The Clowns Quest

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Chapter I

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS

A dingy little room; whitewashed walls, hung here and there with flaming play-bills, printed in red, and blue, and black; a fireplace squeezed into a corner, a brace of battered old rush-bottomed chairs, a looking-glass hanging against the wall, a white crockery jug and basin—jug minus handle and deteriorated in spout, basin cracked—a flaming gas-jet, a saucer of vermilion, and another of bismuth, a collection of wigs in dilapidated cardboard boxes, a heterogeneous mass of garments hanging in a corner, a carpetless floor, a curtainless window, against whose grimy panes the March wind rattles fiercely.

This luxurious retreat is the dressing-room of Signor Grumani, the famous clown; and Signor Grumani himself sits before the coke fire, with his elbows on his knees, staring meditatively at the dull red glow. He has dressed early, and has an hour to spare before his night's work begins. Faintly, far off in the distance of the large theatre, sounds the lively music of the fairy opening to the eminently successful pantomime of 'Harlequin Humpty Dumpty, the Little Old Woman who lived in a Shoe, and the Seventy White Elephants of the King of Siam,' It is the last night of the pantomime, and it is Signor Grumani's birthday.

The first fact fills him with profound satisfaction, for Signor Grumani is a prudent and respectable member of society, as well as the acknowledged prince of pantomimists, and he has saved enough money to be able to enjoy a period of rest after his labours. The second fact makes him thoughtful, and even sad.

A man must be of a shallow and frivolous temper who can contemplate his fortieth birthday without a touch of sadness. Few men there are who, at this halfway house on the high road of life, can look back upon the past with less reason for self upbraiding than had John Groman, other-wise Signor Grumani.

What did the past show him, as he looked into the dull red fire, while the March wind shook the loose window-sash, and the March rain beat against the glass?

First, a snug back-parlour behind a jeweller's shop in a street off Holborn ; a tender, homely mother, a sober, industrious father, a sunny-haired, blue-eyed brother, just one year his junior; decent habits, family affection, a humble, uneventful life. Secondly, a city day school. Thirdly, a stool in an office.

That office-stool never suited Jack Groman, The genius of the born actor and pantomimist had shown itself long before this. He had been a pantomimist before he could walk—an imp full of queer tricks and sprite-like capers; and so it came about, after a little while, that Jack exchanged the office-stool for the sawdust of a circus, much to the regret of his parents. But the boy was good and true to the bottom of his heart, and stuck to the office until he obtained his father's reluctant consent to his new career.

From that hour John Groman's future was made. He lived in the golden age of pantomimists, when the pantomime was a legitimate and honoured feature of the drama, when old Drury thrilled with Homeric laughter at 'Hot Codlings,' and when a clever clown was accounted worthy of honour.

Before he was thirty Signor Grumani was one of the most celebrated men of his age, as well as one of the most respectable. At forty he had made a comfortable fortune, lived in his own house at Pentonville, had a fine collection of fancy pigeons, and cultivated an acre of garden.

The good old father and mother were both gone. The had lived to share their elder son's prosperity, and to exult in his fame; but the inexorable doom had overtaken them, and, though blessed with a loving little wife and troops of friends, looking back at the past, on this fortieth birthday, John Groman felt himself a lonely man.

The knell of our youth is sounded when we have lost those we loved while we were young.

And the blue-eyed, bright-haired brother, What of him?

That is the saddest memory in John Groman's past. He always thinks of his brother Ted on his birthday. Never had brothers loved each other more truly than those two. There had been a sympathy between them almost as subtle as that which sometimes exists between twins, an affection rare among men. And now John looked back and thought of his brother as of the dead. He had so little hope of ever seeing him again upon earth.

Edward was full of talent, and had begun brilliantly as shopman at a West-end jeweller's. His good looks and gentlemanlike manners made him at once popular and valuable. He had a persuasive tongue, and was speedily known as a first-rate salesman. With women he was supposed to be irresistible; from the duchess, before whose languid eyes he displayed a riviére of diamonds, to the milliner's apprentice, who wanted a cheap breast-pin for her lover.

For the first five years of his commercial life he did well, and his father and mother were prouder of the West-end shopman than of the circus-clown; but, just as Jack was leaving the circus for the theatre, and beginning to make himself famous, Ted took a turn for the bad.

Nothing was distinctly known. Those who knew him best said there was a woman at the bottom of it, and even named the woman. John knew something of her, but very little. One black Monday Edward Groman was missing, and a diamond bracelet, worth three hundred pounds, was missing at the same time. The evening's post brought a heartbroken farewell to the miserable mother, but no word of explanation.

'If ever you see me again, mother, I shall be an honest man. I mean to pay back what I have taken, if God lets me live long enough. Try not to think of me as a thief, but as a man driven by hard necessity, and the bitter need of one he loves better than himself.'

'Dear Edward!' sobbed the fond mother; he always wrote such sweet letters.'

And it seemed to this loving soul that a young man who could write so well could hardly do wrong. But the father was of sterner stuff, and his son's dishonesty crushed him. He was never quite the same man after that bitter Monday.

John Groman paid Messrs. Cabochon the price of that diamond bracelet out of his second season at Drury Lane. Three years later he received a polite note from the firm, informing him that a letter had reached them that day from New York, containing bank-bills to the amount due to them, with interest to date. They had much pleasure in handing the principal and interest to Mr. Groman.

And in all these years not a word had come to Signor Grumani from that scapegrace brother of his. It was more than ten years since Messrs, Cabochon had received the bank-bills, Jack had made up his mind that his brother Ted had ended his wanderings long ago.

‘He was too fond of me to have kept silence all this time if he was not silent for ever,’ thought Jack, as he bent shivering over the dull coke fire. That bleak March wind sent ice-cold arrows against his back.

He had thought the same thing many a time, and nothing had ever come of the thought. Every birthday for the last fifteen years, and on many days that were not birthdays,
his mind had dwelt upon the dear companion of his youth, and nothing had ever come of it. No messenger from the other world had come to tell him that his brother was verily lost to him; no ray of hope had ever pierced the darkness that veiled the wanderer’s Fate.

Jack repeated the words dreamily, like an old song.

‘He was too fond of me to keep silence, unless he was silent for ever.’

Suddenly came a sound that thrilled him. The voice of a spirit could not have moved him more. Some one whistled an old, old, familiar, fireside tune just outside his door—a tune he had never heard sung or whistled since he lost his brother—the tune which Edward Groman used to whistle softly to himself when he bent over any task that needed special thoughtfulness and care.

‘My God!’ cried Grumani, starting up from his chair. ‘That’s my brother Edward!’

The door was dashed open, and a man came in, tall, bearded, bright-eyed, clad in rough warm clothes, smelling of the sea—a man who threw his arms wide open, and cried:

‘My blessed old Jack, I made up my mind to come home on your birthday!’

And then the two men hugged each other and clung to each other in a way that was possibly un-English, but which was distinctly human.

‘My dearest Ted!’

‘My brave old Jack!’

‘Where have you been all these years?

‘Everywhere: all over the world, from pillar to post ’

Oh, Ted, why didn’t you write to me?’ asked John, with tender reproachfulness. ‘‘How many a heartache you might have saved me if you had only written!’

‘I was a fool and a brute,’ said Edward, looking very much ashamed of himself for the space of a second, and then brightening suddenly, just in his old happy-go-lucky way.

‘But, you see, I always meant to come home, and I felt somehow that I couldn’t say what I wanted to say in a letter. Sometimes things looked black, and I didn’t care to tell you how low I had got in the world; then, when the tide turned and good luck came, I wanted to come home unawares, as I have to-night, dear old boy, and surprise you. But I sent the money for that—infernal bracelet.’

‘Yes, Ted, I was glad of that. Oh, Ted, my own true-hearted brother. how could you——

‘How could I turn thief? It wasn’t like my father and mother’s son, was it? I'll tell you how it was, Jack. I saw the woman I loved in bitter need—bailiffs in the house, ready to take the bed she slept on—she ill and helpless—the husband who should have cared for her leaving her to her fate, and I—I—that had never had so much as a kiss from her dear lips since she was a wife—the only friend she had to look to in her misery. And I had that cursed bracelet in my waistcoat-pocket to take to a fine lady in May Fair. I took it to Attenborough’s instead, Jack, and I gave that poor girl the money. And then, feeling that I was a ruined, blighted wretch, and had brought shame upon my honest father, I went straight down to the docks and engaged myself on board an East Indiaman as an able-bodied seaman.’

There was a loud knock at the door, and a shrill boyish voice called, ‘Signor Grumani: Transformation scene.’

‘I must be on the stage, in three minutes, and I shan’t be off it above five minutes at a time till the end of the pantomime. Will you sit here and wait for me, Ted, or will you go round to the front?

‘Neither. I'll come back when it’s all over, and if you like to take me home with you——’

‘Like to take you, Ted! My home shall be your home as long as I have a roof to shelter me.’

‘I won’t impose on your generosity, Jack. The tide turned five years ago, und things have gone smoothly with me ever since, I have come home to you a rich man. Look at these.”

He took a couple of little canvas bags from his pocket and showed them to his brother.

‘Do you recognize those, Jack?’

The clown shook his head.

‘Diamonds, Jack, diamonds! I came home by Amsterdam, and put all my money into the raw material. The dear old dad used to say that a man could never lose money in diamonds if he knew anything about them; and I flatter myself I’m a pretty good judge. There’s a small fortune in those two bags, Jack. I mean to get fifty per cent. upon my capital out of the West-end jewellers. I wasn’t three years with old Cabochon for nothing. _

All this was spoken hurriedly. Jack Groman longed to hear more, and yet must needs tear himself away. Another minute and the stage would be waiting for him.

‘When did you get to London, Ted?’ he asked, breathlessly.

‘Last night. I’ve been looking up old haunts all day, and,’ with a stifled sob, ‘I’ve been to see—their grave. I had made up my mind to come upon you unawares to-night,’

‘And you are not afraid of going about with all that property in your pocket?’

‘I shouldn’t be afraid of carrying the crown jewels. Nobody knows that I’ve got anything worth stealing, and I don’t carry them where they could be taken easily.’

‘You’ll be sure to come back for me, Ted?’

‘Without fail.’

‘And we'll go home together. Rose Cottage, Pentonville. That’s my place, Ted, and I've the nicest wife in England,’

‘You deserve her. I shall be back in an hour.’

And so, with a hearty hand-clasp, they parted; and Signor Grumani rushed down a breakneck-staircase, burst into a blaze of gas, and tumbled on the stage just in the nick of time. He had never disappointed the British public in his life, and he would have been sorry to begin, even to-night, albeit his heart was thumping against his ribs with the strongest emotion he had ever felt since the day he was told his brother was a thief.

He went through all the old familiar tricks and buffooneries, the antics, the deliciously comic grimaces, and the people laughed at him as heartily as ever; but the lights and faces, the gilding and colour of the theatre were spinning before his eyes all the time—the music had a far-off sound—the well-known faces in the orchestra looked strange.

‘Upon my soul,’ said Signor Grumani, ‘I believe everybody's drunk, and I’m the drunkest of all.’

CHAPTER II.

MISSING.

The Clown’s last caper was performed; his last broad grin had illuminated the house, like the jolly red-faced sun laughing at the world before he drops behind the broad green hills; and John Groman was his own master again. For three months he had been the nightly slave of the public. Now he was free to go where he liked and do what he pleased, till he took upon himself other bondage.

‘What a jolly time Ted and I will have,’ he said to himself, as he ran up the steep stairs and along the narrow passages to his dressing-room.

The sulky coke fire had gone out altogether, and the room was empty. Jack Groman looked round disconsolately. He had expected to find his brother waiting for him.

‘He said he’d be back in an hour,’ he thought; ‘and it’s full an hour and a half since he left me. Just your old way, Master Ted. Never punctual!’

He began to undress quickly, so that he might be ready to go home with that scapegrace brother of his. He washed the bismuth and vermillion off his honest face, he put on the sober garments of every-day life, and Signor Grumani was transformed into plain John Groman, a well-built man of middle-height, lithe, active-looking, with homely features, an intelligent countenance, dark hair cut short, closely shaved cheek and chin, good broadcloth, and a general appearance of extreme respectability. You might have taken him for a prosperous lawyer, or a doctor with a good practice—for anything or everything except a clown.

It took him a quarter of an hour to dress. The lights in front of the house had been out ever so long—the theatre was as quiet as an empty church.

‘I can’t wait for him here,’ said John Groman. ‘They'll be locking up the stage-door and shutting me in.’

He went down to the stage-door, hoping to find his brother waiting for him in the dismal lobby, where aspirants for dramatic renown sometimes waited for engagements—and did not get them—where the imps and fairies of pantomime congregated on Saturday afternoons, unkempt and dirty, and smelling of old clothes.

No, Edward was not in the hall, The door-keeper had seen a strange gentleman go out ‘nigh two hours ago,’ and had not seen him come back, and the door-keeper was positive that nobody could pass him ‘unbeknown.’

There was nothing to do but to go out and wait in the street for the truant. The door-keeper wanted to lock up the theatre and to retire to his den. So John Groman buttoned-up his comfortable overcoat, pulled his muffler over his chin—clowns are as careful of their lungs as tenors— and went out into the windy night.

There was a colonnade outside the stage-door, and there was a public-house on the other side of the street. The lights within had a comfortable look.

‘I wonder if the fellow has gone into the Anchor?’ thought John.

He ran across, and looked into the bar, and even peered into the parlour. No Edward. John was out in the street again in a minute. He began to feel feverishly anxious lest he should miss his brother.

‘I told him my address, he said to himself, ‘Can he have taken a hackney-coach, and gone home without me?’

That seemed an unlikely proceeding, so John determined to stick to his post, under the colonnade. It was only a question of waiting for half an hour or so. It was nearly one o’clock. The most unpunctual of men could not delay his return much longer.

One o’clock struck, and the quarter after, from the church clocks of the neighbourhood, and still John Groman waited. A chill uncomfortable feeling had crept over him since the striking of the hour. It seemed mere foolishness now to wait for his brother. It was not likely Ted would come back to the theatre that night.

‘He talked about looking up old haunts,” mused Jack; ‘perhaps he has gone to see some of father’s old friends. The Tomkinsons, for instance. Their place isn’t very far from here,’

John Groman went off at once to see if this notion about the Tomkinsons were not a happy idea. He was flurried and eager, and had a kind of desperate feeling that he must find his brother before those sonorous church clocks struck two.

There was something queer and uncanny in this disappearance of Ted's. It began to appal him.

'It isn't kind of him to play me such a trick,' he thought, 'He must know how anxious I am to talk to him.'

Tomkinson's place was a rather dingy-looking house, over a tobacconist's shop, in a narrow street between the Strand and the river. The Tomkinsons and the Gromans had enjoyed that comfortable kind of friendship which finds outward expression in tea and muffins, hot suppers after the play, and homely Christmas or New Year festivities beside the domestic hearth, rum punch, oysters, bottled stout, and conviviality.

Mr. Tomkinson's windows were dark. There was no sign of conviviality to-night. John Groman rang the door-bell loudly in his agitation, and presently a second-floor window was opened, a head thrust out, and a sharp voice asked, crossly,

'What's the matter now?

'It's only I, Susan. Mr. Groman, you know. Is there anybody with your master?

'Master and missus have been abed these three hours,' answered the girl, 'I beg your pardon for speaking so cross, Mr. Groman, but this is the second time I've been scared by that blessed bell. There was a gentleman here an hour ago, who wanted master, but he wouldn't have him waked, and said he'd call to-morrow,

'What kind of a gentleman?'

'Tall—bigger than you—with a beard. He looked like a foreigner, but he spoke like an Englishman.'

'Which way did he go?'

'That way,' answered the girl, pointing towards the Strand.

'Are you sure it was an hour ago?'

'I can't be sure to a minute. It might have been an hour and a half.'

'Or two hours,' suggested John Groman,

‘I can’t say. Shall I call master, sir?’

‘No, no, on no account. I'll look in to-morrow.

The girl shut down the window, and John Groman turned his face to the Strand.

‘There can be no doubt about it,’ he thought. ‘Ted must have gone straight to Rose Cottage, after leaving the Tomkinsons.’

It was just like his brother to steal a march upon him, and go bursting into the quiet little cottage, looking as rough and fresh as the March wind.

‘What a surprise for my little woman!’ the Clown said to himself.

Yet, though he told himself this might be, there was a leaden weight at John Groman’s heart as he plodded manfully northwards, piercing his way across a labyrinth of streets towards the Gray’s Inn Road, cutting off corners, going almost as straight as the crow flies.

The clocks struck two as he skirted the Foundling--two sonorous strokes that seemed to beat upon John Groman’s heart.

‘I thought I should have found him before two o’clock,’ he said to himself; ‘but I’ll be bound he’s in my parlour, making friends with the little woman.’

A belated hackney coach passed just at this moment, John Groman hailed it, and had himself driven home.

At Rose Cottage he found a bright fire, a cosy round table neatly laid for supper, a cheery copper kettle spitting and hissing on the hob, with a view to Teek's nightly glass of whisky-toddy, and a tearful little woman almost ready to go into hysterics on her husband’s shoulder.

‘Oh, Jack, what a fright you have given me!’ she cried, smiling at him through her tears. ‘I thought something had happened.’

‘Something has happened,’ he answered, looking anxiously round. ‘Where’s my brother?’

‘Your brother?’

‘Yes, Fan. Come, no larks. You're hiding him, I know.’

Mrs. Groman stared at her husband in sudden terror. Could he, the soberest of men, have been drinking? That was hardly possible. Yet, what but drunkenness or sudden lunacy could. account for his wild demeanour?

‘Fanny, for God’s sake, tell the truth. My brother Ted is here, isn’t he P’

‘Oh, Jack, do you think I’d deceive you? There’s not a mortal been here this night. What has put your poor brother into your head? I daresay he’s dead and gone, poor fellow, years ago. You'd have heard of him if he were still alive.

‘Fanny, don’t!’ cried John Groman, dropping into a chair. ‘I’ve seen him to night. He came back to me on my birthday. I was to have brought him home to you, and we were to be so happy together.’

Here John Groman broke down. He laid his head against his wife’s honest heart, and sobbed aloud.

‘John, dear John, why should you be so frightened about him? He’ll be here presently, I daresay. Tell me all about it, how it happened, and where you saw him, and everything. "You'll feel happier after you’ve told me,” concluded the little woman, with as patronising an air as if she had been the goddess of wisdom.

John Groman told his tale briefly, and in a tone that was almost despairing.

His wife thought the circumstances were queer, but pretended to make light of them.

‘Perhaps he intended to play you a trick, dear,’ she said, soothingly. ‘You know he was always wild. I’ve heard you say so. Or, perhaps some of his old companions got hold of him, and would not let him keep his appointment with you.’

‘That’s what I fear most of all, Fanny. My brother's old companions were a bad lot. I have bitter reason to know that. And to-night he carried property about him worth a thousand pounds. Heaven help him if he has got among his old companions! Something bad will come of it.

‘Why, John, what a raven you are. Come, cheer up, dear. I’ve got you such a nice little supper, a regular birthday supper—a boiled fowl and oyster sauce.’

John Groman was not in a mood to be consoled by fowl and oyster sauce. He made a pretence of eating his supper to please the ‘little woman.’ then he sent her to bed with a kiss and a cheery word, and when she had gone he opened the shutters, drew up the blind, and let the light of fire and candle shine out upon the dark windy road. There was only a long strip of garden between the footpath and the parlour window.

‘If he comes he shall see the light, and know that I’m waiting up for him,’ said John Groman.

He waited till his candles took a sickly hue in the grey March daylight; waited till the shrill cry of ‘milk below’, sounded in the cold morning street, and the industrious little maid-of-all-work came down and opened the house-door, and shook out her dusty mats, and set vigorously to work with a clattering pail and a lump of hearth-stone. Mrs. Groman was a housekeeper who required extreme neatness and precision in all her domestic arrangements; and the clown was wont to brag of Rose Cottage as a model dwelling, where you might have hunted all day long for a spider or a cockroach, and where a cobweb would have been more astonishing than ghost.

CHAPTER III

“THERE'S A WOMAN IN IT’

Before the table had been laid for the eight o’clock breakfast, John Groman was in Bow Street, asking the advice of the police about his missing brother."

The constable to whom he told his story was an old hand—a man of few words and decided opinions.

‘Don't you think your brother's larking with you?’ he asked. ‘

‘He is not capable of such a thing. Think how cruel it would be to come back to me after fifteen years, and to trifle with my love for him. No, it isn’t in Ted Groman to do it.’

‘On the drink, perhaps?’ suggested the constable.

‘He was never a drinking man.’

‘His habits may have changed in fifteen years. Plenty of time for a man to go to the bad. If he’s not on the drink, and not larking, the case looks dark. A man on the loose in London with a thousand pound’s-worth of diamonds in his pockets! It looks bad, you’d better advertise in the Hue and Cry.

‘Yes. But is there nothing I can do myself ?’

‘Not much, I’m afraid. You may hunt among his old pals. I daresay there’s a woman at the bottom of it’

John Groman remembered the diamond bracelet, and inclined to agree with the constable.

‘Do you know of any woman he was sweet on before he left England? Fifteen years, though! He may have been sweet on a dozen women in that time.’

‘I think he’s more likely to have been constant to the memory of one,’ said John Groman, who knew just enough about that fatal attachment of his brother’s to know that
the wound had been deep.

‘Do you? Well, rely upon it, there’s a woman at the bottom of it. Do you want to offer a reward?’

‘Yes,’ answered Groman. ‘A hundred pounds to the man who brings me my brother safe and sound; fifty to the man who brings me tidings of him!’

‘'That’s liberal,’ said the constable. ‘Unless I’m mistaken, I have the honour of talking to Signor Grumani.’

‘You are not mistaken.’

‘Sir, allow me to shake hands with you, exclaimed the constable, with deep respect. ‘This is the proudest moment of my life. My name is James Wormald, and I’ve been a playgoer from my boyhood. That trick of yours with the old woman and the umbrella is the finest thing that has ever been done in the British drama. There’s nothing in Shakespeare to beat it. Keep your heart up, Signor Grumani. You’re a popular man. Whatever the constabulary of this city are capable of doing will be done for you. And now, perhaps, you can give me a little information that may put me on the right track as to your brother’s old acquaintance, and so on. ‘The lady to whom he was attached, for instance.’

‘It was an unfortunate affair,” said Groman. ‘She was the daughter of a neighbour of ours, a lawyer's clerk——’

‘That sounds artful,” observed the constable. ‘I don’t like the law in its subordinate branches.’

‘Ted and she were sweethearts as children. She was a lovely creature. I don’t think I ever saw a more beautiful face, but she was very small and slight, and there was something wrong about her figure. It wasn’t much; a stranger would hardly have

noticed it; but I used to think sometimes that there was an ugly twist in her mind just as there was in her body. Something crooked somewhere.'

'Was she fond of your brother?'

'Passionately, as he was of her. Yet she would quarrel with him about the veriest trifle, and sulk for a fortnight at a stretch. Then they would make it up, and she would be
all sunshine. One day they had a quarrel that was more desperate than any they had ever had before. My brother came home looking white and agitated. 'I've done with that little wild cat for ever,' he told me. 'What do you think, Jack, she took the locket I gave her off her neck, the locket I made myself—and you know how hard I pinched to buy the pearls I set round it—and chucked it out of the window into the muddy road, just under a brewer's dray that was passing. 'Very good, my lady,' says I, 'you've thrown away your locket, and you've thrown away your lover. You've seen the last of us both.'

Serve her right,' said Wormald. 'I hope he stuck to his word."

He did,' answered Groman, 'for a fortnight, and then he got a letter, signed Clara Valaority, to tell him that she'd married Mr. Valaority, the Greek picture-dealer of Rupert Street, who could afford to keep her like a lady, and she wrote those few lines to bid him good-by, and to give him her best wishes. Ted was like a madman after he got that letter. He raved and raged, swore he would murder Clara and her husband. 'False, abominable girl!' he cried ; 'if I cannot be happy with her I'll be hung for her.'

But, of course he didn't do it,' said the constable.

'No. He bore the loss of her somehow, as we all bear our troubles, because we must. He had just taken a situation at a West-end jeweller's, and he was working very hard, and getting on very fast. His employers had a wonderful opinion of him. But I know he never left off grieving for Clara. She used to pass our shop sometimes of a fine afternoon, on her way to her father's lodgings, dressed like a duchess; but I didn't think she looked happy. Things went on like this for more than two years. Ted's salary had been raised from seventy pounds a year to a hundred and fifty. He dressed like a gentleman, and helped the dear old father and mother with many a five-pound note. I don't believe he had a particle of vice in his composition. One day I met Mrs. Valaority's father. He was in great distress, and told me his troubles. The Greek had gone all wrong. The place in Rupert Street had been sold up, and Valaority and his

wife were in a wretched lodging at the back of Clare Market. Valaority was a gambler and a profligate, according to the old man's account, and his young wife was miserable. I was foolish enough to tell my brother what I had heard.

"And he went to the lodging behind Clare Market to comfort his old love, I suppose," suggested the constable.

"How did you know that?"

"I know human nature."

"I heard nothing more directly of Mrs. Valaority; but indirectly I heard that my brother had been seen with her. His old steady habits were given up; he began to stay out late at night. He had his latch-key, and was his own master as to coming in and going out. I used to hear him come in far on in the small hours. He was always short of money now, poor fellow, and, instead of helping the old people with a five-pound note, was glad to come and borrow one of me. Sometimes he seemed unnaturally lively; at other times he looked miserable. We all felt at home that there was something wrong. I had many a talk with him, and tried my hardest to get him to trust me with his troubles, but it was no use. And one day there came—well, there came a crash, and Ted left England."

"Bolted with the lady?" inquired Mr. Wormald.

"No. She stayed behind."

"Do you know what kind of life he led abroad?"

"No. But I'll be sworn it was an honest one. I could see that in his face last night."

"And he told you that he had been hunting up old friends?"

"Yes."

"And he is a confiding fellow, easily influenced, open-hearted, open-handed?"

"Yes."

"Then I wouldn't mind laying a wager that those Valaoritys have got him. A Greek picture-dealer, sold up fifteen years ago, living by his wits ever since. That's a man to stick at nothing. And your brother would be proud of having made his fortune, and would show his bags of diamonds! Of course. Yes, the Valaoritys have got him."

'But, remember, there can be no friendship between my brother and Mr, Valaority.'

‘Perhaps not; but there’s a strong friendship between him and Mr. Valaority’s wife. She'll have got pretty well toned down to match the colour of her husband by this time. When once a woman takes the downward turn, she goes very fast, pretty dear. I wouldn’t give much for Mrs. Valaority’s respect for the laws of property. Take my word for it, Signor Grumani, she and her husband have got those diamonds.’

John Groman remembered the bracelet, and his heart sank within him.

‘Do you think they have murdered my brother?’ he gasped.

‘I haven’t come to that yet awhile—I think they’ve got the diamonds.”

‘But if my brother were alive, plundered, duped even, surely he would come to me? Who else would be so ready to pity and help him?’

‘He might not care to let you know he had been fooled. What we've got to do is to find the Valaoritys,’

‘And the diamonds.’

‘Find them? You might just as well go and look for so many drops of water in the sea. They’re on their way back to Amsterdam by this time, I daresay, or snugly reposing in paper at a respectable house in Hatton Garden. You needn’t hope to see that stuff again. But if you want to find your brother we had better hunt up the Valaoritys.

‘Is it not as likely that a stranger may have robbed him?’

‘No. He might be weak enough to display his property to an old acquaintance; but he would hardly be such a simpleton as to brag of it to a stranger. Now you go home, Signer Grumani, and make your mind easy. Well find the Valaoritys.,

‘Let me help you. I'm a free man. I couldn't rest at home. Your reward shall be just the same, but let me help—let me look fer my brother.’

‘With all my heart,’ answered the constable. ‘You’re too great an artist not to know how to keep a silent tongue. I shall be proud of your company.’

The constable retired to arrange his affairs with the head of his department, and John Groman sat down in the dingy office to write a letter to his wife—a loving, honest letter— telling her what he was going to do, and begging her not to be uneasy about him should he be obliged to remain absent from home for a night or two. He did not know whither his quest might lead him, or how long it might detain him.

‘Now,’ said the constable, coming back, after an absence of a little more than an hour, dressed in plain clothes, and looking like a country gentleman or a well-to-do grazier, ‘the first thing to be done is to find out where these Valaoritys live. You've no idea, I suppose.

‘Not the slightest.’

‘Do you know any one connected with them?’

‘There’s Clara’s father. He was an old man fifteen years ago, but he’s one of that class of people who never die. They are old, and shrivelled, and dirty when you first know them; and they never get a day older, or a shade dirtier, in the course of your lifetime.’

‘I know the breed,’ answered the constable. ‘They come to their oldest and ugliest early in life, and leave no margin for deterioration.’

‘I passed the old man in Holborn the other day. We shall just get to his lodgings by one o’clock. He used always to dine at home, and I don’t suppose he has changed his habits.

‘Not he, sir, no more than a snail. Life is a fixture with that breed.’

Things fell out as John Groman had anticipated. They got to the dull side-street out of Holborn at the stroke of one, and found the old clerk ruminating over a plate of beef sausages and a pint of porter, a dirty newspaper propped up in front of him against a rickety cruet-stand, much the worse for mustard.

He received John Groman expansively, and was gracious to John’s companion, who was introduced as a friend from Essex; but-he reproached the clown for not having sent him an order for Harlequin Humpty Dumpty.

‘There was a time when you used to remember an old acquaintance,’ he said.

‘I’m very sorry I forgot you, Mr. Clews, especially as I want you to do me a service, replied John Groman. ‘I’ve a notion that there’s been a kind of occasional correspondence carried on between your daughter and my brother Ted, and that Mrs. Valaority could tell me something about him if she liked. Now, I’d give a great deal to know where he is and what he’s doing, and I should take it as a favour if you would tell me where to find your daughter.’

The old clerk sighed, and wiped away a dirty tear with the corner of a blue bird’s-eye handkerchief.:

‘My daughter has not behaved well, Jack. Pardon the familiarity, but in happier days you were always Jack. Valaority has treated her infamously. But that isn’t the worst. He has perverted her mind. She’s never been a daughter to me since her marriage. I hardly see her once in a year unless I happen to run against her in the street. As to telling you where she lives, I can’t take upon myself to do it. They're always on the move.’

‘Have they prospered of late years?’ asked the constable.

‘I’m an intimate friend of Jack, sir. You may speak freely before me.’

‘I don’t know. Sometimes Clara seems flush of money—I can see it in her dress, She was always a slave to dress, poor foolish girl. I believe it was for the sake of fine clothes she married Valaority, who was twenty years her senior, and as ugly as sin. Sometimes she looks poor; but whether she’s rich or poor I never see the colour of her money.’

There was a good deal more talk, Mr. Clews being garrulous, and glad to air his wrongs. Finally, he told John Groman of three different lodgings at which he knew his
daughter to have been living within the last two years.

Chapter IV.

The Dark House by The River.

The clown and the constable spent the next six hours hunting for the Valaoritys. They went from lodging to lodging, getting their information as best they could, sometimes from landladies, sometimes at post-offices. It was hard work, and needed all the constable’s professional tact, and all the clown’s natural ability. Six o’clock found them in a scene so dreary that its aspect froze John Groman’s heart. Could he hope that his brother, having once entered this den of sordid vice, could ever leave it alive? Burke’s house, in the Tanner’s Close, that one lonely dwelling at the end of a blind alley, was hardly‘ a fitter temple for the genius of murder. It was a narrow street on the Surrey shore, between the bridges of Waterloo and Blackfriars, a street leading down to the river. On one side it was overshadowed by a huge bulk of buildings, devoted to some loathsome and unsavory trade, bone-burning, or some industry of an equally repulsive nature; on the other, it was darkened by the high wall of a neighbouring mews. There were only three dwelling-houses in the street,

two at the entrance, and one at the extreme end, backing onto the river, a tall dark house, whose chief windows had been bricked up to save the window-tax.

This was the house to which Mr. Groman and his companion had been last directed, the end of their quest, for they had been told that here Mr. and Mrs. Valaority were now living.

An elderly woman, dark as a gipsy, wearing a tawdry cap and gown, and a pair of long French ear-rings, opened the door at the constable's repeated knock.

'Mr. Valaority at home?' asked Wormald, pushing his way into the passage.

Within all looked dark and dirty in the dim light of a tallow candle, guttering out its brief existence in a large brass candlestick.

'Mr. Valaority started for' the Continent last night, answered the woman, looking suspiciously at the intruders.

'You mean this morning,' said the constable. 'He couldn't have gone last night, for a friend of mine was to sup with him after the play.'

"Your friend didn't come, then,' said the woman; 'Mr. Valaority left last night—indeed, early in the evening.'

Do you know what part of the Continent he is going to?'

'No. He is not a man to tell his business.'

'No, I suppose not. Yet, I should have thought he would hardly have kept you in the dark. You look like a relation.'

'I am a relation.'

'Exactly. Well, I'm sorry he's gone, for I've got particular business with him. However, I daresay Mrs. Valaority went with her husband."

'What, at such short notice? That's odd.'

'I didn't say they went at short notice.'

'Oh, but they must have done so, you know, since Valaority had asked my friend to sup with him after the play.'

John Groman, who was closely watchful of the hag's face, saw that her countenance changed at each mention of the friend invited to supper.

‘Do they often go abroad?’ asked Wormald.

‘As often as the fancy takes them.’

‘A very pleasant life. But Mr. Valaority has some trade or calling, I suppose.’

‘He cleans pictures.’

‘And occasionally manufactures old masters, no doubt. Now, if you’ve no objection, I should like to take a look round your house.’

‘I have a very strong objection,’ said the woman; ‘I couldn’t think of letting you into the house in Mr. Valaority’s absence.

‘I’m sorry to be intrusive, but I’m a police constable, and I came Prepared with a search warrant,’ said Mr. Wormald quietly. ‘So the best thing you can do, old lady, is to take me and my friend round. The gentleman who was expected to supper last night is missing, and we want to make sure he isn’t playing hide and seek with us here.’

The man’s semi-jocose tone chilled John Groman. There was an atmosphere in the house that filled his soul with despair.

The woman scrutinized the warrant, and looked at the two men, as if weighing the possibility of effectual resistance. 'Well, if you want to search the house, you’d better do it,’ she said at last; but Mr. Valaority will have the law on you when he comes back, depend upon it.’

‘Come, take your candle, old lady, and lead the way,’ said the constable coolly.

She opened the door of a parlour at the back of the house, a good-sized room with a wide window down to the round, opening on a wooden balcony that overhung the dingy tide. The stars were shining through the uncurtained window as the men went into the room.

Wormald’s eye took in everything; a table spread with the remains of a convivial meal, a large dish of oyster shells, a couple of empty champagne bottles, cigar ends flung here and there among fragments of bread, a pair of candles burned down to the sockets of the tarnished metal candlesticks, an all-pervading look of dissipation.

‘You see there was a supper last night,’ he said, with a peculiar look at the woman, ‘and Mr. Valaority sat very late for a man on the eve of a long journey.’

Then he walked to the window, opened it, and stepped out upon the balcony, followed closely by John Groman.

The tide was out, and below them lay the slimy river mud, with the stars dimly reflected on its dark surface. The lights of the opposite shore were shining through the evening mist, but on this side all was dark. Impenetrable warehouses projected their dark bulwarks on the river. There was no token of human habitation near.

‘Do you think he was murdered here?’ whispered John Groman, grasping the constable’s arm.

‘I don’t like the look of the place, Mr. Wormald answered gravely. ‘And I don’t like the look of that woman.’

This inspection of the balcony did not occupy five minutes. The woman was standing waiting for them inside the room, candle in hand. They never lost sight of her.

She showed them another room on the ground floor, where Valaority pursued his calling. There was a deal table strewed with brushes and pots, and bottles of varnish, and tubes of colour. A couple of Windsor chairs and a pile of unframed canvases in a corner completed the contents of the room.

Mr. Wormald sounded the walls for hidden cupboards, opened one obvious cupboard, and with those sharp eyes of his scrutinized every inch of the room, just as he had done in the parlour where the fragments of the feast had been left. Then he followed the woman upstairs. There were a couple of bedrooms, dirty and wretchedly furnished, on the first floor, and above that there was only emptiness. The people of the house were in the habit of letting these upper rooms unfurnished, the woman told Mr. Wormald, and had been sometime without a lodger.

‘I should like to see the people of the house,’ said Wormald, ‘Are they in?’

The woman thought not, but after they had explored the upper part of the house the constable insisted upon descending to the basement, John Groman following at his heels.

There, in a miserable den, where the atmosphere was thick with the reek of strong tobacco and faintly odorous of gin, they found the landlady. She was cooking her supper at a scanty fire, while her husband slept on a press bed close by half smothered under a dingy blanket and a tattered patch-work counterpane, and groaning heavily in his sleep every now and then.

The constable looked round the room. It offered little to his scrutiny: bare whitewashed walls, a few shelves garnished with a heterogeneous collection of crockery and hardware, a Dutch clock, and a heap of odd boots and shoes on a bench in a corner. The room, which appeared to be on a level with the bed of the river, was eminently suggestive of rats. Beyond it there was an oosy scullery, like a grotto, floor and walls alike covered with a slimy moisture. The constable penetrated this inner vault, candle in hand, saw nothing but cockroaches, and returned to the more congenial atmosphere of the kitchen.

‘Is that your husband?’

‘Yes, surr, glory be to God!”

‘What's his trade??

‘Ah, thin shure, it isn’t a thrade at all at all. Minding ould shoes is almost as bad as a purfession. Yer may as aisily starve at it!’

‘Is he ill?’

‘The rheumatiz in every blessed bone of ‘um!’

‘How long have the Valaoritys been lodging with you?’

‘Ah, thin sure it’s as near tree months as it can be without bein’ the quarther.’

‘Do you find them decent people?’

‘As honest as the daylight.’

‘When did Mr. and Mrs. Valaority leave?’

‘Last night.’

‘At what time?’

Ah, sure thin, your honor, me husband and me was abed early. We didn’t take notice.’

‘And you heard no disturbance on the floor above last night?’

‘Was it disthurbance? There's not quieter sowls breathin’ the breath of heaven than Mr. and Mrs. Valaority. Shure it’s mild as an angel she is. A sweeter cratur never walked the Lord’s earth.’

After this the constable gave a last searching glance round the kitchen and then departed, escorted to the threshold by Valaority's kinswoman.

"Don't you think it likely that—if any wrong has been done—that Irishwoman and her husband are in it?' asked Groman, when they were in the street.

'I'm sure of it,' answered Wormald.

'And you begin to think there has been foul play?' said Groman tremulously.

'I won't go so far as that; but I think your brother was in that house last night after he left you. There had been a supper—a couple of bottles of champagne: that means business. Yes, your brother has been there, and those people have got the diamonds. The rest remains for us to unravel. Should you be afraid to go to Paris with me?'

'I would go anywhere with you in the hope of finding my brother. But why Paris?'

'Because that city is a magnet which draws men and women of the Valaority stamp, when they have plunder to dispose of, or money to spend. Paris and New York are the two grand centres of crime. The criminal who would escape the felon's dock goes to New York; the happy-go- lucky thief, who only wants to enjoy himself, goes to Paris. Now, it seems to me that one of two things must have happened. Either your brother has gone off with Mrs. Valaority, after giving her husband a share of his property, and sending him to keep out of the way-———'

'Impossible!'

'Then comes the darker fear. The Valaoritys have made away with your brother. Now it seems to me that in this case—God grant it may not be so! —but, at the worst, it seems to me that if you can get hold of Mrs. Valaority, who, from your account, must be a weak piece of humanity, you may wring the truth from her.'

'Yes,' said John Groman, resolutely. 'I believe that if Clara were involved in any crime against my brother, and I had her face to face with me, I could make her tell me all. She loved him passionately. That I know. Whatever good or noble feeling she was capable of was given to him. And if she could stand by and see him murdered —if she could fall

to such a depth of iniquity—I think at the sound of my voice and the sight off my face, and the memory of years that are gone, she would cast herself in the dust at my feet and confess her crime.'

‘We'll try it on, at any rate,’ said the constable; ‘ when there’s a woman in the case I never despair of finding out all I want to know.’

CHAPTER V.

HIS OLD LOVE.

Two days later John Groman and his companion were in Paris, where the constable found an old friend in the French police, a man who had left Bow Street to graduate under Vidocq. This gentleman was familiar with every mesh in the web of Parisian life, and was able, in less than three hours, to favour his friend Wormald with the following information:—

The Valaoritys had been seen by the Parisian police. Valaority was an old hand, and well known to the *railles*. He had been trying to dispose of diamonds at a shop in the Palais Royal, but the shopman had refused to deal with him. It was not known at present where he was lodging, but Mr. Wormald’s friend gave him a list of about twenty probable places, lodging-houses, at which a man of Valaority’s type would be likely to seek accommodation.

‘It is a kind of blackbird that sings always in the same key,’ he said; ‘one knows where to find this species.’

Two hours’ hunt in Paris resulted more successfully than an afternoon’s hunt in London. Before dark on the evening of their arrival in the dazzling city, the clown and the constable had stalked their game. They had found a tall, grimy looking house near the Luxembourg, where Mr. and Mrs. Valaority were living. The porter told them that the Greek gentleman and his wife had gone out to dine at a restaurant, and to take their pleasure afterwards.

‘Let us go and have a stroll on the Boulevards,’ said Mr. Wormald, who had done business in Paris before; ‘we may meet them there. If not, we can return late in the evening.’

Had he been happy in his mind, John Groman would have been delighted with the Boulevards. It was his first visit to Paris. He had often promised his wife to take her over for a month’s holiday and a new bonnet; and he had often promised himself the pleasure of seeing what a French clown was like in his native air. He had seen the species once or twice attached to a circus, and had thought it a spurious article, while

your dancing Pierrot, a poor creature in black and white, seemed to him beneath contempt.

But now he walked the glittering lamp-lit Boulevards without a thought either of business or pleasure. The crowd of faces, the dazzling shop windows, the everlasting cafés, the jingling omnibuses, passed him like objects seen in a dream. He was thinking of that lonely house by the Thames, the balcony overhanging the dark water, the mystery and sordid horror of the scene. The fact that the Valaoritys had been seen in Paris with diamonds in their possession seemed a conclusive proof of the worst. He had little hope now of ever seeing again upon earth the bright familiar face that had flashed upon him like a burst of sudden sunshine on the night of his birthday.

They walked the busy Boulevard to a point at which they seemed to reach the uttermost limit of civilization, and saw no trace of the Valaoritys, though the constable made John Groman look in every café on their way. Near the Porte Saint Martin they went into an unpretentious restaurant and dined, simply and briefly, neither being in the humour for the pleasures of the table.

‘I wonder we haven’t passed them,’ said Wormald; ‘everybody comes to the Boulevards. If it were finer weather I should look for them in the Champs Elysées, but it’s too cold and bleak for walking under trees to-night.’

They crossed the road, and made their way back on the opposite side to that by which they had ascended the Boulevard.

‘What ought I to do if I see them?’ asked Groman.

‘Get hold of her. I'll settle with him.’

“You can’t arrest him?’

‘No, worse luck. He's safe here for the moment.’

John Groman looked at all the faces that passed him, but none recalled the fair young face he remembered fifteen years ago, when Clara Clews was in the bloom of her girlish beauty, a face of extreme delicacy, features finely chiselled as a Roman cameo, eyes of lustrous grey, darkened by long black lashes, a complexion like the carnation bloom on a peach. He looked and looked till his eyes ached, but in vain.

Suddenly the constable pulled him sharply by the arm at the door of a café, a gaudy, glittering place, all lamps, looking-glass, and gilding.

‘I shouldn't be surprised if that was your man,’ he said, directing Groman’s attention to a man and woman sitting at a table near the entrance, with a pair of tall glasses and a champagne bottle before them.

The man was old and ugly, with a mahogany skin and black eyes—sharp, small, and restless as a caged rat’s. If the woman at the house by the river had been a chimney ornament, this man would have made the pair. He bore the same relation to her that the cobbler in old Bristol delf does to his crockery wife.

The woman, sitting opposite him, was of a different type. ‘Features finely chiselled as those in the face John Groman remembered of old; eyes as large and lustrous, but with what an altered radiance; complexion changed from peach-bloom to the dull, sickly hue of old ivory—faded beauty, sad relic of a life ill spent.

‘Yes,’ whispered Groman, ‘ that’s Clara.’

While he was speaking Valaority rose, said something to his wife while he lighted this cigar, and came out of the café, leaving her sitting at the table, with the half-empty bottle before her. Groman and the constable moved away from the door, and the Greek passed without noticing them.

’Now’s your chance,’ said Wormald. ‘I don’t suppose he'll be long away. You’ve no time to lose.’

Gruman seated himself in Valaority’s empty chair.”

‘Clara,’ he said, in a low voice, leaning across the table to speak to her, ‘ what have you done with my brother?’

She had taken the champagne bottle in her hand to refill her glass. At the sound of John Groman’s voice she set it down hastily, striking the glass against the marble.

‘My God!’ she cried, ‘how like your voice is---‘

‘Like my brother’s? ‘That isn't strange. ‘There never were brothers nearer and dearer than Edward and I. But for you I should have had him for my companion and friend all my life. You brought dishonour and misery upon my good, honest father and mother. You blighted my brother's youth, and robbed him of his good name. And when he came back to me after fifteen years, you—his evil genius— lured him to your wicked den to plunder and murder him.’

‘Murder!’ she cried. ‘No, no, no—not murder. It was not my doing. None of it was my doing. I stood up for him—I tried; but you don’t know what Valaority is—a

devil—a devil let loose to prey upon men. He is not made of the same sort of stuff as men like you—he is not flesh and blood to suffer and feel and be sorry, as I suffer and am sorry, though I have been so wicked. My life has been all wickedness since I married him. I linked myself to incarnate sin. I am not his wife, but his slave. When I thwart him—see, this is what he does.'

All this had been spoken hurriedly, in a low, suppressed voice. With her last words she pushed back the lace from her wrist and showed John Groman two livid bruises on the fair skin—bruises that looked like the print of a man's savage hand. Then she took up the bottle again and filled her glass, with a hand that shook like a leaf, and drank the wine eagerly to the last drop.

The constable had brought a chair to the table and seated himself by Groman's side. He was not inclined to trust altogether to his client's discretion.

'Come,' he said, in a soothing tone, as if he had been speaking to a child. 'Come, Mrs. Valaority, tell us all about it. Your husband will be back directly, and then it will be too late. Make a clean breast of it, and we'll take care of you. You've got the diamonds. We know all about that.'

'He has,' said Mrs. Valaority, vindictively, filling her glass again. 'I never get anything but fine clothes and hard usage.'

'What have you done with Edward Groman? Come, you were too fond of him in days gone by to stand by and see him murdered.'

'Murdered!' cried Clara, with her eyes flashing. 'If Valaority had laid a finger upon him I would have torn his eyes out. I would have fought for him as a tigress would for her whelps, if his life had been in danger, weak and small and crooked as I am. Fond of him in days gone by,' she echoed, with a hysterical laugh, 'when have I ever ceased to be fond of him? I am fonder of him now than anything between heaven and earth.'

'And yet you lured him to that vile den of yours,' said John Groman. 'You let your husband——'

'I thought my husband wanted only to borrow a few pounds from him. That was what he told me. Edward had come home flush of money. He called at a tavern kept by old friends of ours—people who were always kind to me—a place where I was always welcome. Edward came in while I was sitting in the bar. It was like seeing a ghost, and he was so pleased to see me, poor fellow, in spite of all the trouble I had

brought upon him; and he told me his adventures and how he had made his fortune; and while he was talking Valaority came in, and pretended not to be angry at seeing us together, and wormed everything out of Edward. He told us that he was going to drop into the theatre in the evening to surprise you on your birthday. Valaority asked him to come to supper with us afterwards, but he said it was impossible, he must stick to dear old Jack, and then—— hush,' she whispered with a look of awful fear, 'here comes my husband.'

Wormald pulled John Groman away from the table.

'I know all about it,' he said. 'There's no use in talking to the Greek.'

The man came scowling up to the table, frowned at the two men, and frowned still more heavily at his wife.

'What have those two fellows been saying to you,' he asked.

'They are strangers in Paris, and were asking me about the sights. You might as well have taken me to a theatre to-night, Stephen. I should like to see that play the people are all talking about, "Thirty years in a Gambler's Life."'

'You'll see plays enough, if you behave yourself,' he answered roughly; and if you don't, you'll be the heroine of a tragedy on your own account.'

'What do you mean by bringing me away?' asked Groman angrily, when they were on the Boulevard. 'Do you think I'm afraid to face Valaority?'

'What's the good of a row? or of getting that poor little woman half murdered? I've no power to arrest him here. You want to find your brother, don't you? 'Yes, of course. Well, I've found him.'

'What do you mean??

"We've been the blindest moles—we've been the most confounded asses—there isn't language strong enough to say what we've been,' cried Wormald, savagely. 'To get into that house, and to see him lying there, and not to understand, after thirty years' experience; and to come across the Channel, and leave him there at the mercy of those two hags.'

For pity's sake, man, don't trifle with me,' exclaimed John Groman, in a paroxysm of excitement. 'What do you mean?'

‘Why, that the man lying in the kitchen, smothered under a blanket, groaning in his sleep—the man that Irish hag called her husband—was your brother—hocussed, robbed, and left in that den in the care of those two beldames.’

‘Great heaven! And we left him there to be murdered.’

‘Hardly. They’ve got what they wanted. They’d hardly use foul play afterwards, unless he rode rusty, and they did it in self-defence. Yes, it’s clear as daylight. Valaority drugged him, robbed him, and left him in charge of these women, The stupefaction of the dose, whatever it was—a pinch of powdered tobacco, perhaps, in a tumbler of stout—would keep him quiet for a day or two. and by that time the thief would have got safe off with his plunder.’

‘God grant you're right,’ cried Groman.

‘I’m so convinced about it, that although I’ve led you on a wild goose chase over here, I’m not afraid to ask you to go back to London with me, and to trust to me to find your brother.’

James Wormald was right. They went back to London, and straight to the house by the river. They had some difficulty in getting in. The Greek hag had vanished, but the Irish woman was still at her post the kitchen fire, cooking sausages, and the man was still lying on the bed covered with a blanket; but this time he was not to be kept quiet by any management of his guardian’s. He flung back the bed coverings, and was talking wildly as Groman and his companion entered the kitchen.

It was Edward Groman, delirious, and in a high fever. The drug employed in the hocussing process had been something stronger than a pinch of tobacco, and, acting upon a brain in a state of hyper-excitement, had been well nigh fatal. Another twenty-four hours in that underground kitchen would have finished him. That was the verdict of the doctor who assisted in removing John Groman’s brother to Rose Cottage, Pentonville.

Here, watched and nursed with unspeakable tenderness by Jack and the little woman, Edward Groman slowly recovered from the horror of those five days and nights in the underground den, during which he had had a dim consciousness of his position and surroundings, and a sense of helplessness more awful than the fear of death. He had lain there like a paralysed creature, and had seen the hag brooding over her grimy hearth, and had not known if she were real, or the hideous vision of his distracted brain.

Neither the Valaoritys nor the stolen diamonds were ever heard of any more, but Edward Groman bore his loss with philosophical equanimity.

‘The seed that a man sows in his youth must be reaped in his age, Jack,’ he said. ‘I have had my lesson. It’s a good thing though, old fellow, that all my eggs were not in the same basket. I bought a block of land in New York with some of my money before I shipped myself for Holland and nobody can steal that. So, when you and the little woman are tired of me, you can send me back to America.’

‘That will never be!’ cried Jack and the little woman, in a chorus of two,

Story Notes:

M.E. Braddon's "The Clown's Quest" is a compelling example of Victorian sensationalist fiction that skillfully blends melodrama with genuine emotional depth. First published in Harper's Bazaar (1877-78), the novella demonstrates Braddon's talent for crafting suspenseful narratives while exploring themes of loyalty, class, and moral redemption.

The story's greatest achievement lies in its atmospheric tension. Braddon excels at creating Gothic unease, particularly in the haunting riverside house–"a tall dark house, whose chief windows had been bricked up"–which becomes a symbol of the moral darkness lurking beneath Victorian respectability. The pacing is masterful; the narrative moves from tender reunion to mounting dread with cinematic efficiency.

The characterization of John Groman transcends typical Victorian stereotypes. As a clown who is simultaneously "the acknowledged prince of pantomimists" and a model of middle-class respectability, he embodies the period's anxieties about performance, authenticity, and social mobility. His devotion to his brother provides genuine pathos that elevates the melodramatic plot.

Braddon also offers subtle social commentary. The contrast between John's honest prosperity and Edward's entanglement with the parasitic Valaoritys illuminates Victorian concerns about moral contamination across class boundaries. Clara Valaority emerges as a surprisingly nuanced figure–neither pure victim nor simple villain–trapped in an abusive marriage yet complicit in crime.

The resolution feels rushed and somewhat contrived. The convenient revelation that Edward was merely drugged rather than murdered, followed by his equally convenient American land holdings, sacrifices realism for a tidy ending. The Irish landlady verges on offensive caricature, reflecting the period's ethnic prejudices.

The prose occasionally strains toward over-elaborate Victorian sentiment ("The knell of our youth is sounded when we have lost those we loved while we were young"), though this is balanced by passages of crisp, effective dialogue and vivid scene-setting.

Despite its melodramatic excesses, "The Clown's Quest" remains an engaging work that showcases Braddon's narrative skill and her ability to infuse popular fiction with psychological complexity. It's a fine specimen of Victorian sensation literature–entertaining, atmospheric, and more thoughtful than its genre conventions might suggest.