

[Written for the Flag of our Union]

*The Dedbroke Mystery*

by Frances Mary Schoolcraft

THE Dedbroke Mystery was a very complicated one, and was, in fact, two distinct mysteries, which finally merged into one. The one that had the most definite shape, originated in the village of Swinebourne. Swinebourne was not far from the sea, and rather above the head of sloop navigation on the Swinebourne River, though small craft did occasionally come up to the village.

A mystery in Swinebourne was a remarkable thing in itself, apart from the circumstances that constituted it; for, generally speaking, nothing was a mystery there. Everybody knew everything about everybody and everything. Outsiders declared that it was a mystery how the settled preacher of the gospel contrived to live, with a wife and seven children, on his small salary; and it really did seem, not merely a mystery, but a positive miracle. But the congregation never cared to raise the question, for fear they should feel compelled to raise the salary as a decent consequence; and the parson himself probably thought it was safer to appeal to Heaven than to the generosity of his flock. But this is a digression.

The mystery had as befitting a local habitation as any one could have selected for it—a deserted house. The house was the old Dedbroke House, which stood on the old Dedbroke Place, a farm of considerable extent, lying on the banks of the river, nearly three-quarters of a mile beyond the village, towards the sea. The farm was a good one, as far as natural advantages went, but had a forlorn and destitute appearance that struck the most transient observer. To any inquiry the inhabitants could always reply that “there was something wrong about the title;” but what that something was, it passed their powers to say. They could tell a long and wandering tale about the Squire Dedbrooke, and about George, who owned the place until he failed and went out West, and about George’s brother Jasper buying it; but why the title did not pass to Jasper they could not say. But they knew that Jasper’s title was not good, because:

“Jasper, he let the place to Dannie Marston, and Dannie wouldn’t pay the rent, after a year or so, and Jasper came down to see about it. Dannie he up and told Jasper, says Dannie, says he, ‘You haint got no more right to make me pay rent for the place than that there old yaller dog. And if you hev,’ says he, ‘make me,’ says Dannie. Well, Jasper couldn’t make Dannie pay, because Dannie hadn’t any money, for one thing; and so he tried to turn him out; but he couldn’t do that, neither. You see, the way he went to work was to try to sell the place; but when the man came to look into the title, he wouldn’t buy, and Jasper he got kinder disgusted, and hasn’t been near the place since. Dannie, he skun the place, and stayed in the house until it got to leaking so bad that Amandy wouldn’t live there any longer, and Dannie he wouldn’t mend the roof, and so he moved out. Dannie ought to have made money out of the place; but he was a poor shoat, and he only jest run it daown, so it wont hardly paster a crow, and it just lets now to whoever will pay the taxes.”

This was the legend of the place, and in this unhappy state it had remained for several years. Jasper Dedbroke having made money as a merchant in Boston, cared less for his ancestral domain than he would have done if it had been his sole possession, and had scarcely visited it since his encounter with the rebellious Dannie, and his futile attempt to sell the place.

Such was the condition of matters when, early one Monday morning, Dannie Marston, who was the nearest neighbor, drove by the old Dedbroke place, and observed smoke coming from one of the chimneys of the house. Dannie, who still retained a kind of proprietary feeling as to the house, at once formed a theory that "some of them darned boys" had assumed squatter sovereignty; and as he judged that he had a prior claim on that basis, he stopped his horse and walked towards the house, which stood some distance back from the road. When he came near enough to see the lower part of the house, he found that all the lower windows were boarded up inside, the doors of the rooms having apparently been used for that purpose. He walked round and round the house, but could neither get in nor look in. He uplifted his voice, and in objurgatory accents called on the imaginary boys to come out. He elicited no response, and at last returned to his wagon, and went upon his way.

He observed the same appearances about the house on his return in the afternoon, and in the evening he went down to the grocery which he patronized, to inquire if anybody knew who was in the old Dedbroke House. No one did. No one even knew any one was there. All the boys in the vicinity were otherwise accounted for, and by the time Dannie left the social circle at the grocery, the Mystery had been fairly ushered into the world. The next day, almost all Swinebourne walked to the Dedbroke House, to see with their own eyes that there was nothing to be seen except the barricaded windows. After dark, small scouting parties still hung about the house, and bivouacked on commanding eminences, and returned with the latest intelligence that there was not a spark of light to be seen, high or low, about the house.

Swinebourne congratulated itself. It had been stagnating lately. The last excitement had been the burning of Simeon Jenkins's new house, just after he had moved into it and got it insured. At that time, a dark rumor prevailed that Simeon, in the natural confusion incident to moving, had stowed away his first lot of housekeeping goods and groceries with so little regard to arrangement that he had put the kerosene and matches among the kindling-wood, and the kindling-wood in a bran-new pine closet, under the stairs where combustion had taken place. But this was nearly a year ago, and so the public mind was in a state of complete leisure and preparation for the conscientious and careful consideration of the Dedbroke house.

The result of the first week's observation was, that no one had been seen either to go in or come out of the house, but there was certainly some one living in it. A heavy rain, that began to fall late Saturday afternoon, checked further inquiry, save in one devoted Pliny of the fields, who dared the wrath of the elements, in his thirst for knowledge. This was Dannie Marston, who had always devoted his mental powers so exclusively to his neighbors' affairs that he had little left to bestow upon his own. Coming home from the village "cross lots," Dannie had observed a gleam of light over one window, and stopped to investigate it thoroughly. As the rain became inconveniently hard and fast, Dannie got under the shelter of the wash-house, which only leaked in places, for the double purpose of waiting until it held up a little, and of watching the house.

"It stands to reason," argued Dannie to himself, "that if no one goes about by day, they must by night, and I'd jest like to know what they are up to. By Judas! how the rain must be coming down in that room now!"

Twelve struck on the village clock. It was pitch dark, and rained harder and harder. Dannie began to think he would have to go home without having gained anything but a drenching, when, through the rush and splash of the rain, and roar of the wind, he heard the sound of a horse and wheels. He got into the driest corner, and waited. The sound approached slowly over the grass-grown cart-track that led to the house.

“It must be somebody that knows the place,” thought Dannie, “to find his way on such a dum dark night as this.”

The driver, however, seemed to lose his bearings at last, for the wheels stopped, and there came a loud, sharp whistle, which was repeated two or three times before the door of the house was opened, and a man and lantern appeared. Dannie tried in vain to distinguish what manner of man it might be; but there was shrubbery between him and the door, and he did not dare to come very near.

“Darn them old laylocks!” murmured Dannie, as the horse and wagon came within the light of the lantern, and then were obscured by the lilac bushes.

However, he could see that it was an open box wagon, and what he subsequently described as “one of these here fast horses,” though the speed of the animal must have been a mere matter of inference. The man jumped out, swearing at the rain, and asking if there was a stable.

“Stable!” said the man from the house, “no.”

This was all the conversation that Dannie overheard. Both men at once went to work and took the horse from the shafts, and then the new-comer led him into the kitchen of the house, into which the back door directly opened, while the other ran the wagon into the wash-house, causing Dannie to retreat precipitately into outer darkness, when he saw the intention. After that, the man went into the house and shut the door, and Dannie, grieving greatly that the storm rendered any eaves-dropping but literal eaves-dropping out of the question, slowly floundered and waded home, and told the wife of his bosom what he had seen. She answered with a great want of wifely feeling:

“It was worth while to get wet to the skin to see *that*, wan’t it? See if I don’t have a time with you bein’ laid up with rheumatism, Dannie Marston!”

“There’s something wrong going on,” said Dannie, “I think jest as likes not they’ve stole that hoss. There’s something wrong, you mark my words, Amandy.”

“Mark a cat’s tail!” said Amandy. “You’d best go to bed.”

“I really think,” said Dannie, “I really think the seelectmen had orter be notified.”

Amandy treated the suggestion with scathing contempt.

“You’d best take the next rainy night and go and notify ‘em,” she said. “It’s a pity you aint one

on 'em. You know most enough to hold office.”

“I guess I know as much as most men,” said Dannie, spurred to some resistance by the unremitting scorn of his wife.

“So you do,” said Amandy, “jest about;” for Amandy professed a very mean opinion of the male sex in general, and the member of it who had appropriated her in particular.

Dannie was subdued by years of experience, and so he crept quietly and humbly to bed, mentally rehearsing the tale of what he had seen and heard, as he intended to repeat it to a more sympathetic audience. Amandy's contempt for the informant destroyed her curiosity as to the information. More cannot be said of the slight esteem in which she held him; and she never condescended to make any personal inquisition into the mystery, so that there was one less witness to what might take place. The general public listened more kindly, and the next day being clear, the popular promenade towards the Dedbroke house was well patronized. No one saw a man, or a horse, or a wagon, however, either then or after; there was no wagon in the wash-house nor elsewhere, and no one ever saw any go away. A small faction, headed by Amandy Marston, maintained that no one ever saw them come, and that the whole story about it was an invention of Dannie's to gain a factitious distinction in the grocery. Dannie confessed himself that it beat him what in natur got that wagon, for he couldn't think any one would go out again in such a storm.

However, this was sure, that some one was living in the house; and for want of any definite and certain information, there were many varying tales circulated. Some said the mysterious tenant was quite youthful; others, that he was well-stricken in years; some, that he was a remarkably fine-looking and athletic man; others, that he was a perfect monster of deformity; and others again, that he was in the last stages of a lingering disease. All these accounts quoted Dannie as authority; though it is due to Dannie to say that he had not committed himself to any decided description of the man he saw. Equally at variance were the causes assigned for the mysterious man's place and mode of life. Some said that he had lost all his own money; others, that he had taken some one's else; and others, that he meant to rob the bank (at Boshford, a few miles distant); some, that he had been in State's Prison, and others, that he ought to go there.

Finally, Swinebourne frightened itself with its own stories, and the more timorous portion of the community (which portion was by no means limited to women and children) began to be shy of going by the place, especially after dark; and even Dannie began to be afraid of “getting the ill-will” of his nameless neighbor. To such an extent did this terror arise, that when a human being was distinctly seen, nailing a sail over the leakiest part of the roof, the witnesses only said to each other that he had undoubtedly stolen it from the sloop then lying in the river, and did not go near enough to see how the thief looked. And when a young man happened to go by, one evening, and saw the door standing open, he took to his heels, and ran as fast as he could.

Every one thought some one ought to inquire into it, but no one knew upon whom the duty of inquiry devolved. A good many said that it was likely Jasper Dedbroke knew all about it. Dannie Marston, true to his principles, said Jasper hadn't no right to let the house; but then Dannie, without deserting those principles, could not assert that a man had no right to live in the house

after Jasper had let it to him; and so he waived the point, and argued in favor of the propriety of the selectmen investigating the affair.

At this juncture, the public mind was relieved by learning that Jasper Dedbroke had taken John Harrison's house, furnished, for the summer, and was coming down at once. Of course they supposed that his sole object in visiting Swinbourne was to protect his property there against the invader; but in this, the community was slightly in error. Jasper had not heard of the Swinebourne Mystery, when he determined to visit his native place, and his movements were chiefly influenced by the other branch of the Dedbroke mystery, to which I have alluded, and which had been perplexing him and his family for some time past, and which I will endeavor to present as concisely as possible.

Jasper Dedbroke, it has been said, was a Boston merchant, and the head of a large importing house. He had abandoned his early home when he was a mere boy, and had been very successful in everything he had undertaken. His family was small. He had but one child living, a daughter, who had been married for several years to the son of his junior partner, which son was now by inheritance junior partner himself. Mrs. Dedbroke was the victim of some mysterious complaint, which did not seem to endanger her life, or even to prevent a pretty fair amount of invalid enjoyment, but which made her a nonentity for all domestic and social purposes, and a blessing to the family doctor and his apothecary. Fortunately for Jasper, his wife had a number of maiden sisters, one of whom came and discharged all the active duties of the station of which Mrs. Dedbroke held the honors.

The marriage of Miss Mary Dedbroke and Henry Curzon was universally conceded to be perfectly desirable and appropriate, in every respect. If it was not made in heaven, the prevailing sentiment was that Heaven could not have made a better one. Mary Dedbroke was an only child, and so was Henry Curzon. Their social position was equal, and so were their worldly possessions, if Jasper left as much as it was supposed he would. Mary was highly educated, and so was Henry. They were both good-looking, and there was just the proper difference in their age, height, etc. In a word, all the friends, relatives and acquaintances of the parties were completely satisfied, and that was the main thing, of course.

The minor point, of how they liked it themselves, was generally disposed of in a satisfactory manner. As it happened, Mr. Curzon and Miss Dedbroke liked each other remarkably well, considering that their fathers had arranged the match before Miss Mary had begun to think that she wasn't a little girl. Mary, in particular, had a high admiration for her husband, and *this* was a point upon which there was a complete harmony of taste between them. Henry Curzon had too sincere a regard for virtue and morality not to be very sensible of the merits of a man whose principles were so correct as his own. He was the infallible interpreter of abstract morality in his circle, and never shunned his duty from any mistaken feelings of modesty. He dealt so faithfully, even with his father-in-law, who was something of a latitudinarian, that Mr. Dedbroke's feelings towards him partook more of enforced respect than spontaneous regard. It was not points of doctrine that Curzon expounded, but the mutual duties of man to man. Mrs. Curzon was not quite a realization of her husband's idea of a perfect woman. She was rather too lively and passionate to always do exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. She was disposed to jealously, too. Not that she had any idea that her husband had any wanderings of fancy towards any other

woman, however superior she might be, but that she thought he did not love *her*. This was naturally rather annoying to Mr. Curzon, who felt that he loved his wife quite as much as she deserved, and that it was not his fault if her childishness and want of self-command prevented that entire harmony of thought and sentiment so desirable in the married state. These little jarrings, however, were strictly confined to the domestic arcana, and Mr. and Mrs. Curzon were generally quoted as a perfectly happy couple.

In the fourth year of their marriage, it became necessary that one of the partners in Dedbroke & Curzon should go to Europe, and the duty was assigned to Curzon. Mrs. Curzon's state of health, and her fear of crossing the ocean, prevented her accompanying him. A short time after his departure, Mr. Dedbroke received a letter from his brother George's daughter. George had married "beneath him," and there had been little communication between the families since his death, seeing that the best-disposed people seldom force themselves on the society of their poor relations, and that Mrs. George Dedbroke preferred millinery to asking favors. When Mrs. George Dedbroke died, she left her daughter Mary a few hundred dollars, upon which the orphan lived in ease and comfort, with a relative of her mother, until a few years before, when a handsome stranger suddenly appeared, and, after a courtship of three weeks, married her, and at the end of three more weeks, left her, ostensibly for the purpose of looking after some business elsewhere. Since that time, she had only heard from him three times, soon after he left. After the last letter, she had heard nothing whatever of him, and what was more, had heard nothing of her little property, which he had drawn from its previous investment to put into his own business. After waiting three years in vain, the deserted wife gave up looking for Fletcher Woodfall's return; her relatives had made her less welcome since her money had vanished, and she had at last taken the bold and hazardous step of writing to her rich uncle for advice and assistance.

Jasper Dedbroke ignored this letter utterly, for six weeks. At the conclusion of that time, he called his sister-in-law and housekeeper, Miss Onslow, to a private consultation. He stated the case, and asked her advice. Miss Onslow advised judicious assistance, but at a discreet distance. Jasper said "Exactly so," and then instructed Miss Onslow to write to his niece, and invite her to his house, to assist in the domestic duties, under the direction of Miss Onslow, who was beginning to complain of them to an extent that annoyed her brother-in-law. Miss Onslow did not exactly like the idea, but obeyed. The young woman returned a thankful acceptance, and in due time arrived, and proved to be a very handsome girl, with very frank and unaffected manners. Miss Onslow predicted that she would make trouble; but the most serious inconvenience that arose was from the fact that her name was Mary, as well as her more fortunate cousin's, which necessitated her being called Mary Woodfall, no other variation suggesting itself. In a short time, Mrs. Woodfall gained the good opinion of her relatives. Miss Onslow found her an exceedingly valuable auxiliary, not at all inclined to insubordination. In addition, Mary Woodfall had a talent for making and altering female apparel that charmed Miss Onslow, who was always wanting something of the kind done in the domestic circle, and wouldn't keep a seamstress because it was so extravagant, and they were so stupid. Even the secluded Mrs. Dedbroke uttered a feeble note of praise, drawn forth by Mary's superior style of making and inventing pudding, pudding being the invalid's staff of life. Mrs. Curzon also took a fancy to her cousin, and her Uncle Jasper appeared to be very much relieved, that his niece was so easily disposed of. The greatest fault that Mary Woodfall manifested was a want of reticence; and though this was sometimes inconvenient and embarrassing, yet, as Miss Onslow said, "it was

better than being sly,” and Mary was forgiven her superfluous candor and blunt speeches, in consideration of her eminent capacity for making herself generally useful. The only subject upon which Mary Woodfall was reserved was her own matrimonial experience, and this only extended to a reluctance to make it a common subject of general conversation, for in private and confidential moments, she spoke of it freely. The most full and minute account she ever gave of the circumstances was to her cousin, Mary Curzon.

Mary Woodfall had been spending part of a day at the Curzons, to give her assistance in some domestic emergency. In the evening, when the two cousins were sitting together, Mary Woodfall told the whole story, confessing to having been very foolish, to have been so easily won, but laying the blame chiefly on Fletcher Woodfall’s handsome face and winning manners. In proof of the first assertion, she showed Mrs. Curzon his photograph, remarking:

“He didn’t *take* very well, because he was so fair; it doesn’t hardly give you an idea of him.”

Mary Curzon took the photograph, and looked at it.

“Why,” she said, “if it was not for the beard, I should almost think it had been taken for Henry.”

“*Does* it look like Mr. Curzon?” said Mary Woodfall, with a glance of new curiosity at the familiar photograph. “Do you know I have never seen his photograph all the time I have been here?”

“He never had it taken but once,” said Mrs. Curzon. “He does not like to have it done.”

Mrs. Curzon went and found a photograph of her husband, and compared it with that of Fletcher Woodfall. There was a striking similarity between the two faces.

“Isn’t it odd,” said Mary Woodfall, “that we two cousins should have married two men that look so much alike? O Cousin Mary, is it at all likely that Fletcher is some relation of Mr. Curzon’s?”

“I think not,” said Mrs. Curzon; “and I dare say that the originals would not look so much alike as the photographs do.”

Mary Woodfall looked at the photograph of Fletcher Woodfall for some moments, evidently forgetting the question of resemblance.

“Should you think he could be alive yet, Cousin Mary?” she asked.

Cousin Mary rather evaded the question. She did not want to express her full opinion of Mr. Fletcher Woodfall, and neither did she wish to comfort her cousin for being a deserted wife, by assuring her that she was probably a widow; and besides, she secretly thought that if her cousin had shown a little more reserve in receiving a stranger’s attentions, she would have escaped the trouble that followed. But she did not wish to say this, either, and she dexterously changed the conversation.

Matters remained in the same state in the Dedbroke family until Mr. Curzon's return. In the general summary of news and events that naturally took place between the husband and wife, Mary Woodfall's arrival was spoken of, and, rather to Mrs. Curzon's surprise, Mr. Curzon expressed decided disapprobation.

"I do not think," he said, "that it was a very wise step. The girl has probably tastes and habits very different from her relatives here, and yet, being so very near a relation, she will expect to be admitted to positive equality at all times and places."

Mrs. Curzon assured him that Mary Woodfall was a very nice girl, and that no trouble had yet arisen as to her social position.

"At any rate," said Mr. Curzon, "I should hope that you would not associate much with her, without being rather better informed as to her antecedents. By her own story, her position is a rather doubtful one."

"Don't be unjust, Henry," said Mrs. Curzon. "It was not her fault that her husband deserted her."

"You don't know that," said Mr. Curzon. "And, in fact—I don't say this, Mary, by way of accusation against your cousin, but merely to point out to you how apt you are to be over-credulous—in fact, you do not know that she ever had a husband."

Mrs. Curzon was very indignant at her husband, and said that her father was quite satisfied. Mr. Curzon responded that what satisfied Mr. Dedbroke as to his niece's fitness to be his assistant housekeeper, did not satisfy *him* as to her fitness to be his wife's companion. After a little more discussion, Mrs. Curzon mentioned that she had seen Mr. Woodfall's photograph, and that it looked very much like Mr. Curzon. Mr. Curzon looked at his wife with an air of haughty disgust.

"I am much obliged to you and your cousin," he said, "for finding a resemblance between me and a wandering gambler, as this Woodfall probably was."

"Very likely," said Mrs. Curzon; "but he certainly looked like you. You have no relations of that name."

"No," said Curzon. "Accidental resemblances are by no means uncommon, but I am rather skeptical as to this one."

Mr. Curzon seemed so much annoyed at being accused of resembling a man of such questionable moral character as Fletcher Woodfall probably was, that his wife dropped the subject. In addition, Curzon manifested a strong prejudice against Mary Woodfall, and actually avoided making her acquaintance, for some time. But he could not avoid it for a very long time, and they met at Mr. Dedbroke's house. Curzon was exceedingly cool and stiff. Mary Woodfall looked at him very earnestly, no doubt to ascertain if the resemblance to Fletcher Woodfall would disappear on a closer examination. Curzon, who had a fair and florid complexion, colored noticeably, and rather abruptly turned away from her. Soon after, Mrs. Woodfall quietly left the room.



The next morning, Curzon received the following note:

“MR. CURZON:—I know that you are Fletcher Woodfall. If you had warned me, I never should have come here. I am sorry to make trouble, especially for Cousin Mary; but I shall have to tell Uncle Jasper. I write you this first, to let you know that I know you. You must act as you think best.

“MARY WOODFALL.”

When Mary Woodfall became convinced that Henry Curzon was Fletcher Woodfall, she was greatly disturbed by the thought of the shock it would be to Mary Curzon. If she had been a heroine, she would have promptly packed up all the necessaries of life in a portable shape, along with all the money she could honestly come by, and would have left her uncle’s house, and never have been heard of again. But she was no heroine, and so she told her Uncle Jasper that she thought she had found Fletcher Woodfall, in the person of Henry Curzon; and, after at first utterly repudiating the idea, her Uncle Jasper sent for his son-in-law. Curzon obeyed the summons. He looked very much agitated and embarrassed, although he tried to preserve his usual cool and lofty manner.

“Henry,” said Mr. Dedbroke, “do you know a man named Fletcher Woodfall?”

A slightly pettish look came over the more serious expression of Curzon’s face. Had his habits permitted it, he would have cursed Fletcher Woodfall before he answered.

“I never even heard the name before I heard that your niece had a husband of that name, and I hope I never shall hear it again.”

Mr. [Dedbroke] took up two or three letters from the table, and handed them to Curzon.

“Whose writing is that?” he asked.

Curzon started when he looked at them, and changed color. The writing was undeniably like his own; so very like that he would probably have admitted it to be his, if it had been an ordinary manuscript or letter, and not letters from Fletcher Woodfall to his wife. He stared stupidly at the writing a moment, and then said, stammering with confusion, as he had a habit of doing:

“I never wrote these.”

Mr. Dedbroke looked at him for some time. He could not tell if Curzon’s manner was bewildered innocence, or detected guilt bent on denial to the last. At last he said:

“It is a very extraordinary coincidence, not only that you look so much like Fletcher Woodfall, but that his hand-writing is an exact fac-simile of yours.”

“It is,” said Curzon; “but I hardly think that any man of sense would look upon it as anything *but* a coincidence. The woman herself must know she is making an unfounded charge. I do not believe a woman could mistake another man for her husband, however great the resemblance

might be.”

“Generally speaking, I agree with you,” said Mr. Dedbroke; “but, as it happens, Mary Woodfall *has* made the mistake, and all you have to do is to convince her of it.”

“I shall take no trouble to convince her,” said Curzon. “I have no idea that there is any mistake in that quarter. It is a mere invention.”

“And these?” said Mr. Dedbroke, pointing to the letters. “These are undoubtedly genuine letters that were written and sent through the post-office several years ago. Mary has not much skill in penmanship, either. And more than that, if it had been an invention, it would probably have been to extort money; and in that case, it would have been her object to have kept the matter between you and her. No, Mary is honest about it. Perhaps, however, she will change her mind about the resemblance if she sees you again.”

“I will not see her,” said Curzon; “it is really too humiliating a position for me to be placed in, to be identified like a thief.”

“Henry,” said Mr. Dedbroke, slowly, “do you know that, whether you are an innocent man or a guilty one, you are acting uncommonly like a fool? I am going to send for Mary, and you had better talk to her a little while, in your ordinary manner, and she will probably see her mistake.”

Mr. Dedbroke sent for his niece. Curzon did not take his father-in-law’s advice, but stood and looked at Mary sternly and indignantly. Mary had been crying, very evidently, and she hardly looked at Curzon, until Mr. Dedbroke said:

“Look at Mr. Curzon, Mary. Do you think yet he is Fletcher Woodfall?”

Mary looked up at Curzon’s frowning face, and, after a few moments, said:

“I never saw him angry before, and he wore a mustache and whiskers.”

“You never saw me before at all,” said Curzon, severely.

Mary looked again, with a steady and bewildered look.

“I hope I never have,” she said; “I am sure I would rather never see you—I mean Fletcher—than find him *so*. If I’m wrong—and I don’t know how I can be—I don’t know how two men can look so much alike; but if I am wrong, it will be very easy to prove that I am, and that you never were in Bellfield.”

“Certainly, Curzon,” said Mr. Dedbroke; “you can easily prove that you were not in Bellfield or its neighborhood in May, 1860.”

This remark was made in a very reassuring tone; but Curzon saw that his father-in-law remembered that in the early part of that year he had been for several months in the Western

States, and particularly in Chicago, from which city the town of Bellfield was about ten miles distant.

“I think it an insult,” Curzon said, “to be even asked to prove the falsehood of such an improbable story, and I will not say another word upon the subject.”

Jasper Dedbroke himself became very much puzzled, after a little more inquiry into the subject. It did not seem likely that Henry Curzon should be guilty of having married one cousin in Bellfield in the spring, and another in Boston in the fall; but then, circumstances looked suspicious, and Jasper had known of men of as fair a life as Curzon being detected in offences quite as bad as bigamy. Nor did it seem likely that, if he had done such a thing, he should have taken no pains to guard against such a discovery; but then, there were quite as glaring instances of blunders in criminals in Jasper’s memory. Mary Woodfall said that Fletcher had asked her again and again if she never corresponded with her relations in Boston, or if she was never likely to see any of them, and she had said, what she then thought, that it was altogether improbable that she ever would. On the other hand, Mary Woodfall seemed as honest and open as the day; but women were sometimes as artful as the devil. Mr. Dedbroke, after thinking of all these things, resolved to go out to Chicago himself, and invited Curzon to accompany him. Curzon consented to the expedition, but preserved a distant and injured tone towards his father-in-law during the whole journey. He recalcitrated against going to Bellfield, but yielded at last, and they went together to see the justice of the peace who had married Fletcher Woodfall to Mary Dedbroke. As soon as the justice saw Curzon, he said:

“Ah, Mr. Woodfall! so you have come back at last?”

Curzon, with great dignity, drew himself to his full height, and said:

“Do you mean to assert that you ever saw me before?”

“Yes sir!” said the justice, in a high key, and with emphasis. “You have shaved since then, but any one who ever saw Fletcher Woodfall would swear to you; I will for one.”

“How often did you see Fletcher Woodfall?” asked Jasper.

Mr. Bullock considered and answered. He had seen him pretty nearly every day all the time he was coming to Bellfield. He had seen him when he first came to the place, and asked if a family named Dedbroke lived there, and talked of settling. Woodfall had spoken of buying a place that belonged to Mr. Bullock. He generally came to Bellfield in the afternoon, and stayed in his office awhile, and then went to see Mary—at least he supposed he went to see her. He had not seen Woodfall since the day he married him, until to-day, but he would swear that he was the same man.

When Mr. Dedbroke and his son-in-law left Bellfield again, neither said a single word. Jasper was beginning to be more and more seriously suspicious. His first idea had been merely of a mistake, that could be easily explained, but the circumstantial evidence grew stronger every day. When they reached Chicago, Curzon announced his intention of returning to Boston at once, but

Jasper so very gravely advised him not to attempt to part company with him, that Curzon sullenly acquiesced in a prolonged stay in Chicago. He refused, however, to take any steps to prove that he had not been in Bellfield. He would leave it altogether to Mr. Dedbroke. Curzon was twice addressed as Woodfall in Chicago, by different individuals. This, by itself, would have amounted to nothing, but it all went the same way with the rest of the evidence. It was not very easy to trace the incidents of Curzon's stay in Chicago, after three years; but, so far as Jasper could find out, in the absence of exact dates, there was nothing to prove that he had *not* been in Bellfield almost every afternoon for three weeks. Curzon said, himself, he had spent his evenings alone in his room at the hotel, in reading and writing; but that was only his assertion. The three weeks of Mary's married life had been passed partly in Chicago and partly in a short excursion on the lakes. This period, most unfortunately, Curzon could give no account of whatever, and he did not seem to court inquiry, saying that Mr. Dedbroke himself would be unable to account for every day in life.

"I might not be *willing* to do it, Henry," said Jasper, with a rather sly and wicked twinkle in his eyes; "but I shouldn't wonder if I *could*. Where do you *say* you were all this time? A steady young man of regular habits, like you, ought to know something about what he was doing."

Curzon coughed, colored and stammered. He had a slight impediment in his speech, that never was very noticeable, except when he was hurried or agitated; and this was one thing that Mary Woodfall had noticed as being one of the characteristics of Woodfall's speech. At last Curzon said:

"I was sick at that time."

"Ah?" said Jasper, rubbing his eye-glasses very fast, and drawing up his eyes a little to look at Curzon without them. "Where did you stay?"

"With a friend," said Curzon.

"*He* had a name, I suppose?" said Jasper.

Curzon colored again.

"Of course," he said; "but he is not in Chicago now, and it would be useless for me to name him. And, in short, I will answer no more questions."

"I wouldn't," said Jasper, dryly; "a man isn't obliged to criminate himself." A minute afterwards, however, he laid his hand on Curzon's arm. "Now look here, Henry, just explain this; it's your best way. You know I don't *want* to believe this story on Mary's account. Do, for God's sake, tell me *something* that a rational man can *pretend* to believe, and *I'll believe it!*"

Curzon made no response to this generous proposition; but, with a look of indignation, and a declaration that he would trust to his own conscious innocence, Jasper shrugged his shoulders, and said no more. The result of the Chicago expedition was, that they returned to Boston very much out of humor with each other. Here they found that Mrs. Curzon was informed of the

charge against her husband. It would have been natural to suppose that a woman already inclined to jealously would have seized upon this occasion eagerly. Curzon had anticipated it confidently. But Mrs. Curzon took a very different course. She utterly refused to believe the story; refused with even scorn and contempt. She attempted no explanation, advanced no theory, set up no defence. She only was firm in the faith that Henry could do no wrong. Mahomet said that his wife's blind faith in his divine mission greatly confirmed and comforted him in it, and Curzon doubtless felt the same degree of comfort from *his* wife's belief in him. He rewarded it by manifesting more warmth of affection towards her than he had ever before, even in the days of their engagement and wedding.

"My wife does not doubt me," he said to Jasper, afterwards, "and she ought to know me best."

The wrinkles around Jasper's eyes twitched skeptically.

"Yes, yes," he said; "it takes a woman to believe through thick and thin. It's a pity they are just as apt to believe a lie as the truth. I think I would rather Mary should come home, until it is a little clearer that she is your wife."

After Mr. Dedbroke had issued this decree, an inconvenience struck him. The rival wives could hardly be asked or expected to live together under the same roof, and yet he wished to keep Mary Woodfall under his own eye, for obvious reasons. It was at this time that he resolved to visit his property at Swinebourne. He believed the house to be uninhabitable, and, on inquiring, found that it was nevertheless inhabited; so he engaged another as before stated, and went out to it, taking Mary Woodfall with him to keep house, and leaving his daughter with her mother and Miss Onslow.

The first day after his arrival Jasper personally inspected his real estate, and received as little satisfaction as any one else. Learning, however, that any movement on the part of the inmates was generally at night, he made a second visit in the twilight. On his way he met Dannie Marston, who saluted him with a forgiving forgetfulness of their little difference about the old house.

"Come to look after the old place, be you?" said Dannie. "You've got some one living here, haint you?"

"I hear so," said Jasper.

"You don't mean to say you didn't let it to nobody?" said Dannie.

"Why no, Dannie," said Jasper, laughing. "I didn't know but *you* had let it."

Dannie laughed, too, and then resumed:

"So he jest moved in, did he?"

"I suppose, so," said Jasper. "What does he do there?"

“Nothin’ that folks can see,” said Dannie; “but I’m afraid there’s suthin that aint legle a goin’ on there. Don’t you think the seelectmen had orter break into the house?”

“I *hardly* think,” said Jasper, “that anybody would come to the neighborhood of Swinebourne to carry on any illegal operations, especially when he commenced in a way that was pretty sure to draw the attention of the neighbors. Why, you alone, Dannie, are worth the whole detective force.”

“Wall, I don’t know abaout that,” said Dannie. “Ye see, it’s a dreffle lonesome kind of place, and folks don’t like to go very nigh it any more, and there might just as well as not be counterfittin’ greenbacks or distillin’ licker goin’ on as not.”

“They couldn’t make much rum without your smelling it, Dannie,” said Jasper. “And if they do, I guess they could find a market for all they make without going further than your house.”

Dannie laughed again at this piece of raillery, and Jasper moved away.

“You aint goin’ up there now, are you?” said Dannie. “It aint reckoned safe.”

Mr. [Dedbroke] disregarded the warning, and walked towards the old house. Dannie followed at a discreet distance. When Jasper reached the hillside that sheltered the house from wind and observation, he stopped and looked at it by the last light of day. It certainly did not seem a likely place for any one to have selected for an abode, with any view to comfort. The frame of the house seemed to stand firmly enough, but all the lighter lumber in its construction appeared on the point of dropping off. The shingles were curled up, and the gutters waved with a luxuriant growth of grass, and weeds, and infant elms—the progeny of the great elm that hung over the house. The only view from the house was a distant sea view, and nearer by a glimpse of a bend in the river. Jasper looked at it for some time. By all precedents he should have been recalling the days of his childhood, but whether he was or not I am unable to say. After a time he resumed his walk, and reaching the front door, knocked at it long and loud without eliciting any response. He tried the back door with the same success, and then, after a little delay, walked back towards Dannie Marston’s place, and met Dannie before he had gone very far.

“Dannie,” he said, “why can’t you step over to your house and fetch me an axe?”

“An axe!” said Dannie. “What for?”

“To knock at the door with,” said Jasper.

“Good Lord, Dedbroke!” said Dannie; “don’t you be too ventersome. You don’t know what sorter men there may be in there.”

“No I don’t,” said Jasper; “but I mean to know. Get me an axe.”

Dannie went for the axe, and, armed with this, Jasper went again to the front door, Dannie

keeping in the background, and watching in expectation of some startling consequence to ensue from the first blow upon the door. He was not disappointed, for the head flew off the axe, Jasper striking with great vigor, and Dannie's tools never being in first rate order. Jasper uttered an exclamation very unbecoming a respectable elderly member of society, which was echoed by a yell of derisive applause from an upper window. Looking up, Jasper saw a head and body leaning from the window, though it had grown too dark to distinguish anything further.

"Try again, try again!" said a clear, sharp, ringing and decidedly insolent voice. Then, after a pause, it added, "It's old Dedbroke himself, I believe!"

"What right have you in this house?" asked Jasper, with a force and acerbity that still remained from that which he had thrown into his stroke on the door.

"The right of possession for one," said the tenant. "What right have you to batter the door in that Vandalistic way?"

"The right of ownership," said Jasper.

"Ah!" said the stranger, laughing. "That's a devilish uncertain right sometimes. Possession is worth ownership nine times over when possessor has the money and the owner hasn't; and no one knows that better than you, Jap Dedbroke!"

Jasper wasted a wrathful look on the darkness at the audacious person who not only invaded his property, but took liberties with his "given name," and said, authoritatively:

"I want you to leave this house to-morrow morning, or I will have you turned out."

"You can't do it," said the stranger—"you can't do it, sir. The house isn't yours."

"Whose is it, then?"

"Mine," said the stranger, coolly—"mine. Have a cigar? This lot is a very good one. I imported them myself, along with some of the best brandy *you* ever tasted, and I suppose you've tasted some that was pretty good. Never paid a cent's duty on 'em, either. This is a bully place—this bit of coast—for running in dutiable articles unbeknown to the inspectors."

"You impudent scoundrel!" said Jasper. "If you do such things you had better keep them to yourself."

"*Who swore to a false invoice?*" asked the stranger. "To be sure you had better keep *such* things to yourself if you can. You are a pretty good hand at keeping things to yourself, but you don't always do it."

"What is to prevent my having you arrested?" demanded Jasper.

"That good sense with which Heaven has blessed you, Mr. Dedbroke. There isn't anything

contraband in the house now, and for all you know I was only *blowing* when I talked about smuggling.”

“Look here, sir,” said Jasper, peremptorily; “you leave this house to-morrow. To-morrow—do you understand?”

“Come down to-morrow at this same time and see if I’ve gone,” said the stranger. “I give you my word the doors will open. I’ll either convince you of my right to stay, or else I’ll go. But don’t do anything before then, if you’re wise. You know there are some things in your family as much to be kept quiet as smuggling.”

And the stranger retired from the window.

Jasper Dedbroke acted upon the advice he had received, though without admitting to himself that he acted on anything but his own conscience. He returned to the old house on the following evening. As he came near, to his astonishment, he saw Henry Curzon a few steps before him.

“Curzon!” he called; “what brings you here?”

Curzon made no answer, but hastened towards the old house, where he disappeared. Jasper followed. As he came nearer the house, he heard a sound of unrestrained hilarity from within. As he stood by the door, a wild chant fell upon his ear. The air was the Soldier’s Chorus from Faust, and the words embodied a sound and resolute temperance spirit, rather at variance with the exceedingly bacchanalian manner in which it was rendered.

When the songsters, who evidently stood in need of such a wholesome resolution, had ceased to express their intention never to get drunk any more, Jasper took advantage of the lull to knock at the door. After a short delay, the nearest window was opened. The room within was dark, and the festivities seemed to be proceeding in the kitchen, which was the largest room in the house.

“Good-evening,” said the same voice that had conversed with Jasper before. “Will you come in? I have a few friends taking tea with me to-night.”

“Didn’t I see Mr. Curzon go in here just now?” asked Jasper.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” said the stranger, carelessly. “Do you want to see him?”

“Yes,” said Jasper.

“Well, I don’t believe he wants to see you,” said the stranger.

“What is his business here?”

“Ah, that’s his business,” said the stranger. “I suppose you can come in if you want to see him very much.”



“I do,” said Jasper.

The stranger disappeared from the window. The door was unlocked and unbarred, and Jasper hastily crossed the threshold and stood in the small square entry. There was no light but that which the rising moon began to make.

“Steady,” said the stranger, as Jasper stumbled on the uneven floor. “Come up stairs; your man is there.”

Jasper obeyed the guidance of the stranger, and went up the stairs. At the head was a half-open door, and by the light within Jasper saw that the room had been rather scantily furnished as a bedroom.

“He isn’t there now,” said the stranger, as Jasper entered, “but he will be here in a minute.”

And before Jasper could speak, the door was drawn shut behind him, and bolted on the outside. At the sound, Jasper felt that he had been rather imprudent to venture into a house of whose occupants he knew no good. But he was not of a timorous nature, and Curzon’s presence in the house reassured him as to everything but his son-in-law’s character. He looked round. His eye fell on several papers lying on the table, and conspicuously docketed, as copies of the last will and testament of Jasper Dedbroke (his father); the deeds to Jasper Dedbroke (himself) of the real estate of his brother George, which Jasper had bought at sheriff’s sale; and inventory of the said real estate, and an opinion of an eminent lawyer—the opinion being that the sale was illegal, as George Dedbroke (who was out of the State for some time before the sale, and had never come back again) had never had a writ served upon him, and had had no notice of the sale. None of these papers were new to Jasper, and yet he sat down and read them all over with a very attentive countenance, especially one line written at the end of the inventory:

“All of which now belongs to Mary Dedbroke, only child of the late George Dedbroke.”

Judging from the expression of Jasper’s countenance, he hardly entered into the spirit of the chorus that was then loosening a few more bricks in the shaky chimneys, and a few more shingles in the roof.

“We always are so jolly.”

Jasper knew there was a flaw in his title, in a legal point of view, but he did not acknowledge it in a moral point of view, because his brother George had owed him money. He had also intended to reconcile all discrepancies by making over the old place to his niece, seeing that it was of no possible use to himself; but he had by no means intended to add those more valuable pieces of real estate in more flourishing districts than Swinebourne, which were included in the inventory, and which he held by the same doubtful title, though no more had yet discovered it. If these were given up to Mary, his fortune would be cut down by something between eighty and a hundred thousand dollars, which would go to make the poor relation an heiress in her own right. Who had been hunting up Mary’s rights? Curzon? Curzon could not claim the property without, as a preliminary, confessing to bigamy. Was he going to silence Mary by pointing out to her rights

which she had never dreamed, and assisting her in setting up her claims?

“Slap, bang! Set ‘em up again,” sang the chorus.

Jasper grew impatient. He tried first to get out of the room, and then to bring some one into it. Failing in both attempts, he went to the window and opened it. The first sight he saw in the clear moonlight was Dannie Marston, his body bent forward at its usual angle, and his whole attention fixed upon the house. The next thing he saw was a light carryall belonging to his own establishment driving up to the house. It stopped under the great elm, and he heard his niece’s voice say:

“Uncle Jasper cannot be here. Hear what a noise there is!”

“Mary,” said Jasper from above, “is that you?”

“O, You *are* here, uncle!” said Mary. “A boy brought a note to me a little while ago, saying you were here, and wanted me to come for you with the carryall.”

“A note from *me*?” said Jasper.

“Yes,” said Mary.

Jasper had no time to say that he never wrote such a note, when Henry Curzon came out of the house, and offered to assist Mary to alight from the carryall. Mary hesitated.

“Shall I come?” she said to her uncle.

“Yes,” said Jasper. “Let us get to the bottom of this confounded rascality.”

Mary hesitated, and said she was afraid to go in.

“Do not be afraid,” said Curzon, gravely. “You will not see any one but your uncle.”

Mary entered the house, and in a few moments the room was opened, and she appeared with Curzon. A moment’s glance led Jasper to the belief that his usually correct son-in-law had been with the convivial party below, and was a little under the influence of stimulating beverage. He handed Mary into the room, saying:

“The lady of the house, Mr. Dedbroke.” Then, turning to Mary, he said: “Look at me, Mrs. Woodfall. Do you say *yet* that I am Fletcher Woodall?”

Mary looked, and answered, firmly and decidedly:

“Yes.”

“And who do *you* say I am, Mr. Dedbroke?” said Curzon, with a mixture of his customary

dignity and a kind of defiance.

“That confounded scoundrel, Henry Curzon!” said Jasper, energetically.

Curzon stepped back out of sight an instant, spoke to some one without, and then returned, saying:

“And who do you say *this* is?”

Jasper stared in stupid wonder at the apparition of *two* Henry Curzons in the doorway, matched point for point in dress and appearance. Mary Woodfall clasped her hands, and looked from one to the other. But both Jasper and Mary were spared further perplexity, by the one bursting out into a laugh, while the other advanced into the room, saying to Jasper:

“You see now where the trouble arose, I presume.”

Jasper did not answer, for he was thoroughly confused for the moment. The second Curzon threw off his assumption of Curzon’s voice and manner which had completed the puzzle, came forward also, but now his voice was recognized by Jasper as that which had discoursed with him so freely from the window.

“I am Fletcher Woodfall,” he said. “I am very sorry to have given Mr. Curzon any trouble by looking so much like him, but it wasn’t my fault; I was born so. That is singular enough, seeing that he was the son of a respectable man, and I—well, I *wasn’t*, and that is all that need be said on *that* head. I’ve always had to live by my wits, and luckily I had a pretty good capital that way. It was some years ago that I first began to hear it remarked how much I looked like Henry Curzon. *He* never heard how much he looked like Fletcher Woodfall, because he hadn’t any knowledge of that class of the community. It would have been strange if I hadn’t began to think how I could turn the likeness to my own advantage; and so I used to take observations of him, and put on all his peculiarities. I have a decided talent for implication, and my impersonations of Henry Curzon were admitted, by men who had an opportunity of seeing a good deal of him, to be a triumph of artistic truth to nature. The fun alone was worth considerable. Well, I followed him out to Chicago. I had informed myself about the Dedbroke family, and knew there was a branch of it in Bellfield, and I went there to see if there was anything there that would work up well. When I found that the family consisted only of one pretty girl, I did not exactly see how that could be turned to advantage, until it struck me that this Mary Dedbroke might be presented at some time as the Mary Dedborke who was to marry Henry Curzon. That fell in with my own views, for I had rather fallen in love, and so I married her. I played Henry Curzon in Bellfield, even to Mary. I can’t say I made love in *his* style—I think likely *not*; but then, as she never saw him do it, she couldn’t know the difference. Well, I married her, as I said. I did not mean to run away from her as I did (I didn’t, Mollie,” he said, in a parenthesis, turning to Mary), “but circumstances over which I had no control forced me to leave those parts in a hurry, and saved Mr. Curzon some money, I rather expect. It was all for the best, however; for I dare say I should have come to open grief and shame if I had carried out my views—only when I bethink me of a scheme, it almost breaks my heart not to put it into operation. I wrote to Mary once or twice after I left, but after that I thought it safest not to do it, and I always meant to go back sometime. I

came back to Boston not very long ago, and I was in a little importing business then, like my connections Dedbroke & Curzon. As I went to almost every place along the coast, I soon came across this old rat's nest, and heard about the defect in title, and all the rest. I took possession with small ceremony, with some idea of coming down as Mr. Curzon, and giving myself permission. I abandoned that idea, because I have a legal friend—not *very* high in his profession, but very good authority on a great many points, and personally acquainted with your family—I shan't tell his name. Well, sir, my legal friend, who loves everything that infringes the law, especially contraband spirits, came down here to see me, and brought me all the news, and among others news that made me open my eyes. That was that this place and other property *ought* to belong to Mary Dedbroke. He told me, too, that she was living with her Uncle Jasper, and that there was some commotion in the Curzon-Dedbroke connection. I began to guess what, and it made me laugh to think that I had made a scene that I didn't calculate on exactly. I only wished I could see something of the fun. I set my learned counsel to look up the whole case, and by vigorously keeping him from whiskey, I got him to nose it all out. I heard you were coming here, and determined to make my claim. I would have had it quieter here, only I had invited my friends a week ago, and Mr. Dedbroke happened to come the day before. After I had made an appointment with him I wrote to Mr. Curzon, and promised him relief if he would come here. That wasn't him you spoke to outside, Mr. Dedbroke; that was me. I came out on purpose to see if you would make the mistake. Mr. Curzon only came just before Mary did. I didn't explain anything to him. I wrote to Mary in your name, too. Imitative chirography is a gift of mine, too, as you can see by my letters to Mary. Mr. Curzon may thank his stars that I didn't take more freedom with his property. Now I believe I have told the whole story; and you see I was right in saying this is *my* house, Mr. Dedbroke, don't you?"

Mr. Dedbroke did not seem very eager to own it.

"And so," he said, "you, sir, who own yourself a swindler and forger, have the face to speak of calling everybody's attention towards you, by laying such a claim."

"You are half right. I don't own myself a swindler and forger. I don't understand that imitating handwriting is a crime unless you get money by it. I have admitted that I had some nefarious designs—but I am glad they never got beyond designs. I've made Mr. Curzon a good deal of trouble, but I haven't cheated him. But I *do* mean to lay the claim, and shall take the first steps to-morrow. Mollie, you aren't afraid to sue your Uncle Jasper, are you?"

Mary Woodfall had been standing silently by during this scene. Her first defined emotion had been one of positive shame at having made an error in the identity of her husband. After a few moments she excused herself, for even now, when Woodfall was using his natural voice and manner, the resemblance was very striking. She did not answer her husband, but glanced towards her uncle. Curzon went up to Jasper, and spoke to him in a low voice, saying that it seemed to him useless to contest Mary's claim, and that he would assist in any settlement to the full extent of his means. Jasper seemed to acquiesce, and Curzon turned to Mary, and said, in a much more unassuming and good-natured manner than was usual to him, that he had been very unkind and unjust to her, and hoped she would forget it. Mary blushed very red, and answered:

"I don't blame you much—I don't know what you must have thought. If I had only kept quiet

until I had seen you once or twice, I think I should have known it wasn't Fletcher."

"Never mind," said Fletcher Woodfall; "after all, you did not have much chance to know how *I* looked—I acted Curzon almost all the time. And now, Mollie, which will you do—stay with me, or go back to your uncle?"

Mary did not answer. She did not want to leave her uncle so suddenly, and under such circumstances, and she did not want to refuse her husband. Her conscience smote her for her secret willingness to place herself at once in the care of a man whose character stood condemned from his own lips, of such exceeding laxity of principle, to say the least.

"What shall I do, Uncle Jasper?" she asked.

"Do as you please," said Jasper, morosely.

Mr. Curzon proposed a compromise. His life-long habits of dictation could not be overcome, though he seemed to exhibit them more mildly.

"Without questioning Mr. Woodfall's rights," he said, "this isn't exactly a fit place to receive a lady, and I think he had best let you return with your uncle, and take his future steps in an open and respectable manner."

"Yes," said Jasper, "that would be the most sensible plan. Mr. Woodfall, if the law does not place any obstacles in your way, I shall not. Admitting Mary's claims does not admit yours. You may have a dozen wives."

"No," said Woodfall; "I am safe there, and I don't object to her going back with you, only I must see her alone first."

This could not well be refused, and Jasper, with his son-in-law, went down stairs, and waited at the door for Mary.

"Henry," said Jasper, abruptly, "what made you act so like an ass in Chicago?"

Mr. Curzon did not resent this aspersion on his wisdom, but still seemed somewhat embarrassed, and at last said:

"Because I had made myself ridiculous, and was ashamed to have it known."

"Was it anything worse than bigamy?"

"No," said Curzon; "but I had *not* committed bigamy, and felt sure it would not be thought so very long, and I *had* done this—"

And Curzon rather hesitatingly explained that just before he had intended to leave Chicago he had accepted an invitation from an acquaintance to supper, and according to his belief the first

glass of wine he drank had been kindly prepared by some one to make it take a very sudden effect upon his brains—a result that would not have been attainable by any regular means, because Curzon, though not a practiser of total abstinence, was rigidly temperate, and never exceeded a certain allowance. In consequence of this pleasant practical joke, Curzon had a very dim remembrance of what happened afterwards, except that he had engaged in a violent political argument with a gentleman from Alabama, which had terminated in a personal encounter; and the next morning Curzon found his face looking as if he had been in a prize fight, and got the worst of it. Being very much ashamed of having departed so much from his usual habits, and also of the looks of his face, he had remained in strict retirement until he had recovered from the effects of his political discussion, and more particularly until his eyes and nose had completely returned to their natural appearance, and he had had his front teeth replaced. Jasper could not help laughing at the thought of Curzon in such a condition, but asked why he had not told him the truth. Curzon repeated his former reason, and added:

“As you had already some doubts as to my character, I did not think it would mend matters much for me to have owned to having drank too much, and got into a fight.”

“No,” said Jasper; “perhaps not.”

They said no more, for they were joined at the moment by Fletcher Woodfall and Mary. Fletcher Woodfall was rather more quiet in his manner, and as to Mary, she had evidently been crying.

“Well,” said Woodfall, “Mary will go with you. I am really sorry I have made you all so much trouble. Good-night.”

Jasper, with his son-in-law and niece, returned home, and Fletcher Woodfall went back to his friends.

Mary Woodfall and her inheritance both were finally transferred to the eccentric Fletcher. It did not appear that Woodfall had ever actually brought himself into contact with any laws but revenue-laws, whatever he may have contemplated. Mary was solemnly warned by her relations of the danger of trusting Woodfall, but of course with very little effect. Jasper did not allow her claim to come to a lawsuit, but settled it quietly. Mr. Woodfall went to France for a couple of years; and when he came back he altered and modernized the old Dedbroke House, and devoted himself to fancy farming with such success that he became an agricultural beacon, and had the most distinguished Jersey bull in the world. No poetical justice ever overtook him, except that he was obliged to submit himself to his wife, whose unremitting exertions made something like a man of him.

Henry Curzon and his wife agreed better than they ever had before, Henry’s heart having been softened by her belief in him. Curzon, altogether, was less dogmatic, afterwards, for some reason—either because Woodfall’s resemblance to him lessened his self-esteem, or because he had found his good character assailable.

*The Flag of our Union*, May 2, 1868