

BOOK THE THIRD. MRS. FARNABY'S FOOT

CHAPTER 1

It is an afternoon concert; and modern German music was largely represented on the programme. The patient English people sat in closely-packed rows, listening to the pretentious instrumental noises which were impudently offered to them as a substitute for melody. While these docile victims of the worst of all quackeries (musical quackery) were still toiling through their first hour of endurance, a passing ripple of interest stirred the stagnant surface of the audience caused by the sudden rising of a lady overcome by the heat. She was quickly led out of the concert-room (after whispering a word of explanation to two young ladies seated at her side) by a gentleman who made a fourth member of the party. Left by themselves, the young ladies looked at each other, whispered to each other, half rose from their places, became confusedly conscious that the wandering attention of the audience was fixed on them, and decided at last on following their companions out of the hall.

But the lady who had preceded them had some reason of her own for not waiting to recover herself in the vestibule. When the gentleman in charge of her asked if he should get a glass of water, she answered sharply, "Get a cab--and be quick about it."

The cab was found in a moment; the gentleman got in after her, by the lady's invitation. "Are you better now?" he asked.

"I have never had anything the matter with me," she replied, quietly; "tell the man to drive faster."

Having obeyed his instructions, the gentleman (otherwise Amelius) began to look a little puzzled. The lady (Mrs. Farnaby herself) perceived his condition of mind, and favoured him with an explanation.

"I had my own motive for asking you to luncheon today," she began, in that steady downright way of speaking that was peculiar to her. "I wanted to have a word with you privately. My niece Regina--don't be surprised at my calling her my niece, when you have heard Mr. Farnaby call her his daughter. She

is my niece. Adopting her is a mere phrase. It doesn't alter facts; it doesn't make her Mr. Farnaby's child or mine, does it?"

She had ended with a question, but she seemed to want no answer to it. Her face was turned towards the cab-window, instead of towards Amelius. He was one of those rare people who are capable of remaining silent when they have nothing to say. Mrs. Farnaby went on.

"My niece Regina is a good creature in her way; but she suspects people. She has some reason of her own for trying to prevent me from taking you into my confidence; and her friend Cecilia is helping her. Yes, yes; the concert was the obstacle which they had arranged to put in my way. You were obliged to go, after telling them you wanted to hear the music; and I couldn't complain, because they had got a fourth ticket for me. I made up my mind what to do; and I have done it. Nothing wonderful in my being taken ill with the heat; nothing wonderful in your doing your duty as a gentleman and looking after me--and what is the consequence? Here we are together, on our way to my room, in spite of them. Not so bad for a poor helpless creature like me, is it?"

Inwardly wondering what it all meant, and what she could possibly want with him, Amelius suggested that the young ladies might leave the concert-room, and, not finding them in the vestibule, might follow them back to the house.

Mrs. Farnaby turned her head from the window, and looked him in the face for the first time. "I have been a match for them so far," she said; "leave it to me, and you will find I can be a match for them still."

After saying this, she watched the puzzled face of Amelius with a moment's steady scrutiny. Her full lips relaxed into a faint smile; her head sank slowly on her bosom. "I wonder whether he thinks I am a little crazy?" she said quietly to herself. "Some women in my place would have gone mad years ago. Perhaps it might have been better for me?" She looked up again at Amelius. "I believe you are a good-tempered fellow," she went on. "Are you in your usual temper now? Did you enjoy your lunch? Has the lively company of the young ladies put you in a good humour with women generally? I want you to be in a particularly good humour with me."

She spoke quite gravely. Amelius, a little to his own astonishment, found himself answering gravely on his side; assuring her, in the most conventional terms, that he was entirely at her service. Something in her manner affected him disagreeably. If he had followed his impulse, he would

have jumped out of the cab, and have recovered his liberty and his light-heartedness at one and the same moment, by running away at the top of his speed.

The driver turned into the street in which Mr. Farnaby's house was situated. Mrs. Farnaby stopped him, and got out at some little distance from the door. "You think the young ones will follow us back," she said to Amelius. "It doesn't matter, the servants will have nothing to tell them if they do." She checked him in the act of knocking, when they reached the house door. "It's tea-time downstairs," she whispered, looking at her watch. "You and I are going into the house, without letting the servants know anything about it. Now do you understand?"

She produced from her pocket a steel ring, with several keys attached to it. "A duplicate of Mr. Farnaby's key," she explained, as she chose one, and opened the street door. "Sometimes, when I find myself waking in the small hours of the morning, I can't endure my bed; I must go out and walk. My key lets me in again, just as it lets us in now, without disturbing anybody. You had better say nothing about it to Mr. Farnaby. Not that it matters much; for I should refuse to give up my key if he asked me. But you're a good-natured fellow--and you don't want to make bad blood between man and wife, do you? Step softly, and follow me."

Amelius hesitated. There was something repellent to him in entering another man's house under these clandestine conditions. "All right!" whispered Mrs. Farnaby, perfectly understanding him. "Consult your dignity; go out again, and knock at the door, and ask if I am at home. I only wanted to prevent a fuss and an interruption when Regina comes back. If the servants don't know we are here, they will tell her we haven't returned--don't you see?"

It would have been absurd to contest the matter, after this. Amelius followed her submissively to the farther end of the hall. There, she opened the door of a long narrow room, built out at the back of the house.

"This is my den," she said, signing to Amelius to pass in. "While we are here, nobody will disturb us." She laid aside her bonnet and shawl, and pointed to a box of cigars on the table. "Take one," she resumed. "I smoke too, when nobody sees me. That's one of the reasons, I dare say, why Regina wished to keep you out of my room. I find smoking composes me. What do you say?"

She lit a cigar, and handed the matches to Amelius. Finding that he stood fairly committed to the adventure, he resigned himself to circumstances with his customary facility. He too lit a cigar, and took a chair by the fire, and

looked about him with an impenetrable composure worthy of Rufus Dingwell himself.

The room bore no sort of resemblance to a boudoir. A faded old turkey carpet was spread on the floor. The common mahogany table had no covering; the chintz on the chairs was of a truly venerable age. Some of the furniture made the place look like a room occupied by a man. Dumb-bells and clubs of the sort used in athletic exercises hung over the bare mantelpiece; a large ugly oaken structure with closed doors, something between a cabinet and a wardrobe, rose on one side to the ceiling; a turning lathe stood against the opposite wall. Above the lathe were hung in a row four prints, in dingy old frames of black wood, which especially attracted the attention of Amelius. Mostly foreign prints, they were all discoloured by time, and they all strangely represented different aspects of the same subject--infants parted from their parents by desertion or robbery. The young Moses was there, in his ark of bulrushes, on the river bank. Good St. Francis appeared next, roaming the streets, and rescuing forsaken children in the wintry night. A third print showed the foundling hospital of old Paris, with the turning cage in the wall, and the bell to ring when the infant was placed in it. The next and last subject was the stealing of a child from the lap of its slumbering nurse by a gipsy woman. These sadly suggestive subjects were the only ornaments on the walls. No traces of books or music were visible; no needlework of any sort was to be seen; no elegant trifles; no china or flowers or delicate lacework or sparkling jewelry--nothing, absolutely nothing, suggestive of a woman's presence appeared in any part of Mrs. Farnaby's room.

"I have got several things to say to you," she began; "but one thing must be settled first. Give me your sacred word of honour that you will not repeat to any mortal creature what I am going to tell you now." She reclined in her chair, and drew in a mouthful of smoke and puffed it out again, and waited for his reply.

Young and unsuspecting as he was, this unscrupulous method of taking his confidence by storm startled Amelius. His natural tact and good sense told him plainly that Mrs. Farnaby was asking too much.

"Don't be angry with me, ma'am," he said; "I must remind you that you are going to tell me your secrets, without any wish to intrude on them on my part--"

She interrupted him there. "What does that matter?" she asked coolly.

Amelius was obstinate; he went on with what he had to say. "I should like to know," he proceeded, "that I am doing no wrong to anybody, before I give you my promise?"

"You will be doing a kindness to a miserable creature," she answered, as quietly as ever; "and you will be doing no wrong to yourself or to anybody else, if you promise. That is all I can say. Your cigar is out. Take a light."

Amelius took a light, with the dog-like docility of a man in a state of blank amazement. She waited, watching him composedly until his cigar was in working order again.

"Well?" she asked. "Will you promise now?"

Amelius gave her his promise.

"On your sacred word of honour?" she persisted.

Amelius repeated the formula. She reclined in her chair once more. "I want to speak to you as if I was speaking to an old friend," she explained. "I suppose I may call you Amelius?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Amelius, I must tell you first that I committed a sin, many long years ago. I have suffered the punishment; I am suffering it still. Ever since I was a young woman, I have had a heavy burden of misery on my heart. I am not reconciled to it, I cannot submit to it, yet. I never shall be reconciled to it, I never shall submit to it, if I live to be a hundred. Do you wish me to enter into particulars? or will you have mercy on me, and be satisfied with what I have told you so far?"

It was not said entreatingly, or tenderly, or humbly: she spoke with a savage self-contained resignation in her manner and in her voice. Amelius forgot his cigar again--and again she reminded him of it. He answered her as his own generous impulsive temperament urged him; he said, "Tell me nothing that causes you a moment's pain; tell me only how I can help you." She handed him the box of matches; she said, "Your cigar is out again."

He laid down his cigar. In his brief span of life he had seen no human misery that expressed itself in this way. "Excuse me," he answered; "I won't smoke just now."

She laid her cigar aside like Amelius, and crossed her arms over her bosom, and looked at him, with the first softening gleam of tenderness that he had seen in her face. "My friend," she said, "yours will be a sad life--I pity you. The world will wound that sensitive heart of yours; the world will trample on that generous nature. One of these days, perhaps, you will be a wretch like me. No more of that. Get up; I have something to show you."

Rising herself, she led the way to the large oaken press, and took her bunch of keys out of her pocket again.

"About this old sorrow of mine," she resumed. "Do me justice, Amelius, at the outset. I haven't treated it as some women treat their sorrows--I haven't nursed it and petted it and made the most of it to myself and to others. No! I have tried every means of relief, every possible pursuit that could occupy my mind. One example of what I say will do as well as a hundred. See it for yourself."

She put the key in the lock. It resisted her first efforts to open it. With a contemptuous burst of impatience and a sudden exertion of her rare strength, she tore open the two doors of the press. Behind the door on the left appeared a row of open shelves. The opposite compartment, behind the door on the right, was filled by drawers with brass handles. She shut the left door; angrily banging it to, as if the opening of it had disclosed something which she did not wish to be seen. By the merest chance, Amelius had looked that way first. In the one instant in which it was possible to see anything, he had noticed, carefully laid out on one of the shelves, a baby's long linen frock and cap, turned yellow by the lapse of time.

The half-told story of the past was more than half told now. The treasured relics of the infant threw their little glimmer of light on the motive which had chosen the subjects of the prints on the wall. A child deserted and lost! A child who, by bare possibility, might be living still!

She turned towards Amelius suddenly, "There is nothing to interest you on that side," she said. "Look at the drawers here; open them for yourself." She drew back as she spoke, and pointed to the uppermost of the row of drawers. A narrow slip of paper was pasted on it, bearing this inscription:-- "Dead Consolations."

Amelius opened the drawer; it was full of books. "Look at them," she said. Amelius, obeying her, discovered dictionaries, grammars, exercises, poems, novels, and histories--all in the German language.

"A foreign language tried as a relief," said Mrs. Farnaby, speaking quietly behind him. "Month after month of hard study--all forgotten now. The old sorrow came back in spite of it. A dead consolation! Open the next drawer."

The next drawer revealed water-colours and drawing materials huddled together in a corner, and a heap of poor little conventional landscapes filling up the rest of the space. As works of art, they were wretched in the last degree; monuments of industry and application miserably and completely thrown away.

"I had no talent for that pursuit, as you see," said Mrs. Farnaby. "But I persevered with it, week after week, month after month. I thought to myself, 'I hate it so, it costs me such dreadful trouble, it so worries and persecutes and humiliates me, that this surely must keep my mind occupied and my thoughts away from myself!' No; the old sorrow stared me in the face again on the paper that I was spoiling, through the colours that I couldn't learn to use. Another dead consolation! Shut it up."

She herself opened a third and a fourth drawer. In one there appeared a copy of Euclid, and a slate with the problems still traced on it; the other contained a microscope, and the treatises relating to its use. "Always the same effort," she said, shutting the door of the press as she spoke; "and always the same result. You have had enough of it, and so have I." She turned, and pointed to the lathe in the corner, and to the clubs and dumb-bells over the mantelpiece. "I can look at them patiently," she went on; "they give me bodily relief. I work at the lathe till my back aches; I swing the clubs till I'm ready to drop with fatigue. And then I lie down on the rug there, and sleep it off, and forget myself for an hour or two. Come back to the fire again. You have seen my dead consolations; you must hear about my living consolation next. In justice to Mr. Farnaby--ah, how I hate him!"

She spoke those last vehement words to herself, but with such intense bitterness of contempt that the tones were quite loud enough to be heard. Amelius looked furtively towards the door. Was there no hope that Regina and her friend might return and interrupt them? After what he had seen and heard, could he hope to console Mrs. Farnaby? He could only wonder what object she could possibly have in view in taking him into her confidence. "Am I always to be in a mess with women?" he thought to himself. "First poor Mellicent, and now this one. What next?" He lit his cigar again. The brotherhood of smokers, and they alone, will understand what a refuge it was to him at that moment.

"Give me a light," said Mrs. Farnaby, recalled to the remembrance of her

own cigar. "I want to know one thing before I go on. Amelius, I watched those bright eyes of yours at luncheon-time. Did they tell me the truth? You're not in love with my niece, are you?"

Amelius took his cigar out of his mouth, and looked at her.

"Out with it boldly!" she said.

Amelius let it out, to a certain extent. "I admire her very much," he answered.

"Ah," Mrs. Farnaby remarked, "you don't know her as well as I do."

The disdainful indifference of her tone irritated Amelius. He was still young enough to believe in the existence of gratitude; and Mrs. Farnaby had spoken ungratefully. Besides, he was fond enough of Regina already to feel offended when she was referred to slightly.

"I am surprised to hear what you say of her," he burst out. "She is quite devoted to you."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Farnaby, carelessly. "She is devoted to me, of course--she is the living consolation I told you of just now. That was Mr. Farnaby's notion in adopting her. Mr. Farnaby thought to himself, 'Here's a ready-made daughter for my wife--that's all this tiresome woman wants to comfort her: now we shall do.' Do you know what I call that? I call it reasoning like an idiot. A man may be very clever at his business--and may be a contemptible fool in other respects. Another woman's child a consolation to me! Pah! it makes me sick to think of it. I have one merit, Amelius, I don't cant. It's my duty to take care of my sister's child; and I do my duty willingly. Regina's a good sort of creature--I don't dispute it. But she's like all those tall darkish women: there's no backbone in her, no dash; a kind, feeble, goody-goody, sugarish disposition; and a deal of quiet obstinacy at the bottom of it, I can tell you. Oh yes, I do her justice; I don't deny that she's devoted to me, as you say. But I am making a clean breast of it now. And you ought to know, and you shall know, that Mr. Farnaby's living consolation is no more a consolation to me than the things you have seen in the drawers. There! now we've done with Regina. No: there's one thing more to be cleared up. When you say you admire her, what do you mean? Do you mean to marry her?"

For once in his life Amelius stood on his dignity. "I have too much respect for the young lady to answer your question," he said loftily.

"Because, if you do," Mrs. Farnaby proceeded, "I mean to put every possible obstacle in your way. In short, I mean to prevent it."

This plain declaration staggered Amelius. He confessed the truth by implication in one word.

"Why?" he asked sharply.

"Wait a little, and recover your temper," she answered.

There was a pause. They sat, on either side of the fireplace, and eyed each other attentively.

"Now are you ready?" Mrs. Farnaby resumed. "Here is my reason. If you marry Regina, or marry anybody, you will settle down somewhere, and lead a dull life."

"Well," said Amelius; "and why not, if I like it?"

"Because I want you to remain a roving bachelor; here today and gone tomorrow--travelling all over the world, and seeing everything and everybody."

"What good will that do to you, Mrs. Farnaby?"

She rose from her own side of the fireplace, crossed to the side on which Amelius was sitting, and, standing before him, placed her hands heavily on his shoulders. Her eyes grew radiant with a sudden interest and animation as they looked down on him, riveted on his face.

"I am still waiting, my friend, for the living consolation that may yet come to me," she said. "And, hear this, Amelius! After all the years that have passed, you may be the man who brings it to me."

In the momentary silence that followed, they heard a double knock at the house-door.

"Regina!" said Mrs. Farnaby.

As the name passed her lips, she sprang to the door of the room, and turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER 2

Amelius rose impulsively from his chair.

Mrs. Farnaby turned at the same moment, and signed to him to resume his seat. "You have given me your promise," she whispered. "All I ask of you is to be silent." She softly drew the key out of the door, and showed it to him. "You can't get out," she said, "unless you take the key from me by force!"

Whatever Amelius might think of the situation in which he now found himself, the one thing that he could honourably do was to say nothing, and submit to it. He remained quietly by the fire. No imaginable consideration (he mentally resolved) should induce him to consent to a second confidential interview in Mrs. Farnaby's room.

The servant opened the house-door. Regina's voice was heard in the hall.

"Has my aunt come in?"

"No, miss."

"Have you heard nothing of her?"

"Nothing, miss."

"Has Mr. Goldenheart been here?"

"No, miss."

"Very extraordinary! What can have become of them, Cecilia?"

The voice of the other lady was heard in answer. "We have probably missed them, on leaving the concert room. Don't alarm yourself, Regina. I must go back, under any circumstances; the carriage will be waiting for me. If I see anything of your aunt, I will say that you are expecting her at home."

"One moment, Cecilia! (Thomas, you needn't wait.) Is it really true that you don't like Mr. Goldenheart?"

"What! has it come to that, already? I'll try to like him, Regina. Goodbye again."

The closing of the street door told that the ladies had separated. The sound was followed, in another moment, by the opening and closing of the dining-room door. Mrs. Farnaby returned to her chair at the fireplace.

"Regina has gone into the dining-room to wait for us," she said. "I see you don't like your position here; and I won't keep you more than a few minutes longer. You are of course at a loss to understand what I was saying to you, when the knock at the door interrupted us. Sit down again for five minutes; it fidgets me to see you standing there, looking at your boots. I told you I had one consolation still possibly left. Judge for yourself what the hope of it is to me, when I own to you that I should long since have put an end to my life, without it. Don't think I am talking nonsense; I mean what I say. It is one of my misfortunes that I have no religious scruples to restrain me. There was a time when I believed that religion might comfort me. I once opened my heart to a clergyman--a worthy person, who did his best to help me. All useless! My heart was too hard, I suppose. It doesn't matter--except to give you one more proof that I am thoroughly in earnest. Patience! patience! I am coming to the point. I asked you some odd questions, on the day when you first dined here? You have forgotten all about them, of course?"

"I remember them perfectly well," Amelius answered.

"You remember them? That looks as if you had thought about them afterwards. Come! tell me plainly what you did think?"

Amelius told her plainly. She became more and more interested, more and more excited, as he went on.

"Quite right!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet and walking swiftly backwards and forwards in the room. "There is a lost girl whom I want to find; and she is between sixteen and seventeen years old, as you thought. Mind! I have no reason--not the shadow of a reason--for believing that she is still a living creature. I have only my own stupid obstinate conviction; rooted here," she pressed both hands fiercely on her heart, "so that nothing can tear it out of me! I have lived in that belief--Oh, don't ask me how long! it is so far, so miserably far, to look back!" She stopped in the middle of the room. Her breath came and went in quick heavy gasps; the first tears that had softened the hard wretchedness in her eyes rose in them now, and transfigured them with the divine beauty of maternal love. "I won't distress you," she said, stamping on the floor, as she struggled with the hysterical passion that was raging in her. "Give me a minute, and I'll force it down again."

She dropped into a chair, threw her arms heavily on the table, and laid her head on them. Amelius thought of the child's frock and cap hidden in the cabinet. All that was manly and noble in his nature felt for the unhappy woman, whose secret was dimly revealed to him now. The little selfish sense of annoyance at the awkward situation in which she had placed him, vanished to return no more. He approached her, and put his hand gently on her shoulder. "I am truly sorry for you," he said. "Tell me how I can help you, and I will do it with all my heart."

"Do you really mean that?" She roughly dashed the tears from her eyes, and rose as she put the question. Holding him with one hand, she parted the hair back from his forehead with the other. "I must see your whole face," she said--"your face will tell me. Yes: you do mean it. The world hasn't spoilt you, yet. Do you believe in dreams?"

Amelius looked at her, startled by the sudden transition. She deliberately repeated her question.

"I ask you seriously," she said; "do you believe in dreams?"

Amelius answered seriously, on his side, "I can't honestly say that I do."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "like me. I don't believe in dreams, either--I wish I did! But it's not in me to believe in superstitions; I'm too hard--and I'm sorry for it. I have seen people who were comforted by their superstitions; happy people, possessed of faith. Don't you even believe that dreams are sometimes fulfilled by chance?"

"Nobody can deny that," Amelius replied; "the instances of it are too many. But for one dream fulfilled by a coincidence, there are--"

"A hundred at least that are not fulfilled," Mrs. Farnaby interposed. "Very well. I calculate on that. See how little hope can live on! There is just the barest possibility that what I dreamed of you the other night may come to pass. It's a poor chance; but it has encouraged me to take you into my confidence, and ask you to help me."

This strange confession--this sad revelation of despair still unconsciously deceiving itself under the disguise of hope--only strengthened the compassionate sympathy which Amelius already felt for her. "What did you dream about me?" he asked gently.

"It's nothing to tell," she replied. "I was in a room that was quite strange to me; and the door opened, and you came in leading a young girl by the hand. You said, 'Be happy at last; here she is.' My heart knew her instantly, though my eyes had never seen her since the first days of her life. And I woke myself, crying for joy. Wait! it's not all told yet. I went to sleep again, and dreamed it again, and woke, and lay awake for awhile, and slept once more, and dreamed it for the third time. Ah, if I could only feel some people's confidence in three times! No; it produced an impression on me--and that was all. I got as far as thinking to myself, there is just a chance; I haven't a creature in the world to help me; I may as well speak to him. O, you needn't remind me that there is a rational explanation of my dream. I have read it all up, in the Encyclopaedia in the library. One of the ideas of wise men is that we think of something, consciously or unconsciously, in the daytime, and then reproduce it in a dream. That's my case, I daresay. When you were first introduced to me, and when I heard where you had been brought up, I thought directly that she might have been one among the many forlorn creatures who had drifted to your Community, and that I might find her through you. Say that thought went to my bed with me--and we have the explanation of my dream. Never mind! There is my one poor chance in a hundred still left. You will remember me, Amelius, if you should meet with her, won't you?"

The implied confession of her own intractable character, without religious faith to ennoble it, without even imagination to refine it--the unconscious disclosure of the one tender and loving instinct in her nature still piteously struggling for existence, with no sympathy to sustain it, with no light to guide it--would have touched the heart of any man not incurably depraved. Amelius spoke with the fervour of his young enthusiasm. "I would go to the uttermost ends of the earth, if I thought I could do you any good. But, oh, it sounds so hopeless!"

She shook her head, and smiled faintly.

"Don't say that! You are free, you have money, you will travel about in the world and amuse yourself. In a week you will see more than stay-at-home people see in a year. How do we know what the future has in store for us? I have my own idea. She may be lost in the labyrinth of London, or she may be hundreds of thousands of miles away. Amuse yourself, Amelius--amuse yourself. Tomorrow or ten years hence, you might meet with her!"

In sheer mercy to the poor creature, Amelius refused to encourage her delusion. "Even supposing such a thing could happen," he objected, "how am I to know the lost girl? You can't describe her to me; you have not seen

her since she was a child. Do you know anything of what happened at the time--I mean at the time when she was lost?"

"I know nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Have you never felt a suspicion of how it happened?"

Her face changed: she frowned as she looked at him. "Not till weeks and months had passed," she said, "not till it was too late. I was ill at the time. When my mind got clear again, I began to suspect one particular person-- little by little, you know; noticing trifles, and thinking about them afterwards." She stopped, evidently restraining herself on the point of saying more.

Amelius tried to lead her on. "Did you suspect the person--?" he began.

"I suspected him of casting the child helpless on the world!" Mrs. Farnaby interposed, with a sudden burst of fury. "Don't ask me any more about it, or I shall break out and shock you!" She clenched her fists as she said the words. "It's well for that man," she muttered between her teeth, "that I have never got beyond suspecting, and never found out the truth! Why did you turn my mind that way? You shouldn't have done it. Help me back again to what we were saying a minute ago. You made some objection; you said--?"

"I said," Amelius reminded her, "that, even if I did meet with the missing girl, I couldn't possibly know it. And I must say more than that--I don't see how you yourself could be sure of recognizing her, if she stood before you at this moment."

He spoke very gently, fearing to irritate her. She showed no sign of irritation--she looked at him, and listened to him, attentively.

"Are you setting a trap for me?" she asked. "No!" she cried, before Amelius could answer, "I am not mean enough to distrust you--I forgot myself. You have innocently said something that rankles in my mind. I can't leave it where you have left it; I don't like to be told that I shouldn't recognize her. Give me time to think. I must clear this up."

She consulted her own thoughts, keeping her eyes fixed on Amelius.

"I am going to speak plainly," she announced, with a sudden appearance of resolution. "Listen to this. When I banged to the door of that big cupboard of mine, it was because I didn't want you to see something on the shelves. Did you see anything in spite of me?"

The question was not an easy one to answer. Amelius hesitated. Mrs. Farnaby insisted on a reply.

"Did you see anything?" she reiterated

Amelius owned that he had seen something.

She turned away from him, and looked into the fire. Her firm full tones sank so low, when she spoke next, that he could barely hear them.

"Was it something belonging to a child?"

"Yes."

"Was it a baby's frock and cap? Answer me. We have gone too far to go back. I don't want apologies or explanations--I want, Yes or No."

"Yes."

There was an interval of silence. She never moved; she still looked into fire--looked, as if all her past life was pictured there in the burning coals.

"Do you despise me?" she asked at last, very quietly.

"As God hears me, I am only sorry for you!" Amelius answered.

Another woman would have melted into tears. This woman still looked into the fire--and that was all. "What a good fellow!" she said to herself, "what a good fellow he is!"

There was another pause. She turned towards him again as abruptly as she had turned away.

"I had hoped to spare you, and to spare myself," she said. "If the miserable truth has come out, it is through no curiosity of yours, and (God knows!) against every wish of mine. I don't know if you really felt like a friend towards me before--you must be my friend now. Don't speak! I know I can

trust you. One last word, Amelius, about my lost child. You doubt whether I should recognize her, if she stood before me now. That might be quite true, if I had only my own poor hopes and anxieties to guide me. But I have something else to guide me--and, after what has passed between us, you may as well know what it is: it might even, by accident, guide you. Don't alarm yourself; it's nothing distressing this time. How can I explain it?" she went on; pausing, and speaking in some perplexity to herself. "It would be easier to show it--and why not?" She addressed herself to Amelius once more. "I'm a strange creature," she resumed. "First, I worry you about my own affairs--then I puzzle you--then I make you sorry for me--and now (would you think it?) I am going to amuse you! Amelius, are you an admirer of pretty feet?"

Amelius had heard of men (in books) who had found reason to doubt whether their own ears were not deceiving them. For the first time, he began to understand those men, and to sympathize with them. He admitted, in a certain bewildered way, that he was an admirer of pretty feet--and waited for what was to come next.

"When a woman has a pretty hand," Mrs. Farnaby proceeded; "she is ready enough to show it. When she goes out to a ball, she favours you with a view of her bosom, and a part of her back. Now tell me! If there is no impropriety in a naked bosom--where is the impropriety in a naked foot?"

Amelius agreed, like a man in a dream.

"Where, indeed!" he remarked--and waited again for what was to come next.

"Look out of the window," said Mrs. Farnaby.

Amelius obeyed. The window had been opened for a few inches at the top, no doubt to ventilate the room. The dull view of the courtyard was varied by the stables at the farther end, and by the kitchen skylight rising in the middle of the open space. As Amelius looked out, he observed that some person at that moment in the kitchen required apparently a large supply of fresh air. The swinging window, on the side of the skylight which was nearest to him, was invisibly and noiselessly pulled open from below; the similar window, on the other side, being already wide open also. Judging by appearance, the inhabitants of the kitchen possessed a merit which is exceedingly rare among domestic servants--they understood the laws of ventilation, and appreciated the blessing of fresh air.

"That will do," said Mrs. Farnaby. "You can turn round now."

Amelius turned. Mrs. Farnaby's boots and stockings were on the hearthrug, and one of Mrs. Farnaby's feet was placed, ready for inspection, on the chair which he had just left. "Look at my right foot first," she said, speaking gravely and composedly in her ordinary tone.

It was well worth looking at--a foot equally beautiful in form and in colour: the instep arched and high, the ankle at once delicate and strong, the toes tinged with rose-colour at the tips. In brief, it was a foot to be photographed, to be cast in plaster, to be fondled and kissed. Amelius attempted to express his admiration, but was not allowed to get beyond the first two or three words. "No," Mrs. Farnaby explained, "this is not vanity--simply information. You have seen my right foot; and you have noticed that there is nothing the matter with it. Very well. Now look at my left foot."

She put her left foot up on the chair. "Look between the third toe and the fourth," she said.

Following his instructions, Amelius discovered that the beauty of the foot was spoilt, in this case, by a singular defect. The two toes were bound together by a flexible web, or membrane, which held them to each other as high as the insertion of the nail on either side.

"Do you wonder," Mrs. Farnaby asked, "why I show you the fault in my foot? Amelius! my poor darling was born with my deformity--and I want you to know exactly what it is, because neither you nor I can say what reason for remembering it there may not be in the future." She stopped, as if to give him an opportunity of speaking. A man shallow and flippant by nature might have seen the disclosure in a grotesque aspect. Amelius was sad and silent. "I like you better and better," she went on. "You are not like the common run of men. Nine out of ten of them would have turned what I have just told you into a joke--nine out of ten would have said, 'Am I to ask every girl I meet to show me her left foot?' You are above that; you understand me. Have I no means of recognizing my own child, now?"

She smiled, and took her foot off the chair--then, after a moment's thought, she pointed to it again.

"Keep this as strictly secret as you keep everything else," she said. "In the past days, when I used to employ people privately to help me to find her, it was my only defence against being imposed upon. Rogues and vagabonds thought of other marks and signs--but not one of them could guess at such a mark as that. Have you got your pocket-book, Amelius? In case we are

separated at some later time, I want to write the name and address in it of a person whom we can trust. I persist, you see, in providing for the future. There's the one chance in a hundred that my dream may come true--and you have so many years before you, and so many girls to meet with in that time!"

She handed back the pocket-book, which Amelius had given to her, after having inscribed a man's name and address on one of the blank leaves.

"He was my father's lawyer," she explained; "and he and his son are both men to be trusted. Suppose I am ill, for instance--no, that's absurd; I never had a day's illness in my life. Suppose I am dead (killed perhaps by some accident, or perhaps by my own hand), the lawyers have my written instructions, in the case of my child being found. Then again--I am such an unaccountable woman--I may go away somewhere, all by myself. Never mind! The lawyers shall have my address, and my positive orders (though they keep it a secret from all the world besides) to tell it to you. I don't ask your pardon, Amelius, for troubling you. The chances are so terribly against me; it is all but impossible that I shall ever see you--as I saw you in my dream--coming into the room, leading my girl by the hand. Odd, isn't it? This is how I veer about between hope and despair. Well, it may amuse you to remember it, one of these days. Years hence, when I am at rest in mother earth, and when you are a middle aged married man, you may tell your wife how strangely you once became the forlorn hope of the most wretched woman that ever lived--and you may say to each other, as you sit by your snug fireside, 'Perhaps that poor lost daughter is still living somewhere, and wondering who her mother was.' No! I won't let you see the tears in my eyes again--I'll let you go at last."

She led the way to the door--a creature to be pitied, if ever there was a pitiable creature yet: a woman whose whole nature was maternal, who was nothing if not a mother; and who had lived through sixteen years of barren life, in the hopeless anticipation of recovering her lost child!

"Goodbye, and thank you," she said. "I want to be left by myself, my dear, with that little frock and cap which you found out in spite of me. Go, and tell my niece it's all right--and don't be stupid enough to fall in love with a girl who has no love to give you in return." She pushed Amelius into the hall. "Here he is, Regina!" she called out; "I have done with him."

Before Amelius could speak, she had shut herself into her room. He advanced along the hall, and met Regina at the door of the dining-room.

CHAPTER 3

The young lady spoke first.

"Mr. Goldenheart," she said, with the coldest possible politeness, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain what this means?"

She turned back into the dining-room. Amelius followed her in silence. "Here I am, in another scrape with a woman!" he thought to himself. "Are men in general as unlucky as I am, I wonder?"

"You needn't close the door," said Regina maliciously. "Everybody in the house is welcome to hear what I have to say to you."

Amelius made a mistake at the outset--he tried what a little humility would do to help him. There is probably no instance on record in which humility on the part of a man has ever really found its way to the indulgence of an irritated woman. The best and the worst of them alike have at least one virtue in common--they secretly despise a man who is not bold enough to defend himself when they are angry with him.

"I hope I have not offended you?" Amelius ventured to say.

She tossed her head contemptuously. "Oh dear, no! I am not offended. Only a little surprised at your being so very ready to oblige my aunt."

In the short experience of her which had fallen to the lot of Amelius, she had never looked so charmingly as she looked now. The nervous irritability under which she was suffering brightened her face with the animation which was wanting in it at ordinary times. Her soft brown eyes sparkled; her smooth dusky cheeks glowed with a warm red flush; her tall supple figure asserted its full dignity, robed in a superb dress of silken purple and black lace, which set off her personal attractions to the utmost advantage. She not only roused the admiration of Amelius--she unconsciously gave him back the self-possession which he had, for the moment, completely lost. He was man enough to feel the humiliation of being despised by the one woman in the world whose love he longed to win; and he answered with a sudden firmness of tone and look that startled her.

"You had better speak more plainly still, Miss Regina," he said. "You may as well blame me at once for the misfortune of being a man."

She drew back a step. "I don't understand you," she answered.

"Do I owe no forbearance to a woman who asks a favour of me?" Amelius went on. "If a man had asked me to steal into the house on tiptoe, I should have said--well! I should have said something I had better not repeat. If a man had stood between me and the door when you came back, I should have taken him by the collar and pulled him out of my way. Could I do that, if you please, with Mrs. Farnaby?"

Regina saw the weak point of this defence with a woman's quickness of perception. "I can't offer any opinion," she said; "especially when you lay all the blame on my aunt."

Amelius opened his lips to protest--and thought better of it. He wisely went straight on with what he had still to say.

"If you will let me finish," he resumed, "you will understand me a little better than that. Whatever blame there may be, Miss Regina, I am quite ready to take on myself. I merely wanted to remind you that I was put in an awkward position, and that I couldn't civilly find a way out of it. As for your aunt, I will only say this: I know of hardly any sacrifice that I would not submit to, if I could be of the smallest service to her. After what I heard, while I was in her room--"

Regina interrupted him at that point. "I suppose it's a secret between you?" she said.

"Yes; it's a secret," Amelius proceeded, "as you say. But one thing I may tell you, without breaking my promise. Mrs. Farnaby has--well! has filled me with kindly feeling towards her. She has a claim, poor soul, to my truest sympathy. And I shall remember her claim. And I shall be faithful to what I feel towards her as long as I live!"

It was not very elegantly expressed; but the tone was the tone of true feeling in his voice trembled, his colour rose. He stood before her, speaking with perfect simplicity straight from his heart--and the woman's heart felt it instantly. This was the man whose ridicule she had dreaded, if her aunt's rash confidence struck him in an absurd light! She sat down in silence, with a grave sad face, reproaching herself for the wrong which her too ready distrust had inflicted on him; longing to ask his pardon, and yet hesitating to say the simple words.

He approached her chair, and, placing his hand on the back of it, said gently, "do you think a little better of me now?"

She had taken off her gloves: she silently folded and refolded them in her lap.

"Your good opinion is very precious to me," Amelius pleaded, bending a little nearer to her. "I can't tell you how sorry I should be--" He stopped, and put it more strongly. "I shall never have courage enough to enter the house again, if I have made you think meanly of me."

A woman who cared nothing for him would have easily answered this. The calm heart of Regina began to flutter: something warned her not to trust herself to speak. Little as he suspected it, Amelius had troubled the tranquil temperament of this woman. He had found his way to those secret reserves of tenderness--placid and deep--of which she was hardly conscious herself, until his influence had enlightened her. She was afraid to look up at him; her eyes would have told him the truth. She lifted her long, finely shaped, dusky hand, and offered it to him as the best answer that she could make.

Amelius took it, looked at it, and ventured on his first familiarity with her--he kissed it. She only said, "Don't!" very faintly.

"The Queen would let me kiss her hand if I went to Court," Amelius reminded her, with a pleasant inner conviction of his wonderful readiness at finding an excuse.

She smiled in spite of herself. "Would the Queen let you hold it?" she asked, gently releasing her hand, and looking at him as she drew it away. The peace was made without another word of explanation. Amelius took a chair at her side. "I'm quite happy now you have forgiven me," he said. "You don't know how I admire you--and how anxious I am to please you, if I only knew how!"

He drew his chair a little nearer; his eyes told her plainly that his language would soon become warmer still, if she gave him the smallest encouragement. This was one reason for changing the subject. But there was another reason, more cogent still. Her first painful sense of having treated him unjustly had ceased to make itself keenly felt; the lower emotions had their opportunity of asserting themselves. Curiosity, irresistible curiosity, took possession of her mind, and urged her to penetrate the mystery of the interview between Amelius and her aunt.

"Will you think me very indiscreet," she began slyly, "if I made a little confession to you?"

Amelius was only too eager to hear the confession: it would pave the way for something of the same sort on his part.

"I understand my aunt making the heat in the concert-room a pretence for taking you away with her," Regina proceeded; "but what astonishes me is that she should have admitted you to her confidence after so short an acquaintance. You are still--what shall I say?--you are still a new friend of ours."

"How long will it be before I become an old friend?" Amelius asked. "I mean," he added, with artful emphasis, "an old friend of yours?"

Confused by the question, Regina passed it over without notice. "I am Mrs. Farnaby's adopted daughter," she resumed. "I have been with her since I was a little girl--and yet she has never told me any of her secrets. Pray don't suppose that I am tempting you to break faith with my aunt! I am quite incapable of such conduct as that."

Amelius saw his way to a thoroughly commonplace compliment which possessed the charm of complete novelty so far as his experience was concerned. He would actually have told her that she was incapable of doing anything which was not perfectly becoming to a charming person, if she had only given him time! She was too eager in the pursuit of her own object to give him time. "I should like to know," she went on, "whether my aunt has been influenced in any way by a dream that she had about you."

Amelius started. "Has she told you of her dream?" he asked, with some appearance of alarm.

Regina blushed and hesitated, "My room is next to my aunt's," she explained. "We keep the door between us open. I am often in and out when she is disturbed in her sleep. She was talking in her sleep, and I heard your name--nothing more. Perhaps I ought not to have mentioned it? Perhaps I ought not to expect you to answer me?"

"There is no harm in my answering you," said Amelius. "The dream really had something to do with her trusting me. You may not think quite so unfavourably of her conduct now you know that."

"It doesn't matter what I think," Regina replied constrainedly. "If my aunt's

secrets have interested you--what right have I to object? I am sure I shall say nothing. Though I am not in my aunt's confidence, nor in your confidence, you will find I can keep a secret."

She folded up her gloves for the twentieth time at least, and gave Amelius his opportunity of retiring by rising from her chair. He made a last effort to recover the ground that he had lost, without betraying Mrs. Farnaby's trust in him.

"I am sure you can keep a secret," he said. "I should like to give you one of my secrets to keep--only I mustn't take the liberty, I suppose, just yet?"

She knew perfectly well what he wanted to say. Her heart began to quicken its beat; she was at a loss how to answer. After an awkward silence, she made an attempt to dismiss him. "Don't let me detain you," she said, "if you have any engagement."

Amelius silently looked round him for his hat. On a table behind him a monthly magazine lay open, exhibiting one of those melancholy modern "illustrations" which present the English art of our day in its laziest and lowest state of degradation. A vacuous young giant, in flowing trousers, stood in a garden, and stared at a plump young giantess with enormous eyes and rotund hips, vacantly boring holes in the grass with the point of her parasol. Perfectly incapable of explaining itself, this imbecile production put its trust in the printer, whose charitable types helped it, at the bottom of the page, with the title of "Love at First Sight." On those remarkable words Amelius seized, with the desperation of the drowning man, catching at the proverbial straw. They offered him a chance of pleading his cause, this time, with a happy indirectness of allusion at which not even a young lady's susceptibility could take offence.

"Do you believe in that?" he said, pointing to the illustration.

Regina declined to understand him. "In what?" she asked.

"In love at first sight."

It would be speaking with inexcusable rudeness to say plainly that she told him a lie. Let the milder form of expression be, that she modestly concealed the truth. "I don't know anything about it," she said.

"I do," Amelius remarked smartly.

She persisted in looking at the illustration. Was there an infection of imbecility in that fatal work? She was too simple to understand him, even yet! "You do--what?" she inquired innocently.

"I know what love at first sight is," Amelius burst out.

Regina turned over the leaves of the magazine. "Ah," she said, "you have read the story."

"I haven't read the story," Amelius answered. "I know what I felt myself--on being introduced to a young lady."

She looked up at him with a sly smile. "A young lady in America?" she asked.

"In England, Miss Regina." He tried to take her hand--but she kept it out of his reach. "In London," he went on, drifting back into his customary plainness of speech. "In this very street," he resumed, seizing her hand before she was aware of him. Too much bewildered to know what else to do, Regina took refuge desperately in shaking hands with him. "Goodbye, Mr. Goldenheart," she said--and gave him his dismissal for the second time.

Amelius submitted to his fate; there was something in her eyes which warned him that he had ventured far enough for that day.

"May I call again, soon?" he asked piteously.

"No!" answered a voice at the door which they both recognized--the voice of Mrs. Farnaby.

"Yes!" Regina whispered to him, as her aunt entered the room. Mrs. Farnaby's interference, following on the earlier events of the day, had touched the young lady's usually placable temper in a tender place--and Amelius reaped the benefit of it.

Mrs. Farnaby walked straight up to him, put her hand in his arm, and led him out into the hall.

"I had my suspicions," she said; "and I find they have not misled me. Twice already, I have warned you to let my niece alone. For the third, and last time, I tell you that she is as cold as ice. She will trifle with you as long as it flatters her vanity; and she will throw you over, as she has thrown other men over. Have your fling, you foolish fellow, before you marry anybody. Pay

no more visits to this house, unless they are visits to me. I shall expect to hear from you." She paused, and pointed to a statue which was one of the ornaments in the hall. "Look at that bronze woman with the clock in her hand. That's Regina. Be off with you--goodbye!"

Amelius found himself in the street. Regina was looking out at the dining-room window. He kissed his hand to her: she smiled and bowed. "Damn the other men!" Amelius said to himself. "I'll call on her tomorrow."

CHAPTER 4

Returning to his hotel, he found three letters waiting for him on the sitting-room table.

The first letter that he opened was from his landlord, and contained his bill for the past week. As he looked at the sum total, Amelius presented to perfection the aspect of a serious young man. He took pen, ink, and paper, and made some elaborate calculations. Money that he had too generously lent, or too freely given away, appeared in his statement of expenses, as well as money that he had spent on himself. The result may be plainly stated in his own words: "Goodbye to the hotel; I must go into lodgings."

Having arrived at this wise decision, he opened the second letter. It proved to be written by the lawyers who had already communicated with him at Tadmor, on the subject of his inheritance.

"DEAR SIR,

"The enclosed, insufficiently addressed as you will perceive, only reached us this day. We beg to remain, etc."

Amelius opened the letter enclosed, and turned to the signature for information. The name instantly took him back to the Community: the writer was Mellicent.

Her letter began abruptly, in these terms:

"Do you remember what I said to you when we parted at Tadmor? I said, 'Be comforted, Amelius, the end is not yet.' And I said again, 'You will come back to me.'

"I remind you of this, my friend--directing to your lawyers, whose names I remember when their letter to you was publicly read in the Common Room. Once or twice a year I shall continue to remind you of those parting words of mine: there will be a time perhaps when you will thank me for doing so.

"In the mean while, light your pipe with my letters; my letters don't matter. If I can comfort you, and reconcile you to your life--years hence, when you, too, my Amelius, may be one of the Fallen Leaves like me--then I shall not have lived and suffered in vain; my last days on earth will be the happiest

days that I have ever seen.

"Be pleased not to answer these lines, or any other written words of mine that may follow, so long as you are prosperous and happy. With that part of your life I have nothing to do. You will find friends wherever you go--among the women especially. Your generous nature shows itself frankly in your face; your manly gentleness and sweetness speak in every tone of your voice; we poor women feel drawn towards you by an attraction which we are not able to resist. Have you fallen in love already with some beautiful English girl? Oh, be careful and prudent! Be sure, before you set your heart on her, that she is worthy of you! So many women are cruel and deceitful. Some of them will make you believe you have won their love, when you have only flattered their vanity; and some are poor weak creatures whose minds are set on their own interests, and who may let bad advisers guide them, when you are not by. For your own sake, take care!

"I am living with my sister, at New York. The days and weeks glide by me quietly; you are in my thoughts and my prayers; I have nothing to complain of; I wait and hope. When the time of my banishment from the Community has expired, I shall go back to Tadmor; and there you will find me, Amelius, the first to welcome you when your spirits are sinking under the burden of life, and your heart turns again to the friends of your early days.

"Goodbye, my dear--goodbye!"

Amelius laid the letter aside, touched and saddened by the artless devotion to him which it expressed. He was conscious also of a feeling of uneasy surprise, when he read the lines which referred to his possible entanglement with some beautiful English girl. Here, with widely different motives, was Mrs. Farnaby's warning repeated, by a stranger writing from another quarter of the globe! It was an odd coincidence, to say the least of it. After thinking for a while, he turned abruptly to the third letter that was waiting for him. He was not at ease; his mind felt the need of relief.

The third letter was from Rufus Dingwell; announcing the close of his tour in Ireland, and his intention of shortly joining Amelius in London. The excellent American expressed, with his customary absence of reserve, his fervent admiration of Irish hospitality, Irish beauty, and Irish whisky. "Green Erin wants but one thing more," Rufus predicted, "to be a Paradise on earth--it wants the day to come when we shall send an American minister to the Irish Republic." Laughing over this quaint outbreak, Amelius turned from the first page to the second. As his eyes fell on the next paragraph, a sudden change passed over him; he let the letter drop on the floor.

"One last word," the American wrote, "about that nice long bright letter of yours. I have read it with strict attention, and thought over it considerably afterwards. Don't be riled, friend Amelius, if I tell you in plain words, that your account of the Farnabys doesn't make me happy--quite the contrary, I do assure you. My back is set up, sir, against that family. You will do well to drop them; and, above all things, mind what you are about with the brown miss, who has found her way to your favourable opinion in such an almighty hurry. Do me a favour, my good boy. Just wait till I have seen her, will you?"

Mrs. Farnaby, Mellicent, Rufus--all three strangers to each other; and all three agreed nevertheless in trying to part him from the beautiful young Englishwoman! "I don't care," Amelius thought to himself "They may say what they please--I'll marry Regina, if she will have me!"