

The Peril of Richard Pardon

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CHAPTER I.

Neither vanity nor ambition impels me to apply myself to the task of narrating, in plain terms as I can command, the singular and extraordinary events of the past few months of my life. It is simply that I consider it right that a record should be made, and placed in the hands of those who, after me, are most nearly concerned, of matters which are at once both public and private, having been made public not by any wish or instigation of mine, but by force of circumstances and by the unwritten law which declares that crime shall not be hidden, but shall be brought forward into the full light of day, so that all men may see and judge. What I am about to narrate is something more than an affair of life and death; for these are but a breath, and are resolved in a moment of time. But a man's good fame, or its reverse, is not created, and does not, so swiftly. It lives long after his is laid in his grave, and sheds honor or disgrace upon those who live after him, and who were nearest and dearest to his heart. It is sad to think that this is so, and that the innocent must often suffer with the guilty; but the frailties of our common nature, no less than our lack of large-hearted charitableness, are continually perpetrating these acts of injustice, and I suppose they must be borne with and made the best of. The opportunity, however, of setting wrong things right must not be neglected. Therefore, in a small measure for my own sake, and in a large measure for the sake of those I love, do I gather together the loose threads of a story in which all the passions and emotions of human nature play their pregnant parts.

My name is Richard Pardon, and at the time of the tragedy, which will be recorded in its proper place, I resided with my wife and only child, Eunice, at Boscombe Lodge, Sevenoaks. A brief description of my abode will suffice. Boscombe Lodge is an estate of about twelve acres, the residence is old-fashioned and roomy, and the pleasure grounds surrounding it are charmingly laid out. Indeed, the natural and artistic beauties of the dear home are perfect, and such as should content any man of moderate good sense, even though his tastes were fastidious. Mine were not; I was a happy, contented man, blessed with an affectionate wife and daughter, and it was perhaps because I had lived a life of ease that I was so ill-fitted to meet trouble when it came to me; but the storm which broke upon me was sufficiently terrible to unsettle the reason of any human being, howsoever wise and mentally strong he might be.

Four female servants, a governess, and a coachman did the work and grounds. In addition, Samuel Fleetwood, my coachman.

bles and misfortunes, very poor. His wife and at more than one juncture Mrs. Pardon and I stepped in to their aid. A ministering angel indeed did my wife ever prove herself to be in such cases as this; her presence in the sick-chamber was balm, her smile sunshine, her gentle voice breathed peace. No man could more strongly appreciate the sympathetic aid rendered in a time of need than Samuel Fleetwood; it stirred him to his innermost depths, and he was profoundly grateful for it. My wife and I stood by Mrs. Fleetwood's deathbed, and almost with her last breath she thanked us for the kindness we had shown to her and her husband, and said that the sacrifice of his life would be but a slight return.

"I speak for him as well as for myself," she said. "He feels as I do."

I received with humbleness, as I am sure my wife did, these extravagant expressions of gratitude, to which, however, I made no demur, because I perceived that the utterance of them afforded the poor woman pleasure. To ease her last moments I said that I would continue to be her husband's friend, and a light of great happiness shone in her eyes.

"He will be your faithful and devoted servant," she said, faintly, "to the hour of his death."

Faithful and devoted indeed he was, and I trusted him as I would have trusted a brother. In speaking of the slight service it was in our power to render Samuel Fleetwood and his wife I speak not in praise of myself, but it is necessary that it should be clearly understood that he was truly and earnestly devoted to me and mine, and that in his heart of hearts he worshipped my wife as an angel of mercy and goodness. I did not know what I subsequently learnt, that he had heart-disease, and that he was aware that his days, almost his days, were counted.

It is necessary, also, for a proper understanding of my story that I should say something here of Mlle. Lenormand, governess, companion, and lady's-maid to my dear daughter Eunice. This unusual mingling of duties was of Mlle. Rosalie's own arranging. She entered our service as governess, to perfect Eunice in modern languages, drawing, and painting. I was perfectly satisfied with my daughter's accomplishments, holding as I do the opinion that girls can be, and frequently are, so over-educated as to unfit them for the groove which the scheme of Nature intends them to occupy; but Eunice, her mother, and a lady friend decided between them that something more was required, and hence the engagement of Mlle. Rosalie. I had nothing to do with the engaging of the lady, and therefore it was that I did not see her until she was regularly installed in our house.

She was a fair lady, with languishing blue eyes, with light hair, and eyebrows almost golden in color. My wife, although she confessed she had not inquired, said that she was about twenty-two years of age. I am not a good judge of a woman's age, especially if that woman be fair, and I took my wife's word for it.

"Isn't she sweet, papa?" asked Eunice.

"Too soon to pronounce," I replied, passing my hand fondly over Eunice's hair, which was dark like my wife's.

Some few weeks afterwards I asked Eunice how she was getting on with modern languages.

CHAPTER II.

My wife's words, "And just now we must have no clouds," were an allusion to a joyful event which we were humanly certain would take place during the day. Within the last two years we had struck up a friendly acquaintanceship with a gentleman of independent fortune who

lived a few miles from Boscombe Lodge, and on the morning of the foregoing conversation with my wife I received the following note from him:

MY DEAR MR. PARDON:—Unless I receive a telegram from you to the effect that you will not be able to see me, I shall do myself the pleasure of calling upon you at about one o'clock, to discuss a matter of the deepest and tenderest interest to both of us. With very kind regards to Mrs. and Miss Pardon and yourself, be me, faithfully yours,

HASTINGS CLANRONALD.

There was no mistaking the purport of this letter. We had long suspected that Mr. Clanronald's son, Harry, was in love with our daughter, and it had formed the subject of many serious conversations between me and my wife. Eunice's heart, we saw, was lost, and Harry's father was now coming to ask her hand for his son. A peculiar self-consciousness on the part of Eunice convinced us that she had been informed by Harry of the impending interview. Loving she always was, but there was a clinging, pathetic tenderness in the morning caresses, the meaning of which, having read Mr. Clanronald's letter, was clear to me—as though she was pleading to me to place no bar to her happiness. It was a natural anxiety, but there were no grounds for it. Our Eunice's welfare was to dear to her mother and me that we should not—with some touch of heartache, I must confess—further her loving wishes. To some extent we were responsible for consequences, for we fully approved of Harry's Clanronald, and had not discouraged his visits. He was a manly young fellow, and appeared in every sense suitable for Eunice. Although two years ago his family and mine were strangers, we had been for a great portion of that time on terms of close intimacy, and had contracted a mutual regard for each other. My only fear was that Harry would press for an early union, and I thought Eunice too young to commence the grave business of married life. My wife, however, combated this view, and reminded me that she was younger than Eunice by three months when we were wed. Arguments such as this, applying to others the rules we deemed correct in our own persons, are seldom convincing, but I allowed myself to be beguiled into the promise not to stipulate for a delay of more than a few months.

At the appointed hour Mr. Clanronald came, and we soon arrived at an understanding that the projected union was suitable in every respect; but it was at my instigation, and not at the instigation of Mr. Clanronald, that the business aspect of the affair was postponed for future consideration. I had the best of reasons for this postponement.

"There will be no difficulty, I presume," said Mr. Clanronald, and his eyes wandered to the evidences of wealth by which I was surrounded.

"You may be mistaken," she remarked.

"I may be," I replied, "but I do not think I am in this instance."

Now, my wife is a gentle-minded lady, absolutely without guile. Pure-minded self, she believes in the purity of all come in contact with her. Suspicion enters her mind. She is ever ready

the best of everything and everywhere heard a word of scandal.

The rich hold her in esteem, also her. Association with a innocent and charitable has my days.

"Ar," said my wife, gently, "we are the best judges of women."

Of women's failings," I said, correcting r out of my wisdom.

Of women's virtues also," said my wife. Consider, Richard; have you seen anything in Mlle. Rosalie's conduct of which you disapprove?"

I did consider, and I could fix upon nothing definite except the subject-matter of the pictures. I spoke of this.

"Mlle. Rosalie," said my wife, "has explained all about them to me. She has had a hard life, Richard, and has been compelled to turn her talent as an artist to profitable account. It meant bread-and-butter to her. The dealers would purchase only certain subjects of her, down from low life, or, rather, dear—not to be unjust from a poorer life that ours."

This was a tender theme with my wife. Her heart was touched with a divine pity for the poor and lowly, and no arguments could induce her to condemn them for their coarseness.

"Had we been born of parents such as theirs," she was in the habit of saying, "in places such as theirs, with surroundings such as theirs, we should have been as they are."

In her presence theorists were dumb.

"So," she continued, "Mlle. Rosalie had no option. How grateful we should be for the blessings we enjoy and for the evils we are spared! Mlle. Rosalie is above reproach; she has come safely out of the fire of temptation and cruel suffering. Eunice is deeply attached to her. She is an orphan, too, and her gratitude for the home she has found with us is boundless."

"Well, well," I said, feeling somewhat relieved, "let it be as you wish."

"Thank you, dear," said my sweet wife.

"We will say nothing of this to Eunice; it would grieve her. And just now," she added, with a bright look, "we must have no clouds."

It did not occur to me till afterwards—and then I would not reopen the matter—to inquire in what way Mlle. Rosalie's explanations concerning the pictures had come about. I inquired now of myself, and decided that it could not have been through the prompting of my wife or daughter; then, the prompting came from Mlle. Rosalie.

"A dressmaker as well!" I exclaimed. "She is a paragon, this Mlle. Rosalie of yours!"

"Indeed she is, papa!"

"She can do everything, it seems," I said, "except teach languages and painting."

"I don't want them now, papa."

"Of course not—now that you have Harry."

"Yes, papa," said Eunice, with perfect seriousness.

I pinched her cheek. "What if the dress shouldn't fit, my dear?"

"Oh, but it will, papa. Mlle. Rosalie declares it shall, and it will be made weeks and weeks beforehand."

If anything could have induced me to hasten the wedding-day it would have been the thought that we should be the sooner rid of a woman to whom, despite the glowing eulogiums of my wife and daughter, I had taken an unaccountable dislike—unaccountable for the reason that I could find no just cause for the feeling she had inspired. I did not attach importance to the fact that Mlle. Rosalie was at some pains to obtain direct from me and my wife the ratification of the promise made to her by Eunice. Whether the events which led to my peril—a peril

as deep as that in which mortal man could possibly be placed—would, but for this promise, have taken a different course in my favor I cannot say, because the testimony against me came from both friend and foe; but it would have been better for me if Mlle. Rosalie, on the day of my daughter's engagement, had turned her back on my house forever.

CHAPTER III.

I must make mention of a peculiarity in my habits to which I have been subject from my earliest remembrance. I am a somnambulist. It is not my purpose to enter into any discussion of this fruitful theme; I am simply recording those facts which bear relation to my strange story.

Often in my youthful days was I followed by my nurse and relatives in the night, while I was walking in my sleep, and carefully watched, in order that I should not come to harm. My wanderings were generally of a harmless kind, and sometimes afforded merriment, as on occasions when I made my way to the larder and helped myself to the good things deposited there. But there was one occasion when they took a more serious turn.

I slept on the second floor of a semi-detached house. In the adjoining house resided a man—a widower when I first became acquainted with him—with a little daughter, between whom and myself some innocent love making took place. The father of this little girl, whose name was Elsie, married again, and the step-mother was not kind to the child. Indeed, when the father was absent from home Elsie was cruelly treated by this woman, and I used to hear the cries through the wall which divided the two houses. Elsie slept also on the second floor, in the room adjoining mine, and when she was beaten in the night I could hear her appeals for mercy very clearly. These sounds greatly distressed me, and my child-mind was exercised as to the means by which I could rescue my little sweetheart from the torture to which she was subjected. One occasion business took the father from his home for two or three weeks, and during this time Elsie's undeserved punishment—I was sure it was undeserved—was sharper, and more frequently administered. She showed me the marks of the blows on her skin, and I remember crying excitedly:

"I will kill her! I will kill her!"

I remember also Elsie's grave reply to the effect that it was very, very wrong to kill people, because, as she illogically added, you would get hanged for it. The killing business was therefore set aside, the consequences being too awful to contemplate, and we decided instead that we would run away to-morrow when the clock struck twelve. Where we should run to was not decided; why we should take our flight in broad daylight was not explained; how we should exist was not considered. We were placidly satisfied that the mere fact of running away when the clock struck twelve would be a crushing blow to the hard-hearted step-mother, and that from that moment Elsie's life and mine would be a life of happiness.

On that night it was that my little sweetheart's cries pierced my mind while I was sleeping, and I unconsciously rose, with the intention of going to her rescue. It happened that those about me were less watchful than usual, and thus I succeeded in creeping, unobserved, to the top of our house, where a short ladder leading to a trap-door in the roof enabled me to reach a similar door in the adjoining house, which I found unlocked. It was a dark night, and my enterprise was full of dangers; but sleep-walkers are like cats, and can walk safely on the edge of a precipice. I succeeded in raising the door in the roof, and, in total darkness, felt my way down the stairs, guided doubtless by the little maid's cries for help and mercy. Dashing into the room in which the torture was being inflicted, I sprang upon the cruel woman, and tore at her and beat her so that she, in her turn, probably more frightened than hurt, screamed loudly for assistance. By this time my own people were aroused, and, obtaining entrance to the adjoining house, bore me away to my room.

When I awoke in the morning I had no knowledge or recollection of what had occurred, and I gathered the particulars from those who were interested in them. My bedroom door was found open, and I not in bed; the two trap-doors in the roofs were open, proclaiming the means by which I left our house and obtained entrance to the other; Elsie drew vivid pictures of my actions when I rushed into her bedroom and sprang upon her step-mother; and my own people supplied the rest.

The adventure made a great impression, and was long remembered and spoken of, and from the day of its occurrence I was more carefully watched at home. Upon me it left, however, a deep impression than upon others, and in after life I often thought of it. It was not a passion or a vindictive man; very rarely did I allow anger to master me; and I may truly say that my master was more inclined to gentleness than to violence. How was it, then, that upon this occasion I should have behaved more like a wild beast than a human being? For this is what I was given to understand by all the witnesses of the affair.

Elsie said, "Oh, Dick, you were dreadful; your eyes blazed!" My guardians, instead

of scolding, praised her for her勇敢.

"I am the happiest man in the world, sir," said Harry. "You may trust her safely to me; I will prove myself worthy of your confidence and her love."

Joy and sadness are strangely mingled on such occasions. Parents wistfully recall the sweet reminiscences of the child-life which illumined the past, and touched the hours with golden light. Memory lingers upon the solemn bridge, beyond which they see a little bed, with a flushed face sleeping in a frame of sunny curls, and from beyond which floats the prattle of a voice melodious as heavenly music. The bright eyes look up into their own, slender form, in its dress of snow-white, kneels by the bedside; the shadows gather round it; the little hands are clasped in prayer. Alas! the loving guardianship is coming to an end, and the dear one is going to the arms of another, for weal or woe. My wife and I shed some natural tears at the impending separation, but we were grateful that Eunice's affections were fixed upon a man of sterling honor.

On the following day Eunice informed me that she had promised Mlle. Rosalie that she should remain with us till the day of the wedding; and, moreover, had promised that her governess should be one of her bridesmaids. I would rather not have had it so, but I had not the heart to cross Eunice's wishes at such a happy time of her life as this.

"What does Harry say to it?" I asked.

"Harry says yes to everything," replied Eunice, with delicious emphasis. "He is

enchanted with her. And what do you think, papa? She is going to make my wedding-dress!"

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going anywhere, or doing anything."

"You never have," remarked my wife.

"It is very annoying," I observed. "I wish to Heaven they had thrown a bucket of cold water over me when I was a child. It might have cured me."

"It might have killed you," said my wife gravely. "It is too late now to fret over it, Richard."

"I should not mind," I said, "if I could remember where I go to, or what I do; but all is a blank."

We spoke of other matters, and went down to breakfast. After the meal my wife and I strolled into the garden, and spent an idle hour there. My daughter and Mlle. Rosalie were in the grounds, and Samuel Fleetwood made his appearance to give me a report of some task I had set him to do. When he came towards me I was conversing with Mlle. Rosalie, my wife and Eunice being at a little distance, and I left my daughter's gover