

VOLUME III

CHAPTER 9

“Nichts in der Welt will rückwärts gehen,’ sagte mir ein alter Eidechs. ‘Alles strebt vorwärts, und am Ende wird ein grosses Naturavancement statt finden.’”

—*Heine, ‘Reisebilder.’*

BETWEEN three and four, one scorching afternoon in the last week of June, Hogan, walking at a rate that seemed almost suicidal in such weather, turned the corner of Cole Alley, and abruptly plunged into the office of his friends Stier and Bruen. There was a cane chair unoccupied in the window, which had been left open to admit such air as might be going; and Hogan threw himself upon it. Mr. Stier, who was standing with his back to the chimney-piece, his hands stuffed far down in his pockets, turned half round and just looked at the new comer. The worthy Hamburger’s face expressed the most intense perplexity; his spectacles were pushed up high off his forehead, and the white-eyelashed eyes blinked in bewilderment.

“Well, Mr. Hogan, you have no news, I see. Ah!”

“None. Lord Brayhead believed Mr. Saltasche in Dublin. I have seen his friend Mrs. Bursford, too. They know nothing. His sister is the only person who could tell us, I daresay.”

“Ah! His clerk knows nothing—not even where to forward letters or telegrams. Bruen! Bruen! I say.”

Mr. Bruen murmured something, and finished directing a letter which he was engaged on. That done, he left his desk, and advanced to the front of the office.

“Bruen,” said the senior partner, “it is likely that Miss Saltasche could tell us something.”

“It would be well,” said Hogan, “for some one to see Miss Saltasche. A personal interview would be advisable, would it not? You must settle, too, about the City article in the *Beacon*. It was very lame yesterday and the day before.”

This was accompanied by a look which evidently conveyed some suggestion to the gentleman to whom it was addressed. The partners nodded to each other, and Mr. Stier replaced his spectacles upon his nose.

“Will you go over to-night?” asked Mr. Bruen of Hogan.

“No. In the first place I must be in the House. Secondly, I am acquainted with Miss Saltasche; and under the circumstances, I think a stranger would be the best. Yourself now, Mr. Bruen?”

“H’m,” returned Mr. Bruen thoughtfully; “I suppose I must. I shall have to hurry; it is just four o’clock. I’ll come back to-morrow night. How to do,—go straight to her house from the train, and surprise her, hey? She used to know all his business: a clever woman! I do not believe he is gone—absconded, I mean; certainly, if he has, he has left nearly two-thirds of his money behind him.”

“He has! do you say? But why has he gone away, and where?”

Hogan was very pale. He had taken off his hat, and was wiping his face with his handkerchief. He had been so stunned at the news of Mr. Saltasche’s disappearance that he had been utterly unable to reason or think over the bearings of the affair. He had dined with the missing man two days before he left the Westminster Hotel. They had walked down the street together—Saltasche on his way, he said, to the Haymarket. Hogan vainly tried to remember any hint of his intended movement in their conversation together. His memory was a blank; there remained to him only a vague recollection that Saltasche had been in unusually high spirits. The dinner had been excellent; champagne—particularly good champagne—had accompanied it. He bit his lip when he remembered that item, and acknowledged to himself that the last bottle might have had something to do with his lack of memory. The barrister was a moderate man; but he was one upon whom temptation and opportunity were not lost. He certainly never “exceeded” at his own expense. But there are men who for three hundred and sixty-four days will eat and drink mod-

erately at their own tables, and on the three hundred and sixty-fifth will deliberately make themselves very ill at a public banquet. And there are men of unblemished character, and high commercial integrity or credit, who think it no sin to cheat a railway company by travelling first-class when they have paid only for second-class accommodation, and by travelling as often as they can without paying anything at all. The most moral and upright have their pet sins, their "mental reservations," while outwardly subscribing to the Decalogue. That last bottle of Giesler's dry Monopole!

"If we knew that," answered Mr. Bruen, quietly from his desk, I should not have to go to Ireland to-night. Tell me where this lady lives—the directions."

Hogan briefly indicated the route, and engaging to meet Mr. Bruen at Euston Square the morning of his return, took his leave of him and the senior partner, and set his face westwards in very bad spirits.

At the very moment that this conversation was being held in Cole Alley, Mr. Saltasche was seated in a shady avenue of Versailles beside Mrs. Poignarde.

No one would have recognized him. A silky moustache of glossy black shaded his upper lip, and joined to an imperial on his chin, utterly altered the whole character of his face. His hair was cropped in the scrubby fashion peculiar to Frenchmen. A frilled shirt, diamond studs, and a red tie, gave him the look of a Parisian *gandin* of the second order. Nor was his companion unchanged. Her rusty black dress had given place to a costume of pink silk and lace of the richest description. Her bonnet, placed far back on her head, lighted up the masses of rich hair and the creamy pale tints of her face and neck; in one jewelled hand she held a parasol, the handle of which was solid coral and gold. She turned it round and round in her hand, looking at it indifferently; *ennui* expressed itself in her very attitude.

"I wonder what they are thinking in Cole Alley," said he reflectively. "Hogan will be in a nice fright. How Stier and Bruen must be puzzled! How well managed it was!"—and he chuckled. "The idea of my seeing Miss Stroude on London Bridge as I went to the boat."

"It was droll," she observed. "I had quite forgotten when she was to return."

“I don’t believe,” said he, turning round and surveying her critically, “that she or anybody would recognize you now. You are changed for the better, my dear,”—and he smiled with a sort of approving air of ownership and patronage. She saw this and winced, though she smiled. Already the golden chain was beginning to gall her. The Dead Sea apples she had coveted for years were turning to ashes and bitterness. She was thoroughly tired of Saltasche. She did not understand him; her intellect could neither follow nor appreciate his. She listened to, but soon lost the thread of his discourse, when he enlarged and expatiated on his schemes. Sometimes, when he had read to her articles out of the *Beacon*, which he managed to procure in Paris, her attention would wander miles away, and the voice fall on her ear unheeded; then, folding up the paper, Saltasche would launch out into histories of the people of whom he had been reading, and she would listen in bewilderment—vainly trying to recall what had gone before. The theatre every night, concerts, every kind of public amusement, filled the time. A huge grand piano was bought, and she played more than ever; still time hung heavily on her hands, and she hated the red velvet and gilt of their grand apartments as fully as she had ever done the dingy room at Inchicore.

“I flatter myself,” continued he, “that my get-up is perfect; but I must soon think of laying it aside again. I shall have to return to London in a week at the latest.”

“Have you thought of what excuse to offer for your disappearance?” she asked.

“Oh dear, yes,” he chuckled; “that won’t take long. I am sending to-night a notice to be inserted in the *Beacon*. They are to believe in London that I was in Naples negotiating about the new Sicilian railway with the Government. What do you say to go to Naples, since you do not care to remain here? If we go there to-morrow, I may have time to place you in a villa of your own. You can amuse yourself during my absence. I had better not send to the *Beacon* after all: no use blowing on the affair too much. I see Prince D’Istria’s villa at Baia is advertised. We’ll look at it together; and I will get all my pictures and things packed and forwarded.” Then he looked at his watch. “Now, Adelaide, we dine at six at the Rocher de Cancale: let us be moving.”

She rose and took his arm, and they walked along the alley towards the gate, on the way to the railway station.

“How long do you expect to have to remain?” asked she.

“In Naples, do you mean? A day or two, at the most, is all I can stay—to my sorrow!” And he looked into her eyes with an expression of sorrowful anxiety thoroughly real.

“And you will return?”

“Need you ask, dear one? I will not delay an hour—no, not one that I can help.”

As they reached the *gare* a crowd of people were passing out from a train just arrived,—Deputies, clerks, business men,—scarcely one that did not bestow a passing tribute of admiration on the beautiful woman beside him. Saltasche drew himself up, delighted beyond measure; he appropriated every glance from the black eyes of the Parisians. Two men, one of them dressed and got up like a *jeune premier*, cast admiring looks into the carriage where Saltasche and his companion had taken their seats.

“*Est-elle belle, est-elle jeune. Ciel! quelle mise!*” said one, rolling his eyes in the vain hope of attracting her attention.

“*Le vieux c’est le père; il la ressemble,—hein?*” returned the *jeune premier*.

Adelaide threw herself back in the cushions of her seat, and pulling the folds of her skirts close to her, relapsed into a moody silence until they reached Paris.