

George Moore, "A Faithful Heart" (*The Speaker*, 16 April 1892)

Part I

It was a lovely morning, and Major Shepherd walked rapidly, his toes turned well out, his shoulders set well back. Behind him floated the summer foliage of Appleton Park----the family seat of the Shepherds----and at the end of the smooth, white road lay the Major's destination----the small town of Branbury.

The Major was the medium height; his features were regular and cleanly cut. He would have been a handsome man if his eyes had not been two dark mud-coloured dots, set close together, wholly lacking in expression. A long brown moustache swept picturesquely over bright, smoothly shaven cheeks, and the ends of this ornament were beginning to whiten. The Major was over forty. He carried under his arm a brown-paper parcel (the Major was rarely seen without a brown-paper parcel), and in it were things he could not possibly do without----his diary and his letter-book. The brown-paper parcel contained likewise a number of other papers; it contained the Major's notes for a book he was writing on the principal county families in Buckinghamshire. The Major had been collecting information for this book for many years, and with it he hoped to make two or three hundred pounds----money which he stood sorely in need of----and to advance his position in the county, a position which, in his opinion, his father had done little to maintain, and which, to his very deep regret, his sisters were now doing their best to compromise. That very morning, while packing up his brown-paper parcel, some quarter of an hour ago, he had had a somewhat angry interview on this subject with his sisters. For he had thought it his duty to reprove them for keeping company with certain small London folk who had chosen to come to live in the neighbourhood. Ethel had said that they were not going to give up their

friends because they were not good enough for him, and Maud had added significantly that they were quite sure that their friends were quite as good as the friend he was going to see in Branbury. The Major turned on his heel and left the house.

As he walked towards Branbury he asked himself if it were possible that they knew anything about Charlotte Street; and as he approached the town he looked round nervously, fearing lest some friend might pop down upon him, and, after some hesitation, decided to take a long detour so as to avoid passing by the house of some people he knew. As he made his way through a bye-street his step quickened, and at the corner of Charlotte Street he looked round to make sure he was not followed. He then drew his keys from his pocket and let himself into a small, mean-looking house.

Major Shepherd might have spared himself the trouble of these precautions; no one was minded to watch him, for everyone knew perfectly well who lived in 27, Charlotte Street. It was common talk that the tall, dark woman who lived in 27 was Mrs Charles Shepherd, and that the little girl who ran by Mrs Shepherd's side on the rare occasions when she was seen in the streets----for it was said that the Major did not wish her to walk much about the town, lest she should attract the attention of the curious, who might be tempted to make inquiries----was the Major's little daughter, and it had been noticed that this little girl went forth now and then, basket on her arm, to do the marketing. It was said that Mrs Shepherd had been a servant in some lodging-house where the Major had been staying; other scandal-mongers declared that they knew for certain that the Major had made his wife's acquaintance in the street. Rumour had never wandered far from the truth. The Major had met his wife one night as he was coming home from his club. They seemed to suit one another; he saw her frequently for several months, and then, fearing to lose her, in a sudden access of jealousy----he had some time before been bitterly jilted----he proposed to marry her. The arrival of his parents, who came up to town beseeching

of him to do nothing rash, only served to intensify his determination, and, losing his temper utterly, he told his father and mother that he would never set his foot in Appleton Park in their lifetime if they ever again ventured to pry into his private affairs; and, refusing to give any information regarding his intentions, he asked them to leave his lodgings. What he did after they never knew; years went by, and they sighed and wondered, but the matter was never alluded to in Appleton Park.

But the Major had only L400 a year, and though he lived at Appleton Park, never spending a penny more than was necessary, he could not allow her more than L3 a week. He had so many expenses: his club, his clothes, and all the incidental expenses he was put to in the grand houses where he went to stay. By strict economy, however, Mrs Shepherd managed to make two ends meet. Except when she was too ill and had to call in a charwoman to help her with the heaviest part of the work, she undertook the entire housework herself: when times were hardest, she had even taken in a lodger, not thinking herself above cooking and taking up his dinner. She had noticed that her economies endeared her to the Major, and it was pleasant to please him. Hers was a kind-hearted, simple nature, that misfortune had brought down in the world; but, as is not uncommon with persons of weak character, she possessed a clear, sensible mind which allowed her to see things in their true lights, and without difficulty she recognized the unalterable nature of her case. It mattered little whether the Major acknowledged her or not, his family would never have anything to do with her; the doors of Society were for ever closed against her. So within a year of her marriage with the Major she was convinced that her marriage had better be kept a secret; for, by helping to keep it a secret, she could make substantial amends to the man who had married her; by proclaiming it to the world, she would only alienate his affection. She understood this very well, and in all docility and obedience lent herself to the deception, accepting without complaint a mean and clandestine existence. But she would not allow her little girl to carry up a jug of hot water, and it was only rarely, when prostrate with pain, that she allowed Nellie to take

the basket and run round to the butcher's and buy a bit of steak for their dinner. The heiress of Appleton Park must be brought up free from all degrading memory. But for herself she had no care. Appleton Park could never be anything to her, even if she outlived the old people, which was hardly probable. What would she, a poor invalid, do there? She did not wish to compromise her husband's future, and still less the future of her darling daughter. She could only hope that, when dead, her sins would be forgiven her; and that this release might not be long delayed she often prayed. The house was poor, and she was miserable, but any place was good enough to suffer in. So she said when she rose and dragged herself downstairs to do a little cooking; and the same thought came to her when she lay all alone in the little parlour, furnished with what a few pounds could buy----a paraffin-lamp, a round table, a few chairs, an old and ill-padded mahogany armchair, in which it was a torture to lie; not an ornament on the chimney-piece, not a flower, not a book to while away the interminable hours. From the barren little passage, covered with a bit of oil-cloth, all and everything in 27 was meagre and unimaginative. The Major had impressed his personality upon the house. Everything looked as if it had been scraped. There was a time when Mrs Shepherd noticed the barrenness of her life; but she had grown accustomed to it, and she waited for the Major in the terrible armchair, glad when she heard his step, almost happy when he sat by her and told her what was happening 'at home'.

He took her hand and asked her how she was. 'You are looking very tired, Alice.'

'Yes, I'm a little tired. I have been working all the morning. I made up my room, and then I went out to the butcher's and bought a piece of steak. I have made you such a nice pudding for your lunch; I hope you will like it.'

'There's not much fear about my liking any beefsteak pudding you make, dear; I never knew anyone

who could make one like you. But you should not tire yourself---and just as you are beginning to get better.'

Mrs Shepherd smiled and pressed her husband's hand. The conversation fell. At the end of a long silence Mrs Shepherd said: 'What has happened to trouble you, dear? I know something has, I can see it by your face.'

Then the Major told how unpleasantly his sisters had answered him when he had ventured to suggest that they saw far too much of their new neighbours, who were merely common sort of Londoners, and never would be received by the county. 'I'm sure that someone must have told them of my visits here; I'm sure they suspect something ... Girls are very sharp nowadays.'

'I am sorry, but it is no fault of mine. I rarely leave the house, and I never walk in the principal streets if I can possibly help it.'

'I know, dear, I know that no one can be more careful than you; but as people are beginning to smell a rat notwithstanding all our precautions, I suppose there's nothing for it but to go back to London.'

'Oh, you don't think it will be necessary to go back to London, do you? The place suits the child so well, and it is so nice to see you almost every day; and it is such a comfort when you are not here to know you are only a few miles away; and from the top of the hill the trees of the park are visible, and whenever I feel well enough I walk there and think of the time our Nellie will be the mistress of all those broad acres.'

'It is the fault of the busybodies,' he said; 'I cannot think what pleasure people find in meddling in other people's affairs. I never care what anyone else does. I have quite enough to do thinking of my own.'

Mrs Shepherd did not answer. 'I see,' he said, 'you don't like moving, but if you remain here all the trouble we have taken not to get found out these last ten years will go for nothing. There will be more worry and vexations, and I really don't think I could bear much more; I believe I should go off my head.' The little man spoke in a calm, even voice, and stroked his silky moustache gravely.

'Very well, then, my dear, I'll return to town as soon as you like----as soon as it is convenient. I daresay you are right.'

'I'm sure I am. You have never found me giving you wrong advice yet, have you, dear?'

Then they went down to the kitchen to eat the steak pudding; and when the Major had finished his second helping he lit his pipe, and the conversation turned on how they should get rid of their house, and how much the furniture would fetch. When he had decided to sell the furniture, and had fixed the day of their departure, Mrs Shepherd said----

'There's one thing I have to ask you, dear, and I hope you won't refuse my request. I should like to see Appleton Park before I leave. I should like to go there with Nellie and see the house and the lands that will one day belong to her.'

'I don't know how it is to be managed. If you were to meet my mother and sisters they would be sure to suspect something at once.'

'No one will know who I am. I should like to walk about the grounds for half an hour with the child.

If I don't see Appleton now I never shall see it.'

The Major stroked his long, silky moustache with his short, crabbed little hand. He remembered that he had heard the carriage ordered for two o'clock----they were all going to a tennis-party some miles distant. Under the circumstances she might walk about the grounds without being noticed. He did not think any of the gardeners would question her, and, if they did, he could trust her to give an evasive answer. And then he would like her to see the place----just to know what she thought of it.

'Won't you say yes?' she said at last, her voice breaking the silence sharply.

'I was just thinking, dear: they have all gone to a tennis-party today. There'll be no one at home.'

'Well! why not today?'

'Well; I was thinking I've been lucky enough to get hold of some very interesting information about the Websters----about their ancestor Sir Thomas, who distinguished himself in the Peninsular----and I wanted to get it copied under the proper heading, but I daresay we can do that another day. The only thing is, how are you to get there? You are not equal to walking so far----'

'I was thinking, dear, that I might take a fly. I know there is the expense, but ...'

'Yes; five or six shillings, at least. And where will you leave the fly? At the lodge gate? The flyman

would be sure to get into conversation with the lodge-keeper or his wife. He'd tell them where he came from, and----'

'Supposing you were to get a two-wheeled trap and drive me yourself; that would be nicer still.'

'I'm so unlucky; someone would be sure to see me.'

The Major puffed at his pipe in silence. Then he said, 'If you were to put on a thick veil, and we were to get out of the town by this end and make our way through the lanes----it would be a long way round; but one hardly meets anyone that way, and the only danger would be going. We should return in the dusk. I don't care how late you make it; my people won't be home till nine or ten o'clock at night, perhaps later still. There will be dancing, and they are sure to stay late.'

Finally the matter was decided, and about four o'clock the Major went to the livery stable to order the trap. Mrs Shepherd and Nellie joined him soon after. Turning from the pony, whose nose he was stroking, he said----

'I hope you have brought a thick shawl; it will be cold coming back in the evening.'

'Yes, dear, here it is, and another for Nellie. What do you think of this veil?'

'It will do very well. I do hope these stablemen won't talk; let's go off at once.' The Major lifted in the child, tucked the rug about them, and cried to the stableman to let go. He drove very nervously, afraid at every moment lest the pony should bolt; and when the animal's extreme docility assured him there

was no such danger, he looked round right and left, expecting at every moment some friend to pounce down upon him. But the ways were empty, the breeze that came across the fields was fresh and sweet, and they were all beginning to enjoy themselves, when he suddenly espied a carriage following in his wake. He whipped up the pony, and contrived to distance his imaginary pursuer; and having succeeded, he praised his own driving, and at the cross-roads he said: 'I dare not go any farther, but you can't miss the lodge gate in that clump of trees----the first white gate you come to. Don't ask any questions; it is ten to one you'll find the gate open; walk straight through, and don't forget to go through the beech-wood at the back of the house; the river runs right round the hill. I want to know what you think of the view. But pray don't ask to see the house; there's nothing to see; the housemaids would be sure to talk, and describe you to my sisters. So now goodbye; hope you'll enjoy yourself. I shall have just time to get to Hambrook and back; I want to see my solicitor. You'll have seen everything in a couple of hours, so in a couple of hours I shall be waiting for you here.'

Part II

It was as the Major said. The lodge-keepers asked no questions, and they passed up the drive, through the silence of an overgrowth of laurels and rhododendrons. Then the park opened before their eyes. Nellie rolled on the short, crisp, worn grass, or chased the dragonflies; the spreading trees enchanted her, and, looking at the house----a grey stone building with steps, pillars, and pilasters, hidden amid cedars and evergreen oaks----she said, 'I never saw anything so beautiful; is that where the Major goes when he leaves us? Look at the flowers, Mother, and the roses. May we not go in there----I don't mean into the house? I heard the Major ask you not to go in for fear we should meet the housemaids----but just past this railing, into the garden? Here is the gate.' The child stood with her hand on the wicket, waiting for reply: the mother stood as in a dream, looking at the house, thinking vaguely of the pictures,

the corridors, and staircases, that lay behind the plate-glass windows.

'Yes; go in, my child.'

The gardens were in tumult of leaf and bloom, and the little girl ran hither and thither, gathering single flowers, and then everything that came under her hands, binding them together in bouquets----one for mother, one for the Major, and one for herself. Mrs Shepherd only smiled a little bitterly when Nellie came running to her with some new and more splendid rose. She did not attempt to reprove the child. Why should she? Everything here would one day be hers. Why then should the present be denied them? And so did her thoughts run as she walked across the sward following Nellie into the beech wood that clothed the steep hillside. The pathway led by the ruins of some Danish military earthworks, ancient hollows full of leaves and silence. Pigeons cooed in the vast green foliage, and from time to time there came up from the river the chiming sound of oars. Rustic seats were at pleasant intervals, and, feeling a little tired, Mrs Shepherd sat down. She could see the river's silver glinting through the branches, and, beyond the river, the low-lying river lands, dotted with cattle and horses grazing, dim already with blue evening vapours. In the warm solitude of the wood the irreparable misfortune of her own life pressed upon her: and in this hour of lassitude her loneliness seemed more than she could bear. The Major was good and kind, but he knew nothing of the weight of the burden he had laid upon her, and that none should know was in this moment a greater weight than the burden itself. Nellie was exploring the ancient hollows where Danes and Saxons had once fought, and had ceased to call forth her discoveries when Mrs Shepherd's bitter meditation was broken by the sudden sound of a footstep.

The intruder was a young lady. She was dressed in white, her pale gold hair was in itself an aristocracy, and her narrow slippered feet were dainty to look upon. 'Don't let me disturb you,' she said. 'This is

my favourite seat; but I pray you not to move, there is plenty of room.' So amiable was she in voice and manner that Mrs Shepherd could not but remain, although she had already recognized the girl as one of the Major's sisters. Fearing to betray herself, greatly nervous, Mrs Shepherd answered briefly Miss Shepherd's allusions to the beauty of the view. At the end of a long silence Miss Shepherd said---

'I think you know my brother, Major Shepherd.'

Mrs Shepherd hesitated, and then she said: 'No. I have never heard the name.'

'Are you sure? Of course, I may be mistaken; but----'

Ethel made pause, and looked Mrs Shepherd straight in the face. Smiling sadly, Mrs Shepherd said---

'Likenesses are so deceptive.'

'Perhaps, but my memory is pretty good for faces.... It was two or three months ago, we were going up to London, and I saw my brother get into the train with a lady who looked like you. She really was very like you.'

Mrs Shepherd smiled and shook her head.

'I do not know the lady my brother was with, but I've often thought I should like to meet her.'

'Perhaps your brother will introduce you.'

'No, I don't think he will. She has come to live at Branbury, and now people talk more than ever. They say that he is secretly married.'

'And you believe it?'

'I don't see why it shouldn't be true. My brother is a good fellow in many ways, but, like all other men, he is selfish. He is just the man who would keep his wife hidden away in a lonely little lodging rather than admit that he had made a _mesalliance_. What I don't understand is why she consents to be kept out of the way. Just fancy giving up this beautiful place, these woods and fields, these gardens, that house for, for----'

'I suppose this woman gives up these things because she loves your brother. Do you not understand self-sacrifice?'

'Oh yes, if I loved a man.... But I think a woman is silly to allow a man to cheat and fool her to the top of his bent.'

'What does it matter if she is happy?'

Ethel tossed her head. Then at the end of a long silence she said: 'Would you care to see the house?'

'No, thank you, Miss; I must be getting on. Goodbye.'

'You cannot get back that way, you must return through the pleasure-grounds. I'll walk with you. A headache kept me at home this afternoon. The others have gone to a tennis-party.... It is a pity I was mistaken. I should like to meet the person my brother goes every day to Branbury to see. I should like to talk with her. My brother has, I'm afraid, persuaded her that we would not receive her. But this is not true; we should only be too glad to receive her. I have heard Father and Mother say so----not to Charles, they dare not speak to him on the subject, but they have to me.'

'Your brother must have some good reason for keeping his marriage secret. This woman may have a past.'

'Yes, they say that----but I should not care if I liked her, if I knew her to be a good woman now.'

To better keep the Major's secret, Mrs Shepherd had given up all friends, all acquaintance. She had not known a woman-friend for years, and the affinities of sex drew her to accept the sympathy with which she was tempted. The reaction of ten years of self-denial surged up within her, and she felt that she must speak, that her secret was being dragged from her. Ethel's eyes were fixed upon her----in another moment she would have spoken, but at that moment Nellie appeared climbing up the steep bank. 'Is that your little girl? Oh, what a pretty child!' Then raising her eyes from the child and looking the mother straight in the face, Ethel said----

'She is like, she is strangely like, Charles.'

Tears glistened in Mrs Shepherd's eyes, and then, no longer doubting that Mrs Shepherd would break down and in a flow of tears tell the whole story of her life, Ethel allowed a note of triumph to creep into her voice, and before she could stop herself she said, 'And that little girl is the heiress of Appleton Park.'

Mrs Shepherd's face changed expression.

'You are mistaken, Miss Shepherd,' she said; 'but if I ever meet your brother I will tell him that you think my little girl like him.'

Mrs Shepherd pursued her way slowly across the park, her long weary figure showing upon the sunset, her black dress trailing on the crisp grass. Often she was obliged to pause; the emotion and exercise of the day had brought back pain, and her whole body thrilled with it. Since the birth of her child she had lived in pain. But as she leaned against the white gate, and looked back on the beautiful park never to be seen by her again, knowledge of her sacrifice quickened within her----the house and the park, and the manner and speech of the young girl, combined to help her to a full appreciation of all she had surrendered. She regretted nothing. However mean and obscure her life had been, it had contained at least one noble moment. Nellie pursued the dragonflies; Mrs Shepherd followed slowly, feeling like a victor in a great battle. She had not broken her trust; she had kept her promise intact; she would return to London tomorrow or next day, or at the end of the week, whenever the Major wished.

He was waiting for them at the corner of the lane, and Nellie was already telling him all she thought of the house, the woods, the flowers, and the lady who had sat down by Mother on the bench above the river. The Major looked at his wife in doubt and fear; her smile, however, reassured him. Soon

after, Nellie fell asleep, and while she dreamed of butterflies and flowers Mrs Shepherd told him what had passed between her and his sister in the beechwood above the river.

'You see, what I told you was right. Your appearance has been described to them; they suspect something, and will never cease worrying until they have found out everything. I'm not a bit surprised. Ethel always was the more cunning and the more spiteful of the two.'

Mrs Shepherd did not tell him how nearly she had been betrayed into confession. She felt that he would not understand her explanation of the mood in which his sister had caught her. Men understand women so little. To tell him would be merely to destroy his confidence in her. As they drove through the twilight, with Nellie fast asleep between, he spoke of her departure, which he had arranged for the end of the week, and then, putting his arm round her waist, he said: 'You have always been a good little woman to me.'

THE END.