

# Madame Midas

By Fergus Hume

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)  
"Drop it," said Silvers severely, in his rasping little voice. Billy pretended not to understand, and after eyeing Silvers for a moment or two, resumed his journey. Silvers stretched out his hand for the ruler, whereupon Billy becoming alive to his danger, dropped the nugget and flew off the table with a discordant shriek. Silvers leaned back in his chair drumming in an absent sort of way with his lean fingers on the table. His cork arm hung down limply, and his one eye was fixed on a letter lying in front of him. This was a communication from the manager of the Pactolus mine requesting Silvers to get him more hands, and Silvers' thoughts had wandered to Madame Midas. "She's a clever woman," observed Silvers in a musing sort of tone, "and she's got a good thing in that claim if she only strikes the lead. What a fool I was not to have collared that ground before she did; but McIntosh never would tell me where the place was. Never mind, I'll be even with him yet."

His expression of face was not pleasant as he said this, and he grasped the letter in front of him in a violent way, as if he were wishing his long fingers were round the writer's throat. Tapping with his wooden leg on the floor, he was soon about to recommence his musings, when he heard a step in the passage, and the door of his office being pushed violently open, a man entered without further ceremony, and flung himself down in a chair near the window.

"Well, Mr. Randolph Villiers," croaked Silvers, after contemplating his visitor for a few moments, "how's business?"

"Bad," retorted Mr. Villiers. "I've lost twenty pounds on those Moscow shares."

"More fool you," replied Silvers. "I could have told you the mine was no good; but you will go on your own bad judgment."

"It's like getting blood out of a stone to get tips from you," growled Villiers, with a sulky air. "Come now, old boy, in a cajoling manner, tell us something good—I'm nearly stone broke, and I must live."

"I don't see the necessity," malignantly returned Silvers, "but if you do want to get into a good thing—"

"Yes! yes!" said the other, eagerly bending forward.

"Get an interest in the Pactolus," and the agreeable old gentleman leaned back and laughed loudly at his visitor's discomfiture.

"You know as well as I do that my wife won't look at me."

"Why don't you ruin your wife, you fool?" said Silvers, turning vindictively on Villiers. "You ain't going to let her have all the money while you are starving, are you?"

"How the deuce am I to do that?" asked Villiers.

"Get the whip hand of her," snarled Silvers viciously; "find out if she's in love, and threaten to divorce her if she doesn't go halves."

"There's no chance of her having any lovers," retorted Villiers; "she's a piece of ice."

"Ice melts," replied Silvers quickly. "Wait till 'Mr. Right' comes along, and then she'll want to get married again."

"Well?"

"You'll have the game in your own hands," hissed the wicked old man, rubbing his hands. "Oh!" he cried, spinning round on his wooden leg, "it's a lovely idea. Wait till we meet 'Mr. Right,' just wait, and he dropped into his chair quite overcome by the state of excitement he had worked himself into.

"If you've quite done with those gymnastics, my friend," said a soft voice near the door, "perhaps I may enter."

Both the inmates of the office looked up at this, and saw that two men were standing at the half-open door—one an extremely handsome young man of about thirty, dressed in a neat suit of blue serge, and wearing a large white wide-awake hat, with a birdseye handkerchief twisted round it. His companion was a short and heavily built, dressed somewhat the same, but with his black hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Come in," growled Silvers, angrily. "What do you want?"

"Work," said the young man, advancing to the table. "We are new arrivals in the country, and were told to come to you to get work."

"I don't keep a factory," snarled Silvers. "I don't think I would come to you if you did," retorted the stranger coolly. "You would not be a pleasant master either to look at or to speak to."

Villiers laughed at this, and Silvers stared dumfounded at being spoken to in such a manner.

Gaston Vandeloup; my friends Pierre Le-maire—both French."

Silvers scrawled this down in the series of black scratches which did duty with him for writing.

"Where do you come from?" was his next question.

"The story," said Mr. Vandeloup, with suavity, "is too long to repeat at present; but we came to-day from Melbourne."

"What kind of work can you do?" asked Silvers sharply.

"Anything that turns up," retorted the Frenchman.

"I was addressing your companion, sir; not you," snarled Silvers, turning viciously on him.

"I have to answer for both," replied the young man coolly, slipping one hand into his pocket and leaning up against the door in a negligent attitude; "my friend is dumb. But his legs, arms and eyes are all there."

Silvers glared at this fresh piece of impertinence, but said nothing. He wrote a letter to McIntosh, recommending him to take on the two men, and handed it to Vandeloup, who received it with a bow.

"The price of your services, Monsieur?" he asked.

"Five bob," growled Silvers, holding out his one hand.

Vandeloup pulled out two half-crowns and put them in the thin, claw-like fingers, which instantly closed on them.

"It's a mining place you're going to," said Silvers, pocketing the money; "the Pactolus claim. There's a pretty woman there."

Vandeloup put on his hat and went to the door, out of which Pierre had already preceded him.

## CHAPTER IV.

Madame Midas was standing on the veranda of her cottage, staring far away into the distance, where she could see the tall chimney and huge mound of white earth which marked the whereabouts of the Pactolus claim. She was a tall woman of the Junoesque type, with firm white hands and well-formed feet.

Scattered over this pastoral looking country were huge mounds of white earth, looking like heaps of carded wool, and at the end of each of these invariably stood a tall, ugly skeleton of wood. These marked the positions of the mines—the towers contained the winding gear, while the white earth was the clay called millch, brought from several hundred feet below the surface. Near these mounds were rough looking sheds with tall red chimneys, which made a pleasant spot of color against the white of the clay. On one of these mounds, rather isolated from the others, and standing by itself in the midst of a wide green paddock, Mrs. Villiers' eyes were fixed, and she soon saw the dark figure of a man coming slowly down the white mound, along the green field and advancing slowly up the hill. She called out to some one inside.

"Archie is coming, Selina—you had better hurry up the tea, for he will be hungry after such a long day."

The person inside made no answer save by an extra clatter of some domestic utensils. Madame walked slowly down the garden path, and leaned lightly over the gate, waiting for the new comer, who was indeed none other than Archibald McIntosh, the manager of the Pactolus.

He was a man of about medium height, rather thin than otherwise, with a long, narrow looking head and boldly cut features. His eyes were gray and shrewd looking, his lips were firmly compressed—in fact, the whole appearance of his face was obstinate—the face of a man who would stick to his opinions whatever anyone else might say to the contrary.

"I've know what this may be?" he said, a smile relaxing his grim features as he held up a rather large nugget; "'tis the third this week!"

Madame Midas took the nugget from him and balanced it carefully in her hand, with a thoughtful look in her face, as if she was making a mental calculation.

"About twenty to twenty-five ounces, I should say," she observed in her soft, low voice; "the last we had was fifteen, and the one before twenty—looks promising, doesn't it?"

"Well, I'll not say but it might mean a deal more," replied McIntosh, with characteristic Scotch caution, as he followed Madame into the house; "it's not a very bad sign; I will not say but what we might be near the Devil's Lead."

"And if we are?" said Madame, turning with a smile.

"Weel, mem, ye'll have more siller nor ye'll know what to do with."

Selina Jane Sprots, who now acted as servant to Mrs. Villiers, was rather an oddity in her way. She had been Madame's nurse and had followed her up to Ballarat, with the determination of never leaving her. Selina was a spinster. She moved noiselessly about the small room, in a wonderfully dextrous manner, and, after laying the table, placed the teapot on the hob.

By and by Archie, who had been making a great splashing in the back premises, came in looking clean and fresh, with a more obstinate look about his face than ever. Madame went to the tea table and sat down. Archie asked blessing.

"You have written to Silvers?" said Madame, raising her eyes.

"That wooden legged body," retorted

McIntosh. "Deed and I have, but the old tyke has not done anything to getting me what I want. Weel, weel," in a resigned sort of a manner, "we might be worse off than we are, an' who knows but Providence will send us men by and by?"

Madame rose to her feet and walked to the window. Her thoughts were not pleasant. She had hoped to cut herself off from all the bitterness and sorrow of her past life, but this husband of hers, like an unquiet spirit, came to trouble her and remind her of a time she would willingly have forgotten.

"If I could only get rid of him," she thought, toying with a flower, "but it is impossible. I can't do that without money, and money I never will have till I find that lead. I must bribe him, I suppose. Oh, why can't he leave me alone now? Surely he has ruined my life sufficiently in the past to let me have a few years, if not of pleasure, at least of forgetfulness." And with a petulant gesture she hurled the rose out of the window, where it struck Archie a soft and fragrant blow on the cheek.

"Yes," said Madame to herself, as she pulled down the window, "I must get rid of him."

## CHAPTER V.

Miss Sprots was much in favor of a constant fire, because of the dampness of the house, and Madame Midas did not by any means object, as she was a perfect salamander for heat. Hence, when the outward door was closed, the faded red curtains of the window drawn, and the newly replenished fire blazed brightly in the wide fireplace, the room was one a sabbath would have contemplated with delight.

Madame Midas was seated now at the small table in the center of the room, poring over a bewildering array of figures, and the soft glow of the lamp touched her smooth hair and white dress with a subdued light.

Archie sat by the fire, half asleep, and there was a dead silence in the room, only broken by the rapid scratching of Madame's pen or the click of Selina's needles. At this moment a knock came to the front door, which caused Selina to drop her work with a sudden start, and rise to her feet.

"Not you, Selina," said Madame, in a quiet voice; "let Archie go; it may be some tramp."

"Deed no, mem," replied Archie, obstinately, as he arose from his seat; "tis very likely a man from the works saying he wants to go. There's more talk nor sense about them, I'm thinkin'—the chattering parrots."

Selina resumed her knitting in a most phlegmatic manner, but Madame listened intently, for she was always haunted by a secret dread of her husband breaking in on her. She heard a murmur of voices, and then Archie returned with two men, who entered the room and stood before Madame in the light of the lamp.

"Tis two men from that wooden-legged Silvers," said Archie, respectfully. "One o' them has a wee bit letter for ye"—turning to receive the same from the foremost man.

The man, however, did not take notice of Archie's gesture, but walking forward to Madame, laid the letter down before her. As he did so, she caught sight of the delicacy of his hands, and looked up suddenly with a piercing gaze. He bore the scrutiny coolly, and took a chair in silence, his companion doing the same, while Madame opened the letter and read Silvers' bad writing with a dexterity only acquired by long practice. Having finished her perusal, she looked up slowly.

"A broken-down gentleman," she said to herself, as she saw the easy bearing and handsome face of the young man; then looking at his companion, she saw by his lumpy aspect and coarse hands that he occupied a much lower rank of life than his friend.

Monsieur Vandeloup—for it was he—caught her eye as she was scrutinizing them, and his face broke into a smile—a most charming smile, as Madame observed mentally, though she allowed nothing of her thoughts to appear on her face.

"You want work," she said, slowly folding up the letter; "do you understand anything about gold mining?"

"Unfortunately, no, Madame," said Vandeloup, coolly; "but we are willing to learn."

Archie granted in a dissatisfied manner, for he was by no means in favor of teaching people their business, and, besides, he thought Vandeloup too much of a gentleman to do good work.

"You look hardly strong enough for such hard labor," said Mrs. Villiers, doubtfully eyeing the slender figure of the young man. "Your companion, I think will do, but you—"

"I, Madame, am like the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin," replied Vandeloup gayly; "but, unfortunately, I am now compelled by necessity to work, and though I should prefer to earn my bread in an easier manner, beggars can not be choosers."

"You are French?" she asked quickly, in that language.

"Yes, Madame," he replied in the same tongue, "both my friend and myself are from Paris, but we have not been long out here."

"Humph!" Madame leaned her head on her hand and thought, while Vandeloup looked at her keenly, and remembered what Silvers had said.

"She is, indeed, a handsome woman," he observed, mentally.

Mrs. Villiers rather liked the looks of this young man; there was a certain fascination about him which few women could resist. His companion, however, she did not care about—he had a sulky and lowering countenance, and looked rather dangerous.

"What is your name?" she asked the young man.

"Gaston Vandeloup."

"You are a gentleman."

He bowed, but said nothing.

"And you?" asked Madame, sharply turning to the other.

He looked up and touched his mouth.

(To be continued.)

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