



THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

By Booth Tarkington

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CHAPTER XI.

IF it were possible I would not speak of the agony of which I was a witness that night in the apartment of my friends at Mme. Brossard's. I went with reluctance, but there was no choice. Keredec had sent for me.

Keredec had told his tragic ward too little. The latter had understood but vaguely the nature of the catastrophe which overhung his return to France, and now that it was indeed concrete and definite the guardian was forced into fuller disclosures, every word making the anguish of the listener more intolerable. To him it seemed that he was being forced to suffer for the sins of another man.

"Do you think that you can make me believe I did this," he cried—"that I made life unbearable for her, drove her from me and took this hideous, painted old woman in her place? It's a lie! You can't make me believe such a monstrous lie as that! You can't! You can't!"

He threw himself violently upon the couch, face downward, shuddering from head to foot.

"My poor boy, it is the truth," said Keredec, kneeling beside him and putting a great arm across his shoulders. "It is what a thousand men are doing this night. Nothing is more common or more unexplainable—or more simple. Of all the nations it is the same, wherever life has become artificial and the poor foolish young men have too much money and nothing to do. You do not understand it, but our friend here, and I, we understand because, we remember what we have been seeing all our lives. You say it is not you who did such crazy, horrible things, and you are right. When this poor woman who is so painted and greasy first caught you, when you began to give your money and your time and your life to her, when she got you into this horrible marriage with her, you were blind—you went staggering in a bad dream. Your soul hid away, far down inside you, with its hands over its face. If it could have once stood straight, if the eyes of your body could have once been clear for it to look through, if you could have once been as you are today or as you were when you were a little child, you would have cry out with horror both of her and of yourself, as you do now, and you would have run away from her and from everything you had put in your life. But in your suffering you must rejoice. The triumph is that your mind hates that old life as greatly as your soul hates it. You are as good as if you had never been the wild fellow—yes, the wicked fellow—that you were. For a man who shakes off his sin is clean. He stands as pure as if he had never sinned."

The desperate young man on the couch answered only with the sobbing of a broken hearted child.

I came back to my pavilion after midnight, but I did not sleep, though I lay upon my bed until dawn. Then I went for a long, hard walk, breakfast at Dives and begged a ride back to Mme. Brossard's in a peasant's cart which was going that way.

I found George Ward waiting for me on the little veranda of the pavilion, looking handsomer and more prosperously distinguished and distinguishedly prosperous and generally well conditioned than ever, as I told him.

"I have some news for you," he said after the hearty greeting—"an announcement, in fact. Elizabeth's going to marry Cresson Ingie."

"That is the news—the announcement—you spoke of?"

"Yes, that is it."

To save my life I could not have told at that moment what else I had expected or feared that he might say, but I certainly took a deep breath of relief. "I am very glad," I said. "It should be a happy alliance."

"On the whole, I think it will be," he returned thoughtfully. "Ingie's done his share of hard living, and I once had a notion—he glanced smilingly at me—"well, I dare say you know my notion. But it is a good match for Elizabeth and not without advantages on many counts. You see, it's true I married myself. She feels that very strongly, and I think her decision to accept Ingie is partly due to her wish to make all clear for a new mistress of my household."

He laughed again, but I did not, and, noting my silence, he turned upon me a more scrutinizing look than he had yet given me and said:

"You look quite haggard. You haven't been ill?"

"No, I've had a bad night. That's all."

"Oh, I heard something of a riotous scene taking place over here," he said. "One of the gardeners was talking about it to Elizabeth."

"What was it you heard?" I asked quickly.

"Not last night, I'm certain. But what difference could it possibly make whether she heard it or not? She doesn't know these people surely?"

"She knows the man."

"The insane?"

"He is not insane," I interrupted. "He has lost the memory of his earlier life—lost it through an accident. You and I saw the accident."

"That's impossible," said George, frowning. "I never saw but one accident that you—"

"That was the one. The man is Larabee Harman."

George had struck a match to light a cigar, but the operation remained incomplete. He dropped the match upon the floor and set his foot upon it.

"Well, tell me about it," he said.

"You haven't heard anything about him since the accident?"

"Only that he did eventually recover and was taken away from the hospital. I heard that his mind was impaired. Does Louise—"

"Does Louise?" he began, stopped and cleared his throat. "Has Mrs. Harman heard that he is here?"

"Yes, she has seen him."

"Do you mean the second he has been bothering her? Elizabeth didn't tell me of this."

"Your sister doesn't know," I said. "I think you ought to understand the whole case."

"Go ahead," he bade me.

"It's not at all what you think," I said. "There's an enormous difference, almost impossible to explain to you, but something you'd understand at once if you saw him."

"What is the change?" asked Ward, and his voice showed that he was greatly disquieted. "What is he like?"

"As well as I can tell you, he's like an odd but very engaging boy, with something pathetic about him; quite splendidly handsome."

"Oh, he had good looks to spare when I first knew him," George said bitterly.

"No. When he came here he did not know of her existence except in the vaguest way. But, to go back to that, I'd better tell you first that the woman we saw with him one day on the boulevard and who was in the accident with him—"

"La Mursiana, the dancer; I know." "She had got him to go through a marriage with her."

"What?" Ward's eyes flashed as he shouted the word.

"It seems inexplicable; but, as I understand it, he was never quite sober at that time. He had begun to use drugs and was often in a half-stupefied condition. As a matter of fact, the woman did what she pleased with him. There's no doubt about the validity of the marriage."

George asked suddenly, "Did this marriage take place in France?"

"Yes, you'd better hear me through," I remonstrated. "When he was taken from the hospital he was placed in charge of a Professor Keredec, a madman of whom you've probably heard."

"Madman? Why, no; he's a member of the institute, a psychologist or metaphysician, isn't he? At any rate, of considerable celebrity."

"Nevertheless," I insisted grimly, "as misty a vapor as I ever saw; a poetic, self-contradicting and inconsistent orator. Harman's aunt put him in Keredec's charge, and he was taken up into the Tyrol and virtually hidden for two years, the idea being literally to give him something like an education. Keredec's phrase is, 'restore mind to his soul.' It was as vital to get him out of his horrible wife's clutches. But she picked up that rat in the garden out yonder—he'd been some sort of stable manager for Harman once—and set him on the track."

"She wants money, of course."

"Yes; more money. A fair allowance has always been sent to her. Keredec has interviewed her notary, and she wants a settlement, naming a sum actually larger than the whole estate amounts to. She refuses to budge until this impossible settlement is made. In the meantime Keredec's ward is in so dreadful a state of horror and grief I am afraid it is possible that his mind may really give way."

"When was it that Louise saw him?"

"Ah, that," I said, "is where Keredec has been a poet and a dreamer indeed. It was his plan that they should meet."

"You mean he brought this wreck of Harman, these husks and shreds of a man, down here for Louise to see?"

Ward cried incredulously, "Oh, monstrous!"

"There is something behind all this that you don't know," he said slowly. "When did Keredec make you his confidant?"

"Last night. Most of what I learned was as much a revelation to his victim as it was to me. Harman did not know till then that the lady he had been meeting had been his wife or that he had ever seen her before he came here. He had mistaken her name, and she did not enlighten him."

"Meeting?" said Ward harshly. "They have been meeting every day, George."

"I won't believe it."

"It's true. He spoke to her in the woods one day; I was there and saw it. I know now that she knew him at once, and she ran away, but not in anger. They've been together every day since then, and I'm afraid—miserably afraid, Ward—that her old feeling for him has been revived."

I have heard Ward use an oath only two or three times in my life, and this was one of them.

"Oh, by —," he cried, starting to his feet. "I should like to meet Professor Keredec."

"I am at your service, my dear sir," said a deep voice from the veranda. And, opening the door, the professor walked into the room.

(To be continued.)

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Commander Peary was notified immediately of the action.

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