

TRACKED.

PART FIRST.

CHAPTER VII.

Great was the commotion of Mrs. Gandy upon finding that Charley had fled.

"There, missus!" said her husband, "see now what's come of your temper! Lads of his age won't be knocked about by women. A pretty kettle of fish you've got us into!"

Mrs. Gandy was at first too stunned by the blow almost to scold. But as soon as she recovered from the first shock she made up for lost time, as well knew every unhappy wight whom she could scourge with her tongue. But never had her weakened face looked so anxious and worried as it did that day.

Of course the news quickly spread through the town that Charley Gandy had run away. One of the first to hear of it was Jack Bilge, whose consternation was second only to that of Mrs. Gandy herself. At first he would not credit the rumor; but when the intelligence was confirmed beyond a doubt, his rage knew no bounds.

"The young cub!" he muttered, grinding his teeth, "to slip through my fingers like that; and I thought I had him so secure, too! He's gone to London to try and find out Helen Deerbrook—that's where he's gone."

In the first heat of his passion, he was going to Gandy's to beard the tigers in her den, and to have the miserable satisfaction of gloatingly avowing his share in the blow that had fallen upon her. But before he could put his purpose into action, his natural caution conquered his temper; and having a cheap and safe way, under English law, of working off the superfluous bile, he, after thrashing his family all round, smoked a pipe, and thought the matter over.

The result of his cogitations was to keep quiet, but watch more carefully than ever. Something must come of this movement, he reasoned. He must endeavor to find out who this correspondent of Mrs. Gandy's really was, and where she lived. He had got a clue, at least, to an important family secret; perhaps those whom it concerned might think it worth their while to bribe him to secrecy.

"I'll make you regret making an enemy of Jack Bilge, Master Charley," he muttered. "Since you've thrown me over, I'll work against you."

He was to have gone off in the boat fishing that day, but he sent away his two eldest sons instead, and, much to his unfortunate wife's dismay, remained at home himself.

First he went to look for his friend, the postman. He met him upon the quay, going his rounds with the afternoon letters.

"Heard about young Gandy bolting?" asked Bilge.

"Yes, well, it's no more than I expected, answered old Sam. "Who could live with such a one as Mother Gandy? By the bye, I've got a letter for her—one of the usual ones."

"Let's see it!" cried Bilge, eagerly. Old Sam handed him a letter directed in a firm, female handwriting. There was the usual postmark—the usual initials in the corner. If he could have read, I believe he would, in defiance of all consequences, have broken open the envelope and made himself master of its contents, so eager had he become to solve the mystery.

For once, he cursed his ignorance, and reluctantly gave back the letter. He sat down upon a heap of stones, and pondered, and tried to think of some means to penetrate the secret.

In the meantime old Sam had given Mrs. Gandy her letter, and that lady had retired to her sitting-room to read it. Her hand trembled a little as she broke the seal.

"It's from her, I s'pose?" said her husband.

"Yes; and to say somebody's coming down in a few days to take the boy off our hands," she answered, looking the letter full upon her lap, with a dismayed look. "Oh dear! oh dear!—did you ever know the like?"

"All your own fault, Sarah; you shouldn't give way to that nasty temper of yours," answered her husband, calmly.

"If you sit there aggravatin' me in that manner, I'll send something at your head!" shrieked out. "What are we to do?"

"Write off and tell her what's happened at once. The sooner you get it over, the better; she can't eat us nor drink us," philosophically remarked Gandy, knocking the ashes out of his pipe.

For once, Mrs. Gandy took her liege lord's advice, and scrawled a letter, which she carried to the post-office herself.

"What's that good-for-nothing fellow been walking about this place for these two days past?" cried Mrs. Gandy to her husband, on the second day after Charley's flight.

"Who do you mean?" he asked.

"Why that ruffian, Bilge. I am sure he's up to no good. I've seen him leering over his wife, with such an expression on his ugly face as tells me he's brooding mischief."

Some remains of beauty yet lingered about the haggard features; the sunken eyes were yet sharp and glittering, with an eager, restless expression; the lines about the mouth were heavily marked, and that feature was drawn down at the corners with a dissatisfied expression.

These physiological particulars were not visible to the curious eyes that from doors and windows surveyed that *rara avis*, a stranger, beneath the thick veil that covered her face, but which we have taken the liberty to raise. Her dress was perfectly plain.

There were two or three customers in the shop when she entered it, who afterwards declared that Mrs. Gandy turned all colors the moment she clasped eyes on the lady.

"Please to walk into the parlor, mum," she said, in a very subdued voice, and curtsying; "I will be in directly."

The stranger walked into the back room without a word.

"Now, then," cried Mrs. Gandy, with a sudden change of tone, addressing her customers, "get what you want, and the sooner you are off, the better. I can't stop here all day waiting on you."

Having summarily dismissed her patrons, the polite shop-mistress prepared for the coming interview. There was nothing of the ordinary self-asserting expression upon her countenance; she was pale and agitated; and her discomfiture was complete, when, happening to cast her eyes across the road, she saw Bilge's face close to the public-house window. She was beginning to feel how dangerous an enemy she had made.

"Well, William, how are you?" asked the lady, as she entered the sitting-room.

"Well, miss, I'm pretty well, and I hope I see you same," answered Gandy, laying down his pipe, and rising to salute her. "Will you take this chair?" pointing to his own chair. "You'll find it more comfortable than the others."

"No, no; keep your seat—do not move."

Just afterwards, Mrs. Gandy came into the room.

"What is the meaning of the boy running away, Sarah?" she asked in a stern voice; and, throwing back her veil, she fixed her piercing eyes upon her.

"Well, miss, I am sure it was no fault of mine."

"The fault does lie with you, woman!" cried the stranger, imperiously; "there is a guiltiness in your look that convicts you—you cannot deceive me. I expect he has met unkind treatment at your hands. Boys do not run away from comfortable homes; especially boys who have been well educated. Tell me the whole truth at once, so that I may fully understand the position of affairs."

Very reluctantly, Mrs. Gandy gave a very softened version, as far as her own share in the transaction was concerned, of what had happened on the night before Charley's flight. But her listener's keen mind could at once detect the true from the false, and, by a series of searching questions, very soon elicited something very nearly approaching to bare truth.

"I can understand it all," she said, quietly. "Your vile, vindictive temper has made the boy's home a purgatory. At last you struck him; he could endure no more, and so he ran away. Have you any conception whether he has gone?"

"None," was the answer in a low tone.

"Wretch!" cried the stranger fiercely. "You have destroyed the work of years, for the gratification of your vile, shrewish temper. How do I know that this boy may have plucked up—may have suspected—may have thought? You say that his manner had, within the last few days, grown sullen and rebellious; that he had been absent from home on two occasions the whole day; that this was an unusual circumstance; that when he returned he evaded your questions as to where he had been. All this convinces me that his mind was brooding upon some secret subject. Again his disappearance so immediately after the disturbance proves to me that he had some scheme in his mind—some notion of whither he should flee. Neither do I believe you have told me all, or, at least, not all you think!"

It would have been a delicious sight for the poor wretches over whom Mrs. Gandy tyrannized to have seen her now object look. The wild cat in a fierce animal until it comes face to face with the tigers. What a transporting sight that picture would have been to old Jack Bilge, whose nose was still flattened against the tap-room window as he watched the opposite house!

"I can assure you, Miss Helen, that you are wrong in that respect," she said.

"Upon that point I shall satisfy myself before I leave town. See what you expose me to by bringing me here. But I could not remain in ignorance, and I knew that I could expect no positive information from your incoherent scrawls. Suppose I were to be recognized. We are not such a great distance from Blakely."

"There's no fear of that," eagerly interrupted Mrs. Gandy.

"You need not be so anxious to impress upon me the ghostly change that sixteen years have made," she answered bitterly. "My looking-glass reminds me of it daily. But my presence here will excite curious gossip and all kinds of speculation. This boy must be traced; and mark me, if mischief follows, it shall fall upon your head, not mine. You have much to fear. I have much to lose, but little to fear. What inquiries have you made about him?"

"I have inquired of everybody."

"But of course, have set no systematic inquiry upon foot," said the lady, contemptuously. "Why, the people of the town would not give

you any information if they possessed it. I have no doubt that you are hated here; at least, I should imagine so, from the tone in which you addressed your customers just now. Make no further inquiries; leave the affair in my hands. I will send to London for some one to occlude this business, and in the meantime shall stay at Dalkham."

After a time, Bilge left his point of observation and retired to the corner of the street, where he could command a view of the house without being himself observed by those within it. Presently he saw the lady come out, and Mrs. Gandy standing at her door, casting sharp looks around, doubtless in search of him.

"He followed the stranger up the street, and saw her enter the 'Greyhound Hotel.' 'I wonder how long she is going to stop—whether only for dinner, or all night?' he said to himself. He lingered about the spot, in the hope of being able to pick up some information. Presently he saw a hostler getting a cab ready in the yard. 'She's off!' he muttered. 'I want to see her face before she goes.'"

He strolled into the yard, and asked the hostler, in a careless tone, for whom he was getting ready the cab.

"A lady, who's just going to take a chop in the coffee-room," was the answer.

"Where's she going?"

"To the 'Star at Dalkham.' (Dalkham was a village, three miles from Sandbank.)"

"Oh, oh!" thought Bilge; "that's the move, eh? Going to put up at Dalkham, to hoodwink the Sandbank people. But there's one you don't gammon, my lady. If she isn't Helen Deerbrook growed old, it's very strange to me; she's got just her way of walking, as if the ground wasn't good enough for her to tread on; just as I remember seeing her in the grounds at Blakely. Everybody was a good deal more afraid of her than she was of the master and mistress. Of course she will stop at Dalkham to night; oh, yes, I needn't trouble my head about that, so I will just get up, and have a bit of summat to eat, and consider on what I had best do next."

And thus cogitating, Bilge lumbered homeward, in an unusually amiable temper.

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK BILGE PROVES HIMSELF TO BE MASTER OF THE SITUATION.

On that same Saturday morning, which was the morning following the arrival of the strange lady in Sandbank, Jack Bilge, in pursuance of a determination he had formed over night, walked over to Dalkham, and presented himself at the Star Hotel. He had washed his hands and face that morning, and left off his son's-wester and his sea-boots. Many a day had elapsed since he had last taken such extraordinary pains with his toilette. The spray that dashed over him from a stormy sea made his only ablutions; and it is doubtful whether, even in bed, he dispensed with his ordinary head and leg covering, for few had ever seen him without them.

On the present occasion, however, a Panama straw hat, and a pair of dingy white ducks, which he had worn while serving in the merchant service, were donned; and an old pilot coat was mounted over his blue-wool. The reason of this wonderful change was, that he was going to pay a visit to a lady.

"Good morning, Mrs. Green," he said as he went up to the bar of the hotel; "I think you've got a lady staying here, as came down from the Greyhound in a cab last night?"

"A lady did come from there last night," replied the landlady, staring at his transfiguration, for he was as well known at Dalkham as he was at Sandbank.

"Well, I want to see that lady," he said.

"Do you know her?"

"Maybe I do and maybe I don't; but I want to see her," he answered, drily.

"She's at breakfast just now."

"Well, I'm in no hurry. I can take half a pint in the tap-room, and wait till she's done."

"Shall I send up your name to her?" asked Mrs. Green, somewhat puzzled to know what the fisherman could possibly require with the lady.

"You can do just as you like about that, mum," answered Bilge, drily. "But if you do, she won't be a bit wiser than she was afore, as I don't suppose she ever heard her. But if you tell her that somebody has got something very important to say to her, and wishes a few minutes' talk, perhaps it will have more effect than if you told her Mr. John Bilge, Esq., desired the honor of an interview."

Mrs. Green promised to send up this message as soon as the lady had finished her breakfast, and the queer visitor retired to the humble region of the tap-room, to beguile the time over a pipe and a mug of ale.

"If it shouldn't be her after all, I shall look rather foolish," he muttered to himself. "Bah! I can't be mistaken! If it ain't Helen Deerbrook—and I'll stake my head against a red herring 'tis—'tis sure to be somebody come here about the boy, for whose else her sort is there to visit Mother Gandy?—so I can't get far out of my latitude."

After a little time a chambermaid came to tell him that the lady could not see strangers; he must send up his business.

"Well, I don't think she'd be pleased if I did," said Bilge, grimly. "You can tell her my business is the same as what brought her down here, and can only be told to herself."

The girl went back with the message, and presently returned to say that the lady would see him.

"What's her name?" asked Bilge, as he followed his conductress up the stairs.

"What, don't you know?" cried the girl.

"If I did I shouldn't ask you," he answered gruffly.

"Mrs. Grosvenor, I think it is," replied the girl.

"Mrs. Grosvenor?" muttered Bilge to himself. "Married, most likely!"

He was ushered into a small private sitting-room. It was almost dark within; the blinds were closely drawn, either to keep out the rays of the sun which fell brightly upon the window, or to shadow the face of the occupant. Coming out of the full daylight, the fisherman could scarcely, for a few seconds discern any object in the room. But as his eyes grew more accustomed to the obscurity he saw a lady sitting upon a couch with her back towards the window; a black veil was draped across her face, as though to protect it from draught.

"What is your business with me?" she asked, abruptly.

"It's she, sure enough! I can recognize the fine spite of the veil, and the voice is quite familiar to me," he said to himself. Jack Bilge was never much ashamed in any presence, whether that of equal or superior; and least of all upon the present occasion, when he felt himself so fully master of the situation. Throughout the interview that followed, his manner was cool and dogged, and at times half insolent.

"I suppose you don't remember me, Miss Deerbrook?" he said, looking her full in the face.

She started and cast an eager, troubled look upon him.

"What do you mean by addressing me by that name?" she said hastily.

"If you have changed it for a husband's, I beg your pardon. Only that was the name I knew you by years ago."

Another questioning look from those eagle-eyes.

"Where did you know me?"

"At Blakely Hall."

Another half-suppressed start, and a slight trembling of the fingers, as she threw back the veil, which was now useless. But the next moment she spoke coolly and collectedly. "I ask you again what is your business with me? Please to be as brief as possible."

"Well, if you are tired for time, we'd best put it off, as my business may take some little while," he answered.

"Sit down there," she replied, pointing to a chair opposite her; "and be as brief as you can."

"You've come down here about a young man called Charley Gandy, who ran away from home a few days ago," began Bilge in a deliberate tone, and fixing his eyes full upon her.

Her heart was beating violently, and her cheek was growing paler at each word he spoke; but the first word he had uttered had prepared her for the worst; thus she was now able to control all outward signs of emotion, save those that shone out of her wild, burning eyes.

"Have you come here only to impart your ideas upon what you imagine to be my business in this place?" she asked calmly.

"Oh, dear, no! I have come here to offer to help you in your business, if you can come to an understanding."

"This time she could not keep her eagerness out of her voice."

"Do you know where that boy is to be found?"

"I can make a shrewd guess where he's gone to."

"Where?"

"To London."

"Rather an indefinite direction, I think," she answered, disdainfully.

"Yes, without some clue," answered Bilge, indifferently.

"Do you possess that clue?"

"Perhaps I do, and perhaps I don't. I'm not too certain about the matter myself."

"Enough of this fencing!" she cried impatiently. "Speak out man—what is your motive in coming here?"

"I'm coming to that point as quick as I can, miss, he answered, with the same provoking calmness of tone; "but I can't abide to hurry things. Do you wish to find the boy called Charley Gandy?"

The haughty and imperious woman began to discover that she had found her match in this ignorant, low-bred fisherman, who was cunningly endeavoring to draw from her a full confession of her plans, while he himself revealed nothing.

"I refuse to answer any further questions until you explain your motives," she answered, peremptorily.

"Cos if you do want to find him," he went on, without heeding her last words, "perhaps I might be able to give you some small information upon that point, as well as upon a much more particular one."

"And what price do you intend to ask for this information?—for I suppose this is the summing up of all this rhodomontade."

"Oh, I've no wish to force the sale—my information will keep for any length of time, and be just as good as ever."

"The price, man—the price! How can I answer you until I know the price of the article?" She spoke in a tone of withering contempt.

He rose from his seat, and bending over the table, said, in a low, emphatic tone,

"How much would you give for the discovery of the heir of Blakely?"

"What do you mean, fellow?" she cried, starting to her feet, and completely thrown off her guard by the suddenness of the blow.

"I mean what I say—you ask for plain speaking, and you've got it! He answered, insolently, stung into directness of speech by her sarcasm, a weapon never to be endured by the vulgar. 'The boy brought up by Mrs. Gandy is the one that was stolen on the night of your sister's murder—and you know it!'"

She had sunk back upon the couch again; for a moment she could not speak. But Helen Deerbrook was a strong-minded woman—a woman with an iron will; and she soon controlled her feelings sufficiently to carry on the conversation in an outwardly calm manner.

"If you have come here to endeavor to extort money from me by such an outrageous story as this, you are mistaken," she said, in a steady voice. "Oh, very well; as I said before, my

information is warranted to keep fresh for any length of time. I'm not in a hurry to dispose of it, so I wish you good morning." And he rose to go.

"Stay," she said; "although I entirely repudiate your monstrous story, I admit that, as being the son of an old and faithful servant of mine, I feel some interest in the boy's fate; and if you can give me any information that will lead to his discovery, I will pay you handsomely for it."

"Now look here, Miss Deerbrook; if we're to come to any understanding, you'll have to drop this pretending and that contemptuous tone of yours," cried Bilge, savagely. "I ain't going to be made out a liar and an impostor, when I know, and you know, that I speak the truth. More than that, the boy knows all about it; and if I have any more fine-lady airs from you, all Sandbank, and all the tenants of Blakely, shall know it, too. Why you want to keep the boy in the background I don't pretend to know, but that you do is pretty clear. Now take your choice, without any more palaver."

"Do you mean to say that the boy knows—that is to say, that he is the person you have named?" said Miss Deerbrook, calmly.

"That's just what I do mean; and more than that, he's determined to sift the matter to the bottom."

She leaned back, and covered her face with her hands. There was a violence of some minutes' duration. Various plans were passing through her brain, plans both of good and evil.

"And now, how do you propose to find this boy?" she said at last.

"I can't propose any way, but I'm ready to help you if you can hit upon one."

"What motive have you for offering your services for this?" she asked, fixing her eyes upon him.

"Because he's treated me bad—sold me; and I've made up my mind to be down upon him for it."

"Yes, I think I can understand," said Miss Deerbrook, quickly; "you have told him some story that leads him to believe that he is not Mrs. Gandy's son, and he has taken flight and left you in the lurch."

Bilge stared hard at the speaker, as much as to say, "How did you find that out?"

"That look confirmed her suspicions. 'This secret which you suppose you have discovered, but which, remember, I by no means admit, having passed out of your hands, has become valueless. Suppose the boy should go with it to some pettifogging lawyer—there are plenty of them to be found in London ready to take up even so absurd a story as the one you have told!'"

"He won't do that; he's too green to think of that," answered Bilge, confidently. "But if he did, what could he do without witnesses? If I hold back, he's got none."

These words suggested an idea to Miss Deerbrook, but it was one that required reflecting upon. She paused, then said, suddenly,

"If there any reason why you should live in Sandbank?"

"None at all, if it paid me better to live anywhere else," was the philosophical reply.

"Come back here in the evening; I must think over what I have heard, and what is to be done," she said. "In the mean time here is something for your trouble; and she took a five pound note out of her purse and handed it to him.

"What time shall I come back?" he asked, putting the note carefully into an old canvas bag, in which he kept his money.

"About seven o'clock. Of course you will not talk of this visit."

"No fear!" was the laconic answer; and, making a slight obeisance, he left the room.

Forwards of an hour Miss Deerbrook sat motionless, absorbed in deep thought. At the end of that time her plans were well arranged and decided upon. She had received a great shock and felt ill and dejected; but this was no time to give way to such feelings.

Her first step was to despatch a messenger to Mrs. Gandy with a note, in which she requested that lady's presence at Dalkham immediately.

"She has betrayed me," she murmured, "and I will be even with her yet; but for the present I must make it to her interest to be silent."

About three o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Gandy heard her appearance, dressed quite handsomely in the black silk dress she used to wear at Blakely Hall, but which had not seen the daylight more than half-a-dozen times since, in a Paisley shawl, and a fur-lined bonnet of antique fashion.

A long interval took place between the ladies, the matter of which need not be recorded here, but the result of which will be recorded in good time.

"Here is a check for one hundred pounds which is the present I always promised you," said Miss Deerbrook, as Mrs. Gandy rose to go; "and the sixty pounds a year you can draw quarterly, or how you please. Remember, in doing this, you consult your own interest—I may say, your own safety—as well as mine, and therefore I presume I may depend upon your doing it."

"Yes, Miss Helen, if Gandy has no objection," was the reply, in the same subdued voice that the shrew always addresses her mistress.

"Gandy!" contemptuously repeated Miss Deerbrook. "You know that he has no will against yours."

At seven o'clock, punctually, Bilge presented himself at the 'Star.' A quarter of an hour's conversation settled his business, and dismissed him with an expression of grim satisfaction upon his countenance.

"So all's safe," murmured Miss Deerbrook, as the door closed upon this last visitor; but it would not have been so had I not come down here."

The next morning she returned to London.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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