

The Lost Duchess

Anonymous

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The Lost Duchess

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The Lost Duchess

I

"Has the duchess returned?"

"No, your grace."

Knowles came farther into the room. He had a letter on a salver. When the duke had taken it, Knowles still lingered. The duke glanced at him.

"Is an answer required?"

"No, your grace." Still Knowles lingered. "Something a little singular has happened. The carriage has returned without the duchess, and the men say that they thought her grace was in it."

"What do you mean?"

"I hardly understand myself, your grace. Perhaps you would like to see Barnes."

Barnes was the coachman.

"Send him up." When Knowles had gone, and he was alone, his grace showed signs of being slightly annoyed. He looked at his watch. "I told her she'd better be in by four. She says that she's not feeling well, and yet one would think that she was not aware of the fatigue entailed in having the prince come to dinner, and a mob of people to follow. I particularly wished her to lie down for a couple of hours."

Knowles ushered in not only Barnes, the coachman, but Moysey, the footman, too. Both these persons seemed to be ill at ease. The duke glanced at them sharply. In his voice there was a suggestion of impatience.

"What is the matter?"

Barnes explained as best he could.

"If you please, your grace, we waited for the duchess outside Cane and Wilson's, the drapers. The duchess came out, got into the carriage, and Moysey shut the door, and her grace said, 'Home!' and yet when we got home she wasn't there."

"She wasn't where?"

"Her grace wasn't in the carriage, your grace."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Her grace did get into the carriage; you shut the door, didn't you?"

Barnes turned to Moysey. Moysey brought his hand up to his brow in a sort of military salute—he had been a soldier in the regiment in which, once upon a time, the duke had been a subaltern.

"She did. The duchess came out of the shop. She seemed rather in a hurry, I thought. She got into the carriage, and she said, 'Home, Moysey!' I shut the door, and Barnes drove straight home. We never stopped anywhere, and we never noticed nothing happen on the way; and yet when we got home the carriage was empty."

The duke started.

"Do you mean to tell me that the duchess got out of the carriage while you were driving full pelt through the streets without saying anything to you, and without you noticing it?"

"The carriage was empty when we got home, your grace."

"Was either of the doors open?"

"No, your grace."

"You fellows have been up to some infernal mischief. You have made a mess of it. You never picked up the duchess, and you're trying to palm this tale off on me to save yourselves."

Barnes was moved to adjuration:

"I'll take my Bible oath, your grace, that the duchess got into the carriage outside Cane and Wilson's."

Moysey seconded his colleague.

"I will swear to that, your grace. She got into that carriage, and I shut the door, and she said, 'Home, Moysey!'"

The duke looked as if he did not know what to make of the story and its tellers.

"What carriage did you have?"

"Her grace's brougham, your grace."

Knowles interposed:

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"The brougham was ordered because I understood that the duchess was not feeling very well, and there's rather a high wind, your grace."

The duke snapped at him:

"What has that to do with it? Are you suggesting that the duchess was more likely to jump out of a brougham while it was dashing through the streets than out of any other kind of vehicle?"

The duke's glance fell on the letter which Knowles had brought him when he first had entered. He had placed it on his writing table. Now he took it up. It was, addressed:

"To His Grace the Duke of Datchet.

Private!

VERY PRESSING! ! !"

The name was written in a fine, clear, almost feminine hand. The words in the left-hand corner of the envelope were written in a different hand. They were large and bold; almost as though they had been painted with the end of the penholder instead of being written with the pen. The envelope itself was of an unusual size, and bulged out as though it contained something else besides a letter.

The duke tore the envelope open. As he did so something fell out of it on to the writing table. It looked as though it was a lock of a woman's hair. As he glanced at it the duke seemed to be a trifle startled. The duke read the letter:

"Your grace will be so good as to bring five hundred pounds in gold to the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade within an hour of the receipt of this. The Duchess of Datchet has been kidnaped. An imitation duchess got into the carriage, which was waiting outside Cane and Wilson's, and she alighted on the road. Unless your grace does as you are requested, the Duchess of Datchet's left-hand little finger will be at once cut off, and sent home in time to receive the prince to dinner. Other portions of her grace will follow. A lock of her grace's hair is inclosed with this as an earnest of our good intentions.

"BEFORE 5:30 P.M. your grace is requested to be at the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade with five hundred pounds in gold. You will there be accosted by an individual in a white top hat, and with a gardenia in his buttonhole. You will be entirely at liberty to give him into custody, or to have him followed by the police, in which case the duchess's left arm, cut off at the shoulder, will be sent home for dinner—not to mention other extremely possible contingencies. But you are ADVISED to give the individual in question the five hundred pounds in gold, because in that case the duchess herself will be home in time to receive the prince to dinner, and with one of the best stories with which to entertain your distinguished guests they ever heard.

"Remember! NOT LATER THAN 5:30, unless you wish to receive her grace's little finger."

The duke stared at this amazing epistle when he had read it as though he found it difficult to believe the evidence of his eyes. He was not a demonstrative person, as a rule, but this little communication astonished even him. He read it again. Then his hands dropped to his sides, and he swore.

He took up the lock of hair which had fallen out of the envelope. Was it possible that it could be his wife's, the duchess? Was it possible that a Duchess of Datchet could be kidnaped, in broad daylight, in the heart of London, and be sent home, as it were, in pieces? Had sacrilegious hands already been playing pranks with that great lady's hair? Certainly, THAT hair was so like HER hair that the mere resemblance made his grace's blood run cold. He turned on Messrs. Barnes and Moysey as though he would have liked to rend them.

"You scoundrels!"

He moved forward as though the intention had entered his ducal heart to knock his servants down. But, if that were so, he did not act quite up to his intention. Instead, he stretched out his arm, pointing at them as if he were an accusing spirit:

"Will you swear that it was the duchess who got into the carriage outside Cane and Wilson's?"

Barnes began to stammer:

"I'll swear, your grace, that I—I thought—"

The duke stormed an interruption:

"I don't ask what you thought. I ask you, will you swear it was?"

The duke's anger was more than Barnes could face. He was silent. Moysey showed a larger courage.

"I could have sworn that it was at the time, your grace. But now it seems to me that it's a rummy go."

"A rummy go!" The peculiarity of the phrase did not seem to strike the duke just then—at least, he echoed it

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as if it didn't. "You call it a rummy go! Do you know that I am told in this letter that the woman who entered the carriage was not the duchess? What you were thinking about, or what case you will be able to make out for yourselves, you know better than I; but I can tell you this—that in an hour you will leave my service, and you may esteem yourselves fortunate if, to-night, you are not both of you sleeping in jail."

One might almost have suspected that the words were spoken in irony. But before they could answer, another servant entered, who also brought a letter for the duke. When his grace's glance fell on it he uttered an exclamation. The writing on the envelope was the same writing that had been on the envelope which had contained the very singular communication—like it in all respects, down to the broomstick-end thickness of the "Private!" and "Very pressing!!!" in the corner.

"Who brought this?" stormed the duke.

The servant appeared to be a little startled by the violence of his grace's manner.

"A lady—or, at least, your grace, she seemed to be a lady."

"Where is she?"

"She came in a hansom, your grace. She gave me that letter, and said, 'Give that to the Duke of Datchet at once—without a moment's delay!' Then she got into the hansom again, and drove away."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Your grace!"

The man seemed surprised, as though the idea of stopping chance visitors to the ducal mansion *vi et armis* had not, until that moment, entered into his philosophy. The duke continued to regard the man as if he could say a good deal, if he chose. Then he pointed to the door. His lips said nothing, but his gesture much. The servant vanished.

"Another hoax!" the duke said grimly, as he tore the envelope open.

This time the envelope contained a sheet of paper, and in the sheet of paper another envelope. The duke unfolded the sheet of paper. On it some words were written. These:

"The duchess appears so particularly anxious to drop you a line, that one really hasn't the heart to refuse her.

"Her grace's communication—written amidst blinding tears!—you will find inclosed with this."

"Knowles," said the duke, in a voice which actually trembled, "Knowles, hoax or no hoax, I will be even with the gentleman who wrote that."

Handing the sheet of paper to Mr. Knowles, his grace turned his attention to the envelope which had been inclosed. It was a small, square envelope, of the finest quality, and it reeked with perfume. The duke's countenance assumed an added frown—he had no fondness for envelopes which were scented. In the center of the envelope were the words, "To the Duke of Datchet," written in the big, bold, sprawling hand which he knew so well.

"Mabel's writing," he said, half to himself, as, with shaking fingers, he tore the envelope open.

The sheet of paper which he took out was almost as stiff as cardboard. It, too, emitted what his grace deemed the nauseous odors of the perfumer's shop. On it was written this letter:

"MY DEAR HEReward—For Heaven's sake do what these people require! I don't know what has happened or where I am, but I am nearly distracted! They have already cut off some of my hair, and they tell me that, if you don't let them have five hundred pounds in gold by half—past five, they will cut off my little finger too. I would sooner die than lose my little finger—and—I don't know what else besides.

"By the token which I send you, and which has never, until now, been off my breast, I conjure you to help me.

"Hereward—HELP ME!"

When he read that letter the duke turned white—very white, as white as the paper on which it was written. He passed the epistle on to Knowles.

"I suppose that also is a hoax?"

Mr. Knowles was silent. He still yielded to his constitutional disrelish to commit himself. At last he asked:

"What is it that your grace proposes to do?"

The duke spoke with a bitterness which almost suggested a personal animosity toward the inoffensive Mr. Knowles.

"I propose, with your permission, to release the duchess from the custody of my estimable correspondent. I propose—always with your permission—to comply with his modest request, and to take him his five hundred

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pounds in gold." He paused, then continued in a tone which, coming from him, meant volumes: "Afterwards, I propose to cry quits with the concocter of this pretty little hoax, even if it costs me every penny I possess. He shall pay more for that five hundred pounds than he supposes."

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II

The Duke of Datchet, coming out of the bank, lingered for a moment on the steps. In one hand he carried a canvas bag which seemed well weighted. On his countenance there was an expression which to a casual observer might have suggested that his grace was not completely at his ease. That casual observer happened to come strolling by. It took the form of Ivor Dacre.

Mr. Dacre looked the Duke of Datchet up and down in that languid way he has. He perceived the canvas bag. Then he remarked, possibly intending to be facetious:

"Been robbing the bank? Shall I call a cart?"

Nobody minds what Ivor Dacre says. Besides, he is the duke's own cousin. Perhaps a little removed; still, there it is. So the duke smiled a sickly smile, as if Mr. Dacre's delicate wit had given him a passing touch of indigestion.

Mr. Dacre noticed that the duke looked sallow, so he gave his pretty sense of humor another airing.

"Kitchen boiler burst? When I saw the duchess just now I wondered if it had."

His grace distinctly started. He almost dropped the canvas bag.

"You saw the duchess just now, Ivor! When?"

The duke was evidently moved. Mr. Dacre was stirred to languid curiosity. "I can't say I clocked it. Perhaps half an hour ago; perhaps a little more."

"Half an hour ago! Are you sure? Where did you see her?"

Mr. Dacre wondered. The Duchess of Datchet could scarcely have been eloping in broad daylight. Moreover, she had not yet been married a year. Everyone knew that she and the duke were still as fond of each other as if they were not man and wife. So, although the duke, for some cause or other, was evidently in an odd state of agitation, Mr. Dacre saw no reason why he should not make a clean breast of all he knew.

"She was going like blazes in a hansom cab."

"In a hansom cab? Where?"

"Down Waterloo Place."

"Was she alone?"

Mr. Dacre reflected. He glanced at the duke out of the corners of his eyes. His languid utterance became a positive drawl.

"I rather fancy that she wasn't."

"Who was with her?"

"My dear fellow, if you were to offer me the bank I couldn't tell you."

"Was it a man?"

Mr. Dacre's drawl became still more pronounced.

"I rather fancy that it was."

Mr. Dacre expected something. The duke was so excited. But he by no means expected what actually came.

"Ivor, she's been kidnaped!"

Mr. Dacre did what he had never been known to do before within the memory of man—he dropped his eyeglass.

"Datchet!"

"She has! Some scoundrel has decoyed her away, and trapped her. He's already sent me a lock of her hair, and he tells me that if I don't let him have five hundred pounds in gold by half—past five he'll let me have her little finger."

Mr. Dacre did not know what to make of his grace at all. He was a sober man—it COULDN'T be that! Mr. Dacre felt really concerned.

"I'll call a cab, old man, and you'd better let me see you home."

Mr. Dacre half raised his stick to hail a passing hansom. The duke caught him by the arm.

"You ass! What do you mean? I am telling you the simple truth. My wife's been kidnaped."

Mr. Dacre's countenance was a thing to be seen—and remembered.

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"Oh! I hadn't heard that there was much of that sort of thing about just now. They talk of poodles being kidnaped, but as for duchesses— You'd really better let me call that cab."

"Ivor, do you want me to kick you? Don't you see that to me it's a question of life and death? I've been in there to get the money." His grace motioned toward the bank. "I'm going to take it to the scoundrel who has my darling at his mercy. Let me but have her hand in mine again, and he shall continue to pay for every sovereign with tears of blood until he dies."

"Look here, Datchet, I don't know if you're having a joke with me, or if you're not well—"

The duke stepped impatiently into the roadway.

"Ivor, you're a fool! Can't you tell jest from earnest, health from disease? I'm off! Are you coming with me? It would be as well that I should have a witness."

"Where are you off to?"

"To the other end of the Arcade."

"Who is the gentleman you expect to have the pleasure of meeting there?"

"How should I know?" The duke took a letter from his pocket—it was the letter which had just arrived. "The fellow is to wear a white top hat, and a gardenia in his buttonhole."

"What is it you have there?"

"It's the letter which brought the news—look for yourself and see; but, for God's sake, make haste!" His grace glanced at his watch. "It's already twenty after five."

"And do you mean to say that on the strength of a letter such as this you are going to hand over five hundred pounds to—"

The duke cut Mr. Dacre short.

"What are five hundred pounds to me? Besides, you don't know all. There is another letter. And I have heard from Mabel. But I will tell you all about it later. If you are coming, come!"

Folding up the letter, Mr. Dacre returned it to the duke.

"As you say, what are five hundred pounds to you? It's as well they are not as much to you as they are to me, or I'm afraid—"

"Hang it, Ivor, do prose afterwards!"

The duke hurried across the road. Mr. Dacre hastened after him. As they entered the Arcade they passed a constable. Mr. Dacre touched his companion's arm.

"Don't you think we'd better ask our friend in blue to walk behind us? His neighborhood might be handy."

"Nonsense!" The duke stopped short. "Ivor, this is my affair, not yours. If you are not content to play the part of silent witness, be so good as to leave me."

"My dear Datchet, I'm entirely at your service. I can be every whit as insane as you, I do assure you."

Side by side they moved rapidly down the Burlington Arcade. The duke was obviously in a state of the extremest nervous tension. Mr. Dacre was equally obviously in a state of the most supreme enjoyment. People stared as they rushed past. The duke saw nothing. Mr. Dacre saw everything, and smiled.

When they reached the Piccadilly end of the Arcade the duke pulled up. He looked about him. Mr. Dacre also looked about him.

"I see nothing of your white-hatted and gardenia-buttonholed friend," said Ivor.

The duke referred to his watch.

"It's not yet half-past five. I'm up to time."

Mr. Dacre held his stick in front of him and leaned on it. He indulged himself with a beatific smile.

"It strikes me, my dear Datchet, that you've been the victim of one of the finest things in hoaxes—"

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

The voice which interrupted Mr. Dacre came from the rear. While they were looking in front of them some one approached them from behind, apparently coming out of the shop which was at their backs.

The speaker looked a gentleman. He sounded like one, too. Costume, appearance, manner, were beyond reproach—even beyond the criticism of two such keen critics as were these. The glorious attire of a London dandy was surmounted with a beautiful white top hat. In his buttonhole was a magnificent gardenia.

In age the stranger was scarcely more than a boy, and a sunny-faced, handsome boy at that. His cheeks were hairless, his eyes were blue. His smile was not only innocent, it was bland. Never was there a more conspicuous

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illustration of that repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

The duke looked at him and glowered. Mr. Dacre looked at him and smiled.

"Who are you?" asked the duke.

"Ah—that is the question!" The newcomer's refined and musical voice breathed the very soul of affability. "I am an individual who is so unfortunate as to be in want of five hundred pounds."

"Are you the scoundrel who sent me that infamous letter?"

The charming stranger never turned a hair.

"I am the scoundrel mentioned in that infamous letter who wants to accost you at the Piccadilly end of the Burlington Arcade before half—past five—as witness my white hat and my gardenia."

"Where's my wife?"

The stranger gently swung his stick in front of him with his two hands. He regarded the duke as a merry—hearted son might regard his father. The thing was beautiful!

"Her grace will be home almost as soon as you are—when you have given me the money which I perceive you have all ready for me in that scarcely elegant—looking canvas bag." He shrugged his shoulders quite gracefully. "Unfortunately, in these matters one has no choice—one is forced to ask for gold."

"And suppose, instead of giving you what is in this canvas bag, I take you by the throat and choke the life right out of you?"

"Or suppose," amended Mr. Dacre, "that you do better, and commend this gentleman to the tender mercies of the first policeman we encounter."

The stranger turned to Mr. Dacre. He condescended to become conscious of his presence.

"Is this gentleman your grace's friend? Ah—Mr. Dacre, I perceive! I have the honor of knowing Mr. Dacre, though, possibly, I am unknown to him."

"You were—until this moment."

With an airy little laugh the stranger returned to the duke. He brushed an invisible speck of dust off the sleeve of his coat.

"As has been intimated in that infamous letter, his grace is at perfect liberty to give me into custody—why not? Only"—he said it with his boyish smile—"if a particular communication is not received from me in certain quarters within a certain time the Duchess of Datchet's beautiful white arm will be hacked off at the shoulder."

"You hound!"

The duke would have taken the stranger by the throat, and have done his best to choke the life right out of him then and there, if Mr. Dacre had not intervened.

"Steady, old man!" Mr. Dacre turned to the stranger. "You appear to be a pretty sort of a scoundrel."

The stranger gave his shoulders that almost imperceptible shrug.

"Oh, my dear Dacre, I am in want of money! I believe that you sometimes are in want of money, too."

Everybody knows that nobody knows where Ivor Dacre gets his money from, so the allusion must have tickled him immensely.

"You're a cool hand," he said.

"Some men are born that way."

"So I should imagine. Men like you must be born, not made."

"Precisely—as you say!" The stranger turned, with his graceful smile, to the duke: "But are we not wasting precious time? I can assure your grace that, in this particular matter, moments are of value."

Mr. Dacre interposed before the duke could answer.

"If you take my strongly urged advice, Datchet, you will summon this constable who is now coming down the Arcade, and hand this gentleman over to his keeping. I do not think that you need fear that the duchess will lose her arm, or even her little finger. Scoundrels of this one's kidney are most amenable to reason when they have handcuffs on their wrists."

The duke plainly hesitated. He would—and he would not. The stranger, as he eyed him, seemed much amused.

"My dear duke, by all means act on Mr. Dacre's valuable suggestion. As I said before, why not? It would at least be interesting to see if the duchess does or does not lose her arm—almost as interesting to you as to Mr. Dacre. Those blackmailing, kidnaping scoundrels do use such empty menaces. Besides, you would have the

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pleasure of seeing me locked up. My imprisonment for life would recompense you even for the loss of her grace's arm. And five hundred pounds is such a sum to have to pay—merely for a wife! Why not, therefore, act on Mr. Dacre's suggestion? Here comes the constable." The constable referred to was advancing toward them—he was not a dozen yards away. "Let me beckon to him—I will with pleasure." He took out his watch—a gold chronograph repeater. "There are scarcely ten minutes left during which it will be possible for me to send the communication which I spoke of, so that it may arrive in time. As it will then be too late, and the instruments are already prepared for the little operation which her grace is eagerly anticipating, it would, perhaps, be as well, after all, that you should give me into charge. You would have saved your five hundred pounds, and you would, at any rate, have something in exchange for her grace's mutilated limb. Ah, here is the constable! Officer!"

The stranger spoke with such a pleasant little air of easy geniality that it was impossible to tell if he were in jest or in earnest. This fact impressed the duke much more than if he had gone in for a liberal indulgence of the—under the circumstances—orthodox melodramatic scowling. And, indeed, in the face of his own common sense, it impressed Mr. Ivor Dacre too.

This well-bred, well-groomed youth was just the being to realize—aux bouts des ongles—a modern type of the devil, the type which depicts him as a perfect gentleman, who keeps smiling all the time.

The constable whom this audacious rogue had signaled approached the little group. He addressed the stranger: "Do you want me, sir?"

"No, I do not want you. I think it is the Duke of Datchet."

The constable, who knew the duke very well by sight, saluted him as he turned to receive instructions.

The duke looked white, even savage. There was not a pleasant look in his eyes and about his lips. He appeared to be endeavoring to put a great restraint upon himself. There was a momentary silence. Mr. Dacre made a movement as if to interpose. The duke caught him by the arm.

He spoke: "No, constable, I do not want you. This person is mistaken."

The constable looked as if he could not quite make out how such a mistake could have arisen, hesitated, then, with another salute, he moved away.

The stranger was still holding his watch in his hand.

"Only eight minutes," he said.

The duke seemed to experience some difficulty in giving utterance to what he had to say.

"If I give you this five hundred pounds, you—you—"

As the duke paused, as if at a loss for language which was strong enough to convey his meaning, the stranger laughed.

"Let us take the adjectives for granted. Besides, it is only boys who call each other names—men do things. If you give me the five hundred sovereigns, which you have in that bag, at once—in five minutes it will be too late—I will promise—I will not swear; if you do not credit my simple promise, you will not believe my solemn affirmation—I will promise that, possibly within an hour, certainly within an hour and a half, the Duchess of Datchet shall return to you absolutely uninjured—except, of course, as you are already aware, with regard to a few of the hairs of her head. I will promise this on the understanding that you do not yourself attempt to see where I go, and that you will allow no one else to do so." This with a glance at Ivor Dacre. "I shall know at once if I am followed. If you entertain such intentions, you had better, on all accounts, remain in possession of your five hundred pounds."

The duke eyed him very grimly.

"I entertain no such intentions—until the duchess returns."

Again the stranger indulged in that musical laugh of his.

"Ah, until the duchess returns! Of course, then the bargain's at an end. When you are once more in the enjoyment of her grace's society, you will be at liberty to set all the dogs in Europe at my heels. I assure you I fully expect that you will do so—why not?" The duke raised the canvas bag. "My dear duke, ten thousand thanks! You shall see her grace at Datchet House, 'pon my honor, probably within the hour."

"Well," commented Ivor Dacre, when the stranger had vanished, with the bag, into Piccadilly, and as the duke and himself moved toward Burlington Gardens, "if a gentleman is to be robbed, it is as well that he should have another gentleman rob him."

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III

Mr. Dacre eyed his companion covertly as they progressed. His Grace of Datchet appeared to have some fresh cause for uneasiness. All at once he gave it utterance, in a tone of voice which was extremely somber:

"Ivor, do you think that scoundrel will dare to play me false?"

"I think," murmured Mr. Dacre, "that he has dared to play you pretty false already."

"I don't mean that. But I mean how am I to know, now that he has his money, that he will still not keep Mabel in his clutches?"

There came an echo from Mr. Dacre.

"Just so—how are you to know?"

"I believe that something of this sort has been done in the States."

"I thought that there they were content to kidnap them after they were dead. I was not aware that they had, as yet, got quite so far as the living."

"I believe that I have heard of something just like this."

"Possibly; they are giants over there."

"And in that case the scoundrels, when their demands were met, refused to keep to the letter of their bargain and asked for more."

The duke stood still. He clinched his fists, and swore:

"Ivor, if that —— villain doesn't keep his word, and Mabel isn't home within the hour, by —— I shall go mad!"

"My dear Datchet"—Mr. Dacre loved strong language as little as he loved a scene—"let us trust to time and, a little, to your white-hatted and gardenia-buttonholed friend's word of honor. You should have thought of possible eventualities before you showed your confidence—really. Suppose, instead of going mad, we first of all go home?"

A hansom stood waiting for a fare at the end of the Arcade. Mr. Dacre had handed the duke into it before his grace had quite realized that the vehicle was there.

"Tell the fellow to drive faster." That was what the duke said when the cab had started.

"My dear Datchet, the man's already driving his geerage off its legs. If a bobby catches sight of him he'll take his number."

A moment later, a murmur from the duke:

"I don't know if you're aware that the prince is coming to dinner?"

"I am perfectly aware of it."

"You take it uncommonly cool. How easy it is to bear our brother's burdens! Ivor, if Mabel doesn't turn up I shall feel like murder."

"I sympathize with you, Datchet, with all my heart, though, I may observe, parenthetically, that I very far from realize the situation even yet. Take my advice. If the duchess does not show quite as soon as we both of us desire, don't make a scene; just let me see what I can do."

Judging from the expression of his countenance, the duke was conscious of no overwhelming desire to witness an exhibition of Mr. Dacre's prowess.

When the cab reached Datchet House his grace dashed up the steps three at a time. The door flew open.

"Has the duchess returned?"

"Hereward!"

A voice floated downward from above. Some one came running down the stairs. It was her Grace of Datchet.

"Mabel!"

She actually rushed into the duke's extended arms. And he kissed her, and she kissed him—before the servants.

"So you're not quite dead?" she cried.

"I am almost," he said.

She drew herself a little away from him.

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"Hereward, were you seriously hurt?"

"Do you suppose that I could have been otherwise than seriously hurt?"

"My darling! Was it a Pickford's van?"

The duke stared.

"A Pickford's van? I don't understand. But come in here. Come along, Ivor. Mabel, you don't see Ivor."

"How do you do, Mr. Dacre?"

Then the trio withdrew into a little anteroom; it was really time. Even then the pair conducted themselves as if Mr. Dacre had been nothing and no one. The duke took the lady's two hands in his. He eyed her fondly.

"So you are uninjured, with the exception of that lock of hair. Where did the villain take it from?"

The lady looked a little puzzled.

"What lock of hair?"

From an envelope which he took from his pocket the duke produced a shining tress. It was the lock of hair which had arrived in the first communication. "I will have it framed."

"You will have what framed?" The duchess glanced at what the duke was so tenderly caressing, almost, as it seemed, a little dubiously. "Whatever is it you have there?"

"It is the lock of hair which that scoundrel sent me." Something in the lady's face caused him to ask a question:

"Didn't he tell you he had sent it to me?"

"Hereward!"

"Did the brute tell you that he meant to cut off your little finger?"

A very curious look came into the lady's face. She glanced at the duke as if she, all at once, was half afraid of him. She cast at Mr. Dacre what really seemed to be a look of inquiry. Her voice was tremulously anxious.

"Hereward, did—did the accident affect you mentally?"

"How could it not have affected me mentally? Do you think that my mental organization is of steel?"

"But you look so well."

"Of course I look well, now that I have you back again. Tell me, darling, did that hound actually threaten you with cutting off your arm? If he did, I shall feel half inclined to kill him yet."

The duchess seemed positively to shrink from her better half's near neighborhood.

"Hereward, was it a Pickford's van?"

The duke seemed puzzled. Well he might be.

"Was what a Pickford's van?"

The lady turned to Mr. Dacre. In her voice there was a ring of anguish.

"Mr. Dacre, tell me, was it a Pickford's van?" Ivor could only imitate his relative's repetition of her inquiry.

"I don't quite catch you—was what a Pickford's van?"

The duchess clasped her hands in front of her.

"What is it you are keeping from me? What is it you are trying to hide? I implore you to tell me the worst, whatever it may be! Do not keep me any longer in suspense; you do not know what I already have endured. Mr. Dacre, is my husband mad?"

One need scarcely observe that the lady's amazing appeal to Mr. Dacre as to her husband's sanity was received with something like surprise. As the duke continued to stare at her, a dreadful fear began to loom in his brain.

"My darling, your brain is unhinged!"

He advanced to take her two hands again in his; but, to his unmistakable distress, she shrank away from him.

"Hereward—don't touch me. How is it that I missed you? Why did you not wait until I came?"

"Wait until you came?"

The duke's bewilderment increased.

"Surely, if your injuries turned out, after all, to be slight, that was all the more reason why you should have waited, after sending for me like that."

"I sent for you—I?" The duke's tone was grave. "My darling, perhaps you had better come upstairs."

"Not until we have had an explanation. You must have known that I should come. Why did you not wait for me after you had sent me that?"

The duchess held out something to the duke. He took it. It was a card—his own visiting card. Something was

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written on the back of it. He read aloud what was written.

"Mabel, come to me at once with the bearer. They tell me that they cannot take me home.' It looks like my own writing."

"Looks like it! It IS your writing."

"It looks like it—and written with a shaky pen."

"My dear child, one's hand would shake at such a moment as that."

"Mabel, where did you get this?"

"It was brought to me in Cane and Wilson's."

"Who brought it?"

"Who brought it? Why, the man you sent."

"The man I sent!" A light burst upon the duke's brain. He fell back a pace. "It's the decoy!"

Her grace echoed the words:

"The decoy?"

"The scoundrel! To set a trap with such a bait! My poor innocent darling, did you think it came from me? Tell me, Mabel, where did he cut off your hair?"

"Cut off my hair?"

Her grace put her hand to her head as if to make sure that her hair was there.

"Where did he take you to?"

"He took me to Draper's Buildings."

"Draper's Buildings?"

"I have never been in the City before, but he told me it was Draper's Buildings. Isn't that near the Stock Exchange?"

"Near the Stock Exchange?"

It seemed rather a curious place to which to take a kidnaped victim. The man's audacity!

"He told me that you were coming out of the Stock Exchange when a van knocked you over. He said that he thought it was a Pickford's van—was it a Pickford's van?"

"No, it was not a Pickford's van. Mabel, were you in Draper's Buildings when you wrote that letter?"

"Wrote what letter?"

"Have you forgotten it already? I do not believe that there is a word in it which will not be branded on my brain until I die."

"Hereward! What do you mean?"

"Surely you cannot have written me such a letter as that, and then have forgotten it already?"

He handed her the letter which had arrived in the second communication. She glanced at it, askance. Then she took it with a little gasp.

"Hereward, if you don't mind, I think I'll take a chair." She took a chair. "Whatever—whatever's this?" As she read the letter the varying expressions which passed across her face were, in themselves, a study in psychology. "Is it possible that you can imagine that, under any conceivable circumstances, I could have written such a letter as this?"

"Mabel!"

She rose to her feet with emphasis.

"Hereward, don't say that you thought this came from me!"

"Not from you?" He remembered Knowles's diplomatic reception of the epistle on its first appearance. "I suppose that you will say next that this is not a lock of your hair?"

"My dear child, what bee have you got in your bonnet? This a lock of my hair! Why, it's not in the least bit like my hair!"

Which was certainly inaccurate. As far as color was concerned it was an almost perfect match. The duke turned to Mr. Dacre.

"Ivor, I've had to go through a good deal this afternoon. If I have to go through much more, something will crack!" He touched his forehead. "I think it's my turn to take a chair." Not the one which the duchess had vacated, but one which faced it. He stretched out his legs in front of him; he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets; he said, in a tone which was not gloomy but absolutely grewsome:

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"Might I ask, Mabel, if you have been kidnaped?"

"Kidnaped?"

"The word I used was 'kidnaped.' But I will spell it if you like. Or I will get a dictionary, that you may see its meaning."

The duchess looked as if she was beginning to be not quite sure if she was awake or sleeping. She turned to Ivor.

"Mr. Dacre, has the accident affected Hereward's brain?"

The duke took the words out of his cousin's mouth.

"On that point, my dear, let me ease your mind. I don't know if you are under the impression that I should be the same shape after a Pickford's van had run over me as I was before; but, in any case, I have not been run over by a Pickford's van. So far as I am concerned there has been no accident. Dismiss that delusion from your mind."

"Oh!"

"You appear surprised. One might even think that you were sorry. But may I now ask what you did when you arrived at Draper's Buildings?"

"Did! I looked for you!"

"Indeed! And when you had looked in vain, what was the next item in your programme?"

The lady shrank still farther from him.

"Hereward, have you been having a jest at my expense? Can you have been so cruel?" Tears stood in her eyes.

Rising, the duke laid his hand upon her arm.

"Mabel, tell me—what did you do when you had looked for me in vain?"

"I looked for you upstairs and downstairs and everywhere. It was quite a large place, it took me ever such a time. I thought that I should go distracted. Nobody seemed to know anything about you, or even that there had been an accident at all—it was all offices. I couldn't make it out in the least, and the people didn't seem to be able to make me out either. So when I couldn't find you anywhere I came straight home again."

The duke was silent for a moment. Then with funereal gravity he turned to Mr. Dacre. He put to him this question:

"Ivor, what are you laughing at?"

Mr. Dacre drew his hand across his mouth with rather a suspicious gesture.

"My dear fellow, only a smile!"

The duchess looked from one to the other.

"What have you two been doing? What is the joke?"

With an air of preternatural solemnity the duke took two letters from the breast pocket of his coat.

"Mabel, you have already seen your letter. You have already seen the lock of your hair. Just look at this—and that."

He gave her the two very singular communications which had arrived in such a mysterious manner, and so quickly one after the other. She read them with wide-open eyes.

"Hereward! Wherever did these come from?"

The duke was standing with his legs apart, and his hands in his trousers pockets. "I would give—I would give another five hundred pounds to know. Shall I tell you, madam, what I have been doing? I have been presenting five hundred golden sovereigns to a perfect stranger, with a top hat, and a gardenia in his buttonhole."

"Whatever for?"

"If you have perused those documents which you have in your hand, you will have some faint idea. Ivor, when it's your funeral, I'll smile. Mabel, Duchess of Datchet, it is beginning to dawn upon the vacuum which represents my brain that I've been the victim of one of the prettiest things in practical jokes that ever yet was planned. When that fellow brought you that card at Cane and Wilson's—which, I need scarcely tell you, never came from me—some one walked out of the front entrance who was so exactly like you that both Barnes and Moysey took her for you. Moysey showed her into the carriage, and Barnes drove her home. But when the carriage reached home it was empty. Your double had got out upon the road."

The duchess uttered a sound which was half gasp, half sigh.

"Hereward!"

"Barnes and Moysey, with beautiful and childlike innocence, when they found that they had brought the thing

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home empty, came straightway and told me that YOU had jumped out of the brougham while it had been driving full pelt through the streets. While I was digesting that piece of information there came the first epistle, with the lock of your hair. Before I had time to digest that there came the second epistle, with yours inside."

"It seems incredible!"

"It sounds incredible; but unfathomable is the folly of man, especially of a man who loves his wife." The duke crossed to Mr. Dacre. "I don't want, Ivor, to suggest anything in the way of bribery and corruption, but if you could keep this matter to yourself, and not mention it to your friends, our white-hatted and gardenia-buttonholed acquaintance is welcome to his five hundred pounds, and—Mabel, what on earth are you laughing at?"

The duchess appeared, all at once, to be seized with inextinguishable laughter.

"Hereward," she cried, "just think how that man must be laughing at you!"

And the Duke of Datchet thought of it.