Vain Fortune — Chapter 6

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CHAPTER VI.

"What will ye ’ave to eat? Eggs and bacon?”

"No, no!”

"Well, then, ’ave a chop?”

"No, no!”

"Ye must ’ave something.”

"A cup of tea, a slice of toast. I’m not hungry.”

“Well, ye are worse than a young lady for a happetite. Miss Massey ’as sent you down these ’ere papers.”

The servant-girl laid the papers on the bed, and Hubert lay back on his pillow, so that he might collect his thoughts. Stretching forth his hands, he selected the inevitable paper.

"For those who do not believe that our English home life is composed mainly, if not entirely, of lying, drunkenness, and conjugal infidelity, and its sequel, divorce, yester evening at the Queen’s Theatre must have been a sad and dismal experience. That men and women who have vowed to love each other do sometimes prove false to their troth no reasonable man will deny. With the divorce court before our eyes, even the most enthusiastic believer in the natural goodness and ultimate perfectibility of human nature must admit that men and women are frail. But drunkenness and infidelity are happily not charac- teristic of our English homes. Then why, we ask, should a dramatist select such a theme, and by every artifice of dialogue force into prominence all that is mean and painful in an unfortunate woman’s life? Always the same relentless method; the cold, passionless curiosity of the vivisector; the scalpel is placed under the nerve, and we are called upon to watch the quivering flesh. Never the kind word, the tears, the effusion, which is man’s highest prerogative, and which separates him from the brute and signifies the immortal end for which he was created. We hold that it is a pity to see so much talent wasted, and it was indeed a melancholy sight to see so many capable actors and actresses labouring to — ”

"This is even worse than usual," said Hubert; and glancing through half a column of hysterical commonplace, he came upon the following: —

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"But if this woman had succeeded in reclaiming from vice the man who unjustly divorced her, and who in his misery goes back to ask her forgiveness for pity's sake, what a lesson we should have had! And, with lightened and not with heavier hearts, we should have left the theatre comforted, better and happier men and women. But turning his back on the goodness, truth, and love whither he had induced us to believe he was leading us, the author flagrantly makes the woman contradict her whole nature in the last act; and, because her husband falls again, she, instead of raising him with all the tender mercies and humanities of wifehood, declares that her life has been one long mistake, and that she accepts the divorce which the Court had unjustly granted. The moral, if such a word may be applied to such a piece is this: 'The law may be bad, but human nature is worse.'"

The other morning papers took the same view, — a great deal of talent wasted on a subject that could please no one. Hubert threw the papers aside, lay back, and in the lucid idleness of the bed his thoughts grew darker. It was hardly possible that the piece could survive such notices; and if it did not? Well, he would have to go. But until the piece was taken out of the bills it would be a weakness to harbour the ugly thought.

There were, however, the evening papers to look forward to, and soon after midday Annie was sent to buy all that had appeared. Hubert expected to find in these papers a more delicate appreciation of his work. Many of the critics of the evening press were his personal friends, and nearly all were young men in full sympathy with the new school of dramatic thought. He read paper after paper with avidity; and Annie was sent in a cab to buy one that had not yet found its way so far north as Fitzroy Street. The opinion of this paper was of all importance, and Hubert tore it open with trembling fingers. Although more temperately written than the others, it was clearly favourable, and Hubert sighed a sweet sigh of relief. A weight was lifted from him; the world suddenly seemed to grow brighter; and he went to the theatre that evening, and, half doubting and half confidently, presented himself at the door of Montague Ford's dressing-room. The actor had not yet begun to dress, and was busy writing letters. He stretched his hand hurriedly to Hubert.

"Excuse me, my dear fellow; I have a couple of letters to finish."

Hubert sat down, glancing nervously from the actor to the morning papers with which the table was strewn. There was not an evening paper there. Had he not seen them? At the end of about ten minutes the actor said, —

"Well, this is a bad business; they are terribly down on us — aren't they? What do you think?"

"Have you seen the evening papers — *The Telephone*, for instance?"

"Oh yes, I've seen them all; but the evening papers don't amount to much. Stiggins's article was terrible. I am afraid he has killed the piece."

"Don't you think it will run, then?"

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[Illustration on page 84]

"Well, that depends upon the public, of course. If they like it, I'll keep it on."

"How's the booking?"

"Not good." Montague Ford moved his papers absent-mindedly. At the end of a long silence he said, "Even if the piece did catch on, it would take a lot of working up to undo the mischief of those articles. Of course you can rely on me to give it every chance. I sha'n't take it out of the bills if I can possibly help."

"There is my *Gipsy*."

"I have another piece ready to put into rehearsal; it was arranged for six months ago. I only consented to produce your play because — well, because there has been such an outcry lately about art.... Tremendous part for me in the new piece… I'm sure you'll like it."

The business did improve, but so very slowly that Hubert was afraid Ford would lose patience and take the play out of the bills. But while the fate of the play hung in the balance, Hubert's life was being rendered unbearable by duns. They had found him out, one and all; to escape being served was an impossibility; and now his table was covered with summonses to appear at the County Court. This would not matter if the piece once took the public taste. Then he would be able to pay every one and have some time to rest and think. And there seemed every prospect of its catching on. Discussions regarding the morality of the play had arisen in the newspapers, and the eternal question whether men and women are happier married or unmarried had reached its height. Hubert spent the afternoon addressing letters to the papers, striving to fan the flame of controversy. Every evening he listened for Rose's footstep on the stairs. — How did the piece go? — Was there a better house? Money or paper? — Have you seen the notice in the — ? — First-rate, wasn't it? — That ought to do some good. — I've heard there was a notice in the — , but I haven't seen it. Have you? — No; but So-and-so saw the paper, and said there was nothing in it. And, do you know, I hear there's going to be a notice in *The Modern Review*, and that So-and-so is writing it.

Every post brought newspapers; the room was filled with newspapers — all kinds of newspapers — papers one has never heard of, — French papers, Welsh papers, North of England papers, Scotch and Irish papers. Hubert read columns about himself, anecdotes of all kinds, — where he was born, who were his parents, and what first induced him to attempt writing for the stage; his personal appearance, mode of life, the cut of his clothes; his religious, moral, and political views. Had he been the plaintiff in an action for criminal libel, greater industry in the collection and the fabrication of personal details could hardly have been displayed. But one evening his attention was caught by an article written, even in the opening lines, with more clearness and more conciseness than the others. The opening lines were a plain statement of how Hubert had come to be a marked man in the theatrical world. It told how

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brutally and how bitterly *Divorce* had been received when it was first produced, how not three men in London had dared speak a word in its favour; "whereas now," said the critic, “if we except an aged scribbler or two, there is not a journalist in Fleet Street who, with or without provocation, is not prepared to declare, in one or two columns stuffed full of allusions to the new dramatic formula, that Mr. Hubert Price is the man the world is waiting for — the man who will achieve the dramatic revolution.

"But the Ethiopian had not changed his skin, nor the leopard his spots," said this critic, "and the explanation of all this noisy kindness and bustling generosity lies in the discovery that, beyond creating a
little useful agitation in dramatic circles, which will enable certain dramatic opportunists to get rid of their wares, Mr. Hubert Price has achieved nothing; it therefore suits every one to praise him, just as it suits every one to praise the dead.”

The humanity of this hypocrisy delighted this critic; and, having made sufficiently merry over it, he turned to what Hubert had already written, and pointed out the signs of incipient sterility even in *Divorce*. In *An Ebbing Tide* there was hardly a good scene. — a few ideas that the author had not been able to develop, a few striking phrases. The critic then ran over cases of artistic sterility, noting the first appearance of the disease, and its subsequent developments. Men of partial genius were said to be peculiarly liable to it, and the tendency of education to foster the growth was interestingly touched upon.

The paper dropped from his hands, and he recollected all his failures.

"Once I could do good work; now I can do neither good work nor bad. Were I a rich man, I should collect my scattered papers and write songs to be sung in drawing-rooms; but being a poor one, I must — I suppose I must get out. Positively, there is no hope, — debts on every side. Fate has willed.me to go as went Haydon, Gerard de Nerval, and Maréchal. The first cut his throat, the second hanged himself, and the third blew out his brains. Clearly the time has come to consider how I shall make my exit. It is a little startling to be called upon so peremptorily to go.”

In this moment of extreme dejection it seemed to Hubert that the writer of the article had told him the exact truth. He refused to admit the plea of poverty. It was of course hard to write when one is being harassed by creditors. But if he had had it in him, it would have come out. The critic had very probably told him the truth. He could not hope to make a living out of literature. He had not the strength to write the masterpiece which the perverse cruelty of nature had permitted him only to see, and he was hopelessly unfit for journalism. But in his simple, wholesome mind there was no bent towards suicide; and he scanned every horizon. Once again he thought of his uncle. Five years ago he had written, asking him for the loan of a hundred pounds. He had received ten. And how vain it would be to write a second time! A few pounds would only serve to prolong his misery. No; he would not drift from degradation to degradation.

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He only glanced at the letter which Annie had brought up with the copy of *The Modern Review*. It was clearly a lawyer's letter. Should he open it? Why not spare himself the pain? He could alter nothing; and in these last days — Leaving the thought unfinished, he sought for his keys; he went to his box, unlocked it, and took out a small paper package. Of the fifty pounds he had received from Ford about twenty remained: he had been poorer before, but hardly quite so hopeless. He scanned every horizon — all were barred. The thought of suicide, and with it the instinctive shrinking from it, came into his mind again. Suppose he took, that very night, an overdose of chloral? He tried to put the thought from him, and returned, a little dazed and helpless, to his chair. Had the critic in *The Modern Review* told him the truth? Was he incapable of earning a living? It seemed so. Above all, was he incapable of finishing *The Gipsy* as he intended? No; that he felt was a lie. Give him six months' quiet, free from worry and all anxiety, and he would do it. Many a year had passed since he had enjoyed a month of quiet; and glancing again at the letter on the table, he thought that perhaps at that very moment a score of gallery boys were hissing his play. Perhaps at that very moment Ford was making up his mind to announce the last six nights of *Divorce*. At a quarter to twelve he heard Rose's foot on the stairs. He opened the door.

"How did the piece go to-night?"

"Pretty well."

"Only pretty well? Won't you come in for a few minutes?... So the piece didn't go very well to-night?"

"Oh yes, it did. I've seen it go better; but — "

"Did you get a call?"

"Yes, after the second act."

"Not after the third?

"No. That act never goes well. Harding came behind; I was speaking to him, and he said something which struck me as being very true. Ford, he said, plays the part a great deal too seriously. When the piece was first produced, it was played more good-humouredly by indifferent actors, who let the thing run without trying to bring out every point. Ford makes it as hard as nails. I think those were his exact words."

Hubert did not answer. At the end of a long silence he said, —

"Did you hear anything about the last nights?"

"No," she said; "I heard nothing of that."

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"Ford appeared quite satisfied, then?”

"Yes, quite," she answered, with difficulty; for his eyes were fixed on her, and she felt he knew she was not telling the truth. The conversation paused again, and to turn it into another channel she said, "Why, you have not opened your letter!”

"I can see it is a lawyer’s letter, on account of some unpaid bill. If I could pay it I would; but as I can’t —”

“You are afraid to open it," said Rose.

Ashamed of his weakness, Hubert opened the letter, and began to read. Rose saw that the letter was not such an one as he had expected, and a moment after his face told her that fortunate news had come to him. The signs of the tumult within were represented by the passing of the hand across the brow, as if to brush aside some strange hallucination, and the sudden coming of a vague look of surprise and fear into the eyes. He said, —

"Read it! Read it!”

Relieved of much detail and much cumbersome legal circumlocution, it was to the following effect: — That about three months ago Mr. Burnett had come up from his place in Sussex, and at the offices of Messrs. Grandly & Co. had made a will, in which he had disinherited his adopted daughter, Miss Emily Watson, and left everything to Mr. Hubert Price. There was no question as to the validity of the will; but Messrs. Grandly deemed it their duty to inform Mr. Hubert Price of the circumstances under which it had been made, and also of the fact that a few weeks before his death Mr. Burnett had told Mr. John Grandly, who was then staying with Mr. Burnett at Ashwood, that he intended adding a codicil, leaving some two or three hundred a year to Miss Watson. It was unfortunate that Mr. Burnett had not had time to do this; for Miss Watson was an orphan, eighteen years of age, and entirely unprovided for. Messrs. Grandly begged to submit these facts to the consideration of Mr. Hubert Price. Miss Watson was now residing at Ashwood. She was there with a friend of hers, Mrs. Bentley; and should Mr. Hubert Price feel inclined to do what Mr. Burnett had left undone, Messrs. Grandly would have very great pleasure in carrying his wishes into effect.

“I’m not dreaming, am I?”

“No, you are not. It is quite true. Your uncle has left his money to you. I am so glad; indeed, I am. You will be able to finish your play, and take a theatre and produce it yourself if you like. I hope you won’t forget me. I do want to play that part. You can’t quite know what I shall do with it. One can’t explain oneself in a scene here and there.... What are you thinking of?”

"I’m thinking of that poor girl Emily Watson. It comes very hard upon her.”

"Who is she?”

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"The girl my uncle disinherited."

"Oh, she! Well, you can marry her if you like. That would not be a bad notion. But if you do you'll forget all about me and Lady Hayward."

"No; I shall never forget you, Rose." He stretched his hand to her; but irrespective of his will, the gesture seemed full of farewell.

"I'm so much obliged to you," he said; "had it not been for you I might never have opened that letter."

"Even if you hadn't it wouldn't have mattered; you would have heard of your good-fortune some other way. But it is getting very late. I must say good- night. I hope you will have a pleasant time in the country, and will finish your play. Good-night."

Returning from the door, he stopped to think. "We have been very good friends — that is all. How strangely determined she is!... More so than I am. She is bound to succeed. There is in her just that note of individual passion.... Perhaps some one will find her out before I have finished, — that would be a pity. I wonder which of us will succeed first?"

Then the madness of good-fortune came upon him suddenly; he could think no more of Rose, and had to go for a long walk in the streets.

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