



THE GUEST OF QUESNAY

By Booth Tarkington

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CHAPTER XII

I SAID involuntarily: "This is Mr. Ward, Professor Kerdec. He is Mrs. Harman's cousin and close friend. We were speaking of your reasons for bringing Mr. Harman to this place. Frankly, we were questioning your motives."

"My motives? I have wished to restore to two young people the paradise which they had lost."

Ward uttered an exclamation none the less violent because it was half suppressed.

"We should be glad of an explanation," he said, resting his arms on my table and leaning across it toward Kerdec.

"It is simple," began the professor. "I learned my poor boy's history well from those who could tell me, from his papers—yes, and from the bundles of old time letters which were given me. From all these I learned what a beautiful soul was that lady who loved him so much that she ran away from her home for his sake. Helas! He was already the slave of what was bad and foolish; he had gone too far from himself, was overlaid with the habit of evil, and she could not save him then. The spirit was dying in him, although it was there, and it was good."

Ward's acid laughter rang out in the room.

"The inconceivable selfishness, the devilish brutality of it!" Ward's face was scarlet. "You didn't care how you sacrificed her?"

"Sacrificed?" The professor suddenly released the huge volume of his voice. "Sacrificed!" he thundered. "If I could give him back to her as he is now it would be restoring to her all that she had loved in him, the real self of him! It would be the greatest gift in her life."

"Then, my dear Kerdec," I answered, "either you are really insane or I am! You knew that this poor, unfortunate devil of a Harman was tied to that hyenic prowler yonder who means to fatten on him and will never release him; you knew that. Then why did you bring him down here to fall in love with a woman he can never have?"

"My dear fellow," interposed George quickly, "you underrate Professor Kerdec's shrewdness. He knows that my cousin Louise never obtained a divorce from her husband."

"What?" I said, amazed.

"I say Mrs. Harman never obtained a divorce."

"I saw notices of it at the time," I gasped.

"No. What you saw was that she had made an application for divorce. Her family got her that far and then she revolted. The suit was dropped."

"It is true, indeed," said Kerdec. "The poor boy was on the other side of the world, and he thought it was granted."

I turned upon him sharply. "You knew it?"

"It is a year that I have known it." "Do you not understand," George interposed, "that what Professor Kerdec risked for his 'poor boy' in returning to France was a trial on the charge of bigamy?"

The professor recoiled from the definite brutality.

"I conceive it very likely to happen," said George, "unless you get him out of the country before the lady now installed here as his wife discovers the truth."

"But she must not!" Kerdec lifted both hands toward Ward appealingly. "They trembled. 'She cannot! There is nothing that could make her suspect it!'"

"One particular thing would be my telling her," said Ward quietly.

"Never!" cried the professor. "You would not do that!"

"I will, unless you get him out of the country, and quickly."

"George!" I exclaimed, coming forward between them. "This won't do at all! You can't!"

"That's enough," he said, waving me back, and I saw that his hand was shaking, too, like Kerdec's. His face had grown very white. "I know what you think," he went on, addressing me, "but you're wrong. It isn't for myself. When I sailed for New York I thought there was a chance that she would carry out the action she began four years ago and rid herself of him definitely—that is, I thought until today there was some hope for me. If she's seen him again and he's been anything except literally unbearable it's all over with me. From the first I never had a chance against him. He was a hard rival, even when he'd become only a cruel memory." His voice rose. "Heaven knows why it is, it isn't because of anything he's done or has—it's just because it's him. I suppose—but I know my chance is gone for good. That leaves me free to act for her. No one can accuse me of doing it for myself. And I swear she shall go through that night of despair again while I have breath in my body!"

"George, for pity's sake!" I shouted, throwing my arm about his shoulders, for his voice had risen to a pitch of excitement and fury that I feared must bring the white place upon us. Some one was already knocking for

admission.

I crossed the room and opened the door. Miss Elizabeth stood there, red faced and flustered, and behind her stood Mr. Cresson Ingle, who looked dubiously amused.

Miss Elizabeth cut short a rather embarrassed handshake which her betrothed and I exchanged.

"This morning I learned the true situation over here, and I'm afraid Louise has heard. At least she's not at Quesnay. I got into a panic for fear she had come here; but, thank heaven, she does not seem to— Good gracious! What's that?"

It was the discordant voice of Mariana in Mrs. Harman's room. My door was still open. I turned to look and saw her, hot faced, tousle haired, insufficiently wrapped, striving to ascend the gallery steps, but valiantly opposed by Mme. Brossard.

"But no, madame," insisted Mme. Brossard. "You cannot ascend. There is nothing on the upper floor except the apartment of Professor Kerdec."

"Name of a dog!" shrieked the other.



"Sacrificed!" he thundered.

"It is my husband's apartment, I tell you. Il y a une femme avec lui!"

"It is Mme. Harman who is there," said Kerdec hoarsely in my ear. "I came away and left them together."

"Come," I said, and, letting the others think what they would, sprang across the veranda, the professor beside me, and ran toward the two women, who were beginning to struggle with more than their tongues. I leaped by them and up the steps, but Kerdec thrust himself between our hostess and her opponent, planting his great bulk on the lowest step. Glancing hurriedly over my shoulder, I saw the Spanish woman strike him furiously upon the breast with both hands, but I knew she would never pass him. I entered the salon of the "grande suite" and closed the door quickly behind me.

Louise Harman was standing at the other end of the room. Her husband was kneeling beside her. He held one of her hands in both of his. Her other rested upon his head, and something in their attitudes made me know I had come in upon their leave taking. But from the face he lifted toward her all



"He shall pay bitterly!"

trace of his tragedy had passed. The wonder and worship written there left no room for anything else.

"Mrs. Harman," I began.

"Yes?" she said. "I am coming."

"But I don't want you to. I've come for fear you would, and you— you must not," I stammered. "You must wait. There is a scene."

"I know," she said quietly. "That must be, of course."

Harman rose, and she took both his hands, holding them against her breast. "My dear," she said gently, "my dearest, you must stay. Will you promise not to pass that door even until you have word from me again?"

"Yes," he answered huskily. "If you'll promise it shall come—some day."

"It shall. Be sure of it."

She stepped out upon the gallery. I followed. Mme. Brossard and Kerdec still held the foot of the steps, but in Mrs. Harman had abandoned the siege and, accompanied by Mr. Percy and Rameau, the black bearded notary, who had joined her, was crossing the garden toward her own apartment. She glanced over her shoulder, sent forth a scream and, whirling about, ran violently for the steps, where she was again blocked by the indomitable Kerdec.

"Ah, you foolish woman, I know who you are!" she cried. "You want to get yourself into trouble! That man in the room up there has been my husband these two years and more."

"No, madame," said Louise Harman, "you are mistaken; he is my husband."

"But you divorced him," vociferated the other wildly. "You divorced him in America?"

"No; you are mistaken," the quiet voice replied. "The suit was withdrawn. He is still my husband."

I heard the professor's groan of despair, but it was drowned in the wild shriek of Mariana. "What? You tell me that? Ah, the miserable! If what you say is true he shall pay bitterly! He shall wish that he had died by fire! What? You think he can marry me, break my leg so that I cannot dance again, ruin my career and then go away with a pretty woman like you and be happy? Ah, there are prisons in France for people who marry two like that! He shall pay for it in suffering"—her voice rose to an incredible and unbearable shriek—"and you, you shall pay too! You can't come stealing honest women's husbands like that. You shall pay!"

(To be continued.)

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