JANET'S DIAMONDS:

—OR—

A Doubtful Dowry That Was Lost at Last.

BY P. J. SMITH.

Chapter III.

Married! I don't think that, for the first few seconds, we realized in the least what the announcement meant. Peggy and Dotty began to laugh, I remember, while Hetty and I repeated stupidly:

"Married? What do you mean? Who's married? To—to what?"

"Philip—my son Philip!" Janet repeated hysterically. "How—how dull you are! What are you laughing about? I tell you it's no joke! He is married! He married a Miss Emmeline Devereux, a Ballarat girl, two months ago! That's why—why he didn't write before; he was afraid—he didn't know how to—to break the news to us!"

"I don't believe it—I don't believe it!" I cried hoarsely. "You may believe it if you like, Janet—you had always a poor opinion of your son—but I—we—never had—never believed that in any circumstances Phil could become like—his father, did we, sisters?"

"No!" they answered, roused by my energetic protest.

"And we don't believe it now!" said Dotty. "It's a mistake! You—you have been misinformed, Janet! Who writes to you?"

"He writes himself," answered Janet, bursting into tears. "I tell you there is no mistake—you can read the letter for yourselves! It—it explains all. Oh, it is cruel of you—seeing the state I'm in—to take it like that, to be so hard and violent and unjust, without even knowing a thing, without knowing all he went through, the—the struggle he made to resist, and the terrible temptation it was! Why—why should you call him a scoundrel for falling in love with the loveliest girl he ever met, when he saw that she—she loved him, when she nursed him through a dangerous illness, when without her care and her father's hospitality he would probably have died—died on the roadside! But I daresay"—dashing the handkerchief from her eyes and gazing into our stern pale faces—"you would rather hear the news of his death than this—you who pretend to love him better than his poor mother did!"

"Yes, Janet," Peggy answered firmly, "I think we would rather hear that the boy was dead than unworthy of our love!"

"If this news is true, I will never speak to him again!" said Dotty.

"Nor I!"

"Nor I!"

"Oh, how cruel you are! Can't you read his letter, somebody," Janet went on wildly, "and not condemn him unheard? And you know there was no real engagement between him and Trot! You know her guardian forbade it expressly—would not let her wear his ring, even! Oh, can't you read his letter somebody—somebody?"

I took it from her hand, read it through twice in silence, then passed it on to the others. It was a blotched, and in some parts almost illegible, scrawl, but the writing was our nephew's and had evidently been penned by him while in a state of shamefaced excitement and apprehension. Oh, as well it might—as well it might, indeed! It said that many, many times during the past month he had tried in vain to write to us, but that now, feeling we might be made too anxious by his long silence, he had forced himself to go through with the task, and humbly begged us all to forgive him the terrible sorrow and disappointment he knew the knowledge of his marriage would be to us. He had struggled desperately at first, he said, to remain true to the dear girl of whom he had felt himself all along to be unworthy; but circumstances had been too strong for him, and he had fallen. He said that his beloved wife knew nothing of his prior bonds; he implored his mother not to imagine that she was in the least bit tainted with his treachery—she was all truth and unselfishness and devotion. Oh, he knew that she—his mother—would love his beautiful Emmeline when he should have the courage to bring her home to them! He was longing to bring her, longing to see his old home again, longing to ask pardon on his bended knees of those whom he loved and had wronged. Would the word of his recall ever come? He had money now to travel, for his wife's father was a merchant of wealth and position, and her fortune was considerable. If he could only present her to us, he felt sure she would win us to forget his unworthiness, *et cetera*. The letter concluded with an account of the manner in which he had been thrown into the young lady's society. Travelling up country to visit the claim he had told us of, he had been thrown from his horse in a wild lonely district and lay for hours helpless under a burning sun with a dislocated shoulder and sprained ankle, and would doubtless have succumbed to his injuries had not Miss Devereux, whose father owned a large property in the neighborhood, been driving past in her carriage, carried him to her home, where he had been tended with the utmost kindness and devotion.

"Well, well, what do you say now?" asked Janet, when the letter had dropped from Dotty's hand. "Do you admit of any excuse for his conduct now? Do you still think him a scoundrel Peggy—Netty?"

Peggy covered her face with her hands and left the answer to me.

"I think, Janet," I said drearily, "that your maternal intuition was a true one, after all—that your son is his father's son too."

At this Janet burst into angry tears and expostulation again, reproaching us, twitting us with our trying to impose upon us in our disappointment, was all in the same breath to say that it was we—we alone who forced that foolish engagement upon the children, that it was we who made them fancy themselves in love with one another, who drove them to one another.

"And you, of course, Janet," Hetty broke in bitterly, "were perfectly neutral in the matter? You never expressed a wish that your son should marry our girl?"

"How can you say such things, Hetty, when you know I was as anxious about the matter as any of you, though I did not let desire carry away my judgment! From the way in which you all talk, one would really think that this blow fell not so heavily upon me as it does upon the rest of you! As if I wouldn't rather have our sweet little Trot for a daughter-in-law with only her six thousand pounds than this beauty with her thirty—forty—I don't know how much—ay, twenty times over! And it's a shame, I say—"

"Hush, hush! Here she comes!"

Before we had time to move an inch or to think of hiding the letter, Trot was among us.

"What's the matter?" she asked in alarm. "Why, Hetty, you look as if you had been crying! Ah"—with a low quick cry as her glance fell upon the paper in Janet's lap—"there's—there's a letter from Australia! Bad news—he's ill—dead? Some one tell me—quick!"

We all glanced at the mother, who answered, with crimson face, stammeringly—

"No, Trot—no; the—the letter is from himself. He is quite well—now, I—I think Heaven!"

"Then what is the matter—the mystery? Why hasn't he written before? Where's my letter?"—snatching the sheet from Janet's knee. "I suppose I may read what he says—eh?"

I covered my face with my hands. I think we all covered our faces with our hands; but a peculiar fascination made us drop them again to watch Trot as she read the dreadful, dreadful letter. Peggy moved closer, put an arm round the girl's shoulder to support her in case she should faint. But she did not faint at all; she did not cry or moan or make any display of emotion, only turned very pale and began to bite her under lip. She was a long time reading the letter—hours, days, it seemed to me. When it was done at last, she laid it back in Janet's lap and said, with a little quivering laugh that went through me—

"Well, this is great strange news, isn't it? You—you none of you expected this explanation of his silence, did you?"

She turned to us; but we were all crying without disguise, and poor Peggy slipped away altogether.

"Aunt Janet, I am glad for you; it must be such a—relief, after the terrible suspense you—we all have been through. You know at times we couldn't help dreading the worst, only we—we didn't admit it to each other—dreading he was dead. And now to hear that he is not dead at all, but only married, and well, and happy—married to a girl he loves, good, beautiful, rich, and able to come home whenever he likes! It is good news for you, aunt Janet!"

"My dearest girl," Janet broke in, folding her in a hysterical embrace, "I bless you for those noble words—they soothe my breaking heart! Oh, some instinct told me you would take it like this! I knew you would bear him no ill-will for a thing—a thing he couldn't help! I knew you would not consider that there was any binding engagement between——"

"Between Phil and me?"—lightly, quickly. "Why, of course not, aunt Janet! I thought every one understood that until I was one-and-twenty, I was as free as he was to marry any one that took my fancy. Surely every one understood that! I—I wore no engagement ring even; I——"

"Well, the others pretend they didn't, Trot; they say that Phil has treated you shamefully, behaved like a——"

"Hold your tongue, Janet!" I burst in angrily. "I will not listen to another word on the subject. Come along, Trot, my dear; I've kept a cup of tea hot for you in the schoolroom."

Trot followed me out, but instinctively stopped at the turn that led to her room. I glanced hurriedly away from the pale piteous face, then answered the unspoken appeal.

"Well, yes, you are right; it is too late for tea, Trot. Quarter past six? I had no idea it was so late."

She took a few steps upward, then turned, laying her hand upon my shoulder.

"Netty, love," she whispered, "don't fret too much about it. We—we mightn't have been happy, you know, and that would have been worse for you all. Tell the others—tell Peggy not to fret. I—I really don't mind—much."

Oh, but I knew better—I knew better, my own dear, brave little maid!

A week went by. The disenchanting news had somehow filtered through our circle of friends, and Trot had had the courage to appear at a tennis party and meet the pittying glances of the people who had congratulated her so warmly two years before. Then, on the Friday following, the Australian mail brought a second letter that almost threw us into the same state of agitation and rebellion as the first. It was a hurried scrawl again from Phil informing us that he had not waited for the answer to his appeal, that he and his bride had intended to take us by storm that very week, arriving by the mail that brought the letter. They had started, it seemed, for Melbourne, taken their cabins, and, at the last moment, just two hours before the vessel was to sail, Phil received a telegram from his partner summoning him at once up country on business and urging him to wire to Europe for the remittance of his second thousand. After a half-distracted consultation between husband and wife, the former decided on sending his poor Emmeline home by the mail, to be sustained by the love and care of his dearest mother and aunts, rather than leave her alone in a Melbourne hotel for an indefinite period.

"Then she is here—the creature is in England—may be down on us at any moment!" Dotty exclaimed, turning thunderstruck to me. "She must have come by the mail that brought this letter."

"I wonder if Janet means us to receive her here—under the roof with our child?" I asked hotly. "I really shouldn't be surprised if she did."

"Oh, no, scarcely that!" Peggy answered gently. "Janet will probably go up to London to-night and meet her daughter-in-law there."

But I was right after all, for, half an hour later, Janet came in to us with a telegram in her hand. The message was couched in the following pathetic strain—

"Is Philip Brownrigg's mother willing to welcome his poor bride, alone, friendless at the Charing Cross Hotel? Wire reply."

"I've wired her to come on at once, so she'll probably be here by the next train. What room had I better get ready for her, girls?" asked Janet, with effusive excitement. "The blue room has rather a southern aspect, and, as she comes from such a hot climate, it would be—"

"The woman will occupy no room in a house of mine, Janet. You must receive your son's wife in a house of your own," I answered determinedly.

The three others confirmed my declaration and looked so inflexible that Janet, without an attempt at expostulation, went off in a flood of tears.

Then Trot, who had been a silent witness of what had taken place, raised us startlingly with flushed cheeks, and tears in her eyes.

"Aunties, I—I won't have it! You must receive Phil's wife to-night; you must receive her as warm and cheerful a welcome as you would have done if I had never existed, for if you don't—"

"Well if we don't, Trot?"

"If you don't, I'll leave the house myself to-night, go straight to my guardian who will be only too delighted to have me, and never, never come back until you give in. I will, as sure as I'm standing before you!"

The end of it was we had to give in, the four of us, for we saw that Trot was determined to carry out her threat. The blue room was placed at Janet's disposal, and she and Trot spent the rest of the afternoon therein, dusting, settling, superintending the housemaid's arrangements, while we sat in the drawing-room, our hands crossed in our laps, swelling with indignation.

At about six o'clock, a few minutes before the arrival of the mail train, Janet, in her best black silk, her thin hair ornamented with a bunch of scarlet feathers, looking very flustered and ill at ease, joined our circle, and then Trot slipped in too. She took her usual place on the footstool between Peggy and me, laid her dark head against my knee, and whispered warningly—

"Be good—be good, all of you. Remember my threat. At the first sign of outbreak I'm off to the Colonel's!"

There was a sound of a carriage wheels coming up the avenue, then Janet, her heavily ringed fingers wreathing nervously, turned wistfully to us.

"Sisters, don't be hard upon her; it is not her fault—she knows nothing about it. And she is a stranger, coming alone among us in the most trying position a—a woman could be placed in, claiming our pity, our protection and love. Help me to make her feel at home, please—please!"

The door opened and we saw her standing on the threshold, a tall, very fair young woman, with bright blue eyes, rather sharp but very pretty features, and a mass of golden hair tumbling about her shoulders. For a moment she stood thus confronting us, her arms slightly outstretched, her lips parted until Janet made a few unsteady steps forward, and then she moved swiftly towards her and fell lightly and gracefully into her arms.

"You are his mother!" she cried. "Oh, I knew it—I felt it the moment I saw you! Mother, you will try to like me, for his—for Philip's sake? You will pity me, for I am nearly broken hearted?"

Janet responded effusively; then, after much kissing, crying, and hurried exchange of information, with the tears still in her bright eyes, the girl turned very prettily to us.

"And you are his aunts about whom I've heard so much? Oh, I love you already for your goodness to him! I think I know you too!"—this to Trot, who had advanced shyly to greet her, for we all stood in the background like a row of mutes, not knowing what to say or do. "He has your photograph all over the room—only you are prettier than your photograph. You are Trot, aren't you? Yes, I thought so. Well, Phil gave me a sweet little parrot for you; but it died when we were in the Bay of Biscay, and I cried a whole day over it. Won't you kiss me, Trot, and tell me you are glad to see me?"

Whereupon Trot raised her lips, made a neat little speech of welcome, and then drew back to make way for us. I advanced, my hand extended.

"I am very glad indeed to make your acquaintance," I said with pompous stiffness. "I hope you will find the climate of the country agrees with you."

Ignoring my hand, she slipped her arm around my neck, and whispered:

"You have eyes just like Phil's!"—I have not; Phil's are brown, mine are green, with a *soupcon* of a cast in the left. "I mean the expression. Which are you—Netty, Hetty?"

"Netty," I answered, molified in spite of myself; and then the others followed suit, the stiffness and soreness disappeared, and we found somehow that we could not snub Phil's wife as we felt she ought to be snubbed.

"Oh, this is so different from what I expected!" the pretty young creature cried, sinking upon her knees beside Janet's chair. "You can't think how I dreaded this meeting! I thought you would be cold, stiff and critical—that it would be weeks before we could know each other, and be really comfortable together. But now I feel almost as if I had known you all my life; I feel at home, happy, at rest. Oh, mother—I may call you that"—clasping Janet's responsive fingers—"for I never knew my own; she died when I was a baby, you know—mother, if we had only our own dear boy among us, how lovely it would be!"

I felt Trot's shoulder quiver slightly under my clasp; but her face was quite cheerful and impassive.

"Well, I hope we shall not have long to wait for that happiness, Emmeline," Janet answered. "Paul will follow you home as quickly as he can, won't he?"

Emmeline laughed a soft conscious little laugh.

"Trust him! I—I don't think there will be much to keep Phil at one side of the equator while I—I mean while we all are at the other, mother. But the business may be a troublesome and tedious one, you know; and that dear money-grubbing old heart of his is set on getting possession of that land. Why, even in the first fortnight of the honeymoon, mother—think of that!—I heard him murmuring in his sleep about 'copper ores,' 'mineral veins,' 'ten tons at a hundred pounds a ton,' all sorts of mercenary calculations—wasn't it a shame?"

"Then this land, Emmeline, is the same that he wrote to me about some months ago. He hasn't got possession of it yet?"

"No; there was some tiresome hitch or other, and before we left he had almost given up the project in despair, when, just as we got on board—as I suppose he told you in his letter—that dreadful telegram came from his partner—the wretch—urging him to return at once and get the purchase money out as quickly as possible. Of course I wanted him to wire to papa and let him manage the whole matter, money included; but he wouldn't listen to me, the proud silly boy; he said nothing would induce him to put his hands into his father-in-law's pocket before he had been married a month, and that besides he had set his heart on working this business with his own hands and head, and paying for it with his own money. I was so angry, so hurt at first; I told him he didn't love me a bit. We had quite a scene—our first quarrel—over it; but in the end I had to give in. Women always have, alas—haven't they mother? Still, I was a good little girl to let him go, wasn't I now? I wonder if you would have been as self-denying if you had been in my place, Miss Trot?"

There was a horrible minute's silence; then Peggy broke it with a rather treacherous tremor in her voice.

"But I—I suppose your sacrifice will be amply recompensed, if Phil finds copper on this land?"

"Oh, then he and I can start a mansion in Belgravia next year and give you all a London season! We shall be just first cousins to millionnaires, aunt Peggy!"

Chapter IV.

When I drew up my blind the next morning the first objects that met my view were Trot and Phil's wife walking round the garden arm-in-arm, making a very pretty picture in their light cotton dresses among the blooming flowers. And, when they came in to breakfast, they appeared to be already on terms of easy girlish intimacy and to have exchanged many confidences.

Emmeline's greeting of us was again a mixture of timidity and effusiveness that we found very disarming, and we were not inclined in the least to complain of her "gush" when she praised the old place we all loved so well—when she declared that it was her ideal, tree for tree, flower for flower, of an English homestead, and that the freshness of our morning air was a tonic strong enough to keep one young and blooming for ever.

"Why, in a few weeks more, aunties, I shouldn't wonder if it improved my poor, pasty, sun-browned skin and made it almost as clear and bright as your own!"

Her complexion was perfect, a mixture of roses and lilies, and I told her so, quite simply; at which she opened her blue eyes questioningly, and, with a pleased little laugh, took a peep into a mirror opposite.

"Is it really, aunt Netty? I didn't know! It must have been the sea voyage, then, for I was a perfect negress when I left Australia! How pleased Phil will be—he admires fair women so, I know! And, oh dear aunties, I want you all to take me in training from this very day and try to turn me out a nice, well behaved, English girl before my dear boy arrives. I want you to tell me at once when I say or do things I oughtn't, to correct my pronunciation—which is shockingly Colonial, I know—and make me as like—like your Trot as possible; for you must know, Miss Trot"—suddenly slipping her arm round the girl's waist and looking at her with a caressing pout—"that once upon a time—oh, long, long ago—I used to be quite jealous of you, my dear? Phil had so many of your photos about his room and used to talk so much of you. And one day—wait till you hear what a little goose I was—one day I piled up my hair on the top of my head—just as you wear it—and it didn't suit me a bit, you know, for, when I took Phil in his beef-tea, he pulled it all down again with his poor bad arm, and said I must always wear it about my face and shoulders in this childish fashion, which I am sure—Trot, where are you going—taking that tray up to the mother?"—for since an attack of rheumatism in the spring, Janet always had her breakfast in bed. "Oh, please let me help you! It is too heavy for you, I'm sure! My arms are much stronger than yours!"

"My arms are quite strong," Trot answered, relinquishing her burthen. "I have carried this for the past three months without accident, but I think it's your turn now Emmeline! I resign my place with pleasure to you!"

"And afterward you will let me show you my poor frocks, won't you, Trot? And tell me what I ought to wear? Phil said you had such sweet taste and advised me to be entirely guided by you in the matter of dress!"

"Phil has entirely too good an opinion of me, Emmeline," poor Trot answered, with a laugh that was a little shrill. "I will do my best to deserve his encomiums, however!"

That afternoon chanced to be our weekly afternoon at home; and, as the news of Emmeline's arrival had already spread in the neighborhood, there was quite a large gathering in the drawing-room, when, at about four o'clock, Janet, who had gone out after lunch to see to the transfer of Phil's property, entered, in a condition of complacent exhaustion, leaning on the arm of her blushing young daughter-in-law.

A faint murmur of approbation went round, and the girl acknowledged it by a deeper blush and a swift drooping of her eyes; but, after a few minutes, she seemed, without the slightest apparent effort, to shake off the burthen of her pretty consciousness and to become her own chatty impulsive self again, moving from group to group with smiling ease and well-bred self-possession. And, when Trot, after a hot game at tennis, re-entered to preside as usual at the tea-table, she found the place already most efficiently filled, Emmeline having been established in it by Janet's cruel tactlessness. Then, to make matters worse, Emmeline, seeing, I suppose, the surprise on the other girl's face, jumped up at once and called out in her clear drawling voice:

"Oh, Trot, I—I have taken your place, dear; but I'm so glad you have come, for I'm making such a muddle of everything—such a muddle!"

Trot, dropping into an arm-chair near the door, answered gaily:

"As you have taken my place Emmeline you certainly will keep it for the rest of the afternoon at least. I'm just too done up to walk across the room. You must refresh me here, my dear, and at once, please!"

Standing half concealed behind a curtain, I watched unnoticed the meaning glances our visitors interchanged, heard a few of the whispers that I knew were circulating all through the room.

"How well she takes it, to be sure! Do you really think the unconcern is all put on?"

"It is hard to know. Some people say the poor girl is nearly broken-hearted—hasn't eaten a morsel or slept an hour since the news was told her; others again say that she doesn't care a pin—that it was the old ladies who forced her into the engagement."

"What do you think of the bride? Hasn't she a charming face?"

"Oh, charming—just like an angel's; and her manners are so graceful and sympathetic."

"Her figure—ha, ha!—rumor says, is the best part of the business. Twenty thousand down the day she married, I believe——"

"I heard forty, and from the best authority, too. Why, her father is one of the merchant princes of South Australia and owns part of a large gold mine besides. Certainly Janet Brownrigg's son has done well for himself, provided he keeps off the paternal track in his prosperity!"

"Provided, indeed! Certainly his behavior to that little girl and those four devoted old ladies——"

"Oh, I don't blame him so much in this instance, my dear! Young men will be young men, you know, and such a sweetly pretty girl and such a fortune!"

"All's well that ends well. How radiant the mother looks! She really ought to have her precious diamonds out to celebrate the occasion."

Janet's affection and appreciation of her daughter-in-law increased daily. They were inseparable, for Janet, suddenly laying aside all her invalid fads and habits, ordered three or four rather juvenile costumes and went about to flower shows, cricket matches, tennis parties in indefatigable chaperonage of her new daughter. Poor Emmeline, however, did not much appreciate this devoted attendance, for Janet, with her usual selfishness, would scarcely allow the girl five minutes from her side, and was perpetually fussing about her when she was enjoying herself among young people of her own age.

"Net, my dear," my sister Dotty said significantly one morning, when our new niece had successfully banished a *soupcon* of one of Janet's nervous headaches, and had persuaded her that she was well enough to keep an appointment with our lawyer at the bank in connection with her son's expected remittance, "do you know it strikes me that Phil's wife is an uncommonly clever young woman, and that I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she ruled her husband as easily and steadily as she rules his mother?"

"Dot, the very thing that has occurred to me!"

"Uncommonly clever!" continued my sister musingly. "With all her pretty appeals to us for help and general enlightenment, it does not seem to me somehow that we have had to teach her much so far, have we?"

"Well, n-no," I answered dubiously; "now that you bring it before me like that, Dot, we certainly have not! For a girl coming from the wilds of the bush, she certainly gets along remarkably well on her own account and seems to make friends wherever she goes! Even in the small matter of her wardrobe, Trot has very few alterations to suggest!"

"From the night of her arrival, Netty, if you look dispassionately back upon the scene, you will find that she had the upper hand somehow; that in fact it was she who received us, not we her; that she made the advance to Janet herself; she introduced herself even to Trot, and gave us the keynote to the manner of reception she wanted."

"She did—she did," I answered, after a moment's retrospection, much surprised at the discovery; "but I should never have found it out myself! How sharp you are, Dotty! Did it strike you at the time?"

"No—only by degrees! And several other little things are striking me by degrees, too, Nettie."

"Yes—yes! What are they, dear?"

"Well, one, for instance. You fancy now, all three of you, that our Trot and Mrs. Phil have struck up a wonderful friendship, don't you?"

"Why, yes, Dot; you can't deny that they seem to get on capitally together! They are always singing each other's praises, always joking and laughing, planning pleasures and amusements together; and you mean to hint that you don't think they like one another?"

"I mean merely to state my impression that the two girls do not like one another, and will never, never like one another."

(To be continued.)