

# The Adventures of a Man of Science.

BY L. T. MEADE AND CLIFFORD HALIFAX, M.D.

We have taken down these stories from time to time as our friend, Paul Gilchrist, has related them to us. He is a man whose life study has been science in its most interesting forms—he is also a keen observer of human nature and a noted traveller. He has an unbounded sympathy for his kind, and it has been his lot to be consulted on many occasions by all sorts and conditions of men.

## V.—AT THE STEPS OF THE ALTAR.



HERE were few cleverer surgeons in London than my friend, Edward Wesseley, and when I called at his house in Harley Street on a certain morning early in the March of last year, I scarcely expected to be able to secure the five minutes of his attention which were essential to my purpose. I was anxious to consult him with regard to a certain point on brain paralysis, about which I was then making some interesting investigations. A word from his vast store of experience would set a small difficulty straight, and I scribbled a message to that effect on my card. The servant quickly reappeared, asking me to come immediately into his master's presence. I entered Wesseley's consulting-room—he came forward with his accustomed eagerness to greet me.

"No apologies, my dear Gilchrist," he cried. "It so happens that you have come in the very nick of time. I am just about to operate on a patient who is awaiting me in my home for cases next door. His illness has arisen from the following cause: He received a bad fall on the left side of the head when playing polo about a month ago. Since then he has been paralyzed in the right arm and leg, with anæsthesia in the leg almost complete, and hyperæsthesia in the arm. I have not the slightest doubt that paralysis is due to pressure on the angular gyrus of the left side of the brain, and am about to trephine immediately. My operation will explain away your difficulties better than any amount of discussion; and if you care to lend me a hand I shall be only too pleased to have your suggestions, and, if necessary, your help."

"Of course I shall be delighted," I answered.

I accompanied Wesseley next door, and

we waited for a moment or two in a room next the one in which the operation was to take place.

"I will not call you in until the patient is unconscious," he said. "I am only waiting now until Rivington, the anæsthetist, has arrived."

Wesseley had scarcely said the latter words before the door was flung open, and a slender, young-looking man was ushered into the room—he had a thin, dark face, and deeply-set eyes with a somewhat nervous expression. Wesseley introduced him to me as Dr. Rivington, and the two men immediately withdrew into the adjoining apartment. The door between the two rooms was slightly ajar, and I could hear their voices murmuring



"WESSELEY INTRODUCED HIM TO ME AS DR. RIVINGTON."

in consultation. I could also get a glimpse of the figure of a tall man lying on a sofa. A nurse, in a conventional dress, was flitting backwards and forwards. The doctors continued to consult together in a distant part of the room; the patient lay motionless. I was just beginning to wonder why the man was not put under the influence of the anæsthetic, when Wesseley hurriedly re-entered the room where I was sitting, shutting the door behind him.

"What is to be done?" he said, in a voice which betrayed some slight irritation. "Rivington is behaving in the most extraordinary manner—he absolutely refuses to administer the anæsthetic."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. He is one of the best anæsthetists in London, and I never saw him hesitate before. He came into the room behind the patient, gave him a glance, changed colour quite perceptibly, and motioned to me to accompany him to the other end of the room. He then explained in a whisper that Colonel Normanton happens to be an acquaintance of his own, that he has a strong personal dislike to him, that he considers him to be a bad subject for anæsthetics, and that, under the circumstances, nothing will induce him to administer the chloroform. I had no time to over-ride his ridiculous scruples, for I am due at another operation within an hour; he was obstinate as a mule, and has just left the house. The unfortunate Colonel is wondering at the unaccountable delay."

"Can I not help you?" I asked. "You remember that I was anæsthetist at my hospital for the last year of my residence. I think I can manage the case, if you are inclined to trust me."

"Capital, Gilchrist," cried Wesseley, relief and delight now beaming over his countenance. "Once again I repeat that you have come in the very nick of time. Will you come with me into the next room?"

I willingly complied, and entered the operating-room with the surgeon.

The patient was still lying perfectly quiet, with a drawn, anxious expression very perceptible on his face. The nature of the operation about to be performed was of the deepest interest to me, but the matter I had in hand was to produce unconsciousness, and when I had got Colonel Normanton into that condition, to watch him with the most undeviating attention.

He was a large, heavily built, somewhat florid man, and I was not surprised that he took some time to get thoroughly under the influence of the anæsthetic. At last, however, the moment arrived when Wesseley could begin to perform the very delicate operation on the side of the head, which was to save the patient's life. A small portion of the skull was removed by the trephine, with that skill and rapidity for which the great surgeon was famous—the usual *toilette* was then completed, and the operation was

over. During that time I scarcely felt myself at liberty to remove my eyes from the patient's face—he had taken the anæsthetic with difficulty, and I now perceived by a blue tinge over his face and the coldness of his extremities that he was in extreme danger of collapse.

"We must get him out of his unconscious state as quickly as possible," I said, turning to Wesseley; "Rivington was right, he is a bad subject for anæsthetics."

The surgeon and I instantly began to use the usual restoratives, artificial respiration, injections of ether, nitrite of amyl, and the rest; and, in order to expedite matters, we opened the flannel shirt which the patient was wearing, and exposed his chest to full view.

Momentous as the present occasion was, when we did this I could not but give a perceptible start: in the neighbourhood of the man's left breast was a large violet patch nearly the size of the palm of the hand; it was red near the edges, and looked inclined to ulcerate. Before I had time to utter a word or to draw Wesseley's attention to it, the patient uttered a sigh and opened his eyes; I hastily fastened his shirt, and Wesseley began to talk to him in an encouraging tone. After a very short period he was sufficiently recovered to be removed to his bed in the adjoining room. Wesseley had to hurry off to his next operation, and I returned to continue the experiments which I was making in my laboratory. The clue I required was now in my hands, and I hoped to produce results of some importance. I was scarcely likely to see Colonel Normanton again—he had unconsciously rendered me a service; and I had, by the merest chance, made a discovery with regard to him which I was scarcely likely to forget.

In my travels over the world I have visited China and other Eastern places, and have therefore had opportunities of going into the subject of the special and terrible disease with which the unfortunate Colonel was infected—how he had contracted it, whether he knew himself of the sure but awful fate which awaited him, whether Wesseley had after all done well to rescue him from a less terrible death, were questions which I could not help asking myself from time to time. From the little I had seen of the patient, he looked like a man who had lived hard and fast—his record was doubtless not the best in the world. Rivington, the well-known anæsthetist, must have had reasons for his extraordinary refusal to administer the anæsthetic.

In the rush of other work and other interests, however, the memory of Normanton began gradually to fade from my mental horizon, and I might, doubtless, have forgotten him altogether had not the following events taken place.

On a certain afternoon in the month of June of the same year I entered a friend's drawing-room just before dinner, and saw Normanton standing by an open window. I recognised him immediately, and as my eyes met his I saw him glance in my direction. He looked now in all respects a different person from the helpless patient whom I had seen a couple of months ago. He was a strikingly handsome man, of between forty and fifty years of age, very tall and broad in proportion—he carried himself like a soldier, and had the suave manner of a man of the world. I had scarcely entered the room when I saw his restless eyes look past me in the direction of the door: a slender, dark-eyed girl of about twenty years of age had come in. She was dressed very simply, in white, and gave an instant impression of great purity and innocence. Our hostess and host came up to speak to her, and then Colonel Normanton advanced to her side; he and she withdrew into the window together, and the next moment dinner was announced. There was something about this girl's face which attracted me, and I had a sort of undefinable feeling that I had seen her before. At dinner, I asked my next-door neighbour her name.

"Oh, she is so charming," was the instant reply; "do you not know her? She is the famous Miss Rivington, the artist—her picture made quite an impression in this year's Academy; she is scarcely twenty yet,

and everyone is talking about her; they say she is engaged to that very handsome Colonel Normanton, with whom we are all more or less in love—you see, he is talking to her now. Don't you admire him immensely?"

I glanced across the dinner-table—Colonel Normanton was saying something to the young girl by his side; she looked up at him in a shy, sweet manner, then the long lashes fell over her pale but beautifully moulded cheeks.

"There is no doubt whatever of the engagement," said the lady whom I had taken in to dinner, "and, for my part," she added, "I am very glad of it, for Hilda really requires someone to look after her."

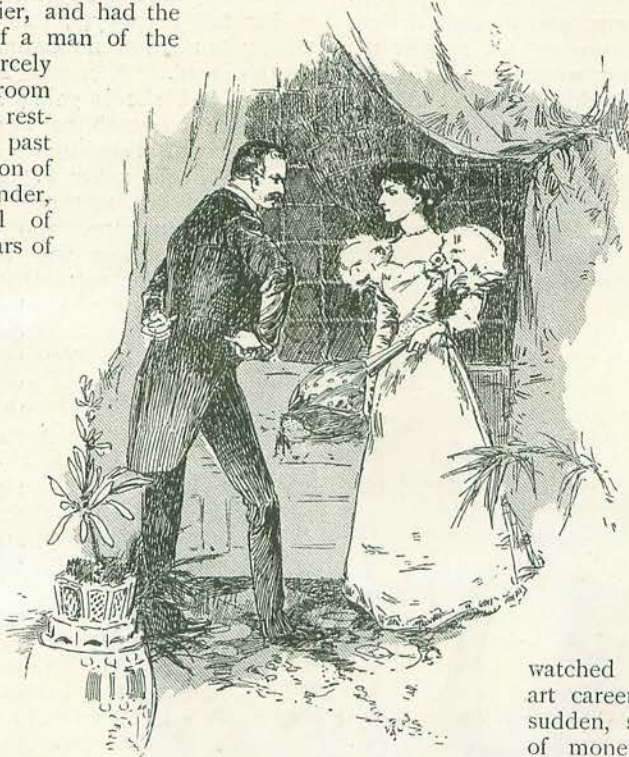
"I fancy that I once saw her brother," I replied. "Is not he Dr. Rivington, the famous anæsthetist?"

"Yes, yes, of course—and, oh, Mr. Gilchrist, there is quite a romantic story about the pair—they were left orphans at a very early age and grew up together, quite devoted, you know. Hilda insisted on making a home for him while he was walking the hospitals; he, on his part,

watched her through her art career. Then, all of a sudden, she was left a lot of money, something between two and three thousand a year. He refused to

touch a penny of it, and, report says, they are not quite so friendly now. I have even heard it whispered that he does not approve of her engagement; but surely nothing could be more suitable. Colonel Normanton belongs to a crack regiment, and is a man of very good family; his being a little older than his bride is too ridiculous a reason for objecting to the match."

I muttered something very like an oath



"HE AND SHE WITHDREW INTO THE WINDOW TOGETHER."

under my breath. In any case such a union would be a desecration; with the knowledge which I possessed of the unfortunate Colonel it would be too horrible to contemplate.

Mrs. Singleton told me some more particulars with regard to Hilda Rivington—she was a philanthropist—she was daring to a degree, not a scrap conventional—utterly fearless, and with a latent obstinacy in her character which caused her on every occasion to carry out her own will, with special tenacity, when once her mind was fully made up.

"I see by your face, Mr. Gilchrist, that you do not approve of the match," said my neighbour at last; "but don't imagine now that you can do anything to make or mar in the matter. Hilda might have been induced to give Colonel Normanton up had Arthur, her brother, not been so set against the union. That fact put her on her mettle, and it is useless to deny that she is desperately in love with the Colonel. For my part, I don't think she could do better."

"As a fact, I believe that discrepancy of age is a mistake in marriage," I answered.

Just then the signal was given for the ladies to retire; soon afterwards we joined them in the drawing-room, where I was intro-

duced to Miss Rivington. She was standing under a tall lamp, which was shaded with rose-coloured silk. Whether the reflection caused by the light or the approach of her lover made the colour to flame into the girl's cheeks, I do not know, but her beauty became more apparent than ever, and I knew that the torch had been already applied which would set a strong but passionate nature on fire.

She motioned me to a seat near her side, and began to talk in a cultivated and intelligent way on many subjects. There was a dash and go about her least word which attracted me much: the sensitive curves of her beautiful lips, the flashing gleams from her teeth, which were as regular and even as a row of pearls; the sympathetic and varying expression which came and went in her full, deep eyes, told me that I was talking to a girl of no ordinary capacity and depth of soul.

"And yet she is going to throw herself away, with her youth, her beauty, her talent," I could not help muttering. "Such a marriage ought never to be contemplated. Yes, I can see that she is in love with Colonel Normanton, and I am a total stranger—it is also true that I have got possession of his more than ghastly secret through an accident, but I very much doubt whether I ought to allow this marriage to proceed."

"Colonel Normanton tells me that you were instrumental in saving his life not very long ago," she said.

"He lays too much stress upon the circumstance," I replied. "I happened to be with Wesseley when he was about to operate on the Colonel for a somewhat serious accident."

"Yes, yes, I know all about it," she continued; "and my brother refused to give the anæsthetic"—her



"WE JOINED THEM IN THE DRAWING-ROOM."

voice underwent a complete change as she uttered the last words. "You met Arthur on that occasion," she continued. "Was that the first time you made his acquaintance?"

"I had heard of your brother, of course, but I had never had the pleasure of meeting him before," I replied.

"I wish he were your friend," she continued, with great earnestness—"I wish he would confide in you, and"—she lowered her voice until it sank almost to a whisper—"I have heard of you before," she said; "you like to do kindnesses for people who are in difficulties. Now, at the present moment, I am in a serious one—I love Colonel Normanton; I respect him more than any other living man—in less than two months' time I hope to be his wife; and yet"—she paused—"he is coming," she said, "and I must be quick. Arthur will not write to me nor see me. He is angry because—because I give myself to the man whom I love. Once Arthur and I had all our thoughts, all our hopes, our loves in common. The idea of this estrangement makes me miserable, notwithstanding that I have the best of all causes for bliss."

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked.

"If you would, you could help me. Would you go and see Arthur?—oh, I know it is too much to ask, but——"

"Give me a message to your brother, and I will take it, with pleasure," I answered.

"That is just it—I cannot give you a direct message"; she rose abruptly as she spoke—Colonel Normanton had almost reached her side.

"I leave it to your judgment," she said, turning round abruptly and facing me—then she held out one of her long, delicate, artistic hands. I clasped it for an instant.

"You are the friend of some friends of mine," she said; "you have had more difficult tasks than this to execute before now." She smiled at me and turned aside. The next instant she was bidding her hostess good-night, and a moment later she and Colonel Normanton had left the room.

When I returned to my flat I sat for some time absorbed in anxious reflection. Miss Rivington had given me a difficult task to execute. She and I were total strangers, and yet she had asked me to interfere in her affairs. She wished me to effect a reconciliation between her brother and herself. This I might accomplish, but not in the way she thought. From time to time I have called myself a bit of a fool for meddling so much in the business of other people; nevertheless,

when the next occasion arises, I always rush into the fray with the same absorbing interest. The thought of this girl, and the really awful fate which awaited her, truly appalled me. I felt now that even if she had not asked me to interfere I must have done so—I must have taken some step to try and save her from herself.

I went to bed in the small hours, and called the following morning early at Rivington's house in Queen Anne Street. I sent in my card, and was admitted at once into his presence. He was a man of extraordinary nervous force and power; very young, not only in appearance but in fact, to have obtained the high position which he had now secured. He came forward to meet me, and shook hands with cordiality.

"I do not apologize for this intrusion," I said; "I met your sister last night at General Sommers's house, in Curzon Street."

When I mentioned his sister's name, Rivington's face underwent a change, not in colour, but in expression—it grew hard and firm, the eyes suddenly appeared sullen. His manner now to me was distinctly distant, not to say cold.

"Sit down, Mr. Gilchrist, pray," he said. "Has my—has Miss Rivington commissioned you to bring me a message?"

"Not exactly," I said. I favoured him with a long glance, and then all of a sudden I resolved to throw prudence to the winds.

"Good heavens! Rivington," I cried, "if you and I are to save that girl from a fate about the most appalling in the world, we must each throw aside our masks, and talk together as man to man."

He stared at me for an instant in astonishment too great for words, then his eyes seemed to lighten—emotion trembled on his fine lips; he sprang up and approached me.

"Your name has not been unknown to me in the past," he said. "I believe you are a good fellow. If you will help me now, you will lift a load which is crushing me to the earth. But what do you mean? You talk strangely."

"You must give me your full confidence before I give you mine," I answered. "Your sister is engaged to Colonel Normanton—you dislike the engagement to such an extent that you have left your only sister, a young girl, a beautiful one, without your protection, at the most critical moment of her life. You dislike Colonel Normanton personally, to such an extreme degree, that you refused, at a critical moment in his life, to use your medical skill for his benefit. What are your reasons?"

"You are an extraordinary man to ask me, but I will tell you," replied Rivington; "and I will reply to your last question first. I refused to administer the anæsthetic because I hate Normanton as I never thought to hate human being, because I dared not, under the circumstances, give the anæsthetic. Do not ask me further."

"I must," I retorted. "You have yet to reply to my first question—why do you desert your only sister at this crisis?"

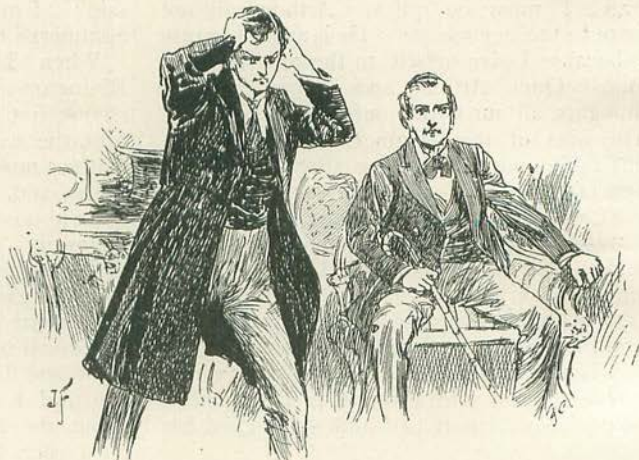
"Good heavens! Gilchrist, you are forcing my confidence to an extraordinary degree. Why do I desert Hilda? I think of her morning, noon, and night; but I have no control over her. You cannot even imagine what she has been to me, what I have been to her. We were both poor, and we struggled. God only knows how we struggled, and how we worked. In those days we knew what real happiness meant; we both tasted the sweets of success, and all went well until a cursed fool thought to interfere by leaving Hilda money. She is rich; an heiress, in fact. She made the acquaintance of Colonel Normanton—he is a very demon with women—and he soon contrived to win her affections. At first I tolerated him, disliking the man, mind you, all the time instinctively; but when Hilda told me of her preference I began to make inquiries, and, oh, heavens! the revelations which were disclosed to me. It is enough

to state to you that the man is bad through and through. I told Hilda everything. I went metaphorically on my knees to her—she would not listen to a word, she would believe nothing—in short, she is infatuated. There was a time when I was certain that she loved me; but I am now forced to believe that her affection for me has utterly ceased to exist—she is a different woman. She is completely her own mistress. Normanton wants her for her money; he is deeply in debt, and believes that her fortune will resuscitate his affairs. Hilda is placed in the extraordinary position of being absolutely able to do what she likes with her money. She has no nearer relation than myself, and as she is just of age I am powerless to interfere. She has chosen between us—she cares nothing more

for me—I wish to forget her, I struggle to forget her. Why did you come this morning to torment me without cause?"

"You make at least one vast mistake," I interrupted, when I could stay the torrent of words which seemed wrung from the poor fellow by an emotion which he could not restrain. "Your sister is in love. In that extraordinary condition people are, in my opinion, not quite sane. I mean, of course, on the one point. But she still cares for you, Rivington; listen, I will convince you of this." I then related briefly the interview which had taken place between us on the previous evening.

I think I told my story well, for Rivington, who had been staring fixedly at me, suddenly sprang to his feet and walked to the window,



"RIVINGTON SUDDENLY SPRANG TO HIS FEET."

doubtless to conceal feelings which were too strong for him. He came back after a moment and stood facing me.

"If you see her again you can repeat to her what I have already said," he began. "She has chosen between us; she knows my mind. I can, when occasion offers, be as obstinate as herself. If she insists on marrying that scoundrel, I will never look at her face again. Beautiful and clever as she is, she cannot have everything. She wants us both. She shall not have us. One or other—yes, one or other—but, before God, not both. Gilchrist, I could not breathe the same air as that wretch."

He grew so excited now that he could not contain himself, and began to pace rapidly up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped and faced me.

"I cannot understand why I am placing so much confidence in you," he said, "but I think I have answered your questions to the best of my ability. It is now your turn to speak to me. Why did you use the words you did when you entered the room? Why did you speak of an awful fate hanging over my sister? Do you know a still blacker side to that man's character?"

"I know nothing whatever about Colonel Normanton's character," I replied; "but, all the same, I know something about him which, in my opinion, will raise an insuperable obstacle to the marriage."

Rivington turned white to his lips and stared fixedly at me, then he spoke abruptly.

"You mean that the scoundrel is already married?" he said.

"He may or may not be, but his past has nothing to do with me," I replied. "I discovered what you might have discovered had you controlled yourself sufficiently to administer the anæsthetic." I rose as I spoke, and whispered a word in Rivington's ear. He started back as if I had shot him.

"No! Impossible! You must be wrong," he said.

"I am right; I cannot make a mistake. I have studied the disease in the East—there is not the faintest shadow of doubt."

"But surely such a thing could not happen to an Englishman?"

"In this case there is no doubt."

"And Hilda knows nothing, my innocent, beautiful girl!"

"She knows nothing whatever."

"Gilchrist, does the man know it himself?"

"That I cannot tell you, Rivington. I only repeat that, bad as the man is morally, his state of health absolutely precludes marriage. Your sister must break off her engagement, and at once."

Rivington flung himself into a chair and covered his face with his hands. After a moment or two he looked up.

"I am not myself just now," he said; "with your permission I will call to see you this evening, then we can discuss what is best to be done."

I rose at the hint.

"Don't forget," I said, "that from what you have told me of the man, and from what I myself gather, he is capable of almost anything to win his purpose. He wants your sister's money, and will marry her in spite of everything if we are not too quick for him."

"I know, I know," he answered. "I will come to see you to-night, without fail."

Rivington shook hands with me, and I left the house.

During all that long day's work my thoughts were much occupied with the brother and sister. I found myself as deeply interested in the man as the girl. Providence, without doubt, was guiding this affair, and even at the risk of a broken heart Hilda Rivington must be saved from the scoundrel who meant to ruin her, body and soul.

Rivington had arranged to call at my rooms at seven in the evening. He would doubtless be punctual, and I waited somewhat impatiently for him; but seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock went by, and he had not put in an appearance. I grew restless at last, and resolved to call at his house. I ran up the steps and rang the bell. The servant opened the door, and I immediately inquired for his master.

"Have you not heard, sir?" he asked.

"No—what? Has anything happened?"

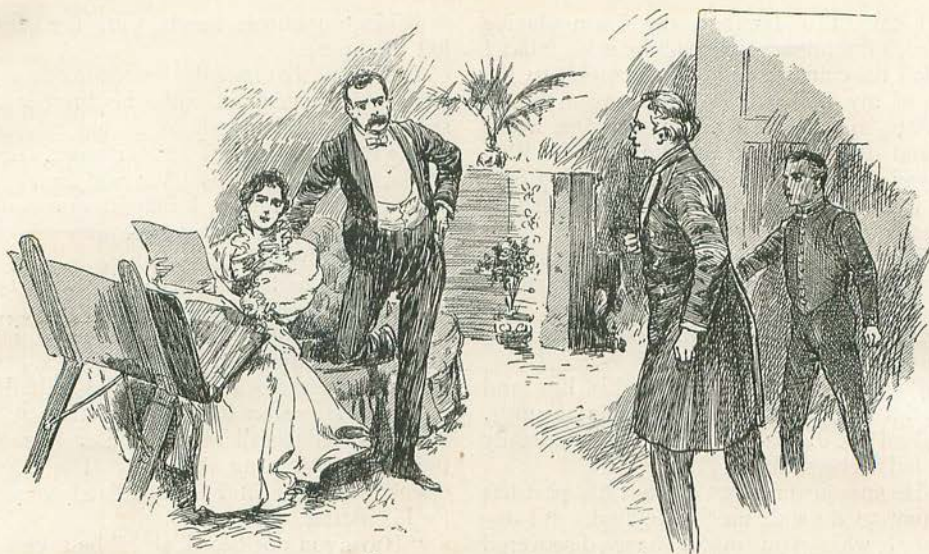
"It is bad news, sir; we are all in great trouble. Mr. Rivington has had a serious carriage accident, and was taken straight to St. George's Hospital. He is very ill indeed, and quite unconscious, and no one is allowed to see him except the nurses and the doctors who are attending him."

"Do you happen to know," I asked, "if his sister, Miss Rivington, is aware of the occurrence?"

"I cannot tell you, sir," was the answer.

I turned and went down the steps. I resolved to call at St. George's Hospital in the morning, but in the meantime something must be done. It was quite possible that, owing to the absolute break between the brother and sister, Miss Rivington might not know of the terrible calamity which really hung over her. I went to General Sommers's house in Curzon Street, saw Mrs. Sommers, who happened to be at home, told her briefly what had happened, and asked for Miss Rivington's address.

Hailing the first hansom I came across, I then drove straight to Fortescue Mansions. Miss Rivington was in, and I was admitted at once into her presence. The rooms which she occupied were handsome and furnished artistically. A smart page flung open the drawing-room door and announced my name. Hilda was seated on a sofa, and Colonel Normanton was standing by her side. An elderly lady, who evidently acted as a sort of companion, left the room by another door as I entered. I could not but perceive that Colonel Normanton's face flushed with some annoyance when he saw



"I WENT UP TO MISS RIVINGTON."

me. I nodded to him, and then went up to Miss Rivington.

"Can I see you alone for a moment?" I asked.

She glanced up at her lover.

"I think not," she said, with a smile—"for George and I have no secrets"; she gave him another look, then her dark eyes, deep as wells, confronted me frankly.

"I guess what you have come to say," she said. "You have fulfilled my commission—thank you in advance. Have you news for me, pleasant news?"

"I have disastrous news for you," I said. I spoke abruptly, for at that moment I had no pity for her; she changed colour, but still looked at me steadily.

"You have failed?" she said, and I detected, with pleasure, a tremor in her voice. "Then you and I, George," she cried, looking back at her lover, "must be all in all to each other, for Arthur will not relent. He will not have us both, and I will not give you up for him. Let it be so, then."

She began to hum a gay air under her breath, and approached an open piano.

"Stay for a moment: you quite misunderstand me," I said. "I may have something further to tell you presently with regard to my interview with Rivington this morning—but you have not heard of the accident which has happened to him?"

"What?" she cried, pausing and turning her head.

"He has had a bad carriage accident, and is lying insensible at St. George's Hospital."

She stood quite silent for a moment, her tall figure swaying faintly; then she clutched at a chair to steady herself.

"A bad accident?" she said. "Then I will go to him immediately."

"No, no, Hilda," interrupted Colonel Normanton; "you must think of your own health, and—"

"Folly!" she replied—then she smiled at him. "Forgive me, George," she said, "I don't quite know what I am saying. Please repeat your news again, Mr. Gilchrist—a *bad* accident?"

"A bad carriage accident; but I really cannot tell you all particulars—Mr. Rivington must have fallen on his head, for he is unconscious—he was taken to St. George's Hospital, and his servant tells me that no one is to see him except the nurses and the doctors."

"And his only sister," she continued. "Thank you, thank you; yes, I will go to him at once—nothing can keep me from his side—I am greatly obliged to you." She turned to leave the room, not even glancing at Colonel Normanton.

The Colonel walked as far as the door, then seemed to hesitate, and turning, came up to where I was standing.

"I must demand some explanation of this interference," he said; "will you come with me to my club?"

I left the house with him without replying—he hailed a hansom, and we both got in; in a few moments we found ourselves in his club in St. James's Street. He led me at



once into an empty room, rang the bell, ordered some refreshments, and then stood on the hearthrug facing me.

"Now," he said, "you have something to explain, pray do it in as few words as possible. Until last evening you did not even know Miss Rivington by name. By what right do you interfere in her private affairs?"

"By the right she herself gave me, and by the common right of humanity," I replied, standing up in my turn. "Colonel Normanton, I hesitated to come to you, but you yourself have now forced the situation. I will speak frankly. Have you any right to marry that innocent girl?"

He raised his brows in well-acted surprise.

"As much right as any other man," he said, with fierceness; "the girl loves me—she wishes to be my wife."

"It is quite impossible that you can love her back again."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"I will explain myself presently. I have heard reports, and they are doubtless true, that you are marrying Miss Rivington for her money."

"Beware, what you are saying, sir; you may go a step too far."

"Colonel Normanton, I must speak out," I answered. "I began to interfere in this affair with unwillingness, but that moment has long passed. I saw Miss Rivington's brother this morning, and but for an unforeseen accident the matter would now be in his hands. As it is, I take it up for him. Is it possible that you are in ignorance of your own condition? Do you not know that there is a fate hanging over you which ought to preclude all thought of marriage?"

In spite of his self-control, he changed colour and shuffled from one foot to the other uneasily.

"Explain yourself," he said, in a voice of ice.

"I mean to do so. When you were under the influence of the anæsthetic I discovered that you are the victim of a very terrible disease, which seldom or never attacks Englishmen—that fact alone precludes your marriage." I bent forward as I spoke and whispered two words in his ear.

He dropped on to the nearest chair—took out a handkerchief and wiped the moisture from his brow.

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"I have known it," he said, after a pause. "God knows the insupportable, hideous thing could not be a secret from its unhappy victim; but I, at least, thought that the secret was all my own, that no one on earth shared it with me. You have got possession of this skeleton in my life through an accident: do you or do you not mean to use it against me?"

"I have already told Miss Rivington's brother. Unless you immediately acquaint her with the truth I must do so."

"Then let me tell you, sir"—Normanton now rose from his chair, white with passion—"let me tell you that you are acting the part of a scoundrel. You won this secret from



"YOU ARE ACTING THE PART OF A SCOUNDREL."

me under a professional disguise. By all that is holy you are bound to respect it."

"There are exceptions to every rule," I replied, "and in this case I do not feel that I am bound. You are about to do a dastardly thing, and as Rivington is too ill to take up the cudgels in his sister's behalf, I feel that it is my duty to take his place."

The Colonel swore a round oath and began to pace up and down before the fire.

"Break off your engagement to Miss Rivington under any plea you care to employ," I continued, "and the secret I have just whispered to you shall never again pass my lips."

"Do you mean what you say?" he asked.

"I do."

"Then give me until to-morrow morning to think matters over. You shall have my answer then. This is my private address." He took out his visiting-card and put it in my hand.

I promised to call upon him, and soon afterwards left the club.

The next morning, at an early hour, I went to St. George's Hospital. The news with regard to Rivington was the reverse of reassuring; he was still quite unconscious, and the doctors entertained serious fears of his ultimate recovery. Miss Rivington had spent the greater part of the night with her brother, but was not just then at St. George's Hospital. As there was nothing further that I could do, I got into a hansom and drove to Colonel Normanton's flat in Bayswater. There I was met with the surprising intelligence that the Colonel had left London the evening before, and had told the hall porter to forward all letters to his club, leaving no other address.

Wondering what this could possibly mean, I went back to my own house. In the course of the afternoon I called to see Miss Rivington at Fortescue Mansions. The young lady herself was absent, but her companion, Miss Curtice, told me that Miss Rivington was with her brother at the hospital, that she was in very great and genuine distress, and that as far as she could tell had had no news whatever from Colonel Normanton. For a brief moment I wondered if the man really meant to quit London, and to give Miss Rivington up in the most effectual way by deserting her. As this, however, would be quite foreign to his probable character, I resolved to watch matters closely.

In about a week's time, although Rivington was not pronounced out of danger, Miss Rivington, greatly to my surprise, ceased to visit the hospital. I called one day at Fortescue Mansions, and heard that she, with her companion, had also left London. My uneasiness now grew greater—I felt convinced that Colonel Normanton was not acting straight, and that Miss Rivington ought to be watched. The Colonel's object would be, if report told true, to hurry on the marriage on any pretext, after which he could snap his fingers at us all.

Feeling anxious and uneasy, I called one day at the hospital, and had my first interview with Rivington—he was quite conscious, but was only allowed to speak a few words. The moment he saw me he motioned me to draw near.

"You are the man I want," he said, in a low whisper, and with the ghost of a smile; "your image has been stamped on my brain all through my delirium. Now that you are here, will you take an oath?"

"What about?" I asked.

"I am too weak, and my faculties too scattered," he continued, "to say many words, but a promise from your lips will content me."

"Rest assured that I will do anything for you, my dear fellow," I replied. "You allude, of course, to your sister and Colonel Normanton?"

"Yes, yes," he nodded, and his face grew more ghastly.

"You must not agitate the patient, sir," said the nurse, coming forward.

"Leave us for a moment, nurse," said the sick man. "Stoop lower, Gilchrist. I want you to take an oath to me that you will stop that marriage."

"You authorize me to act for you, then?" I said.

"I do, I do—I put you in my place. Satisfy me with your promise, your oath."

"Rest assured that I will do my utmost, Rivington—I swear it before Heaven."

He sighed and closed his eyes contentedly, and a moment later the nurse hurried me from the ward.

My duty now was plain, and I owned to a certain sense of relief. That day I visited a well-known private detective, and instructed him to shadow Normanton forthwith. I now spent most of my time in Bloomsbury, anxiously awaiting the result. The detective sent me reports from day to day, but a week and then a fortnight went by, and I had no tidings whatever of either Normanton or Miss Rivington.

Meanwhile, Rivington's condition remained extremely precarious, and as my visits had always the effect of exciting him, the nurse at last forbade me to see him.

One evening, three weeks after the accident, I found, on returning home, a telegram. It was from Deacon, the detective, and ran as follows:—

"Polworthy, Cornwall.—Have discovered my man; come down by next train if you wish to stop wedding.—J. DEACON."

I hunted up time-tables, and found that I could just catch the night mail from Waterloo. I wired to the detective to tell him I was coming, and by a close shave secured the train to the West of England. To my dismay, however, I also discovered that Polworthy was off the main line, and that I must leave the train at St. Ives, and take a small local train for this out-of-the-way part of the country.

At seven o'clock on the following morning, I arrived at the large junction where I was

to part company with the express. On making inquiries, I was told that Polworthy was twenty-five miles away, and the unpleasant news was also conveyed to me that the train to this secluded hamlet would not be due for an hour and a half. Could I have obtained horses I would have driven the remainder of the distance at any risk. I thought the time would never pass, and became restless and excited to an extraordinary degree. Presently, however, the local train crawled in. I took my seat and endeavoured to hope for the best. My principal fear was that Normanton, in his anxiety to secure his bride, would have the marriage solemnized at an early hour. Even now I might be too late. To add to my perplexities the train broke down just outside a tunnel, within a few miles of the little Cornish town. This last mishap was more than I could stand, and, leaving the carriage, I resolved to walk the remainder of the distance. Fortunately a carter, in a smock-frock, who was driving a waggon-load of hay, saw me and offered me a lift, and in this fashion I got over the remaining miles.



"IN THIS FASHION I GOT OVER THE REMAINING MILES."

Knowing that Deacon would be sure to meet me at the railway-station I went straight there, and was relieved to see him standing on the platform. He gave a start of surprise and pleasure when I touched him on the arm.

"I did not wait for the train," I said; "there was a slight accident just outside Rundle tunnel. Now, what is up? Tell me quickly."

"You are barely in time, if that, sir," replied the man. "And now that you have come down I do not quite know what you will be able to do. I had a pretty hunt after that Colonel, but I found him at last. Talk of scoundrels! But I had best give you the history later on."

"Yes," I said, impatiently. "Is Miss Rivington here?"

"She is in the neighbourhood, staying with a lady of the name of Curtice."

"Ah, the companion," I muttered. "I might have guessed that she would be in Normanton's pay. Well, Deacon, relieve my anxiety on this point at least—are they married yet?"

"Not quite; but they are almost in church by this time."

"Then get a cab or a vehicle of some kind without a moment's delay, and let us follow them as quickly as possible."

"I thought you would want a carriage the moment you came, sir," answered the man, "and I have a trap with a fleet little pony outside; come this way."

I followed him, and we were soon spinning over the road. But further and vexatious delay was inevitable—the marriage was not to be solemnized at Polworthy, but at a country church two miles distant.

"A sovereign if you do it in twenty minutes, my man," said Deacon to the driver, taking out his watch as he spoke.

Under this incentive the worthy Cornishman doubled his efforts, and the smart little pony flew over the ground.

"The wedding was to be at ten, and sharp the word," said Deacon to me. "Why, I declare it is almost that now," he cried. He stood up in the trap.

"Look here, my lad," he said to the driver, "two sovereigns if you gain the church door in ten minutes—three, if you do the job in five."

The man nodded, took out his whip, and began still further to stimulate the pony's efforts.

The church stood on the summit of a hill, and we could see it for some little time in the distance. The driver cracked his whip and talked encouragingly to the pony, and the distance between us and the church grew less. At last we had drawn up with a jerk outside the gates. A small crowd of people, such as

always collect to witness even the quietest sort of wedding, were loitering outside.

I sprang from the trap, and Deacon accompanied me up the narrow path which led to the porch. The church door was shut.

"There is a wedding going on inside, sir," said a man, dressed as a verger. "If you will kindly wait a few moments I can show you the church when it is over."

"Pardon me," I replied, "but I have a message for the bridegroom, and must go in at once."

I pushed him aside, turned the handle of the door, and, Deacon following me, we entered the sacred edifice. It was a little, dark church, in the Early Norman style, and just for a moment I could not see distinctly. Then my vision cleared, and I perceived a small group standing before the altar: two ladies—one elderly, one young, a tall man with a handsome presence, a priest in the white robes of his office. A slanting ray of sunshine from a painted window shone athwart the faces of priest, bride, and bridegroom, the other lady stood completely in shadow.

The bride was dressed in a quiet, grey travelling costume, and wore a large hat with plumed feathers on her head. She was very pale, her beautiful profile stood out in strong relief accentuated by the sunshine. My blood boiled hotly within me. I walked quickly up the church and joined the group. Was I in time? Was I too late? Had the fatal words, which were to join this ill-assorted couple together for all time, yet been spoken? No, I was not too late, I might still do my terrible part.

"I require and charge you both," said the priest, bending forward as he spoke, "as ye will answer at the dreadful Day of Judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow, are not joined together by God; neither is their matrimony lawful."

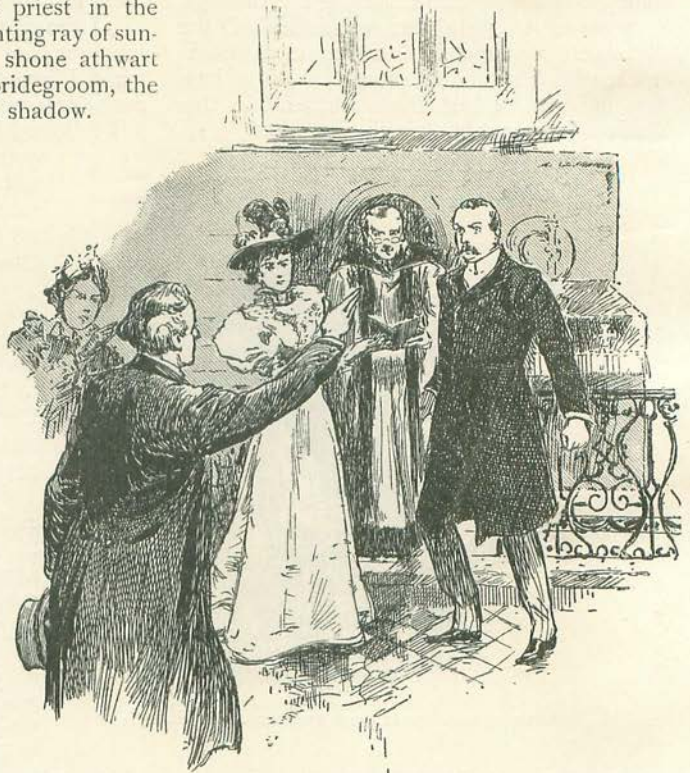
He paused at the end of this solemn charge, as is the invariable custom, and was then about to proceed when I stepped a little nearer.

"There is an impediment to this marriage," I said, "and it ought not to proceed."

My words fell upon the little group like a thunder-clap. Hilda Rivington turned and faced me—her beautiful eyes blazed with indignation. I looked past her, however, to the bridegroom—his face, usually so florid, had turned to the colour of grey ashes, his lips twitched, his prominent dark eyes became bloodshot.

"What does this mean?" said the clergyman, turning to me. "Speak out, sir."

"There is an impediment," I said, boldly; "and in the name of the bride's brother, who is too ill to attend here himself, I declare that



"'THERE IS AN IMPEDIMENT TO THIS MARRIAGE,' I SAID."

the marriage ought not to proceed."

"Of what nature is the impediment?" asked the priest.

"The marriage ought not to be solemnized," I said, "because"—I felt a momentary reluctance to deal the blow, to say the

dreadful words, but they must come out—*“because the bridegroom is a leper!”*

Horror fell upon every face. The bride backed two or three paces away; she grew white to her lips—then, suddenly, there rang through the building a pitiful woman's cry.

“George, say it is not true—he is mad, he must be mad; George, speak!” she said.

“Come into the vestry, all of you, good people,” said the clergyman. He hurried us away from the altar rails, and opened the door of a small vestry at one side of the church. Normanton staggered as he walked. Hilda Rivington clung to him, pitifully.

“It is all false,” she repeated. “It is a monstrous charge, and the man who has brought it against you must be mad.”

She flashed her beautiful eyes at me with indescribable scorn.

“Ask him, Miss Rivington,” I said. “Ask him to tell you the truth. If, knowing all, you still wish to proceed with the marriage, I have done my part, and can say nothing further. I have come here at your brother's request. He made me take an oath that I would stop this wedding, or at least see that you knew the truth.”

“My brother?” she said, looking bewildered, “my brother! But I thought he did not care, that he was indifferent now. You told me so, George.”

“Never mind, it is all over, Hilda,” said the Colonel. He sank down on a chair; and once again, as I had seen him do before, wiped the moisture from his forehead.

“But it is not all over,” she said, recovering both her courage and her firmness. “I must know the truth—this is too bewildering. You remember, George, that you sent for me suddenly; you must remember. I came to you because you said you were ill and in trouble, but you did not tell me that you suffered from—from this horror. Not that I should have minded even that, if you had

told me the whole truth yourself. I came to you, I left my brother who was only just out of danger. Do you remember when you went back to London, and the message you brought me from him—that he was well again, that he had left the hospital, that he cared nothing for us, that he had cut me off from him for ever, that I might do as I pleased with my life as far as he was concerned? Even then I could scarcely believe it, and wanted to see him; but you said that he had left London—giving no address. Then I gave him up.”

“It was false,” I said. “Your brother, Miss Rivington, is still at St. George's Hospital, and even yet lies under the shadow of death. He is better, but not out of danger.”

“Then the marriage is indeed broken off,” said Miss Rivington. “I can bear much, and I can forgive much, but deceit, deceit, never. Come, Mr. Gilchrist, let us go.”

She left the church, leaning on my arm.

The rest of this story is briefly told. Miss Rivington proved to be as inexorable in her anger as she had been firm in her love. Normanton had grossly deceived her—her eyes were at last opened—she refused even to see him again. Seeing that his game was up, the unfortunate Colonel thought it best to leave Polworthy by the next train, and I took Hilda Rivington back to London. The proud girl was shaken, miserable, ill; angry with herself, with me, and the rest of the world. When time brought softening to her feelings, however, I hoped that she would forgive me, and be at least thankful that she had been spared a fate too horrible even to contemplate.

As to Colonel Normanton, he may or may not be alive at the present moment, but I have neither heard of him nor seen him again.