

years Nora Findlay, the daughter of a Scotch ironmaster. Of my own parents the Sisters declared that they knew nothing, and as I grew up they constantly tried to persuade me to take the veil. Nora, my best friend, left the convent, returned to England, and two years afterwards married Sir Henry; whereupon she generously offered me a place in her home as companion. She is no relation, but knowing my susceptibilities, and in order that I should not be looked upon as a paid companion, she gave out that we were cousins. Hence I was accepted as such everywhere.

"With Nora I had a pleasant, care-free life, until about two years ago I met the major, unknown to Nora, and afterwards became on friendly terms with a young man—an officer in the Guards, who was his friend. Tattersett won a large sum from him at cards; and then I saw to my dismay that he had been attracted only by the mild flirtation I had carried on with him, and that he had played in order to please me. The major increased my dismay by telling me that this young man was the son of a certain woman who was his bitter enemy—the Italian woman called La Gioia—and that she would seek a terrible revenge upon us both. This was to frighten me. My life having been spent in the convent I knew very little of the ways of the world; yet I soon saw sufficient of both to know that Tattersett was an expert forger, and that his accomplice Graham was a clever continental thief, whom the police had been long wanting. How I called at the house in Queen's Gate Gardens, and afterwards lost control over my own actions, I have already explained. The motive of our marriage is an absolute enigma."

She stood before me white-faced and rigid.

"It is fortunate that Graham is here. Shall we seek the truth from him?" I asked.

"Yes," she responded. "Demand from him the reason of our mysterious union."

La Gioia touched the bell, gave an order to the servant, and after a few moments of dead silence Graham stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

"You!" gasped the man, halting quickly in alarm.

"Yes," I said. "Enter, Mr Graham. We wish to speak with you."

"You've betrayed me—curse you!" he cried, turning upon La Gioia. "You've told them the truth!" The colour had died from his face, and he looked as grey and aged as on the first occasion when he had met and he had tempted me.

"We desire the truth from your own lips," I said determinedly. "I am not here without precautions. The house is surrounded by police, and they will enter at a sign from me, if you refuse an explanation—the truth, mind. If you lie, you will both be arrested."

"I know nothing," he declared, his countenance dark and sullen. He made a slight instinctive movement towards his pocket, and I knew that a revolver was there.

"You know the reason of our marriage," I said quickly. "What was it?"

"Speak!" urged La Gioia. "You can only save yourself by telling the truth."

"Save myself!" he cried in a tone of defiance. "You wish to force me to confession—you and this woman La Gioia! You've acted cleverly. When she invited me here this afternoon I did not dream that she had outwitted me."

The woman had, however, made the appointment in ignorance of our intentions, therefore she must have had some other motive. But he was entrapped, and saw no way of escape.

"I have worked diligently all these months, and have solved the mystery of what you really are," I said.

"Then that's sufficient for you, I suppose," and his thin lips snapped together.

"No, it is not sufficient. To attempt to conceal anything further is useless. I desire from you a statement of the whole truth."

"And condemn myself?"

"You will not condemn yourself if you are perfectly frank with us," I assured him.

There was a long silence. His small eyes darted an evil look at La Gioia, who stood near him, erect and triumphant. Suddenly he answered in a tone hard and unnatural:

"If you know all, as you say, there is little need to say much about my own association with Tattersett. Of the latter, the police are well aware that he is one of the most expert forgers in Europe. It was he and I who obtained sixty thousand pounds from the Credit Lyonnais in Bordeaux, and who, among other little matters of business, tricked Parr's for twenty thousand. At Scotland Yard they have all along suspected us, but have never obtained sufficient evidence to justify arrest. We took very good care of that, for after ten years' partnership we were not likely to blunder." He spoke braggingly, for all thieves seem proud of the extent of their frauds.

"But you want to know about your marriage—eh?" he went on. "Well, to tell the truth, it happened like this. The major, who had dabbled in the byways of chemistry as a toxicologist, held the secret of a certain most deadly poison—one that was used by the ancients a thousand years ago—and conceived by its means a gigantic plan of defrauding life insurance companies. About that time he accidentally met Miss Wynd, and cultivated her acquaintance because, being extremely handsome, she would be useful as a decoy. The secret marriage was accomplished, but just as the elaborate plan was to be put into operation he made an astounding discovery."

"What was the reason of the marriage?" I inquired, breathlessly. He paused in hesitation.

"Because it was essential that in close association with us we should have a doctor of reputation, able to assist where necessary and give death-certificates for production to the various life insurance companies. You were known to us by repute as a clever but impecunious man; therefore, it was decided that you should become our accomplice. With that object Tattersett, accompanied by a young woman whom he paid to represent herself as Beryl Wynd, went to Doctor's Commons and petitioned for a special license, possession was obtained of the house in Queen's Gate Gardens, which I had occupied two years previously under the name of Ashwicke—for we used each other's names just as circumstances required—paying the caretaker a ten-pound note, and when all was in readiness you were called and bribed to marry Beryl, who was already there, rendered helpless with unbalanced brain by the deadly yavana. As I posed, as you will remember, as Wyndham Wynd, father of the young lady, and after the marriage, in order to entrap you into becoming our accomplice, tempted you to take her life. You refused, therefore you also fell a victim to a cigarette steeped in a decoction of curare, handed you by the major, and were sent out of the country, it being our intention on your return to threaten you with being a party to a fraudulent marriage, and thus compel you to become our accomplice."

"But this paper which I found beneath her pillow?" And I took from my pocket a sheet of paper with the name of La Gioia upon it.

"It is a note I sent to her on the day before her visit to Queen's Gate Gardens in order to induce her to come and consult with me. She had evidently carried it in her pocket."

"And this photograph?" I asked, showing him the picture I had found concealed in the colonel's study.

"We took that picture of her as she lay apparently dead for production afterwards to the life-insurance company. The colonel, who was a friend of Tattersett's, must have found it in the latter's rooms and secured it. It was only because two days after the marriage Sir Henry's wife overheard a conversation between myself and Tattersett, in which you were mentioned, that we were prevented from making our gigantic coup against the life offices. While Beryl was asleep her ladyship found the wedding-ring. Then, knowing your address, for she had seen you with Doctor Raymond, she sought your acquaintance on your return, and by ingenious questioning became half-convinced that you were actually Beryl's husband. Your friend Raymond was slightly acquainted with her, and had been introduced to Beryl some months before."

"But I cannot see why I should have been specially chosen as victim of this extraordinary plot," my wife exclaimed, her arm linked in mine. "You say that Tattersett made a discovery which caused him to alter his plans. What was it?"

"He discovered a few hours after

your marriage that you were his daughter."

"His daughter—the daughter of that man!" she cried.

"Yes," he answered seriously. "He did not, however, know it until while you were lying insensible after the marriage, he discovered on your chest the tattoo mark of the three hearts, which he himself had placed there years before. Then, overcome by remorse, he administered an antidote, placed you upon a seat in Hyde Park and watched until you recovered consciousness and returned to Gloucester Square. It had before been arranged that an insurance already effected upon you should be claimed. The truth is," he went on, "that Wyndham Ashwicke, alias Major Tattersett, first married in York the daughter of a cavalry officer, and by her you were born. A year afterwards, however, they separated, and your mother died, and you were placed in the Convent at Brunoy under the name of Wynd, while your father plunged into a life of dissipation on the Continent which ended in the marriage with this lady, then known as La Gioia."

"It seems incredible," my love declared. "I cannot believe it."

"But Nora introduced you as Feo Ashwicke on the first occasion we met after our marriage," I remarked.

"I well remember it. Nora must have discovered the secret of my birth although when I questioned her after your departure she declared that she had only bestowed a fictitious name upon me as a joke."

"Yet Ashwicke was your actual name," I observed.

"You will find the register of your birth in York," interposed Graham. "I have told you the truth."

"I will hear it from my father's own lips," she said.

"Alas!" the grey faced man answered very gravely, "that is impossible. Your father is dead."

"Dead!" I echoed. "Tattersett dead?"

"Yes; he was dead lifeless in his rooms in Piccadilly East yesterday afternoon. His man called me, and I discovered upon the table a tiny tube containing some crystals of the secret yavana. He had evidently touched them accidentally with his fingers and the result was fatal. The police and doctor believe it due to natural causes, as I secured the tube and destroyed it before their arrival. The news of the discovery is in the evening's papers," and taking a copy of the "Globe" from his pocket he handed it to me, indicating the paragraph.

I read the four bare lines aloud, both my well-beloved and the dead man's widow standing in rigid silence.

The elucidation of the bewildering mystery and its tragic denouement held us speechless. It staggered belief.

My explanation to Bullen, or our subsequent conversation need not be here recounted. Suffice it to say that from that moment when the truth became apparent, the major's widow, who had once sought to take both our lives, became our firmest and most intimate friend; while Graham having expressed regret at his association in the conspiracy, and declared his intention of leading an honest life in future, was allowed to escape abroad, where he still remains.

And Beryl? She is my wife. Ah! that small word, which is so synonymous of peace and happiness! Several years have passed and I have risen

lily in my profession, far above my deserts, I fear. Yet we are still lovers. We had often visitors at Atworth and at Gloucester Square, while there is no more welcome guest at our own table in Harley-street than the ever-erratic Bob Raymond.

The original copy of the ponderous ancient Florentine treatise with its rusty locks, which the major left in possession of La Gioia, has been presented by the letter to the Bodleian Library at Oxford, where it can now be seen, while Hofer's re-discovery of the yavana having opened up an entirely new field to toxicologists, the deadly vegetable, like strychnine and atropia, is to-day used as one of the most powerful and valuable medicines, many lives being saved yearly by its administration in infinitesimal doses.

All the bitterness of the past has faded. What more need I say?

To-night as I sit here in my consulting room, writing down this strange history for you, my friendly reader, my wife lingers beside me, sweet and smiling in white raiment, a dead white dress that reminds me vividly of that July day long ago when we first met within the Church of St. Ann's, Wilton Place, while at her throat is that quaint little charm, the note of interrogation set with diamonds, a relic of her ill-fated mother.

She has bent, and kissing me tenderly upon the brow, has whispered into my ear that no man and wife in all the world are half so happy as ourselves.

[The End.]

We think that when our readers have seen the Christmas number of the "New Zealand Graphic" they will admit that in claiming for it a premier position we do not ask too much. In former years the annual has always taken a first place, not only in New Zealand, but in Australasia, its coloured supplement being invariably ahead of anything issued by any other journal. This year another splendid supplement appears in conjunction with a number that is in every sense an artistic triumph. The subject of the coloured plate is "The Native Birds of New Zealand," and on it are displayed in all their wonderful beauty of form and plumage, representatives of the colony's feathered tribe. The picture is in a way a companion to the "Native Flowers of New Zealand," which was issued last year with the Christmas "Graphic," and is to be found to-day ornamenting thousands of homes in the colony. The birds should be as popular as the flowers.

Passing from the supplement to the body of the annual, it is a picture gallery from cover to cover. Page after page of finely executed engravings, reproduced from special photos or paintings by our leading artists, delight the eye. One would say that all the scenic beauties of New Zealand had been copied there. It is an album of the colony's attractions, and as such should find an honoured place on every table. No more appropriate gift could be sent by New Zealanders to their friends at Home than this unique production, the attractions of which are more specifically set forth in another part of this paper. The price of the annual is one shilling.

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