

## JIM RICHMOND'S CHANCE.

[London Tit-Bits.]

By mutual consent that night a move had been made to the lawn, for the open air was as an invigorating tonic after the closeness of the dining-room. Cigars aglow, Jim Richmond and myself lay comfortably stretched in the garden chairs, while in the French window Jim's wife sat industriously plying her needle on some dainty little garments that augured a coming interesting event, from time to time aiding her husband in his inquisition as to my doings from the date of our previous meeting.

"But come," I said—my examination being completed to their satisfaction—"tell me something about how the world has been going with you." Three years ago I left you, James Richmond, a patientless medico, and a more or less miserable bachelor. Surely some extraordinary chance that comes not to every man who dreams of fat fees and Harley Street must have lifted you into your present established position? There is no other deduction possible. Who, then, is the wealthy valetudinarian, and how did this chance come about?"

My words caused them to smile. "Your deduction is not far wide of the mark," returned Jim, after a pause, "but—that is a story my wife can tell better than I, for to her I owe everything."

"Jim exaggerates my share in the affair, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Richmond, shaking a reproving finger at her husband.

"Tell me the story, and I will judge," I said, promptly, and yielding to my persuasion Jim commenced:—

"Well, Jack, as you know, I was always keen on toxicology, and shortly after leaving the hospital, where I had made a special study of the subject, I contributed a paper to the 'Lancet' on 'The Effect of Certain little-known Oriental Poisons.' Three days after it was published I was surprised to receive a telegram. Hastily tearing open the envelope I read the following message: 'Just read your able treatise. Shall be glad if you will dine with me to-night. My carriage will meet you at the station.—DIDSBURY.'"

"Didsbury of Elton Towers!" I cried, involuntarily, and gave a whistle of amazement. Lord Didsbury! It was a chance that the most noted of my confreres would have jumped at.

"Bradshaw" informed me that it was a three hours' journey, and dining meant staying at Elton the night. There would be just time to pack my bag and run around to acquaint Eileen with the news. Need I say that she was as excited over it as myself. Her whispered "Good luck" was ringing in my ears all through the journey.

Alighting in due course at my destination I entered the waiting brougham, and was rapidly driven to the Towers. "You are expected," said the man who took my card. "Come this way, and I will show you your room. His lordship dines at seven."

By the time I had donned my evening clothes the man reappeared and ushered me into the spacious dining-room. An old gentleman, with snow-white hair, was leaning on the mantelpiece before the fire. He turned at my entrance, and I was immediately struck with the corpse-like pallor or his cadaverous face. It needed no second glance to tell me that this man was ill.

Crossing over to him I took his extended hand. It was limp and cold, and his fingers seemed powerless to exert the slightest pressure.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Richmond," he said, weakly. "Pray be seated. Johnson, you may serve."

The dinner was perfect, and, feeling hungry after my journey, I did justice to it. His lordship, however, took nothing. He sat back in his chair breathing stentoriously, his eyes glaring into vacancy, and after attempting conversation and being answered in monosyllables that proclaimed his aberration I gave it up. He seemed utterly exhausted in mind and body.

It was a somewhat trying experience, and I was not unthankful when I found myself assisting him back to the fireplace. He motioned the servant to leave the room.

"My lord," I said, when we were alone, "I do not know whether you wished to consult me in my professional capacity, but your condition—"

"I know it!" he interrupted, querulously. "I want you to listen. . . . Three months ago I was as hale and hearty as any man of my age. Today I am what you see me—a physical wreck. Carter—my medical man—would have me believe it is only what is to be expected—in short, that I am breaking up. He's a fool! I tell you no man understands his own body better than himself. A man does not break up in a few short weeks like this, and I have studied myself for years. It was all incomprehensible to me until this morning I read your paper. Richmond, if you had studied my case you could not have described the symptoms clearer."

His utterance came disjointedly, as if every word was an effort. To say that I was astonished would be to put it mildly.

"My lord!" I cried, amazedly; "you mean—?"

"As true as heaven's arch is over us," he whispered, solemnly, "I believe that I am being slowly poisoned."

I was not unprepared for the announcement, for, truth to tell, the suspicion had been with me as I watched him at the table. "Pray allow me," I said, bending towards him and taking his wrist. My examination and questioning made suspicion conviction. There was not the least doubt of it. He was suffering from the cumulative effect of a certain drug I had described in my paper.

"It's true, then?" he said, reading my face. "Pshaw! I know it, man. I have known it for weeks. Good heavens! It is horrible. I am, and always have been, an abstemious man. When the certainty forced itself upon me I surreptitiously took samples of my food and drink and had them analyzed. Three times I do so, but nothing deleterious could be found. It is baffling—it is fiendish! I know that someone about me is murdering me, and yet I am impotent. It is driving me mad. . . . I fear to eat. . . . I dare not drink. . . . For Heaven's sake, I adjure you, prevent this crime!"

"Calm yourself, my lord," I said, quietly. "Excitement in your present low condition is dangerous. Will you leave this matter to me?"

My quiet manner reassured him, and he fell back in a chair with a feeble gesture of assent. I touched the bell. "Pray be good enough to order a conveyance," I said to him. "I wish to go to the nearest druggist."

The man appeared and received the order. With a parting word of encouragement I went out, and was rapidly driven to the town. The coachman was inclined to be communicative, and ere I reentered the Towers I had learned that for some two years or more his lordship had lived the life of a recluse.

"A regular 'ermit!" said the man; "don't seem to 'ave the heart for anything. It was different when 'er ladyship was alive—before Lady Flora went away. She was 'is only child—made what they call a runaway match—eloped with Captain Dugard. Dessay you read about it? The old man thought a powerful lot of 'er and the business nearly broke 'is heart for 'e knew the Captain for what 'e was—nothing more nor less than an adventurer. They visit occasionally—for there was some sort of reconciliation, I believe, when 'er ladyship died—but it's very rarely; the last time was three months ago, as near as no matter. . . ."

The man's chatter gave me food for reflection.

I found his lordship sitting as I had left him. Pouring out a dose of the mixture I had obtained from the chemist, I watched him drink it.

"If it be what we think, your lordship," I said, "that is the antidote; but plainly I must tell you the administering of it cannot be prolonged indefinitely. The baue must be discovered." I rang the bell. "His lordship wishes to retire," I said to the man, and assisting him up the stairs I saw him safely into bed, where, almost immediately he fell asleep. Leaving him, I stole downstairs and, dropping into a cosy chair, gave myself up to thought. The solemn-visaged butler placed the tantalus and cigars at my elbow and proceeded to replenish the fire. It struck me that he was taking an inordinate time over the business, and suddenly looking up I found him gazing intently at my face. Anxiety was plainly apparent in his look.

"His lordship seems far from well, Johnson," I said.

"Sorry I am to see it, sir," he returned, "for a truer gentleman never breathed. Thirty year I've been in his lordship's service. Only a year ago I've seen him come back after a day with the guns as keen on his food as the best of 'em. It breaks my heart to see him like this, sir. He eats nothing. It seems almost as if he was afraid to touch the food."

"I suppose his daughter's marriage upset him terribly?" I suggested.

"Yes; it was a bad business that, sir. She was always a headstrong, flighty girl, and the Captain's just the sort of man to attract such a one as her ladyship was. Absolutely impetuous he was. Its common talk that he married her for the fortune he knows some day will come to her. There's queer tales about him. They say he spends most of his time at some gambling casinos on the Continent, only showing up here occasionally to bleed the old man for more money. He takes care to be most assiduous in his attentions while he's here. A rank bad lot, sir, if I may be excused for saying it."

"His lordship, I understand, is of a studious disposition?"

"Yes, sir. Spends most of his time in the library. Most punctilious, too; and a regular stickler for trifles. Only yesterday he discharged a maid because she had forgotten to set out a new pen and clean stationery on the table."

He rambled on for some time, rising to the bait of my questions, until, having ascertained all that I wished to learn from him, I picked up a book and, taking the hint, he withdrew.

After he had gone I lay back and revolved the whole of the circumstances in my mind. The man had informed me that Dugard had

seen service in India previous to leaving the army, and the conviction forced itself upon me that he, hoping to hasten the old man's death, was the culprit. The deduction seemed the only possible one in view of my knowledge of his antecedents and the peculiar means employed. By some means he was even then administering the noxious drug to his victim. But how? It could not be through the medium of his food. That idea could be dismissed at once. How, then? It struck me that the solution could only be arrived at by someone who had the opportunity of observing his lordship's daily routine.

It was impossible for me to remain, for my doing so would only arouse suspicion, and defeat the end. Provided with the antidote the old man would be safe for some days.

Unexpectedly a word spoken by the butler recurred to my mind, and like a flash the way revealed itself to me. Next morning, after a conversation with his lordship, who seemed a new man, I left the Towers, and four hours afterwards was revealing my plan to my love. Without demur she agreed to aid me, and—By Jove! there goes the bell. Eileen, I must leave you to finish the story.

Jim here rose and went to answer the summons. With a smile his wife took up the tale:—

You will, of course, have guessed Jim's plan. I was to take upon myself the duties of Parlour-maid in his lordship's household. Though somewhat doubtful as to my capability for my post, the thought that I might assist him in his career decided me, and the next train carried me to my situation. Lord Didsbury was apprised of my coming, so the ground was made easy for me.

I must have played the part well, for no suspicion as to my real character entered into the minds of my fellow-servants. My explicit instructions were to discover how the poison was administered, and immediately on my arrival I set my woman's wits to work to read the riddle. Association with the servants convinced me that none of them were taking a hand in the dastardly business.

The scheme had been devised by some more subtle brain. His lordship gave me every opportunity, but though I observed him closely for three days I could discover nothing, and every day he had been compelled to have recourse to the antidote.

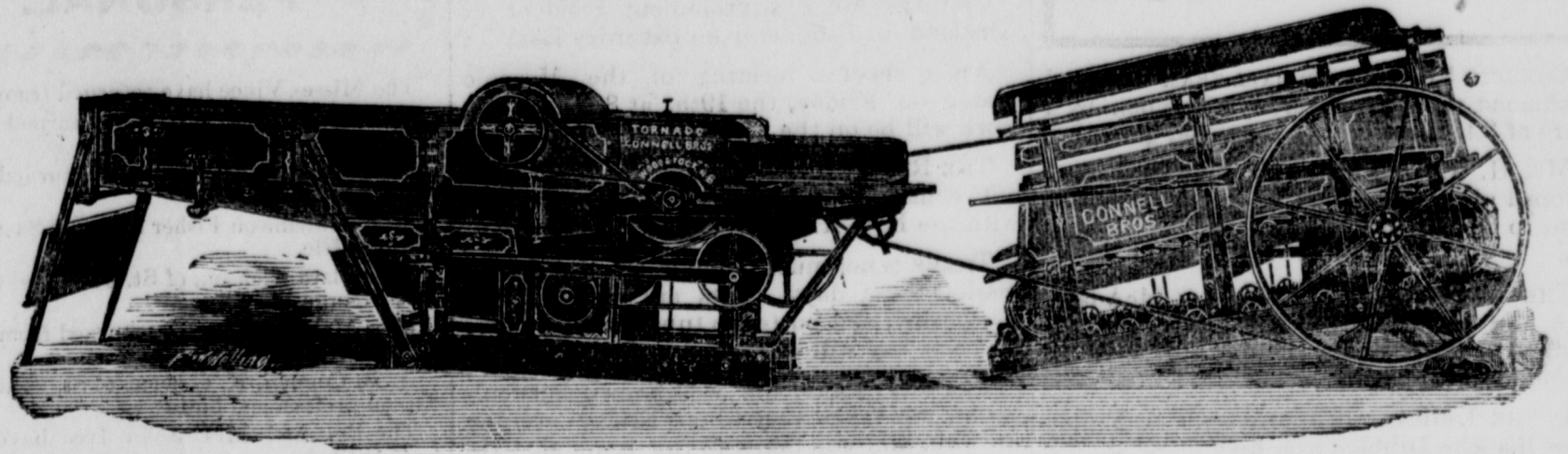
On the fourth day Captain Dugard arrived on one of his flying visits. The wife was indisposed, he said, and he had left her at Mentone. His manner with his lordship struck me as like nothing else than that of a cringing hound, but there was that in his face when he watched the old man tottering about the room that made me insensibly think of a tiger stalking its prey.

He left in the evening, with a smile on his face. Previous to his going, however, he approached Johnson, the butler, in the hall and, slipping a small package into his hand, said: "You might see that this is placed on the old man's table, will you? They're his special nibs. You know what a faddist he is over them. Won't write with anything else. I forgot to give them to him."

The incident seemed trivial at the moment and almost immediately it passed out of my mind. It was the next morning when his lordship came into the library and, sitting at his desk, took up his pen that its significance dawned on me.

It was the duty of the maid to see that fresh stationery was laid out every day, and, forgetting his punctiliousness in the matter, I had neglected to insert a new nib in his penholder. With an ejaculation of annoyance he drew the old one out of the pen and replaced it with one taken from the open box. Then, unconsciously, he placed it in his lips to moisten it, as one naturally is in

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the habit of doing to cause the ink to flow easily.

Like an inspiration sent from Heaven the solution of the mystery revealed itself to me, and I dashed forward to arrest his hand.

"The pen! the pen!" I gasped. He regarded me in silent amazement.

"What do you mean?" he said, presently. "The secret is out at last."

"Believe those nibs are poisoned!" I cried; "I believe those nibs are poisoned!"

He started back in alarm, and the pen dropped from his nerveless fingers on to the table.

"Merciful Heaven!" he quavered, staring wildly at the box.

Five minutes later the wire was flashing its message to Jim. His analysis fully confirmed my supposition. Every nib in the box had been immersed in the deadly poison. Its tastelessness had precluded discovery. Through the medium of his habit Lord Didsbury had unconsciously assimilated into his system a daily modicum of the drug.

That night his lordship wrote to his son-in-law. What he wrote is known only to himself and his would-be murderer.

Some months afterwards the body of a suicide bearing a strange resemblance to the Captain was exposed for identification in the Paris Morgue. It was never claimed.

Lord Didsbury was not unmindful of the part Jim had played in plucking him from the jaws of death, and with him many things were possible. That is why the dream of "fat fees and Harley Street" has become such a pleasing reality.

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