LOUIS TRACY


# NUMBER SEVENTEEN

LOUIS TRACY


# NUMBER SEVENTEEN

**Louis Tracy**

# Number Seventeen

EAN 8596547051893

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

# Table of Contents

# CHAPTER I

# THE OUTCOME OF ARTISTIC CURIOSITY

Table of Contents

"Taxi, sir? Yes, sir. No. 4 will be yours."

A red-faced, loud-breathing commissionaire, engaged in the lucrative task of pocketing sixpences as quickly as he could summon cabs, vanished in a swirl of macintoshes and umbrellas.

People who had arrived at the theater in fine weather were emerging into a drizzle of rain. "All London," as the phrase goes, was flocking to see the latest musical comedy at Daly's, but all London, regarded thus collectively, is far from owning motor cars, or even affording taxicabs, so the majority of the play-goers were hurrying on foot towards tube railways and omnibus routes.

Still, a popular light opera could hardly fail to draw many patrons from the upper ranks of society, and, in the crush at the main exit, Francis Berrold Theydon, hesitating whether to walk or wait the hazard of a cab, deemed himself fortunate when a panting commissionaire promised to secure a taxi "in half a minute."

Automobiles of every known variety were snorting up to the curb and bustling off again as promptly as their users could enter and bestow themselves in dim interiors. Being a considerate person—wishful also to light a cigarette—Theydon moved out of the way. In so doing, he was

cannoned against by an impetuous footman, whose cry, "Your car, sir," led him to follow the man's alert eyes.

He saw a tall, elderly gentleman, with clean-shaven, shrewd, and highly intelligent features, of the type which finance, or the law, or a combination of both, seems to evolve only in big cities, escorting a young lady from the vestibule. Then Theydon remembered that he had noticed this self-same girl's remarkable beauty as she was silhouetted in white against the dark background of a first-tier box. He had even speculated idly as to her identity, and had come to the conclusion, on catching her face in profile, that she must be the daughter of the man seated by her side but half-hidden behind a heavy curtain.

The likeness was momentarily lost now while the two neared him, yet discovered anew when they halted for a second at his elbow. Oddly enough, the man was carrying an umbrella, which he proceeded to open, and his daughter's astonished question put their relationship beyond doubt.

"Dad," she said, with a charming smile in which there was just a hint of a pout, "aren't you coming home with me?"

"No. I must look in at the Constitutional Club. It's only a step. I'll take no harm. This sleet looks worse than it is when every drop shines in the glare of so many lamps. Now, in with you, Evelyn! Tell Downs to come back, and don't forget which club. Anyhow, I'll tell him myself."

"Shall I wait up for you?"

"Well—er—I shan't be late. I'll be free by the time Downs returns."

"No. 4 taxi!" came a voice, and Theydon saw his commissionaire perched on the step of a cab swinging in deftly behind the waiting car. The girl, gazing at her father, happened to look for an instant at Theydon, who, fearful lest his candidly admiring glance might have been a trifle too sustained, pretended a hurried interest in an unlighted cigarette. That was all. The three crossed the pavement almost simultaneously.

The next moment the unknown goddess was gone, though Theydon snatched a final glimpse of her, faintly visible, yet no less radiantly lovely, as she leaned forward from the depths of the limousine, and waved a white-gloved hand to her father through a window jeweled with raindrops.

There was nothing in the incident to provoke a second thought. Assuredly, Frank Theydon—as his friends called him—was not the only man in the vestibule of Daly's Theater who had found the girl well worth looking at, and it was the mere accident of propinquity which enabled him to overhear the quite commonplace remarks of father and daughter.

A score of similar occurrences had probably taken place in the like circumstances that night in London, and the maddest dreamer of fantastic dreams would not have heard the fluttering wings of the spirit of romance in connection with any one of them. It was by no means marvelous, therefore, but rather in obedience to the accepted law of things as they are when contrasted with things as they might be, if Theydon both failed to attach any importance to that chance meeting and proceeded forthwith to think of something else.

He did not forget it, of course. His artist's eyes had been far too interested in a certain rare quality of delicate femininity in the girl's face and figure, and his ear too quick to appreciate the music of her cultured voice, that he should not be able to recall such pleasant memories later. Indeed, during those fleeting moments on the threshold of the theater, he had garnered quite a number of minor impressions, not only of the girl, but of her father.

In some respects they were singularly alike. Thus, each had the same proud, self-reliant carriage, the same large, brilliant eyes, serene brow and firm mouth, the same repose of manner, the same clear, incisive enunciation. Neither could move in any company, however eclectic, without evoking comment.

They held in common that air of refinement and good breeding which is, or should be, the best-marked attribute of an aristocracy. It was impossible to imagine either in rags, but, given such a transformation, each would be notable because of the amazing difference that would exist between garb and mien.

It must not be imagined that Theydon indulged in this close analysis of the physical characteristics of two complete strangers while his cab was wheeling into the scurry of traffic in Cranbourn Street. Rather did he essay a third time to light the cigarette which he still held between his lips. And yet a third time was his intent balked.

A policeman stopped the east-bound stream of vehicles somewhat suddenly at the corner of Charing Cross road; owing to the mud, the taxi skidded a few feet beyond the line; a lamp was torn off by a heavy wagon coming south;

and a fierce argument between taxi driver and policeman resulted in "numbers" being demanded for future vengeance. Then Theydon took a hand in the dispute, poured oil on the troubled waters by tipping the policeman half a crown and the driver half a sovereign—these sums being his private estimate of damages to dignity and lamp—and the journey was resumed, with a net loss, to the person who had absolutely nothing to do with the affair, of twelve and sixpence in money and nearly ten minutes in time.

Theydon was not rich, as shall be seen in due course, but he was generous and impulsive. He hated the notion of any one suffering for having done him a service, and the taxi man might reasonably be deemed a real benefactor on that sloppy night.

So far as he was concerned, the delay of ten minutes was of no consequence. It only meant a slightly deferred snuggling down into an easy chair in his flat with a book and a pipe. That is how he would have expressed himself if questioned on the point. In reality it influenced and controlled his future in the most vital way, because, once the cab had crossed Oxford Street and turned into the quiet thoroughfare on which the first block of Innesmore Mansions abutted, he passed into a new phase of existence.

The cigarette, lighted at last after the altercation, had filled the cab with smoke to such an extent that Theydon lowered a window. At that moment the driver was slowing down to take the corner of the even more secluded road which contained Innesmore Mansions and the gardens appertaining thereto, and nothing else. Necessarily, Theydon was looking out, and he was very greatly surprised

at seeing the unknown gentleman of the theater walking rapidly round the same corner.

He could not be mistaken. The stranger tilted back his umbrella and raised his eyes to ascertain the name of the street, as though he was not quite sure of his whereabouts, and the glare of a lamp fell directly on his clean-cut, almost classical face.

Being thus occupied, he did not glance at the passing cab, or recognition might possibly have been mutual—possibly, though not probably, because, during that brief pause on the steps of the theater, he stood beside Theydon; hence, he was half-turned toward his daughter while they were discussing the night's immediate program.

In itself the fact that he had gone in the direction of Innesmore Mansions rather than toward the Constitutional Club was in nowise remarkable. Nevertheless, he had deceived his daughter—deceived her intentionally, and the knowledge came as a shock to his unsuspected critic in Theydon.

He did not look the sort of man who would stoop to petty evasion of the truth. It was as though a statue of Praxiteles, miraculously gifted with life, should express its emotions, not in Attic Greek, but in the up-to-date slang of the Strand.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Theydon, or words to that effect, and his cab sped on to the third doorway. Innesmore Mansions arranged its roomy flats in blocks of six, and he occupied No. 18.

He held a florin in readiness; the rain, now falling heavily, did not encourage any loitering on the pavement. For all that, he saw out of the tail of his eye that the other man was

approaching, though he had paused to examine the numbers blazoned on a lamp over the first doorway.

"Good night, sir, and thank you!" said the taxi driver.

The cab made off as Theydon ran up a short flight of steps. Innesmore Mansions did not boast elevators. The flats were comfortable, but not absurdly expensive, and their inmates climbed stairs cheerfully; at most, they had only to mount to a second storey. Each block owned a uniformed porter, who, on a night like this, even in May, needed rousing from his lair by a bell if in demand.

Theydon took the stairs two at a stride, opened the door of No. 18, which, with No. 17, occupied the top landing. He was valeted and cooked for by an ex-sergeant of the Army Service Corps and his wife, an admirable couple named Bates, and the male of the species appeared before Theydon had removed coat and opera hat in the tiny hall.

"Bring my tray in fifteen minutes, Bates, and that will be all for tonight," said Theydon.

"Yes, sir," said Bates. "Remarkable change in the weather, sir."

"Rotten. Who would have expected this downpour after such a fine day?"

Bates took the coat and hat, and Theydon entered his sitting room, a spacious, square apartment which faced the gardens. He had purposely prevented Bates from coming immediately with his nightly fare, which consisted of a glass of milk and a plate of bread and butter.

Truth to tell, the artistic temperament contains a spice of curiosity, which is, in some sense, an exercise of the perceptive faculties. Theydon wanted to raise a window and

look out, an unusual action, and one which, therefore, would induce Bates to wonder as to its cause.

For once in his life a man who bothered his head very little about other people's business was puzzled, and meant to ascertain whether or not the unknown was really calling on some resident in Innesmore Mansions. It was a harmless bit of espionage. Theydon scarcely knew the names of the other dwellers in his own block, and his acquaintance did not even go that far with any of the remaining tenants of 48 flats, all told.

Still, to a writer, the vagaries of the tall stranger were decidedly interesting, so he did open a window, and did thrust his head out, and was just in time to see the owner of the limousine which would call at the Constitutional Club in a quarter of an hour mount the steps leading to Nos. 13-18. Somehow, the discovery gave Theydon a veritable thrill.

Could that pretty girl's father, by any chance, be coming to visit him? A wildly improbable development had been whittled down to a five-to-one chance. He closed the window and waited, yes, actually waited, for the bell to ring!

The sitting room door was open, and it faced the hall door. Footsteps sounded sharply on the slate steps of the stairway; when Theydon heard some one climbing to the topmost landing he was almost convinced that, as usual, the unexpected was about to happen. It did happen, but took its own peculiar path. The unknown rang the bell of No. 17, and, after a slight delay, was admitted.

Theydon smiled at the anticlimax. A trivial mystery had developed along strictly orthodox lines. A rather good-looking and distinctly well-dressed lady, a Mrs. Lester,

occupied No. 17. She lived alone, too, he believed. At any rate, he had never seen any other person, except an elderly servant, enter or leave the opposite flat, and he had encountered the tenant herself so seldom that he was not quite certain of recognizing her apart from the environment of the staircase which provided their occasional meeting place.

Then he sighed. Romance evidently denied her magic presence to one who wooed her assiduously by his pen. He was yet to learn that the alluring sprite had not only favored him with her attentions during the past twenty minutes, but meant to stick to him like his own shadow for many a day. And he frowned, too.

He did not approve of that pretty girl's father visiting the attractive Mrs. Lester in conditions which savored of something underhanded and clandestine. The man had deliberately misled his daughter. He left her with a lie on his lips; yet never were appearances more deceptive, for the stranger had the outward aspect of one whose word was his bond.

"Oh, dash it all, what business is it of mine, anyhow?" growled Theydon, and he laughed sourly as he sat down to write a letter which Bates could take to the post, thus himself practicing a slight deceit intended solely to account for the deferred bringing of the tray.

It was apparently an unimportant missive which could well have been postponed till the morning, being merely an announcement to a firm of publishers that he would pay a business call later in the week. In less than five minutes it, and another, making an appointment for Wednesday, this

being the night of Monday, were written, sealed, directed and stamped.

He rang. Bates came, with laden hands, thinking the tray was in demand.

"Kindly post those for me," said Theydon, glancing at the letters. "Better take an umbrella. It's raining cats and dogs."

The man had found the door open, and left it so when he entered. Before he could answer, the door of No. 17 was opened and closed, with the jingle inseparable from the presence of many small panes of glass in leaden casing, and footsteps sounded on the stairs. For some reason—probably because of the unusual fact that any one should be leaving Mrs. Lester's flat at so late an hour, both men listened.

Then Bates recollected himself.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Oddly enough, the man's marked pause suggested a question to his employer.

"Mrs. Lester's visitor didn't stop long," was the comment. "He came up almost on my heels."

"I thought it must ha' bin a gentleman," said Bates.

"Why a 'gentleman'?" laughed Theydon.

"I mean, sir, that the step didn't sound like a lady's."

"Ah, I see."

Vaguely aware that he had committed himself to a definite knowledge as to the sex of Mrs. Lester's visitor, Theydon added:

"I didn't actually see any one on the stairs, but I heard an arrival, and jumped to the same conclusion as you, Bates."

Tacitly, master and man shared the same opinion—it was satisfactory to know that Mrs. Lester's male visitors who

called at the unconventional hour of 11:30 p. m. were shown out so speedily. Innesmore Mansions were intensely respectable.

No lady could live there alone whose credentials had not satisfied a sharp-eyed secretary. Further, Theydon was aware of a momentary disloyalty of thought toward the distinguished-looking father of that remarkably handsome girl, and it pleased him to find that he had erred.

Bates went out, closing the door behind him: he donned an overcoat, secured an umbrella and presently descended to the street. Yielding again to impulse, Theydon reopened the window and peered down. The stranger was walking away rapidly. A policeman, glistening in cape and overalls, stood at the corner, near a pillar box.

The tall man, who topped the burly constable by some inches, halted for a moment to post a letter. Whether by accident or design he held his umbrella so that the other could not see his face. Then he disappeared. Bates came into view. He dropped Theydon's letters into the box, but he and the policeman exchanged a few words, which, his employer guessed, must surely have dealt with the vagaries of the weather.

For an author of repute Theydon's surmises had been wide of the mark several times that night. The policeman had seen the unknown coming out from the doorway of Nos. 13-18, and had noted his stature and appearance.

"Who's the toff who just left your lot?" he said, when Bates arrived.

"Dunno," said Bates. "Some one callin' on Mrs. Lester, I fancy. Why?"

"O, nothing. On'y, if I was togged up regardless on a night like this I'd blue a cab fare."

"I didn't see him meself," commented Bates. "My boss 'eard him come, an' both of us 'eard him go. He didn't stay more'n five minnits."

"Wish I was in his shoes. I've got to stick round here till six in the morning," grinned the policeman.

"Well, cheer-o, mate."

"Cheer-o."

Bates looked in on his master before retiring for the night.

"What time shall I call you, sir?" he said.

Theydon was in the pipe and book stage, having exchanged his dress coat for a smoking jacket. He was reading a treatise on aeronautics, and, like every novice, had already formulated a flying scheme which would supersede all known inventions.

"Not later than 8," he said. "I must be out by 9. And, by the way, I may as well tell you now. After lunch tomorrow I am going to Brooklands. I return to Waterloo at 6:40. As I have to dine in the West End at 7:30, and my train may be a few minutes behind time, I want you to meet me with a suitcase at the hairdresser's place on the main platform. I'll dress there and go straight to my friend's house. It would be cutting things rather fine if I attempted to come here."

"I'll have everything ready, sir."

Bates was eminently reliable in such matters. He could be depended on to the last stud.

The storm which had raged overnight must have cleared the skies for the following day, because Theydon never

enjoyed an outing more than his trip to the famous motor track. His business there, however, lay with aviation. A popular magazine had commissioned him to write an article summing up the progress and practical aims of the airmen and he was devoting afternoon and evening to the quest of information. A couple of experts and a photographer had given him plenty of raw material in the open, but he looked forward with special zest to an undisturbed chat that night with Mr. James Creighton Forbes, millionaire and philanthropist, whose peculiar yet forcible theories as to the peaceful conquest of the air were for the hour engaging the attention of the world's press.

He had never met Mr. Forbes. When on the point of writing for an appointment he had luckily remembered that the great man was a lifelong friend of the professor of physics at his (Theydon's) university, and a delightfully cordial introductory note was forthcoming in the course of a couple of posts. This brought the invitation to dinner. "On Tuesday evening I am dining *en famille*," wrote Mr. Forbes, "so, if you are free, join us at 7:30, and we can talk uninterruptedly afterward."

The train was not late. Bates, erect and soldierly, was standing at the rendezvous. With him were two men whom Theydon had never before seen. One, a bulky, stalwart, florid-faced man of forty, had something of the military aspect; the other supplied his direct antithesis, being small, wizened and sallow.

The big man had a round, bullet head, prominent bright blue eyes, and the cheek bones, chin and physical development of a heavyweight pugilist. His companion,

whose dark and recessed eyes were noticeably bright, too, could not be more than half his weight, and Theydon would not have been surprised if told that this diminutive person was a dancing master. Naturally he classed both as acquaintances of his valet, encountered by chance on the platform at Waterloo.

He was slightly astonished, therefore, when the two faced him, together with Bates. A dramatic explanation of their presence was soon supplied.

"These gentlemen, sir, are Chief Inspector Winter and Detective Inspector Furneaux of Scotland Yard," said the ex-sergeant, in the awed tone which some people cannot help using when speaking of members of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Though daylight had not yet failed it was rather dark in that corner of the station, and Theydon saw now what he had not perceived earlier, that the usually sedate Bates was pale and harassed looking.

"Why, what's up?" he inquired, gazing blankly from one to the other of the ominous pair.

"Haven't you seen the evening papers, Mr. Theydon?" said Winter, the giant of the two.

"No, I've been at Brooklands since two o'clock. But what is it?"

"You don't know, then, that a murder was committed in the Innesmore Mansions last night or early this morning?"

"Good Lord, no! Who was killed?"

"A Mrs. Lester, the lady—"

"Mrs. Lester, who lives in No. 17?"

"Yes."

"What a horrible thing! Why, only the day before yesterday I met her on the stairs."

It was a banal statement, and Theydon knew it, but he blurted out the first crazy words that would serve to cloak the monstrous thought which leaped into his brain. And a picture danced before his mind's eye, a picture, not of the fair and gracious woman who had been done to death, but of a sweet-voiced girl in a white satin dress who was saying to a fine-looking man standing by her side: "Dad, aren't you coming home with me?"

His blurred senses were conscious of the strange medley produced by the familiar noises of a railway station blending with the quietly authoritative voice of the chief inspector.

"Mr. Furneaux and I have the inquiry in hand, Mr. Theydon," the detective was saying. "We called at your flat, and Bates told us of the sounds you both heard about 11:30 last night. I'm afraid we have rather upset you by coming here, but Bates was unable to say what time you would return home, so I thought you would not mind if we accompanied him in order to find out the hour at which it would be convenient for you to meet us at your flat—this evening, of course."

"You have certainly given me the shock of my life," Theydon gasped. "That poor woman dead, murdered! It's too awful! How was she killed?"

"She was strangled."

"O, this is dreadful! Shall I wire an apology to the man I'm dining with?"

"No need for that, Mr. Theydon," said Winter, sympathetically. "I'm sorry now we blurted out our

unpleasant news. But you had to be told, and it was essential that we should get your story some time tonight. Can you be home by eleven?"

"Yes, yes. I'll be there without fail."

"Thank you. We have a good many inquiries to make in the meantime. Goodby, for the present."

The two made off. Winter had done all the talking, but Theydon was far too disturbed to pay heed to the trivial fact that Furneaux, after one swift glance, seemed to regard him as a negligible quantity. It was borne in on him that the detective evidently believed he had something of importance to say, and meant to render it almost impossible that he should escape questioning while his memory was still active with reference to events of the previous night.

And he had so little, yet so much, to tell. On his testimony alone it would be a comparatively easy matter to establish beyond doubt the identity of Mrs. Lester's last known visitor. And what would be the outcome? He dared hardly trust his own too lively imagination. Whether or not his testimony gave a clew to the police, the one irrevocable issue was that somewhere in London there was a girl named Evelyn who would regard a certain young man, Francis Berrold Theydon to wit, as a loathsome and despicable Paul Pry.

Bates, somewhat relieved by the departure of the emissaries of Scotland Yard, recalled his master's scattered wits to the affairs of the moment.

"It's getting on for seven, sir," he said. "I've engaged a dressing room."

"Tell you what, Bates," said Theydon abstractedly, "it is my fixed belief that you and I could do with a brandy and soda apiece."

"That would be a good idea, sir."

The good idea was duly acted on. While Theydon was dressing Bates told him what little he knew of the tragedy, which was discovered by Mrs. Lester's maid when she brought a cup of tea to her mistress' bedroom at ten o'clock that morning.

Bates himself was the first person appealed to by the distracted woman, and he had the good sense to leave the body and its surroundings untouched until a doctor and the police had been summoned by telephone. Thenceforth the day had passed in a whirl of excitement, active in respect to police inquiries and passive in its resistance to newspaper interviewers. He saw no valid reason why his employer's plans should be disturbed, so made no effort to communicate with him at Brooklands.

"Them 'tecs were very pressin', sir," said Bates, rather indignantly, "very pressin', especially the little one. He almost wanted to know what we had for breakfast."

At that Theydon laughed dolefully, and, as it happened, Bates's grim humor prevented him from ascertaining the exact nature of Furneaux's pertinacity. Moreover, the time was passing. At 7:15 Theydon called a taxi and was carried swiftly to Mr. Forbes's house in Belgravia, while Bates disposed himself and the dressing case on top of a northbound omnibus.

The mere change of clothing, aided by the stimulant, had cleared Theydon's faculties. Though he would gladly have

foregone the dinner, he realized that it was not a bad thing that he should be forced, as it were, to wrench his thoughts from the nightmare of a crime with which such a man as "Evelyn's" father might be associated, even innocently.

At any rate, he was given some hours to marshal his forces for the discussion with the representatives of Scotland Yard. He knew well that he must then face the dilemma boldly. Two courses were open. He could either share Bates's scanty knowledge, no more and no less, or avow his ampler observations. And why should he adopt the first of these alternatives? Was he not bringing himself practically within the law?

Why should any man be shielded, no matter what his social position or how beautiful his daughter, who might possibly have caused the death of the pleasant-mannered and ladylike woman fated now to remain for ever a tragic ghost in the memory of one who had dwelt under the same roof with her for five months?

It was a thorny problem, yet it permitted of only one solution. Duty must be done though the heavens fell.

This conviction grew on Theydon as his cab scurried across the Thames and along Birdcage Walk. A pretty conceit could not be allowed to sweep aside the first principles of citizenship. Indeed, so reassuring was this reasoned judgment that he felt a sense of relief as he paid off the cab and rang the bell of the Forbes mansion.

He gave his name to a footman, who disposed of his overcoat and hat, and led him to an upstairs drawing room. Even the most fleeting glances at hall and staircase revealed evidences of a highly trained artistic taste gratified

by great wealth. The furniture, the china, the pictures, were each and all rare and well chosen.

"Mr. Theydon," announced the man, throwing wide the door.

A lady, bent over some prints spread on a distant table, turned at the words, and hastened to greet the guest.

"My father is expecting you, Mr. Theydon," she said. "He was detained rather late in the city, but will be here now at any moment."

Theydon was no neurotic boy, whose surcharged nerves were liable to crack in a crisis demanding some unusual measure of self-control. Yet the room and its contents—and, not least, the graceful girl advancing with outstretched hand—swam before his eyes.

Because this was "Evelyn," and it was certain as the succession of night to day that Mrs. Lester's mysterious visitor must have been "Evelyn's" father, James Creighton Forbes.

# CHAPTER II

# THE COMPACT

Table of Contents

So petrified was Theydon by coming face to face with the last person breathing whom he expected to meet in that room, that he stumbled over a small chair which lay directly between him and his hostess. At any other time the gaucherie would have annoyed him exceedingly; in the existing circumstances, no more fortunate incident could have happened, since it brought Evelyn Forbes herself unwittingly to the rescue.

"I have spoken twenty times about chairs being left in that absurd position," she cried, as their hands met, "but you know how wooden-headed servants are. They will not learn to discriminate. People often sit in that very place of an afternoon, because any one seated just there sees the Canaletto on the opposite wall in the best light. When the lamps are on, the reason for the chair simply ceases to exist, and it becomes a trap for the unwary. You are by no means the first who has been caught in it."

Theydon realized, with a species of irritation, that the girl was discoursing volubly about the offending chair merely in order to extricate an apparently shy and tongue-tied young man from a morass of his own creation.

That an author of some note should not only behave like a country bumpkin, but actually seem to need encouragement so that he should "feel at home" in a

London drawing room, was a fact so ridiculous that it spurred his bemused wits into something approaching their normal activity.

"I have not the excuse of the Canaletto," he said, compelling a pleasant smile, "but may I plead an even more distracting vision? I came here expecting to meet an elderly gentleman of the class which flippant Americans describe as 'high-brow,' and I am suddenly brought face to face with a Romney 'portrait of a lady' in real life. Is it likely that such an insignificant object as a chair, and a small one at that, would succeed in catching my eye?"

Evelyn Forbes laughed, with a joyous mingling of surprise and relief. Most certainly, Mr. Theydon's manner of speech differed vastly from the disconcerting expression of positive bewilderment, if not actual fright, which marred his entrance.

"Do I really resemble a Romney? Which one?" she cried.

"An admitted masterpiece."

"Ah, but people who pay compliments deserve to be put on the rack. I insist on a definition."

"Lady Hamilton as Joan of Arc."

He drew the bow at random, and was gratified to see that his hearer was puzzled.

"I don't know that particular picture," she said, "but I cannot imagine any model less adapted to the subject."

"Romney immortalized the best qualities of both," he answered promptly. "Please, may I look at the Canaletto which indirectly waylaid me?"

She turned to cross the room, but stopped and faced him again with a suddenness that argued an impulsive

temperament.

"Now, I remember," she said. "Dad told me you had written novels and some essays. Have you ever really seen Romney's portrait of Lady Hamilton as Joan of Arc?"

Those fine eyes of hers pierced him with a glance of such candid inquiry that he cast pretence to the winds.

"No," he said.

"Then you just invented the comparison as an excuse for colliding with the chair?"

"Yes. At the same time I throw myself on the mercy of the court."

"It was rather clever of you."

He laughed, and their eyes met, at very close range.

"May I share the joke?" said a voice, and Theydon knew, before he turned, that the man he had last seen disappearing around the corner of Innesmore Mansions in a heavy rainstorm was in the room.

"Why did you tell me that Mr. Theydon was a serious scientific person?" cried the girl. "He is anything but that. He can talk nonsense quite admirably."

"So can a great many serious scientific persons, Evelyn. Glad to see you, Mr. Theydon. Professor Scarth's letter paved the way for something more than a formal meeting, so I thought you wouldn't mind giving us an evening. My wife is not in town. She is a martyr to hay fever, and has to fly from London to the sea early in May to escape. If caught here in June nothing can save her. Tonight, as it happens, you're our only guest, but my daughter is going to a musicale at Lady de Winton's after dinner, so you and I will

be free to soar into the empyrean through a blaze of tobacco smoke."

Standing there, in that delightful drawing room, made welcome by a man like Forbes, and admitted to a degree of charming intimacy by a girl like Forbes's daughter, Theydon tried to believe that his meeting with those ill-omened detectives at Waterloo Station was, in some sort, a figment of the imagination.

But he was instantly and effectually brought back to a dour sense of reality by Evelyn Forbes's next words. She, by chance, looked at Theydon just as she had looked at him the previous night.

"Were you at Daly's Theater last night?" she inquired suddenly.

"Yes," he said. Then, finding there was no help for it, he went on:——

"You and I have hit on the same discovery, Miss Forbes. We three stood together at the exit. I was waiting for a taxi, and saw you get into your car. Now you know just why I fell over the chair."

Forbes glanced up quickly.

"Don't tell me Tomlinson forgot to move that infernal chair again!" he cried. "Really, I must get rid either of our butler or the Canaletto, yet I prize both."

"Don't blame Tomlinson, Dad," laughed the girl. "If Mr. Theydon hadn't made an unconventional entry we would have talked about the weather, or something equally stupid."

At that moment Tomlinson himself, imperturbable and portly, announced that dinner was served. The three