

BEYOND RECALL.

CHAPTER XLIX.

WHAT THE WORLD SAID.

Three days passed, and nothing occurred to break the dead monotony. I found a letter from Mr. Renshaw at the post office, and got the draft it contained cashed at the bank. Counting up the notes before Beeton, I put half in an envelope.

"This is ready for you," I said, hoping that I might tempt him to bring matters to a specific termination.

"Rest assured, my dear sir," said he, "that I am not less anxious than you to discharge my obligations. Nothing can be done till your wife arrives, and I am absolutely certain that she is not yet here."

As the days dragged on I began to doubt if she would come, but Beeton showed no sign of anxiety; on the contrary, his spirits seemed to rise as the time lengthened. We saw each other night and morning. During the day he devoted himself to making inquiries in the cafes; I to watching the railway station, the quay, and the roads to Calvi and Bognano.

On the afternoon of the third day, returning from the Calvi road through the woods, I came to a point on the hillside from which the whole length of the Cours Grandval lay before me. On the right hand side, looking down towards the sea, stood a row of Italian villas, which, in complement to the English who people this quarter, are called cottages. I had learnt that the one next to the British Consul's was Major Cleveden's. The consul's house was marked by the flag which he displays on Sundays. The gabled roof nearer to me, standing out against the eucalyptus beyond, might at that moment cover my wife's head.

Whilst I was looking down at it, a man came from the garden before the house, and turned down towards the place. There was no mistaking him, even at that distance; it was old Beeton. His treachery was evident. I saw now why he had grown so pale. The explanation was this—Major Cleveden had outbid me, and the old rascal was keeping me there while my wife got away.

Was she already gone? That I determined to discover for myself.

I descended the hill and got into the Cours Grandval. The Hotel des Etrangers stood nearly opposite the major's house. I turned in there. The coffee room fronted the street. Through the open window I had an uninterrupted view of the house over the way. The room was empty. I wheeled a chair round to face the window. The water brought me a bottle of wine and left me.

A cart, filled with pots of palms and camelias, drew up before the house, and the driver rang the bell. A boy, dressed in a sailor costume, came from the open door on to the perron, and ran back, calling, in a clear, high voice, "The flowers have come mamma!" That must be her boy, I thought, and she is still here. The man in charge of the cart took out the palms and camelias and set them on the path. When they were all out he began to carry them into the house.

Three or four men came into the coffee room—English and American—seated themselves near the other window, and called loudly for drinks.

The Voltaire chair in which I sat was so turned, that the back screened me from the observation of the men at the other window, and I was so absorbed in watching the house that I never moved from the position I had taken on first seating myself. From the loud and unreserved way in which they talked, it was more than probable that the men were unconscious of my presence. Their conversation had no interest for me until I heard the name of Major Cleveden mentioned.

"What, another of 'em!" exclaimed one. "By Jove! the place swarms with majors. There's the old boy on the other side of the bay—he's a major; there's Major Thingamy down at Barbaco, and our flag-fluttering consul over there is a major; and now there's this Major Cleveden to add to the list. Why, our gallant friends constitute the larger half of the community."

"The major part!" suggested a second voice.

"Oh!" from the rest.

"What's the explanation?" asked one, sententiously.

"Why are you here?"

"Doctor's orders, my dear boy!"

"That's my excuse; but I doubt if you believe me much more than I believe you."

"Oh, I'm ready to admit that the doctor or any one else would order you to leave England—you're dead—disagreeable."

There was a laugh at this sally. When it subsided one said—

"Jack's right. One would rather be thought weak-chested than weak-kneed. Men settle down in a place like this where living's cheap, because they have not the pluck to face poverty at home."

"That doesn't seem to be the case with our friend over the way; he's taking in camelias regardless of expense. What's going on there?"

"There's to be a dance to-night."

"Sunday—phew!"

"Custom of the country. One rejoices here on Sundays."

"Yes. But what do the other English say?"

"My dear fellow, the major wishes it to be understood that he doesn't care a rap what the English say—being out of England."

"That's Jack all over."

"Jack's observation applies to us all. We're only pharisees at home."

"That's the best excuse I've heard yet for living abroad; it's the major's," said he, they called Jack.

"Jack smiles as if he loved the major."

"When Jack smiles it's to hide a sneer."

"You may explain that by the fact that I am the major's friend."

"Are you going over there to-night?"

"Yes. The theatre is closed, and I am fond of the drama."

"You don't mean to say they're going in for private theatricals—to-night?"

"I should like you to tell me at what time we are not going in for private theatricals, my sweet innocent. Every room's a stage as well as all the world, and at any moment we may be called upon the scene."

"What is the nature of the play over there?"

"That is exactly what I have to learn. You never know beforehand how Nature's play will finish—in tears or in smiles; that's

the advantage of her work over those of less skilful dramatists."

"Can you give us a hint at the plot?"

"Yes; and without betraying the major's confidence. He is not the sort of man to let out secrets. But certain facts are known to every one here—except you; and whether they are known to you, or what any one may say, is, as I told you, a matter of perfect indifference to the stout hearted old soldier. Here are the facts:—Ten or twelve years ago Major Cleveden married the younger of two sisters. They lived happily together for some time, until after the birth of the second child—about three years ago. Then the wife's health began to fail. She was said to be in a decline. Her malady was some form of hypochondria, which the medical men declared must end fatally unless some radical change was made in her life. The poor old major, who seems to have been devotedly attached to her, did all he could to produce that change—taking her from one part of Europe to another, and seeking every means of turning her thoughts into a healthy channel. The wife faded and faded, and then suddenly last June she disappeared, and no trace of her could be found. It was believed that she had learnt what her fate must be from the doctors, and had put an end to a life which she felt a burden to herself and a lingering source of torture to her husband. They were living at that time near Torquay, and it was supposed she had thrown herself into the sea from the cliffs. First act—tragedy!

"After three months of fruitless search, the major did what a sensible man, with a couple of helpless children, would do if he could—he married his wife's sister. In England, thanks to a House of Lords and bishops, that is a crime which lays a woman and her children open to the insult of the uncharitable, and as the major did not care to make his wife's happiness dependent on charity, he came here where civilisation is less advanced. Second act—drama with a purpose!

"The major had just settled down in his new house, and introduced his wife and children to the world of Ajaccio, when one fine evening—Thursday was particularly fine, you remember?—wife No. 1 turns up in better health than she has shown for years—having in the interim found that change which the major had sought in vain to procure for her!"

"Hang it all; that's a rum story."

"I see by the way you fellows grin that you think it's going to turn out a farcical comedy."

"Well, you know—what had she been at all the time?"

"Looks as if she had found another major."

"The major will have to sell out and settle in Turkey."

"Yes"—it was Jack's voice now—"it's pretty clear you think it a play for the Palais Royal. What a set you are, rebuking me for the smile that hides a sneer, while you jeer with the laugh of a clown through a horse collar. What do you know of this woman, that you should hint lightly at another major, or of him that you should suggest by way of a joke (save the mark!) his taking his children and those unhappy sisters to Turkey?"

"Hang it all, Jack; a fellow may joke."

"At women? I don't like that sort of profanity. Do you know how quickly sensitive they are, and do you know how long it would take her to read the insistent jest in your heart? Why, just as long as it would take you to summon up the semblance of decency in your face. You have not left your phariseism behind you."

"That will do Jack," said one, in playful expostulation. "Foster will be a good boy, and make no more naughty jokes. How do you think it will end over there?"

"That is just what excites my curiosity, and what I expect to learn to-night. The major would not invite friends to his house three days after the return of his wife, unless he had some purpose in it. You may be sure he does not intend to let the world thrust its tongue in its cheek behind his back."

"But what can he do?"

"That he knows better than we can imagine. You may be sure that curiosity to see the two sisters will make every one accept the invitation he has issued. The acceptance is itself an intimation that the major intends to take all those who call themselves his friends into his confidence. What the consequences may be it is hard to imagine; but it's certain enough that he is prepared to abide by them—either to accept us as friends, or to live down our enmity as becomes an old soldier and an honest gentleman."

CHAPTER L.

"IF PEOPLE WILL HAVE TRANSACTIONS WITH DOUBLE DEALERS!"

"I've been looking for you the last hour," said Beeton, overtaking me in the Cours Napoleon later on—"hunting for you everywhere."

"In the Cours Grandval?" I asked, turning upon him.

His cunning eyes sought an explanation of the question in my face.

"You have been to the major's," he said.

"No, but you have."

Seeing that it was useless to deny the charge, he nodded.

"Come and sit down. I've something to tell you."

He crossed the road and seated himself before an unoccupied table outside a cafe—a rare to gain time for the arrangement of his ideas.

"The end is nearly accomplished," he said, resting his arms on the table, leaning across, and speaking in a confidential tone. "She is here."

"I know it. She has been here two days. How long have you known it?"

"Since the day before yesterday."

"Then you told me a deliberate lie when you said last night that you had heard nothing of her."

"I found it practical to suppress information in the interest of my client. Don't be impatient, my dear sir. I did not do this in your interest. If I had consulted my own merely, I should have laid you yesterday morning when we met on the quay to the road that runs parallel with the Cours Grandval, and pointed out your wife, where I saw her sitting with her children in the garden at the back of the major's house. I should

then have completed my undertaking, and could have claimed the fee agreed upon without any further risk to myself."

"Yes, you might have done that, possibly; but you preferred instead to see if you could not get letter by conniving with the major to get my wife out of the way for a higher sum."

"I do not attempt to deny that there may be some truth in that insinuation."

"But finding that the major would have nothing to do with you, that he is more anxious to get rid of my wife now than to keep her, that double dealing is likely to bring you loss instead of profit, you—you have been looking for me the last hour to tell me what I have found out for myself."

"If your promises were just, your conclusions would be admirable, dear sir; but they are not. In the first place, the major has met me in a friendly and, I may add, a conciliatory spirit, which shows an anxiety on his part to profit by my services; and in the second, I reckon, with something like absolute certainty, on rendering assistance to both clients to my own pecuniary advantage. Now, sir, to be explicit—on the day of our arrival I called upon the major. I told him frankly and candidly what had happened. Pointing out to him that your wife would probably be here in a few hours, and that you would certainly claim her as soon as you saw her, I offered, for a certain sum in excess of the fee you had offered to pay me, to take you back to England or elsewhere on a false scent. The major refused my offer in a manner that excited my surprise and indignation. But on making inquiries I discovered the cause. The major, believing your wife was dead, had married your wife's sister; and, therefore, as you just now suggested, was more anxious to get rid of your wife than to keep her. You can understand the embarrassing position in which he would be placed with the two ladies on his hands. Perceiving this, I at once returned to the major, despite the unpleasant and unceremonious manner in which he had dismissed me, and I then informed him that unless he agreed to terms, I should remove you from Ajaccio before your wife arrived. The major, now aroused to the danger of his position at once changed his front, and, meeting me in that conciliatory spirit which I just now referred to, he promised to consider my proposal and give me an answer in twenty-four hours. The meaning of this delay was that he wished to confirm the truth of my statement, that your wife was coming here, before engaging my services. At six o'clock the following morning your wife arrived here. She came in a carriage from Corte, and the information being brought to me a little after seven by one of my agents, I lost no time in dressing and making a call on the major. In a long interview he asked me what course you intended to take. I told him that you, ignoring his second marriage, and believing that he would introduce your wife to his own friends as his wife would take a favorable opportunity of claiming her in the face of those friends. There is nothing succeeds like telling the truth—sometimes, and you will recollect that this is the plea I suggested to you."

"Have you anything else to tell me?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear sir, or I should not have told you so much. When I had laid your intentions before the major, he said he would provide you with an occasion to claim your wife. This proves that he is anxious now to get rid of her. I suggested an early date—having regard to his interests, yours and my own. He then promised that he would give a dinner party to-night, to which you and your friends would be invited."

"I do not attempt to deny that there may be some truth in that insinuation."

"But finding that the major would have nothing to do with you, that he is more anxious to get rid of my wife now than to keep her, that double dealing is likely to bring you loss instead of profit, you—you have been looking for me the last hour to tell me what I have found out for myself."

"If your promises were just, your conclusions would be admirable, dear sir; but they are not. In the first place, the major has met me in a friendly and, I may add, a conciliatory spirit, which shows an anxiety on his part to profit by my services; and in the second, I reckon, with something like absolute certainty, on rendering assistance to both clients to my own pecuniary advantage. Now, sir, to be explicit—on the day of our arrival I called upon the major. I told him frankly and candidly what had happened. Pointing out to him that your wife would probably be here in a few hours, and that you would certainly claim her as soon as you saw her, I offered, for a certain sum in excess of the fee you had offered to pay me, to take you back to England or elsewhere on a false scent. The major refused my offer in a manner that excited my surprise and indignation. But on making inquiries I discovered the cause. The major, believing your wife was dead, had married your wife's sister; and, therefore, as you just now suggested, was more anxious to get rid of your wife than to keep her. You can understand the embarrassing position in which he would be placed with the two ladies on his hands. Perceiving this, I at once returned to the major, despite the unpleasant and unceremonious manner in which he had dismissed me, and I then informed him that unless he agreed to terms, I should remove you from Ajaccio before your wife arrived. The major, now aroused to the danger of his position at once changed his front, and, meeting me in that conciliatory spirit which I just now referred to, he promised to consider my proposal and give me an answer in twenty-four hours. The meaning of this delay was that he wished to confirm the truth of my statement, that your wife was coming here, before engaging my services. At six o'clock the following morning your wife arrived here. She came in a carriage from Corte, and the information being brought to me a little after seven by one of my agents, I lost no time in dressing and making a call on the major. In a long interview he asked me what course you intended to take. I told him that you, ignoring his second marriage, and believing that he would introduce your wife to his own friends as his wife would take a favorable opportunity of claiming her in the face of those friends. There is nothing succeeds like telling the truth—sometimes, and you will recollect that this is the plea I suggested to you."

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"If your promises were just, your conclusions would be admirable, dear sir; but they are not. In the first place, the major has met me in a friendly and, I may add, a conciliatory spirit, which shows an anxiety on his part to profit by my services; and in the second, I reckon, with something like absolute certainty, on rendering assistance to both clients to my own pecuniary advantage. Now, sir, to be explicit—on the day of our arrival I called upon the major. I told him frankly and candidly what had happened. Pointing out to him that your wife would probably be here in a few hours, and that you would certainly claim her as soon as you saw her, I offered, for a certain sum in excess of the fee you had offered to pay me, to take you back to England or elsewhere on a false scent. The major refused my offer in a manner that excited my surprise and indignation. But on making inquiries I discovered the cause. The major, believing your wife was dead, had married your wife's sister; and, therefore, as you just now suggested, was more anxious to get rid of your wife than to keep her. You can understand the embarrassing position in which he would be placed with the two ladies on his hands. Perceiving this, I at once returned to the major, despite the unpleasant and unceremonious manner in which he had dismissed me, and I then informed him that unless he agreed to terms, I should remove you from Ajaccio before your wife arrived. The major, now aroused to the danger of his position at once changed his front, and, meeting me in that conciliatory spirit which I just now referred to, he promised to consider my proposal and give me an answer in twenty-four hours. The meaning of this delay was that he wished to confirm the truth of my statement, that your wife was coming here, before engaging my services. At six o'clock the following morning your wife arrived here. She came in a carriage from Corte, and the information being brought to me a little after seven by one of my agents, I lost no time in dressing and making a call on the major. In a long interview he asked me what course you intended to take. I told him that you, ignoring his second marriage, and believing that he would introduce your wife to his own friends as his wife would take a favorable opportunity of claiming her in the face of those friends. There is nothing succeeds like telling the truth—sometimes, and you will recollect that this is the plea I suggested to you."

"Have you anything else to tell me?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear sir, or I should not have told you so much. When I had laid your intentions before the major, he said he would provide you with an occasion to claim your wife. This proves that he is anxious now to get rid of her. I suggested an early date—having regard to his interests, yours and my own. He then promised that he would give a dinner party to-night, to which you and your friends would be invited."

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tricked by him over and over again? Was my trust in him due to anything better than the fatuous conceit of a greenhorn to outwit a card sharper? What assurance had I in positive, proved fact that he was not leading me as he professed to be leading the major? If he had misled me in one thing, might he not also have tricked me in another?

I felt no mortification in the possibility that I had been duped; on the contrary, my heart was quickened with an indefinable joy.

I sought now eagerly to know myself; and every proof I could find that made me see I was a fool and a simpleton added to my exhilaration. If I could prove that I had deceived myself, then I could believe that Hebe had not deceived me.

At that thought I stopped still in the squalid street, into which I had wandered, and my heart seemed to bound up into my throat, stopping my breath for the minute. When, with a sudden impulse, I moved quickly on, I caught sight of a woman standing on the opposite side of the path, looking up the alley to see what I had been gaping at.

I saw that it was by being simple, not making myself cunning, that I could get at the truth. "If I throw off the convict's cunning, and regain the trusting confidence of happier days," I said to myself.

The thoughts poured tumultuously through my mind, breaking in one upon the other.

"Does not innocence sometimes wear a mask as well as guilt," I asked myself? If one disguise has deceived me, may not the other also? Why had I believed an old rascal, and not believed Hebe? When I taxed Beeton with deceit, he at once showed me that it was employed to my own advantage. But I had never asked my wife for an explanation. If I had done that, was it impossible that she should have cleared herself? I had condemned her without putting her upon her defence.

My questioning had reached this point, when, coming suddenly on to the quay from the foul and gloomy slums, I was almost blinded by the dazzling brightness of the sun sinking down unclouded upon the still, calm sea. It seemed to my exalted senses like a prophecy.

"Oh, God, let me hope a little longer!" I prayed, as if with the setting of the sun I must sink again into the dark misery of despair.

I was conscious of some one coming quickly towards me. Turning, I found it was Beeton. He held up his finger, and beckoned me with a movement of his head and eye-brows. I had left him abruptly, and my manner had very likely made him uneasy about his money.

"I have just been round by the road I mentioned," he said, laying his claw-like fingers on my arm, and speaking in a low voice—"the one running along the back of the grounds in which the major's house stands. Now if you would like to precipitate matters—if you prefer a short and speedy vengeance, in place of that I suggested which clearly failed to please you—why, you can take it now."

I put my hand in my pocket. I believe the old villain thought I was seeking a knife, for he studiously looked another way as he led me along the road. It was the packet of notes I had set aside for him that I sought.

"There she is!" he whispered, pointing through the iron gates that opened into the garden.

She—Hebe, my wife—was standing with a child beside her on a raised terrace beside an orange tree. Her face was radiant with the glow of the setting sun.

"Go!" I said, putting the notes in the hand of the old man.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Strange Keepsake From a Countess.

The Paris Temps is responsible for the following remarkable story apropos of the death of the well known French astronomer, Camille Flammarion. Some time ago Flammarion received a curious keepsake in a lady admirer. A young countess, who was particularly fond of Flammarion's works, invited him last summer to spend a time with her and her husband at her country house. The scientist accepted the invitation of the lady, who was much younger than her husband. She was of a very sentimental disposition, believed in plurality of worlds, and talked with the latest calm of death, which was quickly robbing, since she was in the last stage of consumption. The evening before Flammarion left the chateau the countess said to him, "I am going to send you something which you must not refuse to accept. If you do I shall be greatly offended. The astronomer had forgotten all about the matter, when one day a small parcel arrived at his house accompanied by a black letter. The parcel contained a piece of beautiful white skin, "which when opened emitted a kind of electric stream."

The accompanying note ran as follows:—Dear Master,—In sending you this I only wish of one who is dead, and who is the greatest admiration for you. She is the death skin of her beautiful husband. Her further request was that you should have the next work you are publishing after her death bound in this skin. I send the relic to you in accordance with my sacred promise to her."

"Dr. V." What was he to do with "keepsake?" was Flammarion's first thought. "Should he refuse it?" "At first it very much inclined to do this," he wrote, "but after a while I said to myself, 'but after a while I said to myself, 'why should I not grant the request of a woman whose memory is very pleasant to me.' Consequently I had the skin very carefully prepared, a process which it took three whole months to accomplish. At last it came back unhurt. My book, 'Terre et Ciel,' was just coming out. I had one copy of it bound according to the wish of the deceased lady; it made a beautiful volume. The edges were red, spangled with golden stars, in memory of the starlight nights during my stay at the chateau in the J