

## CHAPTER VI

### PLOT AND COUNTER-PLOT

Mr. Heatherbloom drifted; not "looking for a way", one was forced upon him. It came to him unexpectedly; chance served him. He would have thrust it from him but could not. During his more or less eccentric peregrinations in Central Park he had formed visual acquaintances with sundry folk; pictures of some of them were very dimly impressed on his consciousness, others--and the major part--on his subconsciousness.

Flat faces, big faces, red faces, pale faces! One countenance in the last class made itself a trifle more insistent than the others. Its possessor had watched with interest his progress, interrupted with entanglements, and had listened to the music of his march, the canine fantasia, staccato, affettuoso! Mr. Heatherbloom's halting footsteps in the park generally led him to the heights; it wasn't a very high point, but it was the highest he could find, and he could look off on something--a lake, or reservoir of water, he didn't know just which, and a jagged sky-line.

The person that exhibited casual curiosity in his movements and his coming thither was a woman. She seemed slight and sinuous, sitting there against the stone parapet, and deep dark eyes accentuated the pallor of her face. He did not think it strange she should always be at this spot

when he came; in fact, it was quite a while before he noticed the almost daily coincidence of their mutual presence at the same place, at about the same time. After her first half-sly, half-sedulous regard of him, she would look away; her face then wore a soft and melancholy expression; she appeared very sad.

It took quite a while for this fact to be communicated to Mr. Heatherbloom. Though she shifted her figure often, as if to call attention to the pale profile of her face against a leaden sky, his thoughts remained introspective. Only the sky-line seemed to interest him. But one day something white came dancing in the breeze to his feet. Absorbed in deep neutral tones afar, he did not see it; his four-footed charges, however, were quick to perceive the object.

"Oh!" said the lady.

Mr. Heatherbloom looked. "Is--is it yours?" he asked.

"It--was," she remarked with a slight accent on the last word.

He got up; there seemed little use endeavoring to rescue the handkerchief now.

"I'm afraid I've been rather slow," he remarked. "Quite stupid, I'm sure."

She may have had her own opinion but maintained a discreet silence. Mr. Heatherbloom stooped and gathered in the remnants. "You will permit me," he observed, "to replace it, of course."

"But it was not your fault."

"It was that of my charges, then."

"No; the wind. Let's blame it on the wind." She laughed, her dark eyes full on his, though Mr. Heatherbloom seemed hardly to see them.

After that when they met on this little elevation, she bowed to him and sometimes ventured a remark or two. He did not seem over-anxious to talk but he met her troubled face with calm and unvarying, though somewhat absent-minded courtesy. He replied to her questions perfunctorily, told her whom he served, betraying, however, in turn, no inquisitiveness concerning her. For him she was just some one who came and went, and incidentally interfered with his study of the sky-line.

By degrees she confided in him; as one so alone she was glad of almost any one to confide in. She wanted, indeed, needed badly, a situation as lady's maid or second maid. She had tried and tried for a position; unfortunately her recommendations were mostly foreign--from Milan, Moscow, Paris. People either scrutinized them suspiciously, or mon Dieu! couldn't read them. It was hard on her; she had had such a time! She, a Viennese, with all her experience in France, Italy, Russia,

found herself at her wits' end in this golden America. Wasn't it odd, très drôle? She had laughed and laughed when she hadn't cried about it.

She had even tried singing in a little music-hall, a horribly common place, but her voice had failed her. Perhaps there was a vacancy at Miss Van--what was her name? There was a place vacant; the maid with the saucy nose, Mr. Heatherbloom indifferently vouchsafed, had just left to marry out of service.

"How fortunate!" the fair questioner cried; then sighed. Miss Van Rolsen, being a maiden lady, would probably be most particular about recommendations; that they should be of the home-made, intelligible brand, from people you could call up by telephone and interrogate. Had she been very particular in his case? Mr. Heatherbloom said "no"--not joyfully, and explained. Though she drew words from him, he talked to the sky-line. She listened; seemed thinking deeply.

"You are not pleased to be there?" Keenly.

"I?--Oh, of course!" Quickly.

She did not appear to note his changed manner. "This Miss Van Rolsen,--isn't she the one whose niece--Miss Elizabeth Dalrymple--recently refused the hand and heart of a Russian prince?" she said musingly.

"Refused?" he cried suddenly. "You mean--" He stopped; the words had been surprised from him.

"Accepted?" She looked at him closer. "Of course; I remember now seeing it in the paper; I was thinking of some one else. One of the other lords, dukes, or noblemen the town is so full of just now."

He got up rather suddenly, bowed and went. With narrowing eyes she watched him walk away, but when he had gone all melancholy disappeared from her face; she stretched herself and laughed. "Voilà! Sonia Turgeinov, comédienne!"

Mr. Heatherbloom did not repair to the point of elevation the next day, nor the day after; but she met him the third day near the Seventy-second Street entrance. More than that, she insinuated herself at his side; at first rather to his discomfort. Later he forgot the constraint her presence occasioned him, when something she said caused him to look upon her with new favor. Beauty had momentarily escaped his vigilance and enjoyed a mad romp after a squirrel before she was captured.

What, his companion laughingly suggested, would have happened if Beauty had really escaped, and he, Mr. Heatherbloom, had been forced to return to the house without her? What? Mr. Heatherbloom started. He might lose his position, n'est-cepas? He did not answer.

The idea was born; why not lose Beauty? No, better still, Naughty; the prime favorite, Naughty. He looked into Naughty's eyes, and they seemed full of liquid reproach. Naughty had been his friend--supposititiously, and to abandon him now to the world, a cold place devoid of French lamb chops? A hard place for homeless dogs and men, alike! About to waive the temptation, Mr. Heatherbloom paused; the idea was capable of modification or expansion. Most ideas are.

But he shortly afterward dismissed the entire matter from his mind; it would, at best, be but a compromise, an evasion of the pact he had made with himself. It was not to be thought of. At this moment his companion swayed and Mr. Heatherbloom had just time to put out his arm; then helped her to a bench.

She partly recovered; it was nothing, she remarked bravely. One gets sometimes a little faint when--it was the old, old story of privation and want that now fell with seeming reluctance from her lips. Mr. Heatherbloom had become all attention. More than that he seemed greatly distressed. A woman actually in need, starving--no use mincing words!--in Central Park, the playground of the most opulent metropolis of the world. It was monstrous; he tendered her his purse, with several weeks' pay in it. Her reply had a spirited ring; he felt abashed and returned the money to his pocket. She sat back with eyes half-closed; he saw now that her face looked drawn and paler than usual.

He, thought and thought; had he not himself found out how difficult it

was to get a position, to procure employment without friends and helpers? He, a man, had walked in search of it, day after day and felt the griping pangs of hunger; had wished for night, and, later, wished for the morn, only to find both equally barren.

Suddenly he spoke--slowly, like a man stating a proposition he has argued carefully in his own mind. She listened, approved, while hope already transfigured her face. She would have thanked him profusely but he did not remain to hear her. In fact, he seemed hardly to see her now; his features had become once more reserved and introspective.

He reappeared at the Van Rolsen house that day without Naughty. Miss Van Rolsen, when she heard the news, burst into tears; then became furious. She was sure he had sold Naughty, winner of three blue ribbons, and "out of the contest" no end of times because superior to all competition!

A broken leash! Fiddlesticks! She penned advertisements wildly and summoned her niece. That young lady responded to protestations and questions with a slightly indifferent expression on her proud languid features. What did she think of it? She didn't really know; her manner said she really didn't care.

Mr. Heatherbloom, standing with the light of the window falling pensively upon him, she didn't seem to see at all; he had once more become a nullity. He rather preferred that rôle, however; perhaps he felt it was easier to impersonate annihilation, in the inception, than

to have it, or a wish for it, thrust later too strongly upon him.

"I adhere to my opinion that he sold Naughty. I should never have employed this man," asserted Miss Van Rolsen, fastening her fiery eyes on Mr. Heatherbloom. "Why don't you speak, my dear, and give me your opinion?" To her niece.

"I haven't any, Aunt."

"You are discerning; you have judgment." Miss Van Rolsen spoke almost hysterically. "Remember he"--pointing a finger--"came without our knowing anything about him."

Miss Dalrymple did not stir; a bunch of bizarre-looking orchids on her gown moved to her even rhythmical breathing. "What was he? Who was he? Maybe, nothing more than--" She paused for want of breath, not of words, to characterize her opinion of Mr. Heatherbloom.

He readjusted his posture. It was very bright outdoors; people went by briskly, full of life and importance; children whirled along on roller skates.

"When I asked your opinion, my dear, as to the wisdom of having employed this person in the first place, under the circumstances, why did you keep silent?" Was Miss Van Rolsen still talking, or rambling on to the impervious beautiful girl? "You should have called me foolish,

eccentric; yes, that's what I was, to have taken him in as I did."

Miss Dalrymple raised her brows and moved to a piano to adjust the flowers in a vase; she smiled at them with soft enigmatic lips.

"If I may venture an opinion, Madam," observed Mr. Heatherbloom in a far-away voice, "I should say Naughty will surely return, or be returned."

"You venture an opinion!" said Miss Van Rolsen. "You!"

Miss Dalrymple breathed the fragrance of the flowers; she apparently liked it.

"You are discharged!" said Miss Van Rolsen violently to Mr. Heatherbloom. "I give you the two-weeks' notice agreed upon."

"I'll waive the notice," suggested the young man at the window quickly.

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Sharply. "It'll take me that time to find another incompetent keeper for them. And, meanwhile, you may be sure," grimly, "you will be very well watched."

"Under the circumstances, I should prefer--since you have discharged me--to leave at once."

"Your preferences are a matter of utter indifference. You were employed with a definite understanding in this regard."

Mr. Heatherbloom gazed rather wildly out of the window; two weeks.--that much longer! He was about to say he would not be well watched; he would take himself off--that she couldn't keep him; but paused. A contract was a contract, though orally made; she could hold him yet a little. But why did she wish to? He had not calculated upon this; he tried to think but could not. He looked from the elder to the younger woman. The latter did not look at him.

Miss Dalrymple had seated herself at the piano; her fingers--light as spirit touches--now swept the keys; a Debussy fantasy, almost as pianissimo as one could play it, vibrated around them. Outside the whir! whir! of the skates went on. A little girl tumbled. Mr. Heatherbloom regarded her; ribbons awry; fat legs in the air. The music continued.

"You may go," said a severe voice.

He aroused himself to belated action, but at the door he looked back. "I'm sure it will be all right," he repeated to Miss Van Rolsen. "On my word"--more impetuously.

At the piano some one laughed, and Mr. Heatherbloom went.

"Why on earth, Aunt, did you want to keep him two weeks longer?" he

heard the girl's now passionate tones ask as he walked away.

"For a number of reasons, my dear," came the response. "One, because he wanted to leave me in the lurch. Another--it will be easier to keep an eye on him until Naughty is returned, or"--her voice had the vindictive ring of a Roman matron's--"this person's culpability is proven. Naughty is a valuable dog and--"

Mr. Heatherbloom's footsteps hastened; he had caught quite enough, but as he disappeared to the rear, the dream chords on the piano, now louder, continued to follow him.