

CHAPTER VII

DEVELOPMENTS

That night, as if his rest were not already sufficiently disturbed, a disconcerting possibility occurred abruptly to Mr. Heatherbloom. It was born in the darkness of the hour; he could not dispel it. What if the person in whom he had confided in the park were not all she seemed? He hated the insinuating suggestion but it insisted on creeping into his brain. He had once, not so long ago, in his search for cheap lodgings, stumbled upon a roomful of alleged cripples and maimed disreputables who made mendicancy a profession; their jibes and jests on the credulity of the public yet rang in his ears. What if she--his casual acquaintance of the day before--belonged to that yet greater class of dissemblers who ply their arts and simulations with more individualism and intelligence?

Mr. Heatherbloom sat up in bed. Naughty might be worth five or even ten thousand dollars. He remembered having read at some previous time about a certain canine whose proud mistress and owner was alleged to have refused twenty thousand for him. The perspiration broke out on Mr. Heatherbloom's face. Was Naughty of this category? He looked very "classy," as if there couldn't be another beast quite like him in the world. What had been the twenty-thousand-dollar mistress' name; not Van--impossible!

But the more he told himself "impossible", the more positive grew a certain perverse inner asseveration that it was quite possible. And what if the person in the park had known it? He reviewed the circumstances of their different meetings; details that had not impressed themselves upon him at the time--that had almost escaped his notice, now stood out clearer--too clear, in his mind. He remembered how she had brightened astonishingly after the brief fainting spell when he had made his ill-advised proposal. It had been as elixir to her. He recalled how she had met him every day. Had it been mere chance? Or--disconcerting suspicion!--had she deliberately planned--

For Mr. Heatherbloom there was no sleep that night. At the first signs of dawn he was up and out, directing his steps toward the park, as a criminal returns to the haunts of his crime. No faces of any kind now greeted him there; only trees confronted him, gaunt, ghostlike in the early morning mists. Even the squirrels were yet abed in their miniature Swiss chalets in the air. The sun rose at last, red and threatening. He now met a policeman who looked at him questioningly. Mr. Heatherbloom greeted him with a blitheness at variance with his mood. Officialdom only growled and gazed after the young man as if to say: "We'll gather you in, yet."

It was past nine o'clock before Mr. Heatherbloom ventured to approach the house; as he did so, the front door closed; some one had been admitted. He himself went in through the area way; from above came joyous barks, a woman's voice; pandemonium. Mr. Heatherbloom listened.

Later he learned what had happened; a young woman had brought back Naughty; a very honest young woman who refused all reward.

"Sure," said the cook, who had the story from the butler, "and she spoke loike a quane. 'I can take nothing for returning what doesn't belong to me, ma'am. I am but doing my jooty. But if ye plaze, would ye be lookin' over these recommends av mine--they're from furriners--and if yez be havin' ony friends who be wanting a maid and yez might be so good as to recommind me, I'd be thankin' of yez, for it's wurrk I wants.' Think av that now. Only wurrk! Who says there arn't honest servin' gurrls, nowadays? The mistress was that pleased with her morals an' her manners--so loidy-loike!--she gave her the job that shlip av a Jane had; wid an advance av salary on the sphot."

"You mean Miss Van Rolsen has actually engaged her?" Mr. Heatherbloom, face abeam, repeated.

"Phawt have I been saying just now?" Scornfully. "Sure, an' is it ears you have on your head?"

Mr. Heatherbloom, a weight lifted from his shoulders, departed from the kitchen. He had wronged her--this poor girl, or young woman, who, in her dire distress, had appealed to him. How he despised now the uncharitable dark thoughts of the night! How he could congratulate himself he had obeyed impulse, and not stopped to reason too closely, or to question too suspiciously, when he had decided to act the day before!

All is well that ends well. All he had to do now was to complete as unostentatiously as possible his term of service--But perhaps he would be released at once?

No; not at once! Those anxious to supersede him began to dribble in, it is true; but they faded away, one by one, after interviews with Miss Van Rolsen, and returned no more. They were a mournful lot, these would-be, ten-dollar-a-week custodians; Mr. Heatherbloom wondered if his own physiognomy in a general way would merge nicely in a composite photograph of them?

His duties he performed now as quietly as he could. Two weeks more, ten days, nine, eight! Then? Ah, then!

He did not see Miss Van Rolsen again nor Miss Dalrymple. He encountered the fair unknown, though, his acquaintance of the park, occasionally, as she in demure cap and white ruffled apron glided softly her allotted way. Sometimes he nodded to her in distant fashion, sometimes she got by before he actually realized he had passed her. She seemed to move so quickly and with such little ado; or, it may be, he was not very observant. He didn't feel very keen on mere minor details these days; he experienced principally the sensation of one who was now merely "marking time", as it were--figuratively performing a variety of goose-step, the way the German soldiers do.

But one day she--Marie, they called her--stopped him.

"I understand from one of the servants that it cost you your position to--do what you did. You know what I mean--"

He looked alarmed. "Don't worry about that."

"But shouldn't I?" Steady dark eyes upon him.

"On the contrary!" Vigorously.

"I don't understand--unless.--"

"The salary--it is nothing here"--Mr. Heatherbloom gestured airily. "I should do much better--one of my ability, you understand!--elsewhere."

"Could you?" She regarded him doubtfully. "But, perhaps, they--It was not very pleasant for you here, anyway. Miss Van Rolsen--her niece, Miss Dalrymple--does not like you." He started. "It was easy to see that; when I mentioned regretfully that the good fortune that brought me where there is plenty; to eat should have been the cause of your being in disfavor, she stopped me short." Mr. Heatherbloom studied the distance. "'The person you speak of intended leaving anyhow,' she said, and her voice was--mon Dieu!--ice."

The listener swallowed. "Quite so," he said jauntily. "Miss Dalrymple

is absolutely correct."

She regarded him an instant with sudden, very mature gaze. "I can't quite make you out."

"No one ever can. Don't try. It isn't worth while. Which reminds me"--he rattled on--"I did you an injury; an injustice--"

"Ah?" she said quickly.

"In my mind! You will excuse me, but do you know that night after I had consigned him to your care in the park, I afterward felt quite anxious--"

"For what?" She came closer.

"Wondering if you--Ha! ha!" Mr. Heatherbloom stopped; in his confusion, his endeavor to turn the conversation from himself and Miss Dalrymple, he seemed to be getting into deep waters.

"You wondered what?" In a low tone.

Since he now felt obliged to speak, he did, coolly enough. "If you had some ulterior motive!" he said with a quiet smile.

She it was who now started back, and her face paled slightly.

"Why?--what ulterior motive? What do you mean?"

He told her in plain words. She breathed more evenly; then smiled sweetly. She had a strange face sometimes. "Thank you," she said. "You are very frank, mon ami. I like you none the less for it. Though you did so injure me--in your thoughts!" Her eyes had an enigmatic light.

"Well, I must go now to Miss Dalrymple. She is beginning to be so fond of me." She drawled the last words as if she liked to linger on them.

"You see I, too, have a little Russian blood in me." Mr. Heatherbloom looked down. "And I think she loves to hear me tell of that wonderful country--the white nights of St. Petersburg--the splendid steppes--the grandeur of our Venice of the north. Of course, she is immensely interested in Russia now." Significantly. "Its ostentation, its splendor, its barbaric picturesqueness! But tell me, what is her prince like? He is very handsome, naturally! Or she would not so dote on him!"

Mr. Heatherbloom's features had hardened; he did not answer directly.

"She likes to talk about Russia?" he said, half to himself.

Marie shrugged. "Is it not to be her country some day?"

"No, it isn't!" The words seemed forced from his lips; he spoke almost fiercely. "She may live there with him, but it will never be her country. This is her country. She is its product; an American to her finger-tips. And all the grand dukes and princes of the Winter Palace can't change her. She belongs to old California; she grew up among the

orange trees and the flowers, and her heart will ever yearn for them in your frozen land of tyranny!"

"Oh! oh! oh!" said Mademoiselle Marie. "How eloquent monsieur can be! Quite an orator! One would say he, too, has known this land of orange trees and flowers!"

"I?" Mr. Heatherbloom bit his lip.

But she only shook a finger. "Oh! oh!" Altogether like a different person from his casual acquaintance of the park! He gazed at her closer; how quickly the marks of trouble, anxiety, had faded from her face; as if they had never existed.

"What do you mean?" he asked, looking into eyes now full of a new and peculiar understanding.

"Nothing," she said and vanished.

He gazed where she had been; he could not account for a sudden strange emotion, as if some one had trailed a shadow over him. A premonition of something going to happen; that could not be foreseen, or averted! Something worse than anything that had gone before! What nonsense! He pressed his lips tightly and went about his duties like an automaton.

Eight days--seven days--six days more!--only six--