

CHAPTER III

"POOR PORSON"

Upon the morning following his conversation with Morris, Colonel Monk spent two hours or more in the library. Painfully did he wrestle there with balance-sheets, adding up bank books; also other financial documents.

"Phew!" he said, when at length the job was done. "It is worse than I thought, a good deal worse. My credit must be excellent, or somebody would have been down upon us before now. Well, I must talk things over with Porson. He understands figures, and so he ought, considering that he kept the books in his grandfather's shop."

Then the Colonel went to lunch less downcast than might have been expected, since he anticipated a not unamusing half-hour with his son. As he knew well, Morris detested business matters and money calculations. Still, reflected his parent, it was only right that he should take his share of the family responsibilities--a fact which he fully intended to explain to him.

But "in vain is the net spread," etc. As Morris passed the door of the library on his way to the old chapel of the Abbey, which now served him as a laboratory, he had seen his father bending over the desk and guessed his occupation. Knowing, therefore, what he must expect at

lunch, Morris determined to dispense with that meal, and went out, much to the Colonel's disappointment and indignation. "I hate," he explained to his brother-in-law Porson afterwards, "yes, I hate a fellow who won't face disagreeables and shirks his responsibilities."

Between Monksland and the town of Northwold lay some four miles of cliff, most of which had been portioned off in building lots, for Northwold was what is called a "rising watering-place." About half-way between the Abbey and this town stood Mr. Porson's mansion. In fact, it was nothing but a dwelling like those about it, presenting the familiar seaside gabled roofs of red tiles, and stucco walls decorated with sham woodwork, with the difference that the house was exceedingly well built and about four times as large as the average villa.

"Great heavens! what a place!" said the Colonel to himself as he halted at the private gateway which opened on to the cliff and surveyed it affronting sea and sky in all its naked horror. "Show me the house and I will show you the man," he went on to himself; "but, after all, one mustn't judge him too hardly. Poor Porson, he did not arrange his own up-bringing or his ancestors. Hello! there he is.

"John, John, John!" he shouted at a stout little person clad in a black alpaca coat, a straw hat, and a pair of spectacles, who was engaged in sad contemplation of a bed of dying evergreens.

At the sound of that well-known voice the little man jumped as though he

had trodden on a pin, and turned round slowly, muttering to himself,

"Gracious! It's him!" an ungrammatical sentence which indicated sufficiently how wide a niche in the temple of his mind was filled with the image of his brother-in-law, Colonel Monk.

John Porson was a man of about six or eight and fifty, round-faced, bald, with large blue eyes not unlike those of a china doll, and clean-shaven except for a pair of sandy-coloured mutton-chop whiskers. In expression he was gentle, even timid, and in figure short and stout. At this very moment behind a hundred counters stand a hundred replicas of that good-hearted man and worthy citizen, John Porson. Can he be described better or more briefly?

"How are you Colonel?" he said, hurrying forward. He had never yet dared to call his brother-in-law "Monk," and much less by his Christian name, so he compromised on "Colonel."

"Pretty well, thank you, considering my years and botherations. And how are you, John?"

"Not very grand, not very grand," said the little man; "my heart has been troubling me, and it was so dreadfully hot in London."

"Then why didn't you come away?"

"Really I don't know. I understood that it had something to do with a party, but I think the fact is that Mary was too lazy to look after the servants while they packed up."

"Perhaps she had some attraction there," suggested the Colonel, with an anxiety which might have been obvious to a more skilled observer.

"Attraction! What do you mean?" asked Porson.

"Mean, you old goose? Why, what should I mean? A young man, of course."

"Oh! I see. No, I am sure it was nothing of that sort. Mary won't be bothered with young men. She is too lazy; she just looks over their heads till they get tired and go away. I am sure it was the packing, or, perhaps, the party. But what are you staring at, Colonel? Is there anything wrong?"

"No, no; only that wonderful window of yours--the one filled with bottle-glass--which always reminds me of a bull's-eye lantern standing on a preserved-beef tin, or the top of a toy lighthouse."

Porson peered at the offending window through his spectacles.

"Certainly, now you mention it, it does look a little odd from here," he said; "naked, rather. You said so before, you remember, and I told them to plant the shrubs; but while I was away they let every one of the poor

things die. I will ask my architect, Jenkins, if he can't do anything; it might be pulled down, perhaps."

"Better leave it alone," said the Colonel, with a sniff. "If I know anything of Jenkins he'd only put up something worse. I tell you, John, that where bricks and mortar are concerned that man's a moral monster."

"I know you don't like his style," murmured Porson; "but won't you come in, it is so hot out here in the sun?"

"Thank you, yes, but let us go to that place you call your den, not to the drawing-room. If you can spare it, I want half-an-hour with you. That's why I came over in the afternoon, before dinner."

"Certainly, certainly," murmured Porson again, as he led the way to the "den," but to himself he added: "It's those mortgages, I'll bet. Oh dear! oh dear! when shall I see the last of them?"

Presently they were established in the den, the Colonel very cool and comfortable in Mr. Porson's armchair, and Porson himself perched upon the edge of a new-looking leather sofa in an attitude of pained expectancy.

"Now I am at your service, Colonel," he said.

"Oh! yes; well, it is just this. I want you, if you will, to look

through these figures for me," and he produced and handed to him a portentous document headed "List of Obligations."

Mr. Porson glanced at it, and instantly his round, simple face became clever and alert. Here he was on his own ground. In five minutes he had mastered the thing.

"Yes," he said, in a quick voice, "this is quite clear, but there is some mistake in the addition making a difference of 87 pounds 3s. 10d. in your favour. Well, where is the schedule of assets?"

"The schedule of assets, my dear John? I wish I knew. I have my pension, and there are the Abbey and estates, which, as things are, seem to be mortgaged to their full value. That's about all, I think.

Unless--unless"--and he laughed, "we throw in Morris's patent electrical machine, which won't work."

"It ought to be reckoned, perhaps," replied Mr. Porson gravely; adding in a kind of burst, with an air of complete conviction: "I believe in Morris's machine, or, at least, I believe in Morris. He has the makings of a great man--no, of a great inventor about him."

"Do you really?" replied the Colonel, much interested. "That is curious--and encouraging; for, my dear John, where business matters are concerned, I trust your judgment."

"But I doubt whether he will make any money out of it," went on Porson.

"One day the world will benefit; probably he will not benefit."

The Colonel's interest faded. "Possibly, John; but, if so, perhaps for present purposes we may leave this mysterious discovery out of the question."

"I think so, I think so; but what is the point?"

"The point is that I seem to be about at the end of my tether, although, as yet, I am glad to say, nobody has actually pressed me, and I have come to you, as a friend and a relative, for advice. What is to be done? I have sold you all the valuable land, and I am glad to think that you have made a very good thing of it. Some years ago, also, you took over the two heaviest mortgages on the Abbey estate, and I am sorry to say that the interest is considerably in arrear. There remain the floating debts and other charges, amounting in all to about 7,000 pounds, which I have no means of meeting, and meanwhile, of course, the place must be kept up. Under these circumstances, John, I ask you as a business man, what is to be done?"

"And, as a business man, I say I'm hanged if I know," said Porson, with unwonted energy. "All debts, no assets--the position is impossible. Unless, indeed, something happens."

"Quite so. That's it. My only comfort is--that something might happen,"

and he paused.

Porson fidgeted about on the edge of the leather sofa and turned red. In his heart he was wondering whether he dared offer to pay off the debts. This he was quite able to do; more, he was willing to do, since to him, good simple man, the welfare of the ancient house of Monk, of which his only sister had married the head, was a far more important thing than parting with a certain number of thousands of pounds. For birth and station, in his plebeian humility, John Porson had a reverence which was almost superstitious. Moreover, he had loved his dead sister dearly, and, in his way, he loved her son also. Also he revered his brother-in-law, the polished and splendid-looking Colonel, although it was true that sometimes he writhed beneath his military and aristocratic heel. Particularly, indeed, did he resent, in his secret heart, those continual sarcasms about his taste in architecture.

Now, although the monetary transactions between them had been many, as luck would have it--entirely without his own design--they chanced in the main to have turned to his, Porson's, advantage. Thus, owing chiefly to his intelligent development of its possibilities, the land which he bought from the Monk estate had increased enormously in value; so much so, indeed, that, even if he lost all the other sums advanced upon mortgage, he would still be considerably to the good. Therefore, as it happened, the Colonel was really under no obligations to him. In these circumstances, Mr. Porson did not quite know how a cold-blooded offer of an advance of cash without security--in practice a gift--would be

received.

"Have you anything definite in your mind?" he hesitated, timidly.

The Colonel reflected. On his part he was wondering how Porson would receive the suggestion of a substantial loan. It seemed too much to risk. He was proud, and did not like to lay himself open to the possibility of rebuff.

"I think not, John. Unless Morris should chance to make a good marriage, which is unlikely, for, as you know, he is an odd fish, I can see nothing before us except ruin. Indeed, at my age, it does not greatly matter, but it seems a pity that the old house should come to an end in such a melancholy and discreditable fashion."

"A pity! It is more than a pity," jerked out Porson, with a sudden wriggle which caused him to rock up and down upon the stiff springs of the new sofa.

As he spoke there came a knock at the door, and from the further side of it a slow, rich voice was heard, saying: "May I come in?"

"That's Mary," said Mr. Porson. "Yes, come in, dear; it's only your uncle."

The door opened, Mary came in, and, in some curious quiet way, at once

her personality seemed to take possession of and dominate that shaded room. To begin with, her stature gave an idea of dominion, for, without being at all coarse, she was tall and full in frame. The face also was somewhat massive, with a rounded chin and large, blue eyes that had a trick of looking half asleep, and above a low, broad forehead grew her waving, golden hair, parted simply in the middle after the old Greek fashion. She wore a white dress, with a silver girdle that set off the beautiful outlines of her figure to great advantage, and with her a perfume seemed to pass, perhaps from the roses on her bosom.

"A beautiful woman," thought the Colonel to himself, as she came in, and he was no mean or inexperienced judge. "A beautiful woman, but a regular lotus-eater."

"How do you do, Uncle Richard?" said Mary, pausing about six feet away and holding out her hand. "I heard you scolding my poor dad about his bow-window. In fact, you woke me up; and, do you know, you used exactly the same words as you did at your visit after we came down from London last year."

"Bless me, my dear," said the Colonel, struggling to his feet, and kissing his niece upon the forehead, "what a memory you have got! It will get you into trouble some day."

"I daresay--me, or somebody else. But history repeated itself, uncle, that is all. The same sleepy Me in a lounge-chair, the same hot day,

the same blue-bottle, and the same You scolding the same Daddy about the same window. Though what on earth dad's window can matter to anyone except himself, I can't understand."

"I daresay not, my dear; I daresay not. We can none of us know everything--not even latter day young ladies--but I suggest that a few hours with Fergusson's 'Handbook of Architecture' might enlighten you on the point."

Mary reflected, but the only repartee that she could conjure at the moment was something about ancient lights which did not seem appropriate. Therefore, as she thought that she had done enough for honour, and to remind her awe-inspiring relative that he could not suppress her, suddenly she changed the subject.

"You are looking very well, uncle," she said, surveying him calmly; "and younger than you did last year. How is my cousin Morris? Will the aerophone talk yet?"

"Be careful," said the Colonel, gallantly. "If even my grey hairs can provoke a compliment, what homage is sufficient for a Sleeping Beauty? As for Morris, he is, I believe, much as usual; at least he stood this morning till daybreak staring at the sea. I understand, however--if he doesn't forget to come--that you are to have the pleasure of seeing him this evening, when you will be able to judge for yourself."

"Now, don't be sarcastic about Morris, uncle; I'd rather you went on abusing dad's window."

"Certainly not, my dear, if it displeases you. But may I ask why he is to be considered sacred?"

"Why?" she answered, and a genuine note crept into her bantering voice.

"Because he is one of the few men worth anything whom I ever chanced to meet--except dad there and----"

"Spare me," cut in the Colonel, with admirable skill, for well he knew that his name was not upon the lady's lips. "But would it be impertinent to inquire what it is that constitutes Morris's preeminent excellence in your eyes?"

"Of course not; only it is three things, not one. First, he works harder than any man I know, and I think men who work adorable, because I am so lazy myself. Secondly, he thinks a great deal, and very few people do that to any purpose. Thirdly, I never feel inclined to go to sleep when he takes me in to dinner. Oh! you may laugh if you like, but ask dad what happened to me last month with that wretched old member of the Government, and before the sweets, too!"

"Please, please," put in Mr. Porson, turning pink under pressure of some painful recollection. "If you have finished sparring with your uncle, isn't there any tea, Mary?"

"I believe so," she said, relapsing into a state of bland indifference.

"I'll go and see. If I don't come back, you'll know it is there," and Mary passed through the door with that indolent, graceful walk which no one could mistake who once had seen her.

Both her father and her uncle looked after her with admiration. Mr. Porson admired her because the man or woman who dared to meet that domestic tyrant his brother-in-law in single combat, and could issue unconquered from the doubtful fray, was indeed worthy to be honoured. Colonel Monk for his part hastened to do homage to a very pretty and charming young lady, one, moreover, who was not in the least afraid of him.

Mary had gone, and the air from the offending window, which was so constructed as to let in a maximum of draught, banged the door behind her. The two men looked at each other. A thought was in the mind of each; but the Colonel, trained by long experience, and wise in his generation, waited for Mr. Porson to speak. Many and many a time in the after days did he find reason to congratulate himself upon this superb reticence--for there are occasions when discretion can amount almost to the height of genius. Under their relative circumstances, if it had been he who first suggested this alliance, he and his family must have remained at the gravest disadvantage, and as for stipulations, well, he could have made none. But as it chanced it was from poor Porson's lips that the suggestion came.

Mr. Porson cleared this throat--once, twice, thrice. At the third rasp, the Colonel became very attentive. He remembered that his brother-in-law had done exactly the same thing at the very apex of a long-departed crisis; indeed, just before he offered spontaneously to take over the mortgages on the Abbey estate.

"You were talking, Colonel," he began, "when Mary came in," and he paused.

"I daresay," replied the Colonel indifferently, fixing a contemptuous glance upon some stone mullions of atrocious design.

"About Morris marrying?"

"Oh, yes, so I was! Well?"

"Well--she seems to like him. I know she does indeed. She never talks of any other young man."

"She? Who?"

"My daughter, Mary; and--so--why shouldn't they--you know?"

"Really, John, I must ask you to be a little more explicit. It's no good your addressing me in your business ciphers."

"Well--I mean--why shouldn't he marry her? Morris marry Mary? Is that plain enough?" he asked in desperation.

For a moment a mist gathered before the Colonel's eyes. Here was salvation indeed, if only it could be brought about. Oh! if only it could be brought about.

But the dark eyes never changed, nor did a muscle move upon that pale, commanding countenance.

"Morris marry Mary," he repeated, dwelling on the alliterative words as though to convince himself that he had heard them aright. "That is a very strange proposition, my dear John, and sudden, too. Why, they are first cousins, and for that reason, I suppose, the thing never occurred to me--till last night," he added to himself.

"Yes, I know, Colonel; but I am not certain that this first cousin business isn't a bit exaggerated. The returns of the asylums seem to show it, and I know my doctor, Sir Henry Andrews, says it's nonsense. You'll admit that he is an authority. Also, it happened in my own family, my father and mother were cousins, and we are none the worse."

On another occasion the Colonel might have been inclined to comment on this statement--of course, most politely. Now, however, he let it pass.

"Well, John," he said, "putting aside the cousinship, let me hear what your idea is of the advantages of such a union, should the parties concerned change to consider it suitable."

"Quite so, quite so, that's business," said Mr. Porson, brightening up at once. "From my point of view, these would be the advantages. As you know, Colonel, so far as I am concerned my origin, for the time I have been able to trace it--that's four generations from old John Porson, the Quaker sugar merchant, who came from nobody knows where--although honest, is humble, and until my father's day all in the line of retail trade. But then my dear wife came in. She was a governess when I married her, as you may have heard, and of a very good Scotch family, one of the Camerons, so Mary isn't all of our cut--any more," he added with a smile, "than Morris is all of yours. Still for her to marry a Monk would be a lift up--a considerable lift up, and looked at from a business point of view, worth a deal of money.

"Also, I like my nephew Morris, and I am sure that Mary likes him, and I'd wish the two of them to inherit what I have got. They wouldn't have very long to wait for it, Colonel, for those doctors may say what they will, but I tell you," he added, pathetically, tapping himself over the heart--"though you don't mention it to Mary--I know better. Oh! yes, I know better. That's about all, except, of course, that I should wish to see her settled before I'm gone. A man dies happier, you understand, if he is certain whom his only child is going to marry; for when he is dead I suppose that he will know nothing of what happens to her. Or,

perhaps," he added, as though by an afterthought, "he may know too much, and not be able to help; which would be painful, very painful."

"Don't get into those speculations, John," said the Colonel, waving his hand. "They are unpleasant, and lead nowhere--sufficient to the day is the evil thereof."

"Quite so, quite so. Life is a queer game of blind-man's buff, isn't it; played in a mist on a mountain top, and the players keep dropping over the precipices. But nobody heeds, because there are always plenty more, and the game goes on forever. Well, that's my side of the case. Do you wish me to put yours?"

"I should like to hear your view of it."

"Very good, it is this. Here's a nice girl, no one can deny that, and a nice man, although he's odd--you will admit as much. He's got name, and he will have fame, or I am much mistaken. But, as it chances, through no fault of his, he wants money, or will want it, for without money the old place can't go on, and without a wife the old race can't go on. Now, Mary will have lots of money, for, to tell the truth, it keeps piling up until I am sick of it. I've been lucky in that way, Colonel, because I don't care much about it, I suppose. I don't think that I ever yet made a really bad investment. Just look. Two years ago, to oblige an old friend who was in the shop with me when I was young, I put 5,000 pounds into an Australian mine, never thinking to see it again. Yesterday I

sold that stock for 50,000 pounds."

"Fifty thousand pounds!" ejaculated the Colonel, astonished into admiration.

"Yes, or to be accurate, 49,375 pounds, 3s., 10d., and--that's where the jar comes in--I don't care. I never thought of it again since I got the broker's note till this minute. I have been thinking all day about my heart, which is uneasy, and about what will happen to Mary when I am gone. What's the good of this dirty money to a dying man? I'd give it all to have my wife and the boy I lost back for a year or two; yes, I would go into a shop again and sell sugar like my grandfather, and live on the profits from the till and the counter. There's Mary calling. We must tell a fib, we must say that we thought she was to come to fetch us; don't you forget. Well, there it is, perhaps you'll think it over at your leisure."

"Yes, John," replied the Colonel, solemnly; "certainly I will think it over. Of course, there are pros and cons, but, on the whole, speaking offhand, I don't see why the young people should not make a match. Also you have always been a good relative, and, what is better, a good friend to me, so, of course, if possible I should like to fall in with your wishes."

Mr. Porson, who was advancing towards the door, wheeled round quickly.

"Thank you, Colonel," he said, "I appreciate your sentiments; but don't you make any mistake. It isn't my wishes that have to be fallen in with--or your wishes. It's the wishes of your son, Morris, and my daughter, Mary. If they are agreeable I'd like it well; if not, all the money in the world, nor all the families in the world, wouldn't make me have anything to do with the job, or you either. Whatever our failings, we are honest men--both of us, who would not sell our flesh and blood for such trash as that."