

FATE'S INSTRUMENTS.

CHAPTER XIV.—(Continued.)

"London is uninhabitable to me, if I do as you ask," he said.

She looked up, the tears escaping from her eyes.

"Ah, and the world to me, if you don't!"

George sat down in an arm-chair; he abandoned the hope of running away. Neera rose, pushed back her hair from her face, and fixed her eyes eagerly on him. He looked down for an instant, and she shot a hasty glance at the mirror, and then concentrated her gaze on him again, a little anxious smile coming to her lips.

"You will?" she asked in a whisper. George petulantly threw his gloves on a table near him. Neera advanced, and knelt down beside him, laying her hand on his shoulder.

"You have made me cry so much," she said. "See, my eyes are dim. You won't make me cry any more?"

George looked at the bright eyes, half veiled in tears, and the mouth trembling on the brink of fresh weeping. And the eyes and mouth were very good.

"It is Gerald," she said; "he is so strict. And the shame, the shame!"

"You don't know what it means to me."

"I do indeed; I know it is hard. But you are generous. No, no, don't turn your face away!"

George still sat silent. Neera took his hand in hers.

"Ah, do!" she said. George smiled—at himself, not at Neera.

"Well, don't cry any more," said he, "or the eyes will be red as well as dim."

"You will, you will?" she whispered eagerly.

He nodded.

"Ah, you are good! God bless you, George; you are good!"

"No, I am only weak."

Neera swiftly bent and kissed his hand. "The hand that gives me life," she said.

"Nonsense," said George, rather roughly.

"Will you clear me altogether?"

"Oh, yes; everything or nothing."

"Will you give me that—that character?"

"Yes."

She seized his reluctant hand, and kissed it again.

"I have your word?"

"You have."

She leapt up, suddenly radiant.

"Ah, George, Cousin George, how I love you! Where is it?"

George took the document out of his pocket.

Neera seized it. "Light a candle," she cried.

George with an amused smile obeyed her.

"You hold the candle, and I will burn it!" And she watched the paper consumed with the look of a gleeful child. Then she suddenly stretched her arms. "Oh, I am tired!"

"Poor child!" said George. "You can leave it to me now."

"However shall I repay you? I never can." Then she suddenly saw the cat, ran to him, and picked him up.

"We are forgiven, Bob! we are forgiven!" she cried, dancing about the room.

George watched her with amusement. She put the cat down and came to him. "See, you have made me happy. Is that enough?"

"It is something," said he. "And here is something more!" And she threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"That's better," said George. "Any more?"

"Not till we are cousins."

"Be gentle in your triumph."

"No, no, don't talk like that. Are you going?"

"Yes, I must go and put things straight."

"Good-bye. I—I hope you won't find it very hard."

"I have been paid in advance."

Neera blushed a little.

"You shall be better paid, if ever I can," she said.

George paused outside, to light a cigarette; then he struck into the park, and walked slowly along, meditating as he went. When he arrived at Hyde Park Corner, he roused himself from his reverie.

"Now the woman was very fair!" said he, as he hailed a hansom.

CHAPTER XV.

Mrs. Pocklington sat with blank amazement in her face, and a copy of the second edition of the Bull's-eye in her hand. On the middle page, in type widely spaced, beneath a noble headline, appeared a letter from George Neston, running thus:

"To the Editor of the Bull's-eye."

"Sir,

"As you have been good enough to interest yourself, and, I hope, fortunate enough to interest your readers, in the subject of certain allegations made by me in respect of a lady whose name has been mentioned in your columns, I have the honour to inform you that such allegations were entirely baseless the result of a chance resemblance between that lady and another person, and of my own hasty conclusions drawn therefrom. I have withdrawn all my assertions, fully and unreservedly, and have addressed apologies for them to those who had a right to receive apologies."

"I have the honor to be, sir, your obedient servant,

"George Neston."

And then a column of exultation, satire, ridicule, preaching, praying, prophesying, moralising, and what not. The pen flew with wings of joy, and ink was nothing regarded on that day.

Mrs. Pocklington was a kind-hearted woman; yet, when she read a sister's vindication, she found nothing better to say than—

"How very provoking!"

And it may be that this unregenerate exclamation fairly summed up public

feeling, if only public feeling had been indecent enough to show itself openly. A man shown to be a fool is altogether too common a spectacle; a woman of fashion proved a thief would have been a more piquant dish. But in this world—and indeed, probably in any other—we must take what we can get; and since society could not trample on Neera Witt, it consoled itself by correcting and chastening the misguided spirit of George Neston. Tommy Myles shook his empty little head, and all the other empty heads shook solemnly in time. Isabel Bourne said she knew she was right, and Sidmouth Vane thought there must be something behind—he always did, as became a statesman in the raw. Mr. Espion re-echoed his own leaders, like a phonograph; and the chairman of the Themis thanked Heaven they were out of an awkward job.

But wrath and fury raged in the breast of Laura Pocklington. She thought George had made a fool of her. He had persuaded her to come over to his side, and had then betrayed the colours. There would be joy in Gath and Askelon; or, in other words, Isabel Bourne and Maud Neston would crow over her insupportably.

"I will never see him or speak to him again, mamma," declared Laura, passionately. "He has behaved abominably!"

This announcement rather took the wind out of Mrs. Pocklington's sails. She was just preparing to bear majestically down upon her daughter with a stern ultimatum to the effect that, for the present, George must be kept at a distance, and daughters must be guided by their mothers. At certain moments nothing is more annoying than to meet with agreement, when one intends to extort submission.

"Good gracious, Laura!" said Mrs. Pocklington, "you can't care much for the man."

"Care for him! I detest him!"

"My dear, it hardly looks like it."

"You must allow me some self-respect, mamma."

Mr. Pocklington, entering, overheard these words. "Hallo!" said he. "What's the matter?"

"Why, my dear, Laura declares that she will have nothing to say to George Neston."

"Well, that's just your own view, isn't it?" A silence ensued. "It seems to me you are agreed."

It really did look like it; but they had been on the verge of a pretty quarrel all the same, and Mr. Pocklington was confirmed in the opinion he had lately begun to entertain that, when paradoxes of mental process are in question, there is in truth not much to choose between wives and daughters.

Meanwhile, George Neston was steadily and unflinchingly devouring his humble pie. He sought and obtained Gerald's forgiveness, after half an hour of grovelling abasement. He listened to Tommy Myles's grave rebuke and Sidmouth Vane's cynical railery without a smile or a tear. He even brought himself to accept with docility a letter full of Christian feeling which Isabel Bourne was moved to write.

All these things, in fact, affected him little in comparison with the great question of his relations with the Pockingtons. That, he felt, must be settled at once, and with his white sheet yet round him and his taper still in his hand, he went to call on Mrs. Pocklington.

He found that lady in an attitude of aggressive tranquillity. With careful ostentation she washed her hands of the whole affair. Left to her own way, she might have been inclined to consider that George's foolish recklessness had been atoned for by his manly retraction—or, on the other hand, might not. It mattered very little which would have been the case; and, if it comforted him, he was at liberty to suppose that she would have decided the former opinion. The decision did not lie with her. Let him ask Laura and Laura's father. They had made up their minds, and it was not in her province or power to try to change their minds for them. In fact, Mrs. Pocklington took up the position which Mr. Spenlow has made famous—only she had two partners where Mr. Spenlow had but one. George had a shrewd idea that her neutrality covered a favorable inclination towards himself, and thanked her warmly for not ranking herself among his enemies.

"I am even emboldened," he said, "to ask your advice how I can best overcome Miss Pocklington's adverse opinion."

"Laura thinks you have made her look foolish. You see, she took your cause up rather warmly."

"I know. She was most generous."

"You were so very confident."

"Yes; but one little thing at the end tripped me up. I couldn't have foreseen it. Mrs. Pocklington, do you think she will be very obdurate?"

"Oh, I've nothing to do with it. Don't ask me."

"I wish I could rely on your influence."

"I haven't any influence," she declared Mrs. Pocklington. "She's as obstinate as a— as resolute as her father."

George rose to go. He was rather disheartened; the price he had to pay for the luxury of generosity seemed very high.

Mrs. Pocklington was moved to pity. "George," she said, "I feel like a traitor, but I will give you one little bit of advice."

"Ah!" cried George, his face brightening. "What is it, my dear Mrs. Pocklington?"

"As to my husband, I say nothing; but as to Laura—"

"Yes, yes!"

"Let her alone—absolutely."

"Let her alone! But that's giving it up."

"Don't call, don't write, don't be known to speak to her. There, I've done what I oughtn't; but you're old friend of mine, George."

"But I say, Mrs. Pocklington, won't some other fellow seize the chance?"

"If she likes you best, what does that matter? If she doesn't—"

And Mrs. Pocklington shrugged her shoulders.

George was convinced by this logic. "I will try," he said.

"Yes, try to let her alone. But it's difficult."

"Stuff and nonsense. Laura isn't indispensable."

"I know those are not your real views."

"You're not her mother; for which you may thank Heaven."

"I do," said George, and took his leave, rather consoled. He would have been even more cheerful had he known that Laura's door was ajar, and Laura was listening for the bang of the hall door. When she heard it, she went down to her mother.

"Who was your visitor, mamma?"

"Oh, George Neston."

"What did he come about?"

"Well, my dear, to see me, I suppose."

"And what did he find to say for himself?"

"Oh, we hardly talked about that affair at all. However, he seems in very good spirits."

"I'm sure he had no business to be."

"Perhaps not, my dear; but he was."

"I didn't know it was Mr. Neston. I'm so glad I didn't come down."

Mrs. Pocklington went on knitting. "I expect he knew why."

Mrs. Pocklington counted three pearl and three plain.

"Did he say anything about it, mamma?"

"One, two, three. About what, dear?"

"Why, about—about my not coming?"

"No, I suppose he thought you were out."

"Did you tell him so?"

"He didn't ask, my dear. He has other things to think about than being attentive to young women."

"It's very lucky he has," said Laura, haughtily.

"My dear, he lets you alone. Why can't you let him alone?"

Laura took up a book, and Mrs. Pocklington counted her stitches in a brisk and cheerful tone.

It will be seen that George had a good friend in Mrs. Pocklington. In truth he needed some kindly countenance, for society at large had gone mad in praise of Neera and Gerald. They were the fashion. Everybody tried to talk to them; everybody was coming to the wedding; everybody raved about Neera's sweet patience and Gerald's unwavering faith. When Neera drove her lover round the park in her victoria, their journey was a triumphal progress; and the very burden of preparing for the wedding prevented the pair being honored guests at every select gathering. Gerald walked on air. His open hopes were realised, his secret fears laid to rest; while Neera's exaggerated excuse for George betrayed to his eyes nothing but the exceeding sweetness of her disposition. Her absolute innocence explained and justified her utter absence of resentment, and, under, Gerald felt, add fresh pangs to George's remorse and shame. These pangs Gerald did not feel it his duty to mitigate.

Thursday came, and Monday was the wedding day. The atmosphere was thick with new clothes, cards of invitation, presents, and congratulations. A thorny question had arisen as to whether George should be invited. Neera's decision was in his favor, and Gerald himself had written the note, hoping all the while that his cousin's own good sense would keep him away.

"It would be hardly decent in him to come," he said to his father.

"I daresay he will make some excuse," answered Lord Tottlebury. "But I hope you won't keep up the quarrel."

"Keep up the quarrel! By jove, father, I'm too happy to quarrel."

"Gerald," said Maud Neston, entering, "here's such a funny letter for you! I wonder it ever reached."

She held out a dirty envelope, and read the address—

"Mr. Neston, Esq.,
"His Lordship Tottlebury,
"London."

"Who in the world is it?" asked Maud, laughing.

Gerald had no secrets. "Give it to me, and we'll see." He opened the letter. The first thing he came upon was a piece of tissue paper neatly folded. Opening it, he found it to be a ten-pound note. "Hallo! is this a wedding present?" said he with a laugh.

"Ten pounds! How funny!" exclaimed Maud. "Is there no letter?"

"Yes, here's a letter!" And Gerald read it to himself.

The letter ran as follows, saving certain eccentricities of spelling which need not be reproduced:—

"Sir,

"I don't rightly know whether this here is your money or Nery's. Nor I don't know where it comes from, after what you said when you was here with her Friday. I can work for my living, thanks be to Him to whom thanks is due, and I don't put money in my pocket as I don't know whose pocket it come out of."

"Your humble servant,
"Susan Bort."

"Susan Bort!" exclaimed Gerald.

"Now, who the deuce is Susan Bort, and what the deuce does she mean?"

"Unless you tell us what she says—"

—began Lord Tottlebury.

Gerald read the letter again, with a growing feeling of uneasiness. He noticed that the postmark was Liverpool. It so chanced that he had not been to Liverpool for more than a year. And who was Susan Bort?

He got up, and, making an apology for not reading out his letter, went to his own room to consider the matter.

"Nery!" said he. "And if I wasn't there, who was?"

It was generous of George Neston to shield Neera at Liverpool. It was also generous of Neera to send Mrs. Bort ten pounds immediately after that lady had treated her so cruelly. It was honest of Mrs. Bort to refuse to accept money which she thought might be the proceeds of burglary. To these commendable actions Gerald was indebted for the communication which disturbed his bliss.

"I wonder if Neera can throw any light on it," said Gerald. "It's very queer. After lunch, I'll go and see her."

CHAPTER XVI.

Mr. Blodwell was entertaining Lord Mapledurham at luncheon at the Themis Club. The Marquis was not in an agreeable mood. He was ill, and when he was ill he was apt to be cross. His host's calm satisfaction with the issue of the Neston affair irritated him.

"Really, Blodwell," he said, "I sometimes think a lawyer's wig is like Samson's hair. When he takes it off, he takes off all his wits with it. Your simplicity is positively childish."

Mr. Blodwell gurgled contentedly over a basin of soup.

"I think no evil unless I'm paid for it," he said, wiping his mouth. "George found he was wrong, and said so."

"I saw the girl in the Park yesterday," the Marquis remarked. "She's a pretty girl."

"Uncommonly. But I'm not aware

that being pretty makes a girl a thief."

"No, but it makes a man a fool."

"My dear Mapledurham!"

"Did he ever tell you what he found out at Liverpool?"

"Did he go to Liverpool?"

"Did he go? God bless the man! Of course he went, to look for—"

Lord Mapledurham stopped, to see who was throwing a shadow over his plate.

"May I join you?" asked Sidmouth Vane, who thought he was conferring a privilege. "I'm interested in what you are discussing."

"Oh, it's you, is it? Have you been listening?"

"No, but everybody's discussing it. Now, I agree with you, Lord Mapledurham. It's a put-up job."

"I expect you thought it was a put-up job when they baptised you, didn't you?" inquired the Marquis.

"And looked for poison in your bottle!" added Blodwell.

Vane gently waved his hand, as if to scotch these clumsy sarcasms. "A man may not be sixty and yet not be an ass," he languidly observed. "Waiter, some salmon, and a pint of 44."

"And may be sixty and yet be an ass, eh?" said the Marquis, chuckling.

"Among ourselves, why do you suppose he let her off?" asked Vane.

"The Marquis pushed back his chair. "My young friend, you are too wise. Something will happen to you."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Vane. "Here's Gerald Neston!"

Gerald came hastily up to Mr. Blodwell. "Do you know where George is?" he asked.

"I believe he's in the club somewhere," answered Mr. Blodwell.

"No, he isn't. I want to see him on business."

Lord Mapledurham rose. "I know your father, Mr. Neston," he said.

"You must allow me to shake hands with you, and congratulate you on your approaching marriage."

Gerald received his congratulations with an absent air. "I must go and find George," he said, and went out.

"There!" said Vane, triumphantly. "Don't you see there's something up now?"

The elder men tried to snub him, but they glanced at one another and silently admitted that it looked as if he were right.

Mrs. Bort's letter had stirred into activity all the doubts that Gerald Neston had tried to stifle, and had at last succeeded in silencing. There was a darkly mysterious tone about the document that roused his suspicions. Evidently there was a new and a more unscrupulous plot against his bride, or else—Gerald did not finish his train of thought, but he determined to see Neera at once, as George could not be found without a journey to the Temple, and a journey to the Temple was twice as far as a journey to Albert Mansions. Nevertheless, had Gerald known what was happening at the Temple, he would have gone there first; for in George's chambers, at that very moment, George was sitting in his chair, gazing blankly at Neera Witt, who was walking restlessly up and down.

"You sent her ten pounds?" he gasped.

"Yes, yes," said Neera. "I can't let the creature starve."

(To be continued.)

A FRENCH IDEA OF JUSTICE.

An Interesting and Suggestive Change Just Made in French Law.

A law which changes radically the legal position of children born out of wedlock, and which, in the eyes of its opponents, threatens the existence of the family in France, was passed, almost without attracting notice during the last session of the French parliament.

It was not discussed at all in the Chamber of Deputies, and met with only faint opposition in the Senate. An illegitimate child who is recognized according to the forms of law by his father may now inherit, or rather cannot be disinherited under normal conditions, a share in the property of the father leaves. His share is to be one-half that of a legitimate child, where one exists; three-quarters if there are only uncles, aunts, and nephews left, while, if the nearest relatives are merely first cousins of the father, the whole inheritance descends to the natural child. The provisions of the French law of inheritance, which secure to legitimate children a certain proportion of their parents' property, inalienable by father or mother, are made to apply to illegitimate children also. Moreover, the father may leave to his natural child a portion of that part of his property of which the law allows him the free disposal, provided that portion is not larger than the portion left to the least favored legitimate child.

Heretofore the law has forbidden legacies to illegitimate children, so that the only way in which a father could make a bequest of his natural child was by refusing to recognize him as his, thereby placing him legally in the position of a stranger unrelated to him.

It will be interesting to watch the effect on French society of this attempt at a solution of a grave social problem. The measure is not so sweeping as it seems to be at first sight, for it affects only a part of the children born out of wedlock. The famous section 310 of the Code Civil: *La recherche de la paternité est interdite*, which many Frenchmen look upon as one of the main bulwarks of social order, remains in full force. The father who refuses to acknowledge his illegitimate child cannot be compelled to do so. If either mother or child were to try to force an acknowledgment, the case would be thrown out of court.

Another class of children born out of wedlock, which is not affected by the law, consists of those who have become legitimate, as by the French parents legitimize their children already born.

The number of persons to whom the modified law will apply must, therefore, be small when compared with the total population of France, much smaller than might be inferred from the prominence given to their so-called wrongs in literature and on the stage. It is large enough, however, to give value to the results of the present experiment, whatever they are. It is not expected that French fathers will hasten to assume all their moral responsibilities simply because the law now permits them to do so.

SKIN GRAFTS CURE BURNS.

Brave Fight for the Life of a Little Girl Who had Been Under the Knife for Months.

Skin grafting has saved the life of Jessie Proudfoot, an eleven-year-old girl in San Rafael, Cal. July a year ago she was playing around a bonfire in the yard when her clothing caught fire. In an instant she was enveloped in flame, and before the fire was extinguished she was very severely burned, and it was not thought that she could possibly live.

She was a frail, delicate child, and large areas of her body were roasted and the skin and flesh sloughed off, leaving the muscles exposed and causing much bleeding from the seared veins and arteries.

The worst burn she received was on the hip. It was sixteen inches long and averaged nine inches wide, covering one hundred and forty-four square inches of her body. There was a burn on her shoulder three by four inches, one six by six on her side and other smaller burns about her body. Despite the fears of her relatives and the doctors, Jessie clung to life, and finally the despair of her mother changed to hope.

Three months after the accident the smaller burns on her arm and side had healed, but the