

THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

By BOOTH TARKINGTON
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CHAPTER XI.

IF it were possible I would not speak of the agony of which I was a witness that night in the apartment of my friends at Mme. Brossard's. I went with reluctance, but there was no choice. Keredec had sent for me.

Keredec had told his tragic ward too much. The latter had understood but only the nature of the catastrophe which overhung his return to France, and now that it was indeed concrete and definite the guardian was forced into fuller disclosures, every word making the anguish of the listener more intolerable. To him it seemed that he was being forced to suffer for the sins of another man.

"Do you think that you can make me believe I did this," he cried—"that I made life unbearable for her, drove her from me and took this hideous, painted old woman in her place? It's a lie! You can't make me believe such a monstrous lie as that! You can't! You can't!"

He threw himself violently upon the couch, face downward, shuddering from head to foot.

"My poor boy, it is the truth," said Keredec, kneeling beside him and putting a great arm across his shoulders. "It is what a thousand men are doing, this night. Nothing is more common or more unexplainable—or more simple. Of all the nations it is the same, wherever life has become artificial and the poor foolish young men have too much money and nothing to do. You do not understand it, but our friend here, and I, we understand because we remember what we have been seeing all our lives. You say it is not you who did such crazy, horrible things, and you are right. When this poor woman who is so painted and who is so old, when you began to give your money and your time and your life to her, when she got you into this horrible marriage with her, you were blind—you went staggering in a bad dream. Your soul hid away, far down inside you, with its hands over its face. If it could have once stood straight, if the eyes of your body could have once been clear for it to look through, if you could have once been as you are today or as you were when you were a little child, you would have cried out with horror both of her and of yourself, as you do now, and you would have run away from her and from everything you had put in your life. But in your suffering you must rejoice. The triumph is that your mind hates that old life as greatly as your soul hates it. You are as good as if you had never been the wild fellow—yes, the wicked fellow—that you were. For a man who shakes off his sin is clean. He stands as pure as if he had never sinned."

The desperate young man on the couch answered only with the sobbing of a broken hearted child.

I came back to my pavilion after midnight, but I did not sleep, though I lay upon my bed until dawn. Then I went for a long, hard walk, breakfasted at Dives and begged a ride back to Mme. Brossard's in a peasant's cart which was going that way.

I found George Ward waiting for me on the little veranda of the pavilion, looking handsome and more prosperously distinguished and distinguishedly prosperous and generally well conditioned than ever, as I told him.

"I have some news for you," he said after the hearty greeting—"an announcement, in fact. Elizabeth's going to marry Cresson Ingle."

"That is the news—the announcement—you spoke of?"

"Yes, that is it."

To save my life I could not have told at that moment what else I had expected or feared that he might say, but I certainly took a deep breath of relief. "I am very glad," I said. "It should be a happy alliance."

"On the whole, I think it will be," he returned thoughtfully. "Ingle's done his share of hard living, and I once had a notion—he glanced smilingly at me—"well, I dare say you know my notion. But it is a good match for Elizabeth and not without advantages on many counts. You see, it's time I married, myself. She feels that very strongly, and I think her decision to accept Ingle is partly due to her wish to make all clear for a new mistress of my household."

He laughed again, but I did not, and, noting my silence, he turned upon me a more scrutinizing look than he had yet given me and said:

"You look quite haggard. You haven't been ill?"

"No; I've had a bad night. That's all."

"Oh, I heard something of a riotous scene taking place over here," he said. "One of the gardeners was talking about it to Elizabeth."

"What was it you heard?" I asked quickly.

"He said that there was great excitement at Mme. Brossard's because a strange woman had turned up and claimed an insane young man for her husband."

"Damnation!" I started from my chair. "Did Mrs. Harman hear this story?"

"Not last night, I'm certain. But what difference would it possibly make whether she heard it or not? She doesn't know these people surely?"

"She knows the man."

"This insane?"

"He is not insane," I interrupted.

"He has lost the memory of his earlier life—lost it through an accident. You and I saw the accident."

"That's impossible," said George, frowning. "I never saw but one accident that you saw."

"That was the one. The man is Larabee Harman."

George had struck a match to light a cigar, but the operation remained incomplete. He dropped the match upon the floor and set his foot upon it.

"Well, tell me about it," he said.

"You haven't heard anything about him since the accident?"

"Only that he did eventually recover and was taken away from the hospital. I heard that his mind was impaired. Does Louise?" he began, stopped and cleared his throat. "Has Mrs. Harman heard that he is here?"

"Yes; she has seen him."

"Do you mean the scoundrel has been bothering her? Elizabeth didn't tell me of this."

"Your sister doesn't know," I said. "I think you ought to understand the whole case."

"Go ahead," he bade me.

"He's not at all what you think," I said. "There's an enormous difference, almost impossible to explain to you, but something you'd understand at once if you saw him."

"What is the change?" asked Ward.

And his voice showed that he was greatly disquieted. "What is he like?"

"As well as I can tell you, he's like an old but very engaging boy, with something pathetic about him; quite splendidly handsome!"

"Oh, he had good looks to spare when I first knew him," George said bitterly.

"No. When he came here he did not know of her existence except in the vaguest way. But, to go back to that, I'd better tell you first that the woman we saw with him one day on the boulevard and who was in the accident with him—"

"La Mursiana, the dancer, I know."

"She had got him to go through a marriage with her."

"What?" Ward's eyes flashed as he shouted the word.

"It seems inexplicable; but, as I understand it, he was never quite sober at that time. He had begun to use drugs and was often in a half stupefied condition. As a matter of fact, the woman did what she pleased with him. There's no doubt about the validity of the marriage."

George asked suddenly, "Did this marriage take place in France?"

"Yes; you'd better hear me through," I remonstrated. "When he was taken from the hospital he was placed in charge of a Professor Keredec, a madman of whom you've probably heard."

"Madman? Why, no; he's a member of the institute, a psychologist or a physician, isn't he? At any rate, of considerable celebrity."

"Nevertheless," I insisted grimly, "as a misty vapor as I ever saw; a poet, self-contradicting and inconsistent orator. Harman's aunt put him in Keredec's charge, and he was taken up into the Tyrol and virtually hidden for two years, the idea being literally to give him something like an education. Keredec's phrase is, 'restoration of his soul.' It was as vital to get him out of his horrible wife's clutches. But she picked up that rat in the garden out yonder—he'd been some sort of stable manager for Harman once—and set him on the track."

"She wants money, of course."

"Yes; more money. A fair allowance has always been sent to her. Keredec has interviewed her notary, and she wants a settlement, naming a sum actually larger than the whole estate amounts to. She refuses to budge until this impossible settlement is made. In the meantime Keredec's ward is in so dreadful a state of horror and grief I am afraid it is possible that his mind may really give way."

"When was it that Louise saw him?"

"Ah, that," I said, "is where Keredec has been a poet and a dreamer indeed. It was his plan that they should meet."

"You mean he brought this wreck of Harman, these husks and shreds of man, down here for Louise to see?"

Ward cried incredulously. "Oh, monstrous!"

"There is something behind all this that you don't know," he said slowly. "When did Keredec make you his confidant?"

"Last night. Most of what I learned was as much a revelation to his victim as it was to me. Harman did not know till then that the lady he had been meeting had been his wife or that he had ever seen her before he came here. He had mistaken her name, and she did not enlighten him."

"Meeting?" said Ward harshly.

"They have been meeting every day, George."

"I won't believe it."

"It's true. He spoke to her in the woods one day; I was there and saw it. I know now that she knew him at once, and she ran away, but not in anger. They've been together every day since then, and I'm afraid—miserably afraid, Ward—that her old feeling for him has been revived."

I have heard Ward use an oath only two or three times in my life, and this was one of them.

"Oh, by —" he cried, starting to his feet. "I should like to meet Professor Keredec."

"I am at your service, my dear sir," said a deep voice from the veranda. And, opening the door, the professor walked into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

SAID cavalierly: "This is Mr. Ward, Professor Keredec. He is Mrs. Harman's cousin and close friend. We were speaking of your reasons for bringing Mr. Harman to this place. Frankly, we were questioning your motives."

"My motives? I have wished to restore to two young people the paradise which they had lost."

Ward uttered an exclamation none the less violent because it was half suppressed.

"We should be glad of an explanation," he said, resting his arms on my table and leaning across it toward Keredec.

"It is simple," began the professor. "I learned my poor boy's history well from those who could tell me, from his papers—yes, and from the bundles of old time letters which were given me. From all these I learned what a beautiful soul was that lady who loved him so much that she ran away from her home for his sake. He was already ready the slave of what was bad and foolish; he had gone too far from himself, and she could not save him then. The spirit was dying in him, although it was there, and it was good."

Ward's acrid laughter rang out in the room.

"The inconceivable selfishness, the devilish brutality of it!" Ward's face was scarlet. "You didn't care how you sacrificed her?"

"Sacrificed?" The professor suddenly released the huge volume of his voice. "Sacrificed!" he thundered. "If I could give him back to her as he is now it would be restoring to her all that she had loved in him, the real part of him! It would be the greatest gift of her life."

"Then, my dear Keredec," I answered, "either you are really insane or I am! You knew that this poor, unfortunate devil of a Harman was tied to that hyenic prowler yonder who tried to fatten on him and will never release him; you knew that. Then why did you bring him down here to fall in love with a woman he can never have?"

"My dear fellow," interposed George quickly, "you underestimate Professor Keredec's shrewdness. He knows that my cousin Louise never obtained a divorce from her husband."

"What?" I said, amazed.

"I say Mrs. Harman never obtained a divorce."

"I saw notices of it at the time," I gasped.

"No. What you saw was that she had made an application for divorce. Her family got her that far and then she revolved. The suit was dropped."

"It is true, indeed," said Keredec. "The poor boy was on the other side of the world, and he thought it was granted."

I turned upon him sharply. "You knew it?"

"It is a year that I have known it."

"Do you not understand," George interposed, "that what Professor Keredec risked for his 'poor boy' in returning to France was a trial on the charge of bigamy?"

The professor recoiled from the definite brutality.

"I conceive it very likely to happen," said George, "unless you get him out of the country before the lady now installed here as his wife discovers the truth."

"But she must not!" Keredec lifted both hands toward Ward appealingly. They trembled. "She cannot! There is nothing that could make her suspect it!"

"One particular thing would be my telling her," said Ward quietly.

"Never!" cried the professor. "You would not do that!"

"I will, unless you get him out of the country, and quickly."

"George!" I exclaimed, coming forward between them. "This won't do at all! You can't!"

"That's enough," he said, waving me back, and I saw that his hand was shaking, too, like Keredec's. His face had grown very white. "I know what you think," he went on, addressing me, "but you're wrong. It isn't for myself. When I sailed for New York I thought there was a chance that she would carry out the action she began four years ago and rid herself of him definitely—that is, I thought until today there was some hope for me. If

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trace of his tragedy had passed. The wonder and worship written there left no room for anything else.

"Mrs. Harman," I began.

"Yes," she said. "I am coming."

"But I don't want you to. I've come for fear you would, and you—you must not!" I stammered. "You must wait. There is a scene—"

"I know," she said quietly. "That must be, of course."

Harman rose, and she took both his hands, holding them against her breast. "My dear," she said gently, "my dearest, you must stay. Will you promise not to pass that door even until you have word from me again?"

"Yes," he answered huskily, "if you'll promise it shall come—some day."

"It shall. Be sure of it."

She stepped out upon the gallery. I followed. Mme. Brossard and Keredec still held the foot of the steps, but La Mursiana had abandoned the siege and, accompanied by Mr. Percy and Rameau, the black bearded notary, who had joined her, was crossing the garden toward her own apartment. She glanced over her shoulder, sent forth a scream and, whirling about, ran viciously for the steps, where she was again blocked by the indomitable Keredec.

"Ah, you foolish woman, I know who you are!" she cried. "You want to get yourself into trouble. That man in the room up there has been my husband three years and more."

"No, madame," said Louise Harman. "You are mistaken; he is my husband."

"But you divorced him," vociferated the other wildly. "You divorced him to America!"

"No; you are mistaken," the quiet voice replied. "The suit was withdrawn. He is still my husband."

I heard the professor's groan of despair, but it was drowned in the wild shriek of Mariana. "What? You tell me that? Ah, the miserable! If what you say is true he shall pay bitterly! He shall wish that he had died by fire!"

What? You think he can marry me, back my leg so that I cannot dance

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she's seen him again and he's been anything except literally unbearable. It's all over with me. From the first I never had a chance against him. He was a hard rival, even when he'd become only a cruel memory. His voice rose. "Heaven knows why it is. It isn't because of anything he's done or has—it's just because it's him. I don't know, but I know my chance is gone for good. That leaves me free to act for her. No one can accuse me of doing it for myself. And I swear

she shall go through that along with me, and I shall have breath in my body."

"George, for pity's sake!" I shouted, throwing my arm about his shoulders, for his voice had risen to a pitch of excitement and fury that I feared must bring the whole place upon us. Some one was already knocking for admission.

I crossed the room and opened the door. Miss Elizabeth stood there, red faced and flustered, and behind her stood Mr. Cresson Ingle, who looked dubiously amused.

Miss Elizabeth cut short a rather embarrassed handshake which her betrothed and I exchanged.

"This morning I learned the true situation over here, and I'm afraid Louise has heard. At least she's not at Quesnay. I got into a panic for fear she had come here; but, thank heaven, she does not seem to— Good gracious! What's that?"

It was the discordant voice of Mariana la Mursiana. My door was still open. I turned to look and saw her, not faced, touselled hair, insufficiently wrapped, striving to ascend the gallery steps, but valiantly opposed by Mme. Brossard.

"But no, madame," insisted Mme. Brossard. "You cannot ascend. There is nothing on the upper floor except the apartment of Professor Keredec."

"Name of a dog!" shrieked the other. "It is my husband's apartment, I tell you. I'll have a femme avec lui!"

"It is Mme. Harman who is there," said Keredec hoarsely in my ear. "I came away and left them together."

"Come," I said, and letting the others think what they would, sprang across the veranda, the professor beside me, and ran toward the two women, who were beginning to struggle with more than their tongues. I leaped by them and up the steps, but Keredec thrust himself between our hostess and her opponent, planting his great bulk on the lowest step. Glancing hurriedly over my shoulder, I saw the Spanish woman strike him furiously upon the breast with both hands, but I knew she would never pass him. I entered the salon of the "grande suite" and closed the door quickly behind me.

Louise Harman was standing at the other end of the room. Her husband was kneeling beside her. He held one of her hands in both of his. Her other rested upon his head, and something in their attitudes made me know I had come in upon their leave taking. But from the face he lifted toward her all

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