

The Peril of Richard Pardon.

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CHAPTER VII.

In the morning my wife and I had a conversation about Samuel Fleetwood. Desiring to pay every attention to Mr. Wilmot during his stay with us, we thought it would add to his comfort if we assigned to Fleetwood the office of attending solely upon him. With the intention of apprising Fleetwood of his new duties, I was on the point of summoning him, when he made his appearance.

"Are you better this morning, Mr. Fleetwood?" asked my wife.

He replied, in a grateful voice, that he felt easier, and thanked her feelingly for some soup and jelly which she herself had prepared for him. My wife had that perfect knowledge of household duties and that perfect mastery of them which add so much to the comfort of a home. In soups, jellies, preserving, and pickling she was pre-eminent, and it was often a pleasure to her to busy herself in these agreeable services.

"I shall continue to make soup and jelly," she said to Fleetwood, "and other things as well, which you must take. Knowing that I have specially prepared them for you, you will not neglect them."

"Everything that comes from you, madam," replied Fleetwood, "is valued and honored."

"These things will make you strong," said my wife, "and assist your recovery to perfect health."

There was no mournfulness or repining in the smile with which she answered her; it was gentle and resigned.

"We are in God's hands, madam," he said.

She gave him a compassionate look, and then, in her presence, I told Fleetwood what we had resolved upon with respect to Mr. Wilmot. He expressed a cheerful acquiescence, and promised to do everything that lay in his power for our expected visitor.

"He is an old gentleman," I said, "and may require attendance in the night. You will sleep in the room adjoining his."

"Yes, sir," said Fleetwood, and the matter being settled, my wife left us, having household duties to attend to.

"You have something to say to me," I said, observing that Fleetwood lingered.

"I was coming to seek you, sir," was his response. "I found these in the garden this morning."

He produced my cigar-case, with its monogram of raised silver letters, and a lady's silver back-comb of peculiar design, which Mdlle. Rosalie usually wore in her hair.

"Why do you bring me this comb?" I asked. "It belongs to Mdlle. Rosalie."

"I know, sir; but the two were lying together, and I thought it right to bring them both to you."

His manner was not offensive, but it struck me as being more than ordinarily sad.

"There is nothing right or wrong in it," I remarked. "It is a simple accident that these two articles were found together. I must have dropped my cigar-case as I was walking in the garden last night."

It impressed itself upon me here that speaking on the subject was unconsciously causing me annoyance, and I said a little testily, "Take the comb to Mdlle. Rosalie, and tell her where you found it."

"I beg you to excuse me, sir," said Fleetwood, respectfully, "and to give the task to another person."

I was reminded of the promise I had tacitly conveyed to Mdlle. Rosalie that I would set her right with the man who regarded her with suspicion.

"Fleetwood, you do not like Mdlle. Rosalie?"

"I have the strongest dislike to her, sir."

"It has grown."

"I own to it, sir—to something almost like aversion."

I heard her and Mdlle. Rosalie conversing about my uncle.

"This Mr. Wilmot," said Mdlle. Rosalie, "is he very, very rich?"

"So para says," replied Eunice. "A millionaire, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Eunice, laughing. "He must be very good, then!"

"How is that?"

"All rich men must be. They cannot help it."

This was an unsophisticated view, and it brought a smile to my own lips.

On the Wednesday in the following week, the three ladies and I were standing on the lawn in front of the house. Mr. Mortlock was absent, and we were not sorry.

"Papa," said Eunice, "is Mr. Wilmot ever coming? He seems to have forgotten his promise."

"Mr. Wilmot never forgets a promise, Eunice," I said.

As I spoke we all turned our heads in the direction of the gates, being attracted by the sound of animated voices and footsteps; and presently two gentlemen came in view—Mr. Mortlock, and an old gentleman leaning on his arm. I knew my uncle instantly, although I saw at a glance that he had aged since we last met, and I hastened to meet him.

"Have I taken you by surprise, nephew Richard?" he asked, but had always addressed me thus. "But friend Mortlock knew I was coming by this train."

A pang of mortification shot through me. Why had "friend Mortlock" known, and not I? Why was he the chosen one? I concealed my mortification, however, and expressed my delight at seeing him.

He nodded, and nodded—he was a little spare man, with not an ounce of superfluous flesh on his bones, and his head seemed to be set on springs—and shook hands with me cordially, and greeted my wife and kissed her, and then, holding Eunice's two hands in his, kissed her also.

"The privilege of old age, my dear," he said. "And you are Eunice. You have grown into a very lovely young woman. We shall be the best of friends—the best of friends. You have a pretty place here, nephew Richard, and it is well looked after. That is what I like to see. I beg your pardon."

These last words were in reference to Mdlle. Rosalie, who stood a little in the background. I introduced her.

"How do you do—how do you do?" he said, nodding at her as he had added to us. Once set going, it seemed difficult for him to stop. "Lenormand—Lenormand, I know a family of that name in Versailles. Any relation?"

"I have no relations, sir," said Mdlle. Rosalie, adding, with a glance at me, "out of England."

"Indeed, indeed," he said, "no relation out of England? Nephew Richard, I want to walk through your grounds, but first I wish to place this in safety." He motioned to Mr. Mortlock, who came forward with a dispatch-box, which I had observed he was carrying. "There is money in it, nephew Richard. I never travel without money. It is the open sesame everywhere, even among savages, my dear"—this to Eunice, "I have seen many, and it is surprising how quickly they learn the value of money."

"Your rooms are ready, sir," I said. "Will you see them now?"

"At once—at once. Carry the box for me. No, do not trouble, my dear. Nephew Richard and I will go alone; we will rejoin you presently."

We went up to his rooms together, and I was glad to hear him say that they were pleasantly situated.

"I hope you will make a long stay with us," I said.

"That depends—that depends. Let me thank you now for your courtesy to my friend Mortlock. He is full of your praises, of yours and your good family's. A charming gentleman—an exceptionally charming gentleman. Do you not think so?"

To please him I replied, in as cheerful a voice as I could command, that Mr. Mortlock was a charming gentleman.

"That is as it should be—as it should be. I have a great regard for him, the greatest regard. I knew that you would be great friends, great friends. Place the box there—there, by the side of my bed, at the head. That is the spot. Thank you! Now we will go down to the ladies."

With polished politeness he offered my wife and Eunice each an arm, and we all strolled through the grounds, at the beauty of which he expressed himself much gratified. Samuel Fleetwood approached us.

He nodded and kept on nodding, till Eunice, selecting a small white rose, put it in his buttonhole.

"Thank you, my dear: I like attention. But why not one to your father?"

Smilingly she picked a flower, and put it in my coat.

"And why not one for friend Mortlock?" said my uncle.

With a heightened color and biting her lip, Eunice gave Mr. Mortlock a rose. He made no demer that she did not fasten it in his coat as she had fastened my uncle's and mine; but he took his revenge by placing the rose to his lips before he put it in his buttonhole.

Mr. Wilmot laughed.

"O, youth, youth!" he exclaimed, "inestimable, priceless treasure, that can so invest with magic qualities a simple rose! Will science ever lead to the discovery of the elixir. Nephew Richard, I have in my despatch-box five thousand pounds. I would give it cheerfully for a year of life: I would give all my wealth, and stand a beggar in naked feet, if I were twenty years more."

My dear niece—and it was a mark of graciousness on his part to so address my wife—"I am, as you see, fond of life: it is all we have."

"Not all," said my wife, raising her eyes to the bright heavens.

"Yes, yes, yes," he responded, nodding and nodding; "but some believe one way some another. I quarrel with no man's opinions on politics or theology, nor will I be quarreled with. My time is too short, and I would enjoy every minute left to me. My health is perfect, and I am only enfeebled physically by old age. I have nourished the juices of my body by the generous juices of Nature. By the way, nephew Richard, some of my own wine will arrive here this evening in time for dinner."

"My cellar is small," I said, "but it contains a few bottles of good vintages."

"I have better," he responded, "and you yourself shall be the judge. It is a lovely day; the air here is pure and salubrious; and beauty accompanies me." He bowed gallantly to Eunice and her mother, and continued to enliven the way by similar chatter, to which we listened without a sign of dissent, as we were in duty bound to do; but I, being able to interpret what was hidden from all others, except perhaps Eunice, saw that my uncle's utterances were disquieting to my wife; and it was upon her advice, "to say nothing to him to-day of Eunice's engagement," that I made no reference to what was nearest to our hearts.

In the evening, when dinner was over, Harry came, and was duly introduced.

"Clanronald!" exclaimed Mr. Wilmot; he eyed Harry narrowly, and there was a shade of displeasure on his face. "Clanronald? Ah!"

Then he looked at Eunice, who was blushing and ill at ease, and at Harry again, who was nervous and awkward in the presence of a stranger who seemed to be criticising him, and not favorably; and then he turned his sharp eyes upon Mr. Mortlock, who met them smilingly, whereat Mr. Wilmot smiled, and nodded and nodded with great vivacity. These two appeared to understand each other without speaking. When his fit of nodding was over, my uncle, undoubtedly with malice prepense, claimed Harry's sole attention, leaving Mr. Mortlock the task of entertaining Eunice. I am sorry to say that this made Harry sullen, and his behavior was certainly not calculated to impress Mr. Wilmot favorably. However, this did not appear to displease my uncle, who took Harry as his partner in a rubber of whist, and even when Harry revoked it did not ruffle him. After the rubber my uncle proposed a game of chess, and checked poor Harry in twelve moves. Then my uncle called upon Mr. Mortlock to furnish entertainment, and this gentleman, with great willingness, applied himself to the task, and surprised us with a display of accomplishments of which he had hitherto made no parade. He related story after story; he gave imitations of singular people he had met in his travels; he sang in French, German, and Italian, and accompanied himself with the skill of a master. My wife, as I observed, disapproved of some of these songs, but Mr. Wilmot shook with laughter. Mdlle. Rosalie was called upon to contribute to the entertainment, and she sang admirably, and with great spirit. At length, to our relief, the evening came to an end. Harry had said good-night and had gone home unhappy, Eunice was miserable, and my wife and I were filled with disquieting reflections. Only Mr. Wilmot and Mr. Mortlock seemed to have enjoyed themselves and to have passed a pleasant time. My uncle bade Eunice and her mother, good-night, and said that he foresaw that his visit would be eminently agreeable.

"I breakfast late," he said. "Nephew Richard, you will see me to my room."

Fleetwood was there when we reached it, arranging Mr. Wilmot's things for the night. Upon our entrance he retired, through a communicating door, into his own adjoining bedroom.

"To-morrow, nephew Richard," said Mr. Wilmot, "we will speak of matters of business, upon which I have no doubt we shall agree. There is a small task I wish you to assist me in to-night. Lift my despatch-box on the table. Thank you. Here is the key. Unlock it. Always on the first night of my arrival in a new place I see that my money and valuables are safe. You will see a cash-box there. Yes, that is it. This key, with a piece of blue ribbon round it, will open it. Now, let us count."

Together we counted the money in the cash-box. There were exactly five thousand pounds—five hundred sovereigns, and four thousand five hundred in Bank of England notes. The cash-box contained also several articles of jewelry of considerable value, one of which, a single-stoned diamond ring, the jewel and its setting of extraordinary brilliancy, although not large, he put on his finger. Before the money and jewels were replaced in the box Mr. Wilmot called Fleetwood into the room, and the three spread out on the table. When they were all safely packed away, my uncle said:

"Do not let me be disturbed in the morning, nephew Richard. I never allow myself to be called or disturbed. Nature informs me when I have had sufficient rest. Tell your good lady that I shall not participate in the family breakfast. Somewhere about one o'clock in the day we will have our chat. Good-night."

On my way to my bedroom I encountered Mdlle. Rosalie, and bade her good-night.

"Good-night, sir," she said. "What a charming gentleman Mr. Wilmot is, and what a delightful evening we have passed!" Then she whispered, "I ought to tell you, sir, that I have not had the courage yet to tell Mr. Pardon my secret. I am writing out my life, which I shall give her to read, and then she will know all."

I nodded, and left her. I had matters of greater importance to think of than Mdlle. Rosalie's small family secrets.

"Now," said my uncle on the following day, when we were together in his room, "we will have our chat. I shall be glad to get it off my mind, and you will, too. First let me express my approval of my new scoundrel, Fleetwood. When I leave you, I shall be almost inclined to tempt him to accompany me."

"He has heart-disease," I said, "and, I am afraid, has not long to live."

"It is a pity, for he seems to be all you represented him. He has been assisting me in my money matters this morning. I have also had a visit from Mdlle. Rosalie. A charming person—a very charming person. Most persons are who take the trouble to make themselves agreeable, and who do not cross you."

He held up his hand, and looked at the diamond ring on his finger which he had placed there the previous night. He had a remarkably white and shapely hand, of which he was evidently proud; and, indeed, wizened and pinched up as he was, he must in his young years have been a handsome, bright-eyed man. "By the way, nephew Richard, the young gentleman who was here last night and revoked at whist? Have you known him long?"

"For somewhat over two years," I replied. "But my letter has explained."

"What letter do you refer to?" asked Mr. Wilmot.

"The letter I sent you a little while since, to the care of your lawyers in London."

"Ah, those letters!" said Mr. Wilmot, interrupting me again with a smile. "Would you believe, nephew Richard, that there are two boxes full of them—actually two boxes full? I burst out laughing when I saw them, and I quickly locked the boxes again. Life is too short for correspondence—and such correspondence! Circulars, begging letters, requests for loans—no, no! I declined to wade through them. When I return to London I shall instruct someone to separate the wheat from the chaff, and then probably burn the lot—positively burn the lot without looking at them."

I was seized with consternation. My uncle had not read my letter announcing Eunice's engagement with Harry Clanronald; he was in ignorance that Eunice's heart was pledged to the young fellow; and he was now in my house with the intention of promoting Mr. Mortlock's suit. I was convinced of it, and presented the proof case, and left no shadow of doubt behind.

"A great many years ago," said my uncle, "I was acquainted with a Mr. Clanronald, whom I have no reason to think well of. If it is the same, he is this young man's father. Perhaps you have a photograph of him?"

"I have. Would you like to see it?"

I went to the drawing-room, and, selecting the album in which Mr. Clanronald's portrait was placed, I took it up to Mr. Wilmot. My mind was filled with misgivings, for my uncle's voice, when he spoke of Mr. Clanronald, boded ill.

"Let me find the portrait for myself," he said; and I handed him the album. As he turned over the pages I felt that consequences almost vital were trembling in the balance. "Yes," said Mr. Wilmot, pausing at a page, "this is the man—it is he!" He nodded and snarled at the bit of pasteboard. "Let us be sure. This is the father of the young man who played what he called chess with me last night?"

"Yes."

He closed the book. "Nephew Richard, you and I do not know much of each other."

"Not as much as I should have desired, sir."

"Well, well. Perhaps a closer acquaintance was not to be desired. Perhaps we have been better friends apart. It is often the case—often the case. I like you; I like your wife; I like your daughter. There are one or two others I like—one or two. I like Mortlock; you like him, too; you said he was a charming gentleman. So he is—charming. There are men I dislike—some more, some less. They do not trouble me, because I do not allow them to trouble me. I wipe them out. I do not express my dislike; I do not as much as think of them, unless they happen to be forced upon me. As in this case, I dislike your Mr. Clanronald, much more than less. I will not enter into the reasons for my dislike; they are private and delicate, and are, to me, sufficient. That much being said, we dismiss the Clanronalds. Let me never hear their name again."

"But, sir," I said, in a helpless tone of remonstrance, for hope seemed surely slipping from me, "it is of this very Harry Clanronald I must speak."

"Pardon me," he said, in a tone of extreme politeness, and had I been better acquainted with his character, it is often the case—often the case. I like you; I like your wife; I like your daughter. There are one or two others I like—one or two. I like Mortlock; you like him, too; you said he was a charming gentleman. So he is—charming. There are men I dislike—some more, some less. They do not trouble me, because I do not allow them to trouble me. I wipe them out. I do not express my dislike; I do not as much as think of them, unless they happen to be forced upon me. As in this case, I dislike your Mr. Clanronald, much more than less. I will not enter into the reasons for my dislike; they are private and delicate, and are, to me, sufficient. That much being said, we dismiss the Clanronalds. Let me never hear their name again."

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change come over his face. His sharp eyes grew sharper and smaller, and this dimming sign, if I may so express it, distinguished all his features. His wizened face grew still more wizened, his mouth seemed to contract, his nostrils to become thinner, and when he spoke again his voice was cold, clear, and precise, and seemed to come through lips of steel.

"Nephew Richard, I was right when I said we did not know much of each other. Even if I had not set my heart upon this match, I would never consent to your daughter marrying young Mr. Clanronald; but I have set my heart upon it, and if you are prudent you will range yourself on my side. You shall not be in the dark, whichever way you decide. I will be very—I trust not painfully—explicit. It is in no petty or boastful mood that I say I have behaved well to you and yours."

"You have behaved, sir," I said, "most liberally, most generously. A lifetime of gratitude could not repay you."

"I will be content with less," he said, dryly. "There is not much merit in what I have done; what you have received from me I could well spare. In all my life I have really loved but one human being—your mother, my only sister. When your father fell into misfortune I resolved upon my course; and once resolved, nephew Richard, it needs, indeed, a powerful reason to move me. Oblige me by unlocking my despatch-box. He paused occasionally, as I attended to his instructions. "Beneath the cash-box are some papers tied round with red tape. Bring them forward. Lawyer's papers, nephew Richard. Lock the box again. Untie the papers, and take from them the largest and most important. It is my will. You may read it if you like."

"Excuse me, sir. I shall feel more at my ease if I do not."

"As you please. It is my will, making you my heir to the greater portion of my property. For what I have done for you, for what I have cheerfully and ungrudgingly done, I have never asked from you the least return; I have never requested you to render me the slightest favor. For the first and only time I ask now a favor at your hands: give your consent to the union of your daughter with friend Mortlock."

"I cannot, sir."

"Weigh well your words, nephew Richard. The consequences of your refusal will be that I shall destroy this will, making another person my heir. To you and yours not one shilling; nor shall you ever receive another shilling of my money."

My heart faint within me, absolute beggary stared me in the face; and with that beggary, as it seemed to me, disgrace, "I regret," continued my uncle, "that I should have been forced into speaking so plainly. I give you till to-morrow morning to reflect, to talk over the matter with your wife, if you care to do so. Till then, we will speak no further upon the subject. What I have resolved upon is irrevocable, and there is nothing surer in life than that you and I have done with each other forever if you then determine to oppose my wishes. Oblige me now by leaving me. At this hour of the day I always seek a little repose."

I saw that it would not improve matters if I remained with him; therefore I left him and sought my wife.

"What has happened?" she asked, in a voice of alarm. She read the news in my face.

"The worst," I replied.

I told her all, and, cast down and despairing as she was, she said that I had acted right.

"Do you realize what it means?" I said. "We shall have to quit this place at once; we shall be thrown upon the world to starve!" And then I started up, and paced the room in a state of terrible excitement, saying that it was monstrous such a blow should be dealt us by a feeble old man.

"Feeble and old," I repeated, vacantly; "yes, feeble and old. He is over seventy. If he should die to-night!" The words froze upon my lips.

"Richard!" cried my wife. "God forgive me!" I said; "I know not what I am saying. But it shall not—shall not—shall not be!"

All our sweet efforts were powerless to rush me, in uncontrollable agitation I came from her presence.

How the day passed I can scarcely recall. I know that my wife sent a note by hand to Harry Clanronald, requesting him not to come to our house this evening. I know that we, Mdlle. Rosalie, Mr. Wilmot, and Mr. Mortlock, dined together, and that I was forced to play the part of host. I know that the three whose names I have written were full of sparkle and