speak to me?”

“Why should I be?”

“Because I’m right down on the bedrock. You can see it for yourself.”

Violetta remembered Alf Bartlett as one of the smartest of the club members. He had been educated for a doctor, had walked the hospitals, gained his diploma, but had never practised. Coming into some money had been his ruin. He had taken to betting, and when he had run through his little fortune, he took to drinking.

“I’m sorry,” said she. “Why don’t you try to pull yourself round? You’re not old, you know.”

“Too old to alter. May I hope that things have gone well with you? You look as if they had.”

“As well as I deserve, I suppose. Anyhow, well enough for *this*—if it’s any good to you.”

She had drawn out a ten shilling note and pressed it upon him.

“I don’t like taking it,” said he brokenly. “I guess it’ll go where the rest went.”

“I hope you won’t be such a fool. Better put it on a horse than down your throat.”

The man’s dull bleary eyes flashed momentarily.

“You’re right, Miss Vaughan. You used to be a witch at spotting a winner. Do you know anything?”

“No. I’m an outsider just for the moment. I rather fancy ‘Daughter of the Mist’ for the Welter Handicap, but I’ve nothing on.”

“None of the tipsters give her as any class.”

“Oh, it’s only a sporting chance. At 30 to 1 there’s not much one need risk. The running’ll be heavy after the rain. That’s against her.”

“So it is, but the course is short, only five furlongs. If she gets in front at the start and can hold on to the last,

she may cover the short course before the heavy horses catch her. I wouldn't say what might happen if she had to go the long course—a mile and one hundred and fifty yards. What makes you fancy her?"

"She's one of the 'Stockwell' blood, that's all."

"H'm. I thought perhaps it might have been because she's in a way your namesake."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we used to call you the 'Cantineer' in the old Beak Street Club days, didn't we? It so happens that 'Daughter of the Mist' was first known as 'Cantineer.' She won a selling race and the man who bought her changed her name."

"Who owned her originally?"

"Sir John Norman, but she was run by a nominee, George Godfree. Maybe you remember him at the club."

What a small world it suddenly seemed! Fate was apparently destined to run her up against Godfree. She wondered if this proximity would end here. But what about Sir John Norman? Was he also destined to play a part in her life?

"Yes," said she, "I recollect Mr. Godfree very well. What had he to do with Sir John Norman?"

"They were close pals for a time. Sir John didn't get any good out of Gentleman George, you may bet your life. He ought to have bought in Cantineer, but I'm told Godfree talked him out of it. Had his own game to play, I'll swear."

"Who bought 'Cantineer'?"

"A chap who knows a good horse when he sees one—Dan Westoby. Of course, I don't know for certain, but it's my impression Westoby made it all right with Godfree

for persuading Sir John to sell the filly.”

“How is it she’s at such long odds to-day?”

“The deuce only knows. It’s got whispered about there’s something wrong about her. All I can say is I managed to get sight of her at a trial about three weeks ago and she seemed to me as right as rain. It’s a funny thing as she should have gone back in the betting ever since.”

Violetta turned the matter over in her mind. Alf Bartlett had no object in deceiving her and she knew that he had the whole gamut of racing dodges at his finger ends.

“Look here, doctor. I’ll have a look at ‘Daughter of the Mist,’ but in any case I shall put a bit on her. I believe I’m a little superstitious. There might be something lucky in her name ‘Cantineer.’”

“Then hanged if I don’t follow your lead, Miss Vaughan. It’s your ten bob, you know. You were always lucky for other people. I’d better get on before I alter my mind. If I lose the lot I shan’t be worse off than I was. And if I win—well, with fifteen quid in my pocket I shall feel like a millionaire. Same time, if I was to follow my own judgment, I’d have a bit on ‘Belphegor’ in spite of his beast of a temper. Anyhow, thank you heartily.”

“I hope it’ll come off, and if it does, don’t make a fool of yourself.”

The man put out a somewhat grimy hand, and Violetta, blinding herself to its dirt, grasped it. Then the “Doctor” rushed off to invest his ten shillings and Violetta continued on her way towards the enclosure.

The crowd outside the ropes was not particularly attractive. Not many had come for the love of sport or of

horses. All that was in their minds was money making. A good many were of the same type, with narrow, pallid faces, long noses, eyes devoid of expression save for a certain restless expectancy, wide thin-lipped mouths. In an odd way they were strangely suggestive of horses. Some were itinerant bookies, and in these cases their eyes were never for a moment still. They came, most of them armed with portable stands on which they placed placards with the names of the horses and their respective odds. These men bawled one against the other, but beyond this there did not seem any outward show of rivalry.

The “prophets” were of a different class. They set out to be absolutely certain of everything they asserted, but with a cunning dash of cautiousness thrown in which made their assurance more impressive. The main point, however, was to get together as large a crowd as possible to listen to their patter. One of these gentlemen started by spreading his overcoat on the grass. Then he produced with a great flourish a bundle of what purported to be five pound notes. After this came a score of golden sovereigns—at least they looked like sovereigns—and the money was solemnly counted and deposited on the overcoat.

It wasn't quite clear what this performance had to do with prophecy, but somehow it conveyed the notion that the prophet was no hard-up catchpenny adventurer, but was a man of substance, able to pay for “correct” information and therefore likely to be “in the know.” The sight of the money and especially the jingle of the sovereigns, whetted curiosity, and never failed to make the hurrying public pause and listen.

The aim of the prophet was to appear perfectly fair and impartial. He hadn't a word to say against the favourite. "Prince Edward" was a good horse, there wasn't a doubt about it, but and here the prophet became very serious in tone and manner—"you've got to be vurry, vurry careful. I don't say 'Prince Edward' won't win, but there is a horse that'll give him some trouble. *I* know what the stable thinks about him and *I* know what he's done in his trial spins. You do as you like, but if you want a pretty safe spec. at long odds, you'll—" At this point the pater became rather hazy, the only definite declaration being that you had but to put down half-a-crown and you would get a slip giving you the name of this dark and mysterious prodigy.

Violetta was highly interested in the man's gab. She knew quite well that anyone with sufficient assurance could pose as a "prophet." Stable "information" was as likely to be wrong as right. Whatever a horse might accomplish beforehand, no one could say what he would do on the day of the race. To her it was amazing how many of the crowd threw down their half-crowns and walked away hugging the little piece of paper to plank their money on the "prophet's" tip.

She did not waste time listening to any of the other tipsters, and hurried towards the enclosure, paid the admission money, and mingled among the groups of "bookies" and backers. She wondered if among the former there were any of the old "crowd."

She felt a slight tap on her shoulder. She turned. A stout farmer-like man, with a smile broadening his cheery face was beaming at her.

CHAPTER V

“DAUGHTER OF THE MIST”

“Blest if the sight o’ you, lass, bean’t good for sore eyes. Leastways if I haven’t made a mistake, an’ I don’t think I have—it bean’t often as I forget a face, ’specially if it be a woman’s, though, to be sure, you gals have a way o’ growing up out o’ knowledge. I’ll bet any money as your name’s Vaughan—little Violetta Vaughan.”

“Yes, and I think I recollect you. Mr. Burrup, isn’t it?”

“Aye, Ben Burrup’s my name an’ Yorkshire my dwelling place. Why, it must be a matter o’ four years since you was ladling out whiskies an’ sodas. I see the death of your poor dad in the *Sporting Gazette*, an’ it give me a bit of a shock. We were great pals, him an’ me.”

“Yes, I remember. Poor father. I missed him awfully.”

“I’ll bet you did. I hope as he left you a bit o’ brass.”

“Only his debts. The horse he was riding was so knocked about the poor thing had to be shot.”

“That was a bit o’ bad luck. If it’s not a rude question, what are you doing here? Not by yourself, eh?”

Violetta understood the roguish look in Mr. Burrup’s twinkling eyes. She laughed.

“Yes, I am. Why not?”

“Then all I’ve got to say is I don’t understand what the Lunnon chaps be about. At Leeds you’d have a whole string of ’em after you.”

“Then I’m glad I’m not at Leeds. I don’t want them, thank you. But, Mr. Burrup, tell me—are you still in the pencilling line?”

“What on earth should I be doing at the A.P. spring meeting if I wasn’t?”

“I’m glad, because I’ve got a fancy I’d like to back.”

The bookmaker’s smile fled.

“Don’t you, Miss Violetta. I wouldn’t-like to know I was walking away with your money in my pocket.”

“What nonsense. How do you know you will? Anyhow, if I lose it’ll only be the fortune of the racecourse. What’s ‘Daughter of the Mist’?”

“Went a bit back this morning—35 to 1.”

“I wonder why. I’m told the filly ran well last year.”

Mr. Burrup gave a short laugh.

“It bean’t no business o’ mine to talk about the ’osses. I hears all and says nothing. It’s only the odds that int’rest me. But you’re an old friend—well, she’s run by one o’ the smartest o’ the smart, Dan Westoby, and he’s got a tricky crowd in his pay. But mum’s the word. D’ye twig?”

Violetta nodded.

“Same time, mind ye, the going’ll be pretty heavy over this sticky, slippery turf. That’s all agen her.”

“Well, I want to see her, and if she shapes well I’ll risk £50 at 35 to 1. Will you take me?”

“That’ll mean £1,750 if I lose. Pretty heavy, my dear,” and Ben Burrup gave a long whistle.

“Well, will any of your friends do it?”

"I'll take you up to £10. Maybe Bill Jackson's good for another tenner. Shall I book your ten?"

"Wait till I've seen the filly. I suppose the horses will come out before the race. You know the ropes pretty well, I guess. Take me to a seat in the Grand Stand where there's a fair view of the course."

"Right y'are. We shall see some of my pals there."

They walked to the entrance of the Grand Stand, Burrup nodding to and cracking jokes with his many acquaintances as he went. He secured Violetta an excellent seat. She surveyed the course through her race glasses and noted its bend about half-way round, and the long straight home. It seemed to her that all things being equal it was a case of skilful jockeying.

"I'll sound some of the boys about 'Daughter of the Mist,'" said Burrup. "Meanwhile you make yourself happy. The horses'll be out in two ticks."

All traces of the morning's storm were gone. The sky was of an intense blue, with here and there a scudding fleecy cloud. The April sun was shining brilliantly as only an English April sun can. The air was exhilarating and under its influence, combined with the excitement of the coming contest and the strong personal interest she felt in it, brought a clear rich crimson to her cheeks.

Violetta was about to put the glasses down when she chanced to swerve, and the movement brought the other end of the Grand Stand into view. She saw a man with his glasses turned in her direction. She knew him at once. It was George Godfree. The woman by his side, tall, fair and somewhat overdressed, was talking to him animatedly. He did not appear to be listening to her.

Violetta could not say why the sight of Godfree was

disquieting, as it was the most natural thing in the world that he should be there, but it was so. However, she dismissed the man from her mind, as at that moment the horses entered the course for a preliminary canter and to show themselves. Violetta at once picked out "Daughter of the Mist." Her jockey's colours were blue and white. She was a beautiful creature—a dark chestnut—perfectly symmetrical, yet strong and wiry. She moved as if on wires working harmoniously. There wasn't a sign of anything wrong with her.

Of the other horses, "Prince Edward," the favourite, won Violetta's approval, but he was a trifle too slightly built, so she thought, to be a stayer. Another horse took her fancy. He was a bright chestnut with a white streak down his nose. Hardly handsome, he was big, bony, and enormously strong. The question was did his speed equal his strength? His jockey's colours were scarlet and gold. She looked at the card—scarlet and gold belonged to "Belphegor," the horse of uncertain temper, mentioned by Alf Bartlett.

The horses came out in a cluster and then separated with the exception of three. One of the latter was "Belphegor." The three kept close together for about twenty yards and then something happened to annoy the bright chestnut and his haunches suddenly went up, and he lashed out one of his hind legs in a vicious kick which luckily touched nothing. The jockey probably was prepared for the horse's attempt at buck jumping, as he stuck to his saddle gallantly. He brought the whip down sharply on the animal's hindquarters, and presently "Belphegor" condescended to use his four legs normally. The knowing ones among the spectators

shook their heads. "Belphegor" was evidently inclined to be in one of his tantrums.

"Not much chance of your getting your money on 'Daughter of the Mist,'" Violetta heard Burrup whisper behind her. "The chaps fight shy of her. The best I could do was to divide your ten pounds between me and Bill Jackson."

"Oh, Mr. Burrup, how horrid. She's lovely, don't you think so?"

"It's not the filly, it's the crowd that's running her we're afraid of. We know something of Dan Westoby, George Godfree, and the rest, and we don't intend to be rooked. I don't suppose half a dozen of the public have backed her. You see, after winning the selling race and coming into Westoby's hands, she did nothing but lose everything she was entered for. It was thought that Westoby was horribly unlucky, because in each case the filly nearly pulled it off."

"Who was the jockey?"

"Ted Loram."

"And is he up to-day?"

"Of course he is."

"Oh."

"Eh? What do you know about him?"

"Nothing much, excepting that I believe he's a bad egg."

"That wouldn't surprise me. It be mighty queer that the backing should only be among the Westoby gang. If Loram doesn't win they don't stand to lose much. But I fancy they're fly and are cocksure they've got a good thing. Jackson tells me that ten minutes ago Godfree wanted to put a bit more on, but Bill wasn't taking any

and George went off with a face as black as my hat. Hallo—there's the bell. 'Xcuse me, miss."

And the bookmaker hurried off leaving Violetta with much to ponder over. Amid her disturbing thoughts one thing was tolerably clear. The Westoby gang, as Bur-rup called it, had clearly engineered the business, with the assistance of Loram, and to-day the coup was to be brought off. She did not feel at all comfortable at benefiting by a fraud.

"All the same I don't see that I'm to blame if 'Daughter of the Mist' shows her true form and beats the rest," she thought.

The annoying part was that in a way she was associated with George Godfree, and she hoped devoutly it would not get to his ears that she had backed the filly. But she had not time to consider further the position. The horses were being marshalled for the start and were coming into line.

Considerable restiveness was caused by Belphegor's bad conduct. Violetta put down the big chestnut as an irreclaimable beast. He was clearly bent on mischief, and it was only after several false starts that the official got them away in something like equality.

At first it was a scramble. "Belphegor" was showing temper, and the jockeys round about him were doing their best to keep away from the brute. But the creature took it into his head to "hug" his horses, and his rider could not get him clear despite whip and spur. It was unlucky that the favourite was his nearest neighbour, for his jockey found himself considerably hampered. About a quarter of the course had been covered and then one of the horses found an opening, shook itself free, and in

a flash was a length in front. The jockey's colours were blue and white.

People stared and looked at their cards. Blue and white stood opposite No. 6, and the name of the horse was "Daughter of the Mist." No one looked pleased. Quite the reverse. She was run in the name of Mr. Jones, about whom nothing was known. As for the filly herself, had anybody troubled to look up her record for the past year it would not have been found sufficiently encouraging to warrant one venturing a shilling upon her chances. No wonder she had been left severely alone.

Violetta's colour fled and returned. She was breathless with excess of emotion. The hand holding the race-glass to her eyes quivered. The excitement of the gaming table was nothing to this. Rouge et noir and roulette were lifeless and sordid. One's thoughts in watching the spinning ball were sordid. There was no struggle of flesh and blood. To watch a number of high-bred sensitive animals straining every nerve and muscle in rivalry was a different matter altogether.

The filly was doing splendidly. She was being kept close to the rails and was quite half a dozen lengths ahead. Unless she was overhauled she would be able to sweep round the bend—one of the features of the A. P. course—without the slightest chance of losing her advantageous position.

"Oh you dear—oh you darling!" murmured Violetta.

The words had hardly escaped her lips than something totally unexpected happened, and a roar burst from the crowd. A jockey in scarlet and gold was sprawling on the ground. Belphegor had thrown his rider. The latter was apparently unhurt. In less than a second he was on

his feet, and had dashed to his horse which with strange perversity was standing stock still, seemingly surveying his work.

The jockey sprang into the saddle, and "Belphegor" seized with a new mood, no sooner felt the weight on his back, than he plunged forward and raced after the other horses at an amazing speed. The jockey had the sense to leave him alone and probably this was what the horse wanted. Shouts were heard all over the course as stride by stride he gained upon the striving horses in front, and about halfway round the bend he was in front and close to the rails. But "Daughter of the Mist" was still half a dozen lengths ahead, and apparently the heavy ground had not yet affected her. But when the two emerged into the straight run home, it was seen that "Belphegor" was only behind by a length, and was moving with tremendous power and freshness. The odds on him had dropped to 6 to 1, and many who had backed the favourite tried to "hedge," for "Prince Edward" was hopelessly beaten. In the short space of a quarter of a minute everything changed for "Daughter of the Mist" was visibly tiring, and "Belphegor" was getting nearer at every stride and was as strong as ever.

Violetta could hardly control her agitation. Money had little to do with it, for if "Belphegor" won, her actual loss out of pocket would be small, but the fever of speculation had seized her, and to be defeated would be galling. As the horses neared the post, "Belphegor," with his muzzle on a level with the filly's haunches, Violetta closed her eyes. There was not more than twenty yards to run, and it was purely a question whether "Daughter of the Mist" would last. Violetta could not look. All the

blood in her body seemed to be rushing to her brain.

Then a tremendous cheering was heard and a man near her ejaculated "Great Scott, did you ever see anything like the way that horse 'Belphegor' forged ahead? Another half a dozen yards and he'd have romped in."

So "Daughter of the Mist" had won, but Violetta could not trust herself to believe it until she saw "No. 6" hoisted on the board. Her friend Burrup presently came to her looking a little rueful, but he warmly congratulated her nevertheless.

"Are you going to follow your luck with the next race, Miss Violetta? I'm a bit afraid of you, you know; still, if you've another good thing up your sleeve, I'll see what I can do."

"No. I've finished for to-day. It was all luck, you see, and a very near thing. Who would have thought it was possible?—I mean about that cantankerous 'Belphegor.' I'd like to see him run again. He was badly ridden. His jockey used the whip and lost his temper in addition."

"You're right there, Miss Vaughan. By Jove, if his mount had been someone who understood him, he'd have chawed up the rest of the field. You should ha' seen Westoby's face when his filly was losing ground every yard. It was a sight, I can tell you. As long as a fiddle. As for Godfree, danged if he didn't go green. They must ha' netted a nice little pile. They won't do the same trick again, I'll bet."

Then he and Violetta had a little talk about the settlement of her bets with him and Jackson, and Violetta went back to town alternately exalted and depressed. She was worried about her strange piece of luck. Was it really to be explained by the fact that she had Norman in her

mind when she backed the horse which had once been Norman's? She had rarely won when she only thought of herself. But what was the use of trying to penetrate the unknown?

CHAPTER VI

“I’VE NO HORSES TO SHOW YOU NOW”

Two days later Violetta was at Paddington on her way to Maidenhead. She had written to Ella to say she was coming and had a reply sufficiently cordial to warrant her expecting a warm welcome.

However, she was now on her way to a different world—a world, which if it were placid and monotonous, was at least refined, and her mercurial temperament revived at the thought. And she was in addition really anxious to hear the story of Sir John Norman’s misfortunes.

She easily found her way to The Willows. It was a double-fronted house with a verandah and a wisteria half covering the windows and reaching to the roof. It had a spacious garden in front with stabling at the side. Very cosy and comfortable, but suburban—quite a contrast to Normanhurst, the stately white stone mansion built in the florid Italian style with its pilasters, its Parthenon-like front, its long balconied windows, its imposing projecting porch, its terrace and spacious lawn and shrubberies.

A neatly dressed maid opened the door to Violetta and ushered her into a pretty room with French windows

opening into a fairly large garden, at the end of which was the river. Comfortable, like the rest of the house, but again a complete contrast to the oak-panelled morning room at Normanhurst.

She had not long to wait. Ella burst in upon her with that hurried, almost rushing manner, which Violetta remembered so well.

“My dear Vi, how glad I am to see you. How awfully sweet of you to come!” she cried in a high-pitched voice.

Violetta found herself being kissed effusively, then held at arms’ length, and being kissed again.

Ella Norman had always been a gusher, and she seemed to Violetta to be more gushing than ever. At seventeen it could be put up with, but at twenty-two it was slightly over-powering. In addition, she had a way of swarming over one, which Violetta had always found rather irritating. Just now it was particularly so. She was half a head taller than her visitor, slim and undulating, and her long arms, after being stretched out after the fashion of the angel on the preposterous Guards’ Memorial in Waterloo Place, enfolded Violetta in a kind of bear’s hug. Despite this overwhelming affection Violetta was quite conscious that her appearance and her dress were being closely scrutinised.

Then the two looked at each other appraisingly, as women do who have not seen each other for a long time. Violetta knew by the faint shade of disappointment which crept over Ella’s face, that she expected to find the wanderer had “gone off,” and that the contrary had happened. As for Ella, she had decidedly deteriorated. The dark half-circles beneath the eyes and the pinched-in sal-low cheeks, showed that she was inclined to be neurotic.

Violetta was sorry but not surprised. If only half the misfortunes hinted at in Ella's letter had taken place, the experience was enough to leave traces behind. But she asked no questions, she knew the story would come. Ella was not one to keep her woes to herself.

"Come and see your room, dear," was Ella's remark after the look of inspection. "I want you to stay a long, long time with me."

"Oh, but I've not come prepared to do that. I've brought nothing with me."

"That doesn't matter. You can easily wire instructions to have your luggage sent on. Meanwhile, with my help you can make shift. It isn't boating weather yet, so you won't be asked to spoil that charming dress, as it certainly would be spoilt if John had the handling of the punt. He hasn't got the hang of the pole yet, and he splashes awfully."

It was characteristic of the baronet's sedateness and incapacity that his sister always spoke of him as "John," never as "Jack."

"He's on the river now," went on Ella, as they ascended the staircase. "I persuaded him to come here. The doctor said he was thoroughly run down and wanted a complete change and plenty of open air exercise. Boating seemed to me to be the best antidote to that detestable racing, so when the collapse came and ruin was in sight, I took this furnished house and brought him here. He was really incapable of thinking for himself. Oh, my dear Violetta, I've heaps to tell you. It's a wonder I'm not dead with worry. What's going to happen I haven't the least idea. Of course, our affairs are in the hands of the lawyers, and you know what snails they are."

Talking incessantly and buzzing about Violetta, hindering rather than helping her to disrobe herself, Ella showed sufficiently the state of her nerves by her passing from one subject to another without the slightest connecting link, and by her spasmodic “oh dear, oh dear,” which seemed to come from her more by force of habit than from any emotional necessity.

At last they were seated quietly in the room with the French windows. Ella ordered tea and plunged without preface into a recital of her brother’s disasters.

“It’s all come about through races and betting. I assure you I never suspected anything of the kind. Of course, John was always fond of horses, but I thought his taste never went beyond hunters, and those cost him no end of money, Heaven knows—one lump, or two, dear? No sugar? Oh well, we can still afford *that* luxury in spite of the price. What was I telling you?”

“About Sir John’s love of hunting.”

“Oh yes. I used to be thankful that he had a hobby as it kept his mind from dwelling on poor Alice. She, I needn’t say, was a constant drag upon him. He paid the doctor who had charge of her £750 a year, and then there were continual extras. I know he looked forward to a life-long infliction, and perhaps had he anticipated she was so soon to pass away, he might not have been so foolish. It’s a terrible thing that the marriage laws are so stupid. He ought to have been able to free himself—I mean so far as the marriage tie was concerned—but there it was. He was helpless. You see the hunting season only lasts a few months, and what was he to do the rest of the year? It never occurred to me when he took to going to races that he had any interest in anything beyond the

animals.”

“Did you really imagine that?” asked Violetta with a elevation of her dark eyebrows at the ends nearest the nose, which always charmed the men.

“Yes, why not? I’ve always heard that racing was supported because it improved the breed of horses.”

“Rubbish. That’s a part of our English self-deception. No one seriously believes it. Stop betting and you stop races. Not that I see any harm in betting.”

“No harm! Violetta, it’s horrible. You don’t know. You don’t understand.”

Violetta was inclined to laugh, but she kept her countenance.

“Haven’t I told you it was betting which practically ruined John? At the same time, he mightn’t have been so foolish but for a friend of his—a man who was with him at Balliol. They hadn’t seen each other for years when unluckily they met accidentally at Newmarket. I never could get much out of John how it was brought about, but it’s certain he came under the influence of this man, who, though of good family, is, I’m sure, a shocking blackguard. I saw him once, and once was quite enough.”

“What was his name?” asked Violetta suddenly.

“George Godfree. I believe he’s entitled to call himself ‘The Honourable,’ and that’s the only thing about him that *is* honourable. He’s connected with the Fitzhaughton family. The Marquis of Fitzhaughton was his uncle or brother-in-law. Some relation anyhow. I never cared to enquire what, I hated the man too much.”

George Godfree! Gentleman George! For a moment Violetta’s heart sank. She felt almost terrified. It was not that she was afraid of Godfree, but it was so strange

that the working of Fate should have thrown Gentleman George in her way twice within forty-eight hours. His connection with Norman's downfall was certainly a serious matter. Soon she recovered herself sufficiently to ask:

"Did your brother run any horses?"

"I don't know. He never told me he did, but, of course, he may have done so. You see, I was mostly in town. I was very much occupied at the time with various social movements. Christian Science was greatly interesting me just then, and soon after I took up the Religious Stage Society. Studying the old Mystery Plays I found exceedingly absorbing, and really I had no leisure for enquiring what John was doing. Why should I? There was no need—at least, so I thought. Of course, I knew nothing about his friendship with Godfree—nor about Godfree either."

Violetta hardly heard what Ella was saying. She didn't care a fig for Christian Science or for Mystery Plays. George Godfree was in her thoughts. She was wondering with what gang he was in league. Gentry of his kind never worked by themselves. Their schemes for swindling the unwary required more than one hand. Gentleman George, with his insinuating society tone and manner when it was necessary to use them, and his real knowledge of society ways, was invaluable as a decoy, but he had not the brains to originate a *modus operandi* or to carry one out.

Violetta was brought back to the subject by Ella entering into a long and involved story how John had got deeper and deeper into the mire and at last had to sell Normanhurst.

"I don't exactly understand how it came about," said

she. "I never could grasp figures or law."

"I should like to know," said Violetta.

"Well, I daresay John could tell you if you care to ask."

"But haven't *you*?"

"Of course I have, but I couldn't make head or tail of the affair. It seemed to me to be awfully complicated. The only thing really definite was that when all the debts were paid there remained enough to bring in about £1,000 a year, and we both have to live upon it."

"You may marry well. You hinted that you were engaged," put in Violetta.

"Oh, well, nothing's settled. It can't be—" she broke off suddenly.

"There's John. Shall we go and meet him?" she exclaimed.

Violetta was only too glad. She found the continuous pouring out of sympathy to be a little trying. The interruption was also acceptable for another reason. Ella at any moment might dart off at a tangent and enquire what she had been doing during the past four years, and though Violetta was ready with a story she was not at all anxious to tell it. The inventive tale might break down under cross-examination. No doubt at some time or another Ella would question her, but the longer the ordeal was delayed the better.

The two passed into the garden. A head and shoulders—the first surmounted by a boating cap, the second swathed in a muffler—could be seen rising slowly above the river bank. Soon the whole figure was visible—tall and slim, resembling Ella's conformation of body, but not so willowy.

Recalling her castle in the air at Monte Carlo when

she first learned that Lady Norman was dead, Violetta regarded the man crossing the lawn, his walk half slouching, half springy, with no little curiosity. She remembered perfectly well how he looked at Normanhurst, and she wondered whether ill luck had affected him. Of course, her aerial castle had toppled over at Ella's story, but the ruins had still some interest for her.

Norman suddenly straightened himself and raised his cap. Violetta thought he was better looking than when she last saw him. His dark hair, which came rather low down on his forehead, showed streaks of grey, but his drooping moustache was unchanged. His expression was as refined as ever, but seemed to show more decision. His eyes, like Ella's, somewhat dreamy, were in keeping with the reputation he had among his friends of being a poet. Violetta had forgotten this side of his character, and it came back to her memory with a sense of surprise.

"You must forgive me, Miss Vaughan, for not being here to welcome you," said he. "Ella didn't appear to know what time you were coming. Anyhow, I hope she's looked after you properly."

"You needn't have any doubt on that score, Sir John. I am quite at home already."

"There's not much to feel at home with. At any rate, I've no horses now to show you," said he.

"I admire other things besides horses."

"I doubt if you'll find many here, and what there is isn't mine."

"The river?"

"I share that in common with others. Are you fond of boating?"

"I know nothing about it."

"Then we'll go out to-morrow providing it's fine. I'll give you a lesson if you like."

"Don't try punting," put in Ella. "It's all very well in the summer when the trickling of cold water down your arm isn't unpleasant; but in this weather—ugh!"

"I didn't say punting. We'll have the double sculler. You may steer us, Ella, if you'll promise to keep your thoughts fixed on the rudder lines. You're not to be trusted, you know."

"You'd better wait until Violetta's luggage comes. I'm not going to let her spoil her pretty frock. There's no hurry, because I want Violetta to stay with us a long, long time—that is, if her plans will allow her."

"Yes—yes. You must stay," urged Norman.

"You're very kind, but I don't intend to inflict myself upon you," said Violetta, who did not fail to note the sudden intensity of Sir John's gaze. "For a few days I'm unsettled and if you don't mind putting up with me while I'm looking out for a post of some kind, I shall be very thankful."

"There's plenty of time for that. After I've made myself decent, I'll join you two. Seven o'clock I suppose, as usual, Ella?"

His sister nodded, and the baronet raising his cap slowly, sauntered towards the house.

"How do you think John looks?" enquired Ella anxiously.

"Better than I should have expected after what he's gone through."

"Do you really think so? I hope you're right. The question that's worrying me is what is he going to do? At his

age he ought to get rid of his purposeless life and have some occupation."

"I suppose so, but one generally regards existence according to one's temperament. Your brother always seemed to be fairly busy one way or the other."

"Yes, but he had Normanhurst to look after. Now that is gone he is like a derelict drifting anywhere, and he may come into collision with something ugly and awkward and be smashed entirely."

"What do you mean by that?"

"My dear Violetta, don't you understand?" cried Ella, impatiently. "In his present mood he's liable to be imposed upon by any designing woman who takes the trouble to capture him."

"Such women are not usually ugly and awkward," remarked Violetta drily.

"Well, we needn't go into details. I know very well that during the last two years he must have mixed with very queer society, both men and women, on the race-course. He was bound to, you know—or perhaps you don't know."

"I'll take your word for it. But if occupation is to be his protection against these dangers, why doesn't he get some Government post?"

"I doubt if he's fitted for Government work. He's frightfully unbusinesslike. Of course, I'm aware a man needn't be clever to do all that's wanted in the War Office or Foreign Office. If you turn up every morning like a piece of clockwork, and are contented with filling up forms and are not silly enough to suggest improvements and are never in a hurry, I believe you get on all right. Cleverness in a Government Depart-

ment means the knack of shifting responsibility on to another Department, never knowing anything, holding your tongue, and taking as many holidays as the chief will stand. John's a good deal too conscientious for that sort of thing; besides, he's too fond of airing his own opinion, and as he's generally wrong, you see what a mess he'd get into. No, there's only one thing I can see for him."

"Ah, and what's that?"

"Marriage, my dear. Marriage with a level-headed rich woman who's above the frivolity of the tastes of the present day and who takes life seriously."

"Oh yes. A bishop's widow, for instance. It's a pity so few of them are about."

Ella looked up sharply. Was her dear friend pulling her leg?

But Violetta's face never moved a muscle.

CHAPTER VII

“I’VE SWORN TO BE MASTER OF NORMANHURST ONCE MORE”

The next day was wet. The river was out of the question. There was quite sufficient dampness in the air outside and inside the house to satisfy anybody with aquatic tastes. Violetta hadn’t the slightest inclination for boating exercise, and secretly was pleased she had escaped. Reclining languorously on the cushions of a punt—preferably amber cushions, as the tint would intensify the violet blue of the Irish eyes she had inherited from her mother—was a different matter. But the picture demanded a scorching sun and the contrast of the deep purple shadows of the overhanging trees of Cliefden. Norman suggested billiards for the morning’s amusement, and this was entirely to her fancy.

“Then you won’t want me,” put in Ella.

“Thanks no, old girl. The last time you marked for me and Percival you were perpetually giving him my score as well as his own. That’s the drawback of an engaged girl, Miss Vaughan. She can think of nobody but the man she’s taken under her wing.”

“Don’t be stupid, John,” returned his sister, half an-

noyed and half pleased. "As for marking for you, I'm only too glad to escape. The click of the balls is apt to get on my nerves, and the talk peculiar to the game bores me to death. Why don't you billiard players find something more original to say than 'hard lines,' 'just missed it, by Jove,' 'sorry old man,' when you pocket the other one's white ball, and so on?"

"You've left out the most important expression 'dammit.' I admit there's not much variation, but I suppose no other words fit the situations so well. How are you going to amuse yourself this morning?"

"I shall call on the Vicar. I'm awfully keen on interesting him in our religious stage work. He's a bit afraid of some of his congregation, but I'm in hopes of talking him over. His mind at present's a perfect blank on the subject. He knows nothing about the old Mystery and Miracle Plays. We're going to revive one, *Violetta*. You ought to be a member of our Society. I believe you'd do one of the characters splendidly."

"Please don't ask me. I'm sure I should be a frightful duffer."

"I'm not so sure. You used to take part in the plays at school that we used to get up on prize-giving days."

"That's a different thing. I'm as ignorant as the Vicar about religious plays."

"Oh, there's an excuse for you but not for him. He didn't even know until I told him that the drama really had its origin in the church, and he looked quite horrified."

"I should think so," said her brother. "He was afraid you'd be asking him to lend you his church for a theatrical show."

"I wish *you'd* take up the study, John. It would at least give you an interesting subject to think about."

"I hate what you call 'interesting' subjects. They're only called interesting because you don't know what else to say about them. But go and convert the Vicar by all means."

Ella went off in something like a huff, and Norman, turning to Violetta, said lightly:

"That's how my discussions with Ella always end. When she finds herself cornered she takes to her heels. She's sometimes impossible. If she were not for ever formulating rules of conduct for my guidance, her impossibility wouldn't matter much, but unfortunately I'm one of her hobbies. Do you know I had the greatest difficulty in persuading her that a billiard room was indispensable in any house she might select. How on earth could I amuse myself indoors on a day like this without one? I suppose she saw this, as she eventually gave in. There are two or three decent boating men who live in the neighbourhood, and they now and again drop in. You play?"

"Oh, a little, but after what you've told me I should be ashamed to show my awkwardness before an expert."

"I'm very far from being that. Occasionally I play a decent game, at other times I'm simply out of it. It all depends upon the mood I'm in, I suppose."

"I hope you're in good form this morning."

"I ought to be."

He smiled at her and his eyes twinkled. That look on his face was new to Violetta. She could not remember anything like it when she was staying at Normanhurst. He struck her then as remote, unfriended, melancholy,

slow, especially the two last. Animation certainly improved him. Perhaps the cloud of his matrimonial trouble was the cause of his subdued aspect in the old days. Or had she misread his character? Whatever it was she was disposed to be more interested in him than she had anticipated.

“Of course you ought. I want to pick up a few hints.”

“I’ll do my best. One thing’s in my favour—I shan’t have any bets on.”

“Do you bet on the game?”

“Generally. It puts a little spice into the play, though I must confess it often spoils mine. Directly I have the slightest responsibility I begin to feel nervous. It’s a beastly stupid weakness, but I’ve never been able to conquer it. In fact—”

He stopped abruptly. Violetta looked at him enquiringly, but he said no more.

The billiard room was built out from the house, and the housekeeper—the only one of the old Normanhurst servants who had been retained—knowing her master’s tastes, had had a fire lighted. The blaze was a sufficient antidote to the drabness and damp of the outside, and the room was really inviting with its crimson walls adorned with sporting prints depicting bygone champions of the racecourse.

Norman’s eyes followed Violetta’s as they glanced at the pictures. Horses appealed to her irresistibly.

“I’d half a mind to have these things removed when I took the place,” said he, half apologetically.

“Why?”

“They gave my conscience a twinge. But I’ve got used to them now. I can see they interest you, so I’m glad I let

them remain.”

“Anything to do with horses I like.”

She walked slowly round the room, reading the inscriptions recording the victories of “Vultigeur,” “The Flying Dutchman,” “Blink Bonny,” “Donovan,” “Eclipse,” “Pretty Polly,” “Ormonde,” and other dead and gone celebrities, while Norman got out the balls and spotted the red. He gave her the choice of the white balls. She chose the plain, and she opened with the usual miss in baulk.

“You know something,” said he, laughingly. “Ella, when she deigns to play, which isn’t often, can never manage the safety stroke. She goes for the red invariably and nearly always misses it and lets me in.”

His reply should, of course, have been another miss in baulk, but he went for the red and left her an easy cannon. She guessed that he made the stroke out of politeness, and she purposely mis-cued, and her ball rolled into a pocket without hitting either the red or the white.

“Better luck next time,” was Norman’s comment.

The red was over the middle pocket and he could not very well avoid scoring without obviously betraying his desire to see her win. The game went on. Do what he would, Norman always found himself a little ahead. Violetta made no break of any account, but what puzzled her antagonist was that when she went for a particularly difficult stroke she always brought it off. On the other hand, she missed some ridiculously easy ones. The game ended in Norman’s favour in spite of his intention to lose.

“I don’t understand your play,” said he. “You made some amazing shots. I never thought you’d go for them.

But you had bad luck. The game ought to have been yours anyway.”

“I suppose so. You did your best to help me, you know.”

He flushed slightly. His little ruse to please her had failed. The tone of her voice as well as her words told him that.

“I confess it. The plain truth is I underrated your skill and benefited by what you call your bad luck. I wanted you to win, but I don’t believe you tried.”

“That’s my impression about you, Sir John—unless you were in one of your moods.”

“Honestly, I played up as though I was in form. But come now, did either of us go straight? You’ve seen what I can’t do. I saw lots of chances you’d have gone for but I fuked them. What do you say—shall we try again and do our level best?”

“If you like, so long as you don’t hate me if I beat you.”

“Hate you, Violetta—by the way, it used to be Violetta at Normanhurst.”

“I don’t remember.”

But she did quite well.

“Well, it must be Violetta once more. No. I won’t hate you whatever you do—I couldn’t. Now I warn you, I’m going to play as I never played before. I’ve a horrible feeling that you ought to give me twenty in a hundred.”

“Nonsense. Do you always have nervous fears you won’t succeed when you attempt anything?” asked Violetta a little scornfully.

“Very often, I own.”

“It’s a great mistake. Haven’t you heard the old fox-hunter’s advice when about to jump a fence? Throw your heart over first, he said, and your horse will follow.

It's true."

"By Jove, that's a fact. Then we start level. I break, I suppose, according to the rules."

Violetta, nodding, chalked her cue.

Norman gave the customary safety miss and Violetta going for the red accomplished a difficult cannon. The positions that followed were easy, and so far from fumbling and mis-cueing as in the first game, she kept the balls well together and left off with a start of twenty-five and with a double baulk for her opponent.

"You take my breath away. See what you've left me."

"Not much, I admit. Are you going in for boldness? There's a possible cannon on."

"I daresay, but it's not possible for me. My choice lies between safety and a fluke. I'll try the latter just to show you I haven't forgotten what the huntsman said."

He struck the ball recklessly. The cannon was not achieved, but unexpectedly he went in off the red. The latter was in baulk and Violetta's ball tucked under the cushion. Naturally, he left the white alone and played at the red. He missed it, and his own ball remained in baulk.

The stroke in front of Violetta was enormously difficult. Her ball was at the top end of the table and almost angled. She could hardly expect to do more than go for one or the other ball and not attempt to score.

"You'll have to trust to your luck this time, Violetta," Norman explained.

"Indeed I won't. I'm going to pot the red and maybe my own ball too. At least, that's what I shall try for. They're nearly in a direct line from where I am."

Norman held his breath while he watched her. Vi-

oletta's statuesque pose while measuring the distance with her eye and estimating the exact amount of force necessary, seemed to Norman to personify the very poetry of billiards.

Violetta was wearing the dress in which she arrived, her everyday wardrobe not having yet come to hand. Her corsage was in the fashion favoured by pretty women to whom nature has generously given full curves. It was cut low at the neck and back, the sleeves were very short and there was a studied absence of trimmings in the way of frills, lace and whatnot. Obviously the costume was very trying to those not qualified to wear it. Violetta would have taken first prize in a competition in this style of dress.

Her arms were beautifully shaped, as Norman could not help seeing when she had to hold the cue at an angle of nearly sixty degrees in order to strike the ball at the exact spot. The position of the body and the elevated right arm slackened the front of the bodice, and for an instant the symmetrical lines of the bust were revealed. Her eyes were fixed steadily on the object ball and the brows slightly drawn together. For a couple of seconds she stood motionless, and then in a flash the statue came to life.

It was a moment of concentrated energy. Force was not so much wanted as a restraint of force. The exact pace had to be given to the ball and no more. It rolled along as if conscious of the skilful hands that had guided it. It clicked the red ball gently and sent it very slowly into the pocket and followed behind as if to make assurance doubly sure.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Norman. "Who on earth

taught you to do that? John Roberts himself couldn't beat it."

"My father was a very fine billiard player. I learned from him pretty well all I know."

"Well, but you must have practised an awful lot. You can't become a player of your rank in five minutes."

"I suppose I was an apt pupil," laughed Violetta.

She did not think it necessary to add that she had many spare hours at the club, and that she often devoted them to billiards. She became so expert that she had no hesitation in opposing the best players among the members. As more than one were little better than sharpers and up to every trick of the game, it is more than probable she learned as much from them as from her father.

The game proceeded. The feat just described was the only one out of the common that she indulged in, and she did not trouble to do more than run up a break out of easy shots. Of course, she won, but she let him down easy, and ran out the victor by ten points. Norman took his defeat very good-humouredly and was warm in his praise.

"That ten points doesn't represent the real difference between us. You could give me twenty-five—thirty in a hundred and still beat me to a frazzle. You're a witch at the game. I only know one man—among amateurs, I mean—who could meet you on level ground."

"Yes? Does he come here?"

"No, and I wouldn't have him. We were great chums at Oxford, and he was a decent chap, I always thought. But since then—well, he's turned out a blackguard. I don't think I'd care to come across him now. There might be ructions."

John Norman's face darkened and, turning abruptly from Violetta, he walked to the fire and stood looking at the blazing coals, his back turned towards his companion.

Had he chosen to glance at Violetta he would have seen that she was as much disturbed as he himself was. It had crossed her mind with a feeling of certainty that the man he referred to was George Godfree. She knew his method of play quite well and could just hold her own with him.

Norman turned. His face had resumed its usual composure.

"Shall we play the conqueror? You to give me thirty points?"

"No. We've each won a game. Let's remain on terms of equality."

"As you please. What about a cigarette? I'll bet that you smoke. You couldn't possibly have found out all you know about billiards without."

"How long will Ella be?" she asked hesitatingly.

"What? Are you among the crowd that Ella rules with a rod of iron?"

"Not quite that. I know her views on the matter, and I don't want to hurt her feelings."

"Ella's feelings? I doubt whether she has any. Real feeling, I mean. It's funny that whenever any family matter is under discussion the first thing everybody asks is what Ella will think—what will she say? She exercises some horrible spell. I find myself under its influence constantly. Are you going to alter your mind?" and he held out his cigarette case, but Violetta shook her head.

They were now seated on a Chesterfield in front of

the fire and Violetta made no reply to Norman's reference to Ella. At the same time, she quite agreed with him, for she remembered how at school Ella in her semi-hysterical "swarming" way dominated the rest. Violetta used to think that Ella would develop into an extremely unpleasant tyrannical old woman.

Norman went on smoking silently and staring at the fire. Suddenly he broke out:

"I suppose she's told you all about my mad folly—racing, betting, the loss of Normanhurst, and all the rest of my crazy doings?"

"Yes, she referred in a way to your heavy losses. It came upon me quite as a shock to hear that you had to sell Normanhurst."

"It was a bit of a wrench, and it's left me stranded—just for the moment—but"

"Then you have some plans for the future," put in Violetta, to fill up a somewhat embarrassing pause.

"In a way. I've sworn to be master of Normanhurst once more, but how the deuce I'm going to do it beats me. You see, I'm left entirely to myself, and I'm not much good by myself. Ella knows that as well as I do, and she's perpetually worrying me with suggestions, all more or less impracticable. What I want is some clever shrewd person always at my elbow—one I can talk to—one that'll do things and not dream over them. *I* can do the dreaming—done too much of it already."

"You need some friend to protect you against yourself? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, you've hit it."

CHAPTER VIII

A CHAPTER FROM THE PAST

“Yes, you’ve hit it,” repeated Sir John. He had turned his eyes from the fire to Violetta and he allowed them to rest upon her.

Violetta’s pose just then was highly attractive. She was leaning slightly forward, her knees crossed and her clasped hands embracing the upper one. The attitude suggested energy, independence; it seemed to indicate that she was mistress of herself; that she was not one to yield to momentary impulses; that she was alert and ready of resource in cases of difficulty. The small compact head, the full neck set on firmly rounded shoulders confirmed this view of her character. Even the shapely arms had character in them.

“You have Ella to talk to,” said she.

“Bother Ella. She’s always been the obstacle. We never agree on a single point and aren’t likely to. Discussions with her always take an unpleasantly personal tone, with any number of ‘I told you so’s.’ She can’t understand the influence of circumstances on character on one’s destiny. Can you, Miss Vaughan—I beg your pardon—Violetta I should have said?”

“Yes. No one better. I’ve seen it verified ever so many times.”

“Then when I tell you I’ve been an ass you won’t believe it’s entirely owing to myself?”

“Of course I shan’t. In cases of extreme foolishness so much depends not only on circumstances but on other people. You remember what a French philosopher once said—‘to know all is to forgive all.’”

“By the lord, it *is* so. Look here, Violetta, I’m wondering if I should bore you very much if I told you something about what Ella calls my childish folly? I promise to boil the story down to shreds.”

“If it will give you any satisfaction, by all means tell me. I’ll be the most patient of listeners.”

“Thanks. The business really began with my marriage. I was only a youngster—just come of age. My father was old and feeble, and he’d got a yearning to see a grandson in the world. He didn’t want the baronetcy to go to any male relation outside the direct line. He mentioned the girl he wished me to marry—the daughter of an old friend. I’ve always looked upon what some people call the serious steps in life as trifles, and it seemed to me it didn’t matter who was my wife so long as she was amiable and decent looking.”

“You were easily pleased at twenty-one. Have you become more fastidious since?” asked Violetta meditatively.

“Can’t say. Perhaps. Certainly I don’t think doll faces appeal to me. Poor Alice had a doll face. Round blue eyes, a small mouth, dimples when she laughed and fair wavy hair. I suppose we were equally matched as to brains. We both made a mistake. We were too much

alike—in temperament, I mean. We ought to have had our opposites. A son, to my father's huge delight, was born, and two years after came a catastrophe. The boy was drowned."

"Great Heaven. Why did you tell me?" cried Violetta, with genuine sympathy. "Ella has never mentioned this terrible thing."

"It isn't often raked up," said Norman huskily. "I wanted to forget it, but I never have. I had too many other misfortunes to remember it by. My wife was stricken down by the news; she had a child prematurely—stillborn—she had a fever, lost her reason, and never regained it. My father also was so much affected that he died within a year."

"What a frightful list of troubles. I think you're wonderful, Sir John, to have maintained your cheerfulness. When I first saw you I should never have suspected you kept so sad a story locked up within you."

"Well, some twelve years had passed over, and one can't be always wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. That's stupid; besides, it's not my idea of bearing troubles."

He relapsed into silence and seemed so absorbed that Violetta hardly liked to disturb his reverie. At last she said:

"I suppose you now and again visited your wife. That must have been a painful ordeal."

"At first it was, but I soon got used to it, as she never recognised me. Some days she was plunged in melancholy. On others she did nothing but rave. Her wild talk revealed something I never suspected. Before I proposed to her she wanted to marry another man, and it was his

name that was always in her thoughts. Subsequently, I discovered that she really had been engaged to this man, and she jilted him to marry me. He thought I was to blame, but I knew nothing of her prior engagement. In fact, they kept it a secret.”

“Have you ever met him?”

“Yes—since Lady Norman died.”

“And are you on speaking terms?”

Norman smiled grimly.

“Not exactly. I think he’d like to cut my throat. He’s got it into his head that my wife went out of her mind through me. It’s utterly false.”

“You never injured him, then?”

“Robbing a man of a girl he’d set his heart upon would be an injury, wouldn’t it?”

“Not if you did it unknowingly.”

“Well, he didn’t take that view. But we needn’t bother about him further than to say that I believe he’s at the bottom of my ruin, though he was far too cunning to show himself.”

“Who were the men who were acting for him?” asked Violetta with sudden interest.

Norman looked at her slightly surprised. He was not a man of quick perception, but he could not help seeing that she did not put the question out of mere curiosity.

“Oh, there was a gang. There always is, I believe, in a racing swindle, and when they quarrel over the spoil the truth oozes out, but the honest man—otherwise the victim, doesn’t necessarily come into his own. I was induced to buy some wretched platers and was kidded into believing that they were ‘dark’ horses, certain to win and at long odds I should have netted a fortune. I never won

a race.”

“But didn’t you know someone of the gang outside racing? You wouldn’t have believed downright strangers, would you?”

“Of course not, and that’s where the sting comes in. The man I mentioned some time ago—the billiard player—my own friend—let me down. I don’t want to talk about him. I’ve wiped the blackguard out of my life.”

Violetta dared not ask for this man’s name. There was no necessity. Ella had told her. She glanced at Norman’s face. She seemed to read in it more determination than she had hitherto credited him with possessing. Maybe his inertness and indecision had their origin in the fact that he had always taken things too easily and had allowed others to think for him. He had indeed hinted at this defect in his character. Maybe if he were forced to fight for himself he would show he could do it.

Then his features relaxed. The resolute look passed away. He relapsed into his habitual dreaminess.

“I wish, Violetta, you hadn’t left Normanhurst four years ago. When you were gone I felt horribly restless. I wanted excitement. The country had lost its attraction. I took a furnished flat in London and that’s where the trouble began. Why did you go?”

“I had to. My father needed me.”

“Your father? He’d been in the Army, hadn’t he? What did he want you for?”

“Various things. We’d always been a good deal together. He was accustomed to rely upon me. Really, we were more like chums than father and daughter. I felt I couldn’t leave him to shift for himself.”

“And he’s dead—so I understand from Ella.”

“Yes, he was killed riding in a steeplechase. It was about the last thing one would have expected. He was a splendid horseman.”

“His death must have made you hate racing and all that belongs to it. Wasn’t that so?”

Violetta evaded the question.

“Has your ill luck made *you* hate it?” said she.

“By heaven, I loathe it. I’ll never again risk a farthing on a horse, and I’ll never trust a woman who does.”

Was this meant as a warning to her? Why should it? There could be no significance in his words beyond an expression of his own tastes. He knew nothing of her life — of her experience. She wondered if he had that knowledge what he would think of her.

“You’re rather hard upon women who bet,” said she, quietly.

“I’ve reason to be. But we needn’t go into that.”

So there was a woman at the bottom of the trouble. Knowing the racing world as she did, Violetta would have been surprised if there hadn’t been.

“Raking up the past is stupid and profitless. It’s the future that matters, isn’t it? I should like to hear how you propose getting back Normanhurst.”

“I’ve told you I don’t know. I’m totally ignorant of soap making, motor manufacturing, or anything like that. It would have been better if I’d been brought up to a business. It would have kept me out of temptation, wouldn’t it?” and he laughed a little bitterly.

“You can make money in business without knowing anything about the business itself. It only wants capital and brains.”

Violetta's frankness did not offend him in the least. On the contrary it amused him.

"Thanks," said he, smilingly. "You've spotted the two weak points."

"I suppose they can be remedied. Was Normanhurst your only landed property?"

"No. I've a ramshackle place about ten miles distant from it that's never brought in more than £50 a year. The house is beastly ugly and the soil's so barren I didn't think it worth while to try to mortgage it. It's called the Owl's Nest and there never was a more appropriate title."

"The Owl's Nest! How romantic it sounds! Is it picturesque?"

"Rather. That's its only recommendation. Between ourselves, I'd a fancy for taking up my quarters there when the crash came, but Ella shrieked when I suggested it. She declared that the place was haunted, and my argument that spooks were in her line—perhaps she hasn't told you that she's a bit gone on spiritualism—went for nothing. Of course, I gave in for the sake of peace and quietness, and so we came to this show, which I never particularly cared for, and which I'm now heartily sick of. But I may like it better now you've come."

Violetta took no notice of the implied compliment. She brushed it aside impatiently.

"I want to hear more about the Owl's Nest. Do tell me. Is it occupied?"

"No, and it hasn't been for over a year. I doubt if the house is inhabitable."

"I should like to see it."

"Would you? There's no difficulty. We could motor there in an hour and a half."

“How jolly. When can we go? To-morrow?”

“All the days are the same to me. To-morrow, if you like.”

“I suppose Ella wouldn’t go?” Violetta’s question was not put with much enthusiasm.

“Not she. I don’t see that we want her. You’re not afraid of Mrs. Grundy, are you?”

“Isn’t Mrs. Grundy out of date these days?”

“Well, yes. Jazz dancing, bare backs and the divorce court have been too much for the old lady. And a good thing too, don’t you think so?”

“I won’t commit myself to that opinion. It all depends upon the person and circumstances.”

At that moment there was a bustle in the lobby outside and Ella bounced in.

“You two look pretty comfy I must say,” she exclaimed in not a particularly pleased tone. “I thought you came here to play billiards.”

“And so we did. We’ve had two games. I beat Violetta in one and she beat me in the other.”

“How did she manage that? You let her win, I suppose.”

“No. It was the other way about. She let *me* win the first game, and in the second she simply ran away from me.”

Ella’s face became as unpleasant as her voice.

“How on earth did you learn to play so well? I almost feel inclined to quote the worn saying that skill at billiards is evidence of an ill-spent youth.”

“It’s a question of comparison, my dear. It doesn’t follow that I play well because I beat your brother.”

“Of course not,” put in Sir John with a chuckle. “What does follow is that I played dashed bad.”

Ella tossed her head. She did not pursue the subject. She turned to her brother in her spasmodic way.

“You’ll be glad to hear, John, that I’ve had a most successful morning.”

“What, has the Vicar promised to lend his church for one of your performances?”

“Don’t be stupid. No. I found a number of most interesting people at the Vicarage. The talk turned upon spiritualism, and I was amazed to find how many of the party had taken up the study. Some of them have had the most satisfactory results.”

“What do you mean by satisfactory?”

“Why, they’ve had most convincing proof of the possibility of communicating with the other world.”

“Really. What did the Vicar say to that? Poaching on his preserves, wasn’t it? I’ve always had an idea that the church was supposed to look after the other world for us.”

“We didn’t let him know what we were talking about. It so happened that those who were interested in the subject were sitting together. Of course we couldn’t talk freely, as he was present and we didn’t know how he would take it. I was afraid he might reprove us and in an argument with a clergyman one always feels at a disadvantage—you can’t contradict the man without an uncomfortable sensation that you’re guilty of blasphemy. So we agreed to meet again and compare our experiences.”

“Hang it, Ella, what experiences have *you* had?”

“Not any, but I want to have some. We’ve arranged

to hold a seance here to-morrow evening. The little round table in the spare room will do splendidly. Mrs. Parry has offered to bring a wonderful medium—a Mrs. Willoughby Smythe, who by a great piece of luck happens to be staying here. We're bound to have some remarkable manifestations if all that's said about her is true."

John Norman stared blankly at his sister. He was biting his lips and frowning slightly. Apparently he did not welcome the prospect of the avalanche.

"I've been thinking, John, that you might do worse than go in for spiritualism as a hobby. It would take you completely out of yourself."

"Thanks. I'm quite contented with myself as I am, and I don't want to be anybody else. So far as spiritualism is concerned, I hate it, and you needn't reckon upon me to-morrow night."

Norman spoke with unwonted asperity and his self-assertion evidently took Ella by surprise.

"Do as you like, of course, but it'll be very awkward. What excuse am I to offer? How am I to explain your refusal to join us when you're in the house all the time?"

"That's where you're wrong. I shan't be in the house. I've promised to motor Violetta to the Owl's Nest. I've been telling her about it and its reputation for being haunted. She's most anxious to see it. Possibly we shall have a better chance there of running across a ghost than you'll have here."

"Motor Violetta to the Owl's Nest," repeated Ella, her face suddenly growing very long. "It's absurd. You must put off the excursion. Any other day but to-morrow will do just as well. Have you promised to go, Violetta?"

“Yes. I was looking forward to it, but as you say, another day will do just as well.”

“Indeed it won’t,” broke in Norman, half angrily. “I hate putting things off—especially for the sake of people I don’t know and don’t want to know. After what Violetta has just said, I shan’t disappoint her.”

“But surely, Violetta, under the circumstances you wouldn’t think of going?” cried Ella petulantly.

“If Sir John insists, I don’t know how I can refuse.”

Violetta from the corner of her eye could see a look of relief stealing over Norman’s face. It looked as if a contest of wills between brother and sister was going on, and she determined to back him up for all she was worth. From what she had seen of the Norman household she had decided that it was time John Norman asserted himself.

“Oh, very well,” snapped Ella, and she swept from the room, her features twitching and suggesting that she was on the verge of tears.

CHAPTER IX

VIOLETTA'S "JOY-RIDE"

The evening passed in a not particularly lively fashion. Ella was alternately snappy and sulky. Her brother was distraught and Violetta felt bored to death. She played and sang out of sheer desperation, and did not much care whether or not she was entertaining her friends. Her hostess professed a slight indisposition and could not be persuaded into doing anything. Evidently she did not look upon the proposed trip to the Owl's Nest with approval. Violetta was quite glad when the time came to say good-night. Before going to bed, she sat for some time in a comfortable, padded wicker chair, nursing her knee—her favourite attitude when she wanted to think over things. On the whole, she was more interested in Sir John Norman than she had expected. She no longer had any idea of captivating him. That notion, if she had ever meant it seriously, had passed away, but it was not from any mercenary motive. She wanted money, it was true, but she was not anxious to get it by marrying a rich man. It might mean a sacrifice of her independence and she valued her freedom more than anything in life. The discovery, therefore, that the baronet was ruined did not

come as the disappointment which she would have felt had she fixed upon him as her husband.

At the same time, he *did* interest her. She was not clear why it was so. She was inclined to put it down to her innate antagonism towards Ella. Outwardly Ella had always been very friendly with her, but the two had never come into conflict over any vital matter. Violetta was not one to take any account of trifling differences of opinion, and she had always given way.

Somehow she now felt inclined for active hostilities. It angered her to see Ella domineering over her brother, and it angered her still more to find the man tamely submitting.

"It's no business of mine, anyway," she told herself. "I suppose I shall have to stay some little time as I've sent for my things and it would be stupid to quarrel with Ella just because her brother hasn't pluck enough to stand up for himself."

She smiled. It had occurred to her that a little drama was beginning in the unexpected determination of Sir John to have his own way, and that this determination was primarily due to herself. But mightn't there be some other motive at work? Why was Norman so set against a spiritualistic seance? She, Violetta, would rather have liked it. "Cranks" of any sort were entertaining once in a way. She did not think that the baronet was afraid of "cranks" or had any particular objection to a seance per se. His manner suggested some personal dislike.

"Perhaps there may be more fun here than I imagined at first" was her final comment, and with hope in her mind she went peacefully to sleep.

It was clear the next morning that Ella had not re-

covered her good temper. She did not appear at the breakfast table and sent down word that she had a bad headache. Sir John, on the other hand, had risen early. He was anxious, he explained, not to be disappointed about the car, and had gone to the garage before breakfast.

"It's all right," said he. "Shall we start about eleven? Will that suit you?"

"Admirably. I shall enjoy the ride immensely, I'm sure. It's a delightful morning, and promises to be an ideal spring day. I'm sorry, though, I haven't any proper motor costume. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind. Why should I? It's you who ought to worry. But you don't seem much troubled."

Violetta, as a matter of fact, was in great good humour and was looking her best. She had had misgivings that Norman's courage might have oozed out during the night, and was rejoiced to find that it hadn't. In addition, her belongings had arrived from the hotel in London, and this was a special source of satisfaction. No woman likes to depend upon a single dress no matter how well she may look in it.

"Troubled? No indeed. I'm never troubled when I'm expecting a pleasure."

"I hope it will be one. Anyway, I shall have nothing to prevent me devoting myself entirely to you. I'm an awful ass where motoring is concerned, so we shall have a chauffeur to take the responsibility. I know it's not the right thing. Almost as bad as a boating man having someone to row for him."

"Luckily, I'm neither a motorist or a boating woman, so it doesn't matter, does it?"

"I don't know that it does. Still, it won't be what's called a joy ride."

"And what's that?" asked Violetta, as demure as the lady depicted in Milton's "Penseroso."

He laughed.

"It must be experienced, I believe. It can't be described. Part of the enjoyment, I understand, consists in getting every ounce of speed out of the car and defying the regulations."

"I shouldn't at all mind that—on a horse."

He became a little graver.

"I suppose not. I remember your splendid riding at Normanhurst. I've given up thinking about horses."

"Not for ever, surely?"

"If I keep in my present mind it may be so, but we won't talk about horses, please."

"You ought to have gone in for training in motoring, then you'd have a topic you'd have plenty to say about. I'm told motor talk's most engrossing."

"I know—I know. I've run across motor maniacs. They open their mouths over nothing else. It's all gibberish to me. Don't worry. Where *you* are Violetta there'll be no lack of a subject for conversation."

"Thanks. I didn't know I could let my tongue run away with me."

"I don't mean that."

He shot her a glance, the meaning of which Violetta understood quite well, and she left it at that.

"Will you give me half an hour, please, to get ready?" said she.

"Take your time, but don't be longer than you can help. Between ourselves, I'd like to get away before Ella

shows up. I upset her last night, and she's horrid when she's put out. I hate to start the day with a row, don't you?"

Violetta nodded and tripped away. She joined him within the half hour. He was pacing the room restlessly, a cigarette between his lips. She thought he looked worried, but she made no remark. He brightened when his eyes lighted upon her, as well they might, for she presented an engaging picture with her tailor made skirt, blouse, up and down collar, and scarf, the pin of which added a provoking touch of coquetry. The masculine suggestions of her costume suited her amazingly. Her hat was a little sailor straw, with a feather artfully disposed.

"By Jove, one would think you were about to mount a horse rather than a motor," he could not help saying.

"I thought you didn't want horses mentioned."

"Perhaps I didn't explain myself. I meant horse racing. Anyhow, let's be off."

As the car started Violetta glanced at one of the upper windows. She saw the blind shift slightly, and she laughed. Ella was on the watch. Violetta had in a way thrown down the gauntlet.

Soon they were bowling along the high road. Presently the car turned into a lane and the chauffeur slackened speed.

"It's a cross-country run to Weltersfield, sir. I suppose you'd like me to take the shortest cut?"

"I'm not so sure about that. What do you say?"

He had turned to Violetta.

"There's no hurry, I suppose," said she. "I should like to see as much as I can of English scenery. I've been away

for a long time you know, and there's nothing on the Continent like the fresh green of our country. I missed the English hedgerows terribly."

"Very well, then, we'll go by the prettiest route and chance it being the longest. It's between thirty and forty miles, I suppose, to Weltersfield, eh?"

"Quite that, sir."

"Nothing for a motor ride, so we'll go leisurely. No 'scorching' mind."

The chauffeur's wooden face never moved. Going leisurely was not his idea of motoring. His difficulty would be keeping within his instructions.

"Whereabouts is Weltersfield?" asked Violetta.

"On the borders of Surrey, ten miles from Normanhurst. As I told you, I should have gone there but for Ella. Plenty of rabbit shooting but not much good for anything else. If you're fond of the picturesque you'll get it there. An artist friend I showed it to raved over the views."

"Well, that's something, anyhow. You don't sketch, I suppose?"

"No. I'm fond of pictures and all that, but nothing more. To tell you the truth, Violetta, I don't believe I'm good at anything—excepting," he added with a queer sort of laugh, "at being fooled."

"Oh, we're most of us touched a bit that way at times, I fancy. We can't always be wise. It would be an awfully dull world if it weren't for the fools. They contribute largely to the gaiety of nations."

"That's your idea, is it? Then you don't think I'm an absolute ass because I allowed myself to be taken in?"

"I don't see why I should. I told you so last night. It's

generally the people we trust we have to thank for our misfortunes, where money's concerned."

"Well, yes. The odd thing was I discovered that what I thought I knew most about I knew least. Horses were always my hobby until I went in for keeping racers, but even then if I hadn't been let down by the man I trusted I mightn't have been so smashed up. You see, he induced me to buy a lot of crocks which turned out frauds. But this wasn't the worst. The best horse I bought was on my own judgment. I backed it for all I was worth to win the Derby, and I'll swear it would, too, but at the last moment it was got at or the jockey was. Do you know what that means?"

"I think I can guess."

"And that's how I came to grief. Then—hang it, Violetta, I entreated you not to talk about horse racing, and here I am prancing about on forbidden ground! I've said enough. Tell me something about yourself just to change one's thoughts. What did you do in Paris?"

Violetta had no difficulty in reeling off actual and imaginary experiences, but not a word did she breathe about racing or gambling.

She saw plainly enough that Norman in his present mood detested both. No doubt it was a case either of a burnt child dreading the fire or of the old adage of the devil being sick, etc.; and maybe if Norman was again in possession of money his interest in horses might revive, but this point just now Violetta was not called upon to decide. She wanted to amuse him and she succeeded. Gradually the nervousness and occasional fits of absorption which Violetta had noticed disappeared, and he chatted as in the old days at Normanhurst.

They lunched at Cobham and sat talking for some time afterwards. The spectre of Ella not hanging over the feast, Violetta had no scruple in indulging in cigarettes. Norman complimented her on her smoking.

"You smoke like a man—you don't hurry. The idea of most women is that a cigarette should be burnt away as quickly as possible."

"Yes, I've noticed it is so. Perhaps that's why I don't do it. I don't always follow the example of other women."

"I'm glad of that," said he, in what sounded almost like a tone of relief.

"Why?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. As one goes through life one learns things, that's all."

Had Violetta cared to avail herself of the opening, she could have teased him as to his views of women, but she remembered the tragedy of his married life, and she let him alone.

They strolled about Cobham and did not resume the journey for some time. It was but a ten mile ride to Weltersfield, and had they gone by the nearest road they would have passed Normanhurst. But Norman could not face the sight of the old house, and directed the chauffeur down a series of lanes by which the estate was avoided. The car finally emerged upon a fine breezy common on the other side of which was a road which led past a small estate bordered by an oak fence wire barbed at the top. On the other side of the fence was a broad stretch of meadow land, and beyond, sheltered by pine trees, was a squat house, a plain, square, uncompromising sort of building—dull brick with a door in the centre and a window each side, and three windows above. At the side

was an extensive range of outbuildings.

Some horses were grazing in the meadow, and between them and the house stood a short thick-set man with slightly bowed legs and somewhat stooping in the shoulders. A companion to whom he was talking was slim, undersized, and with the unmistakable look of a jockey about him.

Violetta took in the shape and build of the horses, their shining, sleek, well-groomed coats and their springy walk, with the delight of a connoisseur. She noted the men and their surroundings, and she knew perfectly well she was passing a trainer's headquarters. But mindful of Norman's injunction, she did not say a word.

Suddenly the motor engine gave one of those irritating alarming explosions to which the mechanism is liable. The full-blooded horses, startled by the sound, set off on a stampede. It was a pretty sight but not to the trainer or his companion. They both shouted and set off to head the frightened steeds. Fortunately, no harm was done as they had raced in the direction of a high hedge, against which one was cannoned by the rest, but suffered no hurt. It might have been otherwise had they rushed for the fence. Doubtless the men expressed their feelings vigorously, but they were too far away for their words to be heard.

"Confound it," she heard Norman mutter. "What the mischief made the thing explode just here. If any of those gees had come to grief I'd have had to make it up to old Peter Gumley, though I suppose legally he'd have no claim against me or the chauffeur either."

"Do you know him?" asked Violetta.

"Know Peter Gumley? I should think I did. The most

honest trainer who ever handled horseflesh. Doesn't bet. Imagine that. But I forgot you know nothing about trainers or betting."

"They're lovely horses, and I'm glad none of them were hurt."

"So am I. Peter Gumley and I were once great pals, and I was an ass to fall out with him. It was a misunderstanding, engineered, as I've reason to know, by enemies of both of us."

Norman said no more, and Violetta asked him no questions, but she treasured up the name of Peter Gumley.

The trainer's quarters were left behind, and about a mile further on the aspect of the country began to change. The road ascended, skirting a typical Surrey common covered with gorse and bracken, interspersed with thickets of bramble and holly. Ahead to the right were rolling downs and to the left woods with here and there clumps of tall pines. The ground was broken, the road still ascending was as full of turns as a snake, and the loose sharp-edged stones showed that there was little or no traffic. The car was traversing what was practically a spur of the long range of chalk hills, of which at Guildford the Hog's Back was a portion.

"I don't much like this travelling, sir," said the chauffeur, jerking round his head. "It'll be a miracle if we get through without a puncture. Is the place far?"

"About half a mile. Go slowly."

"Slow or fast won't make a razor-edged pebble any better," grumbled the chauffeur. "The road's worse the farther one goes."

"Shall we get out and walk?"

"It 'ud be as well I *do* think, sir."

"What do you say, Violetta?"

"I should like it. I'm feeling rather cramped."

"Are you? Sorry. I don't mind confessing I'm a bit that way myself. Here goes."

He opened the door sprang to the ground and assisted Violetta to alight.

"Wait here," said he to the chauffeur. "We may be some time. Here's a cigar to while away the time."

The chauffeur took the corona gratefully, and put down Sir John in his mind as a real gentleman.

"Some toffs would ha' kicked up a shindy," he remarked to himself. "He's got a proper sort o' girl with him too. She knows how to walk. It's a treat to see a pair o' ankles just the right shape, and shoes as don't have egg boilers for heels. Neat figure, dashed if she aint."

And the better to enjoy the pleasing picture, the chauffeur sat down on a grassy bank commanding a view of the winding road and watched the couple toiling up the ascent.

"You see now why I've so much difficulty in letting the Owl's Nest. It's such a climb to get there. Cartage is a frightful bother. Shops are miles away, and the butcher and baker often forget to call or are too lazy to fag up the hill."

"That's true. One would have to turn vegetarian to avoid starvation. I suppose there's accommodation for a cow?"

"Well, yes, and a jolly fine paddock for pasture. It's the only piece of level ground there is."

"Why don't you sell the place?"

"Who'd buy it? Might make a poultry farm, perhaps."

Maybe you wonder why a house was stuck here. I'll tell you. It came about when there was such a scare about Bonaparte invading England more than a century ago. Some genius suggested that a number of tower houses should be built on hills between London and Portsmouth, where a sort of telegraphing could be carried on by semaphore signalling in the daytime, and blazing fires at night. Boney never came and the telegraph houses were useless ever after."

"So the house has a history; that makes it interesting."

"I suppose it does. Anyhow, something in it must have interested my father or he wouldn't have bought it. He used to come here for rabbit shooting. He was a bit of a recluse and liked his own company better than anybody else's. I often wonder whether I take after him."

"I hope you don't find me boring you," said Violetta, in a mock reproachful tone.

"My dear Violetta," began Norman, but went no further.

They had reached the ground surrounding the house. It was approached by a narrow winding road and hedged and fenced around. The foliage of a little wood could be seen beyond. Norman had brought the keys and he unlocked the gate.

"This is the paddock I told you of. It's not very wide, as you see, but I'm told its half a mile round and fairly level. It wouldn't make a bad circus."

"You're getting near the forbidden topic," laughed Violetta. "I warn you."

"Thanks. I'll not forget. The house didn't exhaust the brains of the architect who designed it—what do you think?"

“It’s solid enough, and I imagine it was built to last.”

The Owl’s Nest was simply a square brick building of two storeys. Nothing could be simpler. Between the house and the paddock was a flower garden of an irregular shape on slightly higher ground than the paddock; the house dominated everything.

“To last? I should think it was. I believe the foundations are very solid.”

They entered the house. There were two rooms on a floor, and in each room was some plain old fashioned furniture.

“Mostly Queen Anne stuff. A dealer offered me £250 for the lot, which I guess meant it was worth three or four times that amount. I wasn’t in want of money then and I refused to sell. Most of it came from Normanhurst. If ever I’m stranded I suppose it’ll have to go.”

Violetta was delighted with the place. Its entire absence of ornamentation did not repel her. The furniture was quite in keeping with the severity of the surroundings. They ascended to the roof which was approached through a big trap door by a broad step ladder from one of the rooms. The roof was raised slightly in the centre to allow the rain to drain into a broad gutter on one side. Thence it descended to a tank on the ground.

“That’s for soft water—useful you know for the garden or the laundry,” said Norman. “The views are splendid. My dad liked to smoke his pipe here. You can see into four counties, I believe.”

A wall some three feet high surrounded the roof and against a stack of chimneys was a brazier used at night in former days for signalling purposes. The air was delightfully fresh and the sweet fragrant smell of the pine

woods distinctly perceptible. Violetta inhaled it with pleasure. Her eyes wandered over the landscape taking in its varied beauties and its lights and shadows.

After a time they descended and inspected the out-houses built for the rearing of poultry and other live stock. Everything was in a fair state of repair.

“Shall we have a look at the wood?”

Violetta assented, and they crossed the paddock, and passed through a little wicket gate.

The wood was on the slope of the hill and the irregularity of the ground added to its picturesqueness. The footpaths were innumerable, but the undergrowth was so dense that many of them could only be followed with difficulty.

All at once an opening showed itself. A precipitous path, practically a series of steps, led down to a pond upon which the sun was pouring its full brilliance. It was like coming upon a dazzling mirror. The banks in some places were steep and at others only of gentle descent. All were covered with vegetation at present showing only the tender green of spring, and promising summer luxuriance. Lichen covered roots had here and there forced themselves through the loose soil and by colour and shape added their charm. At one end a thin stream trickled down huge chalk boulders and kept a sufficient movement to prevent the formation of duckweed save in obstructed patches where a fallen tree trunk had held up the current. At the end opposite the miniature waterfall was an outlet and from here the water had made for itself a passage and after many twistings found its way to a ditch.

“How exquisite!” cried Violetta, clasping her hands.

“Why, it’s like fairyland. One can imagine Oberon and Titania holding their revels here in the moonlight.”

“I told you that artists went mad over it. But it has practical qualities as well as poetic ones. It’s a rare place for carp and tench.”

“And you wanted me to believe that the Owl’s Nest was a kind of Starvation Hall. What with growing one’s own vegetables and what with fish, rabbits, and poultry, there’s not much fear of going short. I noticed a fine brick oven in the scullery. What’s to prevent baking one’s daily bread?”

“Nothing whatever. It is, I admit, an ideal Tolstoi residence. It means a lot of work, though.”

“What of that? I’m in love with the place. Do you want to let it?”

“I’ve no objection but who’d take it?”

“I would. What’s the rent?”

Norman stared. He was flabbergasted at the idea. He looked upon Violetta’s proposal as the outcome of a woman’s romance. He said as much.

“It’s not romance at all. I assure you I mean business, and I’m quite prepared to tackle the hard work.”

“You’d better think over it.”

“I *have* thought over it, and I’ve made up my mind. You really must take a common-sense view of your affairs, Sir John, and not let them drift anyhow.”

Violetta had straightened herself. Her tone was emphatic. Her eyes shone with a steady light. Her face, though animated, was firm. She looked more masculine than ever. Norman was taken aback. He recognised her energy but he was incredulous as to her capacity for such a crazy enterprise.

“You don’t realise the difficulties,” he objected. “What’s put this Robinson Crusoe idea into your head? Do you want the place as a haven of rest and pleasure in the summer time—the delusion of the simple life?”

“Not at all. I mean business. Poultry farming. I’m out to make money. Come, the rent please. What did the former tenant pay?”

Norman felt himself cornered by her directness.

“I don’t exactly remember,” said he, reluctantly. “£50, I think it was.”

“Dirt cheap, I call it. If £50 will content you I’ll take it at that.”

“But really — the winter time — you’ll be horribly lonely.”

“I shall have a capable woman or two about me, and a man to do the rough work.”

“But you can’t make friends of them.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I can easily invite friends to stay with me, I suppose.”

“No doubt. Ella might, perhaps—”

“Ella won’t. I don’t think she’ll approve of my being your tenant.”

“Maybe not,” rejoined Norman doubtfully. “I doubt if I shall tell her.”

“Do as you like about that. I don’t care so long as she doesn’t talk you into giving me notice to quit.”

“She won’t do that, I promise you, but I daresay she’ll nag me a bit.”

“Will you stand it? I suppose a man can’t get away from a nagging wife, but a nagging sister—well!”

Violetta finished the sentence with an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

Norman looked a little shamefaced. He remembered how long he had endured Ella's tyranny and in the face of Violetta's rebuke he began to wonder why. But at Normanhurst he had to. How could he leave the place and how could he turn his sister out? Both courses were impossible. He had always given in to her to avoid quarrelling. Yet he had escaped from her domination—for a time. That was when he took the bold step—for him—of running a flat in London.

"I shan't tell her," said he presently. "This is a compact between ourselves Violetta, and it has nothing to do with anyone else."

"Then you agree? Thanks awfully. I suppose we shall have an agreement or lease, or whatever you like to call it, drawn up, shan't we? But your lawyer will see to that. You're not going back from your word?"

"No. I swear—"

"You needn't. Your promise will be sufficient."

"You don't bar me from coming to see you?"

"A landlord has a right, I fancy, to enter his premises at a reasonable time and for a sufficient reason. I daresay you'll want to satisfy yourself that I've kept the place in proper repair."

"I don't care a fig about that. I can't see myself as your landlord, Violetta."

"I shan't forget it, and I'll not fail to remind you every quarter day. Now please let us go back to the house. I want to begin planning at once. You won't mind I hope my making a few alterations."

"Make any that pleases you. Pull the house down if you care to do it."

"Nothing so stupid. I may be silly at times, but not so

silly as all that.”

They returned to the house. Violetta was full of ideas. The prospect of a speculative enterprise had given her new life, and she rattled on, to the surprise and entertainment of her companion. Suddenly she looked at her watch.

“Mercy on us. Do you know we’ve been here nearly three hours? What will have become of your car?”

“It should be where we left it. Perhaps we’d better get back.”

They found the chauffeur fast asleep and he looked rather foolish when he was roused.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he stammered. “I didn’t know how long you’d be. But a car ain’t a horse—it can’t bolt.”

“Oh, it’s all right. Look here, take us on to Guildford. We want to see the country as we go. No making up for lost time, or anything of that sort.”

“Right you are, sir,” rejoined the man, with a sly look at Violetta, as much as to say, “You’re the cause of this slow going.”

They did not arrive at Guildford until five. They put up at the Angel. Violetta had a cup of tea, and Norman ordered dinner for half past six. Meanwhile, they strolled about the interesting old town. They were the best of friends and, as Norman thought, in a fair way of becoming chums.

Most of Norman’s lady friends at Normanhurst were of the conventional type. Those at Thames-side, when they were not conventional were slightly vulgar and decidedly commonplace. They seemed to exude wealth in their display of jewellery, and were of the sort who in London appear to live at restaurants. Dinners and

lunches were to them the most important functions of the day, and auction bridge at night. Violetta on the other hand was wholly unconventional. She had moved about in the world and had been observant of things, and had her own opinion on them. Never had Norman passed a more enjoyable day. Violetta had completely chased away his gloom of the morning.

But as night approached he became a little fidgety. He invented all manner of excuses for delay, and Violetta acquiesced. A motor ride by moonlight promised enjoyment and novelty. It was a goodish stretch from Guildford to Thames-side, and as the chauffeur had to stop several times—generally at hostelries, to enquire the way—the car did not arrive at the Willows until half past ten.

The house was lighted up, and the sounds of a piano and singing were heard.

“Beastly nuisance,” exclaimed Norman in a tone of vexation. “I’d hoped the spiritualistic tomfoolry was over. Ella seems to have turned it into a sing song.”

“Does it matter?” asked Violetta.

“I don’t know that it does. Still—well, we must go through it, I suppose. But I hate the Thames-side people.”

He spoke in a kind of desperation and seemed to regard the gathering much more seriously than it warranted. So at least Violetta thought. But was there any other reason?

CHAPTER X

MRS. WILLOUGHBY SMYTHE

The song—of the inane sentimental revue type, in waltz time, of course—was not finished, and Norman and Violetta waited in the hall rather than interrupt it. Violetta could have easily escaped to her room had she chosen to do so, but she was filled with the spirit of defiance. She knew perfectly well that Norman would need an ally against Ella, certainly, if not against some of the visitors. From what Norman had said about them, she gathered that they were of the new rich class, always ready to stand on what they called their “dignity”—others might term it vulgarity—and the absence of their host they might regard as a great offence. Still, much might be forgiven a baronet. No doubt Violetta would be looked upon as the chief culprit, and she was ready to defend herself if need be.

She chanced to look at Norman. He had gone very pale and he was gnawing his lower lip nervously. He evidently dreaded the coming conflict. Violetta was puzzled. It was unaccountable that he should be in such terror of his sister.

The song ended in a prolonged note, loud and shrill,

and the accompanist's concluding chord was drowned in uproarious applause. Norman still hung back.

"We'd better face the situation," whispered Violetta. "We've got to do it some time, you know."

Her steady voice and her composed manner gave him courage. They entered before the clamour died away. Some of the audience were eager for an encore, which, without a doubt, would have been granted, but for the distraction caused by the unexpected appearance of the two truants. Every eye was turned in their direction, and Violetta did not fail to note the glare of annoyance thrown at her by the vocalist.

Ella hastened to her brother. She looked unmistakably angry.

"Don't make your apologies just yet, John," she whispered snappishly. "Mrs. Willoughby Smythe is going to sing again. So like you, to come at the wrong moment."

Of Violetta she took not the slightest notice.

But Mrs. Willoughby Smythe had no intention of obliging again. She kept her stony stare fixed on Violetta and then deliberately turned her back—there was a good deal of the latter on view. She was a tall fair woman, with a well-developed—almost *too* well-developed—form, and she was undeniably handsome, but of a type more fleshly than refined. Her complexion was artistically laid on, and herein she showed discretion. It was not overdone. Her age was probably not less than thirty.

Violetta classed her at once. She had seen many like her in Paris, on the race course, and at the Folies Bergère. Her prototype was familiar at Monte Carlo. These women were out to make money not by their wits but by the exhibition of their charms. But anyone less

like the orthodox spiritualistic medium could hardly be conceived. What was she doing in that *galère*? Violetta looked at her with considerable curiosity and decided that her interest in the Norman household was deepening.

Norman knew one or two of the visitors and greeted them politely. Then Ella took him in charge and introduced him to others, coming finally to Mrs. Willoughby Smythe, who with her back still turned to the company generally, was apparently absorbed in turning over a pile of music.

"Mrs. Willoughby Smythe," said Ella in her high-pitched voice, "I want to introduce my brother to you."

The lady wheeled round slowly and fixed a somewhat hard smile on Sir John. The latter bowed without saying a word.

"I shall leave him to make his excuses for missing your striking demonstration of psychic power."

Ella swished away and the two were left together. No one was very near, and the loud chatter effectually masked their voices. Mrs. Willoughby Smythe waited for Sir John to speak, and he had no alternative but to begin.

"What does your coming here mean?" he asked coldly.

"I wanted to see you again. I wanted your forgiveness. I know I behaved in a very silly fashion, and you must have thought ever so many bad things about me. But, as you must admit, I wasn't wholly to blame."

"Is it worth while to go into the past?" said he. "You took your own course and I suppose you acted according to what you thought was right. I've nothing to say. You can hardly expect me to forgive you."

“Indeed I do. You *must*. Of course, we can’t discuss the matter here. I ask you—I entreat you to meet me, I want to go into an explanation.”

“I’d rather not hear it. What would be the use? It’s all over between us.”

“Indeed it isn’t. How can it be so? You know better than that, John. Don’t make an enemy of me. I warn you.”

Up to this point her voice, which was really musical, was soft and wheedling. It now took on a harshness of which one would hardly have suspected it was capable.

“I don’t desire that we should be enemies, though I’ve ample cause to look upon you as anything but a friend. Still ...”

“When will you meet me, and where?” she interjected.

“You’d better write what you wish to say. I don’t see that any good can come of a meeting.”

“Who’s the girl you’ve been taking for a joy ride?” she burst out with a quiver in her utterance which told of passion raging within her.

“She’s a friend of my sister’s, but it’s no affair of yours.”

“That’s where you make a mistake. It *is* my affair, and you know it.”

“I know nothing of the kind. Of all people in the world, you’ve the least right to criticise what I choose to do.”

She laughed scornfully.

“We’ll see about that later on. Don’t forget that I can if I choose throw a bombshell into this room that you wouldn’t find very pleasant.”

“Nor would you. I can’t imagine you making such a fool of yourself, Christine.”

The lady's eyes were blazing in the effort to control herself, and she compressed her lips until they were little more than a thin white line. She had evidently taken his words to heart. John Norman had unexpectedly shown fight. It was his way. He was not wanting in courage, but it had to be roused by real danger. He was at his best when in a hot corner.

"We'll defer the argument, but all the same it'll have to be thrashed out."

"As you please. For to-night I take it we've said enough."

He bowed coldly and turned away. He was only just in time. One of the women whom he knew had drawn near them and had they continued the altercation she must have overheard their words, for do what they would they could not help raising their voices.

"Has Mrs. Willoughby Smythe been telling the wonderful things she said about you in her message from the other world?" asked the new comer.

"Mrs. Willoughby Smythe has revealed nothing," returned Norman, with a significant glance at the "medium."

"I never remember what I say under the influence. It all goes when the spirit no longer desires to make use of me."

Mrs. Willoughby Smythe had a voice and manner at her command which she employed when speaking of the spirit world, and she became preternaturally solemn and deliberate. She had discovered that nonsense uttered in an impressive tone generally went down as truth. With spiritualism personal conviction is everything.

"Is that really so? Well, that makes it all the more

wonderful. Then you must get your sister, Sir John, to tell you. She says that if Mrs. Willoughby Smythe had known you all your life she could not have been more accurate. I understood from Miss Norman that you and Mrs. Smythe were perfect strangers.”

“Quite true, Miss Alison,” rejoined Norman, with another challenging glance at Mrs. Willoughby Smythe, who remained silent.

“I do hope you’ll give us another manifestation soon, Mrs. Smythe. You won’t be leaving Thames-side yet awhile, will you?” went on Miss Alison.

“I don’t know. I haven’t made any plans. I’m wanted very much in London.”

“Oh you must be. Spiritualism is so interesting whether you believe in it or not. Good-bye. I trust we shall be meeting again before long. Good-bye, Sir John. The next time we have a séance you really must come.”

“I’m a sceptic. I’m afraid my presence would act as a deterrent.”

“You don’t know until you try. I’ve heard of pronounced sceptics being convinced against their wills and becoming fervent believers. It might be so in your case, Sir John.”

“It might,” echoed Norman. “Anyhow, I’m contented as I am.”

He shot the words at Mrs. Willoughby Smythe as he turned aside to shake hands with another departing guest.

The evening was at an end. The end had come about sooner than was expected. Somehow the arrival of Norman and Violetta had broken into the enjoyment and the interruption could not be bridged over. Ella had not an-

ticipated anything would follow the séance, but a reaction had set in after an hour's enforced silence in a darkened room, and music was welcomed.

Violetta was not averse to the exodus. Ella had behaved very rudely towards her and had not spoken. She was being cut severely, but she did not show the least resentment. She could have slipped away without being noticed, but she never moved. She was determined to sit through the drama which was going on at the other end of the room. Not a single word could, of course, be heard, but the faces of Sir John and Mrs. Willoughby Smythe told her they were not indulging in commonplaces.

Violetta had not removed her outdoor costume, but she was in keeping with others in the room. The party was quite an informal one, and only Mrs. Willoughby Smythe in her capacity as medium was hatless. On the whole Violetta was satisfied with her appearance and was perfectly conscious that the sober simplicity of her attire was in effective contrast with the over-gowned and over-jewelled women. Quite at home, she chatted easily with her nearest neighbour, hoping to annoy Ella by her indifference to the slight sought to be put upon her.

But when the last visitor had departed she prepared herself for the fray. She made up her mind she would have no assistance from Sir John who, with a cigarette between his lips, was walking restlessly about the room, but this did not matter. She could always fight for herself.

Ella came up to her boiling with emotional rage. She could only control herself sufficiently to ejaculate one word which escaped her like a pellet from a popgun.

“Well!”

“Well—what?” was Violetta’s retort.

“What? What explanation have you to offer of your extraordinary conduct?”

“Extraordinary conduct? Please, Ella, spare me. I never was good at guessing riddles.”

“No? Well, I think I can guess yours. I call it most disgraceful.”

“Call what most disgraceful?”

“Your motoring about all day with John and returning at this time of night.”

Norman interposed.

“Come, now, Ella, be fair. What has Violetta—?”

“Violetta? I suppose you mean Miss Vaughan.”

“I said Violetta, and I mean Violetta. If you’re going to work yourself into a passion over anybody, please select me. I’m used to your hysterical outbursts, she’s not. If there’s any blame—which I flatly deny—I’ll take it. But, good Heavens, do you suppose I’m to be talked to as though I were a school boy? Don’t answer, Violetta. There’s nothing for you to answer.”

Norman’s sudden show of spirit both surprised and pleased Violetta.

“I quite agree with you, Sir John,” said she.

“Sir John? Why not John—or *dear* John. I’ve no doubt it was *dear* John and *dear* Violetta on your joy ride.”

“Oh, you’re simply impossible,” cried Norman, waving his hand at Violetta to signal her to keep silence though he need not have troubled himself. She was quite contented to shrug her shoulders and allow him to carry on the contest single handed. She was curious to see whether he would hold his own.

“Impossible, am I? Then what are you? The story will be common talk all over the place to-morrow. There’s nothing the people down here like better than scandal. I begin to think there’s a good deal of truth in what Mrs. Willoughby Smythe said while she was in a trance.”

“Mrs. Willoughby Smythe in a trance! That’s too funny. But I’ll have no more of this nonsense. It’s absolutely silly. I apologise to you, Violetta. I’m sorry my sister has made such an exhibition of herself.”

“I’m sorry too, but it’s not of the least consequence excepting that I regret I’ve been the cause of so much trouble between you. However, I can easily put an end to it. To-morrow morning I return to London.”

“I should think so, indeed,” almost shrieked Ella, who was not to be appeased while her nerves were in tumult.

“I wish you good-night, Sir John, and thank you—not only for the ride but for what you’ve said just now in my behalf.”

Violetta did not show the least discomposure. Norman, anticipating her, moved swiftly to the door, opened it for her, and held out his hand as she passed.

“You’re quite right to leave the house, but it’s not going to mean a parting between us,” said he in a low voice.

“I don’t see why it should. Good-night once more.”

Then she vanished. She had caught sight of Ella’s face white with fury. But for this she did not care a button. She had roused Norman’s latent energy, and this was everything.

“I’ve always said you were a fool where women were, John,” burst out his sister. “If I’d thought Violetta’s object in coming here was to make love to you I’d never have invited her. Yet I might have known what would happen.

At school she was always getting other girls into scrapes and escaping blame herself.”

“Look here, Ella, I’m not in the mood to quarrel with you, either about Violetta or anybody else. Good-night.”

He walked off to Ella’s intense disgust. She had worked herself into a volcano of rage and was eager to vent it upon her brother. But it would keep. She had seen John many a time before slip out of a wrangle by a judicious retirement. It was his way of admitting his defeat. She could not believe that his precipitous retreat meant any more than his usual flight.

The next morning Violetta was up betimes. She always got on well with servants as she never assumed airs and was generous with her tips. She easily persuaded a housemaid to go out and arrange for a taxi to come for her and her luggage. She refused breakfast and accepted only a cup of tea. She was anxious to get away as soon as possible, and so avoid an encounter with Ella, which would have been an unprofitable waste of time. As for Sir John well, she didn’t particularly want to see him. She was still in the same mind about renting the Owl’s Nest, but he had given her the name and address of his solicitor, and she could easily arrange the matter through the lawyer.

No one was in the dining-room when she went in. The cook was scandalised at the idea of so nice a young lady going away breakfastless, and on her own responsibility had added an egg and bread and butter to the cup of tea. She was indifferent to what her mistress would say, but there was little risk of her knowing anything about it, as after one of her outbursts of nerves Ella usually remained in bed half the next day.

Violetta swallowed the meal hastily lest Norman should come in and delay her. The early morning is always an unfavourable time for discussing embarrassing questions. One is rarely strung up to the proper pitch, and she was thankful he did not make his appearance.

Before nine o'clock she was at the station, where she found she had half an hour to wait for the train.

For ten minutes or so she walked up and down the platform and was about to sit down when she saw Norman emerge from the booking office and look about him. Directly he caught sight of her he came forward rapidly.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, raising his hat, "you flitted away like a ghost. You hadn't been gone a minute before I came down. I wanted to have a word with you. I didn't think you would be off so early. You needn't have been in such a hurry. Still, I'd rather talk with you here than in the house. Whether sleeping or waking, Ella's spirit somehow is always pervading the place. What did you think of the unpleasantness last night?"

"I've forgotten all about it. On the whole, it was rather amusing. You see, I knew Ella of old. Perhaps it was as well we came to grips at an early stage. We were bound to have a row sooner or later."

"Yet knowing this you ventured to come."

"Yes, I ventured to come."

"Why on earth did you?"

"I had so pleasant a recollection of my stay at Normanhurst I was tempted to repeat the pleasure. Of course, I hadn't the slightest idea things had so changed. Your losses don't seem to have affected you so much as they have Ella. She has become frightfully tetchy, and much more difficult to deal with than she used to be."

“Beastly difficult. I wish to goodness she’d marry the young fool she’s engaged to, and let me run alone. But”—his manner had become a little hesitating—“when I asked you what you thought of last night I hadn’t Ella in my mind. Like the poor, she’s always with us, and I don’t believe she’ll ever alter. What I wanted to know was your opinion of—of Mrs. Willoughby Smythe?”

“Does my opinion matter?”

“It matters very much—to me. You strike me as so level headed, Violetta, that I feel almost inclined to—” he broke off, reddening. “Yes, I want your opinion of her—candidly.”

“What one woman thinks of another is bound to be prejudiced and possibly unfair.”

“But often bitterly true.”

“Well, as I presume what I think can be of no consequence to you one way or the other, I’ll venture to speak my mind. I don’t know, of course, anything about her as a spiritualistic medium—she may be genuine, she may be a fraud—but in other respects—by the way, are you interested in her?”

“In a fashion I suppose I am.”

“Then please let me off saying anything more. I’d rather not.”

“But you must. I’ve my reasons for asking.”

At that moment the screech of an engine was heard. The London train was approaching.

“I can only look upon her in the light in which one woman always regards another, though perhaps she won’t confess it. I should say to a man who was thinking of marrying her, remember Punch’s advice—don’t.”

Norman did not at once reply. His expression was

sombre; his eyes fixed on space. A second screech from the nearing engine recalled his wandering senses.

“Advice which generally comes too late to be of any good,” said he. “You may be right about Mrs. Willoughby Smythe. She has the reputation of being a reckless gambler and can never resist betting on horses. She is of a class whom I’ve come to detest.”

“Then you know her?”

“No one better. She happens to be my wife! There, it’s out. I wanted to tell you but I hadn’t the pluck. Good-bye. Are you still fixed on taking the Owl’s Nest?”

Violetta stood mute. The unexpected confession had paralysed her. Before she had recovered herself the train was slowing down at the platform. There was no time to express astonishment or sympathy—if sympathy was required. All she could do was to reply to his question.

“Yes”—she forced herself to say—“I shall call on your lawyer as soon as I get back to town.”

“I’m glad—I’m awfully glad. I don’t want to lose sight of you. I won’t. Good-bye—and good luck.”

The next minute she was in the carriage and the train bore her away. Norman, hat in hand, waved her a farewell.

CHAPTER XI

PETER GUMLEY, THE TRAINER

A pleasant undulating bit of country is that part of Sussex known as Holberry Down. Long stretches of fine turf on a chalk bottom alternate with sweet smelling pines and firs, which flourish healthily on the strips of sandy soil to be found, by some odd geological freak, stuck here and there among the chalk. As fine a place for a morning gallop as one could find in all England, and no wonder that experienced judge of horseflesh Peter Gumley, selected it as an ideal place for a training-stable.

Peter Gumley was a man who had been used to horses ever since he had been out of the cradle. He was quite sixty years of age, but looked no more than forty, thanks to his early hours at night, his equally early hours in the morning, and his regular and abstemious life.

He was stoutly built, slightly bowed about the legs, as most horsey men are, and with a quiet resolute face. His hair was closely cut, and of a gingery hue, and he had a slight fringe of whiskers, corresponding in colour to his hair, on the edge of each cheek. He always dressed very quietly, generally in a tweed suit of a sort of snuff tint, and wore a white pique scarf with a big diamond pin—

the gift of some grateful patron—blazing in the centre.

Just now there was an irritable expression on his rosy gills as he walked from the big stable yard into the neat garden which surrounded his house, a plain, square, uncompromising sort of building, dull brick with a door in the centre, a window each side and three windows upstairs.

The house had originally belonged to a farmer, and was even uglier than it was now, for Mrs. Gumley Peter's wife, having a fancy for flowers, had trained a wisteria, a passion flower and a clematis over the front, and this side of the building, at all events, was pleasant to the eye.

Mrs. Gumley herself was standing within a little latticed porch, which projected about a foot from the door, and watched her husband enter the garden and walk towards her down a neatly trimmed box-edge path.

"Well, Peter," said she, enquiringly.

"I'll have no more of it. I've given him a clout on the ear and sent him packing."

"Oh, Peter, the best rider in the stable!"

"And the worst boy—the worst every way 'cepting when his legs are across the saddle."

"I suppose it could not be helped," said Mrs. Gumley, regretfully. She was a buxom, good-natured dame, with rather a soft heart, and was at least ten years younger than her husband.

"Be helped! Of course it can't! Look here, Mary, this is the third time that boy has got drunk, and his sixteenth birthday only last week."

"I know he's a little weak-minded, but I'd ha' given him another chance if I'd been you."

"Chances!" exclaimed the trainer irritably. "He's had

more chances than any boy I've ever had in the stables. And as for his being weak-minded, why, that only makes the thing worse. What's to prevent him being laid hold of by any of the scheming blackguards who are always on the look-out for a 'weak-minded' boy, and selling us? A boy who begins by drinking 'll end in hoccussing."

"Oh, Peter! I'm sure Tim would never do such a dreadful thing!" returned Mrs. Gumley, looking scared.

To her "hoccussing" a racehorse was worse than burglary, forgery, or arson. It ranked next to wilful murder.

"Well, I hope not; but see here—who do you think give him the drink?"

"Law me! how should I know?"

"Barney Moss, that Jew chap, who's been stopping at the 'Barley Mow' for the past fortnight, and whom I've seen hanging round the stables no end of times. He's here for no good, Mary."

"That's true. Well, I'm sorry for Tim Hollis. Such a nice looking boy, too!"

"He's got a bad strain in him, take my word for it. Anyhow, he's gone, and on the whole I think the place is well rid of him."

And Peter Gumley stepped into the house and sat down in the cool little sitting-room, where he took off his hat and mopped his heated brow with a blue bordered handkerchief.

It wasn't often that Peter Gumley allowed himself to be so excited. To tell the truth, he had a sort of sneaking liking for the erring Tim Hollis, and it put him out terribly that the lad should have gone wrong. But his duty was clear before him. Splendid rider as the boy was, and fully acquainted as he might be with all the ins and outs

of the string of colts at present lodged at Holberry Down Farm, it was not safe to keep him, and go he must.

And go he did, and there he was, with a slouching gait, in a dusty road that crossed the Downs into Normanhurst village, leaving so far as he knew Holberry Down for ever.

He was rather a sturdy lad for a stable-boy, who is generally undersized and wizened looking. He had ruddy cheeks and a thick shock head of red hair. He was, as Mrs. Gumley had said, a nice looking boy, but to a judge of character the face was spoilt by a weak mouth and chin, and somewhat heavy brows. The features, indeed, were contradictory. They betokened a mixture of obstinacy and irresolution. Tim Hollis's life depended upon the people he associated with, and upon those who had an influence over him for good or for evil.

Just now he had a sullen look upon his face, and as he moved slowly along, almost dragging one foot after the other in the thick dust, his hands in his pockets, and chewing a straw between his teeth, even good Mrs. Gumley must have admitted there were few signs of penitence and remorse about him.

It did not much matter where he went. He knew he should find occupation wherever horses were, and so he did not trouble. Indeed, his mind was occupied with thoughts of revenge, and when this feeling takes possession of one there is not much room for anything else.

"Peter Gumley might have treated me better, considering what I know. But then, Gumley doesn't know what I know. He'd have done differently if he had; that cuff of the head what he give me stopped my mouth. I'd ha' told him why Barney Moss made me tipsy last night, if

he'd spoke to me fair. Now I shan't."

Tim Hollis strode on moodily, and the straw in his mouth became shorter as he nibbled bits and spat them out of his mouth.

Another quarter of a mile and he would be on the top of the downs and be looking over Normanhurst.

The downs rose by a very gentle inclination, but the gradient of the old road years ago had been found too steep for carriage traffic, and so a road had been cut skirting the acclivity, and thus securing a fairly level piece of driving.

Just where the fork of the upper and lower road was situated, there was a grassy bank at the foot of which bubbled a spring of clear water. It had been cut into when the lower road was made, and there it was, sending up hundreds of gallons a day which were running to waste.

Tim was thirsty. He laid himself down on his stomach, dipped his face in the bubbling spring, and lapped the water like a dog. When he was satisfied and had withdrawn his dripping face he saw a young lady standing near watching him. She was nice to look upon Tim at once decided, with her grey tailor made costume, its short skirt revealing her leather gaiters, and her masculine collar and flowing scarf, and as a well brought up lad used to the fine ladies who crowded the racecourse enclosures, he sprang to his feet and bowed politely. The lady smiled in acknowledgment.

"You drank the water as if you enjoyed it," said she.

"It's all right so fur as water *can* be right. I guess I shan't have a chance of anything else for a goodish time."

"Oh?"

“Down on my luck, miss. I suppose you don’t know of a job going anywhere?”

“What kind of job?”

“Anything to do with ’orses, don’t matter what.”

“You’re used to horses, are you?”

“Just a bit. Bin among ’em ever since I was a kid, an’ before that. I believe I was born in a stable.”

The lady looked at the lad with increased interest. She noted his old-looking, face, his long nose and his thin lipped mouth. She knew the signs.

“Where were you employed?”

“Up at old Peter Gumley’s stables, Holberry Down, across yonder. He gave me the push this morning. The missus would ha’ kept me on—she’s one o’ the best when you know her—but the old man—no. So he fired me.”

“What for?”

“I dunno. He hadn’t got no fault with me as far as my dooties went.”

“What did he find fault with, then?”

“Said I lifted my right ’and too often. P’raps you don’t know what that means, miss.”

“Oh, yes I do. And was it true?”

“Once in a way maybe, but it warn’t my fault.”

“I hope it wasn’t. You’re too young to begin that kind of thing.”

She looked at the lad keenly. He had not a vicious face. Most likely it was as he said. It seemed a pity he should be allowed to drift from bad to worse.

“Look here, boy, I’m going to see Mr. Gumley. Shall I speak to him for you, and ask him to take you back?”

“Thank ’ee kindly Miss, but I’d rather you didn’t. I don’t want to go back. It won’t do me no good.”

“How’s that?”

“‘Cause it won’t. I ain’t sorry to get away. I’d rather work for you, miss.”

“I can’t give you a job that would suit you. I’ve no horses.”

“There might be something else.”

“Do you know anything about gardening or poultry?”

“I guess I do. I’d like ’em for a change.”

“You wouldn’t stay. Before long you’d want to go where there are horses.”

“You might try me, miss.”

“Yes, I might do that, but I won’t promise. Do you know the Owl’s Nest near Weltersfield?”

“Course I do, but there ain’t anybody living there.”

“Oh, yes there is. I am. Come this evening and I’ll see what I can do. Ask for Miss Vaughan. But don’t reckon upon anything for certain, mind.”

“Right y’are, miss.”

The lad brightened visibly.

“What are you going to do meanwhile?”

“Walk about I s’pose.”

“Got any money?”

“Stoney broke, miss.”

“I wonder whether you are,” thought Violetta. “I’ll chance it. I’ve been like that myself more than once. It’s not a nice sensation.”

She gave him a shilling. Tim Hollis could hardly believe his eyes. He spat upon it for luck.

“You *are* a good sort, miss.”

Violetta nodded and went on her way to Holberry Down. She had been at the Owl’s Nest now nearly a month and had worked like a nigger in getting the place

in order. She'd not seen Norman nor heard from him since leaving The Willows. There hadn't been the slightest difficulty in dealing with his lawyer, and she had taken the place for three years. She half expected Norman would have written to her on the settlement of the business, but he had not, and she concluded that after his astounding admission about his marriage, he did not care to do so.

Of her own feelings on the matter she would not allow herself to think. Every day meant such strenuous work that she always went to bed dog tired. She was wholly absorbed in transforming the Owl's Nest according to her own ideas, and with the assistance of a country woman, strong as a horse, and an old man who came in every day she wrought wonders. The change from her indolent life of the past year to one of intense activity suited her restless, energetic temperament admirably and she wondered how she could have endured frittering away her time at Monte Carlo. Still, her stay there had ended advantageously. Without the £250 from the stranger for whom she had acted as a mascotte and whom she set down as a "bookie," she could not have started her enterprise at the Owl's Nest.

What that enterprise was Violetta kept to herself, but it certainly was not poultry farming. Her visit now to Peter Gumley was to be the first step in the furtherance of her plans.

She made her way to the square, unpretending house of the trainer. It was surrounded by a well-kept garden, and the whole was fenced off from the stables and meadows. Any visitor to Peter Gumley who imagined he would have an opportunity of seeing the horses Peter

had under his charge would have been grievously disappointed. Moreover Peter had a vigilant staff of stable helps part of whose duties it was to keep pertinacious racing touts at bay.

Violetta knocked at the door. It was opened by Mrs. Gumley, who was evidently not disposed to make herself agreeable until she was sure of her ground.

"And what may you please want, miss?" said she, after surveying Violetta up and down.

"I want to see Mr. Gumley."

"Aye, an' what about may I ask? I daresay I can manage your business. It's just the same whether you talk to my husband or to me."

Mrs. Gumley's manner was not encouraging. Violetta reckoned her up as an admirable lady Cerberus and worth her weight in gold to Peter.

"I'm sure it is," said Violetta, sweetly. "I'm a new neighbour of yours, but I hope I'm none the worse for that."

"A new neighbour? Yes, and what then?"

"My name's Vaughan. I'm living at the Owl's Nest."

"Be you? I did hear as Squire Norman had let the place. So you're his tenant. I don't want to be uncivil, but I can't see as your living at Owl's Nest makes you any the more welcome. My husband and Sir John bean't the best o' friends."

"Is that so? I'm sorry. I feel I ought to apologise for troubling you, but I'm rather interested in a lad I met in the road just now. He told me he'd been in your employ and had been dismissed, and he seemed so downhearted that I was tempted to take him into my service. Now could you recommend him?"

This was not at all the business which had brought Violetta to the house. She knew the secretive ways of trainers, and saw in the boy an excuse for calling. Otherwise her errand might have been fruitless. It was a stroke of luck, for the mention of the lad awoke Mrs. Gumley's sympathies. She was heartily sorry for him. For all that, she did not lose her caution. After what her husband had hinted about the boy, she was not eager to accept any responsibility. At the same time, she was anxious to do him a good turn.

"So far as I'm concerned, the boy's always behaved nicely. I found him willing and obliging, but of late he didn't get on well with the gov'nor. I'd rather you talked to Mr. Gumley about him."

Violetta desired nothing better, but she showed no eagerness. It was rather the other way about.

"Certainly—if it's not taking up his time. Perhaps he's busy."

"There's always plenty to do here, but I'll see. Step in, Miss Vaughan, and I'll see."

So Violetta followed the good lady into the neat sitting-room, where everything was mathematically arranged, even to the pictures of famous race horses and jockeys and turf celebrities generally, on the walls. Mrs. Gumley dusted a chair, more from force of habit than because it needed dusting, and left her visitor to herself.

Peter Gumley came in. Violetta recognised him at once. He was the man she had seen in the meadow when Norman's car frightened the horses. Mr. Gumley saluted his visitor with his forefinger to his forehead.

"Mornin', young lady. My missus tells me as you're thinking of engaging young Tim Hollis."

"If that's the name of the lad, yes. Is he honest?"

"So fur as money goes, I b'lieve so. Not a bad chap in some ways, but I'm afraid he's got into a queer set. But if you don't run racehorses I guess that set won't have much use for him. Mind you, it's only my suspicions. He drinks a bit, too, but he may give that up if he once gets out with the lot that I'm afraid's got hold of him."

"But he knows horses?"

"Knows a lot. That's where the shame of it comes in. He's got all the makings in him of a first-rate jockey."

"He might suit me, then. I think of buying a race horse."

Peter Gumley stared at the young lady open-mouthed.

"You do, miss? My word! What for?"

"To make money, of course."

"You'll excuse me, but there's no 'of course.' You're just as likely to lose money as to make it. It wants a lot o' capital. If you *must* go in for the turf, you might back a horse so long as you don't risk much."

"I'm not so sure. I've heard it said that it's safer to bet on a horse you know something about than on one about which you know nothing. That's why I say I prefer to own my own racer."

Peter had nothing to say to this. He could only stare again at the young woman who spoke so confidently.

"I wonder, Mr. Gumley, whether you knew my father, Captain Vaughan. He opened a riding school near Regents Park some eighteen years ago, and afterwards ran a sporting club."

"Captain Vaughan! What, are you Frank Vaughan's little girl who used to ride a pony barebacked, when little more than a toddler?"

"Yes, though I don't remember you, Mr. Gumley."

"I don't suppose you do. Well, let's shake hands anyhow on the strength of it. And how's the dad?"

"My father's dead, Mr. Gumley. He was thrown when riding in a steeplechase in France. I warned him against the horse he was on, but it was no good."

"I'll reckon it warn't. Frank Vaughan was bound to have his way if he could get it. He was a rare plucked 'un at going over the sticks, but I told him again an' again he'd do it once too often. Well, well. And so you're going in for the gees, are you?"

"In a small way, yes. I haven't too much coin, but I thought you might have a horse I could buy. Did Mrs. Gumley tell you I'm renting the Owl's Nest at Weltersfield?"

"Aye. It's not a lucky place—leastways, it brought no luck to Sir John Norman."

"He never lived there, I'm told, so I don't see what it had to do with his bad luck."

"P'raps not. Sir John's all right so long as he's not allowed to choose his own friends. He seems bent upon picking up all the rotten ones. It was over one of 'em we fell out—George Godfree. He swore the man was all right 'cause they were chums at Oxford. I knew better, but he wouldn't believe me. As I wouldn't work with Gentleman George Sir John took his horses away from me, and came to grief."

"I've heard about that. It was very silly of him. If I had a string of racers, Mr. Gumley, you should train every one."

"Thankee, Miss Vaughan. I wish you *had* a string of 'em."

“Well, there might be one,” rejoined Violetta, in her most seductive tone. “That is, if you’ve a horse that the owner would sell.”

“What figure are you willing to go to—£1,000?”

“Good gracious, no. I’m not a millionaire—yet. I can’t afford more than £100.”

“Blest if that ain’t a woman all over. She asks for impossibilities, and has a way of getting ’em, too! You’d better have a look at my stables. If you’re as good a judge of horseflesh as you were a rider, you’ll pick out the best of the bunch. But it won’t be a deal at your price. I’ve nothing like that.”

“Never mind, Mr. Gumley. It’ll be a treat to see what you’ve got, all the same.”

CHAPTER XII

VIOLETTA, THE HORSE TAMER

Peter led the way through the house. The back door opened upon the stable yard, spick and span, almost painfully clean. He called to a groom and the man walked behind his master and supplemented when necessary the description given by Peter to the visitor of the pedigree and capabilities of each horse.

Violetta was at once on good terms with the animals. She patted and caressed them, gave them sugar and allowed them to touch her with their noses and satisfy themselves that she was really their friend. Violetta knew well enough how important to horses is the sense of smell.

But the question of buying one, the owner of which might be willing to part with, was a different matter. The lowest price was £500 for a black mare, and Violetta told Peter contemptuously she wouldn't have her at a gift.

"I dunno but what you're right," said the trainer. "She might be the mother of a good horse, but she's no good herself. I'm afeared, Miss Violetta, we can't strike a bargain."

"I'll have to look out for a cab horse of good blood and

fast, but with a little vice which I should have to cure him of," returned Violetta jestingly.

"I've heard of such wonders, but never see one. Well, I suppose we'd better return to the house."

"What's in that farther stable? Sounds like a kicker."

At that moment came a violent thud against the wood-work.

"Kicker's right. He's a beast. Can't do nothing with him. If I could there wouldn't be a horse in the stables as 'ud beat him."

"May I look at the brute?"

The stable was the last of a series. The door was the usual half one, and Violetta looked through the upper open portion.

"Don't go too near, Miss," warned Peter. "There's no knowing what he'll do when he's in a bad temper. How's Belphegor been behaving this morning, Simmons?"

"A bit ratty, sir. Misses the boy, I reckon."

"That lad you think of taking on, Miss Vaughan, was the only one in the place as could do anything with him."

"Really? What are you going to do now the boy's gone?"

"That's a bit of a puzzle. He hasn't been rubbed down since yesterday morning, has he, Simmons?"

"No, sir. Not any of us dursn't go nigh him. Hasn't been out neither. We thought as there might be a bother to get him in again. Sometimes he won't look at his stable. Tim allays had to coax him and sometimes it took him an hour."

Violetta stood silently watching the animal and taking in his points. He was a light chestnut with a white streak down his nose, a combination which gave him a vicious

aspect, which was probably added to by the furtive look in his big eyes. He was not a handsome horse, but was enormously developed in all the muscles which make for speed and strength.

“He ought to be a good stayer,” said Violetta.

“That’s right, miss; but who’s to tell? He’s never yet been fully extended. We did have one trial with young Hollis on his back, and none of the others had a look in. Even then he didn’t show what he could do when put to it.”

Belphegor clearly didn’t like the little crowd staring at him. His ears were laid back, and his fore feet firmly planted. Then he gave an impatient stamp, pawed the ground, two or three times and wheeled round with a nervous switching of the tail.

“Lend me your crop, Simmons,” said Violetta.

The groom was holding a hunting crop, which he handed over hesitatingly and with a glance at the trainer.

“What are you going to do, Miss Vaughan?” cried Peter, as Violetta laid her hand on the bolt of the half door and shot it back.

“Going into the stable,” said she, smilingly.

“Not with my consent. I tell you straight you’re running a terrible risk. You don’t know what the beast is like.”

“Exactly. I want to satisfy myself. It’s a woman’s nature to be curious.”

“That may be, and she sometimes suffers for it. What about Bluebeard’s wives?”

“Bluebeard’s wives don’t concern me. I’m nobody’s wife.”

By this time the bolt was drawn back, and before Peter

Gumley could prevent her, she was a couple of feet inside the stable. The trainer and the groom were about to follow her, but Violetta imperiously waved them back.

“If you don’t want me to come to harm you’ll leave me alone and stay outside.”

“Mercy on us, you don’t seem to care,” cried the trainer, adding to himself, “but she’s right after all. Well, well, good luck go with her.”

So they waited wonderingly while Violetta advanced another couple of paces, calling out softly to Simmons as she did so to shut the door behind her and to keep out of view. She strongly suspected that the horse had his reasons for disliking the groom.

Violetta advanced no further, but stood still as a statue while feeling in her pocket for sugar. She knew quite well that whether with animals or birds it is movement on the part of a human being which startles them and excites their distrust. She had tested the accuracy of this belief, so far as birds and squirrels were concerned, many times in Fontainebleu forest and in the woods at Nice.

Belphegor condescended to look at her. Neither his demeanour nor his attitude was quite so hostile. He stamped his foot once or twice, but he did not bring his hoof down so savagely as before.

“Come along, old chap” said Violetta, softly and caressingly.

The horse was still suspicious, but he was, at the same time, curious. He wanted to decide whether she was a friend or an enemy. Had she moved, the spell she had begun to exercise would have been broken. She was in no hurry, and did not attempt to do more than talk to the horse softly and soothingly. In about a quarter of

an hour Belphegor, his ears perfectly normal, advanced slowly towards her. She waited quietly. He rubbed his nose against her arm, and she patted his neck and stroked his crest. It was a sort of massage and evidently to Belphegor's taste.

Violetta did not believe in whispering some kind of shibboleth in the horse's ear — a performance which some horse trainers used to go through, but in which there is really nothing, so far as the shibboleth is concerned. She whispered, it is true, but what she said was much the same as before, just a few petting words, and she breathed in his nose. Then came the sugar. This completed the conquest.

Just to show she had quite won the affections of the horse, she went on to coax him into the stall to which she had been told he had at times a strong objection, and of which a proof was pretty plain in the shattered boards on one side. This she effected by rubbing his side and flank with the handle end of a hunting crop. He moved under the feel and pressure of the crop in the direction she wanted, and at length she had the satisfaction of seeing him in his stall quite quiet and contented. He even allowed her to tie him up. Then she returned to the door, the horse looking after her. The whole operation had occupied about an hour.

"By the lord, Miss Violetta, if you bean't a wonder," cried the trainer. "What do you think o' that, Simmons?"

"I dunno what to think, master. If I hadn't seen it I wouldn't ha' believed it. What about giving him a rub down now he's in a good temper?"

"Don't do anything of the kind," Violetta cut in imperatively. "I wouldn't answer for his behaviour with any-

body but myself or with the lad you've got rid of. Leave him alone for a bit. Mr. Gumley, I'd like to have a talk with you about Belphegor."

"It's just this," said she, when they were alone. "I've a fancy for buying that horse. He's no good to the owner as he is. None of your men can be trusted to touch him, and he's only eating his head off. What do you think would be a fair sum?"

"I daresay I could get him for £150."

"Too much. A hundred's my figure."

"An' he stood me in at £550. Fact is, Miss Vaughan, the brute's mine. He comes from a good stock—Mountebank, out o' Cutty Sark, and I bought him a thinking as I could break him in. An' so I should ha' done if that urchin Tim hadn't played me false. Tell ye what, miss, you shall have him for £100 and you give me 20 per cent, on all his winnings for the next three years."

"Done, Mr. Gumley. Draw out a little memorandum and I'll take away Belphegor at once."

"The devil you will. How are you going to do it?"

"On his back, of course."

"Then I hope as your life's insured. I may tell 'ee it's all a job to saddle him."

"I expect so. Anyhow, I'll tackle it."

Peter wrote out a memorandum of the sale and its conditions. Violetta, who had made up her mind that she was going to buy something and had come prepared, gave him a cheque and the transaction was completed.

"Before we go any further, Mr. Gumley, just tell me the real reason why you got rid of Tim Hollis and what you mean by saying that he played you false?"

"On the strict q.t., then, miss, I feel satisfied he's been

got at by a gang. Perhaps you don't know I've the favourites for the Two Thou, and Derby in hand, an' knowing what I do know, I've got to guard 'em like the apple of my eye."

"Who's the leader of the gang—George Godfree?"

"Aye. You've hit it fust go."

"I've heard that Godfree was at the bottom of Sir John Norman's losses. But wasn't there someone else behind him?"

"That's so. You know a lot, so I may as well speak out. The man who pulled the wires was Dan Westoby. I don't 'xactly know the rights of the story, but it seems as Sir John Norman and Westoby quarrelled, years ago. Sir John got the best of it, whatever it was and Westoby swore to get his own back an' I guess he did it. It's him as owns Normanhurst now."

"I understand," said Violetta drily. "I'm glad you've told me this. By the way, don't let anybody know you've sold Belphegor to me. Just for the time being I shall lie low and watch the horse. No one will suspect what I'm doing at the Owl's Nest. It's about the last place in the world, I suppose, where one would train a racer."

"You're right there. You may trust me and Simmons too. You've made up your mind then to take on young Tim?"

"Yes. I can't do without him. What about saddling Belphegor?"

"You'd better have a snack o' lunch first. It may take you an hour or more to saddle him, and you'll want summat to work on."

Violetta agreed that the idea wasn't a bad one, and shortly after she was sitting down with the trainer and

his wife before a cold Surrey chicken and a prime Yorkshire ham. When the meal was finished, she went back with Peter to the stables. She stipulated that she was to be left to herself, and the trainer agreed. He brought her a side saddle at which she laughed.

"That's no good. I wouldn't trust myself in a woman's saddle on the back of a horse like Belphegor."

"What! D'ye want a man's saddle?"

"Certainly. Haven't I dressed myself for the part?"

Peter Gumley was a little old-fashioned in his notions. He knew perfectly well that riding straddle-legged was coming into favour with horsewomen, but he did not countenance it. However, he was not going to contradict Violetta, who he could see was bound to do as she liked, and with a shake of the head he brought her a man's saddle, with which she went into the stable.

Belphegor looked round at the sound of the door opening, and at first showed signs of uneasiness, but he must have recognised Violetta, for he let her come quite close to him. She patted and rubbed his neck and let him see the saddle and touch it with his nose and smell it. She was not in the slightest hurry, and every step to familiarise the animal with the saddle was done with the greatest deliberation. Then she patted his back, and in a way went through a form of massage just where the saddle would rest, and in due time when she judged the opportunity had come she gently placed the saddle upon him. He did not show the slightest objection, and cautiously she fastened and tightened the girth but only by degrees.

Saddling had to be followed by putting on the bridle, and this also was done without much trouble. The next

thing was to get the horse accustomed to the new feeling, and with her arm resting on the saddle she walked him slowly about the stable. It was over an hour before she was sufficiently satisfied it was safe to mount him, and the stable being of considerable height, she was able to do this inside.

Then she called out to Peter to open the door, and she rode out looking as gallant a horsewoman as one could wish to see. The trainer was forced to express his admiration.

“But lor, miss, there’s some o’ you women as looks a picture, no matter what you do or wear, and I’m danged if you’re not one of ’em.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gumley. You’ll let me come and see you again, won’t you?”

“Whenever you like, Miss Violetta. You’ll always be welcome. Besides, I shall be anxious to know how Belphegor’s behaving. If you goes on with him as you’ve begun, I may make a bit of money. Who knows?”

“I hope so. But you’ll have to come to the Owl’s Nest. I shall want to consult you.”

“Right y’are. Only too pleased.”

Violetta raised the whip she had borrowed in token of farewell, and rode away at a gentle canter. The horse moved with a delightfully easy free action, and she could even fancy that he was pleased to get away from the trainer’s quarters. It was probable this was so, for Violetta learned afterwards that nearly all the men at the stables had had a go at taming Belphegor, and the notions of the majority were based on cruelty and fatigue to break the horse’s spirit. These attempts had been hopeless failures.

The journey to the Owl's Nest, not excepting the broken winding ascending road to the house, was covered without any mishap. The way was lonely, and out of the beaten track, and nothing like a car or a motor cycle was encountered. Despite her success, Violetta was glad when she had Belphegor safely in the stable she had had prepared for her first purchase. The horse was still highly nervous, and she wanted him to get thoroughly used to her before she would trust him anywhere.

Violetta had a long rest, for her work with Belphegor had been very exhausting. She was lying down in the evening thinking over things when Mrs. Stubbles, the brawny poultry maid, housemaid and cook, and "general utility" domestic announced the arrival of a lad.

"Says, miss, as you told him to call."

"Quite right, Stubbles. Show him in here."

Directly she was alone, Violetta rose and placed a chair near the standard floor lamp, so that the light from the latter should fall upon it, and resumed her recumbent position on the couch.

Tim Hollis shuffled into the room in a shy, shambling fashion, and stood awkwardly, cap in hand, his eyes lost in wonder at the vision of beauty on the couch. He hadn't ceased to think about her ever since she spoke to him in the road. Provokingly charming as she was in her semi-masculine attire, she was still more so, though in a different way, now that she had gone back to her woman's dress.

It amused Violetta and flattered her to see the lad's confusion.

"Sit down, Tim," said she, pointing to the chair under the lamp.

He obeyed, his freckled face reddening to the roots of his hair. Where he was sitting she could study his expression and tell whether he was speaking the truth.

"What have you been doing since I saw you?" said she.

"Nothing, miss."

"That's no answer. How have you been passing the time?"

"Walking about over the downs."

"Have you come across any of your friends—I don't mean any of Gumley's men. Friends from London. Do you understand?"

Tim *did* understand. He saw that the beautiful lady knew something and was not to be taken in. His colour fled, and he fingered the buttons on his jacket nervously.

"I ain't got any friends in London," he mumbled.

"Look here, Tim, whether I take you on depends upon you speaking the truth."

"It *is* the truth, miss, I'm a telling you, s'elp me. I *do* know one or two chaps as live in London, but I don't call 'em friends."

"They've given you money, haven't they?"

"Just a bob or two."

"What for?"

"Only for talking a bit."

"About Peter Gumley's horses?"

"They was allays asking questions an' a bothering me."

"You needn't have answered. You could have told them to go to Jericho. Why did you give away your master's secrets? It wasn't playing the game."

"I know it warn't. Anyhow, I didn't tell 'em much."

"You oughtn't to have told anything. What was your grudge against Mr Gumley?"

Tim did not answer for a few seconds. Then he burst out:

“He wouldn’t let me have a chance with Belphegor. I told him as the horse was the best two-year-old going, but he wouldn’t trust me on him. He put Jack Parsons up once and Jack was throwed like a shuttlecock and broke his leg, and Jack’s the best rider in the stables. For all that, Jack rode him at the A.P. Spring Meeting an’ nigh pulled it off. I love that horse, miss. We’re like two pals, an’ I wanted him at the top of the tree. When I see as Peter was dead set against him I s’pose I did have a drop now and again, an’ it was then that Barney Moss got at me. You can’t drink for nothing nowadays. P’raps Peter didn’t tell you as he give me the sack about two months ago and took me on again?”

“No, he didn’t. How was that?”

“It was this way. I’d been a lifting the right arm too much—was a bit boozed, you know—an’ he said he’d have no more of it an’ off I went. Well, I got worried over Belphegor. I knew as he wouldn’t get his food property. None of the others durst go nigh him, and so the next night I climbs over the fence to look after him. He knowed me fast enough, and he made a noise that woke up Simmons and afore I could do a bunk I was collared, an’—what d’ye think?—accused of burgling!”

“But surely you explained why were you in the stables?”

“*Ra-ther*. Then Simmons, as hates me like pi-son, shifted his ground. He swore that if it wasn’t burglary I was getting at it was something worse—tampering with some of the horses. Old Peter wouldn’t believe it, of me, and when the missus stuck up for me and said I’d done

the right thing by Belphegor, he took me back. But the rest of the stable was all against me. Things went from bad to worse, and then I got kicked out for good. I don't care so much about that. What's bothering me is what'll become of Belphegor."

"I think I can help you there, Tim," said Violetta, rising from the couch. "Come with me."

She was fully convinced that Tim had spoken the truth, and she came to the conclusion that it was a wonderful stroke of luck which had caused her to encounter him at the right moment.

Leading the way to the outbuildings she unhooked a lantern, lighted it, and softly opened the stable door.

No sooner did Tim set eyes on the horse than he shook from head to foot.

"T'aint him," Violetta heard him mutter. "Can't be. Yet t'aint his ghost either. I dunno—"

Belphegor had turned his head and had made a little snorting sound that Tim knew well enough. The next moment he was by the horse, his arms round its neck and Belphegor was rubbing his nose against the lad's sleeve.

Violetta never uttered a word. She understood Tim's feelings and respected his emotion. Under similar circumstances she would have acted in much the same manner—shed a tear or two.

"He knows me, he do. See, Miss?" burst out Tim. "But it beats me to find him here."

"I've bought Belphegor, Tim, and you can stay and look after him so long as you behave yourself and are true to me."

"True to you, miss. I'd fight for you to the last drop o' my blood," said Tim, amid his blubbing.

“That’s enough, Tim, I believe you. After you’ve said all you want to say to Belphegor go to Mrs. Stubbles. She’ll look after you and give you some supper. Be nice to her. She’s one of the best. Perhaps you’d like to have a shake down in the stable along with your pet.”

“That I should, miss.”

“Good. Then you know what to do.”

And Violetta tripped away, leaving Tim in a state of mind best described by his not knowing whether he was on his head or his heels.

CHAPTER XIII

“I'M YOUR WIFE, JACK”

While Violetta was engrossed with her preparations at the Owl's Nest Norman was eating his heart out over his difficulties and chafing incessantly because he could not see a way of escape.

Ella at times irritated him beyond endurance and they were nearer bitter quarrels than they had been at any time of their lives. When she was upset his sister talked violently and at random, and when she criticised Violetta, which she insisted upon doing, it was hard to say whether she was pleased or annoyed at her visitor's sudden departure. It seemed to Norman pretty certain that friendship between the two women was at an end and that there was little chance of a reconciliation.

But did this matter, seeing that he had bound himself hand and foot by his fatal marriage with a woman of doubtful reputation? Looking back he could not explain to himself how he came to be so foolish. But a student of human nature knowing the circumstances and acquainted with Norman's temperament and the skilled devices which Christine had at her command to attract men, would have had no difficulty in solving the prob-

lem. It was really a reaction from the enforced monotony of years which had caused the poor man to shake off his placid and uneventful country surroundings and plunge into the feverish gaiety of smart society life in London. This reaction had been brought about by the death of his wife and the unaccustomed feeling of freedom which had followed.

In nine cases out of ten the sowing of wild oats does no lasting harm to a young man. They are generally the effect of high spirits and exuberant vitality. In youth everything in life is fresh and delightful, and especially our follies. But in the thirties and forties things are different. Women to middle-aged men are not as they appear to men just past their adolescence. Adonis in the insolence of his manhood will make love to all women who come his way and throw them aside with equal facility. And the marvel is that women forgive his fickleness. But let him be past thirty. He is less cruel and more constant than a young man; he takes himself seriously and, what is worse, women take *him* seriously. "He's old enough to know his own mind," is what they think, but is any man old enough for this knowledge where a woman is concerned?

The tragic part of the business is that often times a middle-aged man, after imagining his mind is made up and finding he is mistaken, has not the courage to tell the woman so, and he drifts into a position from which he discovers it is impossible to extricate himself without appearing wholly in the wrong and horribly unjust and unfair to the wife.

It is not the depraved or dissipated who blunder in this way, but the man of honour, the man of good intentions,

and Sir John Norman answered to both. In addition, whether from lack of experience or from his own nature, Norman always believed the best of everyone. So when he ran across George Godfree he was genuinely glad to see him and looked charitably on the fact that Godfree had been sent down from his college under decidedly discreditable circumstances. He wasn't blind to Godfree's deterioration, but this made him the more kindly disposed towards him. The last thing he suspected was that the friend of his youth was deliberately setting himself to work his ruin.

It was not that Godfree had any grudge against Norman. Indeed, he would have preferred to "operate" upon someone else, but the opportunity had come and he justified his treachery by the argument that if he didn't feather his nest by plucking Norman somebody else would. Godfree, in truth, belonged to that variety of rascal who cannot come into contact with anybody with more money than he knows what to do with than he schemes to get it. Godfree, like hosts of others more or less connected with the turf, lived on the capture of "mugs." And he had not lunched and dined and gone to night clubs of a more or less questionable character with Norman half-a-dozen times before he decided that his newly-found friend was a "mug" of the most malleable type. Godfree had a soft job, and he made the most of it with the aid of Christine Davenport, introduced to Norman as a rich American widow. Her wealth existed only in imagination, as Norman was destined to discover.

It may at least be said in justice to Godfree that Norman's marriage with Christine was not in his programme. Mrs. Davenport, however, took the reins in her

own hands. Norman was dazzled, bewildered by her fascinations, assisted by a round of riotous gaiety, and woke up from his spell to find himself united to a lady with expensive tastes and a mania for betting and gambling, with no money of her own and bent only upon spending her husband's. The result was inevitable. When the crash came, and no more coin was forthcoming, she disappeared.

One of the effects of Norman's disastrous experience of life in London was to bring about an intense loathing of everything connected with the turf. It was the turf which had led him to be the prey of Godfree and his brother sharpers. Excepting for the turf he never would have been the dupe of an unscrupulous woman who promised to be a burden to him all her life, but so long as she was quiet and did not trouble him he resolved not to worry, and he tried to forget her existence.

Then Violetta came upon the scene. She had during her visit to Normanhurst strongly impressed him and he was only too pleased to renew the acquaintance at Thameside. His relations with women had been very unfortunate and he thought he saw in Violetta all that was desirable and all that would compensate him for his ill luck. And then the spectre of his wife intruded itself. What was the use of indulging in dreams which could never be realised while Christine was tied to him? The thought had never been absent from his mind while enjoying Violetta's society, and when the spectre suddenly materialised and presented itself in flesh and blood he felt overwhelmed and helpless.

There was, of course, one way out of the difficulty—divorce. He had discovered enough about Christine to

feel pretty sure that he would not have much difficulty in getting evidence. But he dreaded the scandal. He also dreaded the employment of a private detective, the sordid details, the gossip of hotel servants and all the rest of the miserable procedure. And supposing he obtained freedom, what then? Would it help him to win Violetta? Would she marry a man who had made such an utter fool of himself?

But in the meantime it was very plain that he must find out what his wife intended. It could not be from affection that she had sprung herself upon him. He came to the conclusion that he must have a personal interview with her. It was not safe to write. Besides, what with I.O.U.'s the accepting of bills, deeds of mortgage, loans and what not, he had had enough of putting his name to paper.

The difficulty was solved by the reception of a telegram. "Meet me at the Café Nice at one to-day, Christine," it ran. Whether he liked it or not, he would have to go.

The café was crowded. Looking to the right and left he walked slowly along the gangway between the narrow line of tables at the side and those in the centre. He saw the lady sitting at the far end. She had reserved a seat for him. His distaste for the interview was increased by the way in which she was dressed. The fashion was of the latest; the colours terribly obtrusive. He shuddered at the obvious way in which his wife—*his* wife—had set herself to be looked at. She put away the little mirror and the diminutive powder puff when her eyes met his, and she greeted him with a soft giggle which showed all her teeth.

"I was sure you'd come, dear boy. I'll leave you to

order our lunch. You always do it so nicely.”

The “our” jarred upon him, as it was probably meant to do. She had laid such emphasis upon the pronoun. He made no reply, but glanced at the menu and had a brief consultation with one of the ineffable beings who always have smiles at their command. Christine was evidently known at the Café Nice. She chatted affably to the ineffable one who having written down Norman’s order, transmitted it to one of his subordinates to execute.

“What about an appetiser? I’m drinking gin and an-gostura. Have one with me just to show there’s no ill-feeling.”

“No, thanks.”

“How awfully uppish. Don’t put me out. I’ve come in the best of humours. I can soon be ratty—if you prefer it.”

Norman hardly wanted telling. He judged it better to order the *apéritif*.

“Don’t you think I’ve been jolly good to let you alone for a clear three weeks? It’s quite that since I descended upon you at Thames-side.”

“You were always very considerate. May I ask the reason of your seeking me out? You went off without a word, six months ago, and if I remember rightly you took all the money you could find in the place.”

“And precious little there was. It was a clean scoop, anyhow, but I’d a right to it. I’m your wife, Jack.”

“Jack” always sounded horrible on Christine’s lips. Norman winced.

“I don’t forget the unhappy fact. But having gone, why the deuce didn’t you stay away?”

“I suppose a wife has the right to see her husband if

she wants to.”

“And apparently to leave him when the whim strikes her.”

“Well, yes, but a whim isn’t always the cause. Now—
—”

Her reply was cut short by the waiter depositing a dish on the table. Nothing was said for a minute or two. The lady was blessed with a good appetite and *hors d’œuvre*, soup and filleted sole had disappeared before she resumed the conversation. Norman ate slowly and without any relish.

The question as to why his wife had run him to earth was still unanswered. Now and again he glanced at her and decided that handsome as she certainly was, her features had coarsened and her figure had lost a good deal of its elegance. He could guess the cause. His brief experience of married life had told him that champagne and liqueurs had for her too strong an attraction.

Christine was the type of Barbara Villiers as represented by the free and flattering pencil of Lely. But her luxuriant hair was of a golden hue too pronounced to be natural and it was given the lie by her dark brows and grey eyes. The contrast, however, was undeniably attractive and wonderful piquancy was added to her face, especially when she laughed, by what should have been a defect, but which somehow was not. Her left eyebrow was shorter, by nearly half an inch, than the right. Whether this difference was born with her or had been caused by accident was of no consequence. There it was, and it made her face very distinctive.

She had chosen champagne, and a couple of glasses brought a provoking sparkle to her eyes.

“Whatever my faults are, Jack dear, you must own that I’ve always been frank with you. You were under no delusions when you married me. You oughtn’t to have expected I could live otherwise than as I’d been accustomed to. When you came to grief and the supplies stopped I did the best thing for you and for myself by disappearing.”

“No doubt you were ready to look after your own interests.”

“And yours too, you silly, if you’ll only think. If I’d stopped I was bound to run you into debt. As it is you were saved no end of trouble and worry.”

“Admitting that, do you intend to go on providing for yourself?”

“Yes, if you can’t provide for me. We ought to come to some understanding, don’t you think?”

“And it was for this understanding that you sought me out?”

“Well, partly.”

Christine’s cool impudence exasperated Norman almost beyond endurance, but his equable temperament enabled him to maintain his self-control.

“Are you entitled to any consideration? You’ve made no secret that you married me for what you could get, and then, because my means were exhausted—thanks to you and your friends—you ran away. You must think me the biggest ass in creation if you expect I’m going to allow you a single penny. To begin with, it may interest you to know that if anything I’m worse off than when you left me.”

“Rats. You Johnnies can always find coin when you’re put to it,” rejoined the lady, contemptuously. “Just listen

to me. I'm not going to talk sentiment; I don't believe in it—that kind of rot's dead nowadays—I mean business.”

“Thanks. I prefer it so.”

“You do?” she returned hotly. “Then you shall have it, I didn't take long to sum you up, John Norman. You're a bit of a saint, you know. You're awfully careful of what you call your reputation. It would send a cold shiver through you to know you're being talked about and called a fool. I know right enough why you kept your marriage with me a secret. You precious soon discovered that I wasn't the sort of woman who'd get on with your sister. You could see that I'd have the cold shoulder from your highly respectable friends, and so you held your tongue.”

Christine spoke the truth, and Norman inwardly winced. But he agreed with her that there should be no sentiment between them and he steeled himself against any exhibition of weakness.

“You, anyhow, didn't object to the secrecy.”

“Not I. Half an hour of *your* set as your wife and I should be bored to death. As for *my* crowd, why should they care whether I was married or not? Marriage wouldn't make many of them any better than they are. But to you, my dear chappie, marriage is a sort of fetish you bow down to. To come to the point. If you won't allow me a certain sum—weekly, monthly, quarterly, I don't care which—why I must assert my rights, that's all. I shall come back to you as your wife, and if you refuse to receive me I shall apply for restitution of conjugal rights. I don't know in the least what it means, but my lawyer says it's the first step.”

“Does he? I'm afraid you haven't told him all the cir-

cumstances. You'd better go back to him and explain that you ran away from me, and that if anybody was entitled to those rights, it was myself. But I don't intend to take any action in the matter. I don't want you back and I won't have you."

Christine's eyes suddenly blazed, and her cheeks became white, save where the artificial colour had been applied. With her white tremulous lips she was fury personified.

"So that you may console yourself with that bit of a girl you took for a joy ride! I understand."

"Indeed you don't. As for the 'bit of a girl' I refuse to discuss her with you," rejoined Norman, coldly.

"I'm not good enough, I suppose. Very well. I shan't wait for the rubbishy conjugal rights, but shall land myself on you whenever I think I will."

"That means war. I shall face whatever you choose to do. You probably won't like your life for the past six months dug up."

Norman's unexpected show of fight sent the lady into another paroxysm of rage. Her shoulders quivered and her foot beat a tattoo. It was very clear that in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she was as susceptible to sentiment as the majority of her sex. Norman saw quite well that she was intensely jealous and that hatred of Violetta was at the bottom of her threatened campaign.

"My life," she burst out. "What about yours? Two can play at the game of divorce. You won't get rid of me so easily as you think, my lad."

"Very well, do your worst. In the meantime, is it worth while continuing this luncheon any further? I doubt if either you or I have any appetite left. Suppose I call for

the bill. Anyhow, don't let me interfere with your arrangements. If you prefer to stay longer, pray do."

"Thank you for your condescension. It would have been more to the purpose if you'd ordered another half bottle of champagne."

Norman shrugged his shoulders, beckoned to the waiter, told him to add the fresh wine to the bill and bring the latter. The few minutes which elapsed before this could be done were passed in utter silence. Whatever might have been Christine's sensations, Norman's, at all events, were anything but enviable.

The bill was paid, and with a formal bow Norman was about to rise from the table when Christine motioned him to stay. He complied, but remained standing.

"Just a word which I advise you to remember," said she in rasping tones. "In one of our rows over money you were complimentary enough to say you hated women who betted. Is that your opinion now?"

"Yes, stronger than ever."

"Have you asked your new love what has been her experience in such matters?"

"If by my 'new love' you mean the lady you saw at The Willows, I've already told you I refuse to discuss her with you," he replied, his brow darkening.

"I've no desire to discuss her. I only want to tell you that I saw her at the Alexandra Park Spring meeting."

"What of that?"

"Nothing, except that she wouldn't have been there hobnobbing with 'bookies' if she hadn't got a fancy for a flutter. What would you say if I told you that she backed one of Dan Westoby's horses at 35 to 1 and pulled it off? Dan gave her the tip, of course."

“It’s a lie,” he burst out.

“Is it? You’d better ask her. That’s all I’ve got to say. Ta-ta.”

Her lips curled derisively, and with a contemptuous wave of her hand she threw him a kiss. He wheeled round sharply, so that she could not see his face, and walked rapidly out of the café with a sickening feeling creeping over him.

CHAPTER XIV

“VIOLETTA MAY BE NO BETTER THAN CHRISTINE”

What was Norman to think of Christine's words? Dan Westoby had sworn to ruin him, and he had succeeded, but surely it was improbable that he should know Violetta, and equally improbable that she would back horses. He could not recollect a single expression of hers to justify such an assertion. It was all the creation of Christine's malevolence and jealousy. No one knew better than he that his wife had not the least respect for truth when it suited her purpose to tell a falsehood. He tried to brush the calumny aside, but he found it difficult.

He crossed Piccadilly Circus and went down Waterloo Place into St. James' Park. He walked about some time in the quietude, hoping to calm his agitated nerves and dispel his forebodings. In the first he succeeded; in the second he failed.

Norman had never been able to decide whether he had acted wisely or foolishly in telling Violetta that "Mrs. Willoughby Smythe" was his wife. Somehow, the words slipped out before he could stop them, but the confession had enabled him to say that he had acted straightly towards Violetta. Henceforward she would be under no

illusions as to his position. On the other hand, the revelation had completed the history of his folly and he was afraid that so shrewd a young woman must set him down as an utter fool.

This did not trouble him so much as the conviction that he had burnt his boats so far as she was concerned, and that he had nipped their dawning friendship in the bud. As a man with a wife living, he must stand in a totally different light from that which represented him as a widower.

He had thought much over this embarrassment. He would have dearly liked to know Violetta's opinion of him, but he had felt that to call upon her might suggest an erroneous construction. Possibly he need not have been so scrupulous. A man less emotional, less given to introspection, and of a stronger mental fibre, might not have thought twice about it.

But such a man would not have been in love, and this made all the difference. It was really the key to his present inaction. He had in his idle way often dreamed of Violetta during the four years' separation and the unlikelihood of realization had acted rather as a provocative than a check. Gradually, however, these dreams of idealistic happiness had become fewer, and when his freedom came Violetta was but a memory. He never thought to see her again. If ever they did meet, in all probability she would be somebody else's wife.

The unexpected had happened as it has a habit of doing. When that meeting came about it was he who had married. By contrast with Christine, Violetta was perfection, and he was more than ever drawn towards her. But what was the use of dwelling upon the unattainable?

That way madness lay, so he tried to discover a middle road in a sort of platonic love—generally another term for self-deception.

Norman was about the last man in the world who could be trusted to try so hazardous an experiment. He was not impersonal enough. He could not separate himself and his emotions from anything that affected him deeply. Love in the “abstract,” as Sidney Smith’s Scotch young lady termed it, was to him an impossibility, and maybe it was to impose an insurmountable barrier to his own feelings that he had confided to Violetta he had a wife.

He went over all this again and again while pacing the Mall. Christine and Violetta—Violetta and Christine—they danced like puppets through his confused brain, and it was some time before his thoughts settled down into something like order. Violetta, he decided, must for the moment be placed in the background. While he was menaced by Christine he would never have any peace of mind. She must be dealt with at once, and, leaving the Mall at the St. James’s Palace end, he jumped into a taxi in St. James’s Street, and was set down at Gray’s Inn.

Marlowe & Peach, of Gray’s Inn Square, had been the Normans’ solicitors for three generations. There were few family skeletons they could not take from the japanned boxes in their sedate dimly-lighted office with its panelled walls and long narrow windows.

Among these skeletons was Sir John Norman’s foolish marriage. He would have said nothing but for complications with West End tradesmen arising out of debts contracted by Christine in her husband’s name. So when he told Mr. Barlowe, a white-headed, spectacled, solemn-

looking old gentleman—in private life a genial soul with a partiality for old port—that a divorce was in his mind the lawyer was not surprised.

“I should imagine from what I know of the lady that there won’t be much difficulty in getting up a case against her. But it may be an expensive business. Private detectives are like sharks—they’ll swallow all they can get. The worst of that profession is that there’s no check on their charges—no standard of fees. I regard the employment of private detectives as part of the punishment following a breach of morals.”

“That can’t be helped,” rejoined Norman. “I’m desperately hard up—you know that, Mr. Barlowe, as well as, or better than I do—but I must raise the money somehow.”

“Well, there’s no immediate hurry. We can carry on the preliminaries for a time and see how things turn out. Supposing we find a co-respondent who’s a man of means, we might go in for damages. Unfortunately, you can hardly say you’ve suffered material injury in her choosing to go her own way. The court might even consider that you married her with your eyes open, and that a good deal of what followed you might have expected. You had more than arrived at the years of discretion at the time of your marriage. No, I’m afraid there’s little hope of substantial damages. If the worst comes to the worst, you’ll have to sell the last bit of unencumbered land you’ve got—the Owl’s Nest.”

“That would mean turning out Miss Vaughan,” Norman hastily put in.

“Not necessarily. It’s true she’s a quarterly tenant, and a purchaser might think fit to put up her rent at the end of her three years’ agreement. You know she’s got the

place dirt cheap, and but for your explicit instructions we shouldn't have let her have it at £50 a year. It's worth £100 at least, and this is what a new owner would probably want."

"Well, I shouldn't think of selling the place. It would be a breach of faith."

"Would it? Miss Vaughan, I take it, is a friend of yours, Sir John?"

"I hope so."

"She's a very charming young lady. I was struck by her independent and original turn of mind. She's one that a man who wanted a clever wife might easily fall in love with. At the same time, I fancy she wouldn't accept anyone who chanced to offer. She'd pick and choose. Perhaps that's why she's still single. I gather from what she said she's lived in France for some time."

"I believe so."

"Father's dead, she mentioned. I suppose he left her some money."

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Anyhow, she must have some. She's indulging in rather expensive alterations, or additions, I believe they are. Not usual for a quarterly tenant to spend money for the benefit of the landlord."

"Miss Vaughan can do as she likes, I suppose," rejoined Norman, a little tartly. "I gave her full permission. I told her she could pull the house down if she cared to do so."

"Oh, did you? That was showing unusual confidence in the lady."

Mr. Barlowe gazed penetratingly through his gleaming spectacles at his client a second or two and then remarked irrelevantly as it seemed to Norman:

"I had a visit from your sister the other day about some of her investments."

"Yes."

"She enquired whether the Owl's Nest was still vacant."

Norman looked suddenly uncomfortable beneath the microscopic eye of the lawyer.

"Why did she want to know? It's no affair of hers," broke out Norman angrily.

"So I thought. I gave her a general answer. Several people were after it I led her to believe."

"Thanks for your discretion, Mr. Barlowe. The fact is Ella knows nothing about my having let the place to Miss Vaughan."

"That was my impression. Now, Sir John, I want to give you a word of caution. These divorce proceedings sometimes turn out quite differently from what one expects. To be successful you must go into court with absolutely clean hands. The King's Proctor—"

"Dash it all, Mr. Barlowe, what are you driving at. Surely you're not insinuating.—"

"I'm not. It isn't my fashion to insinuate. I find it better to speak plainly. What I wish you to understand is that if there is anything between you and this extremely attractive young lady—"

"Well, there isn't. You may take my solemn word of honour."

"I do. But this is where the point comes in—you mustn't act as if there was. Circumstances, harmless situations, words, can be so twisted as to make white appear black. It is to the interest of the King's Proctor and his agents to bring about this twist. You evidently take a

great interest in Miss Vaughan. While these proceedings are pending, I should advise you to give the Owl's Nest a wide berth."

"I've not been near the place since Miss Vaughan took up her quarters there."

"So much the better. You've begun rather unfortunately by not saying anything about Miss Vaughan to your sister."

"There were reasons why I shouldn't, since we had already had a quarrel about her."

"Indeed? Perhaps you'd better tell me all about it. I mustn't be kept in the dark you know, and have a surprise sprung upon me."

Norman had no alternative but to go over the story of the alleged "joy ride" and of the unlucky encounter the same evening with his wife, not forgetting the assertion of the latter a few hours previous that she had recognised Violetta as having been at the Alexandra Park races.

"I told her she lied," concluded Norman, "but you see she has grounds for making herself unpleasant."

"Deucedly unpleasant," said the lawyer gravely. "If, as you say, Miss Vaughan is nothing to you, why not tell your sister she is your tenant? It would save disagreeable innuendoes being drawn."

"I daresay it would, but I know Ella and you don't. If I opened my mouth to her, the first thing she'd do would be to go to the Owl's Nest and there'd be a precious shindy between the two women. Besides, I promised Miss Vaughan I shouldn't let Ella know."

Mr. Barlowe shrugged his shoulders and took a pinch of snuff.

"Well, we must hope for the best. While we're making

enquiries about Lady Norman you must lie low. No visits to Miss Vaughan—that would be absolutely fatal. Not even a letter.”

Norman went away with the lawyer’s warning in his ears, by no means comfortable, it seemed to him he was in a cleft stick, for the very steps he was taking to get rid of his matrimonial burden were increasing the obstacles in the way of his cementing his friendship with Violetta Vaughan.

But one thing was paramount. He must free himself from his matrimonial shackles.

He had not much faith in Mr. Barlowe when it came to a descent into the sordid and tortuous ways of life’s underworld. Spying out the antecedents of a lady meant wholesale bribery, listening at keyholes, so to speak, interviewing servants, always the source of gossip and scandal. Mr. Barlowe was far too respectable for this sort of thing. He always fought shy of criminal business and police courts generally.

“I hate doing it, but there’s no other way,” thought Norman. “I’ll have to employ some of the gentry who dignify themselves by the name of private enquiry agents.”

Of course, he knew none, and it was doubtful if Mr. Barlowe knew any either, but he wasn’t going to test the old solicitor’s knowledge of the seamy side of London life. He was quite sure that Barlowe would discountenance his contemplated action.

Meanwhile, he had strolled back to Piccadilly Circus. He was so absorbed that he hardly knew where he was going, and when he discovered where his wandering steps had borne him he paused.

It was far too near the Café Nice. For all he knew he might run against his wife, and this was about the last thing he desired. He turned into that somewhat grimy and uninteresting thoroughfare Sherwood Street, but this led to no place in which he was interested. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the Bodega in Glasshouse Street would help him.

In his racketty period of married life with Christine the Bodega was one of his houses of call. He had got to a nodding acquaintance with some of the miscellaneous crowd who foregather in the various resorts of the establishment.

"I'll swear I'll get the information I want out of one of the seedy bounders who were always so ready to drink at my expense," he thought.

Hanging about the door of the Bodega was a shabby, unshorn nondescript whose red nose and pallid cheeks betrayed his besetting passion. He was selling matches and he held out a box to Norman as the latter was brushing past.

"If it's not taking a liberty, Sir John," said the man apologetically, and with a finger to his greasy bowler, "may I ask you to buy a box? I've come down a bit since you used to tip me for fetching you taxis."

"Oh? I don't recollect you."

"Course you don't, sir. I'm Alf Richards. I did a bit o' touting for you and Mr. Godfree. I was useful then picking up news from the stable about the cracks."

"I think I've a glimmering of a remembrance of your face. Things haven't gone well with you."

"Bally bad, sir."

Norman pulled out a shilling. Mr. Richards accepted it

gratefully, and his watery eyes became still more watery.

“By the way, Richards,” said Norman, “I wonder whether you can help me in a little matter.”

“Only too pleased. Don’t often get a job nowadays.”

“Well, it isn’t what you may call a job. I want to get on the track of a certain person, and I thought of employing a private detective. Do you know of anybody who does that kind of thing?”

“You’ve come to the very shop, Sir John. I’ve done a good deal in that line myself.”

Norman looked very doubtful. Alf Richards was such a disreputable person in his appearance. His speech and manner, however, were the reverse. At some time of his life he must have mixed in fairly decent society.

But Norman hesitated. Christine was certain to go her own way, restitution of conjugal rights notwithstanding. She passed her time chiefly at swell restaurants. Alf Richards was hardly the man who could shadow her at fashionable haunts. He hinted at something of the kind.

“Well, that’s true, sir, but there was a time when I knew them all; ah, and the waiters looked after me, too. I always gave them good tips. Put me in a decent suit and I don’t think I’d disgrace you. It would cost you less than if you went to a professional firm. They’d run you up a big bill before you could say knife.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Give me a chance. Do you suppose I like this kind of life? Maybe I do go in too much for the cheerful glass, but what would you expect? It’s the only pleasure I get. If I was sure of a regular sum per week—I shouldn’t want much—I’d keep myself straight and not disgrace you.”

Norman’s good nature and his capacity for believing

the best of everyone came to the rescue of Alf Richards.

"We'll go downstairs and talk over the matter," said he.

"I'm not fit company for you, sir, as I am," hesitated Richards.

"Oh, hang that. Come along."

They descended into the Bodega's lower regions and Norman ordered drinks. Then he explained what he wanted.

"I don't see much difficulty, sir," said Richards. "Mrs. Davenport isn't quite unknown to me. I've seen her lots o' times on the race course."

"No doubt. Well, the first thing you'll have to do is to make yourself fairly decent. Suppose you get yourself a rig out. Here's a £10 note. I daresay you know how to lay it out to the best advantage."

"I guess I do, sir."

Alf Richards handled the flimsy piece of paper Norman gave him as though it were a priceless treasure. His eyes glistened and he folded it up with the greatest care.

"Now you won't let me down, I hope," said Norman. "It's a vital matter to me."

"I understand, sir. I'll do my best and if there's anything to be found out I'll have it. I've had to worm myself into the secrets of many a racing stable before now, and if I chose to open my mouth—well—that kind of thing wants a bit of doing. T'other's child's play."

Mr. Richards drew a long breath and winked. The drink had oiled his tongue, to say nothing of the sight of the tenner and he plunged into a series of reminiscences to which Norman listened languidly.

Suddenly he heard Richards mention the name of "Captain Vaughan," and he pricked up his ears. He had

Violetta in his mind at that moment. Her father, as he knew very well, was Captain Vaughan. It might be only a coincidence that Richards should also know a Captain Vaughan, but it interested him, all the same.

“What Captain Vaughan are you talking about?”

“Why, Captain Vaughan who ran the Beak Street Sporting Club. One of the best. I was awfully sorry to hear of him coming to grief over the sticks. He ought not to have tried that fun at his age. But if he’d made up his mind to do a thing he’d do it, and the devil take the consequence. His handsome daughter takes after him.”

Norman stared at the man, and hardly dared to ask him any more questions. But the impulse was too strong.

“Do you know his daughter?” said he in a voice of suppressed excitement.

“Miss Violetta Vaughan? I should think I do. A clever girl and, like her dad, one of the best. The way she managed the canteen and kept the boys in order was a marvel.”

Norman felt a sinking at the heart. There could be no doubt that Alf Richards was speaking the truth. But Violetta, the manageress of a drinking bar at a sporting club! The idea was horrible.

“What’s become of her?” he ventured to say, putting on an air of indifference.

“Oh, I fancy she’s tumbled on her feet. The club went smash and she went off with the Captain to France. What they did there I don’t quite know, but it was something to do with the turf.”

“Have you seen her since her return from France?”

“Once. It was quite by chance. At the A. P. Easter meeting. She was all there, I can tell you.”

“All there? What the devil do you mean by ‘all there?’”

“Why, making a book, of course. She pulled off a real good thing. Backed ‘Daughter of the Mist’ at thirty-five to one and scooped. I made fifteen quid—thanks to her tip. She must have known something, though she swore—well, she didn’t swear, she’s too much of a lady—she didn’t.”

“Are you sure you’re right? You’re not telling me a fairy tale just to make out how clever you are?” gasped Norman.

“Not likely. Why should I? It’s all gospel truth, and if I didn’t know how lucky she was in the old days in spotting winners, I wouldn’t have believed it myself. You see, ‘Daughter of the Mist’ is one of Dan Westoby’s horses, and Dan and his gang were up to some tricks over her. It was their game to work long odds and, by thunder, they brought it off though the filly was nearly beaten at the post. I don’t understand how Miss Vaughan got to know, unless she was in with Westoby’s boys. But that’s impossible.”

The more revelations Richards unfolded the worse the thing became. Norman could listen to nothing further. He sat still as a statue staring into space.

“When I find out anything about Mrs. Davenport how shall I let you know?” said Richards, breaking the silence.

“Mrs. Davenport,” repeated Norman, blankly.

“Yes. That was her name, you said.”

“Oh, of course,” rejoined the baronet, rousing himself. “Write to the Corinthian Club, Coventry Street.”

“All right, sir. I won’t lose a minute. Any other instructions?”

“No. You know what to do.”

Norman rose abruptly. He was overwhelmed by what he had heard. He nodded to Richards and strode out, feeling like a man who had awakened out of a pleasant dream. He was at that moment incapable of coherent thought, and it was not until he had to face the busy traffic of Regent Street that he got back to stern reality.

“So Christine was right,” he muttered. “It’s appalling what women can do in the way of deception. For anything that I know, Violetta may be no better than Christine!”

CHAPTER XV

HOW A MAN LOOKS AT IT

Violetta, Belphegor, and Tim Hollis before long became the best of friends. It wanted a little patience so far as the horse was concerned for his temper had been thoroughly spoilt by bad usage and the stupidity of some of the grooms in Peter Gumley's stables, and possibly by those who had had the training of him when a yearling and before he came into Peter's possession. The animal was naturally highly nervous and had been made more so, thanks to being continually thwarted and thrashed. At the sight of a riding whip he either became rebellious or shrank from it according to his mood.

"Well, what do you think of him now, Tim?" said his mistress, "Good enough for the Two Thousand?"

"Oh, he's good enough so far as his legs go," returned Tim cautiously, "it's when he comes to mix up with the other gees that he mayn't be trusted. You see Miss, ever since I knowed him he's had a fancy for hugging his horses. It always wanted a bit o' doing to get him to break away and show what he could do by himself. Do you understand what I mean, Miss?"

"Perfectly, Tim. But that was in the bad old days. I

shouldn't be surprised if he hadn't felt a sort of protection in the company of his own kind. I believe horses are very much like human beings—you and me—for instance."

"That's what I believe, too, Miss," returned Tim, touching his forelock quite pleased at Violetta classing him with herself.

Belphegor had been brought out to show his paces and had just done a sprint of a quarter of a mile under Tim's skilful jockeying. The lad had extended him fully, short as the distance was. The horse was now standing as quiet as a lamb with a cloth thrown over his back. He certainly was in superb condition, and somehow did not look so ugly as when Violetta saw him on the A. P. course.

"I bed your pardon, Miss, for a sayin' what's in my mind," went on Tim with an apologetic cough.

"Say anything you please, my lad, I don't mind."

"That's what I like about you, Miss Violetta. You don't snub me as Peter an' his lot was always doin'. Not much good then my trying to have a say. I was told to shut up an' mind my own business. As if 'orses wasn't my business. Oh, good lor!"

"Well, you're not at Peter's now so get a move on with what you were going to tell me."

"It was just this. You'll have to train Belphegor with other 'orses. He'll only show what he can do when he's runnin' against them. A thing as is easy he don't care for."

Violetta tapped her riding boots thoughtfully with her whip. She looked a very attractive picture in her masculine dress, and the regular hours, the out door life, and the bracing air of the Owl's Nest with its elevated posi-

tion, had given her cheeks a glow of health she had never had before.

“Well, what do you suggest,” said she presently.

“Buy a couple more gees, Miss.”

Violetta laughed.

“Gees cost money. Can’t be done. Think of something else.”

But Tim couldn’t. He was only able to scrape the sole of one boot on the upper of the other.

“I suppose I must think of something for you. What about taking him back to Peter Gumley?”

Tim’s face fell.

“What, sell him? Ain’t you satisfied with me? I’ve done my best with Belphegor, s’ttruth, an’ the ’orse knows I have.”

“Don’t look so distressed, Tim,” said Violetta gravely. “You’re all right, and so is Belphegor. But I’m thinking if Peter Gumley saw him now and saw you as well that he’d alter his mind about you both. Peter’s not a bad sort.”

“I never said he was. It’s that beast Parsons, his stud groom, as I could never get on with.”

“That’s so. Well, I’ve reason to know that Parsons has been fired. He was found out robbing his master—altering the corn bills and so on. Things are not quite the same at Holberry Down as they were when you were there. I had a talk with Mr. Gumley the other day, and I put out a feeler after I told him how straight you’d been running. The fact is he’d be very glad to have you back.”

“Well, Miss, I’m not goin’. I’d rather stay here that’s if you’ll keep me on.”

“It’s this way. It’s for the sake of Belphegor that I think

you ought to go to Holberry Down—you and the horse too. He can't get the proper training here. The ground's not suitable. What's the good of a quarter of a mile or even half a mile to a great brute like Belphegor? Why he only gets fairly into his stride when he's a couple of hundred yards from the winning post. You said yourself he wasn't being done justice to as he is."

"Yes—but—"

Tim shuffled his feet again and looked down at his toes.

"Well, what is it? What's your objection?"

"I know it 'ud be a good thing for Belphegor—so long as I was with him, but—well it's myself I've got in mind. I'm a bit afeared of the crowd at the Barley Mow. Barney Moss 'ud be hanging about again if he once heard I was back at Peter's."

"Then you mustn't go near the Barley Mow. Promise me that."

"Of course I will. I only hope as I'll be able to keep my promise. I'll try, Heaven help me. I *will* try," burst out Tim passionately.

"I'm sure you will. I'll ride over to Mr. Gumley's this afternoon and fix the thing up somehow."

Belphegor was not the only occupant of the Owl's Nest stables. Some time after the purchase of the horse Violetta bought a beautiful pony from a local butcher. The latter had not long had the pony in his possession, and he had found it did not suit him or rather his man. The creature was skittish and capricious, had bolted twice, and on the second occasion had kicked the bottom out of the cart and sent the joints flying. The butcher was afraid to trust it, and he sold it to Violetta

cheaply.

Violetta was delighted to have him, and he was soon a great pet.

She lost no time in opening the business which had brought her to Holberry Down, and Peter listened to what she had to say attentively and even approvingly.

"You know, Mr. Gumley, you're as much interested in Belphegor as I am," said she. "Whatever stake he pulls off you'll have a share of. That's agreed between us, isn't it?"

"Yes, I haven't forgotten, and I'd like to see him do some real good work. But as you say, I must have his training under my own eye. I'm not going to have the A. P. show over again."

"Very well, that's what you won't have if you agree to what I propose. Tim must come with him. That's a dead cert."

Peter looked grave and fingered his chin.

"I swore I'd never take the young beggar back."

"Very likely. But what's an oath more or less, especially where horses are concerned. I'm quite sure there are more lies told and more oaths used on the turf than anywhere else in the world."

"Well, that's a fact, Miss Violetta."

"Of course it is. Now, Tim's a reformed character."

"If he is, he has to thank you for it."

"No, I've just treated him decently and trusted to his word. I've come to the conclusion that his disposition's very like that of Belphegor. Both must be allowed to go their own road to a certain extent. I confess that I'm built much on the same lines. We may be led, but we won't be driven."

"I'm not going to contradict you, Miss. But about Tim —what I fear is the Barley Mow. Nothing but touts there."

"I know, and I may tell you that the lad's as much afraid of the Barley Mow as you are. He's given me his word of honour that he'll never go near the place."

"Yes, that may be, and I don't doubt as he'll try to keep his word. But you don't know what a damned crafty crew get there. The landlord's as bad as any of 'em. He's a tenant of Dan Westoby's, and I'll go bail that the two are hand in glove. The only safe thing is to keep the matter quiet. Not a soul must know that I've got the two here."

"Well, that can be done I guess. Your men are used to keeping secrets, aren't they. Can you trust them?"

"I can now. I couldn't three months ago, but I've weeded out the splitters, and I've got a decent lot now. It all depends upon Tim himself."

"And I'll answer for him. He's only to know what's expected from him and I'm convinced he'll act up to it."

"I hope he will. Well, we must risk it, I guess."

"That's right. Now about Belphegor. Can he be entered for the Two Thousand?"

"No. The day's too near. There isn't time to get him into his best form, and I must know what he's like before we think of him as a Derby runner. But the Two Thousand's no good. Besides, I'm fixed on Killarney. He's one of Lord Verschoyle's string, and his lordship's backed him for all he's worth. I must keep faith with Lord Frederick, who's a real gentleman."

"So I've heard. Righto. Then we'll drop the Two Thou. Now when will you come and have a look at Belphegor? I shall be much surprised if you don't say that Tim has

worked wonders.”

“So much the better, but I’ll wager that you’ve had a hand in that same too. Begorra! I shall never forget that lesson in horse training you gave my chaps. They still talk about it.”

“Only a matter of common sense and a bit of humanity Peter. Nothing more.”

“Whatever it was it did the trick. Well I’ll run over to the Owl’s Nest to-morrow evening.”

So the matter was arranged. The trainer presented himself as he promised, and when it was dark Belphegor and Tim were transferred to Holberry Down and Gumley’s staff was sworn to secrecy.

There was every probability of the secret being kept for all the men and boys who had been on bad terms with the lad had been dismissed.

But when the two had departed Violetta felt strangely desolate. It was as though her occupation was gone, and it wasn’t strange that in the vacuity of mind which followed that her thoughts should drift back to John Norman.

“Don’t be a fool,” said she to herself. “You know you’re not in love with the man, and if you were what would be the good. One woman’s made a fool of him, and it would be an act of cruelty to add to his complications by another woman coming on the scene. Besides, he’s a stupid. He simply drifts.”

Quite so, but a drifting man is very often an object of interest to an energetic woman. Violetta tried to banish John Norman from her mind but she found the effort very difficult.

She felt rather annoyed that he had not written to her

and angry with herself because she *was* annoyed. Yet on reasoning the thing out his silence was quite excusable. After his confession of folly he probably had regretted his outburst of confidence. No doubt his conduct, in so doing, was perfectly proper, but it was really putting a barrier in front of their future friendship.

"I suppose that's how a man would look at it," she mused. "A woman doesn't take the same view. When a man admits to one woman what a fool he has made of himself over another it's a sort of tribute to the superiority of the woman to whom the admission is made."

There was something in this argument. The annals of crime abound with examples. Men after perpetrating some offence, whether robbing or violence, are restless and unhappy until they have made some woman their confidant. The police know this full well, and they are quick to take advantage of it. Even Mr. Charles Peace, silent and solitary worker though he prided himself on being, was not proof against the weakness.

But Violetta was not concerned about solving sexual problems of this kind. She did not pursue the subject, and as the stables no longer possessed anything of interest for her she sat down to the piano to drive away her thoughts by grappling with the intricacies of Bach.

A fortnight went over and she missed the peculiarities of Belphegor, which she was never tired of studying, and the shrewd talk of Tim Hollis, who in some of his observations was quite the man of experience, and she felt a restless curiosity to know how both were getting on.

She had not heard from Peter Gumley, but this did not surprise her. The trainer, as he often confessed, was no "scholar," and to put pen to paper was to him always a

task of abhorrence.

The two had arranged that Peter should not go near the Owl's Nest. Peter had reason to believe that Barney Moss or some other tout was always lurking about Holberry Down on the look out for some scraps of news, and he had discovered that one of the stable lads had been approached and offered bribes, but without success. He was particularly anxious that Belphegor should remain a "dark horse," and accordingly neglected no precautions to preserve secrecy.

Violetta quite agreed with this policy, but as the days wore on her anxiety became intolerable, and she at last came to the conclusion that though it might not be wise for Peter Gumley to come to the Owl's Nest, as doubtless his movements were watched, there did not seem any harm in her calling upon him. The touts could hardly care what she did.

So one afternoon she sallied forth, and mounted on her pony she rode to Holberry Down.

CHAPTER XVI

LORD VERSCHOYLE'S "CRACKS"

Ravenscroft House, the family seat of the Verschoyles, was about three miles from Holberry Down Farm. It was a big, old mansion of the Georgian period, when architects seemed to care nothing for beauty and everything for space. Ravenscroft House could not be said to be a picturesque structure. It was a somewhat squat building of two storeys, built of stone, and with an enormous frontage. Its pretensions to ornament were in the debased Italian style then affected.

Standing on a hill, this big white mansion, especially when the sun shone on it, could be seen for miles around. You caught glimpses of it between the trees in the summer, while in the winter it stood out bleak, bare, and gaunt.

While critics of to-day might denounce the taste of the age which could produce such a house, all agreed that it stood in the most charming of parks. The beeches of Ravenscroft House were landmarks, and the spot was a favourite one for picnickers when permission could be obtained—which wasn't often—from the owner of the property.

Lord Verschoyle had the military mind and the military manner. Before he came into his title he was a captain in the Guards and had retired after some years of service. When the war broke out he joined up and went through the arduous campaign with distinction.

He was really a good sort of fellow once you got below, the crust of militaryism. He was nearer forty than thirty, and his hair and moustache, ebony black in his youth, had gone snow white. Certainly a distinguished looking man, if not blessed with superfluity of brains.

He had just got through a generous breakfast when Gleeson, his head groom, was announced. It was part of the daily routine. Gleeson had to make his appearance at nine o'clock exactly every morning to report as to the horses and dogs.

Lord Verschoyle had the same views about punctuality as had the old Duke of Wellington. It did not consist in coming five minutes before the time appointed, and certainly not five minutes later. It had to be on the tick of the clock. Gleeson, who had had experience of his lordship's irascibility, was very careful to observe the law laid down.

"Well, Gleeson, what are we going to do over the Derby?" said his lordship, plunging at once into business.

"Well, m'lord, your lordship's got three 'osses entered and two of 'em's in the Two Thousand. It's this way—"

"I know all about that. We needn't go into it again," interrupted the noble lord impatiently. "I want to know how the horses are going on and which is the best one to fancy. Have you heard anything from Peter Gumley?"

"No, sir, not since the day before yesterday. I reported

yesterday what he said.”

“Well, what’s your opinion?” said the noble lord, after a pause.

“Well, m’lord, I’m rather sweet on Quicksand, but Peter fancies Killarney.”

“So do I. But there’s not much to choose between them. I wonder whether it was good policy entering Quicksand in the name of John Smith. I did it on Peter’s advice.”

“Quite right, m’lord. It’ll make a lot o’ difference in the odds. You can’t win with both.”

“I suppose not,” rejoined his lordship, with a short laugh. “But if I elect to bet on Killarney for the winner, there’s nothing to prevent me backing Quicksand both ways.”

“Nothing at all, m’lord.”

“And what about Laverock?”

“I should leave her alone. She won’t stay the Derby course.”

“Well, we’ll talk about her later on. It’s the Two Thousand we’ve got to think about. Gleeson, after lunch let us ride over to Peter Gumley’s and have a talk with him about the cracks.”

“Right, sir. What will you ride? Polly?”

“Yes, the mare suits me the best. She is the quietest nag I’ve got.”

“Very good, sir; I’ll be round with her in ten minutes.”

And in ten minutes, Gleeson, mounted on a stout cob, appeared leading a beautiful chestnut mare, which one would have said, at first sight, was scarcely up to Lord Verschoyle’s weight. It was her perfect symmetry, however, which made her deceptive. She was really a very

powerful animal, and had the temper of an angel.

His lordship and the stud groom rode along without talking very much. Gleeson knew his master, and did not speak unless he was spoken to. To-day, his lordship was not in a talkative mood, and so from a conversational point of view the ride was a dull one.

At last the scattered buildings of Holberry Down Farm came in view, and the two riders must have been seen from afar off, for Mrs. Gumley met them at the garden gate.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Gumley,” said my lord. “Husband in?”

“Yes, my lord. He half expected you to-day. He’s in the paddock. Jock,” she called out to a curly-headed stable boy, who was peeping through the door leading from the garden to the stalls, “come and take these horses.”

The boy ran forward, and Lord Verschoyle and the groom dismounted.

“Will you come through the house? It’s the nearest way to the paddock.”

“Very well.”

Mrs. Gumley preceded them, and they followed her along the passage, crossing a spacious kitchen, and, leaving a dairy of spotless appearance on the left, went through a kind of poultry-yard into the paddock beyond.

“Eh, what’s Belphegor out for?” exclaimed Gleeson. “Surely Peter’s not going to run him for the Derby?”

“Not likely, Mr. Gleeson. Peter isn’t such a fool. He knows better than run a cross-grained brute like Belphegor.”

“I know; but what’s he being trotted out this afternoon for?”

“Oh, nothing much. Only to see what a new boy can do.”

“Rather a stiff trial, isn’t it, ma’am? I mean for the boy.”

“Yes; but Peter knows best.”

“I’ll be bound he does.”

Belphegor had been back about a week. His arrival as well as the return of Tim Hollis, had been kept a profound secret. It so happened he was being exercised at the time of Lord Verschoyle’s visit, and Mrs. Gumley was a little embarrassed how to account for his appearance in the paddock.

Lord Verschoyle did not matter much. He knew very little about the horse and the little jockey, and had no curiosity concerning them. It was different, however, with Gleeson. The latter was bound to gossip about it, both in the Ravenscroft House stables and at the Barley Mow. Before long there wouldn’t be any secret about the matter.

But the thing was done, and all the trainer’s wife could do was to make the best of it. So she put on an air of indifference.

Just then Peter Gumley caught sight of his visitors and came forward to greet his lordship and the stud groom.

“Well, Gumley,” said his lordship, “and how are the youngsters going on?”

“The whole three are in prime condition, my lord. The best lot turned out from Ravenscroft House for many a long day.”

“Are you still bent upon making Killarney the Derby winner?”

“I see nothing to alter my decision. It all depends on

the Two Thousand, and whether we have luck and a good jockey.”

“Ah, that’s what I want to speak to you about. Gleeson tells me you think of putting up one of the stable boys. Is that so?”

“Well, it was so, sir; but I’ve had to alter my mind since then.”

“I’m glad of it. A stable boy would never win a race like the Two Thousand, let alone the Derby.”

“I’m not so sure of that.”

“Now I should like to see those three horses of mine run, Gumley.”

“Well, sir, it isn’t the best time of the day. If I’d known you were coming, I would have had them ready. Can’t you come over to-morrow and see them do a gallop?”

“No, I can’t. I’ve come here now on purpose. It can’t make any difference to you.”

“Oh, not to me; but it makes a difference to the horses. However, sir, have your own way.”

And with a shrug of his shoulders, as much as to say “It’s no use contradicting this martinet,” Peter turned away and gave some orders to one of the lads, who forthwith disappeared.

In about twenty minutes the three shapely beauties—Killarney, Laverock and Quicksand—appeared, looking round with their big eyes, as much as to say, “What are we brought out at this time of the day for?”

Of the three, Killarney was the handsomest. He was a dark chestnut, with a broad chest and powerful thighs. He looked fit to run for a king’s ransom. Laverock was a black filly, with clean and flat forelegs, and by comparison with Killarney was almost narrow. Still, there was

undeniably the look of a racer about her.

Quicksand, on the other hand, was a grey—a very unusual colour for a racer. He was the least attractive of the three. He was a big horse, with a somewhat lean head, and his frame a little clumsily built. In looks he could not compare with Killarney.

“Johnson, you will ride Killarney; Jock, you’re on Laverock; and who shall I put on Quicksand?”

While the trainer’s eye was wandering round, and he was debating the point within himself, his glance fell on Tim Hollis, who on Belphegor was at the far end of the paddock.

“There’s nobody else handy. It’ll be a bit of practice for the lad,” he thought.

So he sent for Tim, and after Belphegor was stabled the boy presented himself.

“I want you to have a go on the grey. Mind, now, he’s a lazy brute, but there’s plenty of speed in him if you know how to get it out,” said Gumley.

Tim looked at Quicksand, but said nothing. After a minute or two he went up to the animal, patted its neck, and talked to it, as if to introduce himself and get its good will.

The cloths were stripped off the animals, and the boys mounted and cantered across the paddock to the gate which led on to the downs.

It was a breezy April afternoon, and, on the whole, not a bad day for a spin. Peter Gumley looked a little anxiously across the Downs, as if fearing to see Barney Moss or any of his kidney about. But as far as the eye could reach there was not a soul in sight.

“There’ll be no harm done after all,” muttered the

trainer. "No one would expect a trial to be made this afternoon, and so we shall be pretty safe from the attentions of the spies."

"Well, Gleeson, what do you think now?" asked Lord Verschoyle, as they followed the horses across the paddock and criticised the action of each.

"There's no doubt, sir, that Killarney's a grand colt. We know what he's made of. He's got a splendid chance for the Two Thousand, but for all that I fancy Quicksand. Of course, everything depends upon the riding."

"Look here, Gleeson, we must have Tom Allworth to ride him."

"You must talk to Mr. Gumley about that, m'lord," said the groom, with a shrug of the shoulders.

His lordship did ask Gumley.

"You seem to forget, m'lord, that you quarrelled with Allworth just before the Epsom Spring Meeting. He rode Tomtit because he was engaged to do so, but he swore he'd never ride another horse of yours, and I don't suppose he will. Tom's a man of his word."

Lord Verschoyle bit his lips and said no more. He remembered the incident perfectly well. He had been in an unusually bad humour that morning, and, attempting to dictate to Tom Allworth what he should do, the distinguished jockey had virtually, if not in so many words, told him to mind his own business. Allworth went dead against his lordship's instructions and won the race with Tomtit.

There was some little delay before Gumley got the horses off. Killarney was apparently restive, and every now and then his ears went back in a decidedly vicious fashion; but at last a good start was made, and away the

three cracks went, skimming the ground like swallows, Killarney quite a length and a half in front of Laverock, Quicksand plodding away a length behind the second horse.

“Why, it’s a foregone conclusion,” exclaimed Lord Verschoyle. “Killarney’s first and the rest are nowhere.”

“Wait a minute, sir,” said the trainer gravely. “Johnson hasn’t done what I told him. He was to keep him well in hand the first half of the course. Instead of that he’s let the brute have his head. We shall see the result.”

“Eh, look there!” cried Gleeson. “Quicksand’s coming along hand over hand. He’s headed Laverock. Laverock’s beaten. See how he’s creeping up. Why, he’s close to Killarney’s heels—he’s up to his shoulders—he’s beaten him by George.”

“By a couple of lengths, too,” said the trainer, quietly.

Lord Verschoyle put down his glasses, and turned sharply round to the latter.

“What does this mean, Gumley? You led me to understand that Killarney was the best horse in the stable, and that Quicksand was simply intended to make the running, and now this horse, which was supposed to have no chance, beats its companion. How do you account for it?”

“Well, sir, horses are very like men. They can’t be the same every day of their lives. But in this case I should say it’s the riding that did it. That boy got every ounce of speed out of the grey, and he used no whip either. How he managed it I can’t think.”

The trial had upset all Lord Verschoyle’s calculations. He had backed Killarney for a large amount to win, and if the horses showed their true form that day, it looked

as if he stood a good chance to lose his money. It was clear that to make himself safe he must back Quicksand. Fortunately, the grey was a very long way down in the betting, and unless the news of the running that day got wind, his owner would be able easily to hedge, and without much risk.

The horses came back at an easy walk to the paddock, and while the cloths were being put on, Gumley favoured Johnson with a jacketing for disobeying his instructions.

"I did keep him in hand, sir; but the others kept theirs in hand too."

"If that was so, how was it that you couldn't bring him up to the scratch when he was wanted?"

"I dunno, sir, unless he ain't as good a horse as Quicksand, or else there was some secret in that chap's riding. I don't believe it was, though. It was all a fluke, after all."

"Fluke be bothered," exclaimed Mr. Gumley, irritably. "You thought Hollis couldn't ride and you didn't bother yourself."

"I don't suppose he can ride any better than me," said the boy, sullenly.

Bob Johnson was ignominiously sent off with the proverbial "flea in his ear," and Peter Gumley turned to Lord Verschoyle.

"I guess, my lord, you can see what I think by my hauling that disobedient young rascal over the coals," said he.

"You mean that you consider Killarney the better horse."

"I do—if properly mounted. He didn't have a fair chance just now."

"Who was up on Quicksand?"

"A boy who's not had much experience. I wanted to

see what sort of stuff he was made of. That's why I put him on Quicksand. As a matter of fact I'd no one else available. Most of the lads get an hour or two off about this time o' day," returned Gumley carelessly.

"Well, Gumley, if I know anything of horses and riding I should say you've got a find in that youngster. If he goes on as he's doing some day he'll be at the top of the tree."

"You think so, my lord?"

"Think? I'm sure of it. The way he handled Quicksand was splendid."

"It was pretty good. I will say *that*; but with a better jockey on Killarney it 'ud be a different thing."

"May be; but as matters look now, if that boy rides Quicksand in the Two Thousand as well as he did to-day, and Killarney runs no better, it will upset the apple cart. I've too much at stake on Killarney to afford to lose. I've told all my friends to back him, and they've done so pretty heavily. Unless there's a change in the situation it would be better to scratch Quicksand."

Gumley's face fell.

"It'll have a bad effect," said he. "The public won't like it."

"What does that matter?" rejoined his lordship brusquely. "The public have never sacrificed themselves for me. Why should I sacrifice myself for the public?"

"That's true. At the same time you can't prevent people talking. Your lordship's name's A.1. Everybody knows you wouldn't do anything that's unsportsman-like."

"I don't follow you, Gumley," said the nobleman frowningly, and tapping his riding boot with his hunt-

ing crop.

“Well, you know that when a horse is scratched the bookies benefit. The backers lose their money. That’s a bad start to begin with, isn’t it? But what do most of ’em—I mean the backers—say when a horse is scratched? Unless its an undoubted fact that the horse isn’t fit to run, the scratching of it’s put down to a dodge on the part of the owner or of those who are advising him. That’s the *po*-sition my lord.”

An uneasy look crept over Lord Verschoyle’s face. He prided himself on being the soul of honour, as indeed he was. He had always played the game, and always would.

“Hang it, Gumley,” he broke out. “I believe you’re right. Anyhow, we’ve got to guard against loss in the event of Quicksand winning. What do you advise? Back it both ways?”

“That’s the best thing. It’s a dead cert that unless Tom Allworth rides Killarney—”

“I won’t have Tom Allworth,” interposed his lordship angrily.

Peter Gumley shrugged his shoulders and pursed up his mouth as much as to say, “Then you must go to the devil your own way, my lord.”

“Isn’t there any other jockey you can put up?”

“No one that I’d care to see on Killarney. All the best lads have their engagements, and they can’t break ’em. It’s a bit o’ luck that Tom Allworth’s free. But it won’t be for long, and I spoke to him yesterday about Killarney, and he’s quite willing—that is, if your lordship’s willing.”

“You oughtn’t to have taken the matter into your own hands. You ought to have consulted me first,” growled his lordship.

“Pardon me,” retorted the trainer bluntly. “If I’m fit to be trusted with your lordship’s horses, I’m fit to be trusted to select the lads best suited to ride ’em.”

But Lord Verschoyle would not give way, though he knew very well Peter Gumley was in the right. His lordship hated climbing down, and when he did he liked to have a good excuse for it. Quite unexpectedly the excuse was forthcoming.

At that moment the trim figure of a lady irreproachably dressed was seen coming across the paddock towards them.

CHAPTER XVII

VIOLETTA TAKES LORD VERSCHOYLE IN HAND

Peter Gumley's face changed. He did not know whether he was sorry or pleased to see the mistress of the Owl's Nest. Anyhow, her arrival gave him a chance to leave his lordship for a brief space and enable him to chew the cud of his reflections.

So with an apology to Lord Verschoyle, he hastened to meet Violetta knowing that if he stayed to talk over the point in dispute with his lordship a quarrel might end the business.

"I'm glad to see you, Miss Violetta," said Gumley, touching his hat. "But you ought to ha' been here ten minutes ago an' you'd ha' seen a trial of the pick of Lord Verschoyle's stables."

"I did see it. Mrs. Gumley and I watched the spin from the dairy window. Tell me"—she went on a little excitedly—"who was up on the grey? Mrs. Gumley said she was sure it was Tim Hollis, but I could hardly believe it after what you said about him."

"Well, it *was* the young rascal."

"Then you've made it up with the boy."

"Oh, I don't bear no malice. Maybe I was a bit hasty,

an' p'raps I forgot I'd been a boy meself an' sometimes kicked over the traces."

"I'll be bound you did, Peter," said Violetta beamingly. "Anyhow, I'm glad you've taken Tim into favour again. He's certain to do great things for you sooner or later."

"So Lord Verschoyle says."

"Is that Lord Verschoyle?"

Violetta's eyes wandered in the direction of the well set up soldierly man who was pacing slowly up and down, now and again tapping his riding boot with his whip as though the action helped him to settle some doubt in his mind.

"Yes, that's his lordship. He's a real gentleman, but he's got a bit of a temper."

"A man's none the worse for that."

"May be not, but there's tempers and tempers. My lord's temper won't let him listen to reason. That's where he makes a mistake."

Violetta laughed.

"What's amusin' you, Miss?"

"Why, my dear man, all tempers are like that. You must give them time to simmer down."

"There's a lot of sense in what you say, Miss Violetta," returned Gumley, scratching his head. "I'll go bail you could soothe a man's temper as well as you can soothe a horse's. Now if you'd only take Lord Verschoyle in hand—"

"Good Heavens, Peter, you don't want me to whisper in the man's ear, and stroke his neck," broke in Violetta with another burst of merriment.

"No, not quite that—though I'll bet that 'ud put him in a good humour in two twos. It would *me*," and Peter's

eyes twinkled.

"I dare say, but it would put Mrs. Gumley into a bad one. But what is it you want—I mean about Lord Verschoyle?"

"It's just this. His lordship, a little time ago, had a bit of a row with Tom Allworth, and Tom swore he'd never put his legs across one of the Verschoyle string again."

"Did Tom say that to Lord Verschoyle?"

"No. He said it to Gleeson, Lord Verschoyle's stud groom, and of course the blundering blockhead carried Tom's words to his master. That's how mischief's made—people's stupid tongues. It put his lordship's back up and he now swears he won't have Tom ride Killarney. All I've got to say is that if he doesn't go back on his word, he'll come a cropper. Killarney, bar accidents, can't win if Quicksand runs his best."

"And will he?"

"Well, I'm going to put Tim up, and you saw how the boy handled the grey."

"Yes, but why doesn't Lord Verschoyle back Quicksand?"

"He will to a certain extent, but he's too deep in with Killarney to make anything. If he gets his money back supposing Quicksand wins, it'll be as much as he will, and he'd rather the chestnut won, even though he didn't clear a penny."

"I understand. I might feel that way myself over Belphegor."

"Belphegor—h'm."

An uneasy look crept over the trainer's face.

"Well, what about Belphegor?"

"It's the deuce of a bit of bad luck that the brute should

be in the paddock when Lord Verschoyle and Gleeson came. Gleeson's bound to spot him."

"What of that? No one knows that you sold him to me, and that he's been at the Owl's Nest until a week or so since."

"No one know? Parsons knew. He saw you work your magic on the horse, and he was in the stables when you rode him away."

"Yes, but he doesn't know that Belphegor's mine."

"No, he doesn't know that. No one does."

"Well, why shouldn't I have taken the horse to the Owl's Nest to complete the training process. I've returned him to you now that I'm satisfied. Can't you see how it works out?"

"Yes—but—well nothing can be done. Belphegor's entered for the Derby, and I want him to win for your sake. I know and *you* know what he can do, but no one else must, or our pitch'll be queered—I mean so far as our bets are concerned."

"I thought you never betted, Peter."

"I'm going to break my rule. I'm in with you Miss, you know. But I must get back to his lordship. I can see he's fidgeting. Do come with me, Miss Violetta, and put in a word for Tom Allworth."

"All right. But we must be artful. His lordship may bolt when the subject's introduced."

"Not with you, Miss, a guiding him."

"Well, we'll see."

And the two marched across the paddock to where his lordship was impatiently awaiting them.

"Confound it, Gumley, I was beginning to think you'd—"

And then his eyes fell on Violetta's winsome face, and he came at once under the spell of her smile. He raised his hat.

"I excuse you, Gumley. You had every reason for delaying."

He fixed his eyes upon Violetta and his features relaxed pleasantly.

"A neighbour of yours, my lord," said Peter. "Miss Violetta Vaughan of the Owl's Nest."

"I congratulate myself on my good luck," said Lord Verschoyle, and he held out his hand, which Violetta took.

"Miss Vaughan is one of the best judges of a horse that I know," went on the trainer. "She saw the trial spin just now and she'll give you her opinion."

"If you care to have it," said Violetta frankly.

"Care? of course I care. I'd sooner have a woman's opinion than a man's on anything in this world. It's marvellous, Miss Vaughan, how keen your sex is in going straight to the point."

"Not always," laughed Violetta. "When the matter concerns us personally, we are frightfully biassed."

"Well, in this case, I hope you'll be impartial."

"I'll try to be. What would you like me to say?"

"My dear young lady, is that your idea of impartiality? Gad, it isn't what *I* like, but what *you* like. Don't be afraid to say what's in your mind. You saw how the grey, which was supposed to be an inferior horse to the chestnut, turned out the faster."

"Yes, I saw that, yet I should think with proper riding the chestnut should have won."

"There, my lord, what did I tell you?" said Gumley turning to the nobleman.

"Oh, I know," said Verschoyle playfully. "When you experts agree, your unanimity, like that of people on the stage, is wonderful. But your reasons, please."

"No, you must accept my judgment if you accept anything. If I gave you my reasons, they might be worthless."

"Well, anyhow, I suppose I may take it that with such jockeying as to-day, Killarney wouldn't pull off the Two Thousand."

"I'm sure he wouldn't, especially if Tom Allworth had a good mount against him. I'm told that Tom is considering an offer."

"The devil he is. Did you know that Peter?"

"I've heard something of the kind," said the trainer stolidly. "What I *do* know is that he's not fixed up."

"I'd give anything to see Tom Allworth on that lovely chestnut. What did you say his name was, Lord Verschoyle?"

"Killarney."

"That settles it. He must belong to dear old Ireland—like myself. My mother was Irish."

"She must have been a very beautiful woman."

"If you talk like that, Lord Verschoyle, I shall believe that you also have Irish blood in you. You have quite the Blarney touch," said Violetta saucily.

"Have I? It must have come on since I've been talking to you."

Peter Gumley chuckled to himself.

"Wheedled him into a good humour," he muttered. "I knew she would."

“Well, we needn’t discuss Ireland. It’s a forbidden subject to most English people. The point is Tom Allworth and Killarney. Who are you putting on my dear Irish horse?”

“Well, we’ve not decided.”

“Oh, that’s splendid,” exclaimed Violetta clapping her hands. “Then you must engage Tom Allworth. It would be a real treat to see him romp in a couple of lengths ahead.”

“H’m—h’m—”

“What does that mean?” asked Violetta with a mocking smile. “I take back what I said just now about your lordship’s possible Irish origin. I believe you’re from north of the Tweed. H’m—h’m—is Scottish for everything, isn’t it?”

“You’re a witch, Miss Vaughan. My grandmother was Scottish. So you’d like to see Tom Allworth in Killarney’s saddle?”

“I should love it.”

“Then by jove you shall. Peter, Miss Vaughan’s talked me over. I can’t resist her. See Tom and make the best arrangements you can with him.”

Then wheeling round to Violetta, he said with an air of gallantry, which sat well upon him, after a rapid glance at her semi-masculine riding costume, and at the whip in her hand.

“I see you have ridden here. May I have the honour of escorting you part of the way to the Owl’s Nest—that is if you’re going there?”

“Yes. Thank you very much.”

Lord Verschoyle liked the simplicity and directness of her manner. There was nothing of the coy maiden about

her, and he wondered what her age was.

"She doesn't look a day older than twenty-one. But hang it, who can tell what a woman's age is now-a-days," was his thought.

He admired also the frank way with which she accepted his assistance to mount her pony, though he was quite sure she did not need it.

Soon they were side by side, Violetta considerably walking her pony. She was rather taken by the bluff, stand-no-nonsense manner of the military nobleman, and she had not the slightest objection to a chat with him. It was so long since she had talked to a gentleman, and she knew one when she saw one—no woman better.

"That's a pretty pony of yours. Nice easy action. And if I may make so personal a remark you sit your saddle to perfection. I don't mean to compliment you—it's a simple fact."

"I suppose it is as I've been told the same thing before. But its nothing extraordinary seeing I've been accustomed to riding ever since I can remember anything."

"The deuce you have. Well I envy you. I don't think I straddled a horse before I left Eton. Ever hunt?"

"Yes, a little."

"In this part of the country?"

Violetta paused for a moment. She wondered if it would be prudent to mention that she had ridden with Sir John Norman's hounds. She decided she would keep silence.

"I can't quite remember. I hunted a little in France."

"Ah, that's interesting. A bit of difference, I guess, between French and English hunting."

Violetta admitted that there was, and as soon as pos-

sible changed the subject in which she was assisted by a fit of playful rebellion on the part of Bruce, her pony.

Bruce was more than usually restive. He reared, he threw back his head with an impatient jerk, he moved when he so condescended, at awkward angles, he went through a performance as if he was treading on hot plates.

Lord Verschoyle was at first prompted to go to her assistance, but he saw that the young horsewoman was perfectly cool and collected, and he contented himself with watching her. Soon she had the pony quite gentle and subdued. She had never once lost her control over him.

“By jove,” called out his lordship, “you know something. Bravo! And you never once used the whip.”

“I never do, I don’t believe in it”

“Well, you may be right, but—well that isn’t my way with a stubborn and tricky brute like that.”

“You’re not stubborn and you’re not tricky are you, dear?”

She bent on Bruce’s neck and stroked his mane.

“Well, if he isn’t, he’s uncommonly near being both. Take care he doesn’t get you unawares some day and throw you.”

“I’m not a bit afraid of that. He’s really only got one real fault.”

“Oh, you admit that, do you? And what may that fault be?”

“Well, he has an unpleasant habit of stopping at every public house he comes to,” said Violetta gravely.

Lord Verschoyle burst into a Homeric fit of laughter.

“Of course. Its a sign of his intelligence,” she went on gravely.

“How’s that?”

“Well, you see, his last owner was a butcher, and I suspect the butcher’s man got him into the habit. As I don’t happen to be in the butchering trade, the habit’s somewhat embarrassing, but I hope to cure him of it.”

“And I don’t doubt you’ll succeed. I don’t mind betting a ‘monkey’ that you’d succeed in anything you’d a mind to.”

“Well, I should try, of course.”

Once more the horses were walking quietly enough, and the talk and interchange of rallies went on gaily.

Then they came to the steep path leading up to the Owl’s Nest.

“I’ll bid you good day here, please,” said Violetta.

“Mayn’t I come up the hill with you?”

“No. Your horse isn’t used to it, and my pony is. Besides, I’ve taken you a sufficient distance out of your way.”

“That doesn’t matter a bit. I’d ride any number of miles for the sake of your company.”

“I’m not going to test your endurance. I should bore you to death.”

“By the lord—”

The nobleman stopped. Some foolishness was on the tip of his tongue. Though he had escaped the chains of matrimony, he had had his love affairs, serious and flimsy, and though arrived at middle age, he was not averse to a flirtation.

Possibly Violetta read his thoughts. She shot him an enigmatical smile and set her pony at a canter up the

ascent.

“Would it be a liberty if some day I called at the Owl’s Nest?” he shouted after her.

She turned her head towards him, but whether she shook it or nodded he could not quite determine. At any rate, she gave him no answer.

“Provoking, bewitching hussy,” was his lordship’s comment as he rode away.

CHAPTER XVIII

A MEMORY OF MONTE CARLO

It was the day of the Two Thousand. The crowd which assembles at Newmarket on this occasion is but a handful compared with that which streams to Epsom by road and rail on the Derby Day. The event is purely a sporting one, and the bulk of the spectators are more or less interested in the result pecuniarily.

The paddock was fairly thronged, and here was a good sprinkling of turf habituées. Westoby was there, looking stonier and more saturnine than ever. The news that Tom Allworth was to ride the favourite had disturbed him considerably, the more so because the intimation had only leaked out at the eleventh hour. He had made his book on the strength of Killarney losing, and there was not time to hedge.

Peter Gumley looked on cool and imperturbable, and was perfectly impervious to Westoby's overtures of affability. For some reason, the bookmaker seemed anxious to make up old differences with the trainer. Lord Verschoyle was bluff and boisterous as usual, but he was nervous all the same.

Not far from the judge's box, leaning against a post

which supported the rope, was Mr. Barney Moss, together with a group of companions as flashy-looking and as loudly dressed as himself.

“What ought we to win over this, Barney?” asked a short, red-faced young man, in a covert-coat and bowler hat.

“Five thou’, clean as a whistle. Killarney can’t lose.”

“And over the Derby?” went on the red-faced individual, with a wink.

“Wait till it comes,” said Barney, shortly. “Don’t you open your mouth too wide over the Derby, Buttons, old man, or you may spoil the game.”

At this moment up stalked Ned Strangeways, shabbily dressed, dark man, with a dirty bird’s-eye scarf round his neck, with an enormous pin stuck in it.

“Mossy,” said Strangeways, a well-known bookie, in an excited whisper “are you sure you’re on the right tack with Killarney?”

“Sure? D’ye think I’m a juggins!” returned Mr. Moss, scornfully.

“I’ve the tip that the winner is Quicksand—blue with silver stripes.”

“If you don’t believe what I say,” went on Strangeways, “ask Peter Gumley. Quicksand comes from his stables.”

“A fat lot one’s likely to get out of Peter. He’s as close as they make ’em,” retorted Barney. “I’ll bet any money that Quicksand’s entered to make the running for Killarney. Bah! it’s all rot. Do you imagine I don’t know a thing or two? Shut up—here come the horses.”

It was the preliminary canter. Killarney stood out from the lot by his beautiful symmetry of form and his grand action. Still, after the intelligence brought by

Strangeways, it was only natural that the blue and silver stripes should attract a little attention.

All this time Barney Moss had got his eyes fixed on Quicksand's jockey. There was something in the jockey's face which haunted and puzzled him.

"If I didn't know it couldn't be," he muttered, "I'd swear that was Tim Hollis."

However, there was no possibility of satisfying his doubts, for the horses were half-way down the course on the way to the starting post.

There was the usual interval of expectation, and then a shout of "They're off!" went up. Barney Moss, who had come down to Newmarket in a motor, was standing in the driver's seat, and, armed with a big field glass, watched the race intently.

The start was a very good one. The horses went off in a cluster, and for a hundred yards or so it was difficult to tell which was first. Then a chestnut got away from the ruck, and some backer of this particular animal yelled enthusiastically: "Birdcage wins for a hundred!"

"Birdcage, be hanged!" said Moss. "Why, he's challenged already."

And so he was by two horses—one was Killarney, the other was the "dark" horse, the outsider, Quicksand.

Suddenly Moss uttered an oath. Quicksand was forging ahead; if he could only stay he must win. Killarney was close behind, and with that clever consummate horseman, Tom Allworth on his back, no one could say what might happen. Certain it was that the half-length which divided the first and second horse was being maintained.

But as they neared the judge's box the skill of All-

worth was shown. He called upon his horse, and Killarney gamely answered. No one knew exactly how it was done, but somehow Killarney was landed on the post the winner by a short head of the Two Thousand.

A great roar went up from the crowd, for the victory of Killarney was popular; but two or three knowing ones shook their heads and said it was a good thing the rider of Quicksand was not as good a jockey as Tom Allworth, or he must have won.

Directly the result was known, Barney Moss jumped from his seat on the motor with the object of satisfying his doubts as to Quicksand's jockey. The latter, however, had disappeared, and Moss did not trouble much about the matter, seeing that his end—the victory of Killarney—had been achieved.

There was not less excitement in the grand stand than among the crowd below, and Lord Verschoyle was warmly congratulated by his friends on Killarney's win, and his lordship received these congratulations with the air of a man who had passed successfully through an anxious ordeal.

"Thanks, boys," said he. "I hope you'll all put money in your pocket."

"As it's turned out, it's all right," laughed Sir Frederick Dartnell, an old comrade of Lord Verschoyle in the Guards, "but by Jupiter, it was a near thing. No other man in England but Tom Allworth could have snatched victory right on the post. Who's—"

"Excuse me, Dartnell, but I see a friend yonder I want to have a word with."

His lordship had caught sight of Violetta, who, very quietly and unobtrusively dressed, was sitting in a dark

corner which she had purposely chosen, as she did not want to be recognised by George Godfree, who she made sure, would be somewhere on the course.

After the race was over, she had risen to find her way to the railway station. She had no interest in anything but the running of Killarney and Quicksand, and did not care even to congratulate Peter Gumley and Tim Hollis. She could do that easily enough on her return to the Owl's Nest.

But her intention of slipping away unobserved was balked by Lord Verschoyle, whom she saw squeezing through the crowd towards her.

"I've only just caught sight of you, Miss Vaughan," said he, holding out both his hands and his face beaming. "To think of meeting you here!"

"Why not? You know how I love to see horses run."

"Yes, but—"

"Well, what about the but?"

"Oh, it's not quite 'but,' its 'bet.' Silly joke. I apologise. What I mean is, do you back your fancies?"

"Sometimes," rejoined Violetta, composedly. "What's right for a man is, I suppose, right for a woman."

"H'm—well, I'm not going to argue—you always get the best of it. Anyhow, right or wrong, I've reason to thank you. Gad, but for your sticking up for Tom Allworth, I don't believe I'd have climbed down. Had any other jockey been in his place, I stood to lose £10,000. As it is, I've won £20,000."

"I'm very glad to hear it. A mistake though, wasn't it, to plunge so heavily."

"Perhaps, but it happens to be my way in everything I do. I must go the whole hog, you know. And that brings

me to what's uppermost in my mind. My mother gives a dinner party the week after the Derby, and I'm going to ask her to send you an invitation."

"Please don't."

In spite of herself, a look of dismay crept over her face.

"I shall quote your own words—why not?"

"I rarely go to dinner parties. I prefer my own quiet life, and I don't want to be dragged out of it. Besides, I'm quite sure your mother wouldn't like me."

"What on earth does that matter? I like you, and that's everything."

This blunt announcement was quite in accordance with Lord Verschoyle's temperament, and Violetta did not attach much importance to it. Certainly, it did not displease her.

"Your liking me surely doesn't involve me in going through the ordeal of a full dress dinner party," she retorted laughingly. "I'm much too ingrained a Bohemian to feel at home in anything out of my nomadic habits."

"But it's just that spice of Bohemianism which makes you so charming. Now, merely to please me, do accept my mother's hospitality. I've a particular reason for wanting you to know her."

"And may I enquire the reason?"

"Just my whim, that's all."

"Not good enough, Lord Verschoyle. I've never subjected myself to the whim of anyone, and I'm not going to begin."

Lord Verschoyle was not deaf to the tone of hauteur which had crept into Violetta's voice.

"You're right," said he, after a pause. "I apologise. Don't be angry. At the same time—well, I wish you

weren't so dashed independent."

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't alter."

"I don't ask you to alter. I wouldn't have you anything different from what you are. But I hate uncertainties. Do you mind telling me right out what answer you'll send my mother if she does write you."

"I shall thank her, of course, acknowledge the honour, etcetera, but point out that as a perfect stranger to her ladyship, I could not accept her kind invitation."

The handsome face of the nobleman was clouded.

"She won't like that. It'll look like a snub," said he, quickly.

"There's an easy way of avoiding all unpleasantness. You needn't say a word to her about me. I'm very certain she'd feel embarrassed if you do. I should feel so under similar circumstances."

"I wish you women were not so like cats," he blurted out.

"Thank you."

"Well, you know what I mean. Your claws are always ready to scratch one another."

His lordship was unquestionably disappointed and inclined to be snappy, as Violetta saw plainly enough.

"I fancy men have claws, too," said she, quite undisturbed. "I won't retaliate—just to show you I'm not what you've accused me of being."

The cloud cleared away. Lord Verschoyle was no sulker.

"You're an awfully good sort, Violetta—I may call you, Violetta, mayn't I?—but confoundedly obstinate. I'm obstinate too, and I tell you straight that some day my mother *shall* know you, and I don't mind prophesying

that she'll like you as much as I do. But we'll say no more about the dinner party since you don't care for it. Have I pleased you?"

"I'm very grateful."

"As a reward, may I call upon you? I asked your permission once before, if you remember, but you neither gave nor refused it."

"I can't prevent your calling, I suppose."

"That's sufficient. Thanks. You're not leaving, are you?"

"Yes. I don't want to spoil the recollection of that splendid Two Thousand race by seeing any other. I'm going to the railway station."

"Then I'll go with you if you've no objection. My car is at your service."

He seemed so desirous of doing the amiable, that Violetta hadn't the heart to disappoint him. After all, his society and his rough and ready speech were very agreeable. He had not attempted to pay her fulsome compliments, a form of masculine homage which she thoroughly abhorred.

Verschoyle escorted her from the grand stand, and they edged their way through the crowd at the entrance.

Just as they emerged, Violetta heard a hoarse strident laugh which she knew well enough, and she turned her head aside to avoid being recognised by George Godfree.

But she was too late. He had seen her. She was not going to show she was afraid of him, and she went on resolutely.

Godfree had a reputation for impudence which his conduct fully justified. He knew Lord Verschoyle by sight quite well, but this made no difference—indeed, it

rather provoked him to annoy Violetta. He came close to her.

“Mercy on us,” she heard him say. “How proud we have grown. It’s not like you, Violetta, to forget old friends.”

She felt intensely angry at the fellow’s insolence. She wouldn’t have cared a bit had she been alone, but it was horribly humiliating for her to know that Lord Verschoyle should be made aware that she was acquainted with so disreputable a blackguard as George Godfree.

In the contemptuous glance she cast at him she saw that Godfree had further deteriorated since she last met him. Not indeed in his dress; for his clothes were of the latest cut and had evidently been made by a Bond Street tailor. But his face!

Godfree had been “touching” money of late since his association with Dan Westoby, and he had been living like a fighting cock. The results were seen in his blotched bloated cheeks, his watery eyes, and his loose lips. Violetta looked at him in disgust.

Then her expression changed. By the side of Godfree was a man whose hard, colourless face, cold eyes, and thin lips, carried her memory back to Monte Carlo—to that eventful night when for the last time in her life she acted as a mascotte at the gaming table.

The man on whom her gaze was resting was he for whom she won £500, half of which he had insisted upon handing over to her. Nothing but dire necessity had induced her to accept it, and it had remained a burden on her mind ever since.

She had often longed for the opportunity of returning it, but how was it to be done when she did not know the

name of the man, or where he was to be found?

And here he was raising his hat to her, a cold smile lighting up his flinty face. She could not do otherwise than acknowledge the salutation, and she did so with the slightest possible inclination of her head. Godfree she simply ignored.

"Will you hurry, please," she whispered to Lord Verschoyle. "I want to get away from these men."

Verschoyle was much too chivalrous a gentleman not to come to her rescue whatever he might think of her knowing such riff-raff of the turf as George Godfree. He slipped her hand beneath his arm as if to challenge the others to question his right of possession.

Not a word passed until they were within the motor.

"I don't know whether I ought to explain why those two men recognised me," said she.

"Certainly not. Why should you? I'm not curious."

"That I quite believe. Well, some day I may tell you. Mr. Godfree I know to be a dishonourable, treacherous man. I've nothing to do with him, yet for some reason he chooses to be offensive whenever we chance to meet as we did just now. His companion I can't say I know anything of. I met him once abroad, and that is the extent of our acquaintance."

"I congratulate you. Dan Westoby's not a very desirable man to have for a friend. I doubt if he has one."

"I beg your pardon, Lord Verschoyle. What did you say his name was?"

"Dan Westoby. He's well known on every race course. Better known than trusted, I should say. More than one man's had reason to curse his acquaintanceship, poor Sir John Norman among the number. How the deuce he

managed to let the scoundrel get hold of Normanhurst, I can't make out. It was a swindle, I'll swear. You know Normanhurst, of course, Miss Vaughan. It's not more than ten miles from the Owl's Nest."

"Yes, I know the place," said Violetta, in a subdued voice.

"Norman's one of the best of fellows, but an awful fool in some things. He was beastly unlucky in his marriage."

"So I've heard."

"Ever met him?"

"Yes, but I haven't seen him for a long time."

There was no earthly reason apparently why they should talk about Norman, but Violetta instinctively guessed Lord Verschoyle's motive. He wanted to avoid causing her embarrassment by any reference to her unfortunate recognition of two undesirables and she was grateful to him for his tact.

They reached the station, Violetta was conscious of a restraint in Lord Verschoyle's manner. She was not surprised, but all the same she felt intensely mortified. Not that it mattered, she told herself. What was Lord Verschoyle to her? The present was but the second time she had met him. No, it was of no consequence, and after a few hours had gone by she would probably forget the unpleasant episode.

But in her heart she knew it wouldn't be so. Somehow she wanted to stand well in Lord Verschoyle's sight, but had she been asked to say why, she would have found it difficult to answer the question. Lord Verschoyle's last utterances did not add to her tranquillity.

"We shall be running across each other again, I hope, Miss Vaughan. These chance meetings have a charm of

their own.”

“Indeed they have. The unexpected is sometimes pleasant—or the reverse—more often the reverse.”

She had no sooner left fall the words than she wished she could have recalled them. They sounded like a reference to what had happened, and as though the incident was still rankling in her mind, whereas all along she had been trying to make it appear that she regarded it with indifference.

Lord Verschoyle put her into a carriage when the train came up, and stood at the window until the guard’s whistle was heard.

“Well,” said he, as he raised his hat, “I suppose our next excitement will be the Derby. You gave me such good advice over Killarney’s mount to-day that I shall be tempted to seek it again if I’m in a difficulty. Au revoir.”

All very nice, very flattering, very friendly—in a way—but it had not the bluff heartiness of Lord Verschoyle’s usual speech.

Violetta sat back in her seat and sighed wearily. The day which had begun so joyously had ended in vexation of spirit.

“All is vanity. I suppose that’s what everything in this world comes to,” she murmured. “I wonder what Lord Verschoyle would have thought had I agreed to accept his mother’s invitation. I’m glad I didn’t. It might have forced me to give some explanation how I came to know those two men. I doubt if I should have the courage to tell him the truth.”

It was odd the thought should cross her mind that had Lord Verschoyle been Sir John Norman, she would not have the same timidity. Yet Norman hated racing, and

all its associations; and with the nobleman it was just the reverse. Was it because Norman was as Lord Verschoyle put it, "an awful fool?"

But she did not trouble to decide the point. Dan Westoby's pallid face—expressionless save for a certain suggestion of malignance—came into her memory and drove out everything else.

To think that she was under an obligation to this unscrupulous trickster, who was held in utter contempt by honest, straight-going racing men, was abhorrent, and her self reproaches were all the more bitter because it was he who had ruined Sir John Norman.

There was really nothing in her past life which was personally to her discredit. It was rather the other way about. Considering her surroundings at the Beak Street Club, and her associations and temptations in Paris and Monte Carlo, the marvel was that she had passed through such vicious circles unscathed. Her knowledge of the seamy side of life had made her a little cynical, but with that cynicism had come a tolerance of the weaknesses of human nature which kept her heart open to sympathy and generous impulses.

But what would outsiders think— even those who might be charitably disposed towards her? If all were known, women would pass her by on the other side, men would wink and smile and whisper innuendoes. There had been times when Violetta would not have cared a jot what the world said about her, but then she was of no importance to herself.

It was different now; for the first time in her life she felt frightened. What a hold these two men George Godfree and Dan Westoby had over her if they chose to open

their mouths! Between them they practically knew everything. Godfree could tell tales of the Beak Street Club, and place his own construction upon them. Westoby had doubtless heard all the slanderous gossip at Monte Carlo concerning her.

She might steel herself against slander but not against the truth. She could not contradict the fact that Westoby had given her £250. Why? For acting as a mascotte and enabling him to win £500! Who would believe such a fairy tale? Violetta went hot and cold at the interpretation which the malicious might put upon the transaction.

“I’ll not be in his debt a moment longer than I can help—even if it involves my disclosing that I’m the tenant of the Owl’s Nest. I’d rather that Westoby did not know my address, but—”

She stopped. The thought of another danger had suddenly faced her. Westoby had probably made himself intimately acquainted with Sir John Norman’s affairs. Supposing he knew that Norman owned the Owl’s Nest? What conclusion would he draw from the fact that she was living there? Violetta had accepted money from him, why shouldn’t she accept the generosity of Norman? Not, of course, as a mascotte—for Norman had had anything but good luck—but for some other reason.

The position was intolerable, and made all the more so because she could for the moment see no way of safely extricating herself.

CHAPTER XIX

ELLA ASSERTS HERSELF

Violetta was busily occupied in going through her accounts. Her bets on Killarney figured largely in them. She had won over £500.

“That man must be paid back,” she decided. “The question is, how am I to get it to him? He shan’t come here, anyhow.”

It seemed to be a case of the mountain going to Mahomet. Unpleasant, but there was no alternative. She meant Westoby to give her a receipt and that receipt would have to state the circumstances under which he paid her the money. There must be no mistake about *that*.

She had just locked up her books, and Mrs. Stubbles had entered to consult her as to lunch, when there came the loud clang of the outer door bell, followed by an imperious rat-tat of the knocker.

A visitor most certainly. Tradesmen announced themselves in a much more modest way. Violetta looked at Mrs. Stubbles and Mrs. Stubbles looked at her mistress.

For a minute or so Violetta’s heart beats quickened. Could the visitor be Lord Verschoye? Hardly. He would

not have shown so much impatience and pomposity.

“Go and see who it is, Stubbles. If it be any stranger be sure to ask their business. I’m not in a very good humour this morning, and I don’t feel inclined to be bothered.”

Mrs. Stubbles was not disposed to offer any contradiction. She had already noticed Violetta’s mood. She disappeared and Violetta sat expectantly. Once she glanced at the mirror and then shrugged her shoulders disdainfully at her involuntary lapse into feminine weakness. The impression lurked in her mind that after all it might be Lord Verschoyle.

She heard the tones of a high-pitched voice, and the softer accents of Mrs. Stubbles in reply. There was something in the strained note of the voice that seemed familiar, but she could not fix it. Then the housekeeper came into the room looking a little flurried.

“A lady wants to see you, Miss.”

“Did you ask her name?”

“Oh, yes. She said it didn’t matter. She *must* see you she said—quite snappy. She seems put out, and nearly jumped down my throat.”

This did not look promising.

“I suppose you’d better show her in here, Stubbles. Though I hate people who won’t give their names. They nearly always come on some unpleasant business.”

Mrs. Stubbles went off, and presently the door opened and in walked Ella Norman, her nose in the air and a spot of scarlet on each cheek. Violetta, who knew her thoroughly, saw that she had worked herself into a violent passion.

“Well, upon my word,” burst out the young lady as soon as her rage would enable her to speak. But she

could say no more.

Violetta looked at her steadily, and showed no signs of trepidation. Indeed, she felt none. Ella had certainly taken her by surprise—that was all.

“Why not sit down?” she remarked. “You might find it easier to explain the object of your visit when you’re comfortable.”

Violetta’s manner and voice were the essence of sweetness. It set Ella’s passion seething.

“The object of my visit? I should have thought you’d have guessed it. I—I—aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” she almost screamed.

“I don’t think so. What have I to be ashamed of? If that question is all that has brought you here, you might have saved yourself the trouble.”

“I couldn’t believe my ears when Mr. Barlowe told me you were living here.”

“Well, what of it? I must live somewhere, I suppose.”

“But why all this secrecy? Why didn’t you write to me?”

“Write to you? After you virtually turned me out of your house? You’re talking nonsense.”

“Nonsense? I consider your conduct disgraceful. Simply shocking!”

“Does it matter what you think?”

“Answer me this—aren’t you—what is the polite term for a questionable connection—under John’s protection? I suppose you know what I mean?”

Violetta’s reply was to strike the alarm bell which was on, the table. Mrs. Stubbles came in so quickly after the summons that she must have been listening outside the door.

"Please show out this lady, Stubbles," said Violetta, coldly.

"Well, of all the——"

"I've nothing to say to you. I refer you to Mr. Barlowe if you care to know what rent I pay."

"Rent! I've no doubt you and my foolish brother have managed the thing very nicely. I'm quite sure the rent doesn't come out of *your* pocket."

"The door, please, Stubbles."

Violetta rose without haste and walked towards the French window which was open. Without another word she went into the garden and left her visitor speechless with indignation. When she had sufficiently recovered herself she turned to the housekeeper.

"Do you know Sir John Norman?" she demanded, haughtily.

"No, I don't," retorted Mrs. Stubbles, who was nothing if not blunt.

"I don't believe you. He comes here under another name, most likely."

"That's false, beggin' your pardon, ma'am."

"Doesn't Miss Vaughan have a gentleman visitor ever?"

"I'm not here to answer impertinent questions. If you want to know anything about Miss Vaughan you'd better ask Miss Vaughan herself. So far as I'm concerned, I may tell you that Miss Vaughan has no visitors, man or woman. This is the way to the hall."

She opened the door and stood there, a sturdy janitor, Ella would have dearly liked to vent her rage upon an "inferior," but she had sense enough to see that she would get from this buxom independent domestic as good as

she gave, and perhaps better, so she pocketed her wrath and marched out of the room. Mrs. Stubbles followed her and shut the front door after her with a slam which spoke volumes as to her sentiments. Then she joined her mistress in the garden.

"She's gone an' a good thing. Lor, what a wax she was in," exclaimed Mrs. Stubbles with a heave of her ample bosom.

Violetta had her back turned to the woman. When she wheeled round, Mrs. Stubbles saw that her eyes were moist and shining.

"Don't take on about her," exclaimed Mrs. Stubbles sympathisingly. "I'll warrant you gave her a dressin' down or she wouldn't ha' been so wild. A regular vixen *I* call her. But there—well, after it's all over one can't help givin' way a bit. I s'pose we women are built that way. Maybe it's all for the best."

"I dare say. We won't talk any more about it, Stubbles."

Violetta mopped up the betraying tears that stood in her eyes. She was angry with herself for showing signs that Ella's words had wounded her so much. She wished Mrs. Stubbles had not come upon her while she was struggling with her emotion, but the woman meant her intrusion kindly.

"She wanted to pump me about you, Miss," went on the housekeeper, "but I wasn't taking any. Asked me if Sir John Norman ever came to see you. Not knowing nothing, I couldn't tell her nothing. What I did say wasn't much short o' telling her she was a liar."

"That'll do. I don't want to hear any more," rejoined Violetta, a little chokingly.

Violetta had always prided herself upon her perfect

self control, but Ella's cruel insinuations were more than she could bear, and for once she had broken down. The ordeal had come upon her at a time when she was least prepared for it. And the irony of the thing was that the three men who had come into her life—Norman, Lord Verschoyle and Dan Westoby—were nothing to her.

Mrs. Stubbles wisely left her to herself, and after a while she sat down upon a garden chair and allowed the cool, fresh spring air and the bright sunshine to restore her nerves.

In a way this came about, but the recollection of that passage of arms—it had hardly lasted more than a couple of minutes—still rankled.

“I could have launched a bomb shell had I chosen,” she thought. “I'm sure she doesn't know that John Norman has a wife—and that wife the woman who called herself Mrs. Willoughby Smythe. But it would have been horridly mean of me to give the poor man away.”

Besides, it would have done her more harm than good. It would have made it plain to Ella that John Norman was thoroughly abandoned, and that she, Violetta Vaughan, was quite aware of his supposed loose principles and had encouraged them. She quivered at the thought of the story which a spiteful woman could concoct on such a foundation.

As to her feelings towards John Norman, she could hardly analyse them, had she cared to face the task. She liked him as a companion. His amiability and geniality could not be gainsaid. Violetta had a considerable spice of romance about her—perhaps her varied life had had much to do with it, so much of that life had been unusual and sometimes she had seen herself acting as his

guardian angel—a rôle which most women of good instincts love to play and well it is for the world that it should be so—but why she should have this desire she could not explain. It certainly did not spring out of what is called love. And the odd thing was that if one judged by what Sir John Norman had done and left undone, it could hardly be said he was worth the sacrifice that a woman would make to ensure his happiness.

But Violetta now saw Norman by the light of depreciation. At the same time by contrast with the self-indulgent and depraved men she had encountered, he was almost perfection, though she was quite conscious of his shortcomings. Hence, because of Norman's harmlessness and because of her own desire, out of pure friendliness, to extricate him from his embarrassments, Ella's insinuations were doubly shameful and doubly galling.

She began to think that in associating herself with Norman by renting the Owl's Nest, she had made a mistake. Their relations, purely those of landlord and tenant, could be so easily misconstrued. Yet he had never been near her—had never written her a line. But who would believe it?

"Well," at last she exclaimed, "it's the old story, I suppose. 'Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.' Anyway, I'm too deeply in with horses and racing to go back. And I don't think I want to go back. I love horses. They're honest and faithful. And they can't talk. After all, what Ella chooses to say about me isn't of much consequence. But she'll go for Sir John. Poor chap, I'm sorry for him."

As far as calumny went, George Godfree and Dan

Westoby were much more to be feared than Ella Norman.

Violetta had half determined to go to Westoby that very day and force him to accept the £250, but after what had happened her nerves were too strained.

"I must be at the very top of my form when I interview that cold-blooded fellow," was the conclusion she came to, and hearing the housekeeper's summons for lunch, she went into the house in much her usual unruffled demeanour.

Violetta was quite right in foreshadowing a bad quarter of an hour for John Norman. Ever since her departure from Thames-side, relations between him and his sister had been somewhat strained, but there had not been anything like an open rupture.

Norman had long been chafing at his dependance upon Ella. It was her money which paid the rent of The Willows and kept the household going. When she was in a bad temper she was not above reminding him of his obligation to her. His enforced helplessness, however, had had one good effect. It made him exert himself, and he had succeeded in obtaining a Government appointment which with economy (if he were capable of such a virtue) would enable him to run his own diggings. But with his temperamental inertness he had put off announcing his intention.

Ella's return from her visit to the Owl's Nest and the way she flew at him brought matters to a crisis.

Happily, or unhappily, he was in the mood to show fight. Alf Richards as a detective had not turned out a success. He had proved to be more like a sponge than a 'tec. Money had the knack of slipping from him—or into

him, as it mostly disappeared in the shape of whiskey—in the most aggravating fashion.

So far as any details as to Christine's mode of life was concerned, he had plenty to say but the details were repellant, and John Norman's sensitiveness received a most disagreeable shock. No doubt, if Richards was to be believed he would have no difficulty in obtaining a divorce, but it meant descending into a sordid story from which he shrank.

The worst point to Norman, however, was the fact—again, if Richards spoke the truth—that the man upon whom she bestowed her favours was George Godfree. They were always together, reported Richards. Not, said Alfred, always like turtle doves, but more often like fighting cocks. But, considering the tastes of both for champagne, whiskies and sodas, and liqueurs, this mixture of moods was not surprising.

The upshot of the matter was that Norman had determined upon dispensing with Alf's services, and had told him on the very day of Ella's visit to the Owl's Nest that he need not do any more detective work, as he had got all the material he wanted and more. He softened the blow by presenting Mr. Richards with a treasury note over and above his weekly allowance, but the amateur detective went away looking very gloomy.

That evening Norman came home to dinner in a very distracted mood, and the angry look upon Ella's face he never noticed. He sat down to the table without a word, served the soup and the fish and still remained silent.

Meanwhile, Ella was fretting and fuming. She was burning for him to give her an opening for unburdening her soul, but she had no chance. Not that she could

have launched her grievance while the parlour maid was hovering round, but she could have delivered some irritating shafts apropos of nothing in particular and so relieved her overcharged feelings.

At last she could bear the restraint no longer.

"What a cheerful companion you are, John," she broke out. "You sit there solemn as an owl."

"I've nothing to say," he rejoined curtly.

"No? Doesn't the reference to the owl stimulate you?"

Ella had got in one shot. She thought it remarkably apt.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? I should have thought the association of ideas would have suggested something pleasant."

"It doesn't suggest anything at all. You're talking in riddles. I hate riddles."

Ella gave him an acid smile.

"Very well. I'll give you the answer when we're by ourselves."

Shot number two. Norman had afforded her the chance she wanted but for the moment she would hold her hand.

The dinner over, Norman lit a cigar and was about to retire to his room when his sister held up her hand.

"Stay a moment, John, I want to talk to you. Do sit down. I can't say what's in my mind while you're wandering about like a wild beast at the Zoo."

John did not look particularly well pleased, and he threw himself into a chair with an air of resignation.

"What's it all about?"

"The answer to what you were pleased to call my riddle."

“Bother your riddle. Do for once talk sense.”

“Oh, you shall have sense enough, my boy, I promise you. I only said one of two words at dinner—owl—and you did not understand, or pretended you didn’t. Had I said ‘Owl’s Nest’ it would, I fancy, have gone home. Ha, ha!”

There was something ominous in Ella’s assumption of hilarity, obviously forced. John Norman shrugged his shoulders and made no reply.

“I’ve been to Owl’s Nest to-day.”

In spite of himself Norman started. He knew now what was in his sister’s mind.

“How nicely you’ve laid your heads together so that I shouldn’t know what you and that woman were up to.”

A much milder tempered man than John Norman would have been roused by Ella’s offensive words, accentuated as they were by her still more offensive manner.

“And what *have* we been up to?” he retorted, flushing angrily.

“Don’t try to put me off, please, because you won’t. I’m not a child. I suppose I know what the scandalous business means. I’m not surprised that you wanted to keep me in the dark. Of course, you’ve a right to do as you like, but if you must mix yourself up in a disgraceful intrigue you might have had the decency to keep your property out of it. I’m told that such immoral arrangements as you have made with a woman, who’s little more than an adventuress, are common enough in the West end of London. In the circles of vice one expects—”

Norman sprang to his feet. He had fairly boiled over.

“Hold your tongue,” he shouted. “What you’ve just

said is a tissue of false slanderous assertions. I'll listen to no more of them."

"Oh, I know the truth is always unpleasant. Do you deny that you're paying for the keep of Violetta Vaughan—that it is into her pocket that your money goes—that in short, she is your—mistress?"

Ella uttered the last word with a great effort, as though it were something that contaminated her lips. Her face wore such a look of horror that had her brother not been in such a towering passion, it must have struck him as extremely comical.

"I deny every one of your libels."

"Of course you do. But you can't deceive me. The woman had very little money when she came to stay here. I saw evident signs of luxury where she is now. I noticed a horse in the stables—a sort of poultry farm in miniature—a couple of servants. She can't keep up an establishment of that kind on nothing. Where does her money come from, I ask you?"

"And you may ask. I know no more about Miss Vaughan's affairs than you do. Indeed, I should say I know less, for *you've* visited her and *I* haven't."

"What does that matter? No doubt you had her *reputation* to consider. It is so easy—to meet in town."

Norman quivered with rage. He could not believe that his prim sister could say such things.

"Infamous," he cried. "You talked just now about West end vice. It seems to me that you know as much about it as any woman needs to know if she has use for it."

It was Ella who was now in a paroxysm of rage, and when she was in this mood her speech inclined to that of the melodrama.

"If anybody had told me you would have used such vile language to your own flesh and blood, I—I would have struck the base slanderer to the earth," she screamed hysterically.

"You brought it on yourself. I told you to hold your tongue. As it is, we've only succeeded in irritating one another. I can see but one thing left for me to do, and that is to leave you to run this show by yourself. We can't meet with any degree of satisfaction after to-night," said Norman, cooling down.

"I quite agree, and I hope you'll go as soon as possible. It's what I would have proposed but I didn't want you to spread it abroad that I'd turned you out. I may say that I contemplate certain changes here, and now that you've plunged into what the dear vicar calls an irregular life, your presence here would be most embarrassing both for him and for me."

Ella's emotional temperament permitted her to pass from one mood to another with lightning rapidity. Her fit of highflown indignation had disappeared, and she now spoke with quite an air of relief.

John Norman stared, much puzzled by her announcement.

"The dear vicar! What the deuce has the dear vicar got to do with it? I don't see where he comes in."

"Then I'll tell you. I'm going to marry him."

"What, have you chucked young Percival?"

"Pray don't use such vulgar expression. I've 'chucked' as you're pleased to term it, nobody. I was never engaged to Mr. Percival."

"Weren't you? I thought you and he had fixed up matters. But it's no affair of mine. You can marry whom you

please and do as you like. I presume I'm entitled to the same liberty."

Now that they had spoken their minds Norman in his new found energy determined to start upon his fresh path in life at once.

That night brother and sister parted coldly polite to each other, and Norman put up at the Great Western Hotel until he could secure a suitable rest for the sole of his foot.

He began to realise the true cause of Ella's disposition to treat him as a sort of pariah. She was eaten up by the canker of "respectability," and her marriage to a parson would set its seal upon her destiny. Norman was inclined to laugh when he thought what she would have said had she known about Christine!

CHAPTER XX

VIOLETTA SHOWS FIGHT

“There’s something going on at Gumley’s that I don’t quite understand. You must find out, George.”

So declared Dan Westoby in his coldest and most deliberate manner.

“Not so easy, old man,” rejoined the Honourable George. “The place is guarded infernally close. Ever since the Two Thousand, Peter’s put on a double set of watchers, and I tell you straight, Dan, they’re not to be got at.”

“Exactly, and that’s why I want to find out Peter’s game.”

Westoby and George Godfree were seated at luncheon in the stately dining-room of Normanhurst. It was much the same as Sir John had left it for Westoby had bought the furniture as well as the mansion and park.

The bookmaker had an idea that when he became a landed proprietor the gentry would receive him on equal terms. He had been bitterly disappointed. He had been snubbed all round. He could not even obtain the distinction of being made a J.P. Except the satisfaction of having dragged down the man he hated, he had derived

no pleasure from being the owner of Normanhurst.

Perhaps had he flung his money about he would have been more successful, but fits of meanness kept his purse strings tightly tied. He knew the hangers-on of the turf too well to make friends of them. They were useful to him and that was all. George Godfree was an exception, but that was because of Godfree's family connections, and because he had been born a gentleman and could call himself the Honourable George.

As a matter of fact, Westoby was a solitary man, and he had begun to find Normanhurst a bore and a white elephant. The upkeep of the place was a financial burden without much compensation. He had occasional thoughts of selling the property but this would have been an admission of defeat, which for the moment he did not feel inclined to face.

But since the Two Thousand he had discovered a reason why he should hold on. A dream was hovering about his brain. He was thinking of it now, but apparently the mystery of Peter Gumley's extra precautions was the only thing that occupied him.

"Peter's game's a deep one, you may bet your bottom dollar on that, Dan," said Godfree, frowning. "I guess Lord Verschoyle keeps a tight hand over him. It was Verschoyle who insisted upon Gumley firing Parsons and all the gang. He's got to know something."

"What's the meaning of Gumley taking on that boy Tim Hollis again?" said Westoby abruptly. "He was one of the old gang, wasn't he?"

"Well, he was and he wasn't," rejoined Godfree with a short laugh. "Barney Moss got hold of him, it's true, but he was rather a difficult fish to play. If he hadn't

been rubbed the wrong way by Peter he wouldn't have opened his mouth; as it was, Barney had precious little out of him."

"Seen Parsons lately?"

"Yesterday. He's always hanging about the Barley Mow. Seems in low water."

"So much the better. No love lost between him and Gumley, eh!"

"Not as much as a bee's knee."

"And I should think he ought to know the ins and outs of Holberry Down at his fingers' ends, You must work him, George. We must see the next trial spin. If Killarney loses the Derby it'll about sew me up. But he can't lose with Tom Allworth on his back."

"What! do you mean to say you've backed him?" cried Godfree.

"Yes, why not? I suppose it's open to me to back a horse as well as take odds against him?"

"I don't deny it. But it's not like you. I've heard you say that if it weren't for the jugginses backing horses the bookies couldn't live."

"And I still say it. But once in a way a juggins pulls it off. Killarney's a dead cert. Why shouldn't I take advantage of it? It's my whim, so shut up."

Godfree shrugged his shoulders and veered round to his patron's way of thinking that Quicksand's form at Newmarket was but a fluke.

"At the same time, governor, if Tom Allworth hadn't been on Killarney I do believe Quicksand would have beaten him."

"And so do I. That's where the devil interfered. You hadn't got your ears and eyes open, George."

“How the dickens could we tell Verschoyle was going to put up Tom Allworth at the last moment? Quicksand beat him when the two were tried together.”

“Barney Moss got that bit of news for us, didn’t he?”

“Yes, and he was well paid for it. He must have known more than he told us, the sneak. He and his crown backed Killarney for all they were worth. We were nearly sold.”

“Mind it doesn’t happen again, George. We’ll see Gumley’s next trial with our own eyes. Parsons must manage it for us. Enough of this. What about the girl we saw with Verschoyle? Found out anything about her?”

Godfrey eyed his patron closely. He was wondering why Westoby took so much interest in Violetta. The bookmaker was as a rule quite indifferent to women. His ideas about them on the few occasions when he talked on the subject were not elevating. He regarded women as created to squeeze what she could out of man. She would, he held, get anything to benefit herself whether in the way of her pocket or of her personal adornment. Judging from his experience of the majority of women whose acquaintance he had made on the race course possibly he was right.

His sentiments were perfectly well known to George Godfrey and the latter could not conceive Dan regarding Violetta in any other light than as a woman to be bought. Whether this was so or not didn’t matter a rap to the Honourable George. His game was to make his services useful. If Dan Westoby paid him well, and he was able at the same time to indulge his spite against Violetta, he would have a double satisfaction.

“Have I found out anything about her? My dear chap,

there's precious little I don't know, excepting perhaps what she did during the time she was in France."

"Yes, you hinted as much before," rejoined Westoby, impatiently. "Have you found out where she's living? That's the point."

George Godfree's blood-shot eyes glinted maliciously.

"Quite so. It's a bit of a find and I guess you'll open your eyes when I tell you. It cost me a fiver to oil the tongues of the gossips at the Barley Mow."

"The Barley Mow! What the devil's the Barley Mow got to do with her?"

"Simply this. She's living at the Owl's Nest, and her place isn't two miles from the pub. There's nothing the loafers of the bar parlour like better than to chew over the bits of scandal about the 'Quality.'"

"Well."

"What they don't know they invent, and, by Jove, a story in their mouths doesn't lose by telling. The tale is that Sir John Norman, once my old pal, set her up there and is looking after her welfare. The Owl's Nest belongs to Norman, you know."

"I didn't know—curse him."

"Well, it does, and a snigger cage for a pretty bird it would be difficult to find."

Westoby's lips tightened and his nostrils twitched. Godfree watched him narrowly.

"From what I know of her past and present I should say that there's a lot of truth at the bottom of the story. The Hebe of the buffet in a club where some of the rowdiest boys on the turf were to be seen, isn't likely to be very particular. But, touching Norman. By a stroke of luck, Christine, who's the cleverest of devils when she

keeps from the cham. and chartreuse, came across both her and Norman when she was doing the spiritualistic fake and the Christian Science wheeze, and making a good thing out of both. It was at Thames-side, up the river, and she got taken up by the vicar, till he was told something about her that made him drop poor Christine like a hot potato. It's as good as a play to hear her take off his reverence—"

"That'll do. I don't want to hear about Christine. I know all her doings."

"Do you? I doubt it," returned Godfree, with a hoarse laugh. "She wants a bit of knowing. Anyhow, she figures in the story. She was invited to a seance at a riverside villa where Norman and his sister were living, and while she was there Norman and Violetta Vaughan came back from a motor joy ride. They'd been out all day it appeared. Norman's sister, who is a bit of a spitfire, was in a rare wax. Christine learned that the next day she packed off Violetta bag and baggage. Of course, Norman was on the job, and that was how she comes to be living in that secluded shanty of his, the Owl's Nest."

Westoby's face became harder and harder as he listened to this recital of facts ornamented by fictional conclusions.

"How came she to be gadding about at Newmarket with Verschoyle?" he burst out.

"Ask me another, my dear chap. You're not a baby in the ways of women. Draw your own inferences, and while you're doing that draw me a cheque. I guess I've made the way easy for you. It's half the battle when you know the sort of woman you're after. Five tens wouldn't hurt you. I wasn't bound to tell you anything, you know.

Dirty work ought to be well paid.”

Westoby pulled out his cheque book and wrote a cheque for the desired amount.

“There you are, Judas,” he hissed.

Godfree laughed. He was used to Westoby’s ways.

“Get on now to Parsons and don’t mess the thing up,” snarled Westoby.

The tone and manner were those of a master to a servant, and the Honourable George’s face momentarily flushed. But he dared not resent the book-maker’s contempt and tyranny.

Three days went over. Violetta, by sheer force of will, had recovered her equanimity. Had she chosen to dwell upon her disappointments she would have been thoroughly miserable. She had half hoped that Lord Verschoyle would have been tempted to call, but he came not.

“Why should he? You’re a fool to think he would after seeing that choice sample of my acquaintances. He must be feeling jolly glad I didn’t accept his promised invitation to his mother’s dinner party. I suppose I shall be honoured with a distant bow if I should chance to meet him with any of his relations, and with a sort of patronising familiarity if he should be alone. That’s how men treat women who’ve gone down in their estimation. I’ve seen that kind of thing over and over again.”

Immediately after pronouncing this judgment she was inclined to make a reservation in favour of his lordship. In whatever he did he would be a gentleman.

As for Norman, his silence had first surprised and then slightly angered her. Having taken her fully into confidence, he had dropped her. Why? She could find no

reason, but after Ella's base insinuations she was glad he had never written nor sought to see her. No one who knew the facts could cast a stone either at her or him.

But, as she thought, with a shrug of the shoulders, what do facts matter where scandalous tongues are at work?

Notwithstanding that Norman had to a certain extent dropped out of her dreams of the future, the sudden appearance of Dan Westoby and his identity with the man of her "mascotte" days impressed her strangely, and brought to life the romanticism of her nature. It had once pleased her to let her fancy rove in the regions of the ideal when she saw herself the central figure of a story which was to have a happy ending in restoring to Norman his ancestral house. She did not know exactly how this was to be done, and Norman himself had rather knocked the bottom out of her fanciful weavings by his confession. Of late she had ceased to speculate about him and herself—save on one point.

That point was closely allied to her romanticism. She had never cast aside the impression that she brought good luck to other people. Though she had ceased to be a "mascotte," she still believed in her powers. As she had at Monte Carlo told the man who had proved to be Dan Westoby, she had not the slightest idea why she should possess this occult influence. All she could say was that such was the fact.

And with this conviction firmly fixed in her mind, she had governed all her speculative plunges by the idea that she was acting for Norman and not for herself. It might be said to be a species of self delusion, but whether or not she had hitherto not had a failure. Of course, she

herself would benefit by her successes, but this was a minor consideration. She had as a Monte Carlo "mascotte" steadily refused anything but a fair remuneration and she would continue to do so. It was no doubt a "fad," but "fads" have a strange individualistic influence incapable of explanation.

The startling entry of Westoby into her life had made a considerable difference in her views. She now had a strange personal interest in wresting Normanhurst from the man who had deposed its rightful owner. She had no cause for hating Westoby, it was purely the antagonism she felt against him. But with Violetta this was quite enough.

So it came about that the sympathy with Norman and her desire to help him receded into the background, and a yearning to pit herself against Westoby occupied the first place.

In spite of all this, Violetta felt that for the moment she had not nerve enough to take the bold step of calling on Westoby. She had worked herself up into hating the man, but neither his questionable reputation nor his intimacy with her avowed enemy George Godfree had anything to do with that hatred. The cause was something which worked upon her indignation and galled her to the quick. She knew that her character and much of her past were in his hands. And she felt helpless.

Violetta brooded over the position until it began to dash her spirits, and she felt the want of some mental tonic. It came in the shape of a note from Peter Gumley, which arrived by post.

"Dear Miss Vaughan," he wrote. "I should much like you to see the horses run. I'm going to have a trial—

at night. I've reason to believe that spies are about, so I send this by post instead of messenger, who might be watched. To-morrow night the moon will be at the full, and if the present weather continues it ought to be almost as light as day. Come over about nine. I shouldn't ride if I were you, nor travel direct. Take a roundabout route. We can't be too careful. All going well. Yours respectfully, Peter Gumley."

Violetta felt a strange sense of elation. Here was something to fight against. The prospect of a battle of wits always put her in a good humour. She carried out Gumley's instructions to the letter.

A few fleecy clouds flecked the sky when Violetta reached the trainer's house. Gumley was awaiting her. There was a shade of anxiety in his face.

"Are you sure you weren't dogged?" said he.

"Quite sure—that is to say, I saw no one at all suspicious. I set out from my place as if I weren't coming here. I came round by Normanhurst."

"That was rather risky, wasn't it?"

"No. I thought it was the best thing. If you're in any fear of Westoby's people they'd hardly think I should go in his direction."

"Perhaps you're right. What troubles me is that black-guard Parsons. He's been nosing about here these last two or three days. Anyway, all is in readiness, so come along."

The two went into the paddock. The horses were out for a gentle walk to stretch their legs previous to the trial. There they were, the three beauties,—Killarney, Quicksand, and Belphegor. Violetta's heart bounded when she saw how the action and bearing of her favourite had im-

proved.

“Oh, Mr. Gumley, how splendid he looks!” she cried enthusiastically.

“Aye, and I’ll go bail his running will be just as good.”

“Who’s up?”

“Tim, of course. I wouldn’t trust any other boy on his back.”

“That’s right. Who’ll ride Killarney—I mean for the Derby? Tom Allworth, I suppose.”

“Yes, Tom’s booked for the Derby, but for the moment it’s a dead secret.”

“Where does to-night’s run end?”

“At yonder post. Wait here and see ’em come in.”

Violetta purposely avoided making herself known either to Tim or to Belphegor. She wanted the trial to be carried out fairly and squarely on its merits.

The horses were walked to the starting place, and Gumley’s head groom set them going. Violetta and the old trainer watched and waited.

It was an exciting struggle, and to Violetta all the more so because of the solitude and silence. There was no bustle, no roar of a tumultuous crowd, no buzz of tongues to relieve the strain on the nerves.

Soon the quick sullen thud of hoofs became distinctly audible. Violetta, looking direct at the advancing horses, could not determine which was ahead. They seemed to be in a cluster. Gumley’s more experienced eyes, however, told him that Killarney was a little in front, and he said so.

“But that means nothing,” he added. “They’re only through the first half of the spin. The last bit will tell. It’s a little uphill.”

“Oh, if only Belphegor puts out all his strength!” cried Violetta, clasping her hands. “He’s got it in him, I’m sure.”

“I’ll go bail Tim’ll see to that. I never see a boy so wrapped up in a horse. They’re pals, and that’s a fact.”

On they came. At three hundred yards or so from the post they were level, and at a hundred yards Belphegor began to draw away from his companions. He gradually drew ahead and won by a length. It was a dead heat between Killarney and Quicksand.

Violetta rushed to Belphegor, stroked his nose and caressed his neck. The horse knew her. Then she held out her hand to Tim, whose eyes glistened.

“I knowed he’d do it, miss, when he’d got fair play,” gasped Tim, who was breathless with exertion and excitement.

“Yes, and he must do it again at the Derby,” said she.

“You bet he will if I’m on him.”

Violetta turned to Gumley.

“What will Lord Verschoyle say to this, Peter?”

“It’s a bit awkward. He’s pretty deep in with Killarney, though I warned him the Derby wouldn’t be the sure thing the Two Thou, was.”

“Did you say anything about Belphegor?”

“No; I wasn’t confident about him or about Tim either. He’s come along wonderful since then.”

Violetta was silent for a few minutes. Then she looked up with a shade of vexation in her voice.

“I wish you’d invited Lord Verschoyle to-night. He ought to have seen the trial considering he’s so interested in it. It would have been playing the game, wouldn’t it?”

"I suppose it would," rejoined Gumley with an apologetic cough. "But I didn't know how you'd take it."

"How I'd take it? Why on earth should I object?"

"Well, you see, Miss, the thing had to be kept so close on account of Dan Westoby."

"Yes, I know, but Lord Verschoyle's a gentleman. He's to be trusted."

"Of course—of course. Anyhow, the thing's done and can't be undone."

"Yes it can. You must let Lord Verschoyle know as soon as possible. Remember, I insist upon it."

Gumley was a little puzzled over Violetta's manifestation of feeling. And; indeed, Violetta herself was puzzled. It seemed to her, however, that as things had turned out, it might be said that she had been conspiring with Peter Gumley against his lordship. But had Belphegor failed, what then? It was a point she could not decide off-hand.

"How does the betting on Belphegor stand?" said she.

"Ten to one. The bookmakers want less odds. Before the Two Thou, you could have got twenty to one."

"I did," rejoined Violetta quietly.

The trainer gave a long whistle.

"Up to how much?"

"A £100."

"Who's the man who took you?"

"Dan Westoby. I chose him purposely. The bet's not in my name. I booked it through my old friend, William Burrup."

"H'm. If Dan Westoby knew of to-night's result he'd say his £2,000 was as good as gone."

"I suppose he'd get it back and more by Killarney losing. Killarney's hot favourite just now."

"That's so. But he wouldn't be if this trial gets talked about. I've done my level best to keep everything as close as wax, but stable secrets have a nasty way of oozing out."

"I might get on the first thing to-morrow at ten to one," said Violetta, reflecting.

"You might."

"I happen to know Burrup's in town. I shall go to London to-night and see him. Shall I put a bit on for you?"

"No; that would never do. It would upset the show if it were known that I was booking bets."

"I should take care it wasn't known but please yourself. Good-night, Mr. Gumley. If I hurry I shall just catch the next train."

She sped away, and the old trainer's looks followed her. Scratching his chin, the while he muttered:

"Mercy on me, when a woman takes on a hobby, whether its horses or anything else, she goes the whole hog. What did she pick out Westoby for?"

Peter couldn't answer the question and he didn't try. He could only shake his head.

"The gell may be right, but—" well, there was a volume in that "but."

CHAPTER XXI

QUITS!

As Peter feared, somebody in his establishment said "something." Belphegor's price suddenly went from ten to one to five to one. The favourite stood at three to one. On the morning of the third day after the trial spin, Peter had a visit from Dan Westoby. The trainer received the bookmaker civilly but coldly.

"I've called to see you, Gumley, about that tricky horse of yours, Belphegor," said Westoby, going straight to the point, as was his wont. "Some six months ago you offered him to me at my own price."

"Aye, and you refused a deal."

"Well, I've altered my mind. Name your figure."

"Can't be done, Mr. Westoby. The matter's out of my hands."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've sold the horse."

"You might have given me the chance, anyway," said Westoby, his brows contracting.

"You had the chance, Sir, and you let it slip."

Westoby inwardly was raging, but his habitual self-command concealed any outward expression beyond a

tightening of the thin lips.

“Who’s bought the brute?” said he, after a pause.

“Man named Humphries took a fancy to him, and naming me a fair price, I closed with his offer.”

“Humph. Who’s this Humphries? Where’s he to be found?”

“That’s my business, Mr. Westoby.”

“Very well. I’ll make it mine, too.”

“You can do as you like about it.”

Dan Westoby said no more. The parting between him and Peter verged upon the hostile.

The bookmaker had been ill-served by George Godfree. Of course there was a woman at the bottom of the matter—Violetta, though in a roundabout way. The £50 which Godfree had extracted from Westoby for telling him where Violetta might be found was the Honourable George’s undoing.

The trial spin had come off on the very night George received his instructions and the cheque. Godfree had got on the track of Parsons, who in some mysterious way had had the tip concerning Belphegor’s wonderful running. Parsons parted with the secret for a fiver, and told Godfree something besides which had he but known was worth as much more. Godfree could not see that the information would lose anything by his keeping it to himself for twenty-four hours, and burning for a night’s debauch went off to London for that purpose.

Full of importance, George, saturated with champagne and brandy, let out to his pals a good deal of what he knew, and in a wonderfully short time the result was seen in the rapid shortening of the odds, greatly to Westoby’s bewilderment. Godfree’s night of dissipation re-

quired a day for recovery, and forty-eight hours went over before he saw Westoby and told him what had happened. But he said not a word about the other item of gossip which Parsons had mentioned. This item was that Belphegor had been in Violetta's possession for a short time. Parsons could not explain why, but he imagined that Violetta, having succeeded in soothing the horse's savage temper, had had him in her keeping to complete the cure. The important fact that he did not know, was that she had bought the horse.

Westoby was maddened by the news. Violetta had completely mystified him. He had never forgotten her success as a "mascotte." He had found out that she had backed Killarney for the Two Thou., and he had no doubt she would follow her luck and back him also for the Derby. Some curious superstitious feeling had led him to alter his tactics, and he had involved himself heavily in his support of the favourite. Violetta had once brought off a coup in his favour. Why shouldn't she do it again?

The unexpected issue of the trial spin had altered everything. If Belphegor won the Derby he was a broken man. In addition to backing Killarney, he had accepted the odds against Belphegor, and he stood to lose both ways if Belphegor won. The Derby Day was so close that there was little chance of his hedging successfully. The racing public had gone mad over Killarney and Belphegor, and would hardly look at any of the other entries.

Westoby returned to Normanhurst much perturbed, even agitated. It was a new sensation for a man who had always believed in his iron nerves. For the first time in his life his brain refused to grapple with the complicated process of "making a book." Moreover, he was beset by

the constantly recurring image of Violetta Vaughan. She intruded into his thoughts. He took up his betting book, and threw it down impatiently. He glanced through the latest racing odds in that morning's sporting paper, the figures danced before his eyes.

"Curse the jade," he muttered. "Who the devil is she acting for? Norman or Verschoyle?"

Westoby had been the clever show mathematical boy of his grammar school. He was the "lightning calculator," who astonished the examiners. He had on leaving school entered a stockbroker's office and was found a treasure by his employer. He could reel off the fluctuating quotations of the day with an accuracy and a nicety of fractional details truly marvellous. His cold temperament remained undisturbed by women. But there must have been something in his frigidity and air of composed masterfulness which had their influence on the emotional Alice Forbes, the stockbroker's daughter. He cared nothing for her, but he saw his way to his own advancement if the father consented to receive him as a son-in-law.

Westoby had no notion of a secret marriage, and he coolly broached the subject to the stockbroker. The latter was highly indignant, and informed his presumptuous clerk that he intended his daughter to marry Sir John Norman, one of his best clients—indeed, the matter was practically settled. He wound up by suggesting the advisability of Westoby transferring his services elsewhere to prevent embarrassment.

Westoby, of course, knew Norman and had always disliked him for no reasons other than envy and antagonism. Norman's easy well-bred manner was such a con-

trast to his own. Added to this, was the conviction that he could never acquire the air of a gentleman.

He went out of Forbes' office hating Norman with all the venom of a malignant nature. He made a lucky "plunge," became a member of the Stock Exchange—and then his luck turned. He was "hammered," turned outside broker, engaged in some shady transaction, vanished for a year or two and reappeared as a successful "bookie." Eventually, as we know, his chance came to revenge himself upon Sir John Norman.

Abstemious by temperament and system, he had not the relief in stimulants which on occasions most men seek. Teetotalism may tend to affect the brain as injuriously as excess. Westoby thought that abstention from alcohol kept his mind clear. He forgot that the mind depends upon the nerves. Just now his nervous system was in a tumult, and he paced the room a prey to intense vexation and chagrin.

A rap came at the door. A servant entered. A lady had called, said the maid. She wanted to see Mr. Westoby on business.

"Who is she? What's her name?" he rapped out.

"Wouldn't tell me, sir. I asked her."

Westoby was silent for a moment. He decided that whoever the visitor might be he would see her. She would distract his thoughts and that was what at that moment he wanted most.

The servant ushered in the visitor—Violetta.

Westoby stared at her blankly. She looked infinitely more attractive in her well-fitting sober toned dress than she did in the butterfly costume suitable to Monte Carlo.

"You," he faltered. "Pray sit down."

Scarcely knowing what he said or did, he moved a chair towards her. She took no notice.

"The business that has brought me here, Mr. Westoby, won't take two minutes. I want to return the £250 I received from you at Monte Carlo. Will you count the notes and see that they are correct?"

"No, I won't," he returned, brusquely. "The money's yours. It was fairly earned. I'll not take it."

"That's a matter of indifference to me. I shall leave it all the same. I wish you good morning."

She laid the notes on the table, and turned to quit the room.

"Stop," he shouted. "You're not going like that. You've no right. I've done you no injury. I've never offended you so far as I can tell. If I have, I apologise. Just think. We parted as strangers, but now that I know who you are and you know me, the thing's different. I want an explanation."

"Of what?"

"Why you bring me these notes with an air as though they were contaminated."

"It's my whim. I've nothing more to say," she returned steadily.

"But *I* have, and you must listen. It's only fair."

A qualm of conscience seized Violetta. There was reason in what he said. He had done her no wrong, but she hated to be under an obligation to him.

"Do you remember the offer of partnership I made you at Monte Carlo?"

"Yes. My answer was no."

"Exactly, but at that time you did not know me. It did not occur to you that this place—Normanhurst—was

mine.”

“What of that?”

“I offer it to you now. I should fancy it was preferable to the Owl’s Nest. Aren’t you tired of that weak-kneed Norman?”

He thought to surprise her. She heard him quite composedly.

“May I ask you what you mean?”

“Bah! You know quite well. From what I hear, you’ve thrown him over for Lord Verschoyle. Sort of thing one would expect. Here, as my wife, you’d be free from scandal.”

“I’m a topic of scandal, am I?”

He laughed derisively.

“How can you escape being so—with your record?”

“And who knows what you’re pleased to call my record beyond you and George Godfree? If there’s any scandal about me it’s been spread by one or the other, possibly by both. I’m glad to learn this. If ever anything concerning myself comes to my ears I need not trouble to ask who are the scandal mongers.”

His white face broke into pale yellow patches. His cold eyes suddenly blazed.

“I’ve not said a word about you, but I could. I was not deaf to the gossip at Monte Carlo. Personally, I don’t care a hang what character you bear. What you’re doing now—mascotte to the backers of horses as you were a mascotte to gamblers—doesn’t trouble me excepting that I want you for *my* mascotte. You were once, you know, and why not again? I’ll swear I paid you on a much more liberal scale than either Norman or Verschoyle may be doing now. I won’t touch this money. Put it in your

pocket. It'll buy you a few diamonds."

The insinuation was gross—it was unpardonable. For the first time Violetta showed emotion. Her lips quivered slightly and then became firm. Grasping the notes he had pushed towards her, she tore them across and across, flung the fragments contemptuously in his face, and without a word walked out of the room. It was as though she had slashed him with a whip.

CHAPTER XXII

LORD VERSCHOYLE MAKES THE PLUNGE

Violetta's outburst of emotion did not last long. The fresh air and the bright sun restored her nerves to their usual tone. Before she passed through the lodge gate of Normanhurst, she felt a sense of elation, of triumph creep over her.

The cause was not far to seek. She had now a definite reason for hating Westoby. Her instincts had not deceived her. The man was a mercenary cad. She could not feel sufficiently glad that she had got even with him—that she was not under the slightest obligation. As for his base insinuations, she brushed them aside as she would some noisome insect.

She returned home by train. There was no direct railway route and the journey entailed some two miles on foot. But excellent walker as she was, this was of no consequence.

Still, what with this and the strain on her nerves which she had gone through, she found the ascent to the Owl's Nest somewhat fatiguing, and at the bend half way up she paused to rest and take breath. While she was standing, her hand to her side, she heard the scrunching of

the loose gravel path ahead of her and suddenly someone came round the corner with a long swinging stride. It was Lord Verschoyle.

She saw at once that his expression was unusually sombre. It instantly changed, however, when his glance rested upon her and he quickened his pace.

"This is real luck," he exclaimed gaily. "They told me at your place that you were out and that it was uncertain when you'd be back. I was plunged in desolation. But now——"

He held out his hand and retained hers, while his keen grey eyes went rapidly over her face.

"You look horribly fagged," said he bluntly. "What have you been doing?"

"This rough hilly road is always very trying, especially when one is tired."

Without a word he drew her hand inside his arm and they walked slowly up the ascent. In truth she was glad of his support, as much because of his strong cheery presence as because of his physical help.

Presently he broke the silence.

"You see, I've kept my word. I've called upon you. You didn't think I would."

"I've never thought about it."

"No? How disappointing—to me, I mean."

And really a shadow seemed to flit across his face.

"I'm sorry. But now that you're here, you're very welcome."

There was sincerity in her tone. The contrast between Lord Verschoyle's frank, hearty manner, and the dry, saturnine air of Dan Westoby was very refreshing.

"I believe you mean that," he rejoined, with emphasis.

They reached the gate and he held it open while she passed in.

"You have a charming little place here," said he, "an ideal retreat. I took the liberty of walking round the garden. It's tended, I can see, by someone who loves flowers."

"I believe everyone in my small household does."

"Yes, but I can trace the master mind. Yours, I'll swear."

"Oh, I daresay I've something to do with it. But you must see the inside of the house."

The sound of the clock striking the hour came through the open French windows.

"Four o'clock. Is it too early to offer you a cup of tea?"

"I shall be delighted to accept your hospitality at any hour of the day, but more especially now, as I can see that tea is the one thing you want."

"You're really an 'understanding' man," she said, smilingly. "You'll excuse me while I look up my right hand woman. Do please smoke meanwhile. I shan't be long."

They had entered the pleasant low-ceilinged room through the French windows. She hastened away, leaving him to amuse himself as best he might.

Lord Verschoyle was evidently not in the mood to be amused. He was puzzled and not a little worried. A certain restlessness had come over him. He walked about the room twisting his moustache and muttering words chiefly of an ejaculatory character.

"Shall I? I wonder—damned if I can make up my mind," was one of the most complete sentences which escaped his lips.

Then he glanced at the mirror, straightened himself, and did what he ought to have done at first—took ad-

vantage of Violetta's permission and lit a cigarette.

Meanwhile, Violetta was somewhat perturbed by Lord Verschoyle's visit. She had had him in her mind a good deal and was fearful lest he should think she had not done the correct thing in keeping him in the dark about the trial spin. But really, she was quite innocent. If anybody was to blame it was Peter Gumley.

When she appeared, followed by Mrs. Stubbles bearing a tray loaded with dainties, she looked brighter and fresher, and Lord Verschoyle's eyes glinted with pleasure. To his military mind she was the ideal woman—neat, trim, composed yet easy in manner and with a certain alertness of intellect which forbade the idea that she could ever be taken unawares. With all this there was evidence of a desire to please, a most admirable feminine virtue.

The tea was served in the old-fashioned way, and Mrs. Stubbles discreetly left them to themselves, sitting opposite to each other. Despite her unruffled demeanour, Violetta was conscious of a feeling of embarrassment. She was very anxious to clear away any possible misunderstanding, but she did not quite see her way to approach the subject. While she was cudgelling her brains, Lord Verschoyle suddenly said:

“Do you know, Miss Vaughan, you're a most wonderful woman.”

Violetta opened her eyes wide at this.

“In what way?” she asked.

“In the way you can keep a secret.”

“That isn't wonderful at all. What really *is* wonderful is the delusion men are under in fancying that women cannot keep their lips closed when they choose. But

what's the secret I've kept?"

"Before I answer that question, I want to know whether we're friends or enemies."

Just a tinge of seriousness had crept into his lordship's voice.

"Friends, of course. Why shouldn't we be?"

"Quite so. I can't imagine you otherwise. But there's no getting away from the fact that you're up against me over the Derby."

"Then Mr. Gumley has told you," she cried, with heightened colour. "I'm glad of that. He had no business to keep you in the dark when your horse was tried against mine. I was very angry about it."

"You weren't to blame. Peter let me have the whole story of your amazing power over horses—and, may I add, over—ahem!—men also—and I again say you're a most wonderful woman."

"Never mind about that, Lord Verschoyle. Do let us straighten out this business at once. I guess Peter has told you that if Belphegor runs at the Derby as he ran that night at Holberry Down he's bound to win—barring accidents, of course. Quicksand hasn't a chance. Belphegor's only rival is Killarney, and—"

"And Tom Allworth will be up, which he wasn't the other night at Peter's," put in Verschoyle.

"I'm not afraid of Allworth even. Belphegor's the finest horse I ever saw in my life, and he'll be ridden by the only jockey who understands him. He's never been fairly tried as he will be at the Derby."

"Good. Now we know where we are, don't we? Suppose we both throw our cards on the table. I stand to win £1,000 on Killarney. If he doesn't pull it off I drop

£5,000 or £6,000.”

“You ought to hedge. Back Belphegor.”

“Not good enough. The odds this morning are dashed close. Killarney 5 to 2, Belphegor 3 to 1. Had a wire from Tattersalls an hour ago. But—”

His lordship’s eyes twinkled.

“I backed him the first thing in the morning after the trial at 10 to 1. Peter came over the same night, and we had a long jaw.”

“Good old Peter,” cried Violetta, clapping her hands. “Now that was really awfully decent of the old boy. I think I rowed him a bit for not letting you know. But tell me—if Belphegor wins, are you safe?”

“Quite safe.”

“Oh, I am glad.”

Violetta’s increased colour had never left her. Her eyes fairly blazed with excitement. The pleasure she felt had revealed a fascinating dimple in her left cheek. She looked supremely alluring.

At least, that was Lord Verschoyle’s opinion.

“And what about you,” said he, “if Killarney wins?”

“Oh, I can pay what I shall owe on Belphegor.”

“You haven’t then backed my horse?”

“No. You’ll forgive me, won’t you? I made quite a pile through his victory at Newmarket.”

Lord Verschoyle sat silent; his brows wrinkling the while.

“By gad, Miss Vaughan,” he suddenly burst out, “if you’re not as puzzling as you are wonderful. But that’s like a woman—I mean one who’s interesting.”

“Is that intended for a compliment?”

"I don't know what it's intended for. It's the truth, anyhow. But why the deuce *didn't* you back Killarney? Belphegor wasn't in your mind, was he? Anyhow, he hadn't been run against Killarney at that time."

"I fancy I'm full of superstition. I wanted you to win the Two Thousand with Killarney and so I backed him for you."

"For me?" he interposed, in a bewildered tone.

"Yes. You don't in the least understand, but that's of no consequence."

How could he understand? What did he know about her occult power of acting as a mascotte?

"Then you don't care about my carrying off the Blue Riband at Epsom?" said he.

"Well, I'm in a difficulty. You see there's Belphegor. I should like him to win."

It was not necessary to explain to Lord Verschoyle that a victory of Belphegor carried with it two things—the undoing of Dan Westoby and the re-instatement of Norman at Normanhurst—that is, if Norman cared to avail himself of the chance. She stood to win a big sum with Belphegor, and she was quite prepared to lend Norman a substantial amount. But the great thing, from her point of view, was that in running Belphegor she was acting for Norman and not for herself. She was not prepared to argue the matter by the light of common sense. What had common sense to do with the occult?

The tea was over. They had sauntered to the window and were looking across the garden. The season was well advanced, and iris, lily and early roses were in bloom. The air, thanks to the elevated position of the Owl's Nest, was delightfully sweet and fresh and invigorating. The

sense of isolation had its charm.

"Seems to me, Miss Vaughan, that I'm better off than you. I shall win whichever way the Derby goes."

"It's what I would wish."

He cast a glance at her face. It was slightly averted and her profile alone presented itself. How firm, how regular, it was cut, he thought. It reminded him of a cameo.

"Do you know," said he, abruptly, "that I'm greatly indebted to you? But for your coaxing me into putting up Tom Allworth for the Two Thousand I should have lost heavily. No other jockey could have snatched victory at the post as he did. That boy's riding of Quicksand was a marvel."

"He rides Belphegor for the Derby," rejoined Violetta, quickly.

"I congratulate you. Well, if Belphegor wins it'll be your work anyhow." Then, after a pause, and a fidgeting twist of his moustache, he went on:

"Look here, Miss Vaughan, I want to ask you a question—will you marry me?"

Violetta stared blankly at him. Surely he could not be in earnest.

"In token of your gratitude?" she said with a little mocking smile.

"By Jove, no. Don't treat the thing as a joke. I never in my life was more serious. I suppose I didn't make my proposal in the proper way. But what *is* the proper way? If it is to surround one's declaration with a lot of sappy sentimentality, well, then I can't do it. But I don't believe you'd care for that kind of thing."

"Oh, I should hate it."

The mocking smile had fled. There was nothing of the

coy maiden in her frank, clear eyes. She spoke as she felt and he knew it.

"Exactly what I should expect," he whispered joyously. "I won't say that if I were eighteen instead of thirty-eight I shouldn't have burst into some sort of love rot—compared your eyes to stars—they're much brighter, by the way—and so on. As it is, I again ask, will you marry me?"

She did not answer at once.

"It wants thinking over—for you as well as for me," said she softly.

"I grant you. I don't suggest one of the get-married-quick war weddings. The time's gone by for that madness. I don't ask you to decide offhand."

"You know nothing about me, and if I marry you or anyone you *ought* to know."

"I don't see that. I take you as you are. I don't believe, and I never did believe, in the stupid theory that women were born to tempt and deceive. My best friends have always been women."

"So, then, you have a past," said she, the ghost of her mocking smile flitting across her face.

"Nothing to be ashamed of, anyhow. But you won't want to know my past any more than I want to know yours—if you have what's called a past."

"Well, I have, and I'd rather it came to you from the lips of my enemies than from mine."

"That's plucky of you. But surely you haven't enemies?"

"Every woman who tries to go her own way is bound to have. When she defies conventionality she's either ridiculed or condemned. I have two enemies—you saw how they recognised me at Newmarket—George God-

free and Dan Westoby.”

“*Those* two bounders?” cried his lordship, hotly. “Yes, I saw the fellows, and I longed to kick one of them—that unprincipled ruffian and blackleg, Godfree. I’ve never spoken to Westoby, and I’ve had no dealings with him, but I believe his reputation’s none of the best.”

“I’ve no doubt you’re right. Anyway, I refer you to these two for my character. What the one doesn’t know the other will supply.”

“Talk to those blackguards about *you*? I’m damned—I beg your pardon—if I do. George Godfree’s one of the biggest liars and scoundrels going. I knew him years ago. He was in my regiment and was cashiered for cheating at cards. He married a woman of no class. Christine Devenport she called herself—I’ll go bail her real name was Sally Spriggins or something equally low down. I hear that the precious couple are exploiting themselves in the West end picking up flats. They work in couples or single-handed, according to circumstances. Few people know they’re man and wife. They’re careful not to let *that* out. She has half a dozen aliases, but her pet name’s Mrs. Willoughby-Smythe—a widow from Chicago. I apologise to you for plunging you into Godfree’s sordid vicious world.”

“It has its interesting side,” rejoined Violetta, thoughtfully. “You’ve told me more about Mr. Godfree than I knew. How long has he been married?”

“Ten years at least. The lady’s no chicken, though she fakes herself up to look like one. But for heaven’s sake don’t let us talk any more of this miserable subject. Do get back to what’s worrying me and has been for days and days past. Are you going to think over my ques-

tion?"

"Most certainly if you'll promise to do so too. Many things may happen that may cause you to change your mind."

"I can't imagine anything — unless you're going to marry somebody else."

"Well, I'm not," said she, with more emphasis than she intended.

"I breathe again. Shall we leave it at that, Violetta? I warn you it's going to be Violetta with me whatever comes to pass. You don't mind?"

"No, I've been Violetta so long that Miss Vaughan sounds quite strange and hatefully formal."

It was clear his lordship was satisfied with the way his proposal was shaping. He held her hand with a gentle, tender, pressure; he looked at her with longing eyes. Then he abruptly said good-bye and walked rapidly away as though he must have kissed her had he stayed.

At the gate he turned and lifted his hat with a sweeping bow that expressed confidence. Violetta waved her hand and smiled.

But the smile fled as she went into the house. She had so much to ponder over.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

More food for thought was to come. Destiny had ordained that day to be the most absorbing in Violetta's life.

Lord Verschoyle's proposal had embarrassed her terribly. She liked the man, she admired his blunt honesty, she felt he was chivalrous, but granting all this, why should she marry him? Possibly most women past the romantic age of the teens ask themselves this question under similar circumstances, and when they discover a reason why they should say yes, that reason may be wholly fanciful and ill founded. But from some feminine idiosyncrasy it generally suffices. Violetta, however, had not arrived at this stage. She was troubled.

The sudden intrusion of Norman and his affairs, brought about strangely enough by Lord Verschoyle, was the source of her trouble. She had it now in her power to set Norman free from his chains. Of course, he ought to be told, but what would follow?

The truth was, she was disappointed with Norman. She had lost the interest she once felt in him. He had been so impassive—so irresolute. If he had really been

in love with her, she argued, he ought to have told her so, wife or no wife. Whether she would have encouraged him was not the point. Her attitude had nothing to do with the matter. Anyhow, he had lost his chance of winning her, if he ever had one, about which she was extremely doubtful.

She had just come to this conclusion when Stubbles announced a visitor—a gentleman. As usual, he had refused to give his name.

Lord Verschoyle had been gone about twenty minutes. It was hardly likely to be he. He certainly would not have chosen to be anonymous. But it might be Dan Westoby.

Not on any account would she admit Westoby into the house, and she went into the hall with the light of battle in her eyes.

She stopped, transfixed with astonishment. The visitor was Sir John Norman.

He came forward with an air which was distinctly apologetic. Violetta instantly recovered herself and advanced to meet him. They shook hands, and for a few moments not a word passed. Violetta was the first to speak.

“This is a surprise, Sir John,” said she, anxious to end the embarrassment.

“I ought to have written. It isn’t fair to take you un-
awares,” he stammered.

“You haven’t done that. I’m very glad to see you.”

“Really? I don’t know what you must think of my silence. But I had good reasons. I’ve gone through a great deal of worry and anxiety.”

“I hope that’s all passed away.”

“No, unfortunately.”

By this time they were in the sitting-room. Norman was ill at ease and Violetta pointed to a chair. He sat down wearily. His first words were totally unexpected:

“That was Lord Verschoyle whom I passed in the lane leading to your road, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“Only by sight. He may know me, but I can’t say. At all events, he didn’t see me. He seemed in very good spirits.”

“Did he?”

Their talk appeared destined to be carried on in jerks.

“I’d like to explain why I haven’t written to you. I hope you’ve been comfortable here?”

“Oh, yes, I feel quite at home.”

He was so absorbed in his own thoughts he hardly heard her.

“I needn’t tell you,” he went on, “that my worry was about Christine, my wife you know. I’ve been seeking to commence proceedings for a divorce. There’s ample cause, but the exposure would be so terrible that I hesitated. Yet things can’t go on as they are, and I must take some decided step. I think I should have written or called upon you but for Mr. Barlowe’s opinion that it would not be prudent.”

“You mean that disagreeable things were likely to be said?”

“Yes,” he rejoined, evidently relieved at her calmness. “And they *were* said and by Ella. She amazed me by her base insinuations. We had a violent quarrel, over you, and I left the house next morning. I haven’t seen or heard from her since.”

"I'm very sorry I should be the cause of your estrangement."

"It's really turned out for the best. She's going to marry the vicar, and the necessity of doing something for myself forced me to look up some of my friends—Government johnnies, you know—the permanent officials who stick to their posts like leeches and don't go out like their ornamental heads with every general election. I've been landed very comfortably, but the drawback is that I must drop the divorce business. The scandal would smash me up. The chief of my department wouldn't stand it, you know."

"I don't suppose he would. Well, I think I can get you out of your difficulty. Your enquiries I guess, haven't led you to the discovery that the woman with whom you went through the marriage ceremony was at the time the wife of your friend George Godfree."

"What! Good Heavens, how did you learn that?" Norman cried, agitatedly.

"It doesn't matter. All I can say is that my informant isn't likely to make a mistake or say that which isn't true. You've only got to get data to go upon and Somerset House will do the rest."

Norman made no reply. He was quite unnerved. He sat mopping his damp brow and staring helplessly at Violetta.

"So I'm free, and thanks to you," at last he muttered brokenly.

"No thanks to me. It was quite by accident I learned the news. All the same, I congratulate you."

With a violent effort he pulled himself together and speaking fairly calmly, said:

“It’s only right you should know what I’ve been told about you. It’s nothing to your discredit, but it’s worried me a good deal, and I should have said the story was a lie if it hadn’t come from two sources—both tainted, I may say. Mind you, it’s no business of mine, and I’ve no right to utter a word to you on the subject—it’s solely that I may ease my mind by hearing you deny what’s being said.”

Violetta suspected what was coming, but she would not assist him. In her opinion, he had either deteriorated or some change had come over herself. Somehow, she no longer felt sympathetic towards him.

“Well,” said she, simply.

“It’s said you’re continually on the race course—that you bet—that you’re friendly with the men who are my aversion—bookmakers. You know I owe my ruin to one—Dan Westoby by name.”

“I’m not likely to forget. What you’ve heard about my going to races, betting, and all the rest of it, is perfectly true. I even own a race horse, but that’s a secret. Keep it to yourself, please.”

He was staggered. He stared at her amazed, confused.

“I—I am sorry,” he stammered. “The associations, the surroundings of the turf are to me so repulsive that—that—”

“Of course they are. They *must* be. You were unlucky. Do you recollect once forbidding me to talk about horses and racing? It’s I, now, who forbid your mentioning the subject. It isn’t worth while, is it?”

“Oh, you’re right—you always were. No doubt I’m prejudiced. You see, I had such a beastly experience and of course I was a fool. But—” he looked at her yearn-

ingly. She had spoken so kindly; she hadn't shown the slightest rancour at his presumptuous criticism. She was more than ever adorable.

"Confound it, Violetta," he burst out, "now that I can say what's in my heart, why should I keep it back? I love you—I've always loved you from the day when I first saw you at Normanhurst. Things then were impossible, of course, but by Heaven—if I had only run across you when—when I was free—"

"Don't make me laugh," she gently interposed. "What you're saying isn't very flattering, you know. I can't help thinking you were at that time ready to marry anybody. Your Christine amply satisfied you."

Norman bit his lip and coloured deeply. He stood rebuked, and he knew he deserved her sarcasm. He knew also that a declaration of love would not meet with much success—at all events, while Violetta was in her present mood.

But some impulse, some temptation led him on.

"Oh, I admit I was an ass—an egregious ass. And being so, I suppose I'm not good enough for you. But I should worship you, all the same."

"Thanks. I don't want any man's worship. That kind of thing's a delusion."

"It may be so, but that's how I feel. Just to convince you that I've a grain of practical common sense, may I say that my pay is quite substantial—much more than I'm worth I'll swear—that Barlowe tells me the landed property he saved from the wreck is rapidly increasing in value, and that he's in hopes of proving that Westoby cheated me over Normanhurst."

"I congratulate you."

“All this means a lot to me. It means my hopes,” went on Norman hurriedly, “and now that I know from your lips that I’m no longer shackled, the cherished wish of my heart—”

“I can understand how landed property has gone up,” interposed Violetta, remorselessly cutting him short—she was not in the mood for Norman’s sentimental vein—“I always said the rent of the Owl’s Nest was far too low. I’m quite prepared to pay more.”

“Violetta!” he exclaimed, reproachfully.

“I’m speaking in your own interest. You really ought to be more business-like.”

“What has business to do with love? I want you for my wife, Violetta. I’ve always wanted you—”

“Yes, you said as much just now, but it’s of no use. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but my answer is no, and always will be.”

She did not wish to be harsh in her tone and manner, but she could not help it. He irritated her at that moment.

His face fell. He looked utterly miserable.

“We’ve been exceedingly good friends,” went on Violetta, quickly, lest there should be an embarrassing pause, “and I should like our friendship to continue, but there’d be an end to it if you imagined I should alter my mind. Take my advice and lose no time in verifying what I told you about—your Christine.”

“Of course. I—I can see that I’ve been premature. I ought to have made sure where I was before I said what I did just now.”

“It would have made no difference. Pray don’t mistake me.”

She was becoming distressed. She wanted him to go.

Why couldn't he see that? She had had the day of her life. Three proposals of marriage within some ten hours! What woman could go through such a strain and not show it?

"Very well. I obey. Good-bye."

He held out his hand and she took it. Her turmoil of mind was evident in her face. Her expression was softer than Norman had ever seen it. It was tender. It had something in it indefinitely appealing. In an instant he was tempted to recur to the tabooed subject. Naturally, he imagined her unusual emotion was due to his influence, whereas all she wished was to get rid of him.

He raised her hand to his lips and she was alone. Truly, Violetta might have said that no act in his life became John Norman so well as his departure out of hers!

CHAPTER XXIV
VIOLETTA'S TRYING DAY

Of her three offers of marriage, Violetta thought most about Dan Westoby's. It oppressed her. It filled her with apprehension. But it also stimulated her to be on the alert. She felt that Westoby was not a man to take a defeat lying down.

She was right. She had not left him five minutes before he sent a wire to Godfree, and then, locking the door, gathered up the torn Treasury notes with the intention of piecing the fragments together at some time or another. If Violetta was fool enough to throw away £250 he was not, and especially at that time.

Godfree arrived post haste. He had some news about Violetta which he had kept in reserve until a fitting moment came for making money out of it. That moment had now arrived. He and Westoby lunched together and Godfree, after hearing what the bookmaker had to say, told him the important piece of news—for a consideration. The news was that the owner of Belphegor was Violetta Vaughan.

A sickly grin spread itself over Westoby's face. He rarely laughed audibly. He chuckled sometimes, but

more often a noiseless grin sufficed, as it did now. After a long consultation Godfree received his instructions and returned to town with money in his pocket. All that evening the Honourable George prowled about Leicester Square, Coventry Street, Piccadilly Circus, and the Piccadilly end of Regent Street, occasionally making brief excursions into Shaftesbury Avenue. He specially favoured the outside of restaurants and taverns.

At last he found the man he was seeking—a miserable looking creature, seedily dressed, blotchy faced, dull eyed—Alf Richards.

“Hullo, Alf,” said Godfree, thickly (while hovering about the exteriors of the various hostelries he had not forgotten the interiors), “what are you up to?”

“Same old game, Mr. Godfree—stony broke. It’s a toss up between the workhouse and Father Thames.”

“While you’re making up your mind come and have a ‘livener.’ There’s just time.”

It was ten minutes to ten. A public house was handy, and George ran his man into the saloon bar and elbowed his way through a jostling, noisy crowd clamouring for their last drink. Godfree was well-known to the girls behind the counter, and was soon served—two double brandies. Alf swallowed his at two gulps. His eyes glinted. He looked at Godfree expectantly. He knew the Honourable George was not one to fling his money over so wretched an object as himself without wanting something in return.

“Look here, Alf,” whispered Godfree. “I can put you on to a good job, but we can’t jaw about it here. Come along to the Café Astrachan.”

Amid the raucous yells of “Time, gents, please,” the

two men edged themselves out. The Café Astrachan was not five minutes walk away, and the clock was on the stroke of ten when they reached the grimy uninviting establishment which might have been a third class *estaminet* of Montremart in its suggestiveness of dirt and sottish dissipation.

The inside favoured the resemblance. It was a long, narrow shop with bare walls and no attempt at decoration beyond a couple of faded woollen rugs hanging from two of the panels, with what object only the proprietor knew. To the ordinary person they were of neither use nor ornament. The air was hot, foetid, stuffy with the fumes of rank tobacco. Obvious second-hand marble-topped tables and uncomfortable cheap non-upholstered chairs were ranged in two rows with a centre gangway. There were no such luxuries as velvet benches; if the floor was covered with oilcloth, the pattern was indistinguishable through wear and dirt.

The place was about three parts full with a nondescript crowd, mostly dark visaged, unkempt haired and shabbily dressed. Clean collars and cuffs were apparently unknown. Foreign nationalities prevailed, but by a quarter past ten the scourgings of the neighbouring restaurants would swarm in and tax the energies of the active, business like waitresses to the uttermost.

The Astrachan was of the type of café which made you feel depressed and degraded directly you entered it. Some of the giggling noisy girls in tawdry dresses and hats, at which a wardrobe dealer would have turned up her nose, might have looked decent in other surroundings, but here they suggested the Parisian *apache* though for the most part they were English. Their male com-

panions, who paid in lamb-like fashion for anything the girls wanted, and had probably been doing so elsewhere all the evening, had no characteristics beyond extreme foolishness. They were probably under the impression they were seeing "life."

Somehow the unhealthy pallor of some of these young fools, their leaden eyes, their subdued voices, the painted cheeks, the blackened eyebrows, the excessively red lips, and the hysterical laughter of the women—most of them hardly out of their teens—brought to mind the sinister suggestion of cocaine, veronal and goodness knows what other modern nerve poisons.

Godfree and Richards took two vacant seats against the wall and were soon discussing the "job." It had to do with the profession into which Alf Richards proposed entering years and years before—doctoring and drugs. The din was so deafening and incessant when the late comers packed the place that the two men could talk freely without the necessity of whispering save at times when the kernel of the matter was approached.

Alf was clearly averse from undertaking Godfree's commission. Godfree got quite angry at the man's obstinacy, and when Godfree was angry and half drunk he was not very choice in his language.

"Don't be a damned ass," he growled. "You can't afford it. You'll *have* to do what I want. You'd be in an infernal fix if I were to drop a line to the police about—well, you can finish the rest for yourself."

The haggard face of Alf Richards was convulsed with terror. He knew well to what Godfree alluded. Deep down in the secret life of all great cities exists a mode of income open to any man or woman with (or without)

a little surgical skill. From time to time the newspapers reveal the secret. Richards when in desperate straits had made use of his hospital studies in this way, and though he had hitherto escaped the law, Nemesis was always hanging over him.

“All that’s past and forgotten,” he mumbled. “What holds me back is that I hate going against Miss Vaughan. She’s been a good friend to me and—”

“Bah, shut up. Don’t be maudlin. Violetta Vaughan’s not worth thinking twice about. She’s no better and no worse than others of her class who sell themselves and live to fleece men. She’s an unscrupulous Circe and worse. *I know.*”

“What do you know?” suddenly came the words from across the table.

Godfree raised his eyes. He recognised Lord Verschoyle sitting opposite.

“This is a private conversation,” returned Godfree, with an insolent stare. “You’ve no right to interfere.”

“I’ve every right when you speak insultingly of a lady with whom I am acquainted, in a voice loud enough for me and others to hear.”

“If you hadn’t been listening you wouldn’t have heard.”

“You’re a liar and a blackguard. I don’t want to make a disturbance in this place. I ask you to come outside.”

“And I ask you to mind your own business.”

Verschoyle’s reply was short and sharp. His fist shot out and landed full on Godfree’s nose.

“That’s my business,” he exclaimed. “If you’re a man, now come out.”

Instantly the place was in a tumult. Men sprang to

their feet, those far from the scene mounted the chairs, the waitresses fled, women screamed, the agitated proprietor crying out something in a foreign tongue vainly tried to force a path through the crowded gangway.

In his younger days Godfree had been a bit of a bruiser, but he had long since lost his alertness and activity. He retaliated but his blow missed. Before the conflict could be renewed, some of the men restrained the combatants, and the agonised proprietor having by this time edged his way to the table, begged them to go out. He did not want to send for the police.

Godfree was blinded by passion. When he thought of Violetta and of his continual rebuffs at her hands, the recollection always enraged him, and this galling recollection was in his mind as he uttered his foul aspersions. Physically, however, he was no coward. He sullenly rose and went towards the door. Verschoyle had already moved thither and was awaiting him.

Soon they were outside. Verschoyle had his old chum, Sir Frederick Dartnell with him. The two had strolled into the Café Astrachan purely out of curiosity. This curiosity had been soon satisfied, and they were about to leave when Godfree's words reached their ears.

A fairly wide court was but two or three yards away. Godfree knew it well. Said he in a grating, sneering voice when they were at the corner of the court:

“You took a mean advantage of me inside the café. You knew we couldn't fight there. It won't be the same thing here.”

He jerked his head towards the opening of the court and turned into it. Verschoyle followed, despite the whispered remonstrances of Dartnell, to whom a fracas

of a low type did not appeal. Verschoyle took not the slightest notice of his friend's words. He simply handed him his hat.

There was no preliminary squaring or feinting. The two went at it tooth and nail. They were about the same age and build, but whereas Verschoyle was in the very pink of condition, Godfree was quite off colour. Almost the first blow settled him. He fell heavily and remained on the ground like a log.

Verschoyle turned to Richards, who was looking on dismayed.

"See to your friend. I've done with him."

Richards sided up, but instead of taking notice of Godfree he whispered hoarsely to Lord Verschoyle:

"Thank you, sir, for what you did. George Godfree deserved all he got and more. It was all lies, every word—about Miss Vaughan. She's as straight a woman as ever breathed. By God, there's few who would have come unscathed out of the beastly crowd she was in some four or five years ago as she did."

"What do you know about her? Who the deuce are you?"

"I'm no good to anybody, so what does it matter who I am? I'll only say this, that if Violetta Vaughan's your friend you've got a real good pal."

"I believe you. But tell me. What did you mean by that 'beastly crowd?'"

"The Beak Street Club crew. It was this way."

In a few words Alf Richards gave a summary of his recollections of Captain Vaughan's venture, to which Verschoyle listened with intense interest. Alf did not forget to enlarge on Violetta's many good points.

“Thanks. Now about Westoby. What has he to do with Miss Vaughan?”

“I don’t know. Westoby doesn’t often open his mouth. But you’d better get. Godfree’s moving. I don’t want him to see me talking to you. He’s dangerous.”

“Is he? Well, you’ve done me a good turn and we’ll dry up. You don’t look over flourishing. This may be of use to you.”

He thrust a treasury note into Alf’s hand and strode away with Dartnell.

“What the devil’s the answer to this riddle?” asked the latter. “You’re about the last one to get into a street brawl. I’m not curious, but, hang it, I’d like to know. Who’s Violetta Vaughan?”

“The woman I mean to marry—if she’ll have me.”

CHAPTER XXV

DAN WESTOBY'S LAST COUP

Peter Gumley warned by Violetta, took extra precautions to guard the "cracks." She also made a proposition to him to which he was strongly opposed but she was so insistent that at last he reluctantly gave way.

Gumley had no fear of any attempt at foul play being successful, but he had not reckoned upon Parsons, his discharged groom. At one corner of the Holberry Down property was a little patch of low-lying woodland always swampy even in the time of drought. Beneath the patches of weeds and water lay a mass of glutinous mud and slime not much less than a foot deep. On the shelving bank nearest the dry level ground amid the undergrowth was a fence of barbed wire. No watchers patrolled this spot, as Parsons well knew.

On the further side of the wood was barren common land, on which many years before a squatter had built a hut. Before he had remained long enough to establish his claim he was ejected but the hut was left to decay at its leisure. Not far from the hut was a post some ten feet high, with a fragment of a cross-piece hanging loose, black with age and in places greenish with some kind of

fungus. It was all that was left of the gallows where a century and a half ago and more, many a criminal had passed his last moments.

After nightfall few people cared to cross the common, and its solitude made the hut a very convenient place for Godfree and Parsons to meet and arrange their plans. The coup was to be brought off on the eve of the Derby, run very late that year.

Parsons was not seen that night at the Barley Mow. He had taken up his quarters at the hut, and with his pipe and a flask of whisky for his companions, awaited the coming of Godfree and Richards. The latter, terrorised by Godfree's threats had surrendered himself completely.

The hours crept slowly on. The time appointed for the meeting was midnight. Every now and again Parsons ventured from the hut, and looked anxiously at the sky. His fear was lest there should be a moon, but there did not seem to be much cause for apprehension on that score. The night was as dark as the most enthusiastic burglar could wish.

A little after midnight he heard the steps which he expected. The door opened, and Godfree appeared. He was dressed in a close-fitting suit, and with a travelling cap with the lapels pulled down over his ears. It may have been that the night was chilly, or that he wanted to disguise himself slightly. If the latter, the cap answered the purpose fairly well.

"Well," said he, "are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll start. There's no hurry, so we'll take it leisurely. I reckon one o'clock's a good time, eh? What do you think?"

“It ought to be. Ten o’clock’s about the hour everybody goes to bed.”

They quitted the hut and tramped their way through the bracken, which was now fairly high, towards the gallows post. In the darkness a few yards away a man was standing motionless, his head bent, his hands thrust in the side pockets of his overcoat. A slight mist had arisen within a very few minutes and the man’s outline was so vague he might have been simply a shadow.

Godfree went up to him and gripped his arm savagely.

“What are you mooning over, you ass,” he whispered. “Pull yourself together. If you’re going to funk the business give the stuff to me. But don’t suppose, Alf, you’re out of it because I take on the job. I guess I needn’t remind you that I know *something* which might lead you to the neighbourhood of the gallows. You’re close to it now, by the way. Get me?”

Alf Richards turned his face—ghastly grey it looked in the gloom—towards the horrible memento of the past.

“I get you right enough, Mr. Godfree. You’re the sort of man who’d chuck anyone—your best friend if need be—when they’re no longer any use to you.”

“Shut up. Are you going to back out? That’s what I want to know?”

“No. I’m up to the neck in this black business and I’ll have to go through with it.”

“I reckon you will,” muttered Godfree.

Ever since the night of his humiliation at the hands of Lord Verschoyle, Godfree had never relaxed his hold on Alf Richards. He had kept him continually in a state of semi-intoxication.

They tramped on to the wood, Richards walking be-

tween his two companions, who had their hands beneath his arms and forced him to go their pace. Soon they were on the brink of the treacherous spot. For nights past Parsons had been making preparations for crossing. He had collected a number of boulders and had sunk them at convenient intervals to form stepping stones. Risky as was the showing of a light, he flashed his electric torch and showed the tops of the stones peeping above the water.

"This fool'll never keep his footing," growled Godfree. "You'll have to carry him on your back, Parsons."

"Not me, Mr. Godfree. I'd rather leave him here and call for him as we come back. What's the good of him as he is? Pretty nigh *non compost*, I should say."

Godfree admitted this. Hitherto he had not dared to trust Alf Richards out of his sight, but in his present half-helpless and wholly stupid condition he couldn't do much harm. Certainly just now he was a nuisance and a hindrance.

"Give him a drop of his own dope an' he'll be safe enough," suggested Parsons facetiously.

"Don't talk rot. Let us go on and see what happens."

This was very soon settled. Richards promptly collapsed.

"That does it," said Parsons. "He'll have to stay where he is. Has he got the stuff on him?"

"Of course he has. I wanted him to do the job. He knows the ropes, but we'll have to carry on by ourselves."

Godfree thrust his hand into the pocket of the prostrate man's overcoat and took out a cardboard box and a phial. Richards seemed indifferent to or unconscious of what was being done.

Presently Godfree and Parsons attempted the tricky crossing and got over safely. They scrambled up the bank, cutting the lower strands of the barbed wire fence on their way, and Parsons made for a sort of gully at the bottom of which trickled a thin stream. This they crept along and were well concealed.

The gully led to the wall of the stable yard, and at the bottom of the wall was a circular opening to allow the passage of the water. The latter continued its course inside and had an outlet at the wall on the other side of the yard. People often wanted to know the good of this little open ditch with its surface drainage water. They were told that if the water were prevented from coming into the stable yard the soil which was clay would dry and shrink, and the solid stable buildings would be unsafe.

Parsons, who was familiar with every nook and cranny of the Holberry Down stables, saw how the gully and the circular opening in the wall could be made use of. The opening was large enough for even a man as big as Godfree to creep through.

It was done. Parsons went first, and soon the two were crouching in the darkness.

“Which is the door of Belphegor’s stable?” whispered Godfree.

“Keep close to me an’ I’ll take you straight to it. He’s in a stable all to himself. I told you so. Makes things easy, don’t it?”

“What about the dog?”

“Kennel’s right over t’other side of the yard. He won’t bother us if you don’t make no noise.”

Presently he and Godfree were opposite the door. Parsons had a duplicate key which he had had made to fur-

ther his depredations on the corn bin when he was in Peter's employ. It was well oiled and moved noiselessly in the lock. They crept inside unseen, favoured by the darkness and mist.

Parsons, of course, knew the situation of Belphegor's stall, and crept towards it. He could discern a vague outline of a figure on a bundle of hay at the entrance. Godfree saw it too.

"Make for the boy—quick," he breathed.

The contemplated surprise attack might have been brought off but for Belphegor who suddenly elected to be restive. The recumbent form on the hay sprang into life. The light of an electric torch flashed into the two men's faces.

"You vil—"

The word was never completed. Parsons had clutched the speaker's throat, while Godfree whipped open the cardboard box. In a second a sponge saturated with chloroform was pressing over nose and mouth. It was dark once more for in the scuffle the electric torch had been dropped among the hay.

All seemed to be going well, but again Belphegor's temper asserted itself. Whatever was the cause, he lashed out a hoof and caught Godfree a nasty kick on the shoulder.

"Curse the brute," he muttered, together with a few other epithets.

"Been worse if he'd kicked your leg," whispered Parsons. "Where's the dope? Stick the bottle to the boy's lips. A drop or two follerin' that chloryform ought to do the trick."

Godfree's right arm was useless. Parsons had to ad-

minister the dose.

"It'll be all a job to physic that beast. I know him too well. I'd rather put a bullet through his brains. 'Spose I fetch him a crack over the hocks. That ought to spoil his running, I guess."

A long handled brush was on its nail close to the stall, just as it used to hang in Parson's time. He snatched at it, at the same moment Godfree gripped his arm.

"Leave it alone, you damned fool. I don't want to hurt the horse."

"What! Warn't there to be any hocussing?"

"No, not of the horse—the boy. Both I and Dan Westoby mean to let the horse run and do his best or worst—most likely his worst."

"What did you bring me here for, then?"

"You've been well paid. Why are you grumbling? Look here, you blockhead. No one knows better than you that there's only one jockey who can ride Belphegor. Can't you see that if we knock out young Tim Hollis Belphegor hasn't a dog's chance of winning, no matter who's up? Won't that rile its owner more than anything? Hocussing the brute with Hollis on his back wouldn't do it half as much. What about *that*?"

He pointed to the inanimate form on the hay.

"Miss Vaughan may scratch him," said Parsons, gloomily.

"Not she. I'll give the devil his due. She's too good a sport. Now then, let's clear out."

They crept back the way they came. They crossed the stepping stones; they stumbled upon Alf Richards. He was lying exactly in the position in which he was left.

"I don't like this," muttered Godfree, uneasily.

He knelt down, felt the man's pulse, then his heart. He glanced at the ashen face. The eyes were staring. The lips were partly open. A little blood and froth marked them.

"My God, Parsons, the fellow's dead!"

The two men looked at each other. It was a catastrophe totally unlooked for. Anyhow, they were not responsible for his death. And, being dead, he could say nothing. From this point of view the event was all to the good.

"Let's leave him as he is," said Parsons in a low voice. "It may be a week or more afore anybody'll find him."

"That's so."

Parsons had already turned away, and Godfree was about to follow when an idea suddenly struck him. He took the cardboard box and the phial of "dope" and thrust them into Richard's pocket.

"That'll explain everything," he thought.

Then he hurried off.

* * *

"Mary, I feel very worried about Belphegor. I oughtn't to have agreed," said Peter Gumley, rubbing his chin with an air of uneasiness.

"I told you so, Peter. You shouldn't have said yes to such a wild harum scarum idea."

"Well, it's done. Anyhow, there's been no signal and I had the 'phone set up in case anything went wrong. I wasn't to go unless I heard."

"That's nothing to do with it. It's pretty nigh one o'clock in the morning! Go and see if it's all right."

As Peter generally obeyed his wife, he went.

* * *

Three o'clock in the afternoon of the next day. Within ten minutes or so the great race for the Derby stakes would be decided.

The Derby Day has been described a thousand and one times more or less. It would be but a tedious repetition to attempt to do so again. Interest for the present purpose is centred around two men, Dan Westoby and George Godfree. The latter had his right arm in a sling. They were anxiously awaiting the horses.

At last the string entered the course and cantered leisurely to the starting post. Westoby had stationed himself sufficiently near to note every horse and every jockey with the naked eye, but for all that he used his field glasses.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" demanded Westoby sharply. "Tim Hollis is up on Belphegor."

"Rats! The boy won't be fit to ride for a week. I left him last night lying insensible. I—by God, I believe you're right. It is the urchin."

Most certainly it was, and as spry and as healthy looking as he could possibly be.

"You've sold me, you sneak," burst out Westoby.

"Sneak yourself. I risked everything for you, and nearly got killed in the bargain. Parsons must have been hoodwinked. He swore that Hollis would be with the horse all right. We doped some other stable lad."

"That's a lie. Peter wouldn't be such an ass. Belphegor's not to be trusted with a stranger."

He could say no more. The horses were being marshalled. They were off. They started in a cluster, the

jockey's caps and jackets mingling in a confused mass of colour. In half a minute no particular horse seemed prominent; then a blue and orange darted ahead. It was Killarney, the favourite. Tom Allworth had shaken his mount free from the ruck and Killarney was rushing for dear life close to the rails.

"Damn! I shall pull it off after all," muttered Westoby. "Good horse!—great horse!"

But at Tattenham Corner other horses were creeping up. Foremost was a scarlet and black.

"Rouge et Noir! *Her* colours. Curse the woman. She hasn't forgotten her luck."

The thought was Westoby's. It was an omen of evil for him. Violetta was not now his mascotte!

Yard by yard, foot by foot Belphegor overhauled Killarney, which was visibly tiring. Allworth called upon him for another effort, but the pace was too good. Amid an uproar almost unparalleled, Belphegor passed the post half a length in front of the favourite.

Westoby dropped his field glasses into their case with a bang. He turned to Godfree, his face white as a sheet, but quite cool in his manner.

"This lets me down to zero. I don't know whether I've to thank you or Parsons, or the boy, or—the woman."

"Where are you off to?" whispered Godfree, anxiously, as Westoby was striding away.

"Don't know. To the devil, most likely."

He and Godfree, who was sticking to him, had hardly got out of the crowd when a police inspector with a couple of men who, despite their plain clothes, had detective written all over them, approached.

"You are Mr. Dan Westoby, I think."

“Well?”

“And your friend’s name, I believe, is George Godfree.”

“What do you want? Out with it,” said Westoby, brusquely.

“I hold a warrant to arrest both you gentlemen on a charge of conspiracy.”

“Confoundedly vague. Conspiring to do what?”

“To do bodily injury by administering a noxious drug to one Violetta Vaughan,” returned the inspector, reading from the document in his hand.

“By God, she’s done us!” burst out Godfree, furiously.

* * *

It was so. Violetta’s plan was to dress herself in Tim’s clothes and take his place by the side of Belphegor. She was dozing when Godfree and Parsons took her by surprise. But she recognised Godfree and she had not quite succumbed to the effects of the chloroform when Belphegor shot out his hoof. Had Godfree tried to shift the blame on to Alf Richards, his injured shoulder would have given him the lie. But there was no necessity. Parsons, to save his own skin as much as possible, gave his employers away.

Violetta, unconscious, was of course discovered by Peter Gumley, and a doctor was instantly summoned. The quantity of the dope she had swallowed was fortunately very small, and she speedily recovered.

* * *

The last scene. (*Enter Violetta and Lord Verschoyle*).

VIOLETTA Now that I've told you all my past, you may want more time to think over the matter. In marrying me you're marrying a great risk, you know.

LORD VERSCHOYLE I don't care what risk I run to get you, Violetta, and I'll not take a second for thought. A woman who can care for a horse as you do can care still more for a man. Dearest, you're *my* mascotte—for life!

THE END

We hope you enjoyed this book. If you found any mistakes in the content or formatting, or you have any suggestions about how to improve it, please get in touch by email to feedback@charlespearce.org. Thank you.