

Hume Fergus

The Mandarin's Fan



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	27
CHAPTER VI	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

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CHAPTER I

The Advertisement

One July evening in the first year of the present century, two gentlemen were seated on the terrace of the mansion, known as Royabay. A small rose-wood table was placed between the deep arm-chairs, and thereon appeared wine, coffee, and a box of cigars. The young host smoked a briar and sipped coffee, but his guest, very wisely, devoted himself to superlative port and a fragrant cigar. Major Tidman was a battered old soldier of fortune, who appreciated good quarters and made the most of civilised luxuries, when other people paid for them. He had done full justice to a dinner admirably cooked and served, while Ainsleigh, the master of the feast had merely trifled with his food. Now, the wary Tidman gave himself up to the perfect enjoyment of wine, cigar and the quiet evening, while his host restlessly changed his position a dozen times in ten minutes and gloomed misanthropically at the beautiful surroundings.

And these were very beautiful. From the moss-grown terrace shallow steps descended to smooth lawns and rainbow-hued flower-beds, and solemn pines girdled the open space, wherein the house was set. And under the radiance of a saffron coloured sky, stood the house, grey with centuries of wind and weather, bleaching sun and drenching rains. With its Tudor battlements, casements, diamond-paned and low oriel windows, half obliterated escutcheons; its drapery of green ivy, and heavy iron-clamped doors, it looked venerable, picturesque and peaceful. Tennyson sang in the Palace of Art of just such a quiet "English home the haunt of ancient peace."

On the left, the circle of trees receded to reveal the majestic ruins of an abbey, which had supplied the stones used to construct the mansion. Built by the weak but pious Henry III., the Norman-French name Royabbaye (King's Abbey) still designated the house of the courtier who had obtained the monastery from another Henry, less pious, and more prone to destroy than to build. The country folk had corrupted the name to Royabay, and its significance was almost lost. But the owner of this fair domain knew its meaning, and loved the ancient place, which had been in the Ainsleigh family for over three hundred years. And he loved it the more, as there was a possibility of its passing away from him altogether.

Rupert was the last of the old line, poor in relations, and poorer still in money. Till the reign of George the first the Ainsleighs had been rich and famous: but from the time of the Hanovarian advent their fortunes declined. Charles Ainsleigh had thrown in his lot with the unlucky Stewarts, and paid for his loyalty so largely as to cripple those who succeeded him. Augustus, the Regency buck, wasted still further the diminished property he inherited, and a Victorian Ainsleigh proved to be just such another spendthrift. Followed this wastrel, Gilbert more thrifty, who strove, but vainly, to restore the waning fortunes of his race. His son Markham, endeavouring to acquire wealth for the same purpose, went to the far East. But he died in China, – murdered according to family tradition, – and on hearing the news, his widow sickened and died, leaving an only child to battle with the ancestral curse. For a curse there was, as dire as that which over-shadowed the House of Atreus, and the superstitious believed, – and with much reason, – that young Rupert as one of the Ainsleighs, had to bear the burden of the terrible anathema.

Major Tidman knew all these things very well, but being modern and sceptical and grossly material, he discredited such occult influence. Expressing his scornful surprise, that Rupert should trouble his head about such fantasies, he delivered his opinion in the loud free dictatorial speech,

which was characteristic of the bluff soldier. "Bunkum," said the Major sipping his wine with relish, "because an old monk driven to his last fortifications, curses those who burnt him, you believe that his jabber has an effect on the Ainsleighs."

"They have been very unlucky since," said Rupert gloomily.

"Not a bit of it – not a bit. The curse of Abbot Raoul, didn't begin to work, – if work it did, which I for one don't believe, – until many a long day after this place came to your family. I was born in this neighbourhood sixty and more years ago" added the Major, "and I know the history of your family. The Ainsleighs were lucky enough till Anne's reign."

"Till the first George's reign," corrected the young man, "so far as money goes, that is. But not one of them died in his bed."

"Plenty have died in their beds since."

"But have lost all their money," retorted Rupert.

"It's better to lose money than life," said Tidman evasively.

"I'm not so certain of that Major. But you should talk with Mrs. Pettley about Abbot Raoul's curse. She believes in it."

"And you Ainsleigh?"

Rupert shrugged his shoulders. "We certainly seem to be most unlucky," said he, declining to commit himself to an opinion.

"Want of brains," snapped the Major, who was one of those men who have a reason for everything, "your people wasted their money, and refused to soil their hands with trade. Such pig-headedness brings about misfortune, without the aid of a silly old fool's curse."

"I don't think Abbot Raoul was a fool," protested the host mildly, "on the contrary, he is said to have been a learned and clever man. Aymas Ainsleiyh, received the abbey from Henry VIII., and burnt Abbot Raoul in his own cloisters," he nodded towards the ruins, "you can see the blackened square of grass yonder, as a proof of the curse. Herbage will not grow there, and never will, till the curse be lifted."

"Huh," said the Major with supreme contempt, "any chance of that?"

Rupert smiled. "A chance that will never occur I fear. The curse, or prophecy, or whatever you like to call it –"

"I call it rubbish," interpolated the sceptic.

"Well doubting Thomas, it runs like this, – rude enough verse as you will see, but you can't expect a doomed man to be particular as to literary style," and Rupert recited slowly: —

"My curse from the tyrants will never depart,
For a sword in the hands of the angel flashes:
Till Ainsleigh, poor, weds the poor maid of his heart,
And gold be brought forth from the holy ashes."

"I spare you the ancient pronunciation Major."

Tidman filled another glass with wine, and laughed scornfully. "I expect the old monk made up the second line to rhyme with ashes," he said expanding his broad chest. "I've heard that rubbishy poetry before. But haven't the Ainsleighs always married poor girls?"

"Some did, but then they had money. It must be a poor Ainsleigh to wed a poor girl to fulfil the third line. My father and grandfather were both poor, but they married rich brides."

"And what became of the cash?"

"It went – I don't know how – but it went."

"Gold turns to dry leaves in the hands of fools," said Tidman sagely, "there's some sense in the old fairy tales. But the fourth line? how can you get gold from ashes?"

Young Ainsleigh rose and began to pace the terrace. "I'm sure I don't know," he said, "that's the curse. If I marry Miss Rayner, I certainly fulfil the third line. She is poor and I am a pauper. Perhaps when the enigma of the third line is solved by such a marriage the fourth line will be made clear."

"I shouldn't hang on to that poetry if I were you, Ainsleigh. Let some one else solve the third line, and the fourth also if he likes. My advice to you is to marry a dollar heiress."

Rupert looked savage. "I love Miss Rayner, and I marry her, or no one."

Tidman selected another cigar carefully. "I think you are wrong," said he decisively, "you have only a small income it's true, but you have this grand old place, a fine old name, and you ain't bad-looking. I guess Miss Jonathan of N'Yr'k would just jump at you."

"I love Olivia Rayner," repeated Ainsleigh doggedly.

"But the obstacles my dear Don Quixote," argued the Major lighting the cigar, "you are poor and she, at the most, will inherit only a few hundreds a year from that aunt of hers. And that mass of granite Miss Wharf, don't like you, nor does her companion, the Pewsey cat."

"Why do you call her a cat – the harmless creature."

"Because she *is* a cat," said Tidman sturdily, "she'd scratch if she got a chance for all her velvet paws. But she hates you as old Miss Wharf does. Then there's Lady Jabe – "

"Oh heavens," said Rupert and made a wry face.

"You may well say that. She's a bullying Amazon of uncertain age. But she'll do her best to catch Olivia for her nephew Chris Walker."

"Oh he's a nice enough fellow," said Rupert still pacing the terrace. "I've got nothing to say against him, except that he'd better keep out of my way. And after all Olivia would never marry a clerk in a tea merchant's firm."

"But he's nephew to Lady Jabe."

"What of that. She's only the widow of a knight and hasn't a penny to leave him. Why should she want him to marry Olivia?"

"Because Miss Wharf will leave Olivia five hundred a year. Lady Jabe will then live on the young couple. And see here Ainsleigh, if you marry Olivia with that income, you won't be taking to wife the poor girl mentioned in the curse."

"Oh hang the curse," said Rupert crossly.

"By all means," said Tidman serenely, "you didn't bring me here to talk of that did you?"

"No. I want to ask your advice?"

"I've given it – unasked. Marry a dollar-heiress, and let old Jabe make Olivia her niece-in-law. By doing so you will be released from your pecuniary difficulties, and will also escape the hatred of Miss Wharf and that Pewsey cat, who both hate you."

"I wonder why they do?"

"Hum," said Tidman discreetly. He knew pretty well why Miss Wharf hated his host, but he was too wise to speak, "something to do with a love affair."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"Ask me another," replied Major Tidman vulgarly, for he was not going to tell a fiery young man like Rupert, that Markham Ainsleigh, Rupert's father, was mixed up in the romance, "and I wish you would sit down," he went on irritably "you're walking like a cat on hot bricks. What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter," echoed Ainsleigh returning to the arm-chair. "I asked you here to tell you."

"Wait till I have another glass. Now fire ahead." But Rupert did not accept the invitation immediately. He looked at the lovely scene spread out before him, and up to the sky which was now of a pale primrose colour. There was a poetic vein in young Ainsleigh, but troubles from his earliest childhood had stultified it considerably. Ever since he left college had he battled to keep the old

place, but now, it seemed as if all his trouble had been in vain. He explained his circumstances to the Major, and that astute warrior listened to a long tale of mortgages threatened to be foreclosed, of the sale of old and valuable furniture, and of the disposal of family jewels. "But this last mortgage will finish me," said Rupert in conclusion. "I can't raise the money to pay it off. Miss Wharf will foreclose, and then all the creditors will come down on me. The deluge will come in spite of all I can do."

Major Tidman stared. "Do you mean to say that Miss Wharf – "

"She holds the mortgage."

"And she hates you," said Tidman, his eyes bulging, "huh! This is a nice kettle of fish."

Rupert threw himself back in the deep chair with an angry look. He was a tall finely built young man of twenty-five, of Saxon fairness, with clear blue eyes and a skin tanned by an outdoor life. In spite of his poverty and perhaps because of it, he was accurately dressed by a crack London tailor, and looked singularly handsome in his well-fitting evening suit. Pulling his well-trimmed fair moustache, he eyed the tips of his neat, patent leather shoes gloomily, and waited to hear what the Major had to say.

That warrior ruminated, and puffed himself out like the frog in the fable. Tidman was thickset and stout, bald-headed and plethoric. He had a long grey moustache which he tugged at viciously, and on the whole looked a comfortable old gentleman, peaceful enough when let alone. But his face was that of a fighter and his grey eyes were hot and angry. All over the world had the Major fought, and his rank had been gained in South America. With enough to live on, he had returned to the cot where he was born, and was passing his declining days very pleasantly. Having known Rupert for many years and Rupert's father before him, he usually gave his advice when it was asked for, and knew more about the young man's affairs than anyone else did. But the extent of the ruin, as revealed by the late explanation, amazed him. "What's to be done?" he asked.

"That's what I wish you to suggest," said Rupert grimly, "things are coming to a climax, and perhaps when the last Ainsleigh is driven from home, Abbot Raoul will rest quiet in his grave. His ghost walks you know. Ask Mrs. Pettley. She's seen it, or him."

"Stuff-stuff-stuff," grumbled the Major staring, "let the ghost and the curse and all that rubbish alone. What's to be done?"

"Well," said the young man meditatively, "either I must sell up, and clear out to seek my fortune, leaving Olivia to marry young Walker, or – "

"Or what?" asked Tidman seeing Rupert hesitating.

For answer Ainsleigh took a pocket-book from the lower ledge of the table and produced therefrom a slip of printed paper.

"I cut that out of "The Daily Telegraph," said he handing it to the Major, "what do you make of it?"

Tidman mounted a gold pince-nez and read aloud, as follows: —

"The jade fan of Mandarin Lo-Keong, with the four and half beads and the yellow cord. Wealth and long life to the holder, who gives it to Hwei, but death and the doom of the god Kwang-ho to that one who refuses. Address Kan-su at the Joss-house of the Five Thousand Blessings, 43 Perry Street, Whitechapel."

"A mixture of the Far East and the Near West, isn't it?" asked Rupert, when the Major laid down the slip and stared.

"Lo-Keong," said Tidman searching his memory, "wasn't that the man your father knew?"

"The same. That is why I cut out the slip, and why I asked you to see me. You remember my father's expedition to China?"

"Of course. He went there twenty years ago when you were five years of age. I was home at the time – it was just before I went to fight in that Janjalla Republic war in South America. I wanted your father to come with me and see if he couldn't make money: but he was bent on China."

"Well," said Rupert, "I understood he knew of a gold-mine there."

"Yes, on the Hwei River," Major Tidman snatched the slip of print and read the lines again, "and here's the name, Hwei – that's strange."

"But what's stranger still," said Rupert, bending forward, "is, that I looked up some papers of my father and learn that the Hwei River is in the Kan-su province."

"Address Kan-su," murmured Tidman staring harder than ever. "Yes. It seems as though this had something to do with your father."

"It *must* have something to do with him," insisted Rupert, "my father found that gold-mine near the Hwei River in the Kan-su province, and Lo-Keong was the Boxer leader who protected my father from the enmity of the Chinese. I believe he sent my father's papers to England – at least so Dr. Forge says."

"Forge," cried Tidman rising, "quite so. He was with your father. Why not see him, and ask questions."

"I'll do so. Perhaps he may tell me something about this fan."

"What if he does?"

"I might find it."

"And if you do?" asked the Major, his eyes protruding.

Rupert sprang to his feet and took up the slip. "Wealth and long life to the holder who gives it to Hwei," he read: then replaced the slip in his pocket-book, "why shouldn't I find that fan and get enough money to pay off Miss Wharf and others and keep Royabay."

"But it's such a mad idea?"

"I don't see it. If it hadn't to do with my father it would be," said Ainsleigh lighting his pipe, "but my father knew Lo-Keong, and by the names Hwei and Kan-su, it seems as though the locality of the gold-mine had something to do with the matter. I'll see old Forge and try to find this fan." "Oh," said Tidman, a light breaking on him, "you think Lo-Keong may have given the fan to your father?"

"Yes, and Forge may know what luggage and papers were sent home, at the time my father died – "

"Was murdered you mean."

"We can't be sure of that," said Rupert his face flushing, "but I'll find that out, and get hold of the fan also. It's my chance to make money, and I believe Providence has opened this way to me."

CHAPTER II

Dr. Forge

Royabay was distant five miles from Marport, a rising watering place on the Essex coast. In fact so large was the town, and so many the visitors, that it might be said to be quite risen, though the inhabitants insisted that it had not yet attained the height it yet would reach. But be this as it may, Marport was popular and fashionable, and many retired gentlepeople lived in spacious houses along the cliffs and in the suburbs. The ancient town, which lay in a hollow, was left to holiday trippers, and these came in shoals during the summer months. There was the usual pier, the Kursaal, the theatre, many bathing machines and many boarding houses – in fact the usual sort of things which go to make up a popular watering-place. And the town had been in existence – the new part at all events – for only fifteen years. Like Jonah's gourd it had sprung up in a night: but it certainly showed no signs of withering. In fact its attractions increased yearly.

Major Tidman was a wise man, and had not travelled over the world with his eyes shut. He had seen colonial towns spring up and fade away, and knew how the value of land increases. Thus, when he returned to his own country with a certain sum of money, he expended the same in buying land, and in building thereon. This policy produced a lot of money, with which the Major bought more land and more houses. Now, he possessed an avenue of desirable villa residences in the suburbs which brought him in a good income, and which, by reason of their situation, were never empty. The Major did not live here himself. He was a bachelor and fond of company: therefore he took up his quarters in the Bristol Hotel, the most fashionable in Marport. As he had shares in the company which built it, he managed to obtain his rooms at a comparatively moderate rate. Here he lived all the year round, save when he took a trip to the Continent, and, as the Bristol was always full of people, the Major did not lack company. As he was a good-humoured little man, with plenty of small talk and a fund of out-of-the-way information, he soon became immensely popular. In this way the crafty Major had all the comforts of home and the delights of society without bearing the burden of an establishment of his own. His sole attendant was a weather-beaten one-eyed man, who acted as his valet, and who knew how to hold his tongue.

Sometimes the Major would walk up town and inspect his property with great pride. It was balm to his proud heart to walk up and down the spacious avenue, and survey the red brick villas smiling amidst trim gardens. Tidman's birth was humble, – his father had been a small tenant farmer of the Ainsleighs, – and he had started life without even the proverbial shilling. For many years he was absent from his native land, and returned to find fortune waiting for him on the door step. To be sure he brought a nest-egg home with him. Nevertheless, but for his astuteness in buying land and in building he would not have acquired such a good income. So the Major had some cause for self congratulation, when he paced up and down Tidman's Avenue.

Two days after his dinner with Rupert Ainsleigh, the Major spick and span as usual, – he always looked as though he had stepped out of a bandbox, – was strutting up the Avenue. Half way along he came face to face with a withered little woman, who looked like the bad fairy of the old nursery tales. She wore a poke bonnet, a black dress and, strange to say, a scarlet shawl. Her age might have been about fifty-five, but she looked even older. With her dress picked up, and holding a flower in her hand, she came mincing along smiling at the world with a puckered face and out of a pair of very black and brilliant eyes. She looked a quaint old-fashioned gentlewoman of the sort likely to possess a good income, for it seemed that no pauper would have dared to dress in so shabby and old-fashioned a manner. Consequently it was strange that the gallant Major should have showed a disposition to turn tail when he set eyes on her. She might indeed have been the

veritable witch she looked, so pale turned Major Tidman's ruddy face. But the old dame was not going to let him escape in this way.

"Oh good morning," she said in a sharp voice like a saw, "how well you are looking dear Major Tidman – really so very well. I never saw you look younger. The rose in your button-hole is not more blooming. How do you keep your youth so? I remember you –"

But the Major cut her short. He had enough of flattering words which he guessed she did not mean, and didn't want her to remember anything, for he knew her memory extended disagreeably to the time when he had been a poor and humble nobody. "I'm in a hurry Miss Pewsey" he said twirling his stick, "good-morning ma'am – morning."

"If you're going to see Dr. Forge," said Miss Pewsey, her black eyes glittering like jet. "I've just come from his house. He is engaged."

"I can wait I suppose, Miss Pewsey," said Tidman bristling, "that is, supposing I am calling on the doctor."

"Then you really are: not on account of your health I'm sure. I do hope you aren't ill, dear Major. We all look forward to you shining at the ball, which is to take place at the Hotel Bristol."

"I may be there, Miss Pewsey. I may be there, – in fact," the Major flourished his stick again, "I am one of the stewards."

Miss Pewsey clapped together a pair of small claws encased in shabby cotton gloves. "There," she cried in a shriller voice than ever. "I knew it. I said so to my Sophia. Of course you know I always call dear Miss Wharf my Sophia; we have been friends for years – oh yes, for years. We grew on one stem and –"

"You'll excuse me, ma'am –"

"Oh yes – I know you are so busy. But I was saying, that you can give me a ticket for my nephew, Mr. Burgh –"

"The tickets are for sale at the hotel," said Tidman gruffly.

"Yes, but my poor nephew is poor. He also has come from foreign parts Major as you did, and just as poor. You must give him a ticket – oh really you must." Miss Pewsey spoke with an emphasis on every other word, and between her teeth as though she was trying to prevent the speech escaping too rapidly. "Now, Major," she coaxed.

"I'll see, ma'am – I'll see."

"Oh. I knew you would." She clasped her hands again, "come and see my Sophia – dear Miss Wharf, and then you can give Clarence – that's my nephew's name, sweet isn't it? – you can give him the ticket. But don't bring *him*," added Miss Pewsey jerking her old head backward in the direction of Dr. Forge's residence, "he's there."

"Who is there, ma'am?" demanded the Major with a start.

"Why that horrid Mr. Ainsleigh and –"

Miss Pewsey got no further. The Major uttered something naughty under his breath, and taking off his hat with a flourish, bowed his way along the road, pursued by the shrill injunctions of the lady not to forget the ticket.

Tidman walked more rapidly and less jauntily than usual, and stopped at Dr. Forge's gate to wipe his red face, which had now assumed its normal colour.

"By George" said the old soldier, "that woman will marry me, if I don't take care. She ain't safe – she shouldn't be allowed out. Pewsey – a cat – a cat – I always said so. Lavinia Pewsey cat, to Benjamin Tidman gentleman. Not if I know it – ugh – ugh," and he walked up the steps to ring the bell. While waiting, his thoughts went from Miss Pewsey to Rupert. "I thought he had gone to town about that fan business," said the Major fretting, "what's he doing calling on Forge without telling me," and Tidman seemed very much annoyed that Rupert should have taken such a liberty.

True enough, he found young Ainsleigh sitting with Dr. Forge. The doctor was a tall lean man with sad eyes, and a stiff manner. He was dressed in a loose white flannel suit, in a most

unprofessional way. But everyone knew that Forge had money and did not practise, save when the fancy took him. With his watchful grey eyes and sad face and lantern jaws, Forge was not a prepossessing object or a medical attendant to be desired. Also his hands had a claw-like look, which, added to his thin hooked nose, made him look like a hawk. He spoke very little though, and what he did say was to the point: but he was not popular like the Major. A greater contrast than this mummy and handsome young Ainsleigh, can scarcely be imagined.

The Major came puffing into the room and looked around. It was a small apartment furnished with Chinese curiosities. Rice-paper painted in the conventional Chinese fashion adorned the walls: a many-tasseled lantern gay with colour, dangled from the roof, and in each corner of the room a fat mandarin squatted on a pedestal. The furniture was of bamboo, and straw matting covered the floor. A bookcase filled with medical volumes looked somewhat out of place in this eastern room, as did the doctor's writing table, a large one covered with papers and books, and strange looking Chinese scrips. The room was as queer as its owner, and the atmosphere had that indescribable eastern smell, which the Major remembered to have sniffed up at Canton under disagreeable circumstances. Perhaps it was the revival of an unpleasant memory that made him sit down so suddenly, or it might have been the cold grey stony eyes of Forge.

"Well Major," said Rupert who looked handsome and gay in flannels, and who seemed to have lost his melancholy looks, "who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"I came to ask Forge to keep the exterior of his house a little more tidy," said the Major with dignity, "the steps have not been cleaned this morning, and there is straw in the garden, while the shrubs and flowers are dying for want of water."

Forge shrugged his thin shoulders, and nodded towards some egg-shell china cups and a quaint looking tea-pot. But he did not speak.

"No," replied the Major to the silent invitation. "I never drink tea in the afternoon –"

"Or at any time," said Forge in a melancholy way. "I know you of old. Ainsleigh, take another cup."

"Not in the Chinese fashion," said Rupert smiling, "you drink it too hot for my taste and I like milk and sugar. But now I've told you about the fan, I'll leave you to chat with Tidman."

"The fan," said Tidman sitting up as straight as his stoutness would let him, "ah yes – I forgot about that. Well?"

"Well," echoed Rupert lighting a cigarette, "I called at the joss house in Perry Street Whitechapel, and a nice sort of den it is. A Chinaman, heard my explanation about my father's connection with Lo-Keong, and then told me that the fan had been stolen from that gentleman, who is now a Mandarin."

"Lo-Keong was well on the way to the highest post when I saw him last" said Forge preparing a roll of tobacco, "he was much in favour at the court."

"But I thought he was a Boxer," said Tidman, "and surely –"

"Oh he gave up the Boxers, and curried favour with the Dowager Empress. That was seven years ago, when I was last in China. I met you there Tidman."

Again the disagreeable recollection of Canton crossed the Major's memory, and he nodded. "What about the fan?" he asked Rupert again.

"It's of great value," said Ainsleigh, "at least this Chinaman told me so. Lo-Keong is now a Mandarin, and is high in favour with the Dowager Empress –"

"And consequently is hated by the Emperor," murmured Forge.

"I don't know, doctor, I'm not up in Chinese politics. However, the fan was lost by Lo-Keong some years ago, and being a sacred fan, he wants it back. This Chinaman Tung-Yu –"

"Oh," said the Major, "then you didn't see Hwei or Kan-su?"

"Those are names of a river and a province," said the doctor.

"I know," snapped Tidman, "but they were in the advertisement."

"Tung-yu explained that they were used only for the purpose of advertisement," said Rupert, "but to make a long story short, I told him that I had seen the fan – "

"You saw the fan," asked Tidman directing a side look at Forge.

"A dream – a dream," said the doctor.

"No," insisted the young man. "I feel sure I have seen that fan, I can't think where. Perhaps it is amongst my father's effects sent from China by Lo-Keong years ago – "

"Twenty years ago," said Dr. Forge, "and Lo-Keong would hardly send his own fan. I remember the things coming. I came home immediately before. A Chinaman brought your father's papers and luggage to Royabay. He left them with your mother and went away."

"Were you not with my father when he died?" asked Rupert, "I always understood you were."

"No. I was at Pekin at the time. Your father and I were working the mine together, and I went about some imperial concessions. While there I heard that your father was dead."

"Was he murdered?" asked Rupert earnestly.

"I really can't say, Lo-Keong said that he died of dysentery, but he was always a liar. He wouldn't be so high in favour with the Court if he wasn't. Lying is a fine art in the Far East, and – "

"Yes – Yes," said Tidman impatiently, "but what has all this to do with the fan?"

"I think it's all of a piece myself," said Rupert, "and I intend to get to the bottom of it. I have seen that fan somewhere – but I can't think – I can't," he reflected and shook his head, "no. But I have seen it doctor, so its no use your shrugging your shoulders. I want to find it and get that five thousand pounds."

"What?" cried the Major leaping up on his stout little legs.

"Lo-Keong is willing to give five thousand pounds for the return of his fan," said Ainsleigh, who had walked to the door, "and I intend to earn it."

"Against my advice," said Forge looking up oddly.

Rupert laughed. "Oh you are afraid," he said smiling.

"Of you, not of myself. I know what the Chinese are, and have studied the race for years. I know how to deal with them; but you will get into trouble if you meddle with this fan business."

"And so I say," cried Tidman emphatically.

"Why, what do you know of the Chinese, Major?" asked Rupert.

"More than I like to think of," said the little man wiping his bald head. "I went out to China for a trip seven years ago and met with an adventure in Canton – ugh!"

"What sort of an adventure?"

"Ugh!" grunted the Major again, "don't talk about it. It makes me cold to think of it. The Chinese are demons. Forge got me out of the trouble and I left China never to set foot in it again I hope. Ainsleigh, if you want that curse of yours to be realised, meddle with the fan. But if you want to keep your life and your skin, leave the matter alone."

"I'm going to get that five thousand pounds," said Rupert, obstinately, "as soon as I can recollect where I saw that fan. The memory will come back to me. I am sure it will. Doctor you won't help me."

"No," said Forge decisively. "I advise you to leave the matter alone."

"In that case I must search it out myself. Good-day," and Ainsleigh strolled out of the room, lightheartedly enough, as he whistled a gay tune. Major Tidman looked grimly at the closed door, and then still more grimly at the doctor, who was paring his nails.

"Our young friend is ambitious," he said.

Forge laughed gently. "You can hardly blame him. He wants to marry Miss Rayner and save his ancestral home, so I am quite sure he will search for the fan."

"He won't find it then," said the Major petulantly.

"Won't he?" questioned Forge sweetly, "well, perhaps not. By the way you want to see me Major. Mrs. Bressy tells me you called at least twice yesterday."

"Yes. She didn't know when you would be back."

"I never tell her. I like to take the old lady unawares. She is a Dickens' character, with a fondness for drink, and for taking things which don't belong to her. I always go away and come back unexpectedly. Yesterday I was in Paris. Now I am at Marport. Well?"

The Major had contained himself with difficulty all this time, and had grown very red in the face. The colour changed to a lively purple, as he burst out. "See here Forge what's the use of talking to me in this way. You have that fan."

"Have I," said Forge smiling gently.

"Yes. You know well enough that the very fan – the jade fan with the five beads, was the cause of my getting into trouble in Canton. You got me out of the trouble and you asked me to give you the fan, when I thanked you."

"And you refused," said Forge still smiling.

"Well I did at first," said Tidman sulkily. "I risked my life over the beastly thing, and – "

Forge raised a thin hand. "Spare yourself the recital. I know."

"Well then," went on Tidman excitedly. "You asked again for it when you came home, and I gave it to you. Ainsleigh is quite right. He *did* see the fan. I showed it to him one day before you arrived. I see he has forgotten, but any stray thought may revive his memory. I don't want him to have the fan."

"Why not?" asked Forge shutting his knife with a click.

"Because I want the five thousand pounds for myself. I'm not so well off as people think, and I want – "

"You forget," said Forge gently, "you gave me the fan."

"And have you got it?"

"I have," he nodded towards a cabinet of Chinese work adorned with quaint figures, "it's in there."

"Give it to me back."

"No. I think I'll keep it."

"What do you want to do with it?" asked Tidman angrily.

Forge rose and looked stern, "I want to keep it from Lo-Keong," he said savagely, "there's some secret connected with that fan. I can't understand what the secret is or what the fan has to do with it: but it means life and death to this Mandarin. He'd give ten thousand, – twenty thousand to get that fan back. But he shan't."

"Oh," groaned the Major, "why did I give it to you. To think that such a lot of money should go begging. If I had only known what the fan was worth."

"You knew nothing about it save as a curiosity."

"How do you know," demanded the Major.

Forge who had turned towards the cabinet wheeled round and looked more like a hawk than ever as he pounced on the stout man. "What do *you* know?" and he clawed Tidman's plump shoulders.

"Let me go confound you," blustered the Major, "what do you mean by assaulting a gentleman – "

"A gentleman." Forge suddenly released the Major and laughed softly, "does Benjamin Tidman, old Farmer Tidman's son call himself so. Why I remember you – "

"Yes I know you do, and so does that infernal Pewsey cat."

Forge suddenly became attentive. "Miss Pewsey if you please. She is my friend. I may – " Forge halted and swallowed something. "I may even marry her some day."

"What," shouted Tidman backing to the wall, "that old – old – "

"Gently my good Benjamin, gently."

"But – but you're not a marrying man."

"We never know what we are till we die," said Forge turning again towards the black cabinet, "but you needn't mention what I have said. If you do," Forge snarled like an angry cat and shot one glance from his gray eyes that made Tidman shiver: then he resumed his gentle tone. "About this fan. I'll make a bargain with you."

"What's that?" asked the Major avariciously.

"I'll show you the fan, and if you can guess it's secret, I'll let you give it to this Tung-yu or Hwei or Kan-su or whatever he likes to call himself."

"But you don't want Lo-Keong to have the fan," said the Major doubtfully.

Forge opened the cabinet slowly. "So long as I learn the secret he can have the fan. I want to ruin him. He's a devil and – ah – " he started back. "The fan – the fan – "

"What is it?" asked Tidman, craning over Forge's shoulder at an empty drawer, "where is the fan?"

"Lost," cried Forge furiously, and looked like a dangerous grey rat.

"Five thousand pounds gone," moaned the Major.

"My life you fool – my life," cried the doctor, "it is at stake."

CHAPTER III

Miss Wharf at Home

The best houses in Marport were situated on the Cliffs. They stood a considerable way back and had small plots of ground before them cultivated or not, according to the taste of those who owned them. Some of these gardens were brilliant with flowers, others had nothing but shrubs in them, presenting rather a sombre appearance, and a few were bare sun-burnt grass plots, with no adornment whatsoever. A broad road divided the gardens from the grassy undulations of the cliffs, and along this thoroughfare, rolled carriages, bicycles, and motor-cars all day during the season. Then came the grass on the cliff-tops which stretched for a long distance, and which was dotted with shelters for nervous invalids. At one end there was a round bandstand where red-coated musicians played lively airs from the latest musical comedy. Round the stand were rows of chairs hired out at twopence an afternoon, and indeed, all over the lawns, seats of various kinds were scattered. At the end of the grass, the cliffs sloped gradually and were intersected with winding paths, which led downward to the asphalt Esplanade which ran along the water's edge, when the tide was high, and beside evil-smelling mud when the tide was out. And on what was known as the beach – a somewhat gritty strand, – were many bathing machines. Such was the general appearance of Marport which the Essex people looked on as a kind of Brighton, only much better.

Miss Sophia Wharf owned a cosy little house at the far end of the cliffs, and just at the point where Marport begins to melt into the country. It was a modern house comfortably furnished and brilliant with electric lights. The garden in front of it was well taken care of, there were scarlet and white shades to the windows and flower boxes filled with blossoms on the sills. Everyone who passed remarked on the beauty of the house, and Miss Wharf was always pleased when she heard them envy her possessions. She liked to possess a Naboth's Vineyard of her own, and appreciated it the more, when others would have liked to take it. She had an income of one thousand a year and therefore could live very comfortably. The house (Ivy Lodge was its highly original name) was her own, bought in the days when Marport was nothing but a fishing village. She knew everyone in the neighbourhood, was a staunch friend to the vicar who was high church and quite after her own heart in the use of banners, incense, candles and side-altars, and on the whole was one of the leading ladies of the place. She had the reputation of being charitable, but this was owing to Miss Pewsey who constantly trumpeted the bestowal of any stray shilling being by her patroness.

Miss Wharf was a lady of good family, but had quarrelled with her relatives. She was a tall, cold, blonde woman who had once been handsome and still retained a certain portion of good looks, in spite of her forty and more years. She lived with her niece Olivia the child of a sister long since dead, and with Miss Pewsey, to whom she gave a home as a companion. But Miss Wharf well knew, that Lavinia Pewsey was worth her weight in gold owing to the way she praised up her good, kind, devoted, loving, sweet, friend. The adjectives are Miss Pewsey's own, but some people said that Sophia Wharf did not deserve to have them attached to her. The lady had her enemies, and these openly declared, as the Major had done, that she was a mass of granite. Other people, less prejudiced, urged that Miss Wharf looked after Olivia, who was a penniless orphan. To which the grumblers retorted that Miss Wharf liked someone to vent her temper on, and that the poor girl, being too pretty, did duty as a whipping boy. This was possibly true, for Olivia and her aunt did not get on well together. In her own way the girl looked as cold as Miss Wharf, but this coldness was merely a mask to hide a warm and loving nature, while Miss Wharf was an ice-berg through and through. However, on the whole, Sophia Wharf was well liked, and took care to make the most of her looks and her moderate income and her reputation as a charitable lady. And Miss Pewsey was the show-woman who displayed her patroness's points to their best advantage.

The drawing-room of Ivy Lodge was a flimsy, pretty, feminine, room, furnished in a gim-crack fashion, of the high art style. The floor was waxed, and covered with Persian praying mats, the chairs were gilt and had spindle legs, the settee was Empire, the piano was encased in green wood and adorned with much brass, the sofa was Louis Quinze and covered with brocade, and there were many tables of rose-wood, dainty and light, heaped high with useless nick-knacks.

The walls of pale green were adorned with watercolour pictures, and many mirrors draped with Liberty silk. Everywhere were large bowls of flowers, miniatures of Miss Wharf at various times of her life, curiosities from China and Japan and the near East, and all sorts of odds and ends which Miss Wharf had collected on her travels. Not that she had been to the East, for the evidences of civilisation in those lands came from Dr. Forge and Major Tidman, but Miss Wharf had explored Germany, Switzerland and Italy and consequently had brought home cuckoo-clocks, quaint carvings, pictures of the Madonna, Etruscan idols and such like things with which every tourist loads himself or herself. The result was, that the drawing-room looked like a curiosity shop, but it was considered to be one of the prettiest drawing-rooms in Essex.

Miss Wharf looked too large and too substantial for the frail furniture of the room. She had a double chin and was certainly very stout. Very wisely she had a special arm-chair placed in the window – from which she could see all that was going on, – and here she sat working most of the day. She was great on doing fancy articles for bazaars, and silk ties for such gentlemen as she admired, for Miss Wharf, old maid as she was, liked male society. The Major was her great admirer, so was young Walker, Lady Jabe's nephew. Sophia was not very sure of this last gentleman, as she shrewdly suspected – prompted by Miss Pewsey – that he admired Olivia. Rupert also admired Olivia and wanted to marry her, a proceeding which Miss Wharf objected to. Miss Pewsey supported her in this, for both women were envious of the youth which had passed from them for ever. But Miss Wharf had also another reason, which Miss Pewsey knew, but of which Olivia was ignorant. Hitherto Sophia had kept it from the girl but this afternoon in a fit of rage she let it out. The explosion did not come at once, for Lady Jabe was in the room drinking tea, and Miss Pewsey was flitting about, filling odd vases with flowers. Olivia sat on the settee very straight and very cold, looking dark and handsome, and altogether too splendid a woman for her aunt to tolerate.

"Can't you do something?" said Miss Wharf turning her jealous eyes on the girl. "I should think you must be tired, twiddling your thumbs all day."

"I'll do whatever you wish me to do," said Olivia coldly.

"Then help Lavinia with the flowers."

Olivia rose to do so, but Miss Pewsey refused her assistance in a shrill speech spoken as usual between her teeth and with an emphasis on every other word. "Oh no dear, dear, Sophia," cried Miss Pewsey, "I have just finished, and I may say that my eye for colour is better than Olivia's – you don't mind my saying so, darling," she added to the girl.

"Not at all," replied Miss Rayner who detested the sycophant. "I never give the matter a thought."

"You *should* think," said Lady Jabe joining in heavily. She was a tall masculine-looking woman with grey hair and bushy grey eyebrows, and with an expression of face that suggested she should have worn a wig and sat on the bench. She dressed in rather a manly way, and far too young for her fifty years. On the present occasion she wore a yachting-cap, a shirt with a stand-up, all round, collar and a neat bow; a leather belt and a bicycling skirt of blue serge. Her boots and shoes were of tanned brown leather, and she carried a bamboo cane instead of a sunshade. No one could have been more gentlemanly. "You should think," added she once more, "for instance you should think of marriage."

Miss Wharf drew herself up in her cold way. "I fancy that Olivia, few brains as she has, is yet wise enough not to think of marriage at twenty."

"It would not be much good if I did," said Olivia calmly. "I have no money, and young men want a rich wife."

"Not all," said Lady Jabe, "there's Chris – "

"Chris is out of the question," said Miss Rayner quickly.

"And pray why is he?" asked Sophia in arms at once. She never liked Olivia to have an opinion of her own.

"Because I don't love him."

"But Chris loves you," said Lady Jabe, "and really he's getting a very good salary in that Tea-merchant's office. Chris, as you are aware, Olivia, is foreign corresponding clerk to Kum-gum Li & Co. He knows Chinese," finished Lady Jabe, with tremendous emphasis.

"Oh," Miss Pewsey threw up her claws, "how delicious to be made love to in Chinese. I must really ask Mr. Walker what is the Chinese for 'I love you.'"

"Olivia prefers to hear it in English," said Miss Wharf, spitefully.

"Quite so, aunt," retorted her niece, her colour rising, "but don't you think we might change the subject. It really isn't very interesting."

"But indeed I think it is," said Lady Jabe smartly, "I come here to plead the cause of poor Chris. His heart is breaking. Your aunt is willing to – "

"But I am not," said Miss Rayner quickly, "so please let us say no more about the matter. Mr. Walker can marry Lotty Dean."

"But she's a grocer's daughter," said Lady Jabe, who was herself the widow of an oil-merchant, "and remember my title."

"Lotty isn't going to marry you, Lady Jabe."

"Nor Chris, if I can help it," said the other grimly.

Miss Wharf was just about to crush Olivia with a particularly disagreeable remark, when the door opened and two gentlemen entered. One was Christopher Walker, a slim, boyish-looking young fellow, in that callow stage of manhood which sees beauty in every woman. The other, who followed, was Miss Pewsey's nephew.

There was nothing immature about him, although he was but twenty eight years of age. Clarence Burgh was tall, thin, dark and had the appearance of a swashbuckler as he swaggered into the room. His black eyes snapped with an unholy light and his speech smacked too much of the Lands at the Back of Beyond, where he had passed the most part of his life. He was an expert rider, and daily rode a bucking squealing, kicking stallion up and down the road, or took long gallops into the country to reduce the fire of the unruly beast. Burgh was bad all through, daring, free, bold, and had a good deal of the untamed savage about him; but he was emphatically a man, and it was this virile atmosphere about him, which caused his withered aunt to adore him. And indeed Miss Wharf admired him also, as did many of the women in Marport. Clarence looked like a buccaneer who would carry a woman off, and knock her down if she objected to his love-making. Women like that sort of dominating lord of the world, and accordingly Mr. Burgh had nothing to complain of, so far as feminine admiration went, during his sojourn in Marport. But he had set his affections on Olivia, and hitherto she had shrunk from him. All the same, brute as he was, she admired him more than she did effeminate Chris Walker, who smacked of the city and of a feather-bed-four-meals-a-day existence.

"Oh," squeaked Miss Pewsey, flying to the hero and clasping him round the neck, "how very, very sweet of you to come."

"Hadn't anything else to do," said Clarence gracefully, casting himself into a chair. All his movements were graceful like those of a panther. "How are you Miss Wharf – Miss Rayner – Lady Jabe. I guess you all look like a garden of spring flowers this day."

"But flowers we may not pluck," sighed Chris prettily.

Burgh looked at him with contempt. "I reckon a man can pick what he has a mind to," said he drily, and then shifted his gaze to see how Olivia took this speech. To his secret annoyance, she did not let on she heard him.

"Will you have some tea, Mr. Burgh," asked Miss Wharf.

"Thanks. It seems to be the sort of thing one must drink here."

"You drank it in China didn't you?" asked Lady Jabe.

Burgh turned quickly. "Who told you I had been in China?" he asked.

"My nephew Chris. He heard you talking Chinese to someone."

The dark young man looked distinctly annoyed. "When was that?" he asked Chris.

"Two weeks ago," replied the other, "you were standing at the corner of the Mansion House talking to a Chinaman. I only caught a word or two in passing."

"And I guess you didn't understand," said Clarence derisively.

"There you are wrong. I am in a Chinese firm, and know the language. As a matter of fact I write their foreign letters for them."

"The deuce you do," murmured Burgh looking rather disturbed; but he said no more on the subject, and merely enquired if the ladies were prepared for the ball at the Bristol which was to take place in six days. "I hear it's going to be a bully affair."

"Oh charming – charming," said Miss Pewsey. "Major Tidman is one of the stewards. I asked him for a ticket for you Clarence dear."

"I'll go, if Miss Rayner will dance with me."

"I don't know that I am going myself," said Olivia quietly.

"Nonsense," said her aunt sharply, "of course you are going. Everyone is going – the best ball of the season."

"Even poor little me," said Miss Pewsey, with her elderly head on one side.

"Huh," said the irreverent Clarence, "ain't you past hoppin' aunt?"

"I can look on and admire the younger generation dear."

"It will be a splendid ball," prattled Chris sipping his tea and devouring very crumbly cake, "the Glorious Golfers are going to spend a lot of money in decorating the rooms. I met Mr. Ainsleigh. He is going – a rare thing for him. He goes nowhere as a rule."

Miss Wharf glanced sharply at her niece, but beyond a faint flush, she could detect no sign of emotion. "People who are as poor as young Ainsleigh, can't afford to go out," she said deliberately. "I think the wisest thing that young man could do, would be to marry a rich girl," and she again looked at Olivia.

"He is certainly very handsome," said Lady Jabe pensively, "very much like his mother. She was a fine-looking woman, one of the Vanes of Heathersham."

"I remember her," said Miss Wharf, her colour rising, "and I never thought she was good-looking myself."

"Not to compare to you dear," said the sycophant.

But this time Miss Pewsey made a mistake. The remark did not seem to please Miss Wharf. "I don't care for comparisons," she said sharply, "it's bad taste to make them. I like Mr. Ainsleigh, but I don't approve of his idling."

"He has never been brought up to do anything," said Lady Jabe.

"Then he ought to turn his hands to making money in some way. That place is mortgaged and at any time may be sold. Then he won't have a roof over his head."

"I have never met Ainsleigh," said Burgh musingly, "I guess I'd like to have a jaw along o' him. Wasn't his father murdered in China?"

Miss Wharf became suddenly pale. "It is said that he was, but I don't believe it."

"Then he's alive," said Clarence pertinaciously, and looking at her.

"No. He's dead, but he died of dysentery, according to Dr. Forge who was with him when he died – somewhere in the north I believe."

Burgh evidently stored this in his memory and looked keenly at the woman whose bosom rose and fell and whose colour came and went under his steady gaze. Miss Pewsey saw that the persistent look was annoying her patroness, and touched her nephew's arm gently. The touch recalled Burgh to his senses and he looked away. This time his eyes rested on Olivia. Her colour was high and apparently she had been listening with interest to the conversation. "Huh," thought the swashbuckler, "and it was about young Ainsleigh," and he stored this in his memory also.

To make a sensation, which he dearly loved to do, Chris Walker announced that he would bring a distinguished visitor to the ball of the Glorious Golfers. "He's a Chinaman," said he pompously, "and was mixed up in the Boxer rebellion."

None of the ladies seemed impressed, as none of them knew anything about the Boxers, or their rebellion. But Burgh looked up. "Who is he anyhow?" he demanded, compressing his lips.

"A Chinese gentleman called Tung-yu."

"What a very extraordinary name," said Miss Pewsey, and suddenly began to take a deep interest in matters Chinese. While she chatted with Chris who was willing to afford her all information, Burgh folded his arms and leaned back apparently thinking deeply. His face was not pleasant to behold. Olivia saw the evil look and shivered. Then she rose and was about to steal from the room, when her aunt called to her sharply. "Don't go Olivia I want to speak with you."

"And I want to take my usual walk," said Lady Jabe rising and settling her collar, "Chris?"

A tap on the shoulder brought the slim young man to his feet, and giving his arm to his masculine aunt the two departed. Burgh rose also. "I guess I'll make tracks also?" he said smartly. "Walker, you and I can have a yarn together, later."

Miss Pewsey followed her nephew to the door. "Do you wish to ask young Mr. Walker more about Tung-yu?" she asked.

Clarence wheeled round quickly. "What do you know of him aunt?"

"It's such a strange name," simpered Miss Pewsey, looking very innocent, "and I am interested in China. You were out there a long time Clarence."

"Amongst other places, yes. I hung round a bit."

"Then you must tell me all about the natives," said Miss Pewsey, "I want to know of their robes and their fans and –"

"Fans," said Burgh starting: but Miss Pewsey with an artificial laugh flitted back into the room, leaving him uneasy and non-plussed. He walked away frowning darkly.

Olivia would have walked away also frowning, as she was indignant at the way in which her aunt had spoken of Rupert. But Miss Wharf gave her no chance of leaving the room or the house. Olivia had never seen her aunt so pale or upset. She looked as white as chalk, and controlled her emotion with difficulty. Lavinia Pewsey glanced at the two, guessed there was about to be a row, and glided away. She always kept out of trouble.

"Now," said Miss Wharf when they were alone, "I want an explanation."

CHAPTER IV

Rupert's Secret

Olivia was astonished to see the emotion of her aunt, for, as a rule Miss Wharf was cold and self-contained. The two had never got on well together, and the elder woman was undeniably jealous of the youth and superior good looks of the younger. But as Olivia owed bed and board to her aunt, she always behaved as well as possible to one who was very trying in many ways. It is only just to say, that Miss Pewsey made matters much worse by tale-bearing, and probably had she been out of the house, Miss Wharf and her niece might have got on better. But they could never have been congenial companions. The difference between their natures was too great.

"Yes" said Miss Wharf throwing herself back in her seat, and feeling irritated by the silence of Olivia. "I want an explanation."

"What about?" asked the girl seating herself opposite and folding her hands, which, Miss Wharf noticed with bitterness, were more slender and delicate than her own.

"You know well enough."

"If it's about Rupert – "

"There," snapped the aunt, "I knew you would guess. Yes it is about young Ainsleigh, and how dare you call him Rupert?"

"Because I love him," said Olivia firmly, and looked directly into the cold blue eyes of her aunt.

"Then you must put this love out of your head. You shall never marry him – never – never – never."

"If I choose, and I do choose," said Olivia calmly, but with a fine colour. "I shall certainly marry him. I am of age – "

"Yes, and a pauper."

"Rupert would not marry me for my money."

"He is wise; for you have none."

"It is kind of you to speak to me in this way," said Olivia, "to remind me of obligations. I am aware that my parents died poor and left me a penniless orphan. I am aware that you took me in and educated me and – "

"And acted like a mother to you," said Miss Wharf vehemently.

"No. You never acted like a mother. With you, I have had a most unhappy life."

"Olivia," the elder woman started furiously from her chair, "how dare you say that. Have I grudged you clothes or food. Did I not send you to a first-class school and – "

"So far as material things are concerned you have done everything Aunt Sophia, and I thank you for what you have done – "

"A fine way you have of showing it," scoffed Miss Wharf.

"But a mother you have never been," went on Olivia calmly, "you have never given me a kind word; you speak to me before visitors as you should not do: you make me slave for you and run messages and talk of me to others as though I were a servant. What love have you ever shown me?" demanded Olivia, starting up in her turn, and also becoming excited. "I long for love. My heart yearns for it. I would like to be a daughter to you, but always you have kept me at arm's length. Aunt Sophia let me go. I can earn my bread as a governess, or as a typist. It will be better for us both."

"No," said Aunt Sophia, looking as hard as stone.

"I shall not let you go. If you have any gratitude in you, you will remain and help me to manage the house."

"You have Miss Pewsey."

"She is not a relative, you are."

"And so you treat me worse than you do her. Well, Aunt Sophia, I am not ungrateful though you seem to think I am. I shall stop with you. I only ask for a little more consideration."

"I give you every consideration. As for love, I cannot give it to you or to anyone. I gave all the love my nature was capable of feeling to Markham Ainsleigh, and he rejected my love. Yes, you may look astonished, but it was this man's father who broke my heart."

"And that is why you don't want Rupert to marry me."

"That is the reason," said Miss Wharf sitting down and growing more her calm stony self. "I was almost engaged to Markham Ainsleigh: but he saw Violet Vane and fell in love with her. He left me and made her his wife. Can you wonder that I hate the son of the woman who stole my love away from me?"

"Rupert is the son of the man you loved – "

"And of the man who cheated me. Look at my lonely life, at my starved heart. I hate the Ainsleighs – there's only one left but I hate him. And when I heard Markham was murdered in China I was glad – yes, very glad."

"What an unforgiving nature you have."

"I have every right to be unforgiving. Markham ruined my life. And do you think I'll let you marry Rupert – the son of that woman. No! Marry him, and I leave what money I have to Miss Pewsey."

"You can if you like, Aunt Sophia. I don't want your money."

"Reflect," said Miss Wharf violently. "I have a thousand a year. Half of that goes to a distant relative, and the remainder you shall have if you will give this man up. Five hundred a year is not to be thrown away."

"I cannot give Rupert up," said Olivia firmly.

"Think girl," pleaded Miss Wharf, her face becoming red and wrinkled with the violence of her passion, "there are other men who love you. Young Walker would make you a good husband, and Lady Jabe is most anxious for the match."

"I like Chris," said Olivia, "and I have known him all my life. But I can't marry him. I want a master when I marry."

"Then take Clarence Burgh," said Miss Wharf, "he will be your master."

"No. He's a brute."

"He's a man – much more of a man than Rupert Ainsleigh."

"I deny that" said Olivia fiercely.

"He is. Clarence has been all over the world. He has fought everywhere – "

"So has Major Tidman. Do you advise me to marry him?"

"He would make you a better husband than Rupert, old as he is. That young Ainsleigh is a dreamer. He is on the point of losing his estates, yet he sits at Royabay doing nothing."

"He intends to do something, and save the estates."

"Never. He is not the sort of man to work. Olivia if you will take Chris Walker, or Clarence Burgh for your husband I shall leave you five hundred a year. If you refuse I give you nothing."

"I prefer nothing – and Rupert."

"Then you shall not have him. I'll ruin him first."

Olivia started. "You can't ruin him. You talk wildly."

"Oh do I," sneered Miss Wharf, "that shows you know little of me or of my business. Listen. I bought up a mortgage on the Royabay estate. It cost me money which I could ill afford to pay away. But I bought it so as to ruin the son of that woman Vane who took Markham from me. I always intended to buy the estate, or at least to drive Rupert from the place, but if you will give him up, I shall forego my revenge. Now what do you say?"

"Nothing," faltered Olivia, who had turned very pale. "I don't know what to say."

"Will you give the man up."

"I won't see him, if that will please you."

"No. It doesn't please me. You must give him up, and engage yourself to Mr. Walker or to Mr. Burgh."

"I cannot – I cannot – " said poor Olivia.

Miss Wharf stamped her foot and bit her lip. "You are as obstinate as your mother was before you," she said savagely. "I shall give you one month to make up your mind, and that is very generous of me. If you surrender Rupert and choose one of the other two, I will not foreclose the mortgage and will leave you five hundred a year."

"When can you foreclose?" asked Olivia anxiously.

"By the end of the year. So it rests with you, if Rupert Ainsleigh leaves his home in six months or keeps it. Now you can go."

Olivia Rayner was not a girl who would stand dictation. But for some reason or another she meekly bowed her head and went out, leaving Miss Wharf to calm down over her needle-work.

The girl went to her own room, and lay down to think over the situation. What she thought or what plan she conceived, it is difficult to say; but she came down to dinner quite composed. Her aunt looked at her sharply, and Miss Pewsey with suspicion, but neither of them made any remark bearing on the storm. On the contrary Miss Wharf chatted about the ball and talked of her dress and even advised Olivia about her costume. "You will look very well in white," said Miss Wharf.

"But not so lovely as my Sophia in pale blue," said Miss Pewsey with her usual emphasis. "I know you will be the belle of the ball darling Sophia."

"I have been the belle of several balls in my time," said Miss Wharf good-humouredly.

"And will be still," purred Miss Pewsey like the cat she was, "my dear nephew said you were a rattling fine woman."

"It sounds like one of Mr. Burgh's speeches," said Olivia with great contempt. She knew that the buccaneer loved her, and therefore disliked him the more.

"Oh Olivia how can you," cried the little old maid, throwing up her hands, "when poor, dear, darling, Clarence worships the ground you walk on. He's got money too, and wants a wife!"

"Let him marry Lotty Dean then."

"That retired grocer's daughter," cried Miss Pewsey, drawing herself up, "no indeed. I may be poor, but I am of gentle blood Olivia. The Pewsey's have been in Essex for generations. My papa was rich and could afford to send me to a fashionable school when I met my own Sophia. But poor sweet papa lost his money and then – oh, dear me." Miss Pewsey squeezed out a tear. "What sad times I have had."

"You're all right now, Lavinia," said Miss Wharf stolidly, eating fruit and sipping port wine.

"Yes dearest Sophia, thanks to your large and generous heart. I have no one in the world but you and Clarence. He is the son of my only sister, and has travelled – "

"In China," said Olivia.

Miss Pewsey narrowed her eyes and looked as though about to scratch.

"In China, of course. But why do you make that remark, Olivia?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "I observed that Mr. Burgh has not very pleasant recollections of China," she said deliberately, "he was not pleased to find that Mr. Walker could talk the language, and he was uncomfortable when the name Tung-yu was mentioned."

Miss Pewsey bit her lip. "Do you know anything of Tung-yu?"

"No. Why should I. All I know, is that Chris Walker says he will bring the man down here for the ball."

The little old maid looked hard at the girl, but Olivia bore her scrutiny composedly. She wondered why Miss Pewsey stared so hard, and laid such emphasis on the Chinese name, but the

matter slipped from her mind when she retired to her room. She would have wondered still more had she known that Miss Pewsey came up the stairs and listened at the door of the bed-room.

Olivia had arranged to meet Rupert near the band-stand, as their meetings were secret because of Miss Wharf's dislike. Certainly the young man had come to the house, and Miss Wharf had received him with cold dignity: but when he showed a marked preference for Olivia's company, she gave him to understand that she did not approve. Henceforth Rupert stopped away from Ivy Lodge, and met Olivia at intervals near the band-stand. So Olivia, putting on a dark dress and a veil, slipped out of the house, and took her way along the brilliantly lighted front. She had often gone before and always had left her aunt and Miss Pewsey sitting in the drawing-room, Miss Wharf working and the companion reading the newspaper. Miss Wharf never by any chance looked at a newspaper herself, but left it to Miss Pewsey to cull the choice news for her delectation.

So Olivia, feeling quite safe, stepped lightly along to where the crowd gathered round the stand. It was a perfect night and very warm, therefore many people were seated in the chairs and strolling across the grass. Olivia went to a certain corner, and, as she expected, found her lover. He was not in evening-dress, but for the sake of the meeting had assumed a dark serge suit. As she advanced, he recognised her and came forward taking off his hat. Then he gave her his arm and the two strolled to the far end of the green where they sat down under the fence which was round the flag-staff. There, removed from everyone, they could talk in moderately loud tones.

"My darling," said Rupert, possessing himself of Olivia's hand. "I thought you would not come. You were late."

"I could not get away before. Miss Pewsey watches me like a cat does a mouse, and with the same disposition to pounce, I expect."

"She's a detestable woman," said Rupert angrily, "why can't she leave you alone?"

"I don't know. Rupert, she wants me to marry her nephew."

"What, that bounder who rides so furiously," cried Rupert fiercely, "you don't mean to say that he dares –"

"Not in words, but he looks – oh," Olivia shivered, "you know the sort of look a man like that, gives you."

"I'll twist his neck if he insults you."

"Then Miss Pewsey would complain to my aunt and I should get into trouble. Oh, Rupert," she said softly, "I am so afraid."

"Of that man. Nonsense."

"No – of everything. I can keep Mr. Burgh off –"

"Who is he?" asked Rupert jealously.

"Miss Pewsey's nephew. I can manage him, bold as he is. But it is you I am afraid of. Listen," and Olivia told the young man what she had learned from Miss Wharf that afternoon. "She can ruin you," said the poor girl, almost crying, "and she will if she learns the truth."

Rupert pressed the hand he held. "Why not tell her the truth," he said. "I'm willing to face poverty if you are."

"Rupert, are you mad? If Aunt Sophia learned that we were married – hark, what was that?" and Olivia rose, and nervously peered into the shadows, "I thought I heard a noise."

"It's nothing. Only some rats in the long grass within the fence. No one's about. They're all over at the band. But about our marriage, Olivia. Miss Wharf must learn sooner or later."

"Yes. But you know I asked you to keep it quiet that I might not have trouble with her. It was selfish of me, for it would have been braver of me to have faced her anger and then have told all the world that we were married at that Registry Office. But I'm glad now I didn't. She would have ruined you."

"She can't do anything till the end of the year."

"But why didn't you tell me she held this mortgage?"

"Well, I thought that before the end of the year I might manage to pay it and the other mortgages off. Then we could announce that we were married, and live at Royabay on what small income I have."

"I don't mind about the income," said Mrs. Ainsleigh, for that Olivia secretly was. "I'd live on a shilling a day with you, darling. But aunt threatens if I marry you to cut me out of her will. She would do so at once if she knew the truth, and leave the money to Miss Pewsey."

"Let her. I daresay that old maid has schemed for it. She's a wicked old woman that and worthy of her bounder of a nephew. Never mind about the money or the mortgage. Let us announce the marriage. I don't like the position you occupy. It is not fit that my wife should be exposed to the attentions of a cad like this Burgh."

"Wait till the end of the year," said Olivia feverishly, "then you may be able to get money, to put things straight. It is best to keep the matter quiet now. Oh how I wish we had money Rupert."

"I may be able to make it out of the fan?"

"What fan?" asked Olivia looking at him.

Rupert laughed. "I forgot you don't know." He took the slip of paper from his pocket-book and lighting a match he read the description of the fan. "I went up to the place," he continued dropping the lucifer, "and saw a Chinaman, Tung-yu –"

"What," said Olivia starting, "why that is the man Mr. Walker is going to bring to the ball. He's a clerk in the firm of Kum-gum-Li and Company."

"That's strange. I thought he was the keeper of the Joss house in Perry Street, Whitechapel. Humph! Does Walker know of the fan?"

"I don't know. But he knows this Tung-yu, and I think, so does Mr. Burgh. He seemed much annoyed when he heard the name."

"What about?"

"I can't say. And Rupert. Mr. Burgh speaks Chinese –"

"He must be very clever then for I hear it is a most awful language to get hold of. Was Burgh ever in China?"

"Yes. He brought the fan from that place?"

"Fan." Rupert turned round sharply, "what fan?"

"The one you talk about," said Olivia innocently.

"I recognised it at once from the description you read just now."

"Are you sure," said Rupert much excited, for he never expected to hear of the missing fan from Olivia of all people.

"Quite sure – positive. The fan is painted green on one side and the sticks on the other are overlaid with thin jade, so I suppose it gets its name from the mineral. Then it has a cord of yellow silk with four beads and half a bead, and –"

"It is the same. Where did Burgh get it?"

"I don't know. He says he brought it from China, and offered it to me. I refused it –"

"I should think so," said Ainsleigh fuming, "well?"

"Then he gave it to my aunt."

"And has Miss Wharf got it now?"

"I think so, but I have not seen it lately. I expect if she has, she will use it at the ball."

"And Tung-yu who advertises, is coming to the ball," mused Rupert, "there doesn't seem much chance for me. I expect your aunt will make the money after all."

"It won't be much. Who would give a large sum for that fan?"

"Tung-yu will. He is ready to give five thousand pounds."

"Oh," said Olivia with real regret, "and I refused it."

"I'm glad you did," cried Rupert angrily, "I would rather everything went than that you should accept presents from that bounder. Well I fear my chance is gone Olivia. I'm ruined."

"Dearest I will face the ruin with you," and in the shadows they kissed.

CHAPTER V

Concerning the Fan

Rupert returned to Royabay in rather a melancholy frame of mind. He found himself in a very difficult situation, and there did not seem to be any chance of his extricating himself therefrom, now that Miss Wharf possessed the fan. It was strange that she should have received it from Clarence Burgh, and Rupert wondered how that dashing young gentleman became its owner. However, there was little use speculating on this. Miss Wharf had the fan, and probably she would keep it, unless the large sum of money offered by Tung-yu tempted her to do business. Ainsleigh wondered also, if the old maid had read the papers, and if she had seen the advertisement.

"But what does it matter to me," said Rupert, as he turned up the avenue. "I won't get the money, and Miss Wharf will see me hanged first before she will let me make such a sum. While I am poor, she holds me in her clutches, and thinks by means of that mortgage to prevent my marriage with Olivia. What would she say if she knew that we were already married. I was wrong to consent to keep the affair secret, even though Olivia wished it. In any case Miss Wharf can do nothing, till the end of the year, and the truth is bound to come to her ears sooner or later. Then she will strike and spare not. I believe that's the motto of the Wharfs, and it fits her spiteful temper excellently."

Then Rupert went on to reflect on what Olivia had told him of Aunt Sophia's romance with Markham Ainsleigh. The young man had never heard of it before, as he knew little of his father, who had gone to China, a few years after his heir was born. In fact Markham only waited till there was a male Ainsleigh to carry on the succession and to inherit what remained of the estates, and then steamed to the Far East to seek fortune. But fortune had proved unkind and the poor man had died – whether of dysentery or by violence, it is difficult to say. Some people said one thing and some another, but even Rupert did not know the truth. Dr. Forge, who had worked the mine in the Kan-su province along with Markham, knew the absolute truth, and he ascribed the death to dysentery, so Rupert, for the time being at all events, was willing to accept this explanation. He had no reason to doubt the loyalty of Theophilus Forge who had been a college chum of his father's.

Thinking in this way and considering whether it would not be advisable to proclaim his marriage so as to release his wife from the odious attentions of Clarence Burgh, the young man arrived at the house. He was met in the hall by Mrs Petley, who announced that Major Tidman was waiting to see her young master. Rupert nodded in an absent-minded way and was going to the library where the Major was kicking his heels, when Mrs Petley caught him by the arm. "It's walking again," said Mrs Petley, whose fat face was pale, "and say what you like Master Rupert, trouble is coming."

She was a stout old dame with a red face suggestive of drink, a most unfair thing to be said of her as she drank nothing stronger than gin and water, one tumbler a night before retiring. But Mrs Petley had been a cook in her early days; later on she assumed the position of Rupert's nurse, and finally, having married Petley the butler, she became housekeeper of Royabay. She was a common vulgar old woman, but loyal to the core, and adored Rupert. When he had to dismiss the greater part of his servants he retained John Petley, and John Petley's wife, who continued to serve him faithfully and always hoped for better days. Mrs Petley, being intensely superstitious, was always influenced by the appearance of Abbot Raoul whose walking was supposed to predict bad luck to the Ainsleighs. If the ghost did not appear Mrs Petley was happy, but when it did she always prognosticated evil. And it must be admitted that Rupert usually had more trouble with his creditors when Abbot Raoul *did* visit his old haunts. He seemed to be a most malignant spirit. But Rupert as an educated man, was not going to admit occult influence.

"Nonsense Mrs. Petley," said he, shaking her off, "so far as trouble is concerned, Abbot Raoul might remain visible for ever. Am I ever out of trouble?"

"No, that you ain't, worse luck. But this walking means something extra special as I said to John."

"Where did you see the old beast, I mean Abbot Raoul of course."

Mrs. Petley started. "Hush deary," she whispered looking round in a fearful manner, "don't speak evil of speerits. It may be round, and you might anger it. I saw it in the cloisters."

"Near the place?" asked Rupert.

"Aye, standing on the black square where its mortal body was burnt poor soul. It was pointing to a tree."

"To what tree – there are plenty in the cloisters."

"To the copper beech, as you might say Master Rupert. And angry enough he looked. I nearly fainted."

"You should be used to the ghost by this time Mrs. Petley."

"Ghosts is things custom won't help you with," said Mrs. Petley mysteriously, "they freeze your blood every time. Just as I was thinking of a good scream and a faint, it vanished."

"Into thin air like the witches in Macbeth," said Rupert lightly. "Well it doesn't need Abbot Raoul to come and tell me trouble is near. I'm likely to have a good deal by the end of the year."

"Oh Master Rupert what is it?" gasped the old woman.

"Nothing I can tell you at present," said Ainsleigh carelessly, "I have a good mind to seek Abbot Raoul myself and see if he can't help me; but I'm not psychic as you are Mrs. Petley. I see nothing."

"And a good thing too," said the ex-cook solemnly, "if it spoke to you it would be to make matters worse, though worse they can't be."

"Oh yes they can," said Rupert grimly. "I may have to leave –"

"Never," cried Mrs. Petley smiting her fat hands together. "Royabay can never do without an Ainsleigh within its walls."

"It will have to content itself with Abbot Raoul, and I hope he'll jolly well frighten the creditors."

"Drat them," said Mrs. Petley vigorously, "but Master Rupert why did it pint to the copper beech."

"I can't say. Ask it when next you see it. But I must go to Major Tidman. He'll be angry if I keep him."

Mrs. Petley tossed her head and snorted. "The idear of old Farmer Tidman's son, being angry with the likes of you Master Rupert. I mind him when he was a brat of a lad and –"

"Yes – yes – but I must go," said Ainsleigh rather impatiently and left Mrs. Petley talking to the air.

Major Tidman, whose ears must have burnt at the thoughts which occupied Mrs. Petley's brain, was seated in the most comfortable arm-chair he could find, and smoked a good cigar. He had a bottle of port and a glass before him, and apparently had made himself at home while waiting.

"Hope you don't mind my making free with the wine-list," said Tidman, who looked rather uneasy, as he rose. "I've waited two hours."

"What about?" said Rupert, throwing his cap down and sinking wearily into a near chair, "anything wrong?"

"I am," said the Major, "all wrong my dear boy. You see in me a beast and a false friend."

"Indeed. How do you make that out?"

"I have been concealing things from you," said the Major ruefully, "and all to make money. I'm really getting avaricious, Ainsleigh," added the Major desperately, "and it's spoiling my character."

"Well," said Rupert filling his pipe, and wondering what this out-burst meant, "Byron says that avarice is a fine old gentlemanly vice. If you have only that fault to blame yourself for, you are very lucky."

"But I should have told you about the fan."

Rupert blew out the match he had just lighted and sat up. "What's that about the fan?" he asked sharply.

"I know something about it," said Tidman fortifying his courage with a glass of wine, "and I should have spoken the other evening after dinner when you read that advertisement. But I thought I'd get the fan myself and secure the five thousand pounds – though to be sure I didn't know what that Tung-yu would pay for it at the time."

"No," said Rupert drily, "I told you that later. Well, Major, you haven't treated me quite on the square, but I forgive you. I expect neither of us will make money out of that fan."

"No," said Tidman still more ruefully. "Forge has lost it."

Rupert looked puzzled. "Forge? What do you mean?"

"Oh, this is part of my confession of trickery," said the Major rubbing his bald head. "You see Ainsleigh, I held my tongue when you read out about the fan, but I knew where it was all the time."

"And where was it?" asked the young man staring.

"Forge has it – or rather Forge had it," said the Major, and he related his interview with the doctor when Rupert had departed. "So you see," added the Major sadly "I'm punished for my wrong-doing. I'm very sorry, as I like you, Ainsleigh, and after all I'd be glad to see you make the money, though I'm not so well off myself as people think, and five thousand pounds would help me a lot. However, I hope you will think I have made amends for my momentary lapse from squareness by thus confessing."

"Oh that's all right Tidman. But treat me openly for the future. How did you know that Forge had had the fan?"

Rupert did not tell what he had heard from Olivia for the moment. He first wished to hear all that the Major had to say. Tidman had certainly acted wrongly, as he should not have taken advantage of Rupert's confidence, but now he apparently wished to behave properly and Ainsleigh put the Major's temporary deceit out of his mind.

"I gave Forge the fan," blurted out the Major.

"The deuce you did," said Ainsleigh looking puzzled. "And where did you get it?"

"In Canton seven years ago," confessed Tidman, "I was travelling there for my health, and I had an adventure."

"What was that?"

But Tidman did not seem inclined to speak out. "I'll tell you on another occasion," he said with a shudder, "it was not a very pleasant adventure, and Forge, who was in Canton at the time, got me out of it. I stuck to the fan though."

"Oh, so the fan was the cause of the adventure?"

"Partly" admitted Tidman reluctantly. "I'll tell you later as I say," he wiped his forehead, "I can't tell you now, it's too awful. I got the fan though and Forge took a fancy to it. He asked me for it in Canton and I refused. He asked again in England and I gave it to him. He's had it all these seven years, locked up in that black japan cabinet with the gold figures – "

"I know. Its in that Chinese room of his. Well?"

"After you went away the other day I asked him to give me the fan back, as I wanted to get the money from Tung-yu. Forge refused, as he said the fan has something to do with a secret – "

"Whose secret?"

"Lo-Keong's secret. He is the real owner of the fan you know. Forge seems to hate Lo-Keong, and said the fan would get him into trouble."

"But how – how?" asked Ainsleigh impatiently.

The Major wiped his face again, "I don't know – I can't say. But Forge said there was a secret connected with the fan – "

"You said that before," cried Rupert becoming exasperated.

"I don't know what I am saying, and that's the truth," stammered Tidman becoming hotter and redder, "but Forge said if I found the secret he would give me the fan. He then opened the cabinet and found that the fan was gone."

"What did he say?"

"He turned as white as a sheet, and said that his life was at stake."

Rupert rose to pace the room. The mystery of the fan piqued him, "I wonder what he meant by that?" he asked himself.

"Something horrid if it has to do with the Chinese," said the Major, "you have no idea what brutes they are. But Forge thought that Mrs. Bressy, the old woman who looks after him, might have sneaked the fan, as she is fond of taking things and pawning them. But she swore she had never set eyes on it."

"Wasn't the cabinet locked?"

"Yes. That's the strange part, and Forge has the key on his watch-chain. The lock wasn't broken, and no other key would fit it, so how it was opened, is a mystery. But the fan's gone."

"Quite so," said Rupert, facing the Major sharply, "and Miss Wharf has the very fan you speak of."

Tidman fell back in his chair and gasped till he was purple in the face. "Wh – a – a – t," he drawled out. "Sophia Wharf?"

"Yes. Olivia told me, when I explained how I wished to find the fan and make money. It seems that young Burgh – "

"A detestable young cad," snapped Tidman.

"I agree with you. He dares to admire my – to admire Olivia," said Rupert nearly letting his secret slip out, "and, to gain her good graces, he offered her this fan. She refused, and he then presented it to Miss Wharf, who took it and who has it now."

"Oh," groaned the Major, "and it's worth five thousand. What luck some people have."

Rupert shrugged his shoulders. "The luck will not come our way," he replied carelessly, "and to tell you the truth I don't much care. I expect Miss Wharf will sell the fan to Tung-yu."

"But she doesn't know about his wishing to buy it?"

"She may have seen the advertisement, and you know Tung-yu is coming to the ball at the Bristol."

Major Tidman rose like a jack-in-the-box. "Who says so?" he asked.

"Young Walker. Tung-yu is not the keeper of the Whitechapel Joss-house as I thought. He is a clerk in the firm of Kum-gum-Li."

"Chris Walker also works for them," interpolated the Major.

"Certainly, and he is bringing Tung-yu to the ball. I don't know why, and I don't much care," added Ainsleigh somewhat crossly. "I am about tired of this fan business. What will you do?"

Major Tidman buttoned his coat. "I'm going straight to Forge," he said, "and I shall tell him that young Burgh had the fan. I know how he got it."

"Do you, indeed," said Rupert yawning.

"Yes. Miss Pewsey stole it from the cabinet."

"Nonsense. Why should she do that?"

"Because she's always about Forge's house. He told me that he might marry her – ugh," the Major sneered, "fancy marrying that old cat."

"Different people have different tastes," said Ainsleigh coolly, "but if Forge is going to marry Miss Pewsey all the more reason she should not steal the fan."

"But she did," insisted the Major. "I'm sure she stole it and gave it to that scamp of a nephew so that he might gain Miss Rayner's goodwill. You see, Miss Pewsey would like to see Burgh married to Olivia, as she – Miss Pewsey I mean – could then finger the five hundred a year Miss Wharf will leave her niece."

"He had better be certain that Olivia will inherit the money first," said Rupert grimly, thinking of the secret marriage, "and Miss Pewsey hates Olivia."

"She hates everyone," said Tidman shrugging his plump shoulders, "but she hasn't a penny to bless herself with, and when Miss Wharf dies she will be cast on the world. Even five hundred a year is a consideration to her, and if her nephew can secure that by marrying Olivia, why, all the better for Miss Pewsey."

But Rupert shook his head. "If Miss Pewsey had that scheme in her head, she would be more friendly with Olivia," he said, "and she can set her mind at rest: Burgh will not marry Olivia."

"He's a dangerous rival Ainsleigh."

"Pooh. I can manage that young man and half a dozen like him. You don't think I'd give up the girl I love, to anyone, Tidman."

"No," said the Major, looking at the frank brave face of his host, "but Burgh is unscrupulous, and will make mischief. However, perhaps Forge will deal with him for this fan business. When Forge learns that Miss Pewsey has stolen his fan, he won't marry her. I'll have the satisfaction of spoiling her plans at all events."

"She seems to have a great many plans according to you," yawned Ainsleigh, "but frankly I think you have found a mare's nest. I don't believe anything will come of the matter. It's moonshine."

Tidman marched to the door. "We'll see," said he determinedly. "I believe trouble is coming to you through young Burgh," and he departed.

Rupert left alone lighted his pipe and thought of Mrs. Petley's fancy concerning the ghost. "If this is the trouble," said he to himself. "I don't mind. Burgh won't get Olivia unless over my dead body. As to this fan – pah!"

But he little knew what disasters the fan would bring to him. Abbot Raoul's ghost was not walking for nothing.

CHAPTER VI

Burgh's Story

Next morning Major Tidman was seated in his well-furnished room in the Bristol Hotel. From the window he commanded a fine view of the mouth of the Thames, of the pier, and of the picturesque lower town. But the view did not gain the attention of the Major, worthy as it was of his notice. He seated himself at the table which was spread for breakfast, and proceeded to make a good meal. Perhaps he did not eat so well as usual for the Major was worried, as was evident from the cross expression of his face. On the previous night he had gone to see Forge, and had told him how Miss Wharf became possessed of the fan. The doctor had listened to him quietly, but had refrained from making any observation, even when Tidman reminded him of his remark, as to his life being at stake. The interview had on the whole been unsatisfactory, and Tidman was not at all pleased. He wished to learn the truth about the fan.

"There's some secret connected with it," muttered the Major, while he devoured buttered eggs rapidly, "and that secret means a lot of money. Five thousand pounds is worth having. I could buy that plot of waste land near the church and build an hotel there. I believe it would pay. Then there's Forge's life, which, as he says, hangs on the fan, though in what way I can't find out. If I got the fan, I might be able to get something out of him. I would make Forge and Tung-yu bid against one another, and perhaps I'd get even more than is offered. Ainsleigh can't say anything against me now, as I am acting quite square and above board. He's got no enterprise," thought the little man with some scorn, "or he'd get Olivia to take the fan from her aunt and make the money out of it. But if he won't, I will, so I'll see Miss Wharf to-day and try what I can do. I daresay I'd get it from her for a five pound note – that is if she hasn't seen the advertisement. She's keen after money, too – as keen as I am. Humph," added Tidman, filling himself a second cup of coffee. "I wonder why Tung-yu was such a fool as to tell Ainsleigh he was willing to give five thousand. Anyone, not knowing the value of the fan, would get it cheap. There's a mystery about it, and the mystery means money. I must get to the bottom of the affair. Forge is no good, as he is holding his tongue: even when I told him that Miss Pewsey stole it, he did not seem to mind. But he'll never marry her after this, so I've spoilt her chance of marriage, the cat. Though why Forge should marry an old fiend who is eighty, if she's an hour, I can't make out. But Forge was always secretive," ended the Major in disgust, and reached for the *paté-de-foi-gras*.

His meal was interrupted by a smart young waiter, who intimated that a lady and gentleman wished to see the Major. Tidman was rather surprised at a call being paid at ten o'clock in the morning: but he was still more surprised, when at the heels of the waiter appeared Miss Pewsey and Dr. Forge. The latter looked much his usual self, hungry, dismal, and like a bird of prey: but Miss Pewsey had a colour in her cheeks and a fire in her black eyes, which made her look younger. It seemed that her errand was not a peaceful one.

"To what am I indebted – ?" began the courtly Major, when the little old maid cut him short with vinegary politeness.

"Indebted," she said, standing very straight and stiff, and quite ignoring the chair placed for her. "Oh, indeed, – how very polite we are. Judas!" she snapped out the word with flaming eyes. "Oh, Judas!"

"Really, Miss Pewsey – "

"You'd like to see me in the dock would you?" cried Miss Pewsey tossing her head and trembling with wrath, "I'm a thief am I – oh you military fat Judas."

"Did you come here to insult me?" asked Tidman growing purple.

"If you put it in that way I did," sniffed the lady, "and also to ask plainly, what you meant by stating to my promised husband here, that I stole a fan from his cabinet?"

Tidman changed from purple to scarlet. He had not reckoned on the doctor speaking to Miss Pewsey, and he turned a look of reproach on his friend. The doctor immediately took up the challenge, "I see you think I have been too free with my tongue," said he deliberately, "it is not my custom as you know. But I told you Major that I was engaged to Miss Pewsey, and I thought it only right that she should know the aspersions you have cast on her character."

"A character," cried the lady, "which has stood the test of years and which stands deservedly high. I am a Pewsey of Essex," she added as though the whole county belonged to her, "and never before have I been accused of thieving – Judas," she shot out the name again, and the Major quailed. He saw that he was in the wrong, owing to Forge's betrayal, and had to make the best of it.

"I am extremely sorry," he said apologetically, "quite a mistake."

"Oh, indeed. A jury will give their opinion on that," sniffed the maiden.

"No! No I beg of you –"

"The damages will be laid at five thousand pounds."

"The price of the fan," said Tidman starting.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Miss Pewsey, her eyes glittering.

"I mean, just nothing."

"Oh yes, you do. Make a clean breast of it Benjamin Tidman. Oh, to think that the son of a farmer, who was almost a labourer, should dare to speak evil of a Pewsey of Essex. But the law – the law," said the irate lady shaking a thin finger, "and five thousand pounds."

"Get it out of the fan."

"Is it worth that?" asked Forge coldly.

"You heard what young Ainsleigh said," answered Tidman as coldly.

"Yes I remember; but we have not come about the price, but about your libel on this lady."

"I apologise," said Tidman, seeing nothing else was to be done.

"Apology isn't money," snapped Miss Pewsey.

"Oh, if you want money, again I refer you to the fan."

The Major was getting angry. He didn't very much care if Miss Pewsey did bring an action at the moment, though with saner thoughts he would have been horrified at the idea. "I apologise," said he again, "but I was misled by Dr. Forge."

"How were you misled by me?" demanded Forge impassively.

"You said you had the fan in your cabinet, and that it had been stolen. Mrs. Bressy swore she did not take it, and I thought –"

"That I was the thief," cried Miss Pewsey shrilly, "oh how clever of you – how very, very clever. You thought that I got the key from the watch-chain of Dr. Forge where he always carries it, to open the cabinet and steal a fan, I knew nothing about it. I never even knew of the existence of the fan – there Judas," snapped the lady once more.

"Then I was mistaken, and Dr. Forge was mistaken also."

"I confess that I did make a mistake," said the doctor with a sad face, "but that does not excuse your libelling the lady I hope to call my wife. My memory is not so good as it was, and I fear that the drugs I take to induce sleep have impaired what memory I have left. I suffer from neuralgia," added the doctor turning to Miss Pewsey, "and in China I contracted the habit of opium smoking, so –"

"Marriage will put that right," said the lady patting his hand. "I do not expect a perfect husband –"

"I never knew you expected a husband at all," said Tidman injudiciously.

"Ho," cried Miss Pewsey drawing herself up. She had been standing all the time, "another libel. I call Dr. Forge to witness it."

"I really think Tidman you'd better hold your tongue," said the doctor gently, "but I must explain, that I quite forgot that I had parted with the fan. Yes. I received it from you, seven years ago when I brought you home after that adventure in Canton. Two years later I returned to China, to see Lo-Keong on business, and I took the fan with me. He received it."

"No," said the Major shaking his bald head, "I can't believe that, Forge. You declared that you hated Lo-Keong and that the fan would harm you and him also."

"I do hate the man," cried Forge looking more like a bird of prey than ever, "but I got a concession about a gold mine, by giving back the fan. I wanted the money more than Lo-Keong's life. As to my own life, it was in danger from the enemies of the Mandarin, who want the fan to ruin him. That was why I spoke as I did. Are you satisfied?"

"Not quite," said Tidman who was puzzled, "how did the fan come to England again?"

"My nephew Mr. Burgh will tell you that," said Miss Pewsey, "when he has administered the beating I have asked him to inflict."

"Beating," shouted the Major snatching a knife from the breakfast table, "let that young whelp dare to hint such a thing, and I'll kick him round Marport."

"Clarence is not the man to be kicked."

"Nor am I the man to be beaten. I have apologised and that is quite enough. If you are not satisfied Miss Pewsey, you can bring your action and I'll defend it. Beating indeed," snorted Tidman, "I'd like to see anyone who would dare to lay a hand on me," and he looked very fierce as he spoke.

"Very good," said Miss Pewsey in a stately manner, "if you will tell me all about the fan, I shall ask Clarence to spare you the beating."

"Clarence can go to –" the Major mentioned a place which made Miss Pewsey shriek and clap her fingers to her ears. "I am not the least afraid of that cad and bounder – that – that –"

"Libel again Major Tidman."

"Pooh – Pooh," said Forge rising, "let us go Lavinia."

"Not till I hear about the fan. For the sake of my dear Sophia who has the fan, I want to hear."

"All I know, is, that the fan was advertised for –"

"I saw the advertisement," said Miss Pewsey, "but I said nothing to dear Sophia, although I recognized the fan from the description in the newspaper. She never looks at the papers, and trusts to me to tell her the news."

"So you kept from her a piece of news out of which she could make five thousand pounds."

"Really and truly," said Miss Pewsey clutching her bag convulsively and with glittering eyes, "who says so – who pays it – who –?"

"One question at a time," interrupted Tidman, now quite master of himself. "Tung-yu, the man Ainsleigh saw at the Joss House in Perry Street Whitechapel, offered five thousand pounds for the return of the fan. Ainsleigh saw the advertisement and –"

"I know how he came to inquire about the fan," said Miss Pewsey, "Dr. Forge told me, but I did not know the amount offered."

"Will you tell Miss Wharf now."

"No," said Miss Pewsey very decisively, "nor will any one else. My Sophia's health is delicate and if she had a shock like that inflicted on her, she would die."

"What the offer of five thousand pounds –"

"The chance of being killed," said Miss Pewsey, "but I will leave my nephew Mr. Burgh to explain that Major Tidman. I accept your apology for thinking me a – but no," cried the lady, "I can't bring myself to pronounce the nasty word. I am a Pewsey of Essex. All is said in that, I think. Good morning, Major. My abstinence from bringing an action lies in the fact, that you will refrain from unsettling my Sophia's mind by telling about the fan. Good-morning. My Theophilus will we not go?"

Before the Major could recover from the bewilderment into which he was thrown by this torrent of words, Miss Pewsey taking the arm of the melancholy doctor had left the room. When alone Tidman scratched his chin and swore. "There's something in this," he soliloquised. "I believe the old woman wants to get the money herself. By George, I'll keep my eyes on her," and the Major shook his fist at the door, through which the fairy form of Miss Pewsey had just vanished.

Later in the day Tidman dressed to perfection, walked up the town twirling his stick, and beaming on every pretty woman he came across. The stout old boy was not at all appalled by the threat of Miss Pewsey regarding her buccaneering nephew's attentions. When he saw the gentleman in question bearing down on him, he simply stopped and grasped his stick more firmly. If there was to be a fight, the Major resolved to have the first blow. But Burgh did not seem ready to make a dash. He sauntered up to Tidman and looked at him smilingly, "Well met old pard," said he in his slangy fashion.

"My name to you, is Major Tidman," said the old fellow coolly.

"I guess I know that much. Can't we go a stretch along the lower part of the town?"

"If there's any row to come off," said the Major, keeping a wary eye on the young man. "I prefer it to take place here. On guard sir – on guard."

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