

JANET'S DIAMONDS:

A Doubtful Dowry That Was Lost at Last.

BY P. J. SMITH.

"Dot," I said eagerly, "have you seen anything to lead you to form this impression, any grounds for—"

"No," answered my sister, pursing up her lips, "I cannot state a single incident; I never detected a look, a word, that would bear out my impression, yet I believe it to be a true one all the same!"

I glanced from my sister's face to the two girls coming arm-in-arm up the garden towards us and shook my head doubtfully.

"Emmy," Trot cried gaily, when they had handed us the flowers they had gathered, "the coast is clear—I mean your mother won't be back from the bank till luncheon—you'll have time for a grand game at tennis up at the club! Get on your hat quickly, my dear!"

"Oh, Trot, love, I couldn't! Don't you know what day this is? Don't you know I couldn't leave home to-day, not for all the world?"

"Why not?" asked Trot, opening her eyes wide. "What is the matter with the day, Emmy?"

"Aunt Dot, aunt Netty, you know—surely you know?" Emmeline answered, turning to us with clasped hands.

I shook my head; my sister did the same.

"It's Tuesday, the twenty-second of August. It's—the one day for which I live—it's mail day!" Emmeline said in a whisper, her blue eyes fixed ecstatically on the sunlit clouds. "Oh, did none of you remember that?"

"The day varies," I replied, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Mails from such a distance can't arrive—"

"I know, of course! But didn't you see that the boat was reported in last night's mail news? Oh, aunt Netty, it will be my first letter—my first since we parted! And you could not expect me, my heart whole little wretch, to put a ball over the net in such circumstances! Trot, were you ever in love?"

The young wife spent the rest of the morning at a lobby window that commanded a good view of the high-road along which the postman came, and about the time for his arrival I heard her light footsteps pattering down the stairs, saw her fly across the lawn, and then return to her room to enjoy the treasured letter undisturbed.

When she appeared at luncheon-time her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wet though sparkling with delight, as she laid before us a vignette photograph of Phil, taken a few hours after she had left him.

"What do you think of it?" she asked. "Do you think it is like him? Do you think he has changed much—that he has grown old-looking?"

I thought he had changed much, and told her so. His face looked waxy and thin, and in the sunken eyes there was an expression of suffering and shame-faced pleading that touched me in spite of myself.

"You forget how ill—how very ill—he was," the girl urged; "you don't make allowances for his fever. And then—you couldn't expect him to look well and smiling half an hour after he had left me! Oh, you couldn't expect that! Look, dear—look! Be kinder than the others; don't tell me he has changed so much—appears so ill! Oh, don't, dear friend!"

Trot took up the little picture, and, in spite of the wonderful command she had over herself, I saw a shade of pain cross her features as she glanced at the sad altered face of her faithless lover.

"No, dear, no. Making allowances for climate and hard work, I don't think that there is so much change in his appearance," she replied reassuringly. "Besides, the printing of the photo is so bad. Where was it done—Melbourne, you say?" She turned it over, and the following appeal in Phil's bold straggling hand met her eyes—

"When my darling sees this, she will pity me and write at once, I know."

The card dropped from her hand, and Emmeline snatched it up and pressed it to her lips passionately.

"Oh, why did I leave you, my love?" she murmured; and then an uncomfortable silence followed, broken only by Janet's tearless sobbing.

"Do you want to read his letter, any of you?" Emmeline asked, in a tone that warned us off assent. "I—I will show it, if you like; but he only meant it for me—only for me. You don't want to read it? You would rather I told you the news? And you, dear mother, too? Oh, thank you, thank you all! How good you are to me! Then I will tell you everything. And he sends messages for you all; he forgets no one. But one message I don't understand. He sends his love to 'Whit-Monday' and desires him to be told that he's bringing him home a beautiful collar. Who is 'Whit-Monday'?"

"Only a little dog that died a month ago," Peggy answered, her foolish eyes filling with tears; for "Whit-Monday" was a bright little terrier, Phil's first present to Trot on their engagement, and christened by him after the luckless day on which he had declared his love and been accepted.

For the rest of the afternoon we saw no more of Emmeline, as she remained locked up in her room, poring over her letter and adding countless postscripts to the one she was going to send out the next morning.

However, in the quiet room of the day after, when what I called the post-hour was over, I saw Janet and her mother sitting at a big dinner-party at the house, and that day week, for the first time since her departure, I saw her again.

thus tremendous topic, together with the treat in store for Emmeline of seeing the family diamonds, absorbed all other subjects of conversation for the night.

The second week of Emmeline's installation went by quite as smoothly as the first. The mail arrived two days earlier than was expected, and, as Emmeline had received an intimation of the happy fact through the evening papers, she was at the gate to meet the postman, who brought her another voluminous budget more cheerful and hopeful than the first; and Janet's new frock, under her dear daughter's supervision, promised to be a tremendous success.

The afternoon of the eventful day on which the dress was to be worn, as Janet was seated at the window, waiting for Shelton's fly to come and take her to fetch the diamonds from the bank as usual, Trot came running in from the lawn with one of those detestable orange envelopes in her trembling hand.

"Hush!" she cried excitedly. "Don't let her hear; it is a telegram—from Australia! Oh, aunt Peggy, oughtn't somebody to open it before she—Oughtn't—oughtn't—"

"To whom is it addressed—to herself?"

"No, it is addressed merely to 'Brownrigg, Eccleston.' We—we had better take it to his mother; she can open it."

Janet was very much alarmed when we handed her the envelope, and, though we all assured her with feverish volubility that there was nothing to be frightened at, that we felt convinced it was only a message about the money, she let the paper lie in her lap, until at last Dot, not able to bear the suspense, tore open the envelope, where a ringing alarm-bell made her turn hastily round.

Emmeline stood at the door, looking so pale in her terror that I scarcely recognized the gentle pretty countenance.

"Stop!" she shrieked. "Don't read it!—I forbid you to read it—is for me! It is to tell me my love is dead—dead. Give it to me—quick!" She flew across the room to my sister and snatched the paper from her hands.

There was a moment's terrible silence, then she dropped upon the floor with a sound that was half groan and half laugh, and we all rushed toward her and tried to get the paper from her clutched hand.

"He is dead?" we whispered. "Speak, Emma—speak!"

"No—no," she answered, bursting into tears and struggling into a sitting position; "he is all right. Oh, forgive me for frightening you so; but, when I saw the envelope and your faces—I thought my heart must burst. I don't know what I did—said—I—I—"

"Then there is nothing wrong with him?"

"Nothing—the foolish boy; only he did not get any letter from me by the mail, so he couldn't bear the suspense. There's the message, read it—said it out for me again, someone, please."

I read aloud as follows—

"Brownrigg, New Chester, to Brownrigg, Eccleston. No letters. Who well."

"But—but, Emmy, how could he expect to hear from you yet?" said Dot, after a moment's silence. "The mail takes six weeks from Southampton to Melbourne, and you have not been here three weeks yet!"

"How could he expect?" Emmeline repeated, pushing the hair from her still flushed face. "I—I don't know, Dot; I don't understand! Oh, dear, how stupid I am! What am I saying? He did not of course expect to hear of my arrival in England; but he expected to hear from every port at which he stopped and he didn't. Oh, how cruel to lose my letters! Oh, what a state my darling must be in! Quick, some one, give me my hat and let me send the telegram. Every moment must be agony to him!"

It was useless to try to dissuade her; although still very weak and hysterical, the poor young woman insisted on driving to the post-office and sending the message herself. I accompanied her, and with some difficulty prevented her from writing off a volume of nonsense at the rate of seven and six-pence a word, that would have swamped my dividends for the next half year; for she had forgotten her purse, and, as I had only a couple of sovereigns in mine, she had to be content with the following bald communication—

"All right, dear love. Have written."

On our return home we found Janet, quite recovered from the shock, waiting for us in her bedroom, her ruby velvet gown spread out on her bed, her case of diamonds lying unopened on her dressing-table.

"Emmy, Emmy, my child!" she called out shrilly. "Come up quickly—my dress has arrived! It looks lovely; but they've put the lace on the wrong side of the tunic. It's such a pity! I want to know if you think I should have time to change it. Come up—quick!"

But there was no responsive sparkle in Emmeline's blue eyes as they rested on the finery; she sank listlessly into an easy-chair.

"Mother, I hope you won't be too disappointed, but I don't feel up to this entertainment to-night; the shock has been too heavy. You must go without me, dear."

Then we had one of Janet's old scenes. It seemed ages since the last, and its effect on her daughter-in-law was successful. She gave in, and Hetty and Trot went off to help her to dress.

Very pretty she looked in her flowing wedding-gown, but her face lacked its usual animation, and there were dark lines still under her eyes. However, her mother-in-law made up in imposing gorgeousness for the sobriety of her dress. A little scream of astonishment, not unmixed with reprobation, greeted Janet's appearance in the drawing-room, for we had not seen the new style of bodice before, and the almost entire absence of sleeve was at first a little trying to the scraggy shoulders and neck on which the diamonds glittered so magnificently.

"You wear those diamonds often, they do become you so? I never saw such beauties, and the setting is perfect—perfect," Emmeline cried, the color rushing into her pale cheeks.

"Yes," said Janet, with a smile of her train. "I thought you would admire my diamonds, Emmeline. You know this Browning parure is almost historical. Come closer, love; don't be afraid to touch them"—with tender condescension. "You can't do them any harm you know."

"They are perfect—dazzling!" Emmeline murmured. "I can't help admiring them, though you know, dear, jewelry is a thing I don't care for in the least."

As I felt little disposed for sleep and had an interesting book, I sent the servants to bed and waited up for the return of Janet and her daughter-in-law. They arrived at about midnight, both very pleased with their evening's entertainment. Emmeline had evidently quite got over the afternoon's shock, and was her bright lively self again, and Janet was delighted with the effect their joint appearance had made upon the company and was graciously garrulous thereon. When Emmy and I got to bed at last, we folded up her precious gown, wrapping the scanty lace in tissue paper, according to directions, and went on to deposit the diamonds as usual in the old plate-chest, concealed under a sly boarding in the butler's pantry. Then we brought Janet back the massive key, which she placed under her pillow, closing her eyes with a sigh of sleepy content.

The night was so hot and close that, when I got to bed, I was about as wakeful as I had been all the evening. Having finished my story, I had no excuse for lighting the candle, so I remained for long from side to side, watching for the first streak of dawn, and fretting at the utter stillness of the house. But presently, when starting out of a semi-dozed, this cause of grievance was removed, for I heard a loud creak in the passage, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps that stopped right at my door. The perspiration rolled off my face, and I jumped out of bed and turned the key sleepily in the lock.

"Open, Netty—open, please!" Janet's voice called to me in a frightened whisper. "It's only I, indeed!"

"What do you want?" I asked angrily, confronting her. "What do you mean by terrifying?"

"Hush, hush!" she panted. "There's someone in the house—some one after my diamonds, Netty—I woke ten minutes ago with a dreadful headache, and was just crossing the passage to the spare room to get some eau-de-Cologne, when I heard noises, footsteps downstairs distinctly—a strange man's footsteps!"

"Oh, nonsense—how could you tell it was old William—one of the servants getting up. Why—why, it is quite dawn!" I said, my teeth chattering nervously.

"Will—will you peep over the balustrade with me, Netty? We can scream to cause the servants to see—hear anything, and bolt back!"

Hand in hand we stole along to the balustrade, and there sure enough we saw a faint streak of light through the half-closed bazaar door that led to the kitchen stairway.

"Help! Thieves! Murder—murder!" shrieked Janet; and, before we could carry out our intention of bolting back, our cry was echoed downstairs in a shrill female voice, accompanied by a loud rattling, evidently at the door of one of the servant's rooms; then the bazaar door was flung hastily open, and Phil's plucky little wife, carrying a candle in one hand and a heavy poker in the other, appeared before us.

"Emmy, Emmy," we cried, "what is it? What are you doing?"

"Then—then you, too, heard something?" she asked, tottering towards us.

"It—it was not all my imagination?"

"No—yes—no! What did you hear? Did—did you go down all alone? Tell us—quick!"

"I—I was awakened about five minutes ago by a queer sound, like a crash down-stairs, as if some one were breaking a pane of glass to get into the house; and, without thinking what I was doing, I rushed down, hoping to rouse William in time; but I couldn't make him hear—the door was bolted. Then you screamed. Ah, they have heard at last; they're all up now, thank goodness!"

Indeed, half-dazed terrified figures began to gather round us from all corners. Emmy's story was told over again; then, after listening patiently for about five minutes in tense silence and bearing nothing more alarming than the voice of the cat in the lower regions, we agreed to descend en masse and ascertain if there was any cause for our disturbance.

Janet, guarded by Trot and her heroic daughter-in-law, returned to her room for the keys of her casket and of the plate-chest; and we sallied forth, to find after a minute investigation that there was not really any ground for our alarm. All the windows were intact, the out-door fast, and the precious diamonds sparkling on their faded satin bed, not a stone missing.

Emmeline looked rather foolish and began humbly to apologize for her impulsive conduct; and, as daylight had broken distinctly, we all dispersed with some confidence to dress for an early breakfast, feeling that it would be useless to woo sleep again after such excitement.

"Still I must have heard something; I am sure I did hear a crash. I couldn't have dreamed it, you know," Emmeline muttered, peering right and left with a discomfited frown.

When we were half way up the kitchen stairs her voice recalled us eagerly. We found her in the scullery, triumphantly pointing to a mass of broken crockery lying on the ground in front of an old dresser.

"There," she exclaimed—"I am vindicated! You must lay the blame upon puss, not me. Behold the cause of the whole disturbance!"

We all pronounced ourselves perfectly convinced, except Janet, who declared at breakfast that her nervous system was

thoroughly unbugged, and that nothing would induce her to wear her diamonds at the regimental dance, for which we had received invitations that morning.

Chapter V.

After she had been with us two months the family verdict was that—did not like Phil's wife. But why, we did not know; what had tended to remove our first favorable impression, not one of us could satisfactorily state, though we sat in conclave over the question often enough, goodness knows.

However, Janet's affection and delight in the girl increased day by day; the refrain of her attractions, now and then varied by slightly disparaging comments at our Trot's expense, was continually kept up. And we had to agree that there was no questioning the young wife's deep love for and entire trust in her unworthy husband. The tremulous anxiety and delight she had shown over his letters during the first week, which I thought rather overdone and affected at the moment, remained just as marked as time went by.

On mall mornings she was really like a figure on wires, in and out of the room, up and down the stairs twenty times in half an hour, and one day I saw her start impulsively from her favorite seat at the lobby window and, before I could attempt to restrain her, dart downstairs and cross the soldier lawn, in an almost blinding torrent of rain, the moment the postman appeared at the lodge gate. As well as I can remember, it was on the evening of this very day that a circumstance occurred which disturbed and excited us so very unpleasantly, and which proved, also, how unerring was our Dot's judgment!

The rain continued so depressingly, and it got so chilly to sit in the drawing-room, which suggestion we all supported briskly; and, two girls friends of Trot's dropping in to consult her about some bazaar work they had jointly undertaken, we persuaded her to send the rest of the afternoon with us. After tea we all produced our work baskets, knitting-needles, etc., and gathered round the hearth, thoroughly enjoying the cheery blaze. Emmeline was the only member of the party, she was lying on the rug, playing with a pair of Peggy's kittens.

"What is that Mrs. Brownrigg?" Florry Bertram asked, leaning forward to look at some silvery glittering object that Emmeline was trailing on the rug to amuse the pussies. "It seems a very pretty bit of work. May I look at it, please?"

"With pleasure"—holding it up for her inspection. "It is a nettle-purse, worked in silk and beads, you see."

"Why, I know that purse!" exclaimed the girl impulsively. "I remember even working at it myself! Somebody here must have given it to you."

"Oh, nobody—with a soft little sigh, 'Somebody very far away gave it to me.'"

I looked up and saw that it was a purse—the purse that Trot had made as a parting gift for her lover before he started for Australia, and that he had declared to her should never leave the pocket nearest to his heart until he could bring it back filled with some of the gold that was to purchase him the happiness of his life. I stared at it, doubting the evidence of my own eyes. I leaped forward, sharply meeting the heads of two of my sisters advanced for the same purpose, and examining the center, where his initials I knew had been woven. They were there! It was the identical purse! Drawing hastily back, I caught a glimpse of Florry Bertram's startled face. I saw that she realized the wantonness of the outrage Eustace Brownrigg's son had been guilty of.

After a second or two I glanced toward the tea-table where Trot sat. I saw a little crimson face bent low over its work; I saw two tears drop heavily, and I felt that, had I met my nephew at that moment, I should have killed him.

Presently Florry Bertram's voice, high and hurried, reached me indistinctly.

"Thank you—Mrs. Brownrigg; it's a very pretty purse indeed, but it's not the purse I saw before;—the silk is quite a different shade, and the pattern of the bead embroidery is quite different too. At the first glance, I thought it looked rather like—"

"Well, it might be the same, you know," Emmeline answered carelessly, tossing it up like a ball, "for it was my husband who gave it to me, and I know it was worked for him by some young lady or other. I knew it—ha, ha!—the moment I spied it thrust away in a dim corner of his wardrobe, and then when he denied the charge—at least, denied that he set the least value on it, with two or three naughty, naughty words—all my doubts were set at rest, and I ordered him to hand it over to me at once, which he did without the slightest demur. Oh, fickle is the heart of man—ain't it, Miss Bertram?"

I do not know how much longer we sat there, or what any one else said; but after a time I became conscious of the fact that our visitors were taking their leave. I watched Trot help them to fasten up their waterproof cloaks, exchange a merry jest, then stand with dazed flushed face looking after them as they hurried down the avenue, until Emmeline, absently twisting the hateful purse through her fingers, came up and slipped her arm round her waist. Then for the first time I saw her release herself with a shrinking movement and run rather quickly up the stairs, humming a tune as she went.

I followed her with Peggy, and outside her room, in a lead unconcerned voice, made some inquiry about the dress she was to wear at the military dance the next night, and, without waiting for her answer, entered the room.

She had broken down at last, our bright, brave little maid! We found her, her face buried in her pillow, crying as if her heart would burst, sobbing out in wild incoherent words the long restrained torrent of her wrath and pain.

"I know—I know!" she cried, struggling to release herself from our arms, moving her head from side to side in feverish avoidance of our eyes, whispering

lily lips: "Oh, I know all that you have told me that before. He is worthless—worthless; his father—on, I know, and I—I am not fretting for him—not I. I hate him; I—I despise him more every day. I thank Heaven for my escape; and I know that he is mated to his kind—that he is as base, cruel, dishonest as she is, as full of—"

"Oh, Trot, Trot!" we protested. "You who have been so brave, so just—you who have taught us so noble a lesson, don't let your wrongs blind your eyes now. She is not to blame; she knows nothing; she believes in him as you—we all did once; she knows nothing—"

"She knows everything—everything, I tell you!" the girl answered, starting to her feet with clenched hands. "And it is the business, the pleasure of her day to wound, to shame, to—to insult me—me, whom she has so terribly and knowingly—knowingly, I repeat—wronged, and yet who received her with a kiss, who meant and tried to treat her—to like her—as a sister, who—"

"You have no proof of what you say, Trot, not the slightest! You will be sorry for having so misjudged her. Oh, think of what you are saying! How could she know after the scene of this afternoon; what proof can you have?"

"I have proof, I tell you; I have proof! From almost the first day I suspected her, and then—then I became ashamed of my suspicions; I struggled against them—struggled hard not to let you or her know what I felt. I told myself twenty times a day that it was all jealousy—noting but jealousy and envy and bitterness. I tried to see her as you all saw her—a gentle, winning, innocent, and affectionate girl. But I couldn't—I couldn't. To me she was but a coarse, affected, intriguing woman. Her beauty I could see, but that was all, nothing else. I could not see that she was a gentlewoman, even when you all admired her ease of manner, her tact, her gracefulness. I could not see that she was innocent and winning. I fought hard—oh, Miss Peggy, aunt Netty, you are witnesses that I fought hard to overcome my conviction—but, I tell you, it was of no use; it gathered strength every day, and when she saw that I disliked her then—then she did not spare me. I can tell you—oh, she did not spare—"

"What!" I burst in, thoroughly startled. "Do you mean to say that you spoke out, Trot—that she admitted she was aware of her husband's conduct to you?"

"No—oh no! There was no quarrel, no admissions; why, that would have robbed the situation of its point—its piquancy. No, no—with a choking laugh—she stabbed me, her arm round my waist, with her hand clasping mine, with words of affection and endearment on her lips, sweet lips—"

"My poor child—my poor child!" interrupted Peggy, crying weakly. "What can have put such terrible thoughts into your head? Do you think that we, who love you, should not have seen it if such were the case?"

"You say it now and then, aunt Peggy, only you did not understand. But it was not often before you; it was more before other people—people who knew how I had once loved Ph—her husband. It was scenes—incidents like the one she planned this afternoon for Florry's benefit—Florry, who was to have been my bridesmaid, to whom I told—told everything, to whom I—I often showed his letters even."

"Trot," I said vehemently, snatching her hands from her face. "I can not suffer you to talk like this unless you give me some reliable proofs of these accusations. Are you aware that you are showing up this poor girl in the light of a fiend—simply a fiend?"

"Proofs—proofs," she muttered wearily. "I tell you I have a thousand proofs, only you wouldn't see them—understand them! I tell you I know I am speaking the truth—I know it—I know it—there! Oh, leave me alone, then! Don't believe me if you don't like! Believe that I am blinded with bitterness and jealousy, as at first I tried to convince myself. Perhaps you are right, after all; perhaps I'm half off my head and don't know what I'm saying. Dear—dear auntie, forget it all—forget it! Don't mind what I said; don't tell the others!"

"Trot, love," Peggy whispered, bending over her, "would you like me to take you away to the seaside for a little while? You have had no change at all this summer, remember; and I think a month at Brighton or Southsea—"

"Yes, yes—I think I should like that, dear; but not until after the dance to-morrow. I—I don't want her to know that she has driven me from my dear home—she—"

As we paused at the door, I heard her mutter, through a fresh storm of tears—

"Oh, why did I break down? My dear, dear old aunties, how they will fret and worry over this! Oh, what a miserable selfish creature I am!"

It was a terrible state of things, we all agreed, as we sat over the embers of the drawing-room fire, discussing with sore and heavy hearts the unexpected outbreak of the storm that Dot's sagacious eyes had detected in the sky so long ago.

What could be done? After many suggestions and much discussion, we had to confess that, for the present at least, there was nothing to be done but to take the poor child from Fernbank as quickly as possible, and then, with every available means in our power, with judicious argument and persuasion, remove by degrees her groundless and cruel misconceptions, show her forcibly and clearly how grievously she wronged her defenceless guest by such wild and completely unproved accusations; for, notwithstanding our vague dislike of poor Emmeline, not one of us for a moment believed there was even a shadow of truth in them, or that the girl had received the slightest hint, since her arrival among us, of her husband's engagement to his old playmate. Indeed, we had taken particular care to withhold such knowledge from her, foreseeing that it might make the intercourse between the girls strained and unpleasant, and had warned our intimate friends and old servants, who were very garrulously inclined, to keep silent on the matter. We knew at least that the latter had strictly

respected our wishes.

Before separating, Peggy wrote to a friend at Brighton asking her to engage lodgings for her at once; but the next morning after breakfast Trot informed us that she could not leave home until the end of the week on account of the wedding of Grace Harrington, whose chief bridesmaid she had promised to be.

The day passed by uneventfully enough. I took Trot out for a long morning's shopping, and Janet kept her daughter-in-law by her side all day, making some minute alterations in her costume for the ball that night, and discussing with her the mighty question whether she would have the courage to take her diamonds again out of the bank.

Vanity carried the point, as I had known it would. The regiment had a new colonel; the new colonel had, rumor said, a "dresy wife," and this lady had never seen the famous Browning dowry. Janet felt that it was her duty to dazzle, to outdo her at all risks.

So at five o'clock, an hour later than usual, the fly arrived to fetch the diamonds from the bank, and at about nine a brilliant quartette started from our door—Dot, our youngest, who still enjoyed a quadrille or lively set of lancers with one of the partners of our youth—now, alas, mostly bald-headed fathers of families or sorry old bachelors—disparaging Trot, who looked very bright and pretty in pale blue gauze with a silver arrow in her hair; Janet, with the aid of a Cleopatra and about a quarter of an inch less tucker than she had worn at Lord Somerton's, in charge of her daughter-in-law, who again wore her bridal dress.

Hetty and I waited up for them. I always had a weakness for waiting up for people, and have often thought, if fate had given me a convivial husband, what a terror I should have been to him.

About three o'clock they returned, looking little the worse for their revel and evidently in the best of spirits.

"It was a lovely dance, aunt Netty," Emmeline announced, dropping into an easy chair; "and the officers were quite too charming! One of them reminded me awfully of my dear boy—that tall young fellow you sat so much with on the top of the stairs, Miss Trot. Oh, I saw you, my dear, though perhaps your chaparron didn't—ha, ha! He reminded you of Phil now, didn't he—didn't he?"

"Then you enjoyed the dance too, Trot? You had plenty of partners?" I asked eagerly, wheeling round.

"Oh, plenty! There are three new men in the regiment, one of them quite an Anglo, and he reverses like—like an angel! But oh, Netty, anything to equal the conduct of my chaparron—Chaparron, indeed! Three dances running I caught her in the conservatory, hid in a forest of shrubs and plants, alone with a wicked Colonel—a Colonel Roper, too!"

"Colonel Roper, too!" I interrupted eagerly. "Do you mean of the Sixteenth, Trot—Dot?" Oh, fancy his being back here again!"

"He has left the army and settled down here altogether, Netty," Trot answered, with a significant nod. "And his wife is dead—I believe two of his wives are dead—and he has a dozen motherless children on his hands; and—ah—ah—let it be said, Netty—just too awfully sad? I caught him telling Dot all about it, you know. He had a pocket-handkerchief in his hand, and she had one in her hand, too, and looked so sympathetic! There's nothing so nice and soothing as sympathy, is there, Dotty?"

Poor little Freddy Roper! I remember him five-and-twenty years before, just after he had joined the army—an awkward, stammering, susceptible youth whom we all made game of. A few weeks after introduction he had flung himself at Janet's feet, and of course had been callously spurned by that young lady, then in the zenith of her beauty. After that he had turned to Dot, a blooming lively girl just stepping out of the schoolroom; but Dot would not have anything to say to him either, and he had passed out of our paths apparently broken-hearted!

"Two wives, you say—he has had two wives—little Freddy?" I repeated, with an incredulous laugh.

"And buried them—I distinctly stated they were both buried, Net!"

I turned to Dot, and saw that she was what?—actually blushing!

"Dotty, you old—!" I began teasingly, when a particularly vicious look in Janet's eyes suddenly stopped me, and then clever little Mrs. Phil came to the rescue.

"Yes, it was a lovely ball, dears, and both Trot and I looked uncommonly well—I know we did; but, all the same, we weren't the belles of the room by any means!"

"No? Who were they, then, Emmeline?"

"My mother-in-law was one. No, madam, I am not joking! No end of my partners were talking about you and saying that you didn't look thirty; and one of the new subalterns, a Mr. Stan—Stan something or other, I forget the name—asked me if you weren't the Italian princess who was expected at Lord Somerton's last week. And they say she is a beautiful young woman, I know!"

"Fine feathers—clearly a case of fine feathers, Em!" Janet simpered, with a glance at the mirror. "Certainly this is the most becoming dress I've had for years."

"Well, have you settled where you are going to lodge your chief feathers for the night, Janet?" asked Hetty, yawning. "For it's high time we were thinking of bed, you know."

"Oh, yes, it's all settled!" she answered briskly. "William is going to sleep upstairs in the spare room, and I am keeping the diamonds myself. Em is sharing my bed, and promises to sustain my courage and wake up at the lightest sound. I have the greatest confidence in the dear child since her devoted ingenuity at the last alarm."

"Ertie Manners was there; he has immensely improved. She was with him half the night," Dot whispered to me as we said "Good night."

(To be continued.)

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