Run to Earth

by Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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[Illustration: "I am in the power of a maniac" Honoria murmured.—Page 100. Henry French, del. E. Evans, sc.]

RUN TO EARTH

A NOVEL

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "AURORA FLOYD" "ISHMAEL," "VIXEN," "WYLLARD'S WEIRD" ETC. ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

WARNED IN A DREAM.

Seven-and-twenty years ago, and a bleak evening in March. There are gas-lamps flaring down in Ratcliff Highway, and the sound of squeaking fiddles and trampling feet in many public-houses tell of festivity provided for Jack-along-shore. The emporiums of slop-sellers are illuminated for the better display of tarpaulin coats and hats, so stiff of build that they look like so many sea-faring suicides, pendent from the low ceilings. These emporiums are here and there enlivened by festoons of many-coloured bandana handkerchief's; and on every pane of glass in shop or tavern window is painted the glowing representation of Britannia's pride, the immortal Union Jack.

Two men sat drinking and smoking in a little parlour at the back of an old public-house in Shadwell. The room was about as large as a good-sized cupboard, and was illuminated in the day-time by a window commanding a pleasant prospect of coal-shed and dead wall. The paper on the walls was dark and greasy with age; and every bit of clumsy, bulging deal furniture in the room had been transformed into a kind of ebony by the action of time and dirt, the greasy backs and elbows of idle loungers, the tobacco-smoke and beer-stains of half a century.

It was evident that the two men smoking and drinking in this darksome little den

belonged to the seafaring community. In this they resembled each other; but in nothing else. One was tall and stalwart; the other was small, and wizen, and misshapen. One had a dark, bronzed face, with a frank, fearless expression; the other was pale and freckled, and had small, light-gray eyes, that shifted and blinked perpetually, and shifted and blinked most when he was talking with most animation. The first had a sonorous bass voice and a resonant laugh; the second spoke in suppressed tones, and had a trick of dropping his voice to a whisper whenever he was most energetic.

The first was captain and half-owner of the brigantine 'Pizarro', trading between the port of London, and the coast of Mexico. The second was his clerk, factotum, and confidant; half-sailor, half-landsman; able to take the helm in dangerous weather, if need were; and able to afford his employer counsel in the most intricate questions of trading and speculation.

The name of the captain was Valentine Jernam, that of his factotum Joyce Harker. The captain had found him in an American hospital, had taken compassion upon him, and had offered him a free passage home. On the homeward voyage, Joyce Harker had shown himself so handy a personage, that Captain Jernam had declined to part with him at the end of the cruise: and from that time, the wizen little hunchback had been the stalwart seaman's friend and companion. For fifteen years, during which Valentine Jernam and his younger brother, George, had been traders on the high seas, things had gone well with these two brothers; but never had fortune so liberally favoured their trading as during the four years in which Joyce Harker had prompted every commercial adventure, and guided every speculation.

"Four years to-day, Joyce, since I first set eyes upon your face in the hospital at New Orleans," said Captain Jernam, in the confidence of this jovial hour. "'Why, the fellow's dead,' said I. 'No; he's only dying,' says the doctor. 'What's the matter with him?' asked I. 'Home-sickness and empty pockets,' says the doctor; 'he was

employed in a gaming-house in the city, got knocked on the head in some row, and was brought here. We've got him through a fever that was likely enough to have finished him; but there he lies, as weak as a starved rat. He has neither money nor friends. He wants to get back to England; but he has no more hope of ever seeing that country than I have of being Emperor of Mexico.' 'Hasn't he?' says I; 'we'll tell you a different story about that, Mr. Doctor. If you can patch the poor devil up between this and next Monday, I'll take him home in my ship, without the passage costing him sixpence.' You don't feel offended with me for having called you a poor devil, eh, Joyce?—for you really were, you know—you really were an uncommonly poor creature just then," murmured the captain, apologetically.

"Offended with you!" exclaimed the factotum; "that's a likely thing. Don't I owe you my life? How many more of my countrymen passed me by as I lay on that hospital-bed, and left me to rot there, for all they cared? I heard their loud voices and their creaking boots as I lay there, too weak to lift my eyelids and look at them; but not too weak to curse them."

"No, Joyce, don't say that."

"But I do say it; and what's more, I mean it. I'll tell you what it is, captain, there's a general opinion that when a man's shoulders are crooked, his mind is crooked too; and that, if his poor unfortunate legs have shrivelled up small, his heart must have shrivelled up small to match 'em. I dare say there's some truth in the general opinion; for, you see, it doesn't improve a man's temper to find himself cut out according to a different pattern from that his fellow-creatures have been made by, and to find his fellow-creatures setting themselves against him because of that difference; and it doesn't soften a poor wretch's heart towards the world in general, to find the world in general harder than stone against him, for no better reason than his poor weak legs and his poor crooked back. But never mind talking about me and my feelings, captain. I ain't of so much account as to make it worth while for a fine fellow like

you to waste words upon me. What I want to know is your plans. You don't intend to stop down this way, do you?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because it's a dangerous way for a man who carries his fortune about him, as you do. I wish you'd make up your mind to bank that money, captain."

"Not if I know it," answered the sailor, with a look of profound wisdom; "not if I know it, Joyce Harker. I know what your bankers are. You go to them some fine afternoon, and find a lot of clerks standing behind a bran new mahogany counter, everything bright, and shining, and respectable. 'Can I leave a few hundreds on deposit?' asks you. 'Why, of course you can,' reply they; and then you hand over your money, and then they hand you back a little bit of paper. 'That's your receipt,' say they. 'All right,' say you; and off you sheer. Perhaps you feel just a little bit queerish, when you get outside, to think that all your solid cash has been melted down into that morsel of paper; but being a light-hearted, easy-going fellow, you don't think any more of it, till you come home from your next voyage, and go ashore again, and want your money; when it's ten to one if you don't find your fine new bank shut up, and your clerks and bran-new mahogany counter vanished. No, Joyce, I'll trust no bankers."

"I'd rather trust the bankers than the people down this way, any day in the week," answered the clerk, thoughtfully.

"Don't you worry yourself, Joyce! The money won't be in my keeping very long. George is to meet me in London on the fifth of April, at the latest, he says, unless winds and waves are more contrary than ever they've been since he's had to do with them; and you know George is my banker. I'm only a sleeping partner in the firm of Jernam Brothers. George takes the money, and George does what he likes with it—puts it here and there, and speculates in this and speculates in that. You've got a business head of your own, Joyce; you're one of George's own sort; and you are up

to all his dodges, which is more than I am. However, he tells me we're getting rich, and that's pleasant enough—not that I think I should break my heart about it if we were getting poor. I love the sea because it is the sea, and I love my ship for her own sake."

"Captain George is right, though," answered the clerk. "Jernam Brothers are growing rich; Jernam Brothers are prospering. But you haven't told me your plans yet, captain."

"Well, since you say I had better cut this quarter, I suppose I must; though I like to see the rigging above the housetops, and to hear the jolly voices of the sailors, and to know that the 'Pizarro' lies hard by in the Pool. However, there's an old aunt of mine, down in a sleepy little village in Devonshire, who'd be glad to see me, and none the worse for a small slice of Jernam Brothers' good luck; so I'll take a place on the Plymouth coach to-morrow morning, and go down and have a peep at her. You'll be able to keep a look-out on the repairs aboard of the 'Pizarro', and I can be back in time to meet George on the fifth."

"Where are you to meet him?"

"In this room."

The factotum shook his head.

"You're both a good deal too fond of this house," he said. "The people that have got it now are strangers to us. They've bought the business since our last trip. I don't like the look on them."

"No more do I, if it comes to that. I was sorry to hear the old folks had been done up. But come, Joyce, some more rum-and-water. Let's enjoy ourselves to-night, man, if I'm to start by the first coach to-morrow morning. What's that?"

The captain stopped, with the bell-rope in his hand, to listen to the sound of music close at hand. A woman's voice, fresh and clear as the song of a sky-lark, was singing "Wapping Old Stairs," to the accompaniment of a feeble old piano.

"What a voice!" cried the sailor. "Why, it seems to pierce to the very core of my heart as I listen to it. Let's go and hear the music, Joyce."

"Better not, captain," answered the warning voice of the clerk. "I tell you they're a bad lot in this house. It's a sort of concert they give of a night; an excuse for drunkenness, and riot, and low company. If you're going by the coach to-morrow, you'd better get to bed early to-night. You've been drinking quite enough as it is."

"Drinking!" cried Valentine Jernam; "why, I'm as sober as a judge. Come, Joyce, let's go and listen to that girl's singing."

The captain left the room, and Harker followed, shrugging his shoulders as he went.

"There's nothing so hard to manage as a baby of thirty years old," he muttered; "a blessed infant that one's obliged to call master."

He followed the captain, through a dingy little passage, into a room with a sanded floor, and a little platform at one end. The room was full of sailors and disreputable-looking women; and was lighted by several jets of coarse gas, which flared in the bleak March wind.

A group of black-bearded, foreign-looking seamen made room for the captain and his companion at one of the tables. Jernam acknowledged their courtesy with a friendly nod.

"I don't mind standing treat for a civil fellow like you," he said; "come, mates, what do you say to a bowl of punch?"

The men looked at him and grinned a ready assent.

Valentine Jernam called the landlord, and ordered a bowl of rum-punch.

"Plenty of it, remember, and be sure you are not too liberal with the water," said the captain.

The landlord nodded and laughed. He was a broad-shouldered, square-built man, with a flat, pale face, broad and square, like his figure—not a pleasant-looking man

by any means.

Valentine Jernam folded his arms on the rickety, liquor-stained table, and took a leisurely survey of the apartment.

There was a pause in the concert just now. The girl had finished her song, and sat by the old square piano, waiting till she should be required to sing again. There were only two performers in this primitive species of concert—the girl who sang, and an old blind man, who accompanied her on the piano; but such entertainment was quite sufficient for the patrons of the 'Jolly Tar', seven-and-twenty years ago, before the splendours of modern music-halls had arisen in the land.

Valentine Jernam's dark eyes wandered round the room, till they lighted on the face of the girl sitting by the piano. There they fixed themselves all at once, and seemed as if rooted to the face on which they looked. It was a pale, oval face, framed in bands of smooth black hair, and lighted by splendid black eyes; the face of a Roman empress rather than a singing-girl at a public-house in Shadwell. Never before had Valentine Jernam looked on so fair a woman. He had never been a student or admirer of the weaker sex. He had a vague kind of idea that there were women, and mermaids, and other dangerous creatures, lurking somewhere in this world, for the destruction of honest men; but beyond this he had very few ideas on the subject.

Other people were taking very little notice of the singer. The regular patrons of the 'Jolly Tar' were accustomed to her beauty and her singing, and thought very little about her. The girl was very quiet, very modest. She came and went under the care of the old blind pianist, whom she called her grandfather, and she seemed to shrink alike from observation or admiration.

She began to sing again presently.

She stood by the piano, facing the audience, calm as a statue, with her large black eyes looking straight before her. The old man listened to her eagerly, as he played, and nodded fond approval every now and then, as the full, rich notes fell upon his

ear. The poor blind face was illuminated with the musician's rapture. It seemed as if the noisy, disreputable audience had no existence for these two people.

"What a lovely creature!" exclaimed the captain, in a tone of subdued intensity.

"Yes, she's a pretty girl," muttered the clerk, coolly.

"A pretty girl!" echoed Jernam; "an angel, you mean! I did not know there were such women in the world; and to think that such a woman should be here, in this place, in the midst of all this tobacco-smoke, and noise, and blasphemy! It seems hard, doesn't it, Joyce?"

"I don't see that it's any harder for a pretty woman than an ugly one," replied Harker, sententiously. "If the girl had red hair and a snub nose, you wouldn't take the trouble to pity her. I don't see why you should concern yourself about her, because she happens to have black eyes and red lips. I dare say she's a bad lot, like most of 'em about here, and would as soon pick your pocket as look at you, if you gave her the chance."

Valentine Jernam made no reply to these observations. It is possible that he scarcely heard them. The punch came presently; but he pushed the bowl towards Joyce, and bade that gentleman dispense the mixture. His own glass remained before him untouched, while the foreign seamen and Joyce Harker emptied the bowl. When the girl sang, he listened; when she sat in a listless attitude, in the pauses between her songs, he watched her face.

Until she had finished her last song, and left the platform, leading her blind companion by the hand, the captain of the 'Pizarro' seemed like a creature under the influence of a spell. There was only one exit from the room, so the singing-girl and her grandfather had to pass along the narrow space between the two rows of tables. Her dark stuff dress brushed against Jernam as she passed him. To the last, his eyes followed her with the same entranced gaze.

When she had gone, and the door had closed upon her, he started suddenly to his

feet, and followed. He was just in time to see her leave the house with her grandfather, and with a big, ill-looking man, half-sailor, half-landsman, who had been drinking at the bar.

The landlord was standing behind the bar, drawing beer, as Jernam looked out into the street, watching the receding figures of the girl and her two companions.

"She's a pretty girl, isn't she?" said the landlord, as Jernam shut the door.

"She is, indeed!" cried the sailor. "Who is she?—where does she come from?—what's her name?"

"Her name is Jenny Milsom, and she lives with her father, a very respectable man."

"Was that her father who went out with her just now?"

"Yes, that's Tom Milsom."

"He doesn't look very respectable. I don't think I ever set eyes on a worse-looking fellow."

"A man can't help his looks," answered the landlord, rather sulkily; "I've known Tom Milsom these ten years, and I've never known any harm of him."

"No, nor any good either, I should think, Dennis Wayman," said a man who was lounging at the bar; "Black Milsom is the name we gave him over at Rotherhithe. I worked with him in a shipbuilder's yard seven years ago: a surly brute he was then, and a surly brute he is now; and a lazy, skulking vagabond into the bargain, living an idle life out at that cottage of his among the marshes, and eating up his pretty daughter's earnings."

"You seem to know Milsom's business as well as you do your own, Joe Dermot," answered the landlord, with some touch of anger in his tone.

"It's no use looking savage at me, Dennis," returned Dermot; "I never did trust Black Milsom, and never will. There are men who would take your life's blood for the price of a gallon of beer, and I think Milsom is one of 'em."

Valentine Jernam listened attentively to this conversation—not because he was interested in Black Milsom's character, but because he wanted to hear anything that could enlighten him about the girl who had awakened such a new sentiment in his breast.

The clerk had followed his master, and stood in the shadow of the doorway, listening even more attentively than his employer; the small, restless eyes shifted to and fro between the faces of the speakers.

More might have been said about Mr. Thomas Milsom; but it was evident that the landlord of the 'Jolly Tar' was inclined to resent any disrespectful allusion to that individual. The man called Joe Dermot paid his score, and went away. The captain and his factotum retired to the two dingy little apartments which were to accommodate them for the night.

All through that night, sleeping or waking, Valentine Jernam was haunted by the vision of a beautiful face, the sound of a melodious voice, and the face and the voice belonged alike to the singing-girl.

The captain of the 'Pizarro' left his room at five o'clock, and tapped at Joyce Marker's door with the intention of bidding him goodbye.

"I'm off, Joyce," he said; "be sure you keep your eye upon the repairs between this and the fifth."

He was prepared to receive a drowsy answer; but to his surprise the door was opened, and Joyce stood dressed upon the threshold.

"I'm coming to the coach-office with you, captain," answered Harker. "I don't like this place, and I want to see you safe out of it, never to come back to it any more."

"Nonsense, Joyce; the place suits me well enough."

"Does it?" asked the factotum, in a whisper; "and the landlord suits you, I suppose?—and that man they call Black Milsom? There's something more than

common between those two men, Captain Jernam. However that is, you take my advice. Don't you come back to this house till you come to meet Captain George. Captain George is a cool hand, and I'm not afraid of him; but you're too wild and too free-spoken for such folks as hang about the 'Jolly Tar'. You sported your pocket-book too freely last night, when you were paying for the punch. I saw the landlord spot the notes and gold, and I haven't trusted myself to sleep too soundly all night, for fear there should be any attempt at foul play."

"You're a good fellow, Joyce; but though you've pluck enough for twenty in a storm at sea, you're as timid as a baby at home."

"I'm like a dog, captain—I can smell danger when it threatens those I love. Hark! what's that?"

They were going down stairs quietly, in the darkness of the early spring morning. The clerk's quick ear caught the sound of a stealthy footstep; and in the next minute they were face to face with a man who was ascending the narrow stairs.

"You're early astir, Mr. Wayman," said Joyce Harker, recognizing the landlord of the 'Jolly Tar'.

"And so are you, for the matter of that," answered the host.

"My captain is off by an early coach, and I'm going to walk to the office with him," returned Joyce.

"Off by an early coach, is he? Then, if he can stop to drink it, I'll make him a cup of coffee."

"You're very good," answered Joyce, hastily; "but you see, the captain hasn't time for that, if he's going to catch the coach."

"Are you going into the country for long, captain?" asked the landlord.

"Well, no; not for long, mate; for I've got an appointment to keep in this house, on the fifth of April, with a brother of mine, who's homeward-bound from Barbadoes.

You see, my brother and me are partners; whatever good luck one has he shares it with the other. We've been uncommon lucky lately."

The captain slapped his hand upon one of his capacious pockets as he spoke. Dennis Wayman watched the gesture with eager eyes. All through Valentine's speech, Joyce Harker had been trying to arrest his attention, but trying in vain. When the owner of the 'Pizarro' began to talk, it was very difficult to stop him.

The captain bade the landlord a cheerful good day, and departed with his faithful follower.

Out in the street, Joyce Harker remonstrated with his employer.

"I told you that fellow was not to be trusted, captain," he said; "and yet you blabbed to him about the money."

"Nonsense, Joyce. I didn't say a word about money."

"Didn't you though, captain? You said quite enough to let that man know you'd got the cash about you. But you won't go back to that place till you go to meet Captain George on the fifth?"

"Of course not."

"You won't change your mind, captain?"

"Not I."

"Because, you see, I shall be down at Blackwall, looking after the repairs, for it will be sharp work to get finished against you want to sail for Rio. So, you see, I shall be out of the way. And if you did go back to that house alone, Lord knows what they might try on."

"Don't you be afraid, Joyce. In the first place I shan't go back there till twelve o'clock on the fifth. I'll come up from Plymouth by the night coach, and put up at the 'Golden Cross' like a gentleman. And, in the second place, I flatter myself I'm a match for any set of land-sharks in creation."

"No, you're not, captain. No honest man is ever a match for a scoundrel."

Jernam and his companion carried the captain's portmanteau between them. They hailed a hackney-coach presently, and drove to the "Golden Cross," through the chill, gray streets, where the closed shutters had a funereal aspect.

At the coach-office they parted, with many friendly words on both sides; but to the last, Joyce Harker was grave and anxious.

The last he saw of his friend and employer was the captain's dark face looking out of the coach-window; the captain's hand waved in cordial farewell.

"What a good fellow he is!—what a noble fellow!" thought the wizen little clerk, as he trudged back towards the City. "But was there ever a baby so helpless on shore?—was there ever an innocent infant that needed so much looking after?"

* * * * *

Valentine Jernam arrived at Plymouth early the next morning, and walked from Plymouth to the little village of Allanbay, in which lived the only relative he had in the world, except his brother George. Walking at a leisurely pace along the quiet road, Captain Jernam, although not usually a thoughtful person, was fain to think about something, and fell to thinking over the past.

Light-hearted and cheery of spirit as the adventurous sailor was now-a-days, his childhood had been a very sad one. Motherless at eight years of age, and ill-used by a drunken father, the boy had suffered as the children of the poor too often suffer.

His mother had died, leaving George an infant of less than twelve months old; and from the hour of her death, Valentine had been the infant's sole nurse and protector; standing between the helpless little one and the father's brutality; enduring all hardships cheerfully, so long as he was able to shelter little Georgy.

On more than one occasion, the elder boy had braved and defied his father in defence of the younger brother.

It was scarcely strange, therefore, that there should arise between the two brothers an affection beyond the ordinary measure of brotherly love. Valentine had supplied the place of both parents to his brother George,—the place of the mother, who lay buried in Allanbay churchyard; the place of the father, who had sunk into a living death of drunkenness and profligacy.

They were not peasant-born these Jernams. The father had been a lieutenant in the Royal Navy; but had deservedly lost his commission, and had come, with his devoted wife, to hide his disgrace at Allanbay. The vices which had caused his expulsion from the navy had increased with every year, until the family had sunk to the lowest depths of poverty and degradation, in spite of the wife's heroic efforts to accomplish the reform of a reprobate. She had struggled nobly till the last, and had died broken-hearted, leaving the helpless children to the mercy of a wretch whose nature had become utterly debased and brutalized.

Throughout their desolate childhood the brothers had been all in all to each other, and as soon as George was old enough to face the world with his brother, the two boys ran away to sea, and obtained employment on board a small trading vessel.

At sea, as on shore, Valentine stood between his younger brother and all hardships. But the rough sailors were kinder than the drunken father had been, and the two lads fared pretty well.

Thus began the career of the two Jernams. Through all changes of fortune, the brothers had clung to each other. Despite all differences of character, their love for each other had known neither change nor diminution; and to-day, walking alone upon this quiet country road, the tears clouded Valentine Jernam's eyes as he remembered how often he had trodden it in the old time with his little brother in his arms.

"I shall see his dear face on the fifth," he thought; "God bless him!"

The old aunt lived in a cottage near the entrance to the village. She was comfortably

off now—thanks to the two merchant captains; but she had been very poor in the days of their childhood, and had been able to do but little for the neglected lads. She had given them shelter, however, when they had been afraid to go home to their father, and had shared her humble fare with them very often.

Mrs. Jernam, as she was called by her neighbours, in right of her sixty years of age, was sitting by the window when her nephew opened the little garden-gate: but she had opened the door before he could knock, and was standing on the threshold ready to embrace him.

"My boy," she exclaimed, "I have been looking for you so long!"

That day was given up to pleasant talk between the aunt and nephew. She was so anxious to hear his adventures, and he was so willing to tell them. He sat before the fire smoking, while Susan Jernam's busy fingers plied her knitting-needles, and relating his hair-breadth escapes and perils between the puffs of blue smoke.

The captain was regaled with an excellent dinner, and a bottle of wine of his own importation. After dinner, he strolled out into the village, saw his old friends and acquaintances, and talked over old times. Altogether his first day at Allanbay passed very pleasantly.

The second day at Allanbay, however, hung heavily on the captain's hands. He had told all his adventures; he had seen all his old acquaintances. The face of the ballad-singer haunted him perpetually; and he spent the best part of the day leaning over the garden-gate and smoking. Mrs. Jernam was not offended by her nephew's conduct.

"Ah! my boy," she said, smiling fondly on her handsome kinsman, "it's fortunate Providence made you a sailor, for you'd have been ill-fitted for any but a roving life."

The third day of Valentine Jernam's stay at Allanbay was the second of April, and on that morning his patience was exhausted. The face which had made itself a part of

his very mind lured him back to London. He was a man who had never accustomed himself to school his impulses; and the impulse that drew him back to London was irresistible.

"I must and will see her once more," he said to himself; "perhaps, if I see her face again, I shall find out it's only a common face after all, and get the better of this folly. But I must see her. After the fifth, George will be with me, and I shan't be my own master. I must see her before the fifth."

Impetuous in all things, Valentine Jernam was not slow to act upon his resolution. He told his aunt that he had business to transact in London. He left Allanbay at noon, walked to Plymouth, took the afternoon coach, and rode into London on the following day.

It was one o'clock when Captain Jernam found himself once more in the familiar seafaring quarter; early as it was, the noise of riot and revelry had begun already.

The landlord looked up with an expression of considerable surprise as the captain of the 'Pizarro' crossed the threshold.

"Why, captain," he said, "I thought we weren't to see you till the fifth."

"Well, you see, I had some business to do in this neighbourhood, so I changed my mind."

"I'm very glad you did," answered Dennis Wayman, cordially; "you've just come in time to take a snack of dinner with me and my missus, so you can sit down, and make yourself at home, without ceremony."

The captain was too good-natured to refuse an invitation that seemed proffered in such a hearty spirit. And beyond this, he wanted to hear more about Jenny Milsom, the ballad-singer.

So he ate his dinner with Mr. Wayman and his wife, and found himself asking all manner of questions about the singing-girl in the course of his hospitable

entertainment.

He asked if the girl was going to sing at the tavern to-night.

"No," answered the landlord; "this is Friday. She only sings at my place on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays."

"And what does she do with herself for the rest of the week?"

"Ah! that's more than I know; but very likely her father will look in here in the course of the afternoon, and he can tell you. I say, though, captain, you seem uncommonly sweet on this girl," added the landlord, with a leer and a wink.

"Well, perhaps I am sweet upon her," replied Valentine Jernam "perhaps I'm fool enough to be caught by a pretty face, and not wise enough to keep my folly a secret."

"I've got a Little business to see to over in Rotherhithe," said Mr. Wayman, presently; "you'll see after the bar while I'm gone, Nancy. There's the little private room at your service, captain, and I dare say you can make yourself comfortable there with your pipe and the newspaper. It's ten to one but what Tom Milsom will look in before the day's out, and he'll tell you all about his daughter."

Upon this the landlord departed, and Valentine Jernam retired to the little den called a private room, where he speedily fell asleep, wearied out by his journey on the previous night.

His slumbers were not pleasant. He sat in an uneasy position, upon a hard wooden chair, with his arms folded on the table before him, and his head resting on his folded arms.

There was a miserable pretence of a fire, made with bad coals and damp wood.

Sleeping in that wretched atmosphere, in that uncomfortable attitude, it was scarcely strange if Valentine Jernam dreamt a bad dream.

He dreamt that he fell asleep at broad day in his cabin on board the 'Pizarro', and that

he woke suddenly and found himself in darkness. He dreamt that he groped his way up the companion-way, and on to the deck.

There, as below, he found gloom and darkness, and instead of a busy crew, utter loneliness, perfect silence. A stillness like the stillness of death reigned on the level waters around the motionless ship.

The captain shouted, but his voice died away among the shrouds. Presently a glimmer of star-light pierced the universal gloom, and in that uncertain light a shadowy figure came gliding towards him across the ocean—a face shone upon him beneath the radiance of the stars. It was the face of the ballad-singer.

The shadow drew nearer to him, with a strange gliding motion. The shadow lifted a white, transparent hand, and pointed.

To what?

To a tombstone, which glimmered cold and white through the gloom of sky and waters.

The starlight shone upon the tombstone, and on it the sleeper read this inscription—"In memory of Valentine Jernam, aged 33."

The sailor awoke suddenly with a cry, and, looking up, saw the man they called Black Milsom sitting on the opposite side of the table, looking at him earnestly.

"Well, you are a restless sleeper, captain!" said this man: "I dropped in here just now, thinking to find Dennis Wayman, and I've been looking on while you finished your nap. I never saw a harder sleeper."

"I had a bad dream," answered Jernam, starting to his feet.

"A bad dream! What about, captain?"

"About your daughter!"

CHAPTER II.

DONE IN THE DARKNESS.

Before Thomas Milsom, otherwise Black Milsom, could express his surprise, the landlord of the 'Jolly Tar' returned from his business excursion, and presented himself in the dingy little room, where it was already beginning to grow dusk.

Milsom told Dennis Wayman how he had discovered the captain sleeping uneasily, with his head upon the table; and on being pressed a little, Valentine Jernam told his dream as freely as it was his habit to tell everything relating to his own affairs.

"I don't see that it was such a very bad dream, after all," said Dennis Wayman, when the story was finished. "You dreamt you were at sea in a dead calm, that's about the plain English of it."

"Yes; but such a calm! I've been becalmed many a time; but I never remember anything like what I saw in my dream just now. Then the loneliness; not a creature on board besides myself; not a human voice to answer me when I called. And the face—there was something so awful in the face—smiling at me, and yet with a kind of threatening look in the smile; and the hand pointing to the tombstone! Do you know that I was thirty-three last December?"

The sailor covered his face with his hands, and sat for some moments in a meditative attitude. Bold and reckless though he was, the superstition of his class had some hold upon him; and this bad dream influenced him, in spite of himself.

The landlord was the first to break the silence. "Come, captain," he said; "this is what I call giving yourself up to the blue devils. You went to sleep in an uncomfortable position, and you had an uncomfortable dream, with no more sense nor reason in it than such dreams generally have. What do you say to a hand at cards, and a drop of something short? You want cheering up a bit, captain; that's what you want."

Valentine Jernam assented. The cards were brought, and a bowl of punch ordered by the open-handed sailor, who was always ready to invite people to drink at his

expense.

The men played all-fours; and what generally happens in this sort of company happened now to Captain Jernam. He began by winning, and ended by losing; and his losses were much heavier than his gains.

He had been playing for upwards of an hour, and had drunk several glasses of punch, before his luck changed, and he had occasion to take out the bloated leathern pocket-book, distended unnaturally with notes and gold.

But for that rum-punch he might, perhaps, have remembered Joyce Harker's warning, and avoided displaying his wealth before these two men. Unhappily, however, the fumes of the strong liquor had already begun to mount to his brain, and the clerk was completely forgotten. He opened his pocket-book every time he had occasion to pay his losses, and whenever he opened it the greedy eyes of Dennis Wayman and Black Milsom devoured the contents with a furtive gaze.

With every hand the sailor grew more excited. He was playing for small stakes, and as yet his losses only amounted to a few pounds. But the sense of defeat annoyed him. He was feverishly eager for his revenge: and when Milsom rose to go, the captain wanted him to continue to play.

"You shan't sneak off like that," he said; "I want my revenge, and I must have it."

Black Milsom pointed to a little Dutch clock in a corner of the room.

"Past eight o'clock," he said; "and I've got a five-mile walk between me and home. My girl, Jenny, will be waiting up for me, and getting anxious about her father."

In the excitement of play, and the fever engendered by strong drink, Valentine Jernam had forgotten the ballad-singer. But this mention of her name brought the vision of the beautiful face back to him.

"Your daughter!" he muttered; "your daughter! Yes; the girl who sang here, the beautiful girl who sang."

His voice was thick, and his accents indistinct. Both the men had pressed Jernam to drink, while they themselves took very little. They had encouraged him to talk as well as to drink, and the appointment with his brother had been spoken of by the captain.

In speaking of this intended meeting, Valentine Jernam had spoken also of the good fortune which had attended his latest trading adventures; and he had said enough to let these men know that he carried the proceeds of his trading upon his person.

"Joyce wanted me to bank my money," he said; "but none of your banking rogues for me. My brother George is the only banker I trust, or ever mean to trust."

Milsom insisted upon the necessity of his departure, and the sailor declared that he would have his revenge. They were getting to high words, when Dennis Wayman interfered to keep the peace.

"I'll tell you what it is," he said; "if the captain wants his revenge, it's only fair that he should have it. Suppose we go down to your place, Milsom! you can give us a bit of supper, I dare say. What do you say to that?"

Milsom hesitated in a sheepish kind of manner. "Mine's such a poor place for a gentleman like the captain," he said. "My daughter Jenny will do her best to make things straight and comfortable; but still it is about the poorest place that ever was—there's no denying that."

"I'm no fine gentleman," said the captain, enraptured at the idea of seeing the ballad-singer; "if your daughter will give us a crust of bread and cheese, I shall be satisfied. We'll take two or three bottles of wine down with us, and we'll be as jolly as princes. Get your trap ready, Wayman, and let's be off at once."

The captain was all impatience to start. Dennis Wayman went away to get the vehicle ready, and Milsom followed him, but they did not leave Captain Jernam much time for thought, for Dennis Wayman came back almost immediately to say that the vehicle was ready.

"Now, then, look sharp, captain!" he said; "it's a dark night, and we shall have a dark drive."

It was a dark night—dark even here in Wapping, darker still on the road by which Valentine Jernam found himself travelling presently.

The vehicle which Dennis Wayman drove was a disreputable-looking conveyance—half chaise-cart, half gig—and the pony was a vicious-looking animal, with a shaggy mane; but he was a tremendous pony to go, and the dark, marshy country flew past the travellers in the darkness like a landscape in a dream.

The ripple of the water, sounding faintly in the stillness, told Valentine Jernam that the river was near at hand; but beyond this the sailor had little knowledge of his whereabouts.

They had soon left London behind.

After driving some six or seven miles, and always keeping within sound of the dull plash of the river, the landlord of the 'Jolly Tar' drew up suddenly by a dilapidated wooden paling, behind which there was a low-roofed habitation of some kind or other, which was visible only by reason of one faint glimmer of light, flickering athwart a scrap of dingy red curtain. The dull, plashing sound of the river was louder here; and, mingling with that monotonous ripple of the water, there was a shivering sound—the trembling of rushes stirred by the chill night wind.

"I'd almost passed your place, Tom," said the landlord, as he drew up before the darksome habitation.

"You might a'most drive over it on such a night as this," answered Black Milsom, "and not be much the wiser."

The three men alighted, and Dennis Wayman led the vicious pony to a broken-down shed, which served as stable and coach-house in Mr. Milsom's establishment.

Valentine Jernam looked about him. As his eyes grew more familiar with the

locality, he was able to make out the outline of the dilapidated dwelling.

It was little better than a hovel, and stood on a patch of waste ground, which could scarcely have been garden within the memory of man. By one side of the house there was a wide, open ditch, fringed with rushes—a deep, black ditch, that flowed down to the river.

"I can't compliment you on the situation of your cottage, mate," he said; "it might be livelier."

"I dare say it might," answered Black Milsom, rather sulkily. "I took to this place because everybody else was afraid to take to it, and it was to be had for nothing. There was an old miser as cut his throat here seven or eight year ago, and the place has been left to go to decay ever since. The miser's ghost walks about here sometimes, after twelve o'clock at night, folks say. 'Let him walk till he tires himself out,' says I. 'He don't come my way; and if he did he wouldn't scare me.' Come, captain."

Mr. Milsom opened the door, and ushered his visitor into the lively abode, which the prejudice of weak-minded people permitted him to occupy rent-free.

The girl whom Jernam had seen at the Wapping public-house was sitting by the hearth, where a scrap of fire burnt in a rusty grate. She had been sitting in a listless attitude, with her hands lying idle on her lap, and her eyes fixed on the fire; but she looked up as the two men entered.

She did not welcome her father's return with any demonstration of affection; she looked at him with a strange, wondering gaze; and she looked with an anxious expression from him to his companion.

Dennis Wayman came in presently, and as the girl recognized him, a transient look, almost like horror, flitted across her face, unseen by the sailor.

"Come, Jenny," said Milsom; "I've brought Wayman and a friend of his down to supper. What can you give us to eat? There's a bit of cold beef in the house, I know,

and bread and cheese; the captain here has brought the wine; so we shall do well enough. Look sharp, lass. You're in one of your tempers to-night, I suppose; but you ought to know that don't answer with me. I say, captain," added the man, with a laugh, "if ever you're going to marry a pretty woman, make sure she isn't troubled with an ugly temper; for you'll find, as a rule, that the handsomer a woman is the more of the devil there is in her. Now, Jenny, the supper, and no nonsense about it."

The girl went into another room, and returned presently with such fare as Mr. Milsom's establishment could afford. The sailor's eyes followed her wherever she went, full of compassion and love. He was sure this brutal wretch, Milsom, used her badly, and he rejoiced to think that he had disregarded all Joyce Harker's warnings, and penetrated into the scoundrel's home. He rejoiced, for he meant to rescue this lovely, helpless creature. He knew nothing of her, except that she was beautiful, friendless, lonely, and ill-used; and he determined to take her away and marry her.

He did not perplex himself with any consideration as to whether she would return his love, or be grateful for his devotion. He thought only of her unhappy position, and that he was predestined to save her.

The supper was laid upon the rickety deal table, and the three men sat down. Valentine would have waited till his host's daughter had seated herself; but she had laid no plate or knife for herself, and it was evident that she was not expected to share the social repast.

"You can go to bed now," said Milsom. "We're in for a jolly night of it, and you'll only be in the way. Where's the old man?"

"Gone to bed."

"So much the better: and the sooner you follow him will be so much the better again. Good night."

The girl did not answer him. She looked at him for a few moments with an earnest, inquiring gaze, which seemed to compel him to return her look, as if he had been

fascinated by the profound earnestness of those large dark eyes; and then she went slowly and silently from the room.

"Sulky!" muttered Mr. Milsom. "There never was such a girl to sulk."

He took up a candle, and followed his daughter from the room.

A rickety old staircase led to the upper floor, where there were three or four bed-chambers. The house had been originally something more than a cottage, and the rooms and passages were tolerably large.

Thomas Milsom found the girl standing at the top of the stairs, as if waiting for some one.

"What are you standing mooning there for?" asked the man. "Why don't you go to bed?"

"Why have you brought that sailor here?" inquired the girl, without noticing Milsom's question.

"What's that to you? You'd like to know my business, wouldn't you? I've brought him here because he wanted to come. Is that a good answer? I've brought him here because he has money to lose, and is in the humour to lose it. Is that a better answer?"

"Yes," returned the girl, fixing her eyes upon him with a look of horror; "you will win his money, and, if he is angry, there will be a quarrel, as there was on that hideous night three years ago, when you brought home the foreign sailor, and what happened to that man will happen to this one. Father," cried the girl, suddenly and passionately, "let this man leave the house in safety. I sometimes think my heart is almost as hard as yours; but this man trusts us. Don't let any harm come to him."

"Why, what harm should come to him?"

For some time the girl called Jenny stood before her father in silence, with her head bent, and her face in shadow; then she lifted her head suddenly, and looked at him

piteously.

"The other!" she murmured; "the other! I remember what happened to him."

"Come, drop that!" cried Milsom, savagely; "do you think I'm going to stand your mad talk? Get to bed, and go to sleep. And the sounder you sleep the better, unless you want to sleep uncommonly sound for the future, my lady."

The ruffian seized his daughter by the arm, and half pushed, half flung her into a room, the door of which stood open. It was the dreary room which she called her own. Milsom shut the door upon her, and locked it with a key which he took from his pocket—a key which locked every door in the house. "And now, I flatter myself, you're safe, my pretty singing-bird," he muttered.

He went down stairs, and returned to his guest, who had been pressed to eat and drink by Dennis Wayman, and who had yielded good-naturedly to that gentleman's hospitable attentions.

* * * * *

Alone in her room, Jenny Milsom opened the window, and sat looking out into the inky darkness of the night, and listening to the voices of the three men in the room below.

The voices sounded very distinctly in that dilapidated old house. Every now and then a hearty shout of laughter seemed to shake the crazy rafters; but presently the revellers grew silent. Jenny knew they were busy with the cards.

"Yes, yes," she murmured; "it all happens as it happened that night—first the loud voices and laughter; then the silence; then—Great Heaven! will the end be like the end of that night?"

She clasped her hands in silent agony, and sank in a crouching position by the open window, with her head lying on the sill.

For hours this wretched girl sat upon the floor in the same attitude, with the cold

wind blowing in upon her. All seemed tranquil in the room below. The voices sounded now and then, subdued and cautious, and there were no more outbursts of jovial laughter.

A dim, gray streak glimmered faint and low in the east—the first pale flicker of dawn. The girl raised her weary eyes towards that chill gray light.

"Oh! if this night were only ended!" she murmured: "if it were only ended without harm!"

The words were still upon her lips, when the voices sounded loud and harsh from the room below. The girl started to her feet, white and trembling. Louder with every moment grew those angry voices. Then came a struggle; some article of furniture fell with a crash; there was the sound of shivered glass, and then a dull heavy noise, which echoed through the house, and shook the weather-beaten wooden walls to their foundations.

After the fall there came the sound of one loud groan, and then subdued murmurs, cautious whispers.

The window of Jenny Milsom's room looked towards the road. From that window she could see nothing of the sluggish ditch or the river.

She tried the door of her room. It was securely locked, as she had expected to find it.

"They would kill me, if I tried to come between them and their victim," she said; "and I am afraid to die."

She crept to her wretched bed, and flung herself down, dressed as she was. She drew the thin patchwork coverlet round her.

Ten minutes after she had thrown herself upon the bed, a key turned in the lock, and the door was opened by a stealthy hand. Black Milsom looked into the room.

The cold glimmer of day fell full upon the girl's pale face. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was loud and regular.

"Asleep," he whispered to some one outside; "as safe as a rock."

He drew back and closed the door softly.

* * * * *

Joyce Harker worked his hardest on board the 'Pizarro', and the repairs were duly completed by the 4th of April. On the morning of the 5th the vessel was a picture, and Joyce surveyed her with the pride of a man who feels that he has not worked in vain.

He had set his heart upon the brothers celebrating the first day of their re-union on board the trim little craft: and he had made arrangements for the preparation of a dinner which was to be a triumph in its way.

Joyce presented himself at the bar of the 'Jolly Tar' at half-past eleven on the appointed morning. He expected that the brothers would be punctual; but he did not expect either of them to appear before the stroke of noon.

All was very quiet at the 'Jolly Tar' at this hour of the day. The landlord was alone in the bar, reading a paper. He looked up as Joyce entered; but did not appear to recognize him.

"Can I step through into your private room?" asked Joyce; "I expect Captain Jernam and his brother to meet me here in half an hour."

"To be sure you can, mate. There's no one in the private room at this time of day. Jernam—Jernam, did you say? What Jernam is that? I don't recollect the name."

"You've a short memory," answered Joyce; "you might remember Captain Jernam of the 'Pizarro'; for it isn't above a week since he was here with me. He dined here, and slept here, and left early in the morning, though you were uncommonly pressing for him to stay."

"We've so many captains and sailors in and out from year's end to year's end, that I don't remember them by name," said Dennis Wayman; "but I do remember your

friend, mate, now you remind me of him; and I remember you, too."

"Yes," said Joyce, with a grin; "there ain't so many of my pattern. I'll take a glass of rum for the good of the house; and if you can lend me a paper, I'll skim the news of the day while I'm waiting."

Joyce passed into the little room, where Dennis took him the newspaper and the rum.

Twelve o'clock struck, and the clerk began to watch and to listen for the opening of the door, or the sound of a footstep in the passage outside. The time seemed very long to him, watching and listening. The minute-hand of the Dutch clock moved slowly on. He turned every now and then towards the dusky corner where the clock hung, to see what progress that slow hand had made upon the discoloured dial.

He waited thus for an hour.

"What does it mean?" he thought. "Valentine Jernam so faithfully promised to be punctual. And then he's so fond of his brother. He'd scarcely care to be a minute behindhand, when he has the chance of seeing Captain George."

Joyce went into the bar. The landlord was scrutinizing the address of a letter—a foreign letter.

"Didn't you say your friend's name was Jernam?" he asked.

"I did."

"Then this letter must be for him. It has been lying here for the last two or three days; but I forgot all about it till just this minute."

Joyce took the letter. It was addressed to Captain Valentine Jernam, of the 'Pizarro', at the 'Jolly Tar', care of the landlord, and it came from the Cape of Good Hope.

Joyce recognized George Jernam's writing.

"This means a disappointment," he thought, as he turned the letter over and over slowly; "there'll be no meeting yet awhile. Captain George is off to the East Indies

on some new venture, I dare say. But what can have become of Captain Valentine? I'll go down to the 'Golden Cross,' and see if he's there."

He told Dennis Wayman where he was going, and left a message for his captain. From Ratcliff Highway to Charing Cross was a long journey for Joyce; but he had no idea of indulging in any such luxury as a hackney-coach. It was late in the afternoon when he reached the hotel; and there he was doomed to encounter a new disappointment.

Captain Jernam had been there on the second of the month, and had never been there since. He had left in the forenoon, after saying that he should return at night; and in evidence that such had been his intention, the waiter told Joyce that the captain had left a carpet-bag, containing clean linen and a change of clothes.

"He's broken his word to me, and he's got into bad hands," thought Harker. "He's as simple as a child, and he's got into bad hands. But how and where? He'd never, surely, go back to the 'Jolly Tar', after what I said to him. And where else can he have gone? I know no more where to look for him in this great overgrown London than if I was a new-born baby."

In his perfect ignorance of his captain's movements, there was only one thing that Joyce Harker could do, and that was to go back to the "Jolly Tar," with a faint hope of finding Valentine Jernam there.

It was dusk by the time he got back to Ratcliff Highway, and the flaring gas-lamps were lighted. The bar of the tavern was crowded, and the tinkling notes of the old piano sounded feebly from the inner room.

Dennis Wayman was serving his customers, and Thomas Milsom was drinking at the bar. Joyce pushed his way to the landlord.

"Have you seen anything of the captain?" he asked.

"No, he hasn't been here since you left."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"He's not been here to day; but he's been here within the week, hasn't he? He was here on Tuesday, if I'm not misinformed."

"Then you are misinformed," Wayman said, coolly; "for your seafaring friend hasn't darkened my doors since the morning you and he left to go to the coach-office."

Joyce could say nothing further. He passed through the passage into the public room, where the so-called concert had begun. Jenny Milsom was singing to the noisy audience.

The girl was very pale, and her manner and attitude, as she sat by the piano, were even more listless than usual.

Joyce Harker did not stop long in the concert-room. He went back to the bar. This time there was no one but Milsom and Wayman in the bar, and the two seemed to be talking earnestly as Joyce entered.

They left off, and looked up at the sound of the clerk's footsteps.

"Tired of the music already?" asked Wayman.

"I didn't come here to hear music," answered Joyce; "I came to look for my captain. He had an appointment to meet his brother here to-day at twelve o'clock, and it isn't like him to break it. I'm beginning to get uneasy about him."

"But why should you be uneasy? The captain is big enough, and old enough, to take care of himself," said the landlord, with a laugh.

"Yes; but then you see, mate, there are some men who never know how to take care of themselves when they get into bad company. There isn't a better sailor than Valentine Jernam, or a finer fellow at sea; but I don't think, if you searched from one end of this city to the other, you'd find a greater innocent on shore. I'm afraid of his having fallen into bad hands, Mr. Wayman, for he had a goodish bit of money about

him; and there's land-sharks as dangerous as those you meet with on the sea."

"So there are, mate," answered the landlord; "and there's some queer characters about this neighbourhood, for the matter of that."

"I dare say you're right, Mr. Wayman," returned Joyce; "and I'll tell you what it is. If any harm has come to Valentine Jernam, let those that have done the harm look out for themselves. Perhaps they don't know what it is to hurt a man that's got a faithful dog at his heels. Let them hide themselves where they will, and let them be as cunning as they will, the dog will smell them out, sooner or later, and will tear them to pieces when he finds them. I'm Captain Jernam's dog, Mr. Dennis Wayman; and if I don't find my master, I'll hunt till I do find those that have got him out of the way. I don't know what's amiss with me to-night; but I've got a feeling come over me that I shall never look in Valentine Jernam's honest face again. If I'm right, Lord help the scoundrels who have plotted against him, for it'll be the business of my life to track them down, and bring their crime home to them—and I'll do it."

After having said this, slowly and deliberately, with an appalling earnestness of voice and manner, Joyce Harker looked from Dennis Wayman to Black Milsom, and this time the masks they were accustomed to wear did not serve these scoundrels so well as usual, for in the faces of both there was a look of fear.

"I am going to search for my captain," said Joyce. "Good night, mates."

He left the tavern. The two men looked at each other earnestly as the door closed upon him.

"A dangerous man," said Dennis Wayman.

"Bah!" muttered Black Milsom, savagely; "who's afraid of a hunchback's bluster? I dare say he wanted the handling of the money himself."

All that night Joyce Harker wandered to and fro amidst the haunts of sailors and merchant captains; but wander where he would, and inquire of whom he would, he could obtain no tidings of the missing man.

Towards daybreak, he took a couple of hours' sleep in a tavern at Shadwell, and with the day his search began again.

Throughout that day the same patient search continued, the same inquiries were repeated with indomitable perseverance, in every likely and unlikely place; but everywhere the result was failure.

It was towards dusk that Joyce Harker turned his back upon a tavern in Rotherhithe, and set his face towards the river bank.

"I have looked long enough for him among the living," he said; "I must look for him now amongst the dead."

Before midnight the search was ended. Amongst the printed bills flapping on dreary walls in that river-side neighbourhood, Joyce Harker had discovered the description of a man "found drowned." The description fitted Valentine Jernam, and the body had been found within the last two days.

Joyce went to the police-office where the man was lying. He had no need to look at the poor dead face—the dark, handsome face, which was so familiar to him.

"I expected as much," he said to the official who had admitted him to see the body; "he had money about him, and he has fallen into the hands of scoundrels."

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"No; he has been murdered, sir. And I think I know the men who did it."

"You know the men?"

"Yes; but my knowledge won't help to avenge his death, if I can't bring it home to them—and I don't suppose I can. There'll be a coroner's inquest, won't there?"

At the inquest, next day, Joyce Harker told his story; but that story threw very little light on the circumstances of Valentine Jernam's death.

The investigation before the coroner set at rest all question as to the means by which the captain had met his death. A medical examination demonstrated that he had been

murdered by a blow on the back of the head, inflicted by some sharp heavy instrument. The unfortunate man must have died before he was thrown into the water.

The verdict of the coroner's jury was to the effect that Valentine Jernam had been wilfully murdered by some person or persons unknown. And with this verdict Joyce Harker was obliged to be content. His suspicions he dared not mention in open court. They were too vague and shadowy. But he called upon a celebrated Bow Street officer, and submitted the case to him. It was a case for secret inquiry, for careful investigation; and Joyce offered a handsome reward out of his own savings.

While this secret investigation was in progress, Joyce opened the letter addressed to Valentine by his brother George.

"DEAR VAL," wrote the sailor: "I have been tempted to make another trip to Calcutta with a cargo shipped at Lisbon, and shall not be able to meet you in London on the 5th of April. It will be ten or twelve months before I see England again; but when I do come back, I hope to add something handsome to our joint fortunes. I long to see your honest face, and grasp your hand again; but the chance of a big prize lures me out yonder. We are both young, and have all the world before us, so we can afford to wait a year or two. Bank the money; Joyce will tell you where, and how to do it; and let me know your plans before you leave London. A letter addressed to me, care of Riverdale and Co., Calcutta, will be safe. Good luck to you, dear old boy, now and always, and every good wish.—From your affectionate brother," "GEORGE JERNAM."

It was Joyce Harker's melancholy task to tell Valentine Jernam's younger brother the story of the seaman's death. He wrote a long letter, recording everything that had happened within his knowledge, from the moment of the 'Pizarro' reaching Gravesend to the discovery of Valentine's body in the river-side police office. He told George the impression that had been made upon his brother by the

ballad-singer's beauty.

"I think that this girl and these two men, her father, Thomas Milsom, and Dennis Wayman, the landlord of the 'Jolly Tar', are in the secret—are, between them, the murderers of your brother. I think that when he broke his promise to me, and came back to this end of London, before the fifth, he came lured by that girl's beauty. It is to the girl we must look for a key to the secret of his death. I do not expect to extort anything from the fears of the men. They are both hardened villains; and if, as I believe, they are guilty of this crime, it is not likely to be the first in which they have been engaged. The police are on the watch, and I have promised a liberal reward for any discoveries they may make; but it is very slow work."

This, and much more, Joyce Harker wrote to George Jernam. The letter was written immediately after the inquest; and on the night succeeding that inquiry, Joyce went to the 'Jolly Tar', in the hope of seeing Jenny Milsom. But he was doomed to disappointment; for in the concert-room at Dennis Wayman's tavern he found a new singer—a fat, middle-aged woman, with red hair.

"What has become of the pretty girl who used to sing here?" he asked the landlord.

"Milsom's daughter?" said Wayman. "Oh, we've lost her She was a regular she-devil, it seems. Her father and she had a row, and the girl ran away. She can get her living anywhere with that voice of hers; and I don't suppose Milsom treated her over well. He's a rough fellow, but an honest one."

"Yes," answered Joyce, with a sneer; "he seems uncommonly honest. There's a good deal of that sort of honesty about this neighbourhood, I think, mate. I suppose you've heard about my captain?"

"Not a syllable. Is there anything wrong with him?"

"Ah! news seems to travel slowly down here. There was an inquest held this morning, not so many miles from this house."

The landlord shrugged his shoulders.

"I've been busy in-doors all day, and I haven't heard anything," he said.

Joyce told the story of his captain's fate, to which Dennis Wayman listened with every appearance of sympathy.

"And you've no idea what has become of the girl?" Harker asked, after having concluded his story.

"No more than the dead. She's cut and run, that's all I know."

"Has her father gone after her?"

"Not a bit of it. He's not that sort of man. She has chosen to take herself off, and her father will let her go her own way."

"And her grandfather, the old blind man?"

"He has gone with her."

There was no more to be said about the girl after this.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Wayman," said Joyce, "I'm likely to be a good bit down in this neighbourhood, while I'm waiting for directions about my poor captain's ship from his brother Captain George, and as your house suits me as well as any other, I may as well take up my quarters here. I know you've got plenty of room, and you'll find me a quiet lodger."

"So be it," answered the landlord, promptly. "I'm agreeable."

Joyce deliberated profoundly as he walked away from the 'Jolly Tar' that night.

"He's too deep to be caught easily," he thought. "He'll let me into his house, because he knows there's nothing I can find out, watch as I may. Such a murder as that leaves no trace behind it. If I had been able to get hold of the girl, I might have frightened her into telling me something; but it's clear to me she has really bolted, or Wayman would never let me into his house."

For weeks Joyce Harker was a lodger at the 'Jolly Tar'; always on the watch; always ready to seize upon the smallest clue to the mystery of Valentine Jernam's death; but

nothing came of his watching.

The police did their best to discover the key to the dreadful secret; but they worked in vain. The dead man's money had been partly in notes and gold, partly in bills of exchange. It was easy enough to dispose of such bills in the City. There were men ready to take them at a certain price, and to send them abroad; men who never ask questions of their customers.

So there was little chance of any light being thrown on this dark and evil mystery. Joyce watched and waited with dog-like fidelity, ready to seize upon the faintest clue; but he waited and watched in vain.

* * * * *

CHAPTER III.

DISINHERITED.

Nearly a year had elapsed since the murder of Valentine Jernam, and the March winds were blowing amongst the leafless branches of the trees in the Green Park.

In the library of one of the finest houses in Arlington Street, a gentleman paced restlessly to and fro, stopping before one of the windows every now and then, to look, with a fretful glance, at the dull sky. "What weather!" he muttered: "what execrable weather!"

The speaker was a man of some fifty years of age—a man who had been very handsome and who was handsome still—a man with a haughty patrician countenance—not easily forgotten by those who looked upon it. Sir Oswald Eversleigh, Baronet, was a descendant of one of the oldest families in Yorkshire. He was the owner of Raynham Castle, in Yorkshire; Eversleigh Manor, in Lincolnshire; and his property in those two counties constituted a rent-roll of forty thousand per annum.

He was a bachelor, and having nearly reached his fiftieth year it was considered unlikely that he would marry.

Such at least was the fixed idea of those who considered themselves the likely inheritors of the baronet's wealth. The chief of these was Reginald Eversleigh, his favourite nephew, the only son of a younger brother, who had fallen gloriously on an Indian battle-field.

There were two other nephews who had some right to look forward to a share in the baronet's fortune. These were the two sons of Sir Oswald's only sister, who had married a country rector, called Dale. But Lionel and Douglas Dale were not the sort of young men who care to wait for dead men's shoes. They were sincerely attached to their uncle; but they carefully abstained from any demonstration of affection which could seem like worship of his wealth. The elder was preparing himself for the Church; the younger was established in chambers in the Temple, reading for the bar.

It was otherwise with Reginald Eversleigh. From his early boyhood this young man had occupied the position of an adopted son rather than a nephew.

There are some who can bear indulgence, some flowers that flourish best with tender rearing; but Reginald Eversleigh was not one of these.

Sir Oswald was too generous a man to require much display of gratitude from the lad on whom he so freely lavished his wealth and his affection. When the boy showed himself proud and imperious, the baronet admired that high, and haughty spirit. When the boy showed himself reckless and extravagant in his expenditure of money, the baronet fancied that extravagance the proof of a generous disposition, overlooking the fact that it was only on his own pleasures that Reginald wasted his kinsman's money. When bad accounts came from the Eton masters and the Oxford tutors, Sir Oswald deluded himself with the belief that it was only natural for a high-spirited lad to be idle, and that, indeed, youthful idleness was often a proof of

genius.

But even the moral blindness of love cannot last for ever. The day came when the baronet awoke to the knowledge that his dead brother's only son was unworthy of his affection.

The young man entered the army. His uncle purchased for him a commission in a crack cavalry regiment, and he began his military career under the most brilliant auspices. But from the day of his leaving his military tutor, until the present hour, Sir Oswald had been perpetually subject to the demands of his extravagance, and had of late suffered most bitterly from discoveries which had at last convinced him that his nephew was a villain.

In ordinary matters, Sir Oswald Eversleigh was by no means a patient or long-suffering man; but he had exhibited extraordinary endurance in all his dealings with his nephew. The hour had now come when he could be patient no longer.

He had written to his nephew, desiring him to call upon him at three o'clock on this day.

The idea of this interview was most painful to him, for he had resolved that it should be the last between himself and Reginald Eversleigh. In this matter he had acted with no undue haste; for it had been unspeakably distressing to him to decide upon a step which would separate him for ever from the young man.

As the timepiece struck three, Mr. Eversleigh was announced. He was a very handsome man; of a refined and aristocratic type, but of a type rather effeminate than powerful. And pervading his beauty, there was a winning charm of expression which few could resist. It was difficult to believe that Reginald Eversleigh could be mean or base. People liked him, and trusted him, in spite of themselves; and it was only when their confidence had been imposed upon, and their trust betrayed, that they learned to know how despicable the handsome young officer could be. Women did their best to spoil him; and his personal charms of face and manner, added to his

brilliant expectations, rendered him an universal favourite in fashionable circles.

He came to Arlington Street prepared to receive a lecture, and a severe one, for he knew that some of his late delinquencies had become known to Sir Oswald; but he trusted in the influence which he had always been able to exercise over his uncle, and he was determined to face the difficulty boldly, as he had faced it before.

He entered the room with a smile, and advanced towards his uncle, with his hand outstretched.

But Sir Oswald drew back, refusing that proffered hand.

"I shake hands only with gentlemen and honest men," he said, haughtily. "You are neither, Mr. Eversleigh."

Reginald had been used to hear his uncle address him in anger; but never before had Sir Oswald spoken to him in that tone of cool contempt. The colour faded from the young man's face, and he looked at his uncle with an expression of alarm.

"My dear uncle!" he exclaimed.

"Be pleased to forget that you have ever addressed me by that name, or that any relationship exists between us, Mr. Eversleigh," answered Sir Oswald, with unaltered sternness. "Sit down, if you please. Our interview is likely to be a long one."

The young man seated himself in silence.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Eversleigh," said the baronet, "because I wished to tell you, without passion, that the tie which has hitherto bound us has been completely broken. Heaven knows I have been patient; I have endured your misdoings, hoping that they were the thoughtless errors of youth, and not the deliberate sins of a hardened and wicked nature. I have trusted till I can trust no longer; I have hoped till I can hope no more. Within the past week I have learned to know you. An old friend, whose word I cannot doubt, whose honour is beyond all question, has considered it a

duty to acquaint me with certain facts that have reached his knowledge, and has opened my eyes to your real character. I have given much time to reflection before determining on the course I shall pursue with one who has been so dear to me. You know me well enough to be aware that when once I do arrive at a decision, that decision is irrevocable. I wish to act with justice, even towards a scoundrel. I have brought you up with the habits of a rich man, and it is my duty to save you from absolute poverty. I have, therefore, ordered my solicitors to prepare a deed by which an income of two hundred a year will be secured to you for life, unconditionally. After the execution of that deed I shall have no further interest in your fate. You will go your own way, Mr. Eversleigh, and choose your own companions, without remonstrance or interference from the foolish kinsman who has loved you too well."

"But, my dear uncle—Sir Oswald—what have I done that you should treat me so severely?"

The young man was deadly pale. His uncle's manner had taken him by surprise; but even in this desperate moment, when he felt that all was lost, he attempted to assume the aspect of injured innocence.

"What have you done!" cried the baronet, passionately.

"Shall I show you two letters, Reginald Eversleigh—two letters which, by a strange combination of circumstances, have reached my hands; and in each of which there is the clue to a shameful story—a cruel and disgraceful story, of which you are the hero?"

"What letters?"

"You shall read them," replied Sir Oswald. "They are addressed to you, and have been in your possession; but to so fine a gentleman such letters were of little importance. Another person, however, thought them worth preserving, and sent them to me."

The baronet took up two envelopes from the table, and handed them to his nephew.

At the sight of the address of the uppermost envelope, Reginald Eversleigh's face grew livid. He looked at the lower, and then returned both documents to his uncle, with a hand that trembled in spite of himself.

"I know nothing of the letters," he faltered, huskily.

"You do not!" said his uncle; "then it will be necessary for me to enlighten you."

Sir Oswald took a letter from one of the envelopes, but before reading it he looked at his nephew with a grave and mournful countenance, from which all traces of scorn had vanished.

"Before I heard the history of this letter, I fully believed that, in spite of all your follies and extravagances, you were at least honourable and generous-hearted. After hearing the story of this letter, I knew you to be base and heartless. You say you know nothing of the letter? Perhaps you will tell me that you have forgotten the name of the writer. And yet you can scarcely have so soon forgotten Mary Goodwin."

The young man bent his head. A terrible rage possessed him, for he knew that one of the darkest secrets of his life had been revealed to his uncle.

"I will tell you the history of Mary Goodwin," said the baronet, "since you have so poor a memory. She was the favourite and foster-sister of Jane Stukely, a noble and beautiful woman, to whom you were engaged. You met Jane Stukely in London, fell in love with her as it seemed, and preferred your suit. You were accepted by her—approved by her father. No alliance could have been more advantageous. I was never better pleased than when you announced to me your engagement. The influence of a good wife will cure him of all his follies, I thought, and I shall yet have reason to be proud of my nephew."

"Spare me, sir, for pity's sake," murmured Reginald, hoarsely.

"When did you spare others, Mr. Reginald Eversleigh? When did you consider others, if they stood in the way of your base pleasures, your selfish gratifications?

Never! Nor will I spare you. As Jane's engaged lover, you were invited to Stukely Park. There you saw Mary Goodwin. Accident threw you across this girl's pathway very often in the course of your visit; but the time came when you ceased to meet by accident. There were secret meetings in the park. The poor, weak, deluded girl could not resist the fascinations of the fine gentleman—who lured her to destruction by means of lying promises. In due time you left Stukely Park, unsuspected. Within a few days of your departure, the girl, Mary Goodwin, disappeared.

"For six months nothing was heard of the missing Mary Goodwin; but at the end of that time a gentleman, who remembered her in the days of her beauty and innocence at Stukely Park, recognized the features of Miss Stukely's protégée in the face of a suicide, whose body was exhibited in the Morgue at Paris. The girl had been found drowned. The Englishman paid the charges of a decent funeral, and took back to the Stukelys the intelligence of their protégée's fate; but no one knew the secret of her destruction. That secret was, however, suspected by Jane Stukely, who broke her engagement with you on the strength of the dark suspicion.

"It was to you she fled when she left Stukely Park—in your companionship she went abroad, where she passed as your wife, you assuming a false name—under which you were recognized, nevertheless. The day came when you grew weary of your victim. When your funds were exhausted, when the girl's tears and penitence grew troublesome—in the hour when she was most helpless and miserable, and had most need of your pity and protection, you abandoned her, leaving her alone in Paris, with a few pounds to pay for her journey home, if she should have courage to go back to the friends who had sheltered her. In this hour of abandonment and shame, she chose death rather than such an ordeal, and drowned herself."

"I give you my honour, Sir Oswald, I meant to act liberally. I meant,"—the young man interrupted; but his uncle did not notice the interruption.

"I will read you this wretched girl's letter," continued the baronet; "it is her last, and

was left at the hotel where you deserted her, and whence it was forwarded to you. It is a very simple letter; but it bears in every line the testimony of a broken heart:—

"'You have left me, Reginald, and in so doing have proved to me most fully that the love you once felt for me has indeed perished. For the sake of that love I have sacrificed every principle and broken every tie. I have disgraced the name of an honest family, and have betrayed the dearest and kindest friend who ever protected a poor girl. And now you leave me, and tell me to return to my old friends, who will no doubt forgive me, you say, and shelter me in this bitter time of my disgrace. Oh, Reginald, do you know me so little that you think I could go back, could lift my eyes once more to the dear faces that used to smile upon me, but which now would turn from me with loathing and aversion? You know that I cannot go back. You leave me in this great city, so strange and unknown to me, and you do not care to ask yourself any questions as to my probable fate. Shall I tell you what I am going to do, Reginald? You, who were once so fond and passionate a lover—you, whom I have seen kneeling at my feet, humbly born and penniless though I was—it is only right that you should know the fate of your abandoned mistress. When I have finished this letter it will be dark—the shadows are closing in already, and I can scarcely see to write. I shall creep quietly from the house, and shall make my way over to that river which I have crossed so often, seated by your side in a carriage. Once on the bridge, under cover of the blessed darkness, all my troubles will be ended; you will be burdened with me no longer, and I shall not cost you even the ten-pound note which you so generously left for me, and which I shall enclose in this letter. Forgive me if there is some bitterness in my heart. I try to forgive you—I do forgive you! May a merciful heaven pardon my sins, as I pardon your desertion of me! M.G.'"

There was a pause after the reading of the letter—a silence which Mr. Eversleigh did not attempt to break. "The second letter I need scarcely read to you," said the baronet; "it is from a young man whom you were pleased to patronize some twelve months back—a young man in a banking office, aspiring and ambitious, whose chief

weakness was the desire to penetrate the mystic circle of fashionable society. You were good enough to indulge that weakness at your own price, and for your own profit. You initiated the banker's clerk into the mysteries of card-playing and billiards. You won money of him—more than he had to lose; and after being the kindest and most indulgent of friends, you became all at once a stern and pitiless creditor. You threatened the bank-clerk with disgrace if he did not pay his losses. He wrote you pleading letters; but you laughed to scorn his prayers for mercy, and at last, maddened by shame, he helped himself to the money entrusted to him by his employers, in order to pay you. Discovery came, as discovery always does come, sooner or later, in these cases, and your friend and victim was transported. Before leaving England he wrote you a letter, imploring you to have some compassion on his widowed mother, whom his disgrace had deprived of all support. I wonder how much heed you took of that letter, Mr. Eversleigh? I wonder what you did towards the consolation of the helpless and afflicted woman who owed her misfortunes to you?"

The young officer dared not lift his eyes to his uncle's face; the consciousness of guilt rendered him powerless to utter a word in his defence.

"I have little more to say to you," resumed the baronet. "I have loved you as a man rarely loves his nephew. I have loved you for the sake of the brother who died in my arms, and for the sake of one who was even dearer to me than that only brother—for the sake of the woman whom we both loved, and who made her choice between us—choosing the younger and poorer brother, and retaining to her dying day the affection and esteem of the elder. I loved your mother, Reginald Eversleigh, and when she died, within one short year of her husband's death, I swore that her only child should be as dear to me as a son. I have kept that promise. Few parents can find patience to forgive such follies as I have forgiven. But my endurance is exhausted; my affection has been worn out by your heartlessness: henceforward we are strangers."

"You cannot mean this, sir?" murmured Reginald Eversleigh.

There was a terrible fear at his heart—an inward conviction that his uncle was in earnest.

"My solicitors will furnish you with all particulars of the deed I spoke of," said Sir Oswald, without noticing his nephew's appealing tones. "That deed will secure to you two hundred a year. You have a soldier's career before you, and you are young enough to redeem the past—at any rate, in the eyes of the world, if not before the sight of heaven. If you find your regiment too expensive for your altered means, I would recommend you to exchange into the line. And now, Mr. Eversleigh, I wish you good morning."

"But, Sir Oswald—uncle—my dear uncle—you cannot surely cast me off thus coldly—you—"

The baronet rang the bell.

"The door—for Mr. Eversleigh," he said to the servant who answered his summons.

The young man rose, looking at his kinsman with an incredulous gaze. He could not believe that all his hopes were utterly ruined; that he was, indeed, cast off with a pittance which to him seemed positively despicable.

But there was no hope to be derived from Sir Oswald's face. A mask of stone could not have been more inflexible.

"Good morning, sir," said Reginald, in accents that were tremulous with suppressed rage.

He could say no more, for the servant was in attendance, and he could not humiliate himself before the man who had been wont to respect him as Sir Oswald Eversleigh's heir. He took up his hat and cane, bowed to the baronet, and left the room.

Once beyond the doors of his uncle's mansion, Reginald Eversleigh abandoned

himself to the rage that possessed him.

"He shall repent this," he muttered. "Yes; powerful as he is, he shall repent having used his power. As if I had not suffered enough already; as if I had not been haunted perpetually by that girl's pale, reproachful face, ever since the fatal hour in which I abandoned her. But those letters; how could they have fallen into my uncle's hands? That scoundrel, Laston, must have stolen them, in revenge for his dismissal."

He went to the loneliest part of the Green Park, and, stretched at full length upon a bench, abandoned himself to gloomy reflections, with his face hidden by his folded arms.

For hours he lay thus, while the bleak March winds whistled loud and shrill in the leafless trees above his head—while the cold, gray light of the sunless day faded into the shadows of evening. It was past seven o'clock, and the lamps in Piccadilly shone brightly, when he rose, chilled to the bone, and walked away from the park.

"And I am to consider myself rich—with my pay and fifty pounds a quarter," he muttered, with a bitter laugh; "and if I find a crack cavalry regiment too expensive, I am to exchange into the line—turn foot-soldier, and face the scornful looks of all my old acquaintances. No, no, Sir Oswald Eversleigh; you have brought me up as a gentleman, and a gentleman I will remain to the end of the chapter, let who will pay the cost. It may seem easy to cast me off, Sir Oswald; but we have not done with each other yet."

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CHAPTER IV.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

After dismissing his nephew, Sir Oswald Eversleigh abandoned himself for some time to gloomy thought. The trial had been a very bitter one; but at length, arousing

himself from that gloomy reverie, he said aloud, "Thank Heaven it is over; my resolution did not break down, and the link is broken."

Sir Oswald had made his arrangements for leaving London that afternoon, on the first stage of his journey to Raynham Castle. There were few railroads six-and-twenty years ago, and the baronet was in the habit of travelling in his own carriage, with post-horses. The journey from London to the far north of Yorkshire was, therefore, a long one, occupying two or three days.

Sir Oswald left town an hour after his interview with Reginald Eversleigh.

It was ten o'clock when he alighted for the first time in a large, bustling town on the great northern road. He had changed horses several times since leaving London, and had accomplished a considerable distance within the five hours. He put up at the principal hotel, where he intended to remain for the night. From the windows of his rooms was to be seen the broad, open market-place, which to-night was brilliantly lighted, and thronged with people. Sir Oswald looked with surprise at the bustling scene, as one of the waiters drew the curtains before the long windows.

"Your town seems busy to-night," he said.

"Yes, sir; there has been a fair, sir—our spring fair, sir—a cattle fair, sir. Perhaps you'd rather not have the curtains drawn, sir. You may like to look out of the window after dinner, sir."

"Look out of the window?—oh, dear no! Close the curtains by all means."

The waiter wondered at the gentleman's bad taste, and withdrew to hasten the well-known guest's dinner.

It was long past eleven, and Sir Oswald was sitting brooding before the fire, when he was startled from his reverie by the sound of a woman's voice singing in the market-place below. The streets had been for some time deserted, the shops closed, the lights extinguished, except a few street-lamps, flickering feebly here and there. All was quiet, and the voice of the street ballad-singer sounded full and clear in the

stillness.

Sir Oswald Eversleigh was in no humour to listen to street-singers. It must needs be some voice very far removed from common voices which could awaken him from his gloomy abstraction.

It was, indeed, an uncommon voice, such a voice as one rarely hears beyond the walls of the Italian opera-house—such a voice as is not often heard even within those walls. Full, clear, and rich, the melodious accents sent a thrill to the innermost heart of the listener.

The song which the vagrant was singing was the simplest of ballads. It was "Auld Robin Gray."

While he sat by the fire, listening to that familiar ballad, Sir Oswald Eversleigh forgot his sorrow and indignation—forgot his nephew's baseness, forgot everything, except the voice of the woman singing in the deserted market-place below the windows.

He went to one of the windows, and drew back the curtain. The night was cold and boisterous; but a full moon was shining in a clear sky, and every object in the broad street was visible in that penetrating light.

The windows of Sir Oswald's sitting-room opened upon a balcony. He lifted the sash, and stepped out into the chill night air. He saw the figure of a woman moving a way from the pavement before the hotel very slowly, with a languid, uncertain step. Presently he saw her totter and pause, as if scarcely able to proceed. Then she moved unsteadily onwards for a few paces, and at last sank down upon a door-step, with the helpless motion of utter exhaustion.

He did not stop to watch, longer from the balcony. He went back to his room, snatched up his hat, and hurried down stairs. They were beginning to close the establishment for the night, and the waiters stared as Sir Oswald passed them on his way to the street.

In the market-place nothing was stirring. The baronet could see the dark figure of the woman still in the same attitude into which he had seen her sink when she fell exhausted on the door-step, half-sitting, half-lying on the stone.

Sir Oswald hurried to the spot where the woman had sunk down, and bent over her. Her arms were folded on the stone, her head lying on her folded arms.

"Why are you lying there, my good girl?" asked Sir Oswald, gently.

Something in the slender figure told him that the ballad-singer was young, though he could not see her face.

She lifted her head slowly, with a languid action, and looked up at the speaker.

"Where else should I go?" she asked, in bitter tones.

"Have you no home?"

"Home!" echoed the girl. "I have never had what gentlemen like you call a home."

"But where are you going to-night?"

"To the fields—to some empty barn, if I can find one with a door unfastened, into which I may creep. I have been singing all day, and have not earned money enough to pay for a lodging."

The full moon shone broad and clear upon the girl's face. Looking at her by that silvery light, Sir Oswald saw that she was very beautiful.

"Have you been long leading this miserable life?" Sir Oswald asked her presently.

"My life has been one long misery," answered the ballad-singer.

"How long have you been singing in the streets?"

"I have been singing about the country for two years; not always in the streets, for some time I was in a company of show-people; but the mistress of the show treated me badly, and I left her. Since then I have been wandering about from place to place, singing in the streets on market-days, and singing at fairs."

The girl said all this in a dull, mechanical way, as if she were accustomed to be called on to render an account of herself.

"And before you took to this kind of life," said the baronet, strangely interested in this vagrant girl; "how did you get your living before then?"

"I lived with my father," answered the girl, in an altered tone. "Have you finished your questions?"

She shuddered slightly, and rose from her crouching attitude. The moon still shone upon her face, intensifying its deathlike pallor.

"See," said her unknown questioner, "here are a couple of sovereigns. You need not wander into the open country to look for an empty barn. You can procure shelter at some respectable inn. Or stay, it is close upon midnight: you might find it difficult to get admitted to any respectable house at such an hour. You had better come with me to my hotel yonder, the 'Star'—the landlady is a kind-hearted creature, and will see you comfortably lodged. Come!"

The girl stood before Sir Oswald, shivering in the bleak wind, with a thin black shawl wrapped tightly around her, and her dark brown hair blown away from her face by that bitter March wind. She looked at him with unutterable surprise in her countenance.

"You are very good," she said; "no one of your class ever before stepped out of his way to help me. Poor people have been kind to me—often—very often. You are very good."

There was more of astonishment than pleasure in the girl's tone. It seemed as if she cared very little about her own fate, and that her chief feeling was surprise at the goodness of this fine gentleman.

"Do not speak of that," said Sir Oswald, gently; "I am anxious to get you a decent shelter for the night, but that is a very small favour. I happen to be something of a musician, and I have been much struck by the beauty of your voice. I may be able to

put you in the way of making good use of your voice."

"Of my voice!"

The girl echoed the phrase as if it had no meaning to her.

"Come," said her benefactor, "you are weary, and ill, perhaps. You look terribly pale. Come to the hotel, and I will place you in the landlady's charge."

He walked on, and the girl walked by his side, very slowly, as if she had scarcely sufficient strength to carry her even that short distance.

There was something strange in the circumstance of Sir Oswald's meeting with this girl. There was something strange in the sudden interest which she had aroused in him—the eager desire which he felt to learn her previous history.

The mistress of the "Star Hotel" was somewhat surprised when one of the waiters summoned her to the hall, where the street-singer was standing by Sir Oswald's side; but she was too clever a woman to express her astonishment. Sir Oswald was one of her most influential patrons, and Sir Oswald's custom was worth a great deal. It was, therefore, scarcely possible that such a man could do wrong.

"I found this poor girl in an exhausted state in the street just now," said Sir Oswald. "She is quite friendless, and has no shelter for the night, though she seems above the mendicant class. Will you put her somewhere, and see that she is taken good care of, my dear Mrs. Willet? In the morning I may be able to think of some plan for placing her in a more respectable position."

Mrs. Willet promised that the girl should be taken care of, and made thoroughly comfortable. "Poor young thing," said the landlady, "she looks dreadfully pale and ill, and I'm sure she'll be none the worse for a nice little bit of supper. Come with me, my dear."

The girl obeyed; but on the threshold of the hall she turned and spoke to Sir Oswald.

"I thank you," she said; "I thank you with all my heart and soul for your goodness. I

have never met with such kindness before."

"The world must have been very hard for you, my poor child," he replied, "if such small kindness touches you so deeply. Come to me to-morrow morning, and we will talk of your future life. Goodnight!"

"Good night, sir, and God bless you!"

The baronet went slowly and thoughtfully up the broad staircase, on his way to his rooms.

Sir Oswald Eversleigh passed the night of his sojourn at the 'Star' in broken slumbers. The events of the preceding day haunted him perpetually in his sleep, acting themselves over and over again in his brain. Sometimes he was with his nephew, and the young man was pleading with him in an agony of selfish terror; sometimes he was standing in the market-place, with the ghost-like figure of the vagrant ballad-singer by his side.

When he arose in the morning, Sir Oswald resolved to dismiss all thought of his nephew. His strange adventure of the previous night had exercised a very powerful influence upon his mind; and it was upon that adventure he meditated while he breakfasted.

"I have seen a landscape, which had no special charm in broad daylight, transformed into a glimpse of paradise by the magic of the moon," he mused as he lingered over his breakfast. "Perhaps this girl is a very ordinary creature after all—a mere street wanderer, coarse and vulgar."

But Sir Oswald stopped himself, remembering the refined tones of the voice which he had heard last night—the perfect self-possession of the girl's manner.

"No," he exclaimed, "she is neither coarse nor vulgar; she is no common street ballad-singer. Whatever she is, or whoever she is, there is a mystery around and about her—a mystery which it shall be my business to fathom."

When he had breakfasted, Sir Oswald Eversleigh sent for the ballad-singer.

"Be good enough to tell the young person that if she feels herself sufficiently rested and refreshed, I should like much to have a few minutes' conversation with her," said the baronet to the head-waiter.

In a few minutes the waiter returned, and ushered in the girl. Sir Oswald turned to look at her, possessed by a curiosity which was utterly unwarranted by the circumstances. It was not the first time in his life that he had stepped aside from his pathway to perform an act of charity; but it certainly was the first time he had ever felt so absorbing an interest in the object of his benevolence.

The girl's beauty had been no delusion engendered of the moonlight. Standing before him, in the broad sunlight, she seemed even yet more beautiful, for her loveliness was more fully visible.

The ballad-singer betrayed no signs of embarrassment under Sir Oswald's searching gaze. She stood before her benefactor with calm grace; and there was something almost akin to pride in her attitude. Her garments were threadbare and shabby: yet on her they did not appear the garments of a vagrant. Her dress was of some rusty black stuff, patched and mended in a dozen places; but it fitted her neatly, and a clean linen collar surrounded her slender throat, which was almost as white as the linen. Her waving brown hair was drawn away from her face in thick bands, revealing the small, rosy-tinted ear. The dark brown of that magnificent hair contrasted with the ivory white of a complexion which was only relieved by transient blushes of faint rose-colour, that came and went with emotion or excitement.

"Be good enough to take a seat," said Sir Oswald: "I wish to have a little conversation with you. I want to help you, if I can. You do not seem fitted for the life you are leading; and I am convinced that you possess talent which would elevate you to a far higher sphere. But before we talk of the future, I must ask you to tell me

something of the past."

"Tell me," he continued, gently, "how is it that you are so friendless? How is it that your father and mother allow you to lead such an existence?"

"My mother died when I was a child," answered the girl.

"And your father?"

"My father is dead also."

"You did not tell me that last night," replied the baronet, with some touch of suspicion in his tone, for he fancied the girl's manner had changed when she spoke of her father.

"Did I not?" she said, quietly. "I do not think you asked me any question about my father; but if you did, I may have answered at random; I was confused last night from exhaustion and want of rest, and I scarcely knew what I said."

"What was your father?"

"He was a sailor."

"There is something that is scarcely English in your face," said Sir Oswald; "were you born in England?"

"No, I was born in Florence; my mother was a Florentine."

"Indeed."

There was a pause. It seemed evident that this girl did not care to tell the story of her past life, and that whatever information the baronet wanted to obtain, must be extorted from her little by little. A common vagrant would have been eager to pour out some tale of misery, true or false, in the hearing of the man who promised to be her benefactor; but this girl maintained a reserve which Sir Oswald found it very difficult to penetrate.

"I fear there is something of a painful nature in your past history," he said, at last; "something which you do not care to reveal."

"There is much that is painful, much that I cannot tell."

"And yet you must be aware that it will be very difficult for me to give you assistance if I do not know to whom I am giving it. I wish to place you in a position very different from that which you now occupy; but it would be folly to interest myself in a person of whose history I positively know nothing."

"Then dismiss from your mind all thoughts of me, and let me go my own way," answered the girl, with that calm pride of manner which imparted a singular charm to her beauty. "I shall leave this house grateful and contented; I have asked nothing from you, nor did I intend to ask anything. You have been very good to me; you took compassion upon me in my misery, and I have been accustomed to see people of your class pass me by. Let me thank you for your goodness, and go on my way." So saying, she rose, and turned as if to leave the room.

"No!" cried Sir Oswald, impetuously; "I cannot let you go. I must help you in some manner—even if you will throw no light upon your past existence; even if I must act entirely in the dark."

"You are too good, sir," replied the girl, deeply touched; "but remember that I do not ask your help. My history is a terrible one. I have suffered from the crimes of others; but neither crime nor dishonour have sullied my own life. I have lived amongst people I despised, holding myself aloof as far as was possible. I have been laughed at, hated, ill-used for that which has been called pride; but I have at least preserved myself unpolluted by the corruption that surrounded me. If you can believe this, if you can take me upon trust, and stretch forth your hand to help me, knowing no more of me than I have now told you, I shall accept your assistance proudly and gratefully. But if you cannot believe, let me go my own way."

"I will trust you," he said; "I will help you, blindly, since it must be so. Let me ask you two or three questions, then all questioning between us shall be at an end."

"I am ready to answer any inquiry that it is possible for me to answer."

"Your name?"

"My name is Honoria Milford."

"Your age?"

"Eighteen."

"Tell me, how is it that your manner of speaking, your tones of voice, are those of a person who has received a superior education?"

"I am not entirely uneducated. An Italian priest, a cousin of my poor mother's, bestowed some care upon me when I was in Florence. He was a very learned man, and taught me much that is rarely taught to a girl of fourteen or fifteen. His house was my refuge in days of cruel misery, and his teaching was the only happiness of my life. And now, sir, question me no further, I entreat you."

"Very well, then, I will ask no more; and I will trust you."

"I thank you, sir, for your generous confidence."

"And now I will tell you my plans for your future welfare," Sir Oswald continued, kindly. "I was thinking much of you while I breakfasted. You have a very magnificent voice; and it is upon that voice you must depend for the future. Are you fond of music?"

"I am very fond of it."

There was little in the girl's words, but the tone in which they were spoken, the look of inspiration which lighted up the speaker's face, convinced Sir Oswald that she was an enthusiast.

"Do you play the piano?"

"A little; by ear."

"And you know nothing of the science of music?"

"Nothing."

"Then you will have a great deal to learn before you can make any profitable use of your voice. And now I will tell you what I shall do. I shall make immediate arrangements for placing you in a first-class boarding school in London, or the neighbourhood of London. There you will complete your education, and there you will receive lessons from the best masters in music and singing, and devote the greater part of your time to the cultivation of your voice. It will be known that you are intended for the career of a professional singer, and every facility will be afforded you for study. You will remain in this establishment for two years, and at the end of that time I shall place you under the tuition of some eminent singer, who will complete your musical education, and enable you to appear as a public singer. All the rest will depend on your own industry and perseverance."

"And I should be a worthless creature if I were not more industrious than ever any woman was before!" exclaimed Honoria. "Oh, sir, how can I find words to thank you?"

"You have no need to thank me. I am a rich man, with neither wife nor child upon whom to waste my money. Besides, if you find the obligation too heavy to bear, you can repay me when you become a distinguished singer."

"I will work hard to hasten that day, sir," answered the girl, earnestly.

Sir Oswald had spoken thus lightly, in order to set his protégée more at her ease. He saw that her eyes were filled with tears, and moving to the window to give her time to recover herself, stood for some minutes looking out into the market-place. Then he came back to his easy chair by the fire, and addressed her once more.

"I shall post up to town this afternoon to make the arrangements of which I have spoken," he said; "you, in the meantime, will remain under the care of Mrs. Willet, to whom I shall entrust the purchase of your wardrobe. When that has been prepared, you will come straight to my house in Arlington Street, whence I will myself conduct you to the school I may have chosen as your residence. Remember,

that from to-day you will begin a new life. Ah, by the bye, there is one other question I must ask. You have no relations, no associates of the past who are likely to torment you in the future?"

"None. I have no relations who would dare approach me, and I have always held myself aloof from all associates."

"Good, then the future lies clear before you. And now you can return to Mrs. Willet. I will see her presently, and make all arrangements for your comfort."

Honoria curtseyed to her benefactor, and left the room in silence. Her every gesture and her every tone were those of a lady. Sir Oswald looked after her with wonder, as she disappeared from the apartment.

The landlady of the "Star" was very much surprised when Sir Oswald Eversleigh requested her to keep the ballad-singer in her charge for a week, and to purchase for her a simple but thoroughly complete wardrobe.

"And now," said Sir Oswald, "I confide her to you for a week, Mrs. Willet, at the end of which time I hope her wardrobe will be ready. I will write you a cheque for—say fifty pounds. If that is not enough, you can have more."

"Lor' bless you, Sir Oswald, it's more than enough to set her up like a duchess, in a manner of speaking," answered the landlady; and then, seeing Sir Oswald had no more to say to her, she curtseyed and withdrew.

Sir Oswald Eversleigh's carriage was at the door of the "Star" at noon; and at ten minutes after twelve the baronet was on his way back to town.

He visited a great many West-end boarding-schools before he found one that satisfied him in every particular. Had his protégée been his daughter, or his affianced wife, he could not have been more difficult to please. He wondered at his own fastidiousness.

"I am like a child with a new toy," he thought, almost ashamed of the intense interest

he felt in this unknown girl.

At last he found an establishment that pleased him; a noble old mansion at Fulham, surrounded by splendid grounds, and presided over by two maiden sisters. It was a thoroughly aristocratic seminary, and the ladies who kept it knew how to charge for the advantages of their establishment. Sir Oswald assented immediately to the Misses Beaumonts' terms, and promised to bring the expected pupil in less than a week's time.

"The young lady is a relation, I presume, Sir Oswald?" said the elder Miss Beaumont.

"Yes," answered the baronet; "she is—a distant relative."

If he had not been standing with his back to the light, the two ladies might have seen a dusky flush suffuse his face as he pronounced these words. Never before had he told so deliberate a falsehood. But he had feared to tell the truth.

"They will never guess her secret from her manner," he thought; "and if they question her, she will know how to baffle their curiosity."

On the very day that ended the stipulated week, Honoria Milford made her appearance in Arlington Street. Sir Oswald was in his library, seated in an easy-chair before the fire-place, with a book in his hand, but with no power to concentrate his attention to its pages. He was sitting thus when the door was opened, and a servant announced—

"Miss Milford!"

Sir Oswald rose from his chair, and beheld an elegant young lady, who approached him with a graceful timidity of manner. She was simply dressed in gray merino, a black silk mantle, and a straw bonnet, trimmed with white ribbon. Nothing could have been more Quaker-like than the simplicity of this costume, and yet there was an elegance about the wearer which the baronet had seldom seen surpassed.

He rose to welcome her.

"You have just arrived in town?" he said.

"Yes, Sir Oswald; a hackney-coach brought me here from the coach-office."

"I am very glad to see you," said the baronet, holding out his hand, which Honoria Milford touched lightly with her own neatly gloved fingers; "and I am happy to tell you that I have secured you a home which I think you will like."

"Oh, Sir Oswald, you are only too good to me. I shall never know how to thank you."

"Then do not thank me at all. Believe me, I desire no thanks. I have done nothing worthy of gratitude. An influence stronger than my own will has drawn me towards you; and in doing what I can to befriend you, I am only giving way to an impulse which I am powerless to resist."

The girl looked at her benefactor with a bewildered expression, and Sir Oswald interpreted the look.

"Yes," he said, "you may well be astonished by what I tell you. I am astonished myself. There is something mysterious in the interest which you have inspired in my mind."

Although the baronet had thought continually of his protégée during the past week, he had never asked himself if there might not be some simple and easy solution possible for this bewildering enigma. He had never asked himself if it were not just within the limits of possibility that a man of fifty might fall a victim to that fatal fever called love.

He looked at the girl's beautiful face with the admiration which every man feels for the perfection of beauty—the pure, calm, reverential feeling of an artist, or a poet—and he never supposed it possible that the day might not be far distant when he would contemplate that lovely countenance with altered sentiments, with a deeper

emotion.

"Come to the dining-room, Miss Milford," he said; "I expected you to-day—I have made all my arrangements accordingly. You must be hungry after your journey; and as I have not yet lunched, I hope you will share my luncheon?"

Honoria assented. Her manner towards her benefactor was charming in its quiet grace, deferential without being sycophantic—the manner of a daughter rather than a dependent Before leaving the library, she looked round at the books, the bronzes, the pictures, with admiring eyes. Never before had she seen so splendid an apartment: and she possessed that intuitive love of beautiful objects which is the attribute of all refined and richly endowed natures.

The baronet placed his ward on one side of the table, and seated himself opposite to her.

No servant waited upon them. Sir Oswald himself attended to the wants of his guest. He heaped her plate with dainties; he filled her glass with rare old wine; but she ate only a few mouthfuls, and she could drink nothing. The novelty of her present position was too full of excitement.

During the whole of the repast the baronet asked her no questions. He talked as if they had long been known to each other, explaining to her the merits of the different pictures and statues which she admired, pleased to find her intelligence always on a level with his own.

"She is a wonderful creature," he thought; "a wonderful creature—a priceless pearl picked up out of the gutter."

After luncheon Sir Oswald rang for his carriage, and presently Honoria Milford found herself on her way to her new home.

The mansion inhabited by the Misses Beaumont was called "The Beeches." It had of old been the seat of a nobleman, and the grounds which encircled it were such as are rarely to be found within a few miles of the metropolis; and they would in vain be

sought for now. Shabby little streets and terraces cover the ground where grand old cedars of Lebanon cast their dark shadows on the smooth turf seven-and-twenty years ago.

Honoria Milford was enraptured with the beauty of her new home. That stately mansion, shut in by noble old trees from all the dust and clamour of the outer world; those smooth lawns, and exquisitely kept beds, filled with flowers even in this chill spring weather, must have seemed beautiful to those accustomed to handsome habitations. What must they have been then to the wanderer of the streets—the friendless tramp—who a week ago had depended for a night's rest on the chance of finding an empty barn.

She looked at her benefactor with eyes that were dim with tears, as the carriage approached this delightful retreat.

"If I were your daughter, you could not have chosen a better place than this," she said.

"If you were my daughter, I doubt if I could feel a deeper interest in your fate than I feel now," answered Sir Oswald, quietly.

Miss Beaumont the elder received her pupil with ceremonious kindness. She looked at the girl with the keen glance of examination which becomes habitual to the eye of the schoolmistress; but the most severe scrutiny would have failed to detect anything unladylike or ungraceful in the deportment of Honoria Milford.

"The young lady is charming," said Miss Beaumont, confidentially, as the baronet was taking leave; "any one could guess that she was an Eversleigh. She is so elegant, so patrician in face and manner. Ah, Sir Oswald, the good old blood will show itself."

The baronet smiled as he bade adieu to the schoolmistress. He had told Honoria that policy had compelled him to speak of her as a distant relative of his own; and there was no fear that the girl would betray herself or him by any awkward admissions.

Sir Oswald felt depressed and gloomy as he drove back to town. It seemed to him as if, in parting from his protégée, he had lost something that was necessary to his happiness.

"I have not spent half a dozen hours in her society," he thought, "and yet she occupies my mind more than my nephew, Reginald, who for fifteen years of my life has been the object of so much hope, so many cares. What does it all mean? What is the key to this mystery?"

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CHAPTER V.

"EVIL, BE THOU MY GOOD."

Reginald Eversleigh was handsome, accomplished, agreeable—irresistible when he chose, many people said; but he was not richly endowed with those intellectual gifts which lift a man to either the good or bad eminence. He was weak and vacillating—one minute swayed by a good influence, a transient touch of penitence, affection, or generosity; in the next given over entirely to his own selfishness, thinking only of his own enjoyment. He was apt to be influenced by any friend or companion endowed with intellectual superiority; and he possessed such a friend in the person of Victor Carrington, a young surgeon, a man infinitely below Mr. Eversleigh in social status, but whose talents, united to tact, had lifted him above his natural level.

The young surgeon was a slim, elegant-looking young man, with a pale, sallow face, and flashing black eyes. His appearance was altogether foreign, and although his own name was English, he was half a Frenchman, his mother being a native of Bordeaux. This widowed mother now lived with him, dependent on him, and loving him with a devoted affection.

From a chance meeting in a public billiard-room, an intimacy arose between Victor

Carrington and Reginald Eversleigh, which speedily ripened into friendship. The weaker nature was glad to find a stronger on which to lean. Reginald Eversleigh invited his new friend to his rooms—to champagne breakfasts, to suppers of broiled bones, eaten long after midnight: to card-parties, at which large sums of money were lost and won; but the losers were never Victor Carrington or Reginald Eversleigh, and there were men who said that Eversleigh was a more dangerous opponent at loo and whist since he had picked up that fellow Carrington.

"I always feel afraid of Eversleigh, when that sallow-faced surgeon is his partner at whist, or hangs about his chair at écarté," said one of the officers in Reginald Eversleigh's regiment. "It's my opinion that black-eyed Frenchman is Mephistopheles in person. I never saw a countenance that so fully realized my idea of the devil."

People laughed at the dragoon's notion: but there were few of Mr. Eversleigh's guests who liked his new acquaintance, and there were some who kept altogether aloof from the young cornet's rooms, after two or three evenings spent in the society of Mr. Carrington.

"The fellow is too clever," said one of Eversleigh's brother-officers; "these very clever men are almost invariably scoundrels. I respect a man who is great in one thing—a great surgeon, a great lawyer, a great soldier—but your fellow who knows everything better than anybody else is always a villain."

Victor Carrington was the only person to whom Reginald Eversleigh told the real story of his breach with his uncle. He trusted Victor: not because he cared to confide in him—for the story was too humiliating to be told without pain—but because he wanted counsel from a stronger mind than his own.

"It's rather a hard thing to drop from the chance of forty thousand a year to a pension of a couple of hundred, isn't it, Carrington?" said Reginald, as the two young men dined together in the cornet's quarters, a fortnight after the scene in Arlington Street.

"It's rather hard, isn't it, Carrington?"

"Yes, it would be rather hard, if such a contingency were possible," replied the surgeon, coolly; "but we don't mean to drop from forty thousand to two hundred. The generous old uncle may choose to draw his purse-strings, and cast us off to 'beggarly divorcement,' as Desdemona remarks; but we don't mean to let him have his own way. We must take things quietly, and manage matters with a little tact. You want my advice, I suppose, my dear Reginald?"

"I do."

The surgeon almost always addressed his friends by their Christian names, more especially when those friends were of higher standing than himself. There was a depth of pride, which few understood, lurking beneath his quiet and unobtrusive manner; and he had a way of his own by which he let people know that he considered himself in every respect their equal, and in some respects their superior.

"You want my advice. Very well, then, my advice is that you play the penitent prodigal. It is not a difficult part to perform, if you take care what you're about. Sir Oswald has advised you to exchange into the line. Instead of doing that, you will sell out altogether. It will look like a stroke of prudence, and will leave you free to play your cards cleverly, and keep your eye upon this dear uncle."

"Sell out!" exclaimed Reginald. "Leave the army! I have sworn never to do that."

"But you will find yourself obliged to do it, nevertheless. Your regiment is too expensive for a man who has only a pitiful two hundred a year beyond his pay. Your mail-phaeton would cost the whole of your income; your tailor's bill can hardly be covered by another two hundred; and then, where are you to get your gloves, your hot-house flowers, your wines, your cigars? You can't go on upon credit for ever; tradesmen have such a tiresome habit of wanting money, if it's only a hundred or so now and then on account. The Jews are beginning to be suspicious of your paper. The news of your quarrel with Sir Oswald is pretty sure to get about somehow or

other, and then where are you? Cards and billiards are all very well in their way; but you can't live by them, without turning a regular black-leg, and as a black-leg you would have no chance of the Raynham estates. No, my dear Reginald, retrenchment is the word. You must sell out, keep yourself very quiet, and watch your uncle."

"What do you mean by watching him?" asked Mr. Eversleigh, peevishly.

His friend's advice was by no means palatable to him. He sat in a moody attitude, with his elbows on his knees, and his head bent forward, staring at the fire. His wine stood untasted on the table by his side.

"I mean that you must keep your eye upon him, in order to see that he don't play you a trick," answered the surgeon, at his own leisure.

"What trick should he play me?"

"Well, you see, when a man quarrels with his heir, he is apt to turn desperate. Sir Oswald might marry."

"Marry! at fifty years of age?"

"Yes. Men of fifty have been known to fall as desperately in love as any of your heroes of two or three and twenty. Sir Oswald would be a splendid match, and depend upon it, there are plenty of beautiful and high-born women who would be glad to call themselves Lady Eversleigh. Take my advice, Reginald, dear boy, and keep your eye on the baronet."

"But he has turned me out of his house. He has severed every link between us."

"Then it must be our business to establish a secret chain of communication with his household," answered Victor. "He has some confidential servant, I suppose?"

"Yes; he has a valet, called Millard, whom he trusts as far as he trusts any dependent; but he is not a man who talks to his servants."

"Perhaps not; but servants have a way of their own of getting at information, and depend upon it, Mr. Millard knows more of your uncle's business than Sir Oswald

would wish him to know. We must get hold of this faithful Millard."

"But he is a very faithful fellow—honesty itself—the pink of fidelity."

"Humph!" muttered the young surgeon; "did you ever try the effect of a bribe on this pink of fidelity?"

"Never."

"Then you know nothing about him. Remember what Sir Robert Walpole said, 'Every man has his price.' We must find out the price of Mr. Millard."

"You are a wonderful fellow, Carrington."

"You think so? Bah, I keep my eyes open, that's all; other men go through the world with their eyes half-shut. I graduated in a good school, and I may, perhaps, have been a tolerably apt pupil?"

"What school?"

"The school of poverty. That's the sort of education that sharpens a man's intellect. My father was a reprobate and a gamester, and I knew at an early age that I had nothing to hope for from him. I have had my own way to carve in life, and if I have as yet made small progress, I have fought against terrible odds."

"I wonder you don't set up in a professional career," said Mr. Eversleigh; "you have finished your education; obtained your degree. What are you waiting for?"

"I am waiting for my chances," answered Victor; "I don't care to begin the jog-trot career in which other men toil for twenty years or so, before they attain anything like prosperity. I have studied as few men of five-and-twenty have studied,—chemistry as well as surgery. I can afford to wait my chances. I pick up a few pounds a week by writing for the medical journals, and with that resource and occasional luck with cards, I can very easily support the simple home in which my mother and I live. In the meantime, I am free, and believe me, my dear Reginald, there is nothing so precious as freedom."

"And you will not desert me now that I am down in the world, eh, old fellow?"

"No, Reginald, I will never desert you while you have the chance of succeeding to forty thousand a year," answered the surgeon, with a laugh.

His small black eyes flashed and sparkled as he laughed. Reginald looked at him with a sensation that was almost fear.

"What a fellow you are, Carrington!" he exclaimed; "you don't pretend even to have a heart."

"A heart is a luxury which a poor man must dispense with," answered Victor, with perfect sang froid. "I should as soon think of setting up a mail-phaeton and pair as of pretending to benevolent feelings or high-flown sentiments. I have my way to make in the world, Mr. Eversleigh, and must consider my own interests as well as those of my friends. You see, I am no hypocrite. You needn't be alarmed, dear boy. I'll help you, and you shall help me; and it shall go hard if you are not restored to your uncle's favour before the year is out. But you must be patient. Our work will be slow, for we shall have to work underground. If Sir Oswald is still in Arlington Street, I shall make it my business to see Mr. Millard to-morrow."

* * * * *

Sir Oswald Eversleigh had not left Arlington Street, and at dusk on the following evening Mr. Carrington presented himself at the door of the baronet's mansion, and asked to see Mr. Millard, the valet.

Victor Carrington had never seen his friend's kinsman; he was, therefore, secure against all chances of recognition. He had chosen the baronet's dinner-hour as the time for his call, knowing that during that hour the valet must be disengaged. He sent his card to Mr. Millard, with a line written in pencil to request an interview on urgent business.

Millard came to the hall at once to see his visitor, and ushered Mr. Carrington into a small room that was used occasionally by the upper servants.

The surgeon was skilled in every science by which a man may purchase the hearts and minds of his fellow-men. He could read Sir Oswald Eversleigh's valet as he could have read an open book He saw that the man was weak, irresolute, tolerably honest, but open to temptation. He was a middle-aged man, with sandy hair, a pale face, and light, greenish-gray eyes.

"Weak," thought the surgeon, as he examined this man's countenance, "greedy, and avaricious. So, so; we can do what we like with Mr. Millard."

Victor Carrington told the valet that he was the most intimate friend of Reginald Eversleigh, and that he made this visit entirely without that gentleman's knowledge. He dwelt much upon Mr. Eversleigh's grief—his despair.

"But he is very proud," he added; "too proud to approach this house, either directly or indirectly. The shock caused by his uncle's unexpected abandonment of him has completely prostrated him. I am a member of the medical profession, Mr. Millard, and I assure you that during the past fortnight I have almost feared for my friend's reason. I therefore determined upon a desperate step—a step which Reginald Eversleigh would never forgive, were he to become aware of it. I determined upon coming to this house, and ascertaining, if possible, the nature of Sir Oswald's feelings towards his nephew. Is there any hope of a reconciliation?"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"That's a bad thing," said Victor, gravely; "a very bad thing. A vast estate is at stake. It would be a bad thing for every one if that estate were to pass into strange hands—a very bad thing for old servants, for with strangers all old links are broken. It would be a still worse thing for every one if Sir Oswald should take it into his head to marry."

The valet looked very grave.

"If you had said such a thing to me a fortnight ago, I should have told you it was impossible," he said; "but now—."

"Now, what do you say?"

"Well, sir, you're a gentleman, and, of course, you can keep a secret; so I'll tell you candidly that nothing my master could do would surprise me after what I've seen within the last fortnight."

This was quite enough for Victor Carrington, who did not leave Arlington Street until he had extorted from the valet the entire history of the baronet's adoption of the ballad-singer.

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CHAPTER VI.

AULD ROBIN GRAY.

A year and some months had passed, and the midsummer sunlight shone upon the woods around Raynham Castle.

It was a grand pile of buildings, blackened by the darkening hand of time. At one end Norman towers loomed, round and grim; at another extremity the light tracery of a Gothic era was visible in window and archway, turret and tower. The centre had been rebuilt in the reign of Henry VIII, and a long range of noble Tudor windows looked out upon the broad terrace, beyond which there was a garden, or pleasaunce, sloping down to the park. In the centre of this long façade there was an archway, opening into a stone quadrangle, where a fountain played perpetually in a marble basin. This was Raynham Castle, and all the woods and pastures as far as the eye could reach, and far beyond the reach of any human eye, belonged to the castle estate. This was the fair domain of which Reginald Eversleigh had been for years the acknowledged heir, and which his own folly and dishonour had forfeited.

Now all was changed. There was not a peasant in Raynham village who had not as much right to enter the castle, and as good a chance of a welcome, as he who had

once been acknowledged heir to that proud domain. It was scarcely strange if Reginald Eversleigh felt this bitter change very keenly.

He had placed himself entirely in the hands of his friend and adviser, Victor Carrington. He had sold out of the cavalry regiment, and had taken up his abode in a modest lodging, situated in a small street at the West-end of London. Here he had tried to live quietly, according to his friend's advice; but he was too much the slave of his own follies and vices to endure a quiet existence.

The sale of his commission made him rich for the time being, and, so long as his money lasted, he pursued the old course, betting, playing billiards, haunting all the aristocratic temples of folly and dissipation; but, at the worst, conducting himself with greater caution than he had done of old, and always allowing himself to be held somewhat in check by his prudent ally and counsellor.

"Enjoy yourself as much as you please, my dear Reginald," said Victor Carrington; "but take care that your little follies don't reach the ears of your uncle. Remember, I count upon your being reconciled to him before the year is out."

"That will never be," answered Mr. Eversleigh, with a tone of sullen despair. "I am utterly ruined, Carrington. It's no use trying to shirk the truth. I am a doomed wretch, a beggar for life, and the sooner I throw myself over one of the bridges, and make an end of my miserable existence, the better. According to Millard's account my uncle's infatuation for that singing-girl grows stronger and stronger. Not a week now passes without his visiting the school where the young adventuress is finishing her education. As sure as fate, it will end by his marrying her and the street ballad-singer will be my Lady Eversleigh."

"And when she is my Lady Eversleigh, it must be our business to step between her and the Eversleigh estates," answered Victor, quietly. "I told you that your uncle's marriage would be an unlucky thing for you; but I never told you that it would put an end to your chances. I think, from what Millard tells us, there is very little doubt

Sir Oswald will make a fool of himself by marrying this girl. If he does, we must set our wits to work to prevent his leaving her his fortune. She is utterly friendless and obscure, so he is not likely to make any settlement upon her. And for the rest, a man of fifty who marries a girl of nineteen is very apt to repent of his folly. It must be our business to make your uncle repent very soon after he has taken the fatal step."

"I don't understand you, Carrington."

"My dear Eversleigh, you very seldom do understand me," answered the surgeon, in that half-contemptuous tone in which he was apt to address his friend; "but that is not of the smallest consequence. Only do what I tell you, and leave the rest to me. You shall be lord of Raynham Castle yet, if my wits are good for anything."

* * * * *

A year had elapsed, which had been passed by Sir Oswald between Raynham Castle and Arlington Street, and during which he had paid more visits than he could count to "The Beeches."

On the occasion of these visits, he only saw his protégée for about a quarter of an hour, while the stately Miss Beaumont looked on, smiling a dignified smile upon her pupil and the liberal patron who paid so handsomely for that pupil's education. She had always a good account to give of Sir Oswald's protégée—there never was so much talent united to so much industry, according to Miss Beaumont's report. Sometimes Sir Oswald begged to hear Miss Milford sing, and Honoria seated herself at the piano, over whose notes her white fingers seemed to have already acquired perfect command.

The rich and clear soprano voice had attained new power since Sir Oswald had heard it in the moonlit market-place; the execution of the singer improved day by day. The Italian singing-master spoke in raptures of his pupil—never was there a finer organ or more talent. Miss Milford could not fail to create a profound impression when her musical education should be completed, and she should appear

before the public.

But as the year drew to its close, Sir Oswald Eversleigh talked less and less of that public career for which he had destined his protégée. He no longer reminded her that on her own industry depended her future fortune. He no longer spoke in glowing terms of that brilliant pathway which lay before her. His manner was entirely changed, and he was grave and silent whenever any allusion was made by Miss Beaumont or Honoria to the future use which was to be made of that superb voice and exceptional genius.

The schoolmistress remarked upon this alteration one day, when talking to her pupil.

"Do you know, my dear Miss Milford, I am really inclined to believe that Sir Oswald Eversleigh has changed his mind with regard to your future career, and that he does not intend you to be an opera-singer."

"Surely, dear Miss Beaumont, that is impossible," answered Honoria, quietly; "my education is costing my kind bene—relative a great deal of money, which would be wasted if I were not to make music my profession. Besides, what else have I to look to in the future? Remember, Sir Oswald has always told you that I have my own fortune to achieve. I have no claim on any one, and it is to his generosity alone I owe my present position."

"Well, I don't know how it may be, my dear," answered Miss Beaumont, "I may be mistaken; but I cannot help thinking that Sir Oswald has changed his mind about you. I need not tell you that my opinions are opposed to a professional career for any young lady brought up in my establishment, however highly gifted. I'm sure my blood actually freezes in my veins, when I think of any pupil of mine standing on a public stage, to be gazed at by the common herd; and I told Sir Oswald, when he first proposed bringing you here, that it would be necessary to keep your destiny a profound secret from your fellow-pupils; for I assure you, my love, there are mammas and papas who would come to this house in the dead of the night and carry

off their children, without a moment's warning, if they were informed that a young person intended to appear on the stage of the Italian Opera was receiving her education within these walls. In short, nothing but your own discreet conduct, and Sir Oswald's very liberal terms, could have reconciled me to the risk which I have run in receiving you."

The first year of Honoria Milford's residence at "The Beeches" expired, and another year began. Sir Oswald's visits became more and more frequent. When the accounts of his protégée's progress were more than usually enthusiastic, his visits were generally followed very speedily by the arrival of some costly gift for Miss Beaumont's pupil—a ring—a bracelet—a locket—always in perfect taste, and such as a young lady at a boarding-school might wear, but always of the most valuable description.

Honoria Milford must have possessed a heart of stone, if she had not been grateful to so noble a benefactor. She was grateful, and her gratitude was obvious to her generous protector. Her beautiful face was illuminated with an unwonted radiance when she entered the drawing-room where he awaited her coming: and the pleasure with which she received his brief visits was as palpable as if it had been expressed in words.

It was midsummer, and Honoria Milford had been a year and a quarter at "The Beeches." She had acquired much during that period; new accomplishments, new graces; and her beauty had developed into fresh splendour in the calm repose of that comfortable abode. She was liked by her fellow-pupils; but she had made neither friends nor confidantes. The dark secrets of her past life shut her out from all intimate companionship with girls of her own age.

She had, in a manner, lived a lonely life amongst all these companions, and her chief happiness had been derived from her studies. Thus it was, perhaps, that she had made double progress during her residence with the Misses Beaumont.

One bright afternoon in June, Sir Oswald's mail-phaeton and pair drove past the windows of the school-room.

"Visitors for Miss Milford!" exclaimed the pupils seated near the windows, as they recognized the elegant equipage.

Honoria rose from her desk, awaiting the summons of the schoolroom-maid. She had not long to wait. The young woman appeared at the door in a few moments, and Miss Milford was requested to go to the drawing-room.

She went, and found Sir Oswald Eversleigh awaiting her alone. It was the first time that she had ever known Miss Beaumont to be absent from the reception-room on the visit of the baronet.

He rose to receive her, and took the hand which she extended towards him.

"I am alone, you see, Honoria," he said; "I told Miss Beaumont that I had something of a serious nature to say to you, and she left me to receive you alone."

"Something of a serious nature," repeated the girl, looking at her benefactor with surprise. "Oh, I think I can guess what you are going to say," she added, after a moment's hesitation; "my musical education is now sufficiently advanced for me to take some new step in the pathway which you wish me to tread."

"No, Honoria, you are mistaken," answered the baronet, gravely; "so far from wishing to hasten your musical education, I am about to entreat you to abandon all thought of a professional career."

"To abandon all thought of a professional career! You would ask me this, Sir Oswald—you who have so often told me that all my hopes for the future depended on my cultivation of the art I love?"

"You love your art very much then, Honoria?"

"More than I love life itself."

"And it would grieve you much, no doubt, to resign all idea of a public career—to

abandon your dream of becoming a public singer?"

There was a pause, and then the girl answered, in a dreamy tone—

"I don't know. I have never thought of the public. I have never imagined the hour in which I should stand before a great crowd, as I have stood in the cruel streets, amongst all the noise and confusion, singing to people who cared so little to hear me. I have never thought of that—I love music for its own sake, and feel as much pleasure when I sing alone in my own room, as I could feel in the grandest opera-house that ever was built."

"And the applause, the admiration, the worship, which your beauty, as well as your voice, would win—does the idea of resigning such intoxicating incense give you no pain, Honoria?"

The girl shook her head sadly.

"You forget what I was when you rescued me from the pitiless stones of the market-place, or you would scarcely ask me such a question. I have confronted the public—not the brilliant throng of the opera-house, but the squalid crowd which gathers before the door of a gin-shop, to listen to a vagrant ballad-singer. I have sung at races, where the rich and the high-born were congregated, and have received their admiration. I know what it is worth, Sir Oswald. The same benefactor who throws a handful of half-pence, offers an insult with his donation."

Sir Oswald contemplated his protégée in silent admiration, and it was some moments before he continued the conversation.

"Will you walk with me in the garden?" he asked, presently; "that avenue of beeches is delightful, and—and I think I shall be better able to say what I wish there, than in this room. At any rate, I shall feel less afraid of interruption."

Honoria rose to comply with her benefactor's wish, with that deferential manner which she always preserved in her intercourse with him, and they walked out upon the velvet lawn. Across the lawn lay the beech-avenue, and it was thither Sir Oswald

directed his steps.

"Honoria," he said, after a silence of some duration, "if you knew how much doubt—how much hesitation I experienced before I came here to-day—how much I still question the wisdom of my coming—I think you would pity me. But I am here, and I must needs speak plainly, if I am to speak at all. Long ago I tried to think that my interest in your fate was only a natural impulse of charity—only an ordinary tribute to gifts so far above the common. I tried to think this, and I acted with the cold, calculating wisdom of a man of the world, when I marked out for you a career by which you might win distinction for yourself, and placed you in the way of following that career. I meant to spend last year upon the Continent. I did not expect to see you once in twelve months; but the strange influence which possessed me in the hour of our first meeting grew stronger upon me day by day. In spite of myself, I thought of you; in spite of myself I came here again and again, to look upon your face, to hear your voice, for a few brief moments, and then to go out into the world, to find it darker and colder by contrast with the brightness of your beauty. Little by little, the idea of your becoming a public singer became odious to me," continued Sir Oswald. "At first I thought with pride of the success which would be yours, the worship which would be offered at your shrine; but my feeling changed completely before long, and I shuddered at the image of your triumphs, for those triumphs must, doubtless, separate us for ever. Why should I dwell upon this change of feeling? You must have already guessed the secret of my heart. Tell me that you do not despise me!"

"Despise you, Sir Oswald!—you, the noblest and most generous of men! Surely, you must know that I admire and reverence you for all your noble qualities, as well as for your goodness to a wretched creature like me."

"But, Honoria, I want something more than your esteem. Do you remember the night I first heard you singing in the market-place on the north road?"

"Can I ever forget that miserable night?" cried the girl, in a tone of surprise—the question seemed so strange to her—"that bitter hour, in which you came to my rescue?"

"Do you remember the song you were singing—the last song you ever sang in the streets?"

Honoria Milford paused for some moments before answering It was evident that she could not at first recall the memory of that last song.

"My brain was almost bewildered that night," she said; "I was so weary, so miserable; and yet, stay, I do remember the song. It was 'Auld Robin Gray.'"

"Yes, Honoria, the story of an old man's love for a woman young enough to be his daughter. I was sitting by my cheerless fire-side, meditating very gloomily upon the events of the day, which had been a sad one for me, when your thrilling tones stole upon my ear, and roused me from my reverie. I listened to every note of that old ballad. Although those words had long been familiar to me, they seemed new and strange that night. An irresistible impulse led me to the spot where you had sunk down in your helplessness. From that hour to this you have been the ruling influence of my life. I have loved you with a devotion which few men have power to feel. Tell me, Honoria, have I loved in vain? The happiness of my life trembles in the balance. It is for you to decide whether my existence henceforward is to be worthless to me, or whether I am to be the proudest and happiest of men."

"Would my love make you happy, Sir Oswald?"

"Unutterably happy."

"Then it is yours."

"You love me—in spite of the difference between our ages?"

"Yes, Sir Oswald, I honour and love you with all my heart," answered Honoria Milford. "Whom have I seen so worthy of a woman's affection? From the first hour

in which some guardian angel threw me across your pathway, what have I seen in you but nobility of soul and generosity of heart? Is it strange, therefore, if my gratitude has ripened into love?"

"Honoria," murmured Sir Oswald, bending over the drooping head, and pressing his lips gently on the pure brow—"Honoria, you have made me too happy. I can scarcely believe that this happiness is not some dream, which will melt away presently, and leave me alone and desolate—the fool of my own fancy."

He led Honoria back towards the house. Even in this moment of supreme happiness he was obliged to remember Miss Beaumont, who would, no doubt, be lurking somewhere on the watch for her pupil.

"Then you will give up all thought of a professional career, Honoria?" said the baronet, as they walked slowly back.

"I will obey you in everything."

"My dearest girl—and when you leave this house, you will leave it as Lady Eversleigh."

Miss Beaumont was waiting in the drawing-room, and was evidently somewhat astonished by the duration of the interview between Sir Oswald and her pupil.

"You have been admiring the grounds, I see, Sir Oswald," she said, very graciously. "It is not quite usual for a gentleman visitor and a pupil to promenade in the grounds tête-à-tête; but I suppose, in the case of a gentleman of your time of life, we must relax the severity of our rules in some measure."

The baronet bowed stiffly. A man of fifty does not care to be reminded of his time of life at the very moment when he has just been accepted as the husband of a girl of nineteen.

"It may, perhaps, be the last opportunity which I may have of admiring your grounds, Miss Beaumont," he said, presently, "for I think of removing your pupil

very shortly."

"Indeed!" cried the governess, reddening with suppressed indignation. "I trust Miss Milford has not found occasion to make any complaint; she has enjoyed especial privileges under this roof—a separate bed-room, silver forks and spoons, roast veal or lamb on Sundays, throughout the summer season—to say nothing of the most unremitting supervision of a positively maternal character, and I should really consider Miss Milford wanting in common gratitude if she had complained."

"You are mistaken, my dear madam; Miss Milford has uttered no word of complaint. On the contrary, I am sure she has been perfectly happy in your establishment; but changes occur every day, and an important change will, I trust, speedily occur in my life, and in that of Miss Milford. When I first proposed bringing her to you, you asked me if she was a relation; I told you he was distantly related to me. I hope soon to be able to say that distant relationship has been transformed into a very near one. I hope soon to call Honoria Milford my wife."

Miss Beaumont's astonishment on hearing this announcement was extreme; but as surprise was one of the emotions peculiar to the common herd, the governess did her best to suppress all signs of that feeling. Sir Oswald told her that, as Miss Milford was an orphan, and without any near relative, he would wish to take her straight from "The Beeches" to the church in which he would make her his wife, and he begged Miss Beaumont to give him her assistance in the arrangement of the wedding.

The mistress of "The Beeches" possessed a really kind heart beneath the ice of her ultra-gentility, and she was pleased with the idea of assisting in the bringing about of a genuine love-match. Besides, the affair, if well managed, would reflect considerable importance upon herself, and she would be able by and bye to talk of "my pupil, Lady Eversleigh;" or, "that sweet girl, Miss Milford, who afterwards married the wealthy baronet, Sir Oswald Eversleigh." Sir Oswald pleaded for an

early celebration of the marriage—and Honoria, accustomed to obey him in all things, did not oppose his wish in this crisis of his life. Once more Sir Oswald wrote a cheque for the wardrobe of his protégée, and Miss Beaumont swelled with pomposity as she thought of the grandeur which might be derived from the expenditure of a large sum of money at certain West-end emporiums where she was in the habit of making purchases for her pupils, and where she was already considered a person of some importance.

It was holiday-time at "The Beeches," and almost all the pupils were absent. Miss Beaumont was, therefore, able to devote the ensuing fortnight to the delightful task of shopping. She drove into town almost every day with Honoria, and hours were spent in the choice of silks and satins, velvets and laces, and in long consultations with milliners and dressmakers of Parisian celebrity and boundless extravagance.

"Sir Oswald has intrusted me with the supervision of this most important business, and I will drop down in a fainting-fit from sheer exhaustion before the counter at Howell and James's, sooner than I would fail in my duty to the extent of an iota," Miss Beaumont said, when Honoria begged her to take less trouble about the wedding trousseau.

It was Sir Oswald's wish that the wedding should be strictly private. Whom could he invite to assist at his union with a nameless and friendless bride? Miss Beaumont was the only person whom he could trust, and even her he had deceived; for she believed that Honoria Milford was some fourth or fifth cousin—some poor relative of Sir Oswald's.

Early in July the wedding took place. All preparations had been made so quietly as to baffle even the penetration of the watchful Millard. He had perceived that the baronet was more than usually occupied, and in higher spirits than were habitual to him; but he could not discover the reason.

"There's something going on, sir," he said to Victor Carrington; "but I'm blest if I

know what it is. I dare say that young woman is at the bottom of it. I never did see my master look so well or so happy. It seems as if he was growing younger every day."

Reginald Eversleigh looked at his friend in blank despair when these tidings reached him.

"I told you I was ruined, Victor," he said; "and now, perhaps, you will believe me. My uncle will marry that woman."

It was only on the eve of his wedding-day that Sir Oswald Eversleigh made any communication to his valet. While dressing for dinner that evening, he said, quietly—

"I want my portmanteaus packed for travelling between this and two o'clock to-morrow, Millard; and you will hold yourself in readiness to accompany me. I shall post from London, starting from a house near Fulham, at three o'clock. The chariot must leave here, with you and the luggage, at two."

"You are going abroad, sir?"

"No, I am going to North Wales for a week or two; but I do not go alone. I am going to be married to-morrow morning, Millard, and Lady Eversleigh will accompany me."

Much as the probability of this marriage had been discussed in the Arlington Street household, the fact came upon Joseph Millard as a surprise. Nothing is so unwelcome to old servants as the marriage of a master who has long been a bachelor. Let the bride be never so fair, never so high-born, she will be looked on as an interloper; and if, as in this case, she happens to be poor and nameless, the bridegroom is regarded as a dupe and a fool; the bride is stigmatized as an adventuress.

The valet was fully occupied that evening with preparations for the journey of the following day, and could find no time to call at Mr. Eversleigh's lodgings with his

evil tidings.

"He'll hear of it soon enough, I dare say, poor, unfortunate young man," thought Mr. Millard.

The valet was right. In a few days the announcement of the baronet's marriage appeared in "The Times" newspaper; for, though he had celebrated that marriage with all privacy, he had no wish to keep his fair young wife hidden from the world.

"On Thursday, the 4th instant, at St. Mary's Church, Fulham, Sir Oswald Morton Vansittart Eversleigh, Bart., to Honoria daughter of the late Thomas Milford."

This was all; and this was the announcement which Reginald Eversleigh read one morning, as he dawdled over his late breakfast, after a night spent in dissipation and folly. He threw the paper away from him, with an oath, and hurried to his toilet. He dressed himself with less care than usual, for to-day he was in a hurry; he wanted at once to communicate with his friend, Victor Carrington.

The young surgeon lived at the very extremity of the Maida Hill district, in a cottage, which was then almost in the country. It was a comfortable little residence; but Reginald Eversleigh looked at it with supreme contempt.

"You can wait," he said to the hackney coachman; "I shall be here in about half an hour."

The man drove away to refresh his horses at the nearest inn, and Reginald Eversleigh strode impatiently past the trim little servant-girl who opened the garden gate, and walked, unannounced, into the miniature hall.

Everything in and about Victor Carrington's abode was the perfection of neatness. The presence of poverty was visible, it is true; but poverty was made to wear its fairest shape. In the snug drawing-room to which Reginald Eversleigh was admitted all was bright and fresh. White muslin curtains shaded the French window; birds sang in gilded cages, of inexpensive quality, but elegant design; and tall glass vases of freshly cut flowers adorned tables and mantel-piece.

Sir Oswald's nephew looked contemptuously at this elegance of poverty. For him nothing but the splendour of wealth possessed any charm.

The surgeon came to him while he stood musing thus.

"Do you mind coming to my laboratory?" he asked, after shaking hands with his unexpected visitor. "I can see that you have something of importance to say to me, and we shall be safer from interruption there."

"I shouldn't have come to this fag-end of Christendom if I hadn't wanted very much to see you, you may depend upon it, Carrington," answered Reginald, sulkily. "What on earth makes you live in such an out-of-the-way hole?"

"I am a student, and an out-of-the-way hole—as you are good enough to call it—suits my habits. Besides, this house is cheap, and the rent suits my pocket."

"It looks like a doll's house," said Reginald, contemptuously.

"My mother likes to surround herself with birds and flowers," answered the surgeon; "and I like to indulge any fancy of my mother's."

Victor Carrington's countenance seemed to undergo a kind of transformation as he spoke of his mother. The bright glitter of his eyes softened; the hard lines of his iron mouth relaxed.

The one tender sentiment of a dark and dangerous nature was this man's affection for his widowed mother.

He opened the door of an apartment at the back of the house, and entered, followed by Mr. Eversleigh.

Reginald stared in wonder at the chamber in which he found himself. The room had once been a kitchen, and was much larger than any other room in the cottage. Here there was no attempt at either comfort or elegance. The bare, white-washed walls had no adornment but a deal shelf here and there, loaded with strange-looking phials and gallipots. Here all the elaborate paraphernalia of a chemist's laboratory was

visible. Here Reginald Eversleigh beheld stoves, retorts, alembics, distilling apparatus; all the strange machinery of that science which always seems dark and mysterious to the ignorant.

The visitor looked about him in utter bewilderment.

"Why, Victor," he exclaimed, "your room looks like the laboratory of some alchymist of the Middle Ages—the sort of man people used to burn as a wizard."

"I am rather an enthusiastic student of my art," answered the surgeon.

The visitor's eyes wandered round the room in amazement. Suddenly they alighted on some object on the table near the stove. Carrington perceived the glance, and, with a hasty movement, very unusual to him, dropped his handkerchief upon the object.

The movement, rapid though it was, came too late, for Reginald Eversleigh had distinguished the nature of the object which the surgeon wished to conceal from him.

It was a mask of metal, with glass eyes.

"So you wear a mask when you are at work, eh, Carrington?" said Mr. Eversleigh. "That looks as if you dabble in poisons."

"Half the agents employed in chemistry are poisonous," answered Victor, coolly.

"I hope there is no danger in the atmosphere of this room just now?"

"None whatever. Come, Reginald, I am sure you have bad news to tell me, or you would never have taken the trouble to come here."

"I have, and the worst news. My uncle has married this street ballad-singer."

"Good; then we must try to turn this marriage to account."

"How so?"

"By making it the means of bringing about a reconciliation. You will write a letter of congratulation to Sir Oswald—a generous letter—in which you will speak of your

penitence, your affection, the anguish you have endured during this bitter period of estrangement. You can venture to speak freely of these things now, you will say, for now that your honoured uncle has found new ties you can no longer be suspected of any mercenary motive. You can now approach him boldly, you will say, for you have henceforward nothing to hope from him except his forgiveness. Then you will wind up with an earnest prayer for his happiness. And if I am not very much out in my reckoning of human nature, that letter will bring about a reconciliation. Do you understand my tactics?"

"I do. You are a wonderful fellow, Carrington."

"Don't say that until the day when you are restored to your old position as your uncle's heir. Then you may pay me any compliment you please."

"If ever that day arrives, you shall not find me ungrateful."

"I hope not; and now go back to town and write your letter. I want to see you invited to Raynham Castle to pay your respects to the bride."

"But why so?"

"I want to know what the bride is like. Our future plans will depend much upon her."

Before leaving Lorrimore Cottage, Reginald Eversleigh was introduced to his friend's mother, whom he had never before seen. She was very like her son. She had the same pale, sallow face, the same glittering black eyes. She was slim and tall, with a somewhat stately manner, and with little of the vivacity usual to her countrywomen.

She looked at Mr. Eversleigh with a searching glance—a glance which was often repeated, as he stood for a few minutes talking to her. Nothing which interested her son was without interest for her; and she knew that this young man was his chief friend and companion.

Reginald Eversleigh went back to town in much better spirits than when he had left

the West-end that morning. He lost no time in writing the letter suggested by his friend, and, as he was gifted with considerable powers of persuasion, the letter was a good one.

"I believe Carrington is right," he thought, as he sealed it: "and this letter will bring about a reconciliation. It will reach my uncle at a time when he will be intoxicated with his new position as the husband of a young and lovely bride; and he will be inclined to think kindly of me, and of all the world. Yes—the letter is decidedly a fine stroke of diplomacy."

Reginald Eversleigh awaited a reply to his epistle with feverish impatience; but an impatience mingled with hope.

His hopes did not deceive him. The reply came by return of post, and was even more favourable than his most sanguine expectations had led him to anticipate.

"Dear Reginald," wrote the baronet, "your generous and disinterested letter has touched me to the heart. Let the past be forgotten and forgiven. I do not doubt that you have suffered, as all men must suffer, from the evil deeds of their youth.

"You were no doubt surprised to receive the tidings of my marriage. I have consulted my heart alone in the choice which I have made, and I venture to hope that choice will secure the happiness of my future existence. I am spending the first weeks of my married life amidst the lovely solitudes of North Wales. On the 24th of this month, Lady Eversleigh and I go to Raynham, where we shall be glad to see you immediately on our arrival. Come to us, my dear boy; come to me, as if this unhappy estrangement had never arisen, and we will discuss your future together.—Your affectionate uncle, OSWALD EVERSLEIGH." "Royal Hotel, Bannerdoon, N. W."

Nothing could be more satisfactory than this epistle. Reginald Eversleigh and Victor Carrington dined together that evening, and the baronet's letter was freely discussed between them.

"The ground lies all clear before you now," said the surgeon: "you will go to Raynham, make yourself as agreeable as possible to the bride, win your uncle's heart by an appearance of extreme remorse for the past, and most complete disinterestedness for the future, and leave all the rest to me."

"But how the deuce can you help me at Raynham?"

"Time alone can show. I have only one hint to give you at present. Don't be surprised if you meet me unexpectedly amongst the Yorkshire hills and wolds, and take care to follow suit with whatever cards you see me playing. Whatever I do will be done in your interest, depend upon it. Mind, by the bye, if you do see me in the north, that I know nothing of your visit to Raynham. I shall be as much surprised to see you as you will be to see me."

"So be it; I will fall into your plans. As your first move has been so wonderfully successful, I shall be inclined to trust you implicitly in the future. I suppose you will want to be paid rather stiffly by and bye, if you do succeed in getting me any portion of Sir Oswald's fortune?"

"Well, I shall ask for some reward, no doubt. I am a poor man, you know, and do not pretend to be disinterested or generous. However, we will discuss that question when we meet at Raynham."

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On the 28th of July, Reginald Eversleigh presented himself at Raynham Castle. He had thought never more to set foot upon that broad terrace, never more to pass beneath the shadow of that grand old archway; and a sense of triumph thrilled through his veins as he stood once again on the familiar threshold.

And yet his position in life was terribly changed since he had last stood there. He was no longer the acknowledged heir to whom all dependents paid deferential homage. He fancied that the old servants looked at him coldly, and that their greeting was the chilling welcome which is accorded to a poor relation. He had

never done much to win affection or gratitude in the days of his prosperity. It may be that he remembered this now, and regretted it, not from any kindly impulse towards these people, but from a selfish annoyance at the chilling reception accorded him.

"If ever I win back what I have lost, these pampered parasites shall suffer for their insolence," thought the young man, as he walked across the broad Gothic hall of the castle, escorted by the grave old butler.

But he had not much leisure to think about his uncle's servants. Another and far more important person occupied his mind, and that person was his uncle's bride.

"Lady Eversleigh is at home?" he asked, while crossing the hall.

"Yes, sir; her ladyship is in the long drawing-room."

The butler opened a ponderous oaken door, and ushered Reginald into one of the finest apartments in the castle.

In the centre of this room, by the side of a grand piano, from which she had just risen, stood the new mistress of the castle. She was simply dressed in pale gray silk, relieved only by a scarlet ribbon twisted in the masses of her raven hair. Her beauty had the same effect upon Reginald Eversleigh which it exercised on almost all who looked at her for the first time. He was dazzled, bewildered, by the singular loveliness.

"And this divinity—this goddess of grace and beauty, is my uncle's wife," he thought; "this is the street ballad-singer whom he picked up out of the gutter."

For some moments the elegant and accomplished Reginald Eversleigh stood abashed before the calm presence of the nameless girl his uncle had married.

Sir Oswald welcomed his nephew with perfect cordiality. He was happy, and in the hour of his happiness he could cherish no unkind feeling towards the adopted son who had once been so dear to him. But while ready to open his arms to the repentant

prodigal, his intentions with regard to the disposition of his wealth had undergone no change. He had arrived, calmly and deliberately, at a certain resolve, and he intended to adhere to that decision.

The baronet told his nephew this frankly in the first confidential conversation which they had after the young man's arrival at Raynham.

"You may think me harsh and severe," he said, gravely; "but the resolution which I announced to you in Arlington Street cost me much thought and care. I believe that I have acted for the best. I think that my over-indulgence was the bane of your youth, Reginald, and that you would have been a better man had you been more roughly reared. Since you have left the army, I have heard no more of your follies; and I trust that you have at last struck out a better path for yourself, and separated yourself from all dangerous associates. But you must choose a new profession. You must not live an idle life on the small income which you receive from me. I only intended that annuity as a safeguard against poverty, not as a sufficient means of life. You must select a new career, Reginald; and whatever it may be, I will give you some help to smooth your pathway. Your first cousin, Douglas Dale, is studying for the law—would not that profession suit you?"

"I am in your hands, sir, and am ready to obey you in everything."

"Well, think over what I have said; and if you choose to enter yourself as a student in the Temple, I will assist you with all necessary funds."

"My dear uncle, you are too good."

"I wish to serve you as far as I can with justice to others. And now, Reginald, we will speak no more of the past. What do you think of my wife?"

"She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld."

"And she is as good and true as she is beautiful—a pearl of price, Reginald. I thank Providence for giving me so great a treasure."

"And this treasure will be possessor of Raynham Castle, I suppose," thought the young man, savagely.

Sir Oswald spoke presently, almost as if in answer to his nephew's thoughts.

"As I have been thoroughly candid with you, Reginald," he said, "I may as well tell you even more. I am at an age which some call the prime of life, and I feel all my old vigour. But death sometimes comes suddenly to men whose life seems as full of promise as mine seems to me now. I wish that when I die there may be no possible disappointment as to the disposal of my fortune. Other men make a mystery of the contents of their wills. I wish the terms of my will to be known by all interested in it."

"I have no desire to be enlightened, sir," murmured Reginald, who felt that his uncle's words boded no good to himself.

"My will has been made since my marriage," continued Sir Oswald, without noticing his nephew's interruption; "any previous will would, indeed, have been invalidated by that event Two-thirds—more than two-thirds—of my property has been left to my wife, who will be a very rich woman when I am dead and gone. Should she have a son, the landed estates will, of course, go to him; but in any case, Lady Eversleigh will be mistress of a large fortune. I leave five thousand a year to each of my nephews. As for you, Reginald, you will, perhaps, consider yourself bitterly wronged; but you must, in justice, remember that you have been your own enemy. The annuity of two hundred a year which you now possess will, after my death, become an income of five hundred a year, derived from a small estate called Morton Grange, in Lincolnshire. You have nothing more than a modest competency to hope for, therefore; and it rests with yourself to win wealth and distinction by the exercise of your own talents."

The pallor of Reginald Eversleigh's face alone revealed the passion which consumed him as he received these most unwelcome statements from his uncle's lips.

Fortunately for the young man, Sir Oswald did not observe his countenance, for at this moment Lady Eversleigh appeared on the terrace-walk outside the open window of her husband's study, and he hurried to her.

"What are to be our plans for this afternoon, darling?" he asked. "I have transacted all my business, and am quite at your service for the rest of the day."

"Very well, then, you cannot please me better than by showing me some more of the beauties of your native county."

"You make that proposition because you know it pleases me, artful puss; but I obey. Shall we ride or drive? Perhaps, as the afternoon is hot, we had better take the barouche," continued Sir Oswald, while Honoria hesitated. "Come to luncheon. I will give all necessary orders."

They went to the dining-room, whither Reginald accompanied them. Already he had contrived to banish the traces of emotion from his countenance: but his uncle's words were still ringing in his ears.

Five hundred a year!—he was to receive a pitiful five hundred a year; whilst his cousins—struggling men of the world, unaccustomed to luxury and splendour—were each to have an income of five thousand. And this woman—this base, unknown, friendless creature, who had nothing but her diabolical beauty to recommend her—was to have a splendid fortune!

These were the thoughts which tormented Reginald Eversleigh as he took his place at the luncheon-table. He had been now a fortnight at Raynham Castle, and had become, to all outward appearance, perfectly at his ease with the fair young mistress of the mansion. There are some women who seem fitted to occupy any station, however lofty. They need no teaching; they are in no way bewildered by the novelty of wealth or splendour; they make no errors. They possess an instinctive tact, which all the teaching possible cannot always impart to others. They glide naturally into their position; and, looking on them in their calm dignity, their unstudied grace, it is

difficult to believe they have not been born in the purple.

Such a woman was Honoria, Lady Eversleigh. The novelty of her position gave her no embarrassment; the splendour around her charmed and delighted her sense of the beautiful, but it caused her no bewilderment; it did not dazzle her unaccustomed eyes. She received her husband's nephew with the friendly, yet dignified, bearing which it was fitting Sir Oswald's wife should display towards his kinsman; and the scrutinizing eyes of the young man sought in vain to detect some secret hidden beneath that placid and patrician exterior.

"The woman is a mystery," he thought; "one would think she were some princess in disguise. Does she really love my uncle, I wonder? She acts her part well, if it is a false one. But, then, who would not act a part for such a prize as she is likely to win? I wish Victor were here. He, perhaps, might be able to penetrate the secret of her existence. She is a hypocrite, no doubt; and an accomplished one. I would give a great deal for the power to strip the veil from her beautiful face, and show my lady in her true colours!"

Such bitter thoughts as these continually harassed the ambitious and disappointed man. And yet he was able to bear himself with studied courtesy towards Lady Eversleigh. The best people in the county had come to Raynham to pay their homage to Sir Oswald's bride. Nothing could exceed her husband's pride as he beheld her courted and admired. No shadow of jealousy obscured his pleasure when he saw younger men flock round her to worship and admire. He felt secure of her love, for she had again and again assured him that her heart had been entirely his even before he declared himself to her. He felt an implicit faith in her purity and innocence.

Such a man as Oswald Eversleigh is not easily moved to jealousy; but with such a man, one breath of suspicion, one word of slander, against the creature he loves, is horrible as the agony of death.

Reginald Eversleigh had shared in all the pleasures and amusements of Sir Oswald and his wife. They had gone nowhere without him since his arrival at the castle; for at present he was the only visitor staying in the house, and the baronet was too courteous to leave him alone.

"After the twelfth we shall have plenty of bachelor visitors," said Sir Oswald; "and you will find the old place more to your taste, I dare say, Reginald. In the meantime, you must content yourself with our society."

"I am more than contented, my dear uncle, and do not sigh for the arrival of your bachelor friends; though I dare say I shall on very well with them when they do come."

"I expect a bevy of pretty girls as well. Do you remember Lydia Graham, the sister of Gordon Graham, of the Fusiliers?"

"Yes, I remember her perfectly."

"I think there used to be something like a flirtation between you and her."

Sir Oswald and Lady Eversleigh seated themselves in the barouche; Reginald rode by their side, on a thorough-bred hack out of the Raynham stables.

The scenery within twenty miles of the castle was varied in character and rich in beauty. In the purple distance, to the west of the castle, there was a range of heather-clad hills; and between those hills and the village of Raynham there flowed a noble river, crossed at intervals by quaint old bridges, and bordered by little villages, nestling amid green pastures.

The calm beauty of a rustic landscape, and the grandeur of wilder scenery, were alike within reach of the explorer from the castle.

On this bright August afternoon, Sir Oswald had chosen for the special object of their drive the summit of a wooded hill, whence a superb range of country was to be seen. This hill was called Thorpe Peak, and was about seven miles from the castle.

The barouche stopped at the foot of the hill; the baronet and his wife alighted, and walked up a woody pathway leading to the summit, accompanied by Reginald, who left his horse with the servants.

They ascended the hill slowly, Lady Eversleigh leaning upon her husband's arm. The pathway wound upward, through plantations of fir, and it was only on the summit that the open country burst on the view of the pedestrian. On the summit they found a gentleman seated on the trunk of a fallen tree, sketching. A light portable colour-box lay open by his side, and a small portfolio rested on his knees.

He seemed completely absorbed in his occupation, for he did not raise his eyes from his work as Sir Oswald and his companions approached. He wore a loose travelling dress, which, in its picturesque carelessness of style, was not without elegance.

A horse was grazing under a group of firs near at hand, fastened to one of the trees by the bridle.

This traveller was Victor Carrington.

"Carrington!" exclaimed Mr. Eversleigh; "whoever would have thought of finding you up here? Sketching too!"

The surgeon lifted his head suddenly, looked at his friend, and burst out laughing, as he rose to shake hands. He looked handsomer in his artistic costume than ever Reginald Eversleigh had seen him look before. The loose velvet coat, the wide linen collar and neckerchief of dark-blue silk, set off the slim figure and pale foreign face.

"You are surprised to see me; but I have still more right to be surprised at seeing you. What brings you here?"

"I am staying with my uncle, Sir Oswald Eversleigh, at Raynham Castle."

"Ah, to be sure; that superb place within four miles of the village of Abbey wood, where I have taken up my quarters."

The baronet and his wife had been standing at a little distance from the two young

men; but Sir Oswald advanced, with Honoria still upon his arm.

"Introduce me to your friend, Reginald," he said, in his most cordial manner.

Reginald obeyed, and Victor was presented to Sir Oswald and his wife. His easy and graceful bearing was calculated to make an agreeable impression at the outset, and Sir Oswald was evidently pleased with the appearance and manners of his nephew's friend.

"You are an artist, I see, Mr. Carrington," he said, after glancing at the young man's sketch, which, even in its unfinished state, was no contemptible performance.

"An amateur only, Sir Oswald," answered Victor. "I am by profession a surgeon; but as yet I have not practised. I find independence so agreeable that I can scarcely bring myself to resign it. I have been wandering about this delightful county for the last week or two, with my sketch-book under my arm—halting for a day or two in any picturesque spot I came upon, and hiring a horse whenever I could get a decent animal. It is a very simple mode of enjoying a holiday; but it suits me."

"Your taste does you credit. But if you are in my neighbourhood, you must take your horses from the Raynham stables. Where are your present quarters?"

"At the little inn by Abbeywood Bridge."

"Four miles from the castle. We are near neighbours, Mr. Carrington, according to country habits. You must ride back with us, and dine at Raynham."

"You are very kind, Sir Oswald; but my dress will preclude—"

"No consequence whatever. We are quite alone just now; and I am sure Lady Eversleigh will excuse a traveller's toilet. If you are not bent upon finishing this very charming sketch, I shall insist on your returning with us; and you join me in the request, eh, Honoria?"

Lady Eversleigh smiled an assent, and the surgeon murmured his thanks. As yet he had looked little at the baronet's beautiful wife. He had come to Yorkshire with the

intention of studying this woman as a man studies an abstruse and difficult science; but he was too great a tactician to betray any unwonted interest in her. The policy of his life was patience, and in this as in everything else, he waited his opportunity.

"She is very beautiful," he thought, "and she has made a good market out of her beauty; but it is only the beginning of the story yet—the middle and the end have still to come."

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After this meeting on Thorpe Peak, the surgeon became a constant visitor at Raynham. Sir Oswald was delighted with the young man's talents and accomplishments; and Victor contrived to win credit by the apparently accidental revelation of his early struggles, his mother's poverty, his patient studies, and indomitable perseverance. He told of these things without seeming to tell them; a word now, a chance allusion then, revealed the story of his friendless youth. Sir Oswald fancied that such a companion was eminently adapted to urge his nephew onward in the difficult road that leads to fortune and distinction.

"If Reginald had only half your industry, half your perseverance, I should not fear for his future career, Mr. Carrington," said the baronet, in the course of a confidential conversation with his visitor.

"That will come in good time, Sir Oswald," answered Victor. "Reginald is a noble fellow, and has a far nobler nature than I can pretend to possess. The very qualities which you are good enough to praise in me are qualities which you cannot expect to find in him. I was a pupil in the stern school of poverty from my earliest infancy, while Reginald was reared in the lap of luxury. Pardon me, Sir Oswald, if I speak plainly; but I must remind you that there are few young men who would have passed honourably through the ordeal of such a change of fortune as that which has fallen on your nephew."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that with most men such a reverse would have been utter ruin of soul and body. An ordinary man, finding all the hopes of his future, all the expectations, which had been a part of his very life, taken suddenly from him, would have abandoned himself to a career of vice; he would have become a blackleg, a swindler, a drunkard, a beggar at the doors of the kinsman who had cast him off. But it was not so with Reginald Eversleigh. From the moment in which he found himself cast adrift by the benefactor who had been more than a father to him, he confronted evil fortune calmly and bravely. He cut the link between himself and extravagant companions. He disappeared from the circles in which he had been admired and courted; and the only grief which preyed upon his generous heart sprang from the knowledge that he had forfeited his uncle's affection."

Sir Oswald sighed. For the first time he began to think that it was just possible he had treated his nephew with injustice.

"You are right, Mr. Carrington," he said, after a pause; "it was a hard trial for any man; and I am proud to think that Reginald passed unscathed through so severe an ordeal. But the resolution at which I arrived a year and a half ago is one that I cannot alter now. I have formed new ties; I have new hopes for the future. My nephew must pay the penalty of his past errors, and must look to his own exertions for wealth and honour. If I die without a direct heir, he will succeed to the baronetcy, and I hope he will try his uttermost to win a fortune by which he may maintain his title."

There was very little promise in this; but Victor Carrington was, nevertheless, tolerably well satisfied with the result of the conversation. He had sown the seeds of doubt and uncertainty in the baronet's breast. Time only could bring the harvest. The surgeon was accustomed to work underground, and knew that all such work must be slow and laborious.

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CHAPTER VII.

"O BEWARE, MY LORD, OF JEALOUSY."

The castle was gay with the presence of many guests. The baronet was proud to gather old friends and acquaintances round him, in order that he might show them the fair young wife he had chosen to be the solace of his declining years. A man of fifty who marries a girl of nineteen is always subject to the ridicule of scandalous lips, the ironical jests of pitiless tongues. Sir Oswald Eversleigh knew this, and he wanted to show the world that he was happy—supremely happy—in the choice that he had made.

Amongst those who came to Raynham Castle this autumn was one trusted friend of Sir Oswald, a gruff old soldier, Captain Copplestone, a man who had never won advancement in the service; but who was known to have nobly earned the promotion which had never been awarded him.

This man was on brotherly terms with Sir Oswald, and was about the only creature who had ever dared to utter disagreeable truths to the baronet. He was very poor; but had never accepted the smallest favour from the hands of his wealthy friend. Sir Oswald was devoutly attached to him, and would have gladly opened his purse to him as to a brother; but he dared not offend the stern old soldier's pride by even hinting at such a desire.

Captain Copplestone came to Raynham prepared to remonstrate with his friend on the folly of his marriage. He arrived when the reception-room was crowded with other visitors, and he stood by, looking on in grim disdain, while the newly arrived guests were pressing their felicitations on Sir Oswald.

By and bye the guests departed to their rooms, and the friends were left alone.

"Well, old friend," cried the baronet, stretching out both his hands to grasp those of the captain in a warmer salutation than that of his first welcome, "am I to have no word of congratulation from you?"

"What word do you want?" growled Copplestone. "If I tell you the truth, you won't like it; and if I were to try to tell you a lie, egad! I think the syllables would choke me. It has been hard enough for me to keep patience while all those idiots have been babbling their unmeaning compliments; and now that they've gone away to laugh at you behind your back, you'd better let me follow their example, and not risk the chance of a quarrel with an old friend by speaking my mind."

"You think me a fool, then, Copplestone?"

"Why, what else can I think of you? If a man of fifty must needs go and marry a girl of nineteen, he can't expect to be thought a Solon."

"Ah, Copplestone, when you have seen my wife, you will think differently."

"Not a bit of it. The prettier she is, the more fool I shall think you; for there'll be so much the more certainty that she'll make your life miserable."

"Here she comes!" said the baronet; "look at her before you judge her too severely, old friend, and let her face answer for her truth."

The room in which the two men were standing opened into another and larger apartment, and through the open folding-doors Captain Copplestone saw Lady Eversleigh approaching. She was dressed in white—that pure, transparent muslin in which her husband loved best to see her—and one large natural rose was fastened amidst her dark hair. As she drew nearer to the baronet and his friend, the bluff old soldier's face softened.

The introduction was made by Sir Oswald, and Honoria held out her hand with her brightest and most bewitching smile.

"My husband has spoken of you very often, Captain Copplestone," she said; "and I feel as if we were old friends rather than strangers. I have pleasure in bidding welcome to all Sir Oswald's guests; but not such pleasure as I feel in welcoming you."

The soldier extended his bronzed hand, and grasped the soft white fingers in a pressure that was something like that of an iron vice. He looked at Lady Eversleigh with a serio-comic expression of bewilderment, and looked from her to the baronet.

"Well?" asked Sir Oswald, presently, when Honoria had left them.

"Well, Oswald, if the truth must be told, I think you had some excuse for your folly. She is a beautiful creature; and if there is any faith to be put in the human countenance, she is as good as she is beautiful."

The baronet grasped his friend's hand with a pressure that was more eloquent than words. He believed implicitly in the captain's powers of penetration, and this favourable judgment of the wife he adored filled him with gratitude. It was not that the faintest shadow of doubt obscured his own mind. He trusted her fully and unreservedly; but he wanted others to trust her also.

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While Sir Oswald and his friend were enjoying a brief interval of confidential intercourse, Reginald Eversleigh and Victor Carrington lounged in a pleasant little sitting-room, smoking their cigars, and leaning on the stone sill of the wide Gothic window.

They were talking, and talking very earnestly.

"You are a very clever fellow, I know, my dear Carrington," said Reginald; "but it is slow work, very slow work, and I don't see my way through it."

"Because you are as impatient as a child who has set his heart on a new toy," answered the surgeon, disdainfully. "You complain that the game is slow, and yet you see one move after another made upon the board—and made successfully. A month ago you did not believe in the possibility of a reconciliation between your uncle and yourself; and yet that reconciliation has come about. A fortnight ago you would have laughed at the idea of my being here at Raynham, an invited guest; and yet here I am. Do you think there has been no patient thought necessary to work out

this much of our scheme? Do you suppose that I was on Thorpe Hill by accident that afternoon?"

"And you hope that something may come of your visit here?"

"I hope that much may come of it. I have already dared to drop hints at injustice done to you. That idea of injustice will rankle in your uncle's mind. I have my plans, Reginald, and you have only to be patient, and to trust in me."

"But why should you refuse to tell me the nature of your plans?"

"Because my plans are as yet but half formed. I may soon be able to speak more plainly. Do you see those two figures yonder, walking in the pleasaunce?"

"Yes, I see them—my uncle and his wife," answered Reginald, with a gesture of impatience.

"They are very happy—are they not? It is quite an Arcadian picture. I beg you to contemplate it earnestly."

"What a fool you are, Carrington!" cried the young man, flinging away his cigar. "If my uncle chooses to make an idiot of himself, that is no reason why I should watch the evidence of his folly!"

"But there is another reason," answered Victor, with a sinister look in his glittering black eyes. "Look at the picture while you may, Reginald, for you will not have the chance of seeing it very often."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the day is near at hand when Lady Eversleigh will fall from her high estate. I mean that an elevation as sudden as hers is often the forerunner of a sudden disgrace. The hour will come when Sir Oswald will mourn his fatal marriage as the one irrevocable mistake of his life; and when, in his despair, he will restore you, the disgraced nephew, to your place, as his acknowledged heir; because you will at least seem to him more worthy than his disgraced wife."

"And who is to bring this about?" asked Reginald, gazing at his friend in complete bewilderment.

"I am," answered the surgeon; "but before I do so I must have some understanding as to the price of my services. If the cat who pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for the benefit of the monkey had made an agreement beforehand as to how much of the plunder he was to receive for his pains, the name of the animal would not have become a bye-word with posterity. When I have worked to win your fortune, I must have my reward, my dear Reginald."

"Do you suppose I should be ungrateful?"

"Of course not. But, you see, I don't ask for your gratitude—I want a good round sum down on the nail—hard cash. Your uncle's fortune, if you get two-thirds of it, will be worth thirty thousand a year; and for such a fortune you can very well afford to pay me twenty thousand in ready money within two years of your accession to the inheritance."

"Twenty thousand!"

"Yes; if you think the sum too much, we will say no more about it. The business is a very difficult one, and I scarcely care to engage in it."

"My dear Victor, you bewilder me. I cannot bring myself to believe that you can bring about my restoration to my old place in my uncle's will; but if you do, the twenty thousand shall be yours."

"Good!" answered the surgeon, in his coolest and most business-like manner; "I must have it in black and white. You will give me two promissory notes; one for ten thousand, to fall due a year hence—the other for the same sum, to fall due in two years."

"But if I do not get the fortune—and I am not likely to get it within that time; my uncle's life is a good one, and—"

"Never mind your uncle's life. I will give you an undertaking to cancel those notes of hand if you have not succeeded to the Raynham estates. And now here are stamps. You may as well fill in the body of the notes, and sign them at once, and so close the transaction."

"You are prepared with the stamps?"

"Yes; I am a man of business, although a man of science."

"Victor," said Reginald Eversleigh; "you sometimes make me shudder, There is something almost diabolical about you."

"But if I drag yonder fair lady down from her high, estate, you would scarcely care if I were the foul fiend in person," said Carrington, looking at his friend with a sardonic smile. "Oh, I think I know you, Reginald Eversleigh, better than you know me."

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Amongst the guests who had arrived at the castle within the last few days was Lydia Graham, the young lady of whom the baronet had spoken to his nephew. She was a fascinating girl, with a bold, handsome face, brilliant gray eyes, an aquiline nose, and a profusion of dark, waving hair. She was a woman who knew how to make the most of every charm with which nature had endowed her. She dressed superbly; but with an extravagance far beyond the limits of her means. She was, for this reason, deeply in debt, and her only chance of extrication from her difficulties lay in a brilliant marriage.

For nearly nine years she had been trying to make this brilliant marriage. She had "come out," as the phrase goes, at seventeen, and she was now nine-and-twenty.

During that period she had been wooed and flattered by troops of admirers. She had revelled in flirtations; she had triumphed in the power of her beauty; but she had known more than one disappointment of her fairest hopes, and she had not won the prize in the great lottery of fashionable life—a wealthy and patrician husband.

Her nine-and-twentieth birthday had passed; and contemplating herself earnestly in her glass, she was fain to confess that something of the brilliancy of her beauty had faded.

"I am getting wan and sallow," she said to herself; "what is to become of me if I do not marry?"

The prospect was indeed a sorry one.

Lydia Graham possessed an income of two hundred a year, inherited from her mother: but such an income was the merest pittance for a young lady with Miss Graham's tastes. Her brother was a captain of an expensive regiment, selfish and extravagant, and by no means inclined to open his purse for his sister's benefit.

She had no home; but lived sometimes with one wealthy relation, sometimes with another—always admired, always elegantly dressed; but not always happy.

Amidst all Miss Graham's matrimonial disappointments, she had endured none more bitter than that which she had felt when she read the announcement of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's marriage in the "Times" newspaper.

She had met the rich baronet very frequently in society. She had visited at Raynham with her brother. Sir Oswald had, to all appearance, admired her beauty and accomplishments; and she had imagined that time and opportunity alone were wanting to transform that admiration into a warmer feeling. In plain words, Lydia Graham had hoped with a little good management, to become Lady Eversleigh of Raynham; and no words can fully describe her mortification when she learnt that the baronet had bestowed his name and fortune on a woman of whom the fashionable world knew nothing, except that she was utterly unknown.

Lydia Graham came to Raynham Castle with poisonous feelings rankling in her heart, but she wore her brightest smiles as well as her most elegant dresses. She congratulated the baronet in honeyed words, and offered warmest friendship to the lovely mistress of the mansion.

"I am sure we shall suit each other delightfully, dear Lady Eversleigh," she said; "and we shall be fast friends henceforward-shall we not?"

Honoria's disposition was naturally reserved. She revolted against frivolous and unmeaning sentimentality. She responded politely to Miss Graham's proffers of friendship; but not with corresponding warmth.

Lydia Graham perceived the coldness of her manner, and bitterly resented it. She felt that she had reason to hate this woman, who had caused the disappointment of her dearest hopes, whose beauty was infinitely superior to her own; and who was several years younger than herself.

There was one person at Raynham whose scrutinizing eyes perceived the animosity of feeling lurking beneath Lydia Graham's smooth manner. That penetrating observer was Victor Carrington. He saw that the fashionable beauty hated Lady Eversleigh, and he resolved to make use of her hatred for the furtherance of his schemes.

"I fancy Miss Graham has at some time of her life cherished an idea that she might become mistress of this place, eh, Reginald?" he said one morning, as the two men lounged together on the terrace.

"How did you know that?" said Reginald, questioning and replying at once.

"By no diabolical power of divination, I assure you, my dear Reginald. I have only used my eyes. But it seems, from your exclamation, that I am right. Miss Graham did once hope to become Lady Eversleigh."

"Well, I believe she tried her uttermost to win my uncle for a husband. I have watched her manoeuvres—when she was here two years ago; but they did not give me much uneasiness, for I thought Sir Oswald was a confirmed bachelor. She used to vary her amusements by flirting with me. I was the acknowledged heir in those days, you know, and I have no doubt she would have married me if I had given her the opportunity. But she is too clever a woman for my taste; and with all her

brilliancy, I never admired her."

"You are wise, for once in the way, my dear Reginald. Miss Graham is a dangerous woman. She has a very beautiful smile; but she is the sort of woman who can smile and murder while she smiles. But she may be made a very useful tool, notwithstanding."

"A tool?"

"Yes; a good workman takes his tools wherever he finds them. I may be in want of just such a tool as Lydia Graham."

All went merry as a marriage-bell at Raynham Castle during the bright August weather. The baronet was unspeakably happy. Honoria, too, was happy in the novelty of her position; happy in the knowledge of her husband's love. His noble nature had won the reward such natures should win. He was beloved by his young wife as few men are beloved in the heyday of their youth. Her affection was reverential, profound, and pure. To her mind, Oswald Eversleigh was the perfection of all that is noble in mankind, and she was proud of his devotion, grateful of his love.

No guest at the castle was more popular than Victor Carrington, the surgeon. His accomplishments were of so varied a nature as to make him invaluable in a large party, and he was always ready to devote himself to the amusement of others. Sir Oswald was astonished at the versatility of his nephew's friend. As a linguist, an artist, a musician, Victor alike shone pre-eminent; but in music he was triumphant. Professing only to be an amateur, he exhibited a scientific knowledge, a mechanical proficiency, as rare as they were admirable.

"A poor man is obliged to study many arts," he said, carelessly, when Sir Oswald complimented him on his musical powers. "My life has been one of laborious industry; and the cultivation of music has been almost the only relaxation I have allowed myself. I am not, like Lady Eversleigh, a musical genius. I only pretend to

be a patient student of the great masters."

The baronet was delighted with the musical talents of his guest because they assisted much in the display of Lady Eversleigh's exceptional power. Victor Carrington's brilliant playing set off the magnificent singing of Honoria. With him as her accompanyist, she sang as she could not sing without his aid. Every evening there was an impromptu concert in the long drawing-room; every evening Lady Eversleigh sang to Victor Carrington's accompaniment.

One evening, in the summer dusk, when she had been singing even more superbly than usual, Lydia Graham happened to be seated near Sir Oswald, in one of the broad open windows.

"Lady Eversleigh is indeed a genius," said Miss Graham, at the close of a superb bravura; "but how delightful for her to have that accomplished Mr. Carrington to accompany her—though some people prefer to play their own accompaniments. I do, for instance; but when one has a relative who plays so well, it is, of course, a different thing."

"A relative! I don't understand you, my dear Miss Graham."

"I mean that it is very nice for Lady Eversleigh to have a cousin who is so accomplished a musician."

"A cousin?"

"Yes. Mr. Carrington is Lady Eversleigh's cousin—is he not? Or, I beg your pardon, perhaps he is her brother. I don't know your wife's maiden name."

"My wife's maiden name was Milford," answered the baronet, with some displeasure in his tone. "And Mr. Carrington is neither her brother nor her cousin; he is no relation whatever to her."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Miss Graham.

There was a strange significance in that word "indeed"; and after having uttered it,

the young lady seemed seized with a sudden sense of embarrassment.

Sir Oswald looked at her sharply; but her face was half averted from him, as if she had turned away in confusion. "You seem surprised," he said, haughtily, "and yet I do not see anything surprising in the fact that my wife and Mr. Carrington are not related to each other."

"Oh, dear no, Sir Oswald; of course not," replied Lydia, with a light laugh, which had the artificial sound of a laugh intended to disguise some painful embarrassment. "Of course not. It was very absurd of me to appear surprised, if I did really appear so; but I was not aware of it. You see, it was scarcely strange if I thought Lady Eversleigh and Mr. Carrington were nearly related; for, when people are very old friends, they seem like relations: it is only in name that there is any difference."

"You seemed determined to make mistakes this evening, Miss Graham," answered the baronet, with icy sternness. "Lady Eversleigh and Mr. Carrington are by no means old friends. Neither my wife nor I have known the gentleman more than a fortnight. He happens to be a very accomplished musician, and is good enough to make himself useful in accompanying Lady Eversleigh when she sings. That is the only claim which he has on her friendship; and it is one of only a few days' standing."

"Indeed!" said Miss Graham, repeating the exclamation which had sounded so disagreeable to Sir Oswald. "I certainly should have mistaken them for old friends; but then dear Lady Eversleigh is of Italian extraction, and there is always a warmth of manner, an absence of reserve, in the southern temperament which is foreign to our colder natures."

Lady Eversleigh rose from her seat just at this moment, in compliance with the entreaties of the circle about her.

She approached the grand piano, where Victor Carrington was still sitting, turning over the leaves of some music, and at the same moment Sir Oswald rose also, and

hurried towards her.

"Do not sing any more to-night, Honoria," he said; "you will fatigue yourself."

There was some lack of politeness in this speech, as Lady Eversleigh was about to sing in compliance with the entreaties of her guests. She turned to her husband with a smile—

"I am not in the least tired, my dear Oswald," she said; "and if our friends really wish for another song, I am quite ready to sing one. That is to say, if Mr. Carrington is not tired of accompanying me."

Victor Carrington declared that nothing gave him greater pleasure than to play Lady Eversleigh's accompaniments.

"Mr. Carrington is very good," answered the baronet, coldly, "but I do not wish you to tire yourself by singing all the evening; and I beg that you will not sing again to-night, Honoria."

Never before had the baronet addressed his wife with such cold decision of manner. There was something almost severe in his tone, and Honoria looked at him with wondering eyes.

"I have no greater pleasure than in obeying you," she said, gently, as she withdrew from the piano.

She seated herself by one of the tables, and opened a portfolio of sketches. Her head drooped over the book, and she seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the drawings. Glancing at her furtively, Sir Oswald could see that she was wounded; and yet he—the adoring husband, the devoted lover—did not approach her. His mind was disturbed—his thoughts confused. He passed through one of the open windows, and went out upon the terrace. There all was calm and tranquil; but the tranquil loveliness of the scene had no soothing influence on Sir Oswald. His brain was on fire. An intense affection can scarcely exist without a lurking tendency to jealousy. Until to-night every jealous feeling had been lulled to rest by the confiding

trust of the happy husband; but to-night a few words—spoken in apparent carelessness—spoken by one who could have, as Sir Oswald thought, no motive for malice—had aroused the sleeping passion, and peace had fled from his heart.

As Sir Oswald passed the window by which he had left Lydia Graham, he heard that young lady talking to some one.

"It is positively disgraceful," she said; "her flirtation with that Mr. Carrington is really too obvious, though Sir Oswald is so blind as not to perceive it. I thought they were cousins until to-night. Imagine my surprise when I found that they were not even distantly related; that they have actually only known each other for a fortnight. The woman must be a shameless flirt, and the man is evidently an adventurer."

The poisoned arrow shot to its mark. Sir Oswald believed that these words had never been intended to reach his ears. He did not for a moment suspect that Lydia Graham had recognized his approaching figure on the moonlit terrace, and had uttered these words to her friend on purpose that they should reach his ears.

How should a true-hearted man suspect a woman's malice? How should he fathom the black depths of wickedness to which a really false and heartless woman can descend?

He did not know that Lydia Graham had ever hoped to be mistress of his home. He did not know that she was inspired by fury against himself—by passionate envy of his wife. To him her words seemed only the careless slander of society, and experience had shown him that in such slanders there lurked generally some leaven of truth.

"I will not doubt her," he thought, as he walked onward in the moonlight, too proud and too honourable to linger in order to hear anything more that Miss Graham might have to say. "I will not doubt the wife I love so fondly, because idle tongues are already busy with her fair fame. Already! We have not been married two months, and already evil tongues drop the poison of doubt into my ear. It seems too cruel!

But I will watch her with this man. Her ignorance of the world may have caused her to be more familiar with him than the rigid usages of society would permit. And yet she is generally so dignified, so reserved—apt to err on the side of coldness rather than of warmth. I must watch!—I must watch!"

Never before had Sir Oswald known the anguish of distrust. But his was an impulsive nature, easily swayed by the force of any absorbing passion. Blindly, unquestionably, as he had abandoned himself to his love for Honoria Milford, so now he abandoned himself to the jealous doubts inspired by a malicious woman's lying tongue.

That night his slumbers were broken and feverish. The next day he set himself to watch his wife and Victor Carrington.

The mind, imbued with suspicion, contemplates everything in a distorted light. Victor Carrington was especially attentive to the mistress of the castle. It was not that he talked to her, or usurped more of her society than his position warranted; but he devoted himself to her service with a slavish watchfulness which was foreign to the manner of an ordinary guest.

Wherever Lady Eversleigh went, Carrington's eyes followed her; every wish of hers seemed to be divined by him. If she lingered for a few moments by an open window, Mr. Carrington was at hand with her shawl. If she was reading, and the leaves of her book required to be cut open, the surgeon had procured her a paper-knife before she could suffer inconvenience or delay. If she went to the piano, he was at the instrument before her, ready to adjust her chair, to arrange her music. In another man these attentions might have appeared very common-place, but so quiet of foot, so subdued of voice, was Victor Carrington, that there seemed something stealthy, something secret in his devotion; something which had no right to exist. One long day of patient watchfulness revealed all this to Sir Oswald Eversleigh; and with the revelation came a new and terrible agony.

How far was his wife to blame for all that was exceptional in the surgeon's manner? Was she aware of his devotion? Did she encourage this silent and stealthy worship? She did not, at any rate, discourage it, since she permitted it.

The baronet wondered whether Victor Carrington's manner impressed others as it impressed himself. One person had, he knew, been scandalized by the surgeon's devotion to Lady Eversleigh; and had spoken of it in the plainest terms. But did other eyes see as Lydia Graham and he himself had seen?

He determined on questioning his nephew as to the character of the gentlemanly and accomplished surgeon, whom an impulse of kindness had prompted him to welcome under his roof—an impulse which he now bitterly regretted.

"Your friend, Mr. Carrington, is very attentive to Lady Eversleigh," said Sir Oswald to Reginald, with a pitiable attempt at indifference of manner; "is he generally so devoted in his attention to ladies?"

"On the contrary, my dear uncle," answered Reginald, with an appearance of carelessness which was as well assumed as that of his kinsman was awkward and constrained; "Victor Carrington generally entertains the most profound contempt for the fair sex. He is devoted to the science of chemistry, you know, and in London passes the best part of his life in his laboratory. But then Lady Eversleigh is such a superior person—it is no wonder he admires her."

"He admires her very much, then?"

"Amazingly—if I can judge by what he said when first he became acquainted with her. He has grown more reserved lately."

"Oh, indeed. He has grown more reserved lately, has he?" asked the baronet, whose suspicions were fed by every word his nephew uttered.

"Yes. I suppose he thinks I might take objection to his enthusiastic admiration of Lady Eversleigh. Very absurd of him, is it not? For, of course, my dear uncle, you cannot feel otherwise than proud when you see your beautiful young wife

surrounded by worshippers; and one devotee more or less at the shrine can make little difference."

These words, carelessly spoken, galled Sir Oswald to the quick; but he tried to conceal his pain, and parted from his nephew with affected gaiety of spirit.

Alone in his own study, he pondered long and moodily over the events of the day. He shrank from the society of his wife. Her tender words irritated him; he began to think those soft and loving accents were false. More than once he answered Honoria's anxious questions as to the cause of his gloom with a harshness that terrified her. She saw that her husband was changed, and knew not whence the change arose. And this vagrant's nature was a proud one. Her own manner changed to the man who had elevated her from the very mire to a position of splendour and honour. She, too, became reserved, and a cruel breach yawned between the husband and wife who, a few short days before, had been so happily united.

Truly, Victor Carrington's schemes prospered. Reginald Eversleigh looked on in silent wonder—too base to oppose himself to the foul plot which was being concocted under his eyes. Whatever the schemer bade him do, he did without shame or scruple. Before him glittered the dazzling vision of future fortune.

A week elapsed—a weary week for Sir Oswald Eversleigh, for every day and every hour seemed to widen the gulf between himself and his wife. Conscious of her innocence of the smallest offence against the man she truly and honestly loved, Honoria was too proud to sue for an explanation of that mysterious change which had banished all happiness and peace from her breast. More than once she had asked the cause of her husband's gloom of manner; more than once she had been coldly, almost rudely, repulsed. She sought, therefore, to question him no further; but held herself aloof from him with proud reserve. The cruel estrangement cost her dear; but she waited for Sir Oswald to break the ice—she waited for him to explain the meaning of his altered conduct.

In the meantime, she performed all her duties as mistress of the mansion with the same calm grace which had distinguished her from the first hour of her elevation to her new position. But the struggle was a painful one, and left its traces on her beautiful face. Sir Oswald perceived the change in that lovely countenance, and his jealousy distorted this change into a damning evidence against her.

"This man's devotion has touched her heart," he thought. "It is of him she is thinking when she is silent and pensive. She loves me no longer. Fool that I am, she never loved me! She saw in me a dupe ready to lift her from obscurity into the place she longed to occupy; and now that place is hers, she need no longer care to blindfold the eyes of her dupe; she may please herself, and enjoy the attentions of more agreeable adorers."

Then, in the next moment, remorse took possession of the baronet's heart, and for awhile he fancied that he had wronged his wife.

"Is she to blame because this man loves her?" he asked himself. "She may not even be aware of his love, though my watchful eyes have penetrated the secret. Oh, if I could only take her away from Raynham without delay—this very moment—or if I could clear the castle of all this frivolous, selfish, heartless gang—what happiness it would be! But I can do neither. I have invited these people, and I must play my part to the end. Even this Victor Carrington I dare not send out of my house; for, in so doing, I should confirm the suspicions of Lydia Graham, and all who think like her."

Thus mused Sir Oswald as he paced the broad terrace-walk alone, while his guests were enjoying themselves in different parts of the castle and grounds; and while Lady Eversleigh spent the summer afternoon in her own apartments, brooding sadly on her husband's unkindness.

There was one person to whom, in any ordinary trouble of mind, Sir Oswald Eversleigh would have most certainly turned for consolation; and that person was his old and tried friend, Captain Copplestone. But the jealous doubts which racked

his brain were not to be revealed, even to this faithful friend. There was bitter humiliation in the thought of opening those bleeding wounds which had so newly lacerated his heart.

If Captain Copplestone had been near his friend in the hour of his trouble, he might, perhaps, have wrung the baronet's secret from him in some unguarded moment; but within the last week the Captain had been confined to his own apartments by a violent attack of gout; and except a brief daily visit of inquiry, Sir Oswald had seen nothing of him.

He was very carefully tended, however, in his hours of suffering. Even her own anxiety of mind did not render Lady Eversleigh forgetful of her husband's invalid friend. Every day, and many times a day, the Captain received some new evidence of her thoughtful care. It pleased her to do this—apart from her natural inclination to be kind to the suffering and friendless; for the soldier was her husband's valued friend, and in testifying her respect for him, it seemed to her as if she were in some manner proving her devotion to the husband from whom she had become so mysteriously estranged.

Amongst the many plans which had been set on foot for the amusement of the guests at Raynham, there was one on which all the visitors, male and female, had especially set their hearts. This much-talked-of entertainment was a pic-nic, to take place at a celebrated spot, whose picturesque loveliness was supposed to be unrivalled in the county, and scarcely exceeded by any scene in all the expanse of fair England.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE PIC-NIC.

The place was called the Wizard's Cave. It was a gigantic grotto, near which flowed a waterfall of surpassing beauty. A wild extent of woodland stretched on one side of this romantic scene; on the other a broad moor spread wide before a range of hills,

one of which was crowned by the ruins of an old Norman castle that had stood many a siege in days gone by.

It would have been difficult to select a spot better adapted for a pic-nic; and some of the gentlemen who had ridden over to inspect the scene were rapturous in their praises of its sylvan beauty. The cave lay within ten miles of Raynham. "Just the distance for a delightful drive," said the ladies—and from the moment that Sir Oswald had proposed the entertainment, there had been perpetual discussion of the arrangements necessary, the probability of fine weather, and the date to be finally chosen. The baronet had proposed this rustic fête when his own heart had been light and happy; now he looked forward to the day with a sickening dread of its weariness. Others would be happy; but the sound of mirthful voices and light laughter would fall with a terrible discordance on the ear of the man whose mind was tortured by hidden doubts. Sir Oswald was too courteous a host to disappoint his visitors. All the preparations for the rustic festival were duly made: and on the appointed morning a train of horses and carriages drew up in a line in the quadrangle of the castle.

It would have been impossible to imagine a brighter picture of English life; and as the guests emerged in groups from the wide, arched doorway, and took their places in the carriages, or sprang lightly into their saddles, the spectacle grew more and more enlivening.

Lydia Graham had done her utmost to surpass all rivals on this important day. Wealthy country squires and rich young lordlings were to be present at the festival, and the husband-huntress might, perchance, find a victim among these eligible bachelors. Deeply as she was already in debt, Miss Graham had written to her French milliner, imploring her to send her a costume regardless of expense, and promising a speedy payment of at least half her long-standing account. The fair and false Lydia did not scruple to hint at the possibility of her making a brilliant

matrimonial alliance ere many months were over, in order that this hope might beguile the long-suffering milliner into giving further credit.

The fashionable beauty was not disappointed. The milliner sent the costume ordered, but wrote to inform Miss Graham, with all due circumlocution and politeness, that, unless her long-standing account were quickly settled, legal proceedings must be taken. Lydia threw the letter aside with a frown, and proceeded to inspect her dress, which was perfect in its way.

But Miss Graham could scarcely repress a sigh of envy as she looked at Lady Eversleigh's more simple toilet, and perceived that, with all its appearance of simplicity, it was twice as costly as her own more gorgeous attire. The jewels, too, were worth more than all the trinkets Lydia possessed; and she knew that the treasures of Lady Eversleigh's jewel-cases were almost inexhaustible, with such a lavish hand had her husband heaped his gifts upon her.

"Perhaps he will not be so liberal with his presents in future," thought the malicious and disappointed woman, as she looked at Honoria, and acknowledged to her own envious heart that never had she seen her look more beautiful, more elegant, or more fitted to adorn the position which Miss Graham would willingly have persuaded herself she disgraced. "If he thinks that her love is bestowed upon another, he will scarcely find such delight in future in offering her costly tributes of affection."

There was a great deal of discussion as to who should occupy the different carriages; but at last all was arranged apparently to every one's satisfaction. There were many who had chosen to ride; and among the equestrians was Sir Oswald himself.

For the first time in any excursion, the baronet deserted his accustomed place by the side of his wife. Honoria deeply felt the slight involved in this desertion; but she was too proud to entreat him to alter his arrangements. She saw his favourite horse brought round to the broad steps; she saw her husband mount the animal without a word of remonstrance, without so much as a reproachful glance, though her heart

was swelling with passionate indignation. And then she took her place in the barouche, and allowed the gentlemen standing near to assist in the arrangement of the shawls and carriage-rugs, which were provided in case of change of weather.

Sir Oswald was not slow to remark that appearance of indifference. When once estrangement has arisen between those who truly love each other, everything tends to widen the breach. The jealous husband had chosen to separate himself from his wife in a sudden impulse of angry distrust; but he was still more angry, still more distrustful, when he saw her apparent carelessness of his desertion.

"She is happier without me," he thought, bitterly, as he drew his horse on one side, and watched all that took place around the barouche. "Unrestrained by my presence, she will be free to revel in the flatteries of her younger admirers. She will be perfectly happy, for she will forget for a while that she is chained for life to a husband whom she does not love."

A silvery laugh from Honoria seemed to answer his thoughts, and to confirm his suspicions. He little dreamed that laugh was assumed, in order to deceive the malicious Lydia, who had just uttered a polite little speech, intended to wound the mistress of Raynham.

The baronet kept his horse a little way behind the carriage, and watched his wife with jealous and angry eyes.

Lydia Graham had taken her seat in the barouche, and there was now a slight discussion as to the gentlemen who should accompany the two ladies. Many were eager for the privilege, and the occasion was a fitting one for the display of feminine coquetry. Miss Graham did not neglect the opportunity; and after a little animated conversation between the lady and a young fop who was heir to a peerage, the lordling took his place opposite the fashionable beauty.

The second place still remained unoccupied. The baronet waited with painful eagerness to see who would take this place, for amongst the gentlemen grouped

about the door of the carriage was Victor Carrington.

Sir Oswald had not to wait long. He ground his teeth in a sudden access of jealous fury as he saw the young surgeon step lightly into the vehicle, and seat himself opposite Lady Eversleigh. He took it for granted that it was on that lady's invitation the young man occupied this place of honour. He did not for a moment imagine that it was at Lydia Graham's entreaty the surgeon had taken his seat in the barouche. And yet it was so.

"Do come with us, Mr. Carrington," Lydia had said. "I know that you are well versed in county history and archaeology, and will be able to tell us all manner of interesting facts connected with the villages and churches we pass on our road."

Lydia Graham hated Honoria for having won the proud position she herself had tried so hard to attain; she hated Sir Oswald for having chosen another in preference to herself; and she was determined to be revenged on both. She knew that her hints had already had their effect on the baronet; and she now sought, by every base and treacherous trick, to render Honoria Eversleigh an object of suspicion in the eyes of her husband. She had a double game to play; for she sought at once to gratify her ambition and her thirst for revenge. On one hand she wished to captivate Lord Sumner Howden; on the other she wanted to widen the gulf between Sir Oswald and his wife.

She little knew that she was only playing into the hands of a deeper and more accomplished schemer than herself. She little thought that Victor Carrington's searching glance had penetrated the secrets of her heart; and that he watched her malicious manoeuvres with a calm sense of amusement.

Though August had already given place to September, the weather was warm and balmy, as in the full glory of midsummer.

Sir Oswald rode behind Lady Eversleigh's barouche, too remote to hear the words that were spoken by those who occupied the vehicle; but quite near enough to

distinguish the tones and the laughter, and to perceive every gesture. He saw Victor bend forward to address Honoria. He saw that deferential and devoted manner which had so much offended him since he had first set himself to watch the surgeon. And Lady Eversleigh did not discourage her admirer; she let him talk; she seemed interested in his conversation; and as Lydia Graham and Lord Howden were entirely occupied with each other, the conversation between Honoria was a complete tête-à-tête. The young man's handsome head bent lower and lower over the plumed hat of Lady Eversleigh; and with every step of that ten-mile journey, the cloud that overshadowed the baronet's mind grew more profound in its fatal gloom. He no longer struggled against his doubts—he abandoned himself altogether to the passion that held possession of him.

But the eyes of the world were on Sir Oswald, and he was obliged to meet those unpitying eyes with a smile. The long line of equipages drew up at last on the margin of a wood; the pleasure-seekers alighted, and wandered about in twos and threes amongst the umbrageous pathways which led towards the Wizard's Cave.

After alighting from the barouche, Lady Eversleigh waited to see if her husband would approach her, and offer his arm; she had a faint hope that he would do so, even in spite of his evident estrangement; but her hope was cruelly disappointed. Sir Oswald walked straight to a portly dowager, and offered to escort her to the cave.

"Do you remember a pic-nic here twenty years ago, at which you and I danced together by moon-light, Lady Hetherington?" he said. "We old folks have pleasant memories of the past, and are the fittest companions for each other. The young people can enjoy themselves much better without the restraint of our society."

He said this loud enough for his wife to hear. She did hear every word, and felt there was hidden significance in that careless speech. For a moment she was inclined to break down the icy barrier of reserve. The words which she wanted to speak were almost on her lips, "Let me go with you, Oswald." But in the next instant she met

her husband's eyes, and their cold gaze chilled her heart.

At the same moment Victor Carrington offered her his arm, with his accustomed deferential manner. She accepted the proffered arm, scarcely knowing who offered it, so deeply did she feel her husband's unkindness.

"What have I done to offend him?" she thought. "What is this cruel mystery which divides us, and which is almost breaking my heart?"

"Come, Lady Eversleigh," cried several voices; "we want you to accompany us to the Wizard's Cave."

Nothing could be more successful than the pic-nic. Elegantly dressed women and aristocratic-looking men wandered here and there amidst the woodland, and by the margin of the waterfall; sometimes in gay little parties, whose talk and laughter rang out clearly on the balmy air; sometimes strolling tête-à-tête, and engaged in conversations of a more confidential character. Half-hidden by the foliage of a little thicket of pollard oaks, there was a military band, whose services Sir Oswald had obtained from a garrison-town some twenty miles from Raynham, and the stirring music added much to the charm of the festival.

Lydia Graham was as happy as it is possible for any evil-minded woman to be. Her envious feelings were lulled to temporary rest by the enjoyment of her own triumphs; for the young lordling seemed to be completely subjugated by her charms, and devoted himself exclusively to attendance upon her.

The scheming beauty's heart thrilled with a sense of triumph. She thought that she had at last made a conquest that might be better worth the making than any of those past conquests, which had all ended in such bitter disappointments.

She looked at Lady Eversleigh with flashing eyes, as she remembered that by the subjugation of this empty-headed young nobleman she might attain a higher position and greater wealth than that enjoyed by Sir Oswald's envied wife.

"As Lady Sumner Howden, I could look down upon the mistress of Raynham

Castle," she thought. "As Countess of Vandeluce, I should take precedence of nobler women than Lady Eversleigh."

The day waned. The revellers lingered long over the splendid collation, served in a marquee which had been sent from York for the occasion. The banquet seemed a joyous one, enlivened by the sound of laughter, the popping of champagne corks, the joyous talk that emanated alike from the really light-hearted and those whose gaiety is only a mockery and a sham. The sun was sloping westward when Lady Eversleigh arose, absent and despondent, to give the signal for the withdrawal of the ladies.

As she did so, she looked to the other end of the marquee—to the table where her husband had been seated. To her surprise, his place was empty.

Throughout the whole day Honoria had been a prey to gloomy forebodings. The estrangement between herself and her husband was so unexpected, so inexplicable, that she was powerless to struggle against the sense of misery and bewilderment which it had occasioned in her mind.

Again and again she asked herself what had she done to offend him; again and again she pondered over the smallest and most insignificant actions—the lightest words—of the past few weeks, in order to discover some clue to the mystery of Sir Oswald's altered conduct.

But the past afforded her no such clue. She had said nothing, she had done nothing, which could offend the most sensitive of men.

Then a new and terrible light began to dawn upon her. She remembered her wretched extraction—the pitiable condition in which the baronet had discovered her, and she began to think that he repented of his marriage. "He regrets his folly, and I am hateful in his eyes," thought Honoria, "for he remembers my degraded position—the mystery of my past life. He has heard sneering words and cruel innuendoes fall from the lips of his fashionable friends, perhaps; and he is ashamed of his marriage. He little knows how gladly I would release him from the tie that

binds us—if, indeed, it has grown hateful to him." Thus musing and wandering alone, in one of the forest pathways—for she had outstripped her guests, and sought a little relief for her overwrought spirits, constrained to the courtesies of her position for the moment—she scarcely knew whither, she came presently upon a group of grooms, who were lounging before a rough canvas tent, which had been erected for the accommodation of the horses.

"Is 'Orestes' in that tent, Plummer?" she asked of the old groom who generally attended her in her rides and drives.

"No, my lady, Sir Oswald had him saddled a quarter of an hour ago, and rode him away."

"Sir Oswald has gone away!"

"Yes, my lady. He got a message, I think, while he was sitting at dinner, and he rode off as fast as he could go, across th' moor—it's the nighest way to the castle, you know, my lady; though it ain't the pleasantest."

Honoria grew very uneasy. What was the meaning of this sudden departure?

"Do you know who brought the message from Raynham?" she asked the groom.

"No, indeed, my lady. I don't even know for sure and certain that the message was from Raynham. I only guess as much."

"Why did not Sir Oswald take you with him?"

"I can't say, my lady. I asked master if I wasn't to go with him, and he said, 'No, he would rather be alone.'" This was all that Honoria could learn from the groom. She walked back towards the marquee, whence the sound of voices and laughter grew louder as the sun sank across the broad expanse of moorland.

The ladies of the party had gathered together on a broad patch of velvet greensward, near the oak thicket where the band was stationed. Here the younger members of the party were waltzing merrily to the accompaniment of one of Strauss's sweetest

waltzes; while the elders sat here and there on camp-stools or fallen logs of trees, and looked on, or indulged in a little agreeable gossip.

Honoria Eversleigh made her way unobserved to the marquee, and approached one of the openings less used and less crowded than the others. Here she found a servant, whom she sent into the marquee with a message for Mr. Eversleigh, to inquire if he could explain Sir Oswald's sudden departure.

The man entered the tent, in obedience to his mistress; and Lady Eversleigh seated herself on a camp-stool, at a little distance, awaiting the issue of her message.

She had been waiting only a few moments, when she saw Victor Carrington approaching her hurriedly—not from the marquee, but from the pathway by which she herself had come. There was an unwonted agitation about his manner as he approached her, which, in her present state of nervous apprehension, filled her with alarm.

She went to meet him, pale and trembling.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Lady Eversleigh," he said, hurriedly.

"You have been looking for me? Something has happened then-Sir Oswald—"

"Yes, it is, unhappily, of Sir Oswald I have to speak."

"Speak quickly, then. What has happened? You are agonizing me, Mr. Carrington—for pity's sake, speak! Your face fills me with fear!"

"Your fears are, unhappily, too well founded. Sir Oswald has been thrown from his horse, on his way across the moor, and lies dangerously hurt, at the ruins of Yarborough Tower—that black building on the edge of the moor yonder. A lad has just brought me the tidings."

"Let me go to him—for heaven's sake, let me go at once! Dangerously hurt—he is dangerously hurt, you say?"

"I fear so, from the boy's account."

"And we have no medical man among our company. Yes; you are a surgeon—you can be of assistance."

"I trust so, my dear Lady Eversleigh. I shall hurry to Sir Oswald immediately, and in the meantime they have sent from the tower for medical help."

"I must go to him!" said Honoria, wildly. "Call the servants, Mr. Carrington! My carriage—this moment!"

She could scarcely utter the words in her excitement. Her voice had a choking sound, and but for the surgeon's supporting arm she must have fallen prone on the grass at his feet.

As she clung to his arm, as she gasped out her eager entreaties that he would take her to her husband, a faint rustling stirred the underwood beneath some sycamores at a little distance, and curious eyes peered through the foliage.

Lydia Graham had happened to stroll that way. Her curiosity had been excited by the absence of Lady Eversleigh from among her guests, and, being no longer occupied by her flirtation with the young viscount, she had set out in search of the missing Honoria.

She was amply rewarded for her trouble by the scene which she beheld from her hiding-place among the sycamores.

She saw Victor and Lady Eversleigh talking to each other with every appearance of agitation; she saw the baronet's wife clinging, in some wild terror, to the arm of the surgeon; and she began to think that Honoria Eversleigh was indeed the base and guilty wretch she would fain have represented her.

Lydia Graham was too far from the two figures to hear a word that was spoken. She could only watch their gestures, and draw her own inferences therefrom.

"My carriage, Mr. Carrington!" repeated Honoria; "why don't you call the servants?"

"One moment, Lady Eversleigh," said the surgeon, calmly. "You must remember,

that on such an occasion as this, there is nothing so important as presence of mind—self-command. If I alarm your servants, all the guests assembled here will take the alarm; and they will rush helter-skelter to Yarborough Tower, to testify their devotion to Sir Oswald, and to do him all the harm they possibly can. What would be the effect of a crowd of half-drunken men, clustering round him, with their noisy expressions of sympathy? What I have to propose is this: I am going to Sir Oswald immediately in my medical capacity. I have a gig and horse ready, under that group of fir-trees yonder—the fastest horse and lightest vehicle I could find. If you will trust yourself in that vehicle behind that horse, I will drive you across the moor, and we shall reach the ruins in half an hour. Have you courage to come with me thus, Lady Eversleigh, quietly, unobserved by any one?—or will you wait for your barouche; and wait until the revellers yonder are all ready to start with you?"

The voices came loudly from the marquee as the surgeon spoke; and Honoria felt that he spoke wisely.

"You are right," she said; "these people must know nothing of the accident until my husband is safely back at Raynham. But you had better go and tell Plummer, the groom, to send the barouche after us. A carriage will be wanted to convey Sir Oswald from the tower, if he is fit to be moved."

"True," answered Victor; "I will see to it."

"And quickly!" cried Lady Eversleigh; "go quickly, I implore. You will find me by the fir-trees when you return, ready to start with you! Do not waste time in words, Mr. Carrington. Remember, it is a matter of life and death."

Victor left her, and she walked to the little grove of firs, where she found the gig of which he had spoken, and the horse standing near it, ready harnessed, and with his bridle fastened to a tree.

Two pathways led to this fir-grove—a lower and an upper—the upper completely screened by brushwood. Along this upper pathway, which was on the edge of a

sloping bank, Lydia Graham made her way, careless what injury she inflicted on her costly dress, so eager was she to discover whither lady Eversleigh was going. Completely hidden from Honoria, though at only a few paces' distance, Miss Graham waited to watch the proceedings of the baronet's wife.

She was mystified by the appearance of the gig and horse, stationed in this out-of-the-way spot. She was still more mystified when she saw Lady Eversleigh clasp her hands before her face, and stand for a few moments, motionless and statue-like, as if abandoned to despair.

"What does it all mean?" Miss Graham asked herself. "Surely she cannot intend to elope with this Carrington. She may be wicked; but she cannot be so insane as to throw away wealth and position for the sake of this foreign adventurer."

She waited, almost breathless with excitement, crouching amongst the brushwood at the top of the woody bank, and looking downward towards the fir-grove, with watchful eyes. She had not to wait long. Victor appeared in a few minutes, out of breath from running.

"Have you given orders about the carriage?"

"Yes, I have given all necessary orders."

No more was said. Victor handed Lady Eversleigh into the vehicle, and drove away—slowly while they were still on the edge of the wood; but accelerating his pace as they emerged upon the moorland.

"It is an elopement!" exclaimed Miss Graham, whose astonishment was unbounded. "It is an elopement! The infamous creature has gone off with that penniless young man. And now, Sir Oswald, I think you will have good reason to repent your fine romantic marriage with a base-born adventuress, whom nobody ever heard of until she burst forth upon the world as Lady Eversleigh of Raynham Castle."

Filled with the triumphant delight of gratified malice, Lydia Graham went back to the broad greensward by the Wizard's Cave. The gentlemen had now left the

marquee; the full moon was rising, round and yellow, on the horizon, like a great globe of molten gold. Preparations had already commenced for the return, and the younger members of the party were busy discussing the arrangements of the homeward drive.

That moonlight drive was looked forward to as one of the chief pleasures of the excursion; it would afford such glorious opportunities for flirtation. It would enable romantic young ladies to quote so much poetry about the moon and the summer night, while poetically-disposed young gentlemen replied in the same strain. All was animation and excitement. The champagne and burgundy, the sparkling hock and moselle, which had been consumed in the marquee, had only rendered the majority of the gentlemen more gallant and agreeable; and softly-spoken compliments, and tender pressures of pretty little delicately-gloved hands, testified to the devotion of the cavaliers who were to escort the band of fair ones homeward.

Lydia Graham hoped that she would be able to take up the thread of her flirtation with Lord Howden exactly where it had dropped when she had risen to leave the dinner-table. She had thought it even possible that, if she could secure a tête-à-tête drive home with the weak-brained young nobleman, she might lure him on until he made a formal proposal, from which he would find it no easy matter to recede; for Captain Graham was at his sister's call, and was a gentleman of no very yielding temper where his own interests were at stake. He had long been anxious that his sister should make a wealthy marriage, for her debts and difficulties annoyed him; and he felt that if she were well married, he would be able to borrow money of her, instead of being pestered by her applications for assistance.

Miss Graham was doomed to endure a disappointment. Lord Sumner Howden was one of the few gentleman upon whom iced champagne and moselle had produced anything but an exhilarating effect. He was dull and stupid, pallid and sleepy; like some great, greedy school-boy who has over-eaten himself, and is suffering the

consequences of his gluttony.

The fair Lydia had the mortification of hearing him tell one of the grooms to put him into a close carriage, where he could have a nap on his way home.

Reginald Eversleigh took the lordling's seat in the barouche, which was the first in the line of carriages for the homeward journey, in spite of Honoria's entreaties to Victor Carrington. The young man was almost as dull and stupid, to all appearance, as Lord Sumner Howden; but, although he had been drinking deeply, intoxication had nothing to do with his gloomy silence.

He knew that Carrington's scheme had been ripening day by day; and he knew also that within a few hours the final blow was to be struck. He did not know the nature of that intended stroke of treachery; but he was aware that it would involve misery and humiliation for Sir Oswald, utter ruin and disgrace for Honoria. The very uncertainty as to the nature of the cruel plot made it all the more dreadful; and he waited with no very pleasant feelings for the development of his friend's scheme.

When all was ready for the start, it was discovered that "dear Lady Eversleigh" was missing. Servants were sent in every direction to search for her; but with no avail. Sir Oswald was also missed; but Plummer, the old groom, informed Mr. Eversleigh that his uncle had left some hours before; and as some of the party had seen the baronet leave the dinner-table, in compliance with a sudden summons, this occasioned little surprise.

The next person missed was Victor Carrington. It was Lydia who drew attention to the fact of his absence.

The party waited an hour, while search for Lady Eversleigh was renewed in every direction, while many of the guests expressed their fears that something must have happened to her—that she had wandered too far, and lost her way in the wood—or that she had missed her footing on the edge of one of the deep pools by the cavern, and had fallen into the water—or that she had been attacked by ruffians.

But in due time it was discovered that Mr. Carrington had been seen to take a gig from amongst the vehicles; and a lad, who had been in charge of the gig and the horse belonging to it, told the other servants that Mr. Carrington had said he wanted the vehicle to drive Lady Eversleigh home. She was tired, Mr. Carrington had said, and wanted to go home quietly.

This information was brought to Reginald by one of the upper servants; and the question of Lady Eversleigh's disappearance being at once set at rest, the procession of carriages moved away in the moonlight.

"It was really too bad of dear Lady Eversleigh to give us such unnecessary alarm," said Lydia Graham.

The lady who had taken the second place in the barouche agreed with this remark.

"I never was more alarmed in my life," she said. "I felt sure that something very dreadful must have happened."

"And to think that Lady Eversleigh should prefer going home in a gig," said Lydia, maliciously; "for my part, I think a gig a most unpleasant vehicle."

The other lady whispered something about Lady Eversleigh's humble extraction, and her ignorance of the usages of society.

"You can't wonder at it, my dear," she murmured. "For my part, I was surprised to see her so much at her ease in her new position. But, you see, her ignorance has now betrayed her into a terrible breach of the proprieties. Her conduct is, to say the least of it, most eccentric; and you may depend, no one here will ever forget this ride home in a gig with that clever young surgeon. I don't suppose Sir Oswald will very much approve of such conduct."

"Nor I," said Lydia, in the same subdued tone. "Poor Sir Oswald! What could he expect when he disgraced himself by such a marriage?"

Reginald Eversleigh leaned back in the carriage, with his arum folded, and his eyes

fixed on vacancy, while the ladies gossipped in whispers.

* * * * *

CHAPTER IX.

ON YARBOROUGH TOWER.

No sooner had Victor Carrington got completely clear of the wood, than he drove his horse at a gallop.

The light gig swayed from side to side, and jolted violently several times on crossing some obstruction in the way.

"You are not afraid?" asked Victor.

"I am only afraid of delay," answered Honoria, calmly; for by this time she had recovered much of her ordinary firmness, and was prepared to face her sorrow with at least outward tranquillity. "Tell me, Mr. Carrington, have you reason to think that my husband is in great danger?"

"I can tell you nothing for certain. You know how stupid the country people are. The boy who brought the message told me that the gentleman had been thrown from his horse, and was very much hurt. He was insensible, and was injured about the head. I gathered from this, and from the boy's manner, rather than his words, that the injuries were very serious."

"Why was Sir Oswald taken to such a wretched place as a ruined tower?"

"Because the accident happened near the ruin; and your husband was found by the people who have charge of the tower."

"And could they take him to no better place?"

"No. There is no habitation of any kind within three miles."

No more was said. It was not very easy to talk while flying through the air at the utmost speed of a spirited horse.

The moon bathed the broad moorland in mellow light. The wide expanse of level turf looked like a sea of black water that had suddenly been frozen into stillness. Not a tree—not a patch of brushwood, or a solitary bush—broke the monotony of the scene: but far away against the moonlit horizon rose a wild and craggy steep, and on the summit of that steep appeared a massive tower, with black and ruined battlements, that stood out grimly against the luminous sky.

This was Yarborough Tower—a stronghold that had defied many a besieging force in the obscure past; but of the origin of which little was now known.

Victor Carrington drove the gig up a rough and narrow road that curved around the sides of the craggy hill, and wound gradually towards the top.

He was obliged to drive slowly here, and Lady Eversleigh had ample leisure to gaze upwards at the dreary-looking ruin, whose walls seemed more densely black as they grew nearer and nearer.

"What a horrible place!" she murmured. "To think of my husband lying there—with no better shelter than those ruined walls in the hour of his suffering."

Honoria Eversleigh looked around her with a shudder, as the gig passed across a narrow wooden drawbridge that spanned an enormous chasm in the craggy hill-side.

She looked up at the tower. All was dark, and the dismal cry of a raven suddenly broke the awful stillness with a sound that was even yet more awful.

"Why are there no lights in the windows?" she asked; "surely Sir Oswald is not lying in the darkness?"

"I don't know. The chamber in which they have placed him may be on the other side of the tower," answered Victor, briefly. "And now, Lady Eversleigh, you must alight. We can go no further with the vehicle, and I must take it back to the other side of the drawbridge."

They had reached the entrance of the tower, an archway of solid masonry, over

which the ivy hung like a sombre curtain.

Honoria alighted, and passed under the black shadow of the arch.

"You had better wait till I return, Lady Eversleigh," said Victor. "You will scarcely find your way without my help."

Honoria obeyed. Anxious as she was to reach Sir Oswald without a moment's unnecessary delay, she felt herself powerless to proceed without a guide—so dark was the interior of the tower. She heard the ravens shrieking hoarsely in the battlements above, and the ivy flapping in the evening wind; but she could hear nothing else.

Victor came back to her in a few minutes. As he rejoined her, there was a noise of some ponderous object falling, with a grating and rattling of heavy chains; but Lady Eversleigh was too much absorbed by her own anxieties to feel any curiosity as to the origin of the sound.

"Come," said Victor; "give me your hand, Lady Eversleigh, and let me guide you."

She placed her hand in that of the surgeon. He led her to a steep staircase, formed by blocks of solid stone, which were rendered slippery by the moss that had gathered on them. It was a winding staircase, built in a turret which formed one angle of the tower. Looking upwards, Honoria saw a gap in the roof, through which the moonlight shone bright. But there was no sign of any other light.

"Where is my husband?" she asked. "I see no lights; I hear no voices; the place seems like a tomb."

Victor Carrington did not answer her question.

"Come," he said, in a commanding voice. "Follow me, Lady Eversleigh."

He still held her hand, and she obeyed him, making her way with some difficulty up the steep and winding staircase.

At last she found herself at the top. A narrow doorway opened before her; and

following her companion through this doorway, she emerged on the roof of the tower.

Around her were the ruined battlements, broken away altogether here and there; below her was the craggy hill-side, sloping downwards to the wide expanse of the moorland; above her was the purple sky, flooded with the calm radiance of the moon; but there was no sign of human habitation, no sound of a human voice.

"Where is my husband, Mr. Carrington?" she cried, with a wild alarm, which had but that moment taken possession of her. "This ruin is uninhabited. I saw the empty rooms, through gaps in the broken wall as we came up that staircase. Where is my husband?"

"At Raynham Castle, Lady Eversleigh, to the best of my knowledge," answered the surgeon, with imperturbable calmness.

He had seated himself on one of the broken battlements, in a lounging attitude, with one arm leaning on the ruined stone, and he was looking quietly out at the solitary expanse of barren waste sleeping beneath the moonlight.

Lady Eversleigh looked at him with a countenance that had grown rigid with horror and alarm.

"My husband at Raynham—at Raynham!" she repeated, as if she could not credit the evidence of her own ears. "Am I mad, or are you mad, Mr. Carrington? My husband at Raynham Castle, you say?"

"I cannot undertake to answer positively for the movements of any gentleman; but I should say that, at this present moment, Sir Oswald Eversleigh is in his own house, for which he started some hours ago."

"Then why am I here?"

"To answer that question clearly will involve the telling of a long story, Lady Eversleigh," answered Victor. "My motive for bringing you here concerns myself

and another person. You are here to farther the interests of two people, and those two people are Reginald Eversleigh and your humble servant."

"But the accident? Sir Oswald's danger—"

"I must beg you not to give yourself any further alarm on that subject. I regret very much that I have been obliged to inflict unnecessary pain upon a lady. The story of the accident is a little invention of my own. Sir Oswald is perfectly safe."

"Thank heaven!" cried Honoria, clasping her hands in the fervour of sudden gratitude; "thank heaven for that!"

Her face looked beautiful, as she lifted it towards the moonlit sky. Victor Carrington contemplated her with wonder.

"Can it be possible that she loves this man?" he thought. "Can it be that she has not been acting a part after all?"

Her first thought, on hearing that she had been deceived, was one of unmingled joy, of deep and heartfelt gratitude. Her second thought was of the shameful trick that had been played upon her; and she turned to Victor Carrington with passionate indignation.

"What is the meaning of this juggling, sir?" she cried; "and why have I been brought to this place?"

"It is a long story, Lady Eversleigh, and I would recommend you to calm yourself before you listen to it, if you have any wish to understand me clearly."

"I can stop to listen to no long stories, sir. Your trick is a shameful and unmanly one, whatever its motive. I beg that you will take me back to Raynham without a moment's delay; and I would advise you to comply with my request, unless you wish to draw upon yourself Sir Oswald's vengeance for the wrong you have done me. I am the last person in the world to involve my husband in a quarrel; but if you do not immediately take steps towards restoring me to my own home, I shall certainly let

him know how deeply I have been wronged and insulted."

"I am not afraid of your husband, my dear Lady Eversleigh," answered the surgeon, with cool insolence; "for I do not think Sir Oswald will care to take up the cudgels in your defence, after the events of to-night."

Honoria Eversleigh looked at the speaker with unutterable scorn, and then turned towards the doorway which communicated with the staircase.

"Since you refuse to assist in my return, I will go alone and unassisted," she said.

Victor raised his hand with a warning gesture.

"Do not attempt to descend that staircase, my dear Lady Eversleigh," he said. "In the first place, the steps are slippery, and the descent very dangerous; and, in the next, you would find yourself unable to go beyond the archway."

"What do you mean?"

"Oblige me by looking down through that breach in the battlements."

He had risen from his lounging position, and pointed downward as he spoke.

Involuntarily Honoria followed the indication of his hand.

A cry of horror broke from her lips as she looked below. The drawbridge no longer spanned the chasm. It had fallen, and hung over the edge of the abyss, suspended by massive chains. On all sides of the tower yawned a gulf of some fifteen feet wide.

At first Lady Eversleigh thought that this chasm might only be on one side of the ruin, but on rushing to the opposite battlements, and looking down, she saw that it was a moss-grown stone-moat, which completely encircled the stronghold.

"The warriors of old knew how to build their fortresses, and how to protect themselves from their foes," said Victor Carrington, as if in answer to his companion's despairing cry. "Those who built this edifice and dug that moat, little knew how useful their arrangements would be in these degenerate days. Do not pace to and fro with that distracted air, Lady Eversleigh. Believe me, you will do wisely

to take things quietly. You are doomed to remain here till daybreak. This ruin is in the care of a man who leaves it at a certain hour every evening. When he leaves, he drops the drawbridge—you must have heard him do it a little while ago—and no hand but his can raise the chains that support it; for he only knows the secret of their machinery. He has left the place for the night. He lives three miles and a half away, at a little village yonder, which looks only a black speck in the distance, and he will not return till some time after daybreak."

"And you would keep me a prisoner here—you would detain me in this miserable place, while my husband is, no doubt, expecting me at Raynham, perplexed and bewildered by my mysterious absence?"

"Yes, Lady Eversleigh, there will be wonder and perplexity enough on your account to-night at Raynham Castle."

There was a pause after this.

Honoria sank upon a block of fallen stone, bewildered, terror-stricken, for the moment powerless to express either her fears or her indignation, so strange, so completely inexplicable was the position in which she found herself.

"I am in the power of a maniac," she murmured; "no one but a maniac could be capable of this wild act. My life is in the power of a madman. I can but wait the issue. Let me be calm. Oh, merciful heaven, give me fortitude to face my danger quietly!"

The strength she prayed for seemed to come with the prayer.

The wild beating of her heart slackened a little. She swept the heavy masses of hair away from her forehead, and bound the fallen plaits in a knot at the back of her head. She did this almost as calmly as if she had been making her toilet in her dressing-room at Raynham. Victor Carrington watched her with surprise.

"She is a wonderful woman," he said to himself; "a noble creature. As powerful in mind as she is lovely in person. What a pity that I should make myself the enemy of

this woman for the sake of such a mean-spirited hound as Reginald Eversleigh! But my interests compel me to run counter to my inclination. It is a great pity. With this woman as my ally, I might have done greater things than I shall ever do by myself."

Victor Carrington mused thus while Honoria Eversleigh sat on the edge of the broken wall, at a few paces from him, looking calmly out at the purple sky.

She fully believed that she had fallen into the power of a maniac. What, except madness, could have prompted such conduct as that of Victor Carrington's?

She knew that there is no defence so powerful as an appearance of calmness; and it was with tranquillity she addressed her companion, after that interval of deliberation.

"Now, Mr. Carrington," she said, "since it seems I am your prisoner, perhaps you will be good enough to inform me why you have brought me to this place, and what injury I have ever done you that you should inflict so deep a wrong on me?"

"You have never injured me, Lady Eversleigh," replied Victor Carrington; "but you have injured one who is my friend, and whose interests are closely linked with mine."

"Who is that friend?"

"Reginald Eversleigh."

"Reginald Eversleigh!" repeated Honoria, with amazement. "In what manner have I injured Reginald Eversleigh? Is he not my husband's nephew, and am I not bound to feel interest in his welfare? How, then, can I have injured him?"

"You have done him the worst wrong that one individual can do another—you stand between him and fortune. Do you not know that, little more than a year ago, Reginald Eversleigh was the heir to Raynham and all its surroundings?"

"I know that; but he was disinherited before I crossed his uncle's pathway."

"True; but had you not crossed Sir Oswald's path, there is no doubt Reginald would

have been restored to favour. But you have woven your spells round his kinsman, and his only hope lies in your disgrace—"

"My disgrace!"

"Yes, Lady Eversleigh. Life is a battle, in which the weakest must be trodden down; you have triumphed hitherto, but the hour of your triumph is past. Yesterday you were queen of Raynham Castle; to-morrow no kitchen-wench within its walls will be so low as you."

"What do you mean?" asked Honoria, more and more mystified every moment by her companion's words.

For the first time, an awful fear took possession of her, and she began to perceive that she was the victim of a foul and villanous plot.

"What do you mean?" she repeated, in accents of alarm.

"I mean this, Lady Eversleigh—the world judges of people's actions by their outward seeming, not by their inward truth. Appearances have conspired to condemn you. Before to-morrow every creature in Raynham Castle will believe that you have fled from your home, and with me—"

"Fled from my home!"

"Yes; how else can your absence to-night—your sudden disappearance from the pic-nic—be construed?"

"If I live, I shall go back to the castle at daybreak to-morrow morning—go back to denounce your villany—to implore my husband's vengeance on your infamy!"

"And do you think any one will believe your denunciation? You will go back too late Lady Eversleigh."

"Oh, villain! villain!" murmured Honoria, in accents of mingled abhorrence and despair—abhorrence of her companion's infamy, despair inspired by the horror of her own position.

"You have played for a very high stake, Lady Eversleigh," said the surgeon; "and you must not wonder if you have found opponents ready to encounter your play with a still more desperate, and a still more dexterous game. When a nameless and obscure woman springs from poverty and obscurity to rank and riches, she must expect to find others ready to dispute the prize which she has won."

"And there can exist a wretch calling himself a man, and yet capable of such an act as this!" cried Honoria, looking upward to the calm and cloudless sky, as if she would have called heaven to witness the iniquity of her enemy. "Do not speak to me, sir," she added, turning to Victor Carrington, with unutterable scorn. "I believed a few minutes ago that you were a madman, and I thought myself the victim of a maniac's folly. I understand all now. You have plotted nobly for your friend's service; and he will, no doubt, reward you richly if you succeed. But you have not yet succeeded. Providence sometimes seems to favour the wicked. It his favoured you, so far; but the end has not come yet."

She turned from him and walked to the opposite side of the tower. Here she seated herself on the battlemented wall, as calm, in outward seeming, as if she had been in her own drawing-room. She took out a tiny jewelled watch; by that soft light she could perceive the figures on the dial.

It was a few minutes after one o'clock. It was not likely that the man who had charge of the ruins would come to the tower until seven or eight in the morning. For six or seven hours, therefore, Honoria Eversleigh was likely to be a prisoner—for six or seven hours she would have to endure the hateful presence of the man whose treachery had placed her in this hideous position.

Despair reigned in her heart, entire and overwhelming despair. When released from her prison, she might hurry back to the castle. But who would believe a story so wild, so improbable, as that which she would have to tell?

Would her husband believe her? Would he, who had to all appearance withdrawn his

love from her for no reason whatever—would he believe in her purity and truth, when circumstances conspired in damning evidence of her guilt? A sense of hopeless misery took possession of her heart; but no cry of anguish broke from her pale lips. She sat motionless as a statue, with her eyes fixed upon the eastern horizon, counting the moments as they passed with cruel slowness, watching with yearning gaze for the first glimmer of morning.

Victor Carrington contemplated that statuesque figure, that pale and tranquil face, with unalloyed admiration. Until to-night he had despised women as frail, helpless creatures, only made to be flattered by false words, and tyrannized over by stronger natures than their own. Among all the women with whom he had ever been associated, his mother was the only one in whose good sense he had believed, or for whose intellect he had felt the smallest respect. But now he beheld a woman of another stamp—a woman whose pride and fortitude were akin to the heroic.

"You endure the unpleasantness of your position nobly, Lady Eversleigh," he said; "and I can find no words to express my admiration of your conduct. It is very hard to find oneself the enemy of a lady, and, above all, of a lady whose beauty and whose intellect are alike calculated to inspire admiration. But in this world, Lady Eversleigh, there is only one rule—only one governing principle by which men regulate their lives—let them seek as they will to mask the truth with specious lies, which other men pretend to believe, but do not. That one rule, that one governing principle, is SELF-INTEREST. For the advancement of his own fortunes, the man who calls himself honest will trample on the dearest ties, will sacrifice the firmest friendships. The game which Reginald Eversleigh and I have played against you is a desperate one; but Sir Oswald rendered his nephew desperate when he reduced him, in one short hour, from wealth to poverty—when he robbed him of expectations that had been his from infancy. A desperate man will do desperate deeds; and it has been your fate, Lady Eversleigh, to cross the path of such a man."

He waited, with his eyes fixed on the face of Sir Oswald's wife. But during the whole of his speech she had never once looked at him. She had never withdrawn her eyes from the eastern horizon. Passionless contempt was expressed by that curving lip, that calm repose of eye and brow. It seemed as if this woman's disdain for the plotting villain into whose power she had fallen absorbed every other feeling.

Victor Carrington waited in vain for some reply from those scornful lips; but none came. He took out his cigar-case, lighted a cigar, and sat in a meditative attitude, smoking, and looking down moodily at the black chasm below the base of the tower. For the first time in his life this man, who was utterly without honour or principle—this man, who held self-interest as the one rule of conduct—this unscrupulous trickster and villain, felt the bitterness of a woman's scorn. He would have been unmoved by the loudest evidence of his victim's despair; but her silent contempt stung him to the quick. The hours dragged themselves out with a hideous slowness for the despairing creature who sat watching for the dawn; but at last that long night came to an end, the chill morning light glimmered faint and gray in the east. It was not the first time that Sir Oswald's wife had watched in anguish for the coming of that light. In that lonely tower, with her heart tortured by a sense of unutterable agony, there came back to her the memory of another vigil which she had kept more than two years before.

She heard the dull, plashing sound of a river, the shivering of rushes, then the noise of a struggle, oaths, a heavy crashing fall, a groan, and then no more!

Blessed with her husband's love, she had for a while closed her eyes upon that horrible picture of the past; but now, in the hour of despair, it came back to her, hideously distinct, awfully palpable.

"How could I hope for happiness?" she thought; "I, the daughter of an assassin! The sins of one generation are visited on another. A curse is upon me, and I can never hope for happiness."

The sun rose, and shone broad and full over the barren moorland; but it was several hours after sunrise before the man who took care of the ruins came to release the wretched prisoner.

He picked up a scanty living by showing the tower to visitors, and he knew that no visitors were likely to come before nine o'clock in the morning. It was nearly nine when Honoria saw him approaching in the distance.

It was after nine when he drew up the bridge, and came across it to the ruined fortress.

"You are free from this moment, Lady Eversleigh," said the surgeon, whose face looked horribly pale and worn in the broad sunlight. That night of watching had not been without its agony for him.

Honoria did not condescend to notice his words. She took up the plumed hat, which had been lying among the long grass at her feet. The delicate feathers were wet and spoiled by the night dew, and she took them from the fragile hat and flung them away. Her thin, white dress was heavy with the damp, and clung round her like a shroud. But she had not felt the chilling night winds.

Lady Eversleigh groped her way down the winding staircase, which was dark even in the daytime—except here and there, where a gap in the wall let in a patch of light upon the gloomy stones.

Under the archway she met the countryman, who uttered a cry on beholding the white, phantom-like figure.

"Oh, Loard!" he cried, when he had recovered from his terror; "I ask pardon, my lady, but danged if I didn't teak thee for a ghaist."

"You did not know, when you went away last night, that there was any one in the tower?"

"No, indeed, my lady. I'd been away for a few minutes look'n' arter a bit of peg I've

got in a shed down yander; and when I keame back to let down th' drawbridge, I didn't sing out to ax if there wur any one in th' old too-wer, for t'aint often as there be any one at that time of night."

"Tell me the way to the nearest village," cried Honoria. "I want to get some conveyance to take me to Raynham."

"Then you had better go to Edgington, ma'am. That's four miles from here—on t' Raynham ro-ad."

The man pointed out the way to the village of which he spoke; and Lady Eversleigh set forth across the wide expanse of moorland alone.

She had considerable difficulty in finding her way, for there were no landmarks on that broad stretch of level turf. She wandered out of the track more than once, and it was one o'clock before she reached the village of Edgington.

Here, after considerable delay, she procured a carriage to take her on to Raynham; but there was little chance that she could reach the castle until between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

CHAPTER X.

"HOW ART THOU LOST!—HOW ON A SUDDEN LOST!"

If Honoria Eversleigh had endured a night of anguish amid the wild desolation of Yarborough Tower, Sir Oswald had suffered an agony scarcely less terrible at Raynham. He had been summoned from the dinner-table in the marquee by one of his servants, who told him that a boy was waiting for him with a letter, which he would entrust to no one but Sir Oswald Eversleigh himself.

Mystified by the strange character of this message, Sir Oswald went immediately to see the boy who had brought it. He found a lad waiting for him under the trees near the marquee. The boy handed him a letter, which he opened and read immediately.

The contents of that letter were well calculated to agitate and disturb him.

The letter was anonymous. It consisted of the following words:—

"If Sir Oswald Eversleigh wishes to be convinced of his wife's truth or falsehood, let him ride back to Raynham without a moment's delay. There he will receive ample evidence of her real character. He may have to wait; but the friend who writes this advises him to wait patiently. He will not wait in vain.

"A NAMELESS COUNSELLOR."

A fortnight before, Sir Oswald would have flung such a letter as this away from him with indignant scorn; but the poison of suspicion had done its corroding work.

For a little time Sir Oswald hesitated, half-inclined to despise the mysterious warning. All his better feelings prompted him to disregard this nameless correspondent—all his noblest impulses urged him to confide blindly and unquestioningly in the truth of the wife he loved; but jealousy—that dark and fatal passion—triumphed over every generous feeling, and he yielded to the influence of his hidden counsellor.

"No harm can arise from my return to Raynham," he thought. "My friends yonder are enjoying themselves too much to trouble themselves about my absence. If this anonymous correspondent is fooling me, I shall soon discover my mistake."

Having once arrived at this determination, Sir Oswald lost no time in putting it into execution. He ordered his horse, Orestes, and rode away as fast as the animal would carry him.

Arrived at Raynham, he inquired if any one had asked for him, but was told there had not been any visitors at the castle throughout the day.

Again and again Sir Oswald consulted the anonymous letter. It told him to wait, but for what was he to wait? Half ashamed of himself for having yielded to the tempter, restless and uneasy in spirit, he wandered from room to room in the twilight, abandoned to gloomy and miserable thoughts.

The servants lighted the lamps in the many chambers of Raynham, while Sir Oswald paced to and fro—now in the long drawing-room; now in the library; now on the terrace, where the September moon shone broad and full. It was eleven o'clock when the sound of approaching wheels proclaimed the return of the picnic party; and until that hour the baronet had watched and waited without having been rewarded by the smallest discovery of any kind whatever. He felt bitterly ashamed of himself for having been duped by so shallow a trick.

"It is the handiwork of some kind friend; the practical joke of some flippant youngster, who thinks it a delightful piece of humour to play upon the jealousy of a husband of fifty," mused the baronet, as he brooded over his folly. "I wish to heaven I could discover the writer of the epistle. He should find that it is rather a dangerous thing to trifle with a man's feelings."

Sir Oswald went himself to assist at the reception of his guests. He expected to see his wife arrive with the rest. For the moment, he forgot all about his suspicions of the last fortnight. He thought only of the anonymous letter, and the wrong which he had done Honoria in being influenced by its dark hints.

If he could have met his wife at that moment, when every impulse of his heart drew him towards her, all sense of estrangement would have melted away; all his doubts would have vanished before a smile from her. But though Sir Oswald found his wife's barouche the first of the carriages, she was not in it. Lydia Graham told him how "dear Lady Eversleigh" had caused all the party such terrible alarm.

"I suppose she reached home two hours ago," added the young lady. "She had more than an hour's start of us; and with that light vehicle and spirited horse she and Mr. Carrington must have come so rapidly."

"My wife and Mr. Carrington! What do you mean, Miss Graham?"

Lydia explained, and Reginald Eversleigh confirmed her statement. Lady Eversleigh had left the Wizard's Cave more than an hour before the rest of the party,

accompanied by Mr. Carrington.

No words can describe the consternation of Sir Oswald. He did his best to conceal his alarm; but the livid hue of his face, the ashen pallor of his lips, betrayed the intensity of his emotion. He sent out mounted grooms to search the different roads between the castle and the scene of the pic-nic; and then he left his guests without a word, and shut himself in his own apartments, to await the issue of the search.

Had any fatal accident happened to her and her companion?—or were Honoria Eversleigh and Victor Carrington two guilty creatures, who had abandoned themselves to the folly and madness of a wicked attachment, and had fled together, reckless alike of reputation and fortune?

He tried to believe that this latter chance was beyond the region of possibility; but horrible suspicions racked his brain as he paced to and fro, waiting for the issue of the search that was being made.

Better that he should be told that his wife had been found lying dead upon the hard, cruel road, than that he should hear that she had left him for another; a false and degraded creature!

"Why did she trust herself to the companionship of this man?" he asked himself. "Why did she disgrace herself by leaving her guests in the company of a young man who ought to be little more than a stranger to her? She is no ignorant or foolish girl; she has shown herself able to hold her own in the most trying positions. What madness could have possessed her, that she should bring disgrace upon herself and me by such conduct as this?"

The grooms came back after a search that had been utterly in vain. No trace of the missing lady had been discovered. Inquiries had been made everywhere along the road, but without result. No gig had been seen to pass between the neighbourhood of the Wizard's Cave and Raynham Castle.

Sir Oswald abandoned himself to despair.

There was no longer any hope: his wife had fled from him. Bitter, indeed, was the penalty which he was called upon to pay for his romantic marriage—his blind confidence in the woman who had fascinated and bewitched him. He bowed his head beneath the blow, and alone, hidden from the cruel gaze of the world, he resigned himself to his misery.

All that night he sat alone, his head buried in his clasped hands, stunned and bewildered by his agony.

His valet, Joseph Millard, knocked at the door at the usual hour, anxious to assist at his master's toilet; but the door was securely locked, and Sir Oswald told his servant that he needed no help. He spoke in a firm voice; for he knew that the valet's ear would be keen to mark any evidence of his misery. When the man was gone, he rose up for the first time, and looked across the sunlit woods.

A groan of agony burst from his lips as he gazed upon that beautiful landscape.

He had brought his young wife to be mistress of this splendid domain. He had shown her that fair scene; and had told her that she was to be queen over all those proud possessions until the day of her death. No hand was ever to rob her of them. They were the free gift of his boundless love! to be shared only by her children, should heaven bless her and her husband with inheritors for this ancient estate. He had never been weary of testifying his devotion, his passionate love; and yet, before she had been his wife three months, she left him for another.

While he stood before the open window, with these bitter thoughts in his mind, he heard the sound of wheels in the corridor without. The wheels belonged to an invalid chair, used by Captain Copplestone when the gout held him prisoner, a self-propelling chair, in which the captain could make his way where he pleased.

The captain knocked at his old comrade's door.

"Let me in, Oswald" he said; "I want to see you immediately."

"Not this morning, my dear Copplestone; I can't see any one this morning,"

answered the baronet.

"You can see me, Oswald. I must and will see you, and I shall stop here till you let me in."

A loud knock at the door with a heavy-headed cane accompanied the close of his speech.

Sir Oswald opened the door, and admitted the captain, who pushed his chair dexterously through the doorway.

"Well," said this eccentric visitor, when Sir Oswald had shut the door, "so you've not been to bed all night?"

"How do you know that?"

"By your looks, for one thing: and by the appearance of your bed, which I can see through the open door yonder, for another. Pretty goings on, these!"

"A heavy sorrow has fallen upon me, Copplestone."

"Your wife has run away—that's what you mean, I suppose?"

"What!" cried Sir Oswald. "It is all known, then?"

"What is all known?"

"That my wife has left me."

"Well, my dear Oswald, there is a rumour of that kind afloat, and I have come here in consequence of that rumour. But I don't believe there's a word of truth in it."

The baronet turned from his friend with a bitter smile of derision.

"I may strive to hoodwink the world, Copplestone," he said, "but I have no wish to deceive you. My wife has left me—there is no doubt of it."

"I don't believe it," cried the captain. "No, Oswald Eversleigh, I don't believe it. You know what I am. I'm not quite like the Miller of Dee, for I do care for somebody; and that somebody is my oldest friend. When I first heard of your marriage, I told

you that you were a fool. That was plain-spoken enough, if you like. When I saw your wife, I told you that had changed my mind, and that I thought your folly an excusable one. If ever I saw purity and truth in a woman's face, I saw them in the face of Lady Eversleigh; and I will stake my life that she is as true as steel."

Sir Oswald clasped his friend's hand, too deeply moved for words. There was unspeakable consolation in such friendship as this. For the first tame since midnight a ray of hope dawned upon him. He had always trusted in his old comrade's judgment. Might he not trust in him still?

When Captain Copplestone left him, he went to his dressing-room, and made even a more than usually careful toilet, and went to face "the world."

In the great dining-room he found all his guests assembled, and he took his seat amongst them calmly, though the sight of Honoria's empty place cut him to the heart.

Never, perhaps, was a more miserable meal eaten than that breakfast. There were long intervals of silence; and what little conversation there was appeared forced and artificial.

Perhaps the most self-possessed person—the calmest to all appearance, of the whole party—was Sir Oswald Eversleigh, so heroic an effort had he made over himself, in order to face the world proudly. He had a few words to say to every one; and was particularly courteous to the guests near him. He opened his letters with an unshaking hand. But he abstained from all allusion to his wife, or the events of the previous evening.

He had finished breakfast, and was leaving the room, when his nephew approached him—

"Can I speak to you for a few moments alone?" asked Reginald.

"Certainly. I am going to the library to write my letters. You can go with me, if you like."

They went together to the library. As Sir Oswald closed the door, and turned to face his nephew, he perceived that Reginald was deadly pale.

"What is amiss?" he asked.

"You ask me that, my dear uncle, at a time when you ought to know that my sympathy for your sorrow—"

"Reserve your sympathy until it is needed," answered the baronet, abruptly. "I dare say you mean well, my dear Reginald; but there are some subjects which I will suffer no man to approach."

"I beg your pardon, sir. Then, in that case, I can tell you nothing. I fancied that it was my duty to bring you any information that reached me; but I defer to you entirely. The subject is a most unhappy one, and I am glad to be spared the pain involved in speaking of it."

"What do you mean?" said the baronet. "If you have anything to tell me—anything that can throw light upon the mystery of my wife's flight—speak out, and speak quickly. I am almost mad, Reginald. Forgive me, if I spoke harshly just now. You are my nephew, and the mask I wear before the world may be dropped in your presence."

"I know nothing personally of Lady Eversleigh's disappearance," said Reginald; "but I have good reason to believe that Miss Graham could tell you much, if she chose to speak out. She has hinted at being in the secret, and I think it only right you should question her."

"I will question her," answered sir Oswald, starting to his feet. "Send her to me, Reginald."

Mr. Eversleigh left his uncle, and Miss Graham very speedily appeared—looking the very image of unconscious innocence—and quite unable to imagine what "dear Sir Oswald" could want with her.

The baronet came to the point very quickly, and before Lydia had time for consideration, she had been made to give a full account of the scene which she had witnessed on the previous evening between Victor Carrington and Honoria.

Of course, Miss Graham told Sir Oswald that she had witnessed this strange scene in the most accidental manner. She had happened to be in a walk that commanded a view of the fir-grove.

"And you saw my wife agitated, clinging to that man?"

"Lady Eversleigh was terribly agitated."

"And then you saw her take her place in the gig, of her own free will?"

"I did, Sir Oswald."

"Oh, what infamy!" murmured the baronet; "what hideous infamy!"

It was to himself that he spoke rather than to Miss Graham. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, and it seemed as if he were scarcely aware of the young lady's presence.

Lydia was almost terrified by that blank, awful look. She waited for a few moments, and then, finding that Sir Oswald questioned her no further, she crept quietly from the room, glad to escape from the sorrow-stricken husband. Malicious though she was, she believed that this time she had spoken the truth.

"He has reason to repent his romantic choice," she thought as she left the library. "Perhaps now he will think that he might have done better by choosing a wife from his own set."

The day wore on; Sir Oswald remained alone in the library, seated before a table, with his arms folded, his gaze fixed on empty space—a picture of despair.

The clock had struck many times; the hot afternoon sun blazed full upon the broad Tudor windows, when the door was opened gently, and some one came into the room. Sir Oswald looked up angrily, thinking it was one of the servants who had intruded on him.

It was his wife who stood before him, dressed in the white robes she had worn at the picnic; but wan and haggard, white as the dress she wore.

"Oswald," she cried, with outstretched hands, and the look of one who did not doubt she would be welcome.

The baronet sprang to his feet, and looked at that pale face with a gaze of unspeakable indignation.

"And you dare to come back?" he exclaimed. "False-hearted adventuress—actress—hypocrite—you dare to come to me with that lying smile upon your face—after your infamy of last night!"

"I am neither adventuress, nor hypocrite, Oswald. Oh, where have your love and confidence vanished that you can condemn me unheard? I have done no wrong—not by so much as one thought that is not full of love for you! I am the helpless victim of the vilest plot that was ever concocted for the destruction of a woman's happiness."

A mocking laugh burst from the lips of Sir Oswald.

"Oh," he cried, "so that is your story. You are the victim of a plot, are you? You were carried away by ruffians, I suppose? You did not go willingly with your paramour? Woman, you stand convicted of your treachery by the fullest evidence. You were seen to leave the Wizard's Cave! You were seen clinging to Victor Carrington—were seen to go with him, willingly. And then you come and tell me you are the victim of a plot! Oh, Lady Eversleigh, this is too poor a story. I should have given you credit for greater powers of invention."

"If I am guilty, why am I here?" asked Honoria.

"Shall I tell you why you are here?" cried Sir Oswald, passionately, "Look yonder, madam! look at those wide woodlands, the deer-park, the lakes and gardens; this is only one side of Raynham Castle. It was for those you returned, Lady Eversleigh, for the love of those—and those alone. Influenced by a mad and wicked passion, you fled with your lover last night; but no sooner did you remember the wealth you

had lost, the position you had sacrificed, than you repented your folly. You determined to come back. Your doting husband would doubtless open his arms to receive you. A few imploring words, a tear or so, and the poor, weak dupe would be melted. This is how you argued; but you were wrong. I have been foolish. I have abandoned myself to the dream of a dotard; but the dream is past. The awakening has been rude, but it has been efficacious. I shall never dream again."

"Oswald, will you not listen to my story?"

"No, madam, I will not give you the opportunity of making me a second time your dupe. Go—go back to your lover, Victor Carrington. Your repentance comes too late. The Raynham heritage will never be yours. Go back to your lover; or, if he will not receive you, go back to the gutter from which I took you."

"Oswald!"

The cry of reproach went like a dagger to the heart of the baronet. But he steeled himself against those imploring tones. He believed that he had been wronged—that this woman was as false as she was beautiful.

"Oswald," cried Honoria, "you must and shall hear my story. I demand a hearing as a right—a right which you could not withhold from the vilest criminal, and which you shall not withhold from me, your lawfully wedded and faithful wife. You may disbelieve my story, if you please—heaven knows it seems wild and improbable!—but you shall hear it. Yes, Oswald, you shall!"

She stood before him, drawn to her fullest height, confronting him proudly. If this was guilt, it was, indeed, shameless guilt. Unhappily, the baronet believed in the evidence of Lydia Graham, rather than in the witness of his wife's truth. Why should Lydia have deceived him? he asked himself. What possible motive could she have for seeking to blight his wife's fair name?

Honoria told her story from first to last; she told the history of her night of anguish. She spoke with her eyes fixed on her husband's face, in which she could read the

indications of his every feeling. As her story drew to a close, her own countenance grew rigid with despair, for she saw that her words had made no impression on the obdurate heart to which she appealed.

"I do not ask you if you believe me," she said, when her story was finished. "I can see that you do not. All is over between us, Sir Oswald," she added, in a tone of intense sadness—"all is over. You are right in what you said just now, cruel though your words were. You did take me from the gutter; you accepted me in ignorance of my past history; you gave your love and your name to a friendless, nameless creature; and now that circumstances conspire to condemn me, can I wonder if you, too, condemn—if you refuse to believe my declaration of my innocence? I do not wonder. I am only grieved that it should be so. I should have been so proud of your love if it could have survived this fiery ordeal—so proud! But let that pass. I would not remain an hour beneath this roof on sufferance. I am quite ready to go from this house to-day, at an hour's warning, never to re-enter it. Raynham Castle is no more to me than that desolate tower in which I spent last night—without your love. I will leave you without one word of reproach, and you shall never hear my name, or see my face again."

She moved towards the door as she spoke. There was a quiet earnestness in her manner which might have gone far to convince Oswald Eversleigh of her truth; but his mind was too deeply imbued with a belief in her falsehood. This dignified calm, this subdued resignation, seemed to him only the consummate art of a finished actress.

"She is steeped in falsehood to the very lips," he thought. "Doubtless, the little she told me of the history of her childhood was as false as all the rest. Heaven only knows what shameful secrets may have been hidden in her past life!"

She had crossed the threshold of the door, when some sudden impulse moved him to follow her.

"Do not leave Raynham till you have heard further from me, Lady Eversleigh," he said. "It will be my task to make all arrangements for your future life."

His wife did not answer him. She walked towards the hall, her head bent, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"She will not leave the castle until she is obliged to do so," thought Sir Oswald, as he returned to the library. "Oh, what a tissue of falsehood she tried to palm upon me! And she would have blackened my nephew's name, in order to screen her own guilt!"

He rang a bell, and told the servant who answered it to fetch Mr. Eversleigh. His nephew appeared five minutes afterwards, still very pale and anxious-looking.

"I have sent for you, Reginald," said the baronet, "because I have a duty to perform—a very painful duty—but one which I do not care to delay. It is now nearly a year and a half since I made a will which disinherited you. I had good reason for that step, as you know; but I have heard no further talk of your vices or your follies; and, so far as I can judge, you have undergone a reformation. It is not for me, therefore, to hold sternly to a determination which I had made in a moment of extreme anger: and I should perhaps have restored you to your old position ere this, had not a new interest absorbed my heart and mind. I have had cruel reason to repent my folly. I might feel resentment against you, on account of your friend's infamy, but I am not weak enough for that. Victor Carrington and I have a terrible account to settle, and it shall be settled to the uttermost. I need hardly tell you that, if you hold any further communication with him, you will for ever forfeit my friendship."

"My dear sir, you surely cannot suppose—"

"Do not interrupt me. I wish to say what I have to say, and to have done with this subject for ever. You know I have already told you the contents of the will which I made after my marriage. That will left the bulk of my fortune to my wife. That will must now be destroyed; and in the document which I shall substitute for it, your

name will occupy its old place. Heaven grant that I do wisely, Reginald, and that you will prove yourself worthy of my confidence."

"My dear uncle, your goodness overpowers me. I cannot find words to express my gratitude."

"No thanks, Reginald. Remember that the change which restores you to your old position is brought about by my misery. Say no more. Better that an Eversleigh should be master of Raynham when I am dead and gone. And now leave me."

The young man retired. His face betrayed conflicting emotions. Lost to all sense of honour though he was, the iniquity of the scheme by which he had succeeded weighed horribly upon his mind, and he was seized with a wild fear of the man through whose agency it had been brought about.

* * * * *

CHAPTER XI.

"THE WILL! THE TESTAMENT!"

The brief pang of fear and remorse passed quickly away, and Reginald went out upon the terrace to look upon those woods which were once more his promised heritage; on which he could gaze, as of old, with the proud sense of possession. While looking over that fair domain, he forgot the hateful means by which he had re-established himself as the heir of Raynham. He forgot Victor Carrington—everything except his own good fortune. His heart throbbed with a sense of triumph.

He left the terrace, crossed the Italian garden, and made his way to the light iron gate which opened upon the park. Leaning wearily upon this gate, he saw an old man in the costume of a pedlar. A broad, slouched hat almost concealed his face, and a long iron-grey beard drooped upon his chest. His garments were dusty, as if with many a

weary mile's wandering on the parched high-roads, and he carried a large pack of goods upon his back.

The park was open to the public; and this man had, no doubt, come to the garden-gate in the hope of finding some servant who would be beguiled into letting him carry his wares to the castle, for the inspection of Sir Oswald's numerous household.

"Stand aside, my good fellow, and let me pass," said Reginald, as he approached the little gate.

The man did not stir. His arms were folded on the topmost bar of the gate, and he did not alter his attitude.

"Let me be the first to congratulate the heir of Raynham on his renewed hopes," he said, quietly.

"Carrington!" cried Reginald; and then, after a pause, he asked, "What, in heaven's name, is the meaning of this masquerade?"

The surgeon removed his broad-brimmed hat, and wiped his forehead with a hand that looked brown, wizen, and wrinkled as the hand of an old man. Nothing could have been more perfect than his disguise.

The accustomed pallor of his face was changed to the brown and sunburnt hue produced by constant exposure to all kinds of weather. A network of wrinkles surrounded the brilliant black eyes, which now shone under shaggy eyebrows of iron-grey.

"I should never have recognized you," said Reginald, staring for some moments at his friend's face, completely lost in surprise.

"Very likely not," answered the surgeon, coolly; "I don't want people to recognize me. A disguise that can by any possibility be penetrated is the most fatal mistake. I can disguise my voice as well as my face, as you will, perhaps, hear by and by.

When talking to a friend there is no occasion to take so much trouble."

"But why have you assumed this disguise?"

"Because I want to be on the spot; and you may imagine that, after having eloped with the lady of the house, I could not very safely show myself here in my own proper person."

"What need had you to return? Your scheme is accomplished, is it not?"

"Well, not quite."

"Is there anything more to be done?"

"Yes, there is something more."

"What is the nature of that something?" asked Reginald.

"Leave that to me," answered the surgeon; "and now you had better pass on, young heir of Raynham, and leave the poor old pedlar to smoke his pipe, and to watch for some passing maid-servant who will admit him to the castle."

Reginald lingered, fascinated in some manner by the presence of his friend and counsellor. He wanted to penetrate the mystery hidden in the breast of his ally.

"How did you know that your scheme had succeeded?" he asked, presently.

"I read my success in your face as you came towards this gate just now. It was the face of an acknowledged heir; and now, perhaps, you will be good enough to tell me your news."

Reginald related all that had happened; the use he had made of Lydia Graham's malice; the interview with his uncle after Lady Eversleigh's return.

"Good!" exclaimed Victor; "good from first to last! Did ever any scheme work so smoothly? That was a stroke of genius of yours, Reginald, the use you made of Miss Graham's evidence. And so she was watching us, was she? Charming creature! how little she knows to what an extent we are indebted to her. Well, Reginald, I congratulate you. It is a grand thing to be the acknowledged heir of such an estate as

this."

He glanced across the broad gardens, blazing with rich masses of vivid colour, produced by the artistic arrangement of the flower-beds. He looked up to the long range of windows, the terrace, the massive towers, the grand old archway, and then he looked back at his friend, with a sinister light in his glittering black eyes.

"There is only one drawback," he said.

"And that is—"

"That you may have to wait a very long time for your inheritance. Let me see; your uncle is fifty years of age, I think?"

"Yes; he is about fifty." "And he has an iron constitution. He has led a temperate, hardy life. Such a man is as likely to live to be eighty as I am to see my fortieth birthday. And that would give you thirty years' waiting: a long delay—a terrible trial of patience."

"Why do you say these things?" cried Reginald, impatiently. "Do you want to make me miserable in the hour of our triumph? Do you mean that we have burdened our souls with all this crime and falsehood for nothing? You are mad, Victor!"

"No; I am only in a speculative mood. Thirty years!—thirty years would be a long time to wait."

"Who says that I shall have to wait thirty years? My uncle may die long before that time."

"Ah! to be sure! your uncle may die—suddenly, perhaps—very soon, it may be. The shock of his wife's falsehood may kill him—after he has made a new will in your favour!"

The two men stood face to face, looking at each other.

"What do you mean?" Reginald asked; "and why do you look at me like that?"

"I am only thinking what a lucky fellow you would be if this grief that has fallen

upon your uncle were to be fatal to his life."

"Don't talk like that, Carrington. I won't think of such a thing. I am had enough, I know; but not quite so bad as to wish my uncle dead."

"You would be sorry if he were dead, I suppose? Sorry—with this domain your own! with all power and pleasure that wealth can purchase for a man! You would be sorry, would you? You wish well to the kind kinsman to whom you have been such a devoted nephew! You would prefer to wait thirty years for your heritage—if you should live so long!"

"Victor Carrington," cried Reginald, passionately, "you are the fiend himself, in disguise! Let me pass. I will not stop to listen to your hateful words."

"Wait to hear one question, at any rate. Why do you suppose I made you sign that promissory note at a twelvemonth's date?"

"I don't know; but you must know, as well as I do, that the note will be waste-paper so long as my uncle lives."

"I do know that, my dear Reginald; but I got you to date the document as you did, because I have a kind of presentiment that before that date you will be master of Raynham!"

"You mean that my uncle will die within the year?"

"I am subject to presentiments of that kind. I do not think Sir Oswald will see the end of the year!"

"Carrington!" exclaimed Reginald. "Your schemes are hateful. I will have no further dealings with you."

"Indeed! Then am I to go to Sir Oswald, and tell him the story of last night? Am I to tell him that his wife is innocent?"

"No, no; tell him nothing. Let things stand as they are. The promise of the estate is mine. I have suffered too much from the loss of my position, and I cannot forego my

new hopes. But let there be no more guilt—no more plotting. We have succeeded. Let us wait patiently for the end."

"Yes," answered the surgeon, coolly, "we will wait for the end; and if the end should come sooner than our most sanguine hopes have led us to expect, we will not quarrel with the handiwork of fate. Now leave me. I see a petticoat yonder amongst the trees. It belongs to some housemaid from the castle, I dare say; and I must see if my eloquence as a wandering merchant cannot win me admission within the walls which I dare not approach as Victor Carrington."

Reginald opened the gate with his pass-key, and allowed the surgeon to go through into the gardens.

* * * * *

It was dusk when Sir Oswald left the library. He had sent a message to the chief of his guests, excusing himself from attending the dinner-table, on the ground of ill-health. When he knew that all his visitors would be assembled in the dining-room, he left the library, for the first time since he had entered it after breakfast.

He had brooded long and gloomily over his misery, and had come to a determination as to the line of conduct which he should pursue towards his wife. He went now to Lady Eversleigh's apartments, in order to inform her of his decision; but, to his surprise, he found the rooms empty. His wife's maid was sitting at needlework by one of the windows of the dressing-room.

"Where is your mistress?" asked Sir Oswald.

"She has gone out, sir. She has left the castle for some little time, I think, sir; for she put on the plainest of her travelling dresses, and she took a small travelling-bag with her. There is a note, sir, on the mantel-piece in the next room. Shall I fetch it?"

"No; I will get it myself. At what time did Lady Eversleigh leave the castle?"

"About two hours ago, sir."

"Two hours! In time for the afternoon coach to York," thought Sir Oswald. "Go and inquire if your mistress really left the castle at that time," he said to the maid.

He went into the boudoir, and took the letter from the mantel-piece. He crushed it into his breast-pocket with the seal unbroken—

"Time enough to discover what new falsehood she has tried to palm upon me," he thought.

He looked round the empty room—which she was never more to occupy. Her books, her music, were scattered on every side. The sound of her rich voice seemed still to vibrate through the room. And she was gone—for ever! Well, she was a base and guilty creature, and it was better so—infinitely better that her polluting presence should no longer dishonour those ancient chambers, within which generations of proud and pure women had lived and died. But to see the rooms empty, and to know that she was gone, gave him nevertheless a pang.

"What will become of her?" thought Sir Oswald. "She will return to her lover, of course, and he will console her for the sacrifice she has made by her mad folly. Let her prize him while he still lives to console her; for she may not have him long. Why do I think of her?—why do I trouble myself about her? I have my affairs to arrange—a new will to make—before I think of vengeance. And those matters once settled, vengeance shall be my only thought. I have done for ever with love!"

Sir Oswald returned to the library. A lamp burned on the table at which he was accustomed to write. It was a shaded reading-lamp, which made a wide circle of vivid light around the spot where it stood, but left the rest of the room in shadow.

The night was oppressively hot—an August rather than a September night; and, before beginning his work, Sir Oswald flung open one of the broad windows leading out upon the terrace. Then he unlocked a carved oak bureau, and took out a packet of papers. He seated himself at the table, and began to examine these papers.

Among them was the will which he had executed since his marriage. He read this, and then laid it aside. As he did so, a figure approached the wide-open window; an eager face, illuminated by glittering eyes, peered into the room. It was the face of Victor Carrington, hidden beneath the disguise of assumed age, and completely metamorphosed by the dark skin and grizzled beard. Had Sir Oswald looked up and seen that face, he would not have recognized its owner.

After laying aside the document he had read, Sir Oswald began to write. He wrote slowly, meditating upon every word; and after having written for about half an hour, he rose and left the room. The surgeon had never stirred from his post by the window; and as Sir Oswald closed the door behind him, he crept stealthily into the apartment, and to the table where the papers lay. His footstep, light always, made no sound upon the thick velvet pile. He glanced at the contents of the paper, on which the ink was still wet. It was a will, leaving the bulk of Sir Oswald's fortune to his nephew, Reginald, unconditionally. Victor Carrington did not linger a moment longer than was necessary to convince him of this fact. He hurried back to his post by the window: nor was he an instant too soon. The door opened before he had fairly stepped from the apartment.

Sir Oswald re-entered, followed by two men. One was the butler, the other was the valet, Joseph Millard. The will was executed in the presence of these men, who affixed their signatures to it as witnesses.

"I have no wish to keep the nature of this will a secret from my household," said Sir Oswald. "It restores my nephew, Mr. Reginald Eversleigh, to his position as heir to this estate. You will henceforth respect him as my successor."

The two men bowed and retired. Sir Oswald walked towards the window: and Victor Carrington drew back into the shadow cast by a massive abutment of stone-work.

It was not very easy for a man to conceal himself on the terrace in that broad moonlight.

Voices sounded presently, near one of the windows; and a group of ladies and gentlemen emerged from the drawing-room.

"It is the hottest night we have had this summer," said one of them. "The house is really oppressive."

Miss Graham had enchanted her viscount once more, and she and that gentleman walked side by side on the terrace.

"They will discover me if they come this way," muttered Victor, as he shrank back into the shadow. "I have seen all that I want to see for the present, and had better make my escape while I am safe."

He stole quietly along by the front of the castle, lurking always in the shadow of the masonry, and descended the terrace steps. From thence he went to the court-yard, on which the servants' hall opened; and in a few minutes he was comfortably seated in that apartment, listening to the gossip of the servants, who could only speak upon the one subject of Lady Eversleigh's elopement.

* * * * *

The baronet sat with the newly-made will before him, gazing at the open leaves with fixed and dreamy eyes.

Now that the document was signed, a feeling of doubt had taken possession of him. He remembered how deliberately he had pondered over the step before he had disinherited his nephew; and now that work, which had cost him so much pain and thought, had been undone on the impulse of a moment.

"Have I done right, I wonder?" he asked himself.

The papers which had been tied in the packet containing the old will had been scattered on the table when the baronet unfastened the band that secured them. He took one of these documents up in sheer absence of mind, and opened it.

It was the letter written by the wretched girl who drowned herself in the Seine—the

letter of Reginald Eversleigh's victim—the very letter on the evidence of which Sir Oswald had decided that his nephew was no fitting heir to a great fortune.

The baronet's brow contracted as he read.

"And it is to the man who could abandon a wretched woman to despair and death, that I am about to leave wealth and power," he exclaimed. "No; the decision which I arrived at in Arlington Street was a just and wise decision. I have been mad to-day—maddened by anger and despair; but it is not too late to repent my folly. The seducer of Mary Goodwin shall never be the master of Raynham Castle."

Sir Oswald folded the sheet of foolscap on which the will was written, and held it over the flame of the lamp. He carried it over to the fire-place, and threw it blazing on the empty hearth. He watched it thoughtfully until the greater part of the paper was consumed by the flame, and then went back to his seat.

"My nephews, Lionel and Douglas Dale, shall divide the estate between them," he thought. "I will send for my solicitor to-morrow, and make a new will."

* * * * *

Victor Carrington sat in the servants' hall at Raynham until past eleven o'clock. He had made himself quite at home with the domestics in his assumed character. The women were delighted with the showy goods which he carried in his pack, and which he sold them at prices far below those of the best bargains they had ever made before.

At a few minutes after eleven he rose to bid them good night.

"I suppose I shall find the gates open?" he said.

"Yes; the gates of the court-yard are never locked till half-past eleven," answered a sturdy old coachman.

The pedlar took his leave; but he did not go out by the court-yard. He went straight to the terrace, along which he crept with stealthy footsteps. Many lights twinkled in

the upper windows of the terrace front, for at this hour the greater number of Sir Oswald's guests had retired to their rooms.

The broad window of the library was still open; but a curtain had been drawn before it, on one side of which there remained a crevice. Through this crevice Victor Carrington could watch the interior of the chamber with very little risk of being discovered.

The baronet was still sitting by the writing-table, with the light of the library-lamp shining full upon him. An open letter was in his hand. It was the letter his wife had left for him. It was not like the letter of a guilty woman. It was quiet, subdued; full of sadness and resignation, rather than of passionate despair.

"I know now that I ought never to have married you, Oswald," wrote Lady Eversleigh. "The sacrifice which you made for my sake was too great a one. No happiness could well come of such an unequal bargain. You gave me everything, and I could give you so little. The cloud upon my past life was black and impenetrable. You took me nameless, friendless, unknown; and I can scarcely wonder if, at the first breath of suspicion, your faith wavered and your love failed. Farewell, dearest and best of men! You never can know how truly I have loved you; how I have reverenced your noble nature. In all that has come to pass between us since the first hour of our miserable estrangement, nothing has grieved me so deeply as to see your generous soul overclouded by suspicions and doubts, as unworthy of you as they are needless and unfounded. Farewell! I go back to the obscurity from whence you took me. You need not fear for my future. The musical education which I owe to your generous help will enable me to live; and I have no wish to live otherwise than humbly. May heaven bless you!"

HONORIA.

This was all. There were no complaints, no entreaties. The letter seemed instinct with the dignity of truth.

"And she has gone forth alone, unprotected. She has gone back to her lonely and desolate life," thought the baronet, inclined, for a moment at least, to believe in his wife's words.

But in the next instant he remembered the evidence of Lydia Graham—the wild and improbable story by which Honoria had tried to account for her absence.

"No no," he exclaimed; "it is all treachery from first to last. She is hiding herself somewhere near at hand, no doubt to wait the result of this artful letter. And when she finds that her artifices are thrown away—when she discovers that my heart has been changed to adamant by her infamy—she will go back to her lover, if he still lives to shelter her."

A hundred conflicting ideas confused Sir Oswald's brain. But one thought was paramount—and that was the thought of revenge. He resolved to send for his lawyer early the next morning, to make a new will in favour of his sister's two sons, and then to start in search of the man who had robbed him of his wife's affection. Reginald would, of course, be able to assist him in finding Victor Carrington.

While Sir Oswald mused thus, the man of whom he was thinking watched him through the narrow space between the curtains.

"Shall it be to-night?" thought Carrington. "It cannot be too soon. He might change his mind about his will at any moment; and if it should happen to-night, people will say the shock of his wife's flight has killed him."

Sir Oswald's folded arms rested on the table; his head sank forward on his arms. The passionate emotions of the day, the previous night of agony, had at last exhausted him. He fell into a doze—a feverish, troubled sleep. Carrington watched him for upwards of a quarter of an hour as he slept thus.

"I think he is safe now—and I may venture," murmured Victor, at the end of that time.

He crept softly into the room, making a wide circle, and keeping himself completely

in the shadow, till he was behind the sleeping baronet. Then he came towards the lamp-lit table.

Amongst the scattered letters and papers, there stood a claret jug, a large carafe of water, and an empty glass. Victor drew close to the table, and listened for some moments to the breathing of the sleeper. Then he took a small bottle from his pocket, and dropped a few globules of some colourless liquid into the empty glass. Having done this, he withdrew from the apartment as silently as he had entered it. Twelve o'clock struck as he was leaving the terrace.

"So," he muttered, "it is little more than three-quarters of an hour since I left the servants' hall. It would not be difficult to prove an alibi, with the help of a blundering village innkeeper."

He did not attempt to leave the castle by the court-yard, which he knew would be locked by this time. He had made himself acquainted with all the ins and outs of the place, and had possessed himself of a key belonging to one of the garden gates. Through this gate he passed out into the park, climbed a low fence, and made his way into Raynham village, where the landlord of the "Hen and Chickens" was just closing his doors.

"I have been told by the castle servants that you can give me a bed," he said.

The landlord, who was always delighted to oblige his patrons in Sir Oswald's servants' hall and stables, declared himself ready to give the traveller the best accommodation his house could afford.

"It's late, sir," he said; "but we'll manage to make things comfortable for you."

So that night the surgeon slept in the village of Raynham. He, too, was worn out by the fatigue of the past twenty-four hours, and he slept soundly all through the night, and slept as calmly as a child.

It was eight o'clock next morning when he went down the steep, old-fashioned staircase of the inn. He found a strange hubbub and confusion below. Awful tidings

had just been brought from the castle. Sir Oswald Eversleigh had been found seated in his library, DEAD, with the lamp still burning near him, in the bright summer morning. One of the grooms had come down to the little inn, and was telling his story to all comers, when the pedlar came into the open space before the bar.

"It was Millard that found him," the man said. "He was sitting, quite calm-like, with his head lying back upon the cushion of his arm-chair. There were papers and open letters scattered all about; and they sent off immediately for Mr. Dalton, the lawyer, to look to the papers, and seal up the locks of drawers and desks, and so on. Mr. Dalton is busy at it now. Mr. Eversleigh is awfully shocked, he is. I never saw such a white face in all my life as his, when he came out into the hall after hearing the news. It's a rare fine thing for him, as you may say; for they say Sir Oswald made a new will last night, and left his nephew everything; and Mr. Eversleigh has been a regular wild one, and is deep in debt. But, for all that, I never saw any one so cut up as he was just now."

"Poor Sir Oswald!" cried the bystanders. "Such a noble gentleman as he was, too. What did he die of Mr. Kimber?—do you know?"

"The doctor says it must have been heart-disease," answered the groom. "A broken heart, I say; that's the only disease Sir Oswald had. It's my lady's conduct has killed him. She must have been a regular bad one, mustn't she?"

The story of the elopement had been fully discussed on the previous day at the "Hen and Chickens," and everywhere else in the village of Raynham. The country gossips shook their heads over Lady Eversleigh's iniquity, but they said little. This new event was of so appalling a nature, that it silenced even the tongue of gossip for a while.

The pedlar took his breakfast in the little parlour behind the bar, and listened quietly to all that was said by the villagers and the groom.

"And where is my lady?" asked the innkeeper; "she came back yesterday, didn't

she?"

"Yes, and went away again yesterday afternoon," returned the groom. "She's got enough to answer for, she has."

* * * * *

Terrible indeed was the consternation, which reigned that day at Raynham Castle. Already Sir Oswald's guests had been making hasty arrangements for their departure; and many visitors had departed even before the discovery of that awful event, which came like a thunderclap upon all within the castle.

Few men had ever been better liked by his acquaintances than Sir Oswald Eversleigh.

His generous nature, his honourable character, had won him every man's respect. His great wealth had been spent lavishly for the benefit of others. His hand had always been open to the poor and necessitous. He had been a kind master, a liberal landlord, an ardent and devoted friend. There is little wonder, therefore, if the news of his sudden death fell like an overwhelming blow on all assembled within the castle, and on many more beyond the castle walls.

The feeling against Honoria Eversleigh was one of unmitigated execration. No words could be too bitter for those who spoke of Sir Oswald's wife.

It had been thought on the previous evening that she had left the castle for ever, banished by the command of her husband. Nothing, therefore, could have exceeded the surprise which filled every breast when she entered the crowded hall some minutes after the discovery of Sir Oswald's death.

Her face was whiter than marble, and its awful whiteness was contrasted by the black dress which she wore.

"Is this true?" she cried, in accents of despair. "Is he really dead?"

"Yes, Lady Eversleigh," answered General Desmond, an Indian officer, and an old

friend of the dead man, "Sir Oswald is dead."

"Let me go to him! I cannot believe it—I cannot—I cannot!" she cried, wildly. "Let me go to him!"

Those assembled round the door of the library looked at her with horror and aversion. To them this semblance of agony seemed only the consummate artifice of an accomplished hypocrite.

"Let me go to him! For pity's sake, let me see him!" she pleaded, with clasped hands. "I cannot believe that he is dead."

Reginald Eversleigh was standing by the door of the library, pale as death—more ghastly of aspect than death itself. He had been leaning against the doorway, as if unable to support himself; but, as Honoria approached, he aroused himself from a kind of stupor, and stretched out his arm to bar her entrance to the death-chamber.

"This is no scene for you, Lady Eversleigh," he said, sternly. "You have no right to enter that chamber. You have no right to be beneath this roof."

"Who dares to banish me?" she asked, proudly. "And who can deny my right?"

"I can do both, as the nearest relative of your dead husband."

"And as the friend of Victor Carrington," answered Honoria, looking fixedly at her accuser. "Oh! it is a marvellous plot, Reginald Eversleigh, and it wanted but this to complete it. My disgrace was the first act in the drama, my husband's death the second. Your friend's treachery accomplished one, you have achieved the other. Sir Oswald Eversleigh has been murdered!"

A suppressed cry of horror broke simultaneously from every lip. As the awful word "murder" was repeated, the doctor, who had been until this moment beside the dead man, came to the door, and opened it.

"Who was it spoke of murder?" he asked.

"It was I," answered Honoria. "I say that my husband's death is no sudden stroke

from the hand of heaven! There is one here who refuses to let me see him, lest I should lay my hand upon his corpse and call down heaven's vengeance on his assassin!"

"The woman is mad," faltered Reginald Eversleigh.

"Look at the speaker," cried Honoria. "I am not mad, Reginald Eversleigh, though, by you and your fellow-plotter, I have been made to suffer that which might have turned a stronger brain than mine. I am not mad. I say that my husband has been murdered; and I ask all present to mark my words. I have no evidence of what I say, except instinct; but I know that it does not deceive me. As for you, Reginald Eversleigh, I refuse to recognize your rights beneath this roof. As the widow of Sir Oswald, I claim the place of mistress in this house, until events show whether I have a right to it or not."

These were bold words from one who, in the eyes of all present, was a disgraced wife, who had been banished by her husband.

General Desmond was the person who took upon himself to reply. He was the oldest and most important guest now remaining at the castle, and he was a man who had been much respected by Sir Oswald.

"I certainly do not think that any one here can dispute Lady Eversleigh's rights, until Sir Oswald's will has been read, and his last wishes made known. Whatever passed between my poor friend and his wife yesterday is known to Lady Eversleigh alone. It is for her to settle matters with her own conscience; and if she chooses to remain beneath this roof, no one here can presume to banish her from it, except in obedience to the dictates of the dead."

"The wishes of the dead will soon be known," said Reginald; "and then that guilty woman will no longer dare to pollute this house by her presence."

"I do not fear, Reginald Eversleigh," answered Honoria, with sublime calmness. "Let the worst come. I abide the issue of events. I wait to see whether iniquity is to

succeed; or whether, at the last moment, the hand of Providence will be outstretched to confound the guilty. My faith is strong in Providence, Mr. Eversleigh. And now stand aside, if you please, and let me look upon the face of my husband."

This time, Reginald Eversleigh did not venture to dispute the widow's right to enter the death-chamber. He made way for her to pass him, and she went in and knelt by the side of the dead. Mr. Dalton, the lawyer, was moving softly about the room, putting seals on all the locks, and collecting the papers that had been scattered on the table. The parish doctor, who had been summoned hastily, stood near the corpse. A groom had been despatched to a large town, twenty miles distant, to summon a medical man of some distinction. There were few railroads in those days; no electric telegraph to summon a man from one end of the country to another. But all the most distinguished doctors who ever lived could not have restored Sir Oswald Eversleigh to an hour's life. All that medical science could do now, was to discover the mode of the baronet's death.

The crowd left the hall by and by, and the interior of the castle grew more tranquil. All the remaining guests, with the exception of General Desmond, made immediate arrangements for leaving the house of death.

General Desmond declared his intention of remaining until after the funeral.

"I may be of some use in watching the interests of my dear friend," he said to Reginald Eversleigh. "There is only one person who will feel your uncle's death more deeply than I shall, and that is poor old Copplestone. He is still in the castle, I suppose?"

"Yes, he is confined to his rooms still by the gout."

Reginald Eversleigh was by no means pleased by the general's decision. He would rather have been alone in the castle. It seemed as if his uncle's old friend was inclined to take the place of master in the household. The young man's pride revolted against the general's love of dictation; and his fears—strange and terrible

fears—made the presence of the general very painful to him.

Joseph Millard had come to Reginald a little time after the discovery of the baronet's death, and had told him the contents of the new will.

"Master told us with his own lips that he had left you heir to the estates, sir," said the valet. "There was no need for it to be kept a secret, he said; and we signed the will as witnesses—Peterson, the butler, and me."

"And you are sure you have made no mistake, Millard. Sir Oswald—my poor, poor uncle, said that?"

"He said those very words, Mr. Eversleigh; and I hope, sir, now that you are master of Raynham, you won't forget that I was always anxious for your interests, and gave you valuable information, sir, when I little thought you would ever inherit the estate, sir."

"Yes, yes—you will not find me ungrateful, Millard," answered Reginald, impatiently; for in the terrible agitation of his mind, this man's talk jarred upon him. "I shall reward you liberally for past services, you may depend upon it," he added.

"Thank you very much, sir," murmured the valet, about to retire.

"Stay, Millard," said the young man. "You have been with my uncle twenty years. You must know everything about his health. Did you ever hear that he suffered from heart-disease?"

"No, sir; he never did suffer from anything of the kind. There never was a stronger gentleman than Sir Oswald. In all the years that I have known him, I don't recollect his having a day's serious illness. And as to his dying of disease of the heart, I can't believe it, Mr. Eversleigh."

"But in heart-complaint death is almost always sudden, and the disease is generally unsuspected until death reveals it."

"Well, I don't know, sir. Of course the medical gentlemen understand such things;

but I must say that I don't understand Sir Oswald going off sudden like that."

"You'd better keep your opinions to yourself down stairs, Millard. If an idea of that kind were to get about in the servants' hall, it might do mischief."

"I should be the last to speak, Mr. Eversleigh. You asked me for my opinion, and I gave it you, candid. But as to expressing my sentiments in the servants' hall, I should as soon think of standing on my head. In the first place, I don't take my meals in the servants' hall, but in the steward's room; and it's very seldom I hold any communication whatever with under-servants. It don't do, Mr. Eversleigh—you may think me 'aughty; but it don't do. If upper-servants want to be respected by under-servants, they must first respect themselves."

"Well, well, Millard; I know I can rely upon your discretion. You can leave me now—my mind is quite unhinged by this dreadful event."

No sooner had the valet departed than Reginald hurried from the castle, and walked across the garden to the gate by which he had encountered Victor Carrington on the previous day. He had no appointment with Victor, and did not even know if he were still in the neighbourhood; but he fancied it was just possible the surgeon might be waiting for him somewhere without the boundary of the garden.

He was not mistaken. A few minutes after passing through the gateway, he saw the figure of the pedlar approaching him under the shade of the spreading beeches.

"I am glad you are here," said Reginald; "I fancied I might find you somewhere hereabouts."

"And I have been waiting and watching about here for the last two hours. I dared not trust a messenger, and could only take my chance of seeing you."

"You have heard of—of—"

"I have heard everything, I believe."

"What does it mean, Victor?—what does it all mean?"

"It means that you are a wonderfully lucky fellow; and that, instead of waiting thirty years to see your uncle grow a semi-idiotic old dotard, you will step at once into one of the finest estates in England."

"You knew, then, that the will was made last night?"

"Well, I guessed as much."

"You have seen Millard?"

"No, I have not seen Millard."

"How could you know of my uncle's will, then? It was only executed last night."

"Never mind how I know it, my dear Reginald. I do know it. Let that be enough for you."

"It is too terrible," murmured the young man, after a pause; "it is too terrible."

"What is too terrible?"

"This sudden death."

"Is it?" cried Victor Carrington, looking full in his companion's face, with an expression of supreme scorn. "Would you rather have waited thirty years for these estates? Would you rather have waited twenty years?—ten years? No, Reginald Eversleigh, you would not. I know you better than you know yourself, and I will answer for you in this matter. If your uncle's life had lain in your open palm last night, and the closing of your hand would have ended it, your hand would have closed, Mr. Eversleigh, affectionate nephew though you be. You are a hypocrite, Reginald. You palter with your own conscience. Better to be like me and have no conscience, than to have one and palter with it as you do."

Reginald made no reply to this disdainful speech. His own weakness of character placed him entirely in the power of his friend. The two men walked on together in silence.

"You do not know all that has occurred since last night at the castle," said Reginald,

at last; "Lady Eversleigh has reappeared."

"Lady Eversleigh! I thought she left Raynham yesterday afternoon."

"So it was generally supposed; but this morning she came into the hall, and demanded to be admitted to see her dead husband. Nor was this all. She publicly declared that he had been murdered, and accused me of the crime. This is terrible, Victor."

"It is terrible, and it must be put an end to at once."

"But how is it to be put an end to?" asked Reginald. "If this woman repeats her accusations, who is to seal her lips?"

"The tables must be turned upon her. If she again accuses you, you must accuse her. If Sir Oswald were indeed murdered, who so likely to have committed the murder as this woman—whose hatred and revenge were, no doubt, excited by her husband's refusal to receive her back, after her disgraceful flight? This is what you have to say; and as every one's opinion is against Lady Eversleigh, she will find herself in rather an unpleasant position, and will be glad to hold her peace for the future upon the subject of Sir Oswald's death."

"You do not doubt my uncle died a natural death, do you, Victor?" asked Reginald, with a strange eagerness. "You do not think that he was murdered?"

"No, indeed. Why should I think so?" returned the surgeon, with perfect calmness of manner. "No one in the castle, but you and Lady Eversleigh, had any interest in his life or death. If he came to his end by any foul means, she must be the guilty person, and on her the deed must be fixed. You must hold firm, Reginald, remember."

The two men parted soon after this; but not before they had appointed to meet on the following day, at the same hour, and on the same spot. Reginald Eversleigh returned to the castle, gloomy and ill at ease, and on entering the house he discovered that the doctor from Plimborough had arrived during his absence, and was to remain until the following day, when his evidence would be required at the inquest.

It was Joseph Millard who told him this.

"The inquest! What inquest?" asked Reginald.

"The coroner's inquest, sir. It is to be held to-morrow in the great dining-room. Sir Oswald died so suddenly, you see, sir, that it's only natural there should be an inquest. I'm sorry to say there's a talk about his having committed suicide, poor gentleman!"

"Suicide—yes—yes—that is possible; he may have committed suicide," murmured Reginald.

"It's very dreadful, isn't it, sir? The two doctors and Mr. Dalton, the lawyer, are together in the library. The body has been moved into the state bed-room."

The lawyer emerged from the library at this moment, and approached Reginald.

"Can I speak with you for a few minutes, Mr. Eversleigh?" he asked.

"Certainly."

He went into the library, where he found the two doctors, and another person, whom he had not expected to see.

This was a country gentleman—a wealthy landed squire and magistrate—whom Reginald Eversleigh had known from his boyhood. His name was Gilbert Ashburne; and he was an individual of considerable importance in the neighbourhood of Raynham, near which village he had a fine estate.

Mr. Ashburne was standing with his back to the empty fireplace, in conversation with one of the medical men, when Reginald entered the room. He advanced a few paces, to shake hands with the young man, and then resumed his favourite magisterial attitude, leaning against the chimney-piece, with his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"My dear Eversleigh," he said, "this is a very terrible affair—very terrible!"

"Yes, Mr. Ashburne, my uncle's sudden death is indeed terrible."

"But the manner of his death! It is not the suddenness only, but the nature—"

"You forget, Mr. Ashburne," interposed one of the medical men, "Mr. Eversleigh knows nothing of the facts which I have stated to you."

"Ah, he does not! I was not aware of that. You have no suspicion of any foul play in this sad business, eh, Mr. Eversleigh?" asked the magistrate.

"No," answered Reginald. "There is only one person I could possibly suspect; and that person has herself given utterance to suspicions that sound like the ravings of madness."

"You mean Lady Eversleigh?" said the Raynham doctor.

"Pardon me," said Mr. Ashburne; "but this business is altogether so painful that it obliges me to touch upon painful subjects. Is there any truth in the report which I have heard of Lady Eversleigh's flight on the evening of some rustic gathering?"

"Unhappily, the report has only too good a foundation. My uncle's wife did take flight with a lover on the night before last; but she returned yesterday, and had an interview with her husband. What took place at that interview I cannot tell you; but I imagine that my uncle forbade her to remain beneath his roof. Immediately after she had left him, he sent for me, and announced his determination to reinstate me in my old position as his heir. He would not, I am sure, have done this, had he believed his wife innocent."

"And she left the castle at his bidding?"

"It was supposed that she left the castle; but this morning she reappeared, and claimed the right to remain beneath this roof."

"And where had she passed the night?"

"Not in her own apartments. Of that I have been informed by her maid, who believed that she had left Raynham for good."

"Strange!" exclaimed the magistrate. "If she is guilty, why does she remain here,

where her guilt is known—where she maybe suspected of a crime, and the most terrible of crimes?"

"Of what crime?"

"Of murder, Mr. Eversleigh. I regret to tell you that these two medical gentlemen concur in the opinion that your uncle's death was caused by poison. A post-mortem examination will be made to-night."

"Upon what evidence?"

"On the evidence of an empty glass, which is under lock and key in yonder cabinet," answered the doctor from Plimborough; "and at the bottom of which I found traces of one of the most powerful poisons known to those who are skilled in the science of toxicology: and on the further evidence of diagnostics which I need not explain—the evidence of the dead man's appearance, Mr. Eversleigh. That your uncle died from the effects of poison, there cannot be the smallest doubt. The next question to be considered is, whether that poison was administered by his own hand, or the hand of an assassin."

"He may have committed suicide," said Reginald, with some hesitation.

"It is just possible," answered Gilbert Ashburne; "though from my knowledge of your uncle's character, I should imagine it most unlikely. At any rate, his papers will reveal the state of his mind immediately before his death. It is my suggestion, therefore, that his papers should be examined immediately by you, as his nearest relative and acknowledged heir—by me, as magistrate of the district, and in the presence of Mr. Dalton, who was your uncle's confidential solicitor. Have you any objection to offer to this course, Mr. Eversleigh, or Sir Reginald, as I suppose I ought now to call you?" It was the first time Reginald Eversleigh had heard himself addressed by the title which was now his own—that title which, borne by the possessor of a great fortune, bestows so much dignity; but which, when held by a poor man, is so hollow a mockery. In spite of his fears—in spite of that sense of

remorse which had come upon him since his uncle's death—the sound of the title was pleasant to his ears, and he stood for the moment silent, overpowered by the selfish rapture of gratified pride.

The magistrate repeated his question.

"Have you any objection to offer, Sir Reginald?"

"None whatever, Mr. Ashburne."

Reginald Eversleigh was only too glad to accede to the magistrate's proposition. He was feverishly anxious to see the will which was to make him master of Raynham. He knew that such a will had been duly executed. He had no reason to fear that it had been destroyed; but still he wanted to see it—to hold it in his hands, to have incontestable proof of its existence.

The examination of the papers was serious work. The lawyer suggested that the first to be scrutinized should be those that he had found on the table at which Sir Oswald had been writing.

The first of these papers which came into the magistrate's hand was Mary Goodwin's letter. Reginald Eversleigh recognized the familiar handwriting, the faded ink, and crumpled paper. He stretched out his hand at the moment Gilbert Ashburne was about to examine the document.

"That is a letter," he said, "a strictly private letter, which I recognize. It is addressed to me, as you will see; and posted in Paris nearly two years ago. I must beg you not to read it."

"Very well, Sir Reginald, I will take your word for it. The letter has nothing to do with the subject of our present inquiry. Certainly, a letter, posted in Paris two years ago, can scarcely have any connection with the state of your uncle's mind last night."

The magistrate little thought how very important an influence that crumpled sheet of paper had exercised upon the events of the previous night.

Gilbert Ashburne and the lawyer examined the rest of the packet. There were no papers of importance; nothing throwing any light upon late events, except Lady Eversleigh's letter, and the will made by the baronet immediately after his marriage.

"There is another and a later will," said Reginald, eagerly; "a will made last night, and witnessed by Millard and Peterson. This earlier will ought to have been destroyed."

"It is not of the least consequence, Sir Reginald," replied the solicitor. "The will of latest date is the true one, if there should be a dozen in existence."

"We had better search for the will made last night," said Reginald, anxiously.

The magistrate and the lawyer complied. They perceived the anxiety of the expectant heir, and gave way to it. The search occupied a long time, but no second will was found; the only will that could be discovered was that made within a week of the baronet's marriage.

"The will attested last night must be in this room," exclaimed Reginald. "I will send for Millard; and you shall hear from his lips an exact account of what occurred."

The young man tried in vain to conceal the feeling of alarm which had taken possession of him. What would be his position if this will should not be found? A beggar, steeped in crime.

He rang the bell and sent for the valet. Joseph Millard came, and repeated his account of the previous night's transaction. It was clear that the will had been made. It was equally clear that if it were still in existence, it must be found in that room, for the valet declared that his master had not left the library after the execution of the document.

"I was on the watch and on the listen all night, you see, gentlemen," said Joseph Millard; "for I was very uneasy about master, knowing what trouble had come upon him, and how he'd never been to bed all the night before. I thought he might call me at any minute, so I kept close at hand. There's a little room next to this, and I sat in

there with the door open, and though I dropped off into a doze now and then, I never was sound enough asleep not to have heard this door open, if it did open. But I'll take my Bible oath that Sir Oswald never left this room after me and Peterson witnessed the will."

"Then the will must be somewhere in the room, and it will be our business to find it," answered Mr. Ashburne. "That will do, Millard; you can go."

The valet retired.

Reginald recommenced the search for the will, assisted by the magistrate and the lawyer, while the two doctors stood by the fire-place, talking together in suppressed tones.

This time the search left no crevice unexamined. But all was done without avail; and despair began to gain upon Reginald Eversleigh.

What if all the crime, the falsehood, the infamy of the past few days had been committed for no result?

He was turning over the papers in the bureau for the third or fourth time, with trembling hands, in the desperate hope that somehow or other the missing will might have escaped former investigations, when he was arrested by a sudden exclamation from Mr. Missenden, the Plimborough surgeon.

"I don't think you need look any farther, Sir Reginald," said this gentleman.

"What do you mean?" cried Reginald, eagerly.

"I believe the will is found."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed the young man.

"You mistake, Sir Reginald," said Mr. Missenden, who was kneeling by the fire-place, looking intently at some object in the polished steel fender; "if I am right, and that this really is the document in question, I fear it will be of very little use to you."

"It has been destroyed!" gasped Reginald.

"I fear so. This looks to me like the fragment of a will."

He handed Reginald a scrap of paper, which he had found amongst a heap of grey ashes. It was scorched to a deep yellow colour, and burnt at the edges; but the few words written upon it were perfectly legible, nevertheless.

These words were the following:—

"—Nephew, Reginald Eversleigh—Raynham Castle estate—all lands and tenements appertaining—sole use and benefit—"

This was all. Reginald gazed at the scrap of scorched paper with wild, dilated eyes. All hope was gone; there could be little doubt that this morsel of paper was all that remained of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's latest will.

And the will made previously bequeathed Raynham to the testator's window, a handsome fortune to each of the two Dales, and a pittance of five hundred a-year to Reginald.

The young man sank into a chair, stricken down by this overwhelming blow. His white face was the very picture of despair.

"My uncle never destroyed this document," he exclaimed; "I will not believe it. Some treacherous hand has been thrust between me and my rights. Why should Sir Oswald have made a will in one hour and destroyed it in the next? What could have influenced him to alter his mind?"

As he uttered these words, Reginald Eversleigh remembered that fatal letter of Mary Goodwin, which had been found lying uppermost amongst the late baronet's papers. That letter had caused Sir Oswald to disinherit his nephew once. Was it possible that the same letter had influenced him a second time?

But the disappointed man did not suffer himself to dwell long on this subject. He thought of his uncle's widow, and the triumph that she had won over the schemers

who had plotted so basely to achieve her destruction. A savage fury filled his soul as he thought of Honoria.

"This will has been destroyed by the one person most interested in its destruction," he cried. "Who can doubt now that my uncle was poisoned, and the will destroyed by the same person?—and who can doubt that person to be Lady Eversleigh?"

"My dear sir," exclaimed Mr. Ashburne, "this really will not do. I cannot listen to such accusations, unsupported by any evidence."

"What evidence do you need, except the evidence of truth?" cried Reginald, passionately. "Who else was interested in the destruction of that paper?—who else was likely to desire my uncle's death? Who but his false and guilty wife? She had been banished from beneath this roof; she was supposed to have left the castle; but instead of going away, she remained in hiding, waiting her chances. If there has been a murder committed, who can doubt that she is the murderess? Who can question that it was she who burnt the will which robbed her of wealth and station, and branded her with disgrace?"

"You are too impetuous, Sir Reginald," returned the magistrate. "I will own there are grounds for suspicion in the circumstances of which you speak; but in such a terrible affair as this there must be no jumping at conclusions. However, the death of your uncle by poison immediately after the renunciation of his wife, and the burning of the will which transferred the estates from her to you, are, when considered in conjunction, so very mysterious—not to say suspicious—that I shall consider myself justified in issuing a warrant for the detention of Lady Eversleigh, upon suspicion of being concerned in the death of her husband. I shall hold an inquiry here to-morrow, immediately after the coroner's inquest, and shall endeavour to sift matters most thoroughly. If Lady Eversleigh is innocent, her temporary arrest can do her no harm. She will not be called upon to leave her own apartments; and very few outside the castle, or, indeed, within it, need be aware of her arrest. I think I will wait upon her

myself, and explain the painful necessity."

"Yes, and be duped by her plausible tongue," cried Reginald bitterly." She completely bewitched my poor uncle. Do you know that he picked her up out of the gutter, and knew no more of her past life than he knew of the inhabitants of the other planets? If you see her, she will fool you as she fooled him."

"I am not afraid of her witcheries," answered the magistrate, with dignity. "I shall do my duty, Sir Reginald, you may depend upon it."

Reginald Eversleigh said no more. He left the library without uttering a word to any of the gentlemen. The despair which had seized upon him was too terrible for words. Alone, locked in his own room, he gnashed his teeth in agony.

"Fools! dolts! idiots that we have been, with all our deeply-laid plots and subtle scheming," he cried, as he paced up and down the room in a paroxysm of mad rage, "She triumphs in spite of us—she can laugh us to scorn! And Victor Carrington, the man whose intellect was to conquer impossibilities, what a shallow fool he has shown himself, after all! I thought there was something superhuman in his success, so strangely did fate seem to favour his scheming; and now, at the last—when the cup was at my lips—it is snatched away, and dashed to the ground!"

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CHAPTER XII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

While the new baronet abandoned himself to the anguish of disappointed avarice and ambition, Honoria sat quietly in her own apartments, brooding very sadly over her husband's death.

She had loved him honestly and truly. No younger lover had ever won possession of her heart. Her life, before her meeting with Sir Oswald, had been too miserable for

the indulgence of the romantic dreams or poetic fancies of girlhood. The youthful feelings of this woman, who called herself Honoria, had been withered by the blasting influence of crime. It was only when gratitude for Sir Oswald's goodness melted the ice of that proud nature—it was then only that Honoria's womanly tenderness awoke—it was then only that affection—a deep-felt and pure affection—for the first time occupied her heart.

That affection was all the more intense in its nature because it was the first love of a noble heart. Honoria had reverenced in her husband all that she had ever known of manly virtue.

And he was lost to her! He had died believing her false.

"I could have borne anything but that," she thought, in her desolation.

The magistrate came to her, and explained the painful necessity under which he found himself placed. But he did not tell her of the destruction of the will, nor yet that the medical men had pronounced decisively as to Sir Oswald's death. He only told her that there were suspicious circumstances connected with that death; and that it was considered necessary there should be a careful investigation of those circumstances.

"The investigation cannot be too complete," replied Honoria, eagerly. "I know that there has been foul play, and that the best and noblest of men has fallen a victim to the hand of an assassin. Oh, sir, if you are able to distinguish truth from falsehood, I implore you to listen to the story which my poor husband refused to believe—the story of the basest treachery that was ever plotted against a helpless woman!"

Mr. Ashburne declared himself willing to hear any statement Lady Eversleigh might wish to make; but he warned her that it was just possible that statement might be used against her hereafter.

Honoria told him the circumstances which she had related to Sir Oswald; the false alarm about her husband, the drive to Yarborough Tower, and the night of agony

spent within the ruins; but, to her horror, she perceived that this man also disbelieved her. The story seemed wild and improbable, and people had already condemned her. They were prepared to hear a fabrication from her lips; and the truth which she had to tell seemed the most clumsy and shallow of inventions.

Gilbert Ashburne did not tell her that he doubted her; but, polite as his words were, she could read the indications of distrust in his face. She could see that he thought worse of her after having heard the statement which was her sole justification.

"And where is this Mr. Carrington now to be found?" he asked, presently. "I do not know. Having accomplished his base plot, and caused his friend's restoration to the estates, I suppose he has taken care to go far away from the scene of his infamy."

The magistrate looked searchingly at her face. Was this acting, or was she ignorant of the destruction of the will? Did she, indeed, believe that the estates were lost to herself?

* * * * *

Before the hour at which the coroner's inquest was to be held in the great dining-room, Reginald Eversleigh and Victor Carrington met at the appointed spot in the avenue of firs.

One glance at his friend's face informed Victor that some fatal event had occurred since the previous day. Reginald told him, in brief, passionate words, of the destruction of the will.

"You are a clever schemer, no doubt, Mr. Carrington," he added, bitterly; "but clever as you are, you have been outwitted as completely as the veriest fool that ever blundered into ruin. Do you understand, Carrington—we are not richer by one halfpenny for all your scheming?"

Carrington was silent for awhile; but when, after a considerable pause, he at length spoke, his voice betrayed a despair as intense in its quiet depth as the louder passion of his companion.

"I cannot believe it," he exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper. "I tell you, man, you must, have made some senseless mistake. The will cannot have been destroyed."

"I had the fragments in my hand," answered Reginald. "I saw my name written on the worthless scrap of burnt paper. All that was left besides that wretched fragment were the ashes in the grate."

"I saw the will executed—I saw it—within a few hours of Sir Oswald's death."

"You saw it done?"

"Yes, I was outside the window of the library."

"And you—! oh, it is too horrible," cried Reginald.

"What is too horrible?"

"The deed that was done that night."

"That deed is no business of ours," answered Victor; "the person who destroyed the will was your uncle's assassin, if he died by the hand of an assassin."

"Do you really believe that, Carrington; or are you only fooling me?"

"What else should I believe?"

The two men parted. Reginald Eversleigh knew that his presence would be required at the coroner's inquest. The surgeon did not attempt to detain him.

For the time, at least, this arch-plotter found himself suddenly brought to a stand-still.

The inquest commenced almost immediately after Reginald's return to the castle.

The first witness examined was the valet, who had been the person to discover the death; the next were the two medical men, whose evidence was of a most important nature.

It was a closed court, and no one was admitted who was not required to give evidence. Lady Eversleigh sat at the opposite end of the table to that occupied by the

coroner. She had declined to avail herself of the services of any legal adviser. She had declared her determination to trust in her own innocence, and in that alone. Proud, calm, and self-possessed, she confronted the solemn assembly, and did not shrink from the scrutinizing looks that met her eyes in every direction.

Reginald Eversleigh contemplated her with a feeling of murderous hatred, as he took his place at some little distance from her seat.

The evidence of Mr. Missenden was to the effect that Sir Oswald Eversleigh had died from the effects of a subtle and little-known poison. He had discovered traces of this poison in the empty glass which had been found upon the table beside the dead man, and he had discovered further traces of the same poison in the stomach of the deceased.

After the medical witnesses had both been examined, Peterson, the butler, was sworn. He related the facts connected with the execution of the will, and further stated that it was he who had carried the carafe of water, claret-jug, and the empty glass to Sir Oswald.

"Did you fetch the water yourself?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, your worship—Sir Oswald was very particular about the water being iced—I took it from a filter in my own charge."

"And the glass?"

"I took the glass from my own pantry."

"Are you sure that there was nothing in the glass when you took the salver to you master?"

"Quite sure, sir. I'm very particular about having all my glass bright and clear—it's the under butler's duty to see to that, and it's my duty to keep him up to his work. I should have seen in a moment if the glass had been dull and smudgy at the bottom."

The water remaining in the carafe had been examined by the medical witnesses, and

had been declared by them to be perfectly pure. The claret had been untouched. The poison could, therefore, have only been introduced to the baronet's room in the glass; and the butler protested that no one but himself and his assistant had access to the place in which the glass had been kept.

How, then, could the baronet have been poisoned, except by his own hand?

Reginald Eversleigh was one of the last witnesses examined. He told of the interview between himself and his uncle, on the day preceding Sir Oswald's death. He told of Lydia Graham's revelations—he told everything calculated to bring disgrace upon the woman who sat, pale and silent, confronting her fate.

She seemed unmoved by these scandalous revelations. She had passed through such bitter agony within the last few days and nights, that it seemed to her as if nothing could have power to move her more.

She had endured the shame of her husband's distrust. The man she loved so dearly had cast her from him with disdain and aversion. What new agony could await her equal to that through which she had passed.

Reginald Eversleigh's hatred and rage betrayed him into passing the limits of prudence. He told the story of the destroyed will, and boldly accused Lady Eversleigh of having destroyed it.

"You forget yourself, Sir Reginald," said the coroner; "you are here as a witness, and not as an accuser."

"But am I to keep silence, when I know that yonder woman is guilty of a crime by which I am robbed of my heritage?" cried the young man, passionately. "Who but she was interested in the destruction of that will? Who had so strong a motive for wishing my uncle's death? Why was she hiding in the castle after her pretended departure, except for some guilty purpose? She left her own apartments before dusk, after writing a farewell letter to her husband. Where was she, and what was she doing, after leaving those apartments?"

"Let me answer those questions, Sir Reginald Eversleigh," said a voice from the doorway.

The young baronet turned and recognized the speaker. It was his uncle's old friend, Captain Copplestone, who had made his way into the room unheard while Reginald had been giving his evidence. He was still seated in his invalid-chair—still unable to move without its aid.

"Let me answer those questions," he repeated. "I have only just heard of Lady Eversleigh's painful position. I beg to be sworn immediately, for my evidence may be of some importance to that lady."

Reginald sat down, unable to contest the captain's right to be heard, though he would fain have done so.

Lady Eversleigh for the first time that day gave evidence of some slight emotion. She raised her eyes to Captain Copplestone's bronzed face with a tearful glance, expressive of gratitude and confidence.

The captain was duly sworn, and then proceeded to give his evidence, in brief, abrupt sentences, without waiting to be questioned.

"You ask where Lady Eversleigh spent the night of her husband's death, and how she spent it. I can answer both those questions. She spent that night in my room, nursing a sick old man, who was mad with the tortures of rheumatic gout, and weeping over Sir Oswald's refusal to believe in her innocence.

"You'll ask, perhaps, how she came to be in my apartments on that night. I'll answer you in a few words. Before leaving the castle she came to my room, and asked my old servant to admit her. She had been very kind and attentive to me throughout my illness. My servant is a gruff and tough old fellow, but he is grateful for any kindness that's shown to his master. He admitted Lady Eversleigh to see me, ill as I was. She told me the whole story which she told her husband. 'He refused to believe me, Captain Copplestone,' she said; 'he who once loved me so dearly refused to

believe me. So I come to you, his best and oldest friend, in the hope that you may think better of me; and that some day, when I am far away, and time has softened my husband's heart towards me, you may speak a good word in my behalf.' And I did believe her. Yes, Mr. Eversleigh—or Sir Reginald Eversleigh—I did, and I do, believe that lady."

"Captain Copplestone," said the coroner; "we really do not require all these particulars; the question is—when did Lady Eversleigh enter your rooms, and when did she quit them?"

"She came to me at dusk, and she did not leave my rooms until the next morning, after the discovery of my poor friend's death. When she had told me her story, and her intention of leaving the castle immediately, I begged her to remain until the next day. She would be safe in my rooms, I told her. No one but myself and my old servant would know that she had not really left the castle; and the next day, when Sir Oswald's passion had been calmed by reflection, I should be able, perhaps, to intercede successfully for the wife whose innocence I most implicitly believed, in spite of all the circumstances that had conspired to condemn her. Lady Eversleigh knew my influence over her husband; and, after some persuasion, consented to take my advice. My diabolical gout happened to be a good deal worse than usual that night, and my friend's wife assisted my servant to nurse me, with the patience of an angel, or a sister of charity. From the beginning to the end of that fatal night she never left my apartments. She entered my room before the will could have been executed, and she did not leave it until after her husband's death."

"Your evidence is conclusive, Captain Copplestone, and it exonerates her ladyship from all suspicion," said the coroner.

"My evidence can be confirmed in every particular by my old servant, Solomon Grundy," said the captain, "if it requires confirmation."

"It requires none, Captain Copplestone."

Reginald Eversleigh gnawed his bearded lip savagely. This man's evidence proved that Lady Eversleigh had not destroyed the will. Sir Oswald himself, therefore, must have burned the precious document. And for what reason?

A horrible conviction now took possession of the young baronet's mind. He believed that Mary Goodwin's letter had been for the second time instrumental in the destruction of his prospects. A fatal accident had thrown it in his uncle's way after the execution of the will, and the sight of that letter had recalled to Sir Oswald the stern resolution at which he had arrived in Arlington Street.

Utter ruin stared Reginald Eversleigh in the face. The possessor of an empty title, and of an income which, to a man of his expensive habits, was the merest pittance, he saw before him a life of unmitigated wretchedness. But he did not execrate his own sins and vices for the misery which they had brought upon him. He cursed the failure of Victor Carrington's schemes, and thought of himself as the victim of Victor Carrington's blundering.

The verdict of the coroner's jury was an open one, to the effect that "Sir Oswald Eversleigh died by poison, but by whom administered there was no evidence to show."

The general opinion of those who had listened to the evidence was that the baronet had committed suicide. Public opinion around and about Raynham was terribly against his widow. Sir Oswald had been universally esteemed and respected, and his melancholy end was looked on as her work. She had been acquitted of any positive hand is his death; but she was not acquitted of the guilt of having broken his heart by her falsehood.

Her obscure origin, her utter friendlessness, influenced people against her. What must be the past life of this woman, who, in the hour of her widowhood, had not one friend to come forward to support and protect her?

The world always chooses to see the darker side of the picture. Nobody for a

moment imagined that Honoria Eversleigh might possibly be the innocent victim of the villany of others.

The funeral of Sir Oswald Eversleigh was conducted with all the pomp and splendour befitting the burial of a man whose race had held the land for centuries, with untarnished fame and honour. The day of the funeral was dark, cold, and gloomy; stormy winds howled and shrieked among the oaks and beeches of Raynham Park. The tall firs in the avenue were tossed to and fro in the blast, like the funereal plumes of that stately hearse which was to issue at noon from the quadrangle of the castle.

It was difficult to believe that less than a fortnight had elapsed since that bright and balmy day on which the picnic had been held at the Wizard's Cave.

Lady Eversleigh had declared her intention of following her husband to his last resting-place. She had been told that it was unusual for women of the higher classes to take part in a funeral cortège; but she had stedfastly adhered to her resolution.

"You tell me it is not the fashion!" she said to Mr. Ashburne. "I do not care for fashion, I would offer the last mark of respect and affection to the husband who was my dearest and truest friend upon this earth, and without whom the earth is very desolate for me. If the dead pass at once into those heavenly regions were Divine Wisdom reigns supreme over all mortal weakness, the emancipated spirit of him who goes to his tomb this day knows that my love, my faith, never faltered. If I had wronged him as the world believes, Mr. Ashburne, I must, indeed, be the most hardened of wretches to insult the dead by my presence. Accept my determination as a proof of my innocence, if you can."

"The question of your guilt or innocence is a dark enigma which I cannot take upon myself to solve, Lady Eversleigh," answered Gilbert Ashburne, gravely. "It would be an unspeakable relief to my mind if I could think you innocent. Unhappily, circumstances combine to condemn you in such a manner that even Christian charity

can scarcely admit the possibility of your innocence."

"Yes," murmured the widow, sadly, "I am the victim of a plot so skilfully devised, so subtly woven, that I can scarcely wonder if the world refuses to believe me guiltless. And yet you see that honourable soldier, that brave and true-hearted gentleman, Captain Copplestone, does not think me the wretch I seem to be.

"Captain Copplestone is a man who allows himself to be guided by his instincts and impulses, and who takes a pride in differing from his fellow-men. I am a man of the world, and I am unable to form any judgment which is not justified by facts. If facts combine to condemn you, Lady Eversleigh, you must not think me harsh or cruel if I cannot bring myself to acquit you."

During the preceding conversation Honoria Eversleigh had revealed the most gentle, the most womanly side of her character. There had been a pleading tone in her voice, an appealing softness in her glances. But now the expression of her face changed all at once; the beautiful countenance grew cold and stern, the haughty lip quivered with the agony of offended pride.

"Enough!" she said. "I will never again trouble you, Mr. Ashburne, by entreating your merciful consideration. Let your judgment be the judgment of the world. I am content to await the hour of my justification; I am content to trust in Time, the avenger of all wrongs, and the consoler of all sorrows. In the meanwhile, I will stand alone—a woman without a friend, a woman who has to fight her own battles with the world."

Gilbert Ashburne could not withhold his respect from the woman who stood before him, queen-like in her calm dignity.

"She may be the basest and vilest of her sex," he thought to himself, as he left her presence; "but she is a woman whom it is impossible to despise."

The funeral procession was to leave Raynham at noon. At eleven o'clock the arrival of Mr. Dale and Mr. Douglas Dale was announced. These two gentlemen had just

arrived at the castle, and the elder of the two requested the favour of an interview with his uncle's widow.

She was seated in one of the apartments which had been allotted to her especial use when she arrived, a proud and happy bride, from her brief honeymoon tour. It was the spacious morning-room which had been sacred to the late Lady Eversleigh, Sir Oswald's mother.

Here the widow sat in the hour of her desolation, unhonoured, unloved, without friend or counsellor; unless, indeed, the gallant soldier who had defended her from the suspicion of a hideous crime might stoop to befriend her further in her bitter need. She sat alone, uncertain, after the reading of the dead man's will, whether she might not be thrust forth from the doors of Raynham Castle, shelterless, homeless, penniless, once more a beggar and an outcast.

Her heart was so cruelly stricken by the crushing blow that had fallen upon her; the grief she felt for her husband's untimely fate was so deep and sincere, that she thought but little of her own future. She had ceased to feel either hope or fear. Let fate do its worst. No sorrow that could come to her in the future, no disgrace, no humiliation, could equal in bitterness that fiery ordeal through which she had passed during the last few days.

Lionel Dale was ushered into the morning-room while Lady Eversleigh sat by the hearth, absorbed in gloomy thought.

She rose as Lionel Dale entered the room, and received him with stately courtesy.

She was prepared to find herself despised by this young man, who would, in all probability, very speedily learn, or who had perhaps already learned, the story of her degradation.

She was prepared to find herself misjudged by him. But he was the nephew of the man who had once so devotedly loved her; the husband whose memory was hallowed for her; and she was determined to receive him with all respect, for the

sake of the beloved and honoured dead.

"You are doubtless surprised to see me here, madam," said Mr. Dale, in a tone whose chilling accent told Honoria that this stranger was already prejudiced against her. "I have received no invitation to take part in the sad ceremonial of to-day, either from you or from Sir Reginald Eversleigh. But I loved Sir Oswald very dearly, and I am here to pay the last poor tribute of respect to that honoured and generous friend."

"Permit me thank you for that tribute," answered Lady Eversleigh. "If I did not invite you and your brother to attend the funeral, it was from no wish to exclude you. My desires have been in no manner consulted with regard to the arrangements of to-day. Very bitter misery has fallen upon me within the last fortnight—heaven alone knows how undeserved that misery has been—and I know not whether this roof will shelter me after to-day."

She looked at the stranger very earnestly as she said this. It was bitter to stand quite alone in the world; to know herself utterly fallen in the estimation of all around her; and she looked at Lionel Dale with a faint hope that she might discover some touch of compassion, some shadow of doubt in his countenance.

Alas, no,—there was none. It was a frank, handsome face—a face that was no polished mask beneath which the real man concealed himself. It was a true and noble countenance, easy to read as an open book. Honoria looked at it with despair in her heart, for she perceived but too plainly that this man also despised her. She understood at once that he had been told the story of his uncle's death, and regarded her as the indirect cause of that fatal event.

And she was right. He had arrived at the chief inn in Raynham two hours before, and there he had heard the story of Lady Eversleigh's flight and Sir Oswald's sudden death, with some details of the inquest. Slow to believe evil, he had questioned Gilbert Ashburne, before accepting the terrible story as he had heard it from the landlord of the inn. Mr. Ashburne only confirmed that story, and admitted that, in

his opinion, the flight and disgrace of the wife had been the sole cause of the death of the husband.

Once having heard this, and from the lips of a man whom he knew to be the soul of truth and honour, Lionel Dale had but one feeling for his uncle's widow, and that feeling was abhorrence.

He saw her in her beauty and her desolation; but he had no pity for her miserable position, and her beauty inspired him only with loathing; for had not that beauty been the first cause of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's melancholy fate?

"I wished to see you, madam," said Lionel Dale, after that silence which seemed so long, "in order to apologize for a visit which might appear an intrusion. Having done so, I need trouble you no further."

He bowed with chilling courtesy, and left the room. He had uttered no word of consolation, no assurance of sympathy, to that pale widow of a week; nothing could have been more marked than the omission of those customary phrases, and Honoria keenly felt their absence.

The dead leaves strewed the avenue along which Sir Oswald Eversleigh went to his last resting-place; the dead leaves fluttered slowly downward from the giant oaks—the noble old beeches; there was not one gleam of sunshine on the landscape, not one break in the leaden grey of the sky. It seemed as if the funeral of departed summer was being celebrated on this first dreary autumn day.

Lady Eversleigh occupied the second carriage in the stately procession. She was alone. Captain Copplestone was confined to his room by the gout. She went alone—tearless—in outward aspect calm as a statue; but the face of the corpse hidden in the coffin could scarcely have been whiter than hers.

As the procession passed out of the gates of Raynham, a tramp who stood among the rest of the crowd, was strangely startled by the sight of that beautiful face, so lovely even in its marble whiteness.

"Who is that woman sitting in yonder carriage?" he asked.

He was a rough, bare-footed vagabond, with a dark evil-looking countenance, which he did well to keep shrouded by the broad brim of his battered hat. He looked more like a smuggler or a sailor than an agricultural labourer, and his skin was bronzed by long exposure to the weather.

"She's Sir Oswald's widow," answered one of the bystanders; "she's his widow, more shame for her! It was she that brought him to his death, with her disgraceful goings-on."

The man who spoke was a Raynham tradesman.

"What goings-on?" asked the tramp, eagerly. "I'm a stranger in these parts, and don't know anything about yonder funeral."

"More's the pity," replied the tradesman. "Everybody ought to know the story of that fine madam, who just passed us by in her carriage. It might serve as a warning for honest men not to be led away by a pretty face. That white-faced woman yonder is Lady Eversleigh. Nobody knows who she was, or where she came from, before Sir Oswald brought her home here. She hadn't been home a month before she ran away from her husband with a young foreigner. She repented her wickedness before she'd got very far, and begged and prayed to be took back again, and vowed and declared that she'd been lured away by a villain; and that it was all a mistake. That's how I've heard the story from the servants, and one and another. But Sir Oswald would not speak to her, and she would have been turned out of doors if it hadn't been for an old friend of his. However, the end of her wickedness was that Sir Oswald poisoned himself, as every one knows."

No more was said. The tramp followed the procession with the rest of the crowd, first to the village church, where a portion of the funeral service was read, and then back to the park, where the melancholy ceremonial was completed before the family mausoleum.

It was while the crowd made a circle round this mausoleum that the tramp contrived to push his way to the front rank of the spectators. He stood foremost amongst a group of villagers, when Lady Eversleigh happened to look towards the spot where he was stationed.

In that moment a sudden change came over the face of the widow. Its marble whiteness was dyed by a vivid crimson—a sudden flush of shame or indignation, which passed away quickly; but a dark shadow remained upon Lady Eversleigh's brow after that red glow had faded from her cheek.

No one observed that change of countenance. The moment was a solemn one; and even those who did not really feel its solemnity, affected to do so.

At the last instant, when the iron doors of the mausoleum closed with a clanging sound upon the new inmate of that dark abode, Honoria's fortitude all at once forsook her. One long cry, which was like a shriek wrung from the spirit of despair, broke from her colourless lips, and in the next moment she had sunk fainting upon the ground before those inexorable doors.

No sympathizing eyes had watched her looks, or friendly arm was stretched forth in time to support her. But when she lay lifeless and unconscious on the sodden grass, some touch of pity stirred the hearts of the two brothers, Lionel and Douglas Dale.

The elder, Lionel, stepped forward, and lifted that lifeless form from the ground. He carried the unconscious widow to the carriage, where he seated her.

Sense returned only too quickly to that tortured brain. Honoria Eversleigh opened her eyes, and recognized the man who stood by her side.

"I am better now," she said. "Do not let my weakness cause you any trouble. I do not often faint; but that last moment was too bitter."

"Are you really quite recovered? Can I venture to leave you?" asked Lionel Dale, in a much kinder tone than he had employed before in speaking to his uncle's widow.

"Yes, indeed, I have quite recovered. I thank you for your kindness," murmured Honoria, gently.

Lionel Dale went back to the carriage allotted to himself and his brother. On his way, he encountered Reginald Eversleigh.

"I have heard it whispered that my uncle's wife was an actress," said Reginald. "That exhibition just now was rather calculated to confirm the idea."

"If by 'exhibition' you mean that outburst of despair, I am convinced that it was perfectly genuine," answered Lionel, coldly.

"I am sorry you are so easily duped, my dear Lionel," returned his cousin, with a sneer. "I did not think a pretty face would have such influence over you."

No more was said. The two men passed to their respective carriages, and the funeral procession moved homewards.

In the grand dining-hall of the castle, Sir Oswald's lawyer was to read the will. Kinsmen, friends, servants, all were assembled to hear the reading of that solemn document.

In the place of honour sat Lady Eversleigh. She sat on the right hand of the lawyer, calm and dignified, as if no taint of suspicion had ever tarnished her fame.

The solicitor read the will. It was that will which Sir Oswald had executed immediately after his marriage—the will, of which he had spoken to his nephew, Reginald.

It made Honoria Eversleigh sole mistress of the Raynham estates. It gave to Lionel and Douglas Dale property worth ten thousand a year. It gave to Reginald a small estate, producing an income of five hundred a year. To Captain Copplestone the baronet left a legacy of three thousand pounds, and an antique seal-ring which had been worn by himself.

The old servants of Raynham were all remembered, and some curious old plate and

gold snuff-boxes were left to Mr. Wargrave, the rector, and Gilbert Ashburne.

This was all. Five hundred a year was the amount by which Reginald had profited by the death of a generous kinsman.

By the terms of Sir Oswald's will the estates of Lionel and Douglas Dale would revert to Reginald Eversleigh in case the owners should die without direct heirs. If either of these young men were to die unmarried, his brother would succeed to his estate, worth five thousand a year. But if both should die, Reginald Eversleigh would become the owner of double that amount.

It was the merest chance, the shadow of a chance, for the lives of both young men were better than his own, inasmuch as both had led healthful and steadier lives than the dissipated Reginald Eversleigh. But even this poor chance was something.

"They may die," he thought; "death lurks in every bush that borders the highway of life. They or both may die, and I may regain the wealth that should have been mine."

He looked at the two young men. Lionel, the elder, was the handsomer of the two. He was fair, with brown curling hair, and frank blue eyes. Reginald, as he looked at him, thought bitterly, "I must indeed be the very fool of hope and credulity to fancy he will not marry. But, if he were safe, I should not so much fear Douglas." The younger, Douglas, was a man whom some people would have called plain. But the dark sallow face, with its irregular features, was illuminated by an expression of mingled intelligence and amiability, which possessed a charm for all judges worth pleasing.

Lionel was the clergyman, Douglas the lawyer, or rather law-student, for the glory of his maiden brief was yet to come.

How Reginald envied these fortunate kinsmen! He hated them with passionate hate. He looked from them to Honoria, the woman against whom he had plotted—the woman who triumphed in spite of him—for he could not imagine that grief for a dead husband could have any place in the heart of a woman who found herself

mistress of such a domain as Raynham, and its dependencies.

Lady Eversleigh's astonishment was unbounded. This will placed her in even a loftier position than that which she had occupied when possessed of the confidence and affection of her husband. For her pride there was some consolation in this thought; but the triumph, which was sweet to the proud spirit, afforded no balm for the wounded heart. He was gone—he whose love had made her mistress of that wealth and splendour. He was gone from her for ever, and he had died believing her false.

In the midst of her triumph the widow bowed her head upon her hands, and sobbed convulsively. The tears wrung from her in this moment were the first she had shed that day, and they were very bitter.

Reginald Eversleigh watched her with scorn and hatred in his heart.

"What do you say now, Lionel?" he said to his cousin, when the three young men had left the dining-hall, and were seated at luncheon in a smaller chamber. "You did not think my respected aunt a clever actress when she fainted before the doors of the mausoleum. You will at least acknowledge that the piece of acting she favoured us with just now was superb."

"What do you mean by 'a piece of acting'?"

"That outburst of grief which my lady indulged in, when she found herself mistress of Raynham."

"I believe that it was genuine," answered Mr. Dale, gravely.

"Oh, you think the inheritance a fitting subject for lamentation?"

"No, Reginald. I think a woman who had wronged her husband, and had been the indirect cause of his death, might well feel sorrow when she discovered how deeply she had been loved, and how fully she had been trusted by that generous husband."

"Bah!" cried Reginald, contemptuously. "I tell you, man, Lady Eversleigh is a

consummate actress, though she never acted before a better audience than the clodhoppers at a country fair. Do you know who my lady was when Sir Oswald picked her out of the gutter? If you don't, I'll enlighten you. She was a street ballad-singer, whom the baronet found one night starving in the market-place of a country town. He picked her up—out of charity; and because the creature happened to have a pretty face, he was weak enough to marry her."

"Respect the follies of the dead," replied Lionel. "My uncle's love was generous. I only regret that the object of it was so unworthy."

"Oh!" exclaimed Reginald, "I thought just now that you sympathized with my lady."

"I sympathize with every remorseful sinner," said Lionel.

"Ah, that's your shop!" cried Reginald, who could not conceal his bitter feelings. "You sympathize with Lady Eversleigh because she is a wealthy sinner, and mistress of Raynham Castle. Perhaps you'll stop here and try to step into Sir Oswald's shoes. I don't know whether there's any law against a man marrying his uncle's widow."

"You insult me, and you insult the dead, Sir Reginald, by the tone in which you discuss these things," answered Lionel Dale. "I shall leave Raynham by this evening's coach, and there is little likelihood that Lady Eversleigh and I shall ever meet again. It is not for me to judge her sins, or penetrate the secrets of her heart. I believe that her grief to-day was thoroughly genuine. It is not because a woman has sinned that she must needs be incapable of any womanly feeling."

"You are in a very charitable humour, Lionel," said Sir Reginald, with a sneer; "but you can afford to be charitable."

Mr. Dale did not reply to this insolent speech.

Sir Reginald Eversleigh and his two cousins left the village of Raynham by the same coach. The evening was finer than the day had been, and a full moon steeped the landscape in her soft light, as the travellers looked their last on the grand old castle.

The baronet contemplated the scene with unmitigated rage.

"Hers!" he muttered; "hers! to have and hold so long as she lives! A nameless woman has tricked me out of the inheritance which should have been mine. But let her beware! Despair is bold, and I may yet discover some mode of vengeance."

While the departing traveller mused thus, a pale woman stood at one of the windows of Raynham Castle, looking out upon the woods, over which the moon sailed in all her glory.

"Mine!" she said to herself; "those lands and woods belong to me!—to me, who have stood face to face with starvation!—to me, who have considered it a privilege to sleep in an empty barn! They are mine; but the possession of them brings no pleasure. My life has been blighted by a wrong so cruel, that wealth and position are worthless in my eyes."

* * * * *

CHAPTER XIII.

IN YOUR PATIENCE YE ARE STRONG.

Early upon the morning after the funeral, a lad from the village of Raynham presented himself at the principal door of the servants' offices, and asked to see Lady Eversleigh's maid.

The young woman who filled that office was summoned, and came to inquire the business of the messenger.

Her name was Jane Payland; she was a Londoner by birth, and a citizen of the world by education.

She had known very little of either comfort or prosperity before she entered the service of Lady Eversleigh. She was, therefore, in some measure at least, devoted to the interests of that mistress, and she was inclined to believe in her innocence;

though, even to her, the story of the night in Yarborough Tower seemed almost too wild and improbable for belief.

Jane Payland was about twenty-four years of age, tall, slim, and active. She had no pretensions to beauty; but was the sort of person who is generally called lady-like.

This morning she went to the little lobby, in which the boy had been told to wait, indignant at the impertinence of anyone who could dare to intrude upon her mistress at such a time.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she asked angrily.

"If you please, ma'am, I'm Widow Beckett's son," the boy answered, in evident terror of the young woman in the rustling black silk dress and smart cap; "and I've brought this letter, please; and I was only to give it to the lady's own maid, please.

"I am her own maid," answered Jane.

The boy handed her a dirty-looking letter, directed, in a bold clear hand, to Lady Eversleigh.

"Who gave you this?" asked Jane Payland, looking at the dirty envelope with extreme disgust.

"It was a tramp as give it me—a tramp as I met in the village; and I'm to wait for an answer, please, and I'm to take it to him at the 'Hen and Chickens.'"

"How dare you bring Lady Eversleigh a letter given you by a tramp—a begging letter, of course? I wonder at your impudence."

"I didn't go to do no harm," expostulated Master Beckett. "He says to me, he says, 'If her ladyship once sets eyes upon that letter, she'll arnswer it fast enough; and now you cut and run,' he says; 'it's a matter of life and death, it is, and it won't do to waste time over it.'"

These words were rather startling to the mind of Jane Payland. What was she to do? Her own idea was, that the letter was the concoction of some practised impostor, and

that it would be an act of folly to take it to her mistress. But what if the letter should be really of importance? What if there should be some meaning in the boy's words? Was it not her duty to convey the letter to Lady Eversleigh?

"Stay here till I return," she said, pointing to a bench in the lobby.

The boy seated himself on the extremest edge of the bench, with his hat on his knees, and Jane Payland left him.

She went straight to the suite of apartments occupied by Lady Eversleigh.

Honoria did not raise her eyes when Jane Payland entered the room. There was a gloomy abstraction in her face, and melancholy engrossed her thoughts.

"I beg pardon for disturbing you, my lady," said Jane; "but a lad from the village has brought a letter, given him by a tramp; and, according to his account, the man talked in such a very strange manner that I thought I really ought to tell you, my lady; and—"

To the surprise of Jane Payland, Lady Eversleigh started suddenly from her seat, and advanced towards her, awakened into sudden life and energy as by a spell.

"Give me the letter," she cried, abruptly.

She took the soiled and crumpled envelope from her servant's hand with a hasty gesture.

"You may go," she said; "I will ring when I want you."

Jane Payland would have given a good deal to see that letter opened; but she had no excuse for remaining longer in the room. So she departed, and went to her lady's dressing-room, which, as well as all the other apartments, opened out of the corridor.

In about a quarter of an hour, Lady Eversleigh's bell rang, and Jane hurried to the morning-room.

She found her mistress still seated by the hearth. Her desk stood open on the table by her side; and on the desk lay a letter, so newly addressed that the ink on the envelope

was still wet.

"You will take that to the lad who is waiting," said Honoria, pointing to this newly-written letter.

"Yes, my lady."

Jane Payland departed. On the way between Lady Eversleigh's room and the lobby in the servants' offices, she had ample leisure to examine the letter.

It was addressed—

"Mr. Brown, at the 'Hen and Chickens.'"

It was sealed with a plain seal. Jane Payland was very well acquainted with the writing of her mistress, and she perceived at once that this letter was not directed in Lady Eversleigh's usual hand.

The writing had been disguised. It was evident, therefore, that this was a letter which Lady Eversleigh would have shrunk from avowing as her own.

Every moment the mystery grew darker. Jane Payland liked her mistress; but there were two things which she liked still better. Those two things were power and gain. She perceived in the possession of her lady's secrets a high-road to the mastery of both. Thus it happened that, when she had very nearly arrived at the lobby where the boy was waiting, Jane Payland suddenly changed her mind, and darted off in another direction.

She hurried along a narrow passage, up the servants' staircase, and into her own room. Here she remained for some fifteen or twenty minutes, occupied with some task which required the aid of a lighted candle.

At the end of that time she emerged, with a triumphant smile upon her thin lips, and Lady Eversleigh's letter in her hand.

The seal which secured the envelope was a blank seal; but it was not the same as the one with which Honoria Eversleigh had fastened her letter half an hour before.

The abigail carried the letter to the boy, and the boy departed, very well pleased to get clear of the castle without having received any further reproof.

He went at his best speed to the little inn, where he inquired for Mr. Brown.

That gentleman emerged presently from the inn-yard, where he had been hanging about, listening to all that was to be heard, and talking to the ostler.

He took the letter from the boy's hand, and rewarded him with the promised shilling. Then he left the yard, and walked down a lane leading towards the river.

In this unfrequented lane he tore open the envelope, and read his letter.

It was very brief:

"Since my only chance of escaping persecution is to accede, in some measure, to your demands, I will consent to see you. If you will wait for me to-night, at nine o'clock, by the water-side, to the left of the bridge, I will try to come to that spot at that hour. Heaven grant the meeting may be our last!"

Exactly as the village church clock struck nine, a dark figure crossed a low, flat meadow, lying near the water, and appeared upon the narrow towing-path by the river's edge. A man was walking on this pathway, his face half hidden by a slouched hat, and a short pipe in his month.

He lifted his hat presently, and bared his head to the cool night breeze. His hair was closely cropped, like that of a convict. The broad moonlight shining fall upon his face, revealed a dark, weather-beaten countenance—the face of the tramp who had stood at the park-gates to watch the passing of Sir Oswald's funeral train—the face of the tramp who had loitered in the stable-yard of the "Hen and Chickens"—the face of the man who had been known in Ratcliff Highway by the ominous name of Black Milsom.

This was the man who waited for Honoria Eversleigh in the moonlight by the quiet river.

He advanced to meet her as she came out of the meadow and appeared upon the pathway.

"Good evening, my lady," he said. "I suppose I ought to be humbly beholden to such a grand lady as you for coming here to meet the likes of me. But it seems rather strange you must needs come out here in secret to see such a very intimate acquaintance as I am, considering as you're the mistress of that great castle up yonder. I must say it seems uncommon hard a man can't pay a visit to his own—"

"Hush!" cried Lady Eversleigh. "Do not call me by that name, if you do not wish to inspire me with a deeper loathing than that which I already feel for you."

"Well, I'm blest!" muttered Mr. Milsom; "that's uncommon civil language from a young woman to—"

Honoria stopped him by a sudden gesture.

"I suppose you expect to profit by this interview?" she said.

"That I most decidedly do expect," answered the tramp.

"In that case, you will carefully avoid all mention of the past, for otherwise you will get nothing from me."

The man responded at first only with a sulky growl. Then, after a brief pause, he muttered—

"I don't want to talk about the past any more than you do, my fine, proud madam. If it isn't a pleasant time for you to remember, it isn't a pleasant time for me to remember. It's all very well for a young woman who has her victuals found for her to give herself airs about the manner other people find their victuals; but a man must live somehow or other. If he can't get his living in a pleasant way, he must get it in an unpleasant way."

After this there was a silence which lasted for some minutes. Lady Eversleigh was trying to control the agitation which oppressed her, despite the apparent calmness of

her manner. Black Milsom walked by her side in sullen silence, waiting for her to speak.

The spot was lonely. Lady Eversleigh and her companion were justified in believing themselves unobserved.

But it was not so. Lonely as the spot was, those two were not alone. A stealthy, gliding, female figure, dark and shadowy in the uncertain light, had followed Lady Eversleigh from the castle gates, and that figure was beside her now, as she walked with Black Milsom upon the river bank.

The spy crept by the side of the hedge that separated the river bank from the meadow; and sheltered thus, she was able to distinguish almost every word spoken by the two upon the bank, so clearly sounded their voices in the still night air.

"How did you find me here?" asked Lady Eversleigh, at last.

"By accident. You gave us the slip so cleverly that time you took it into your precious head to cut and run, that, hunt where we would, we were never able to find you. I gave it up for a bad job; and then things went agen me, and I got sent away. But I'm my own master again now; and I mean to make good use of my liberty, I can tell you, my lady. I little knew how you'd feathered your nest while I was on the other side of the water. I little thought how you would turn up at last, when I least expected to see you. You might have knocked me down with a feather yesterday, when that fine funeral came out of the park gates, and I saw your face at the window of one of the coaches. You must have been an uncommonly clever young woman, and an uncommonly sly one, to get a baronite for your husband, and to get a spooney old cove to leave you all his fortune, after behaving so precious bad to him. Did your husband know who you were when he married you?"

"He found me starving in the street of a country town. He knew that I was friendless, homeless, penniless. That knowledge did not prevent him making me his wife."

"Ah! but there was something more he didn't know. He didn't know that you were

Black Milsom's daughter; you didn't tell him that, I'll lay a wager."

"I did not tell him that which I know to be a lie," replied Honoria, calmly.

"Oh, it's a lie, is it? You are not my daughter, I suppose?"

"No, Thomas Milsom, I am not—I know and feel that I am not"

"Humph!" muttered Black Milsom, savagely; "if you were not my daughter, how was it that you grew up to call me father?"

"Because I was forced to do so. I remember being told to call you father. I remember being beaten because I refused to do so—beaten till I submitted from very fear of being beaten to death. Oh, it was a bright and happy childhood, was it not, Thomas Milsom? A childhood to look back to with love and regret. And now, finding that fortune has lifted me out of the gutter into which you flung me, you come to me to demand your share of my good fortune, I suppose?"

"That's about it, my lady," answered Mr. Milsom, with supreme coolness. "I don't mind a few hard words, more or less—they break no bones; and, what's more, I'm used to 'em. What I want is money, ready money, down on the nail, and plenty of it. You may pelt me as hard as you like with fine speeches, as long as you cash up liberally; but cash I must have, by fair means or foul, and I want a pretty good sum to start with."

"You want a large sum," said Honoria, quietly; "how much do you want?"

"Well, I don't want to take a mean advantage of your generosity, so I'll be moderate. Say five thousand pounds—to begin with."

"And you expect to get that from me?"

"Of course I do."

"Five thousand pounds?"

"Five thousand pounds, ready money."

Lady Eversleigh stopped suddenly, and looked the man full in the face.

"You shall not have five thousand pence," she exclaimed, "not five thousand pence. My dead husband's money shall never pass into your hands, to be squandered in scenes of vice and crime. If you choose to live an honest life, I will allow you a hundred a year—a pension which shall be paid you quarterly—through the hands of my London solicitors. Beyond this, I will not give you a halfpenny."

"What!" roared Black Milsom, in an infuriated tone. "What, Jenny Milsom, Honoria, Lady Eversleigh, or whatever you may please to call yourself, do you think I will stand that? Do you think I will hold my tongue unless you pay me handsomely to keep silence? You don't know the kind of man you have to deal with. To-morrow every one in the village shall know what a high-born lady lives up at the old castle—they shall know what a dutiful daughter the lady of Raynham is, and how she suffers her father to tramp barefoot in the mud, while she rides in her carriage!"

"You may tell them what you please."

"I'll tell them plenty, you may depend upon it."

"Will you tell them how Valentine Jernam came by his death?" asked Honoria, in a strange tone.

The tramp started, and for a few moments seemed at a loss for words in which to reply. But he recovered himself very quickly, and exclaimed, savagely—

"I'm not going to tell them any of your senseless dreams and fancies; but I mean to tell them who you are. That will be quite enough for them; and before I do let them know so much, you'd better change your mind, and act generously towards me."

"Upon that subject I shall never change my mind," answered Honoria Eversleigh, with perfect self-possession. "You will accept the pension I offer you, or you will reject it, as you please—you will never receive more, directly or indirectly, from me," she continued, presently. "As for your threat of telling my miserable history to the people of this place, it is a threat which can have no influence over me. Tell these people what you choose. Happily, the opinion of the world is of small account

to me."

"You will change your mind between this and to-morrow morning," cried Black Milsom.

He was almost beside himself with rage and mortification. He felt as if he could have torn this woman to pieces—this proud and courageous creature, who dared to defy him.

"I shall not change my mind," answered Honoria. "You could not conquer me, even when I was a weak and helpless child; you must remember that."

"Humph! you were rather a queer temper in those days—a strange-looking child, too, with your white face and your big black eyes."

"Aye; and even in those days my will was able to do battle with men and women, and to support me even against your violence. You, and those belonging to you, were able to break my heart, but were not strong enough to bend my spirit. I have the same spirit yet, Thomas Milsom; and you will find it useless to try to turn me from my purpose."

The man did not answer immediately. He looked fiercely, searchingly, at the pale, resolute face that was turned to him in the moonlight.

"The name of my solicitor is Dunford," said Honoria, presently; "Mr. Joseph Dunford, of Gray's Inn. If you apply to him on your arrival in London, he will give you the first installment of your pension."

"Five and twenty pounds!" grumbled Milsom; "a very handsome amount, upon my word! And you have fifteen thousand a year!"

"I have."

"May the curse of a black and bitter heart cling to you!" cried the man.

Lady Eversleigh turned from her companion with a gesture of loathing. But there was no fear in her heart. She walked slowly back to the gate leading into the

meadow, followed by Milsom, who heaped abusive epithets upon her at every step. As she entered the meadow, the figure of the spy drew suddenly back into the shadow of the hedge; from which it did not emerge till Honoria had disappeared through the little gate on the opposite side of the field, and the heavy tramp of Milsom's footsteps had died away in the distance.

Then the figure came forth into the broad moonlight; and that subdued, but clear radiance, revealed the pale, thin face of Jane Payland.

* * * * *

When Jane Payland was brushing her mistress's hair that night, she ventured to sound her as to her future movements, by a few cautions and respectful questions, to which Lady Eversleigh replied with less than her usual reticence. From her lady's answers, the waiting-maid ascertained that she had no idea of seeking any relaxation in change of scene, but purposed to reside at Raynham for at least one year.

Jane Payland wondered at the decision of her mistress's manner. She had imagined that Lady Eversleigh would be eager to leave a place in which she found herself the object of disapprobation and contempt.

"If I were her, I would go to France, and be a great lady in Paris—which is twenty times gayer and more delightful than any place in stupid, straight-laced old England," thought Jane Payland. "If I had her money, I would spend it, and enjoy life, in spite of all the world."

"I'm afraid your health will suffer from a long residence at the castle, my lady," said Jane, presently, determined to do all in her power to bring about a change in her mistress's plans. "After such a shock as you have had, some distraction must be necessary. When I had the honour of living with the Duchess of Mountaintour, and we lost the dear duke, the first thing I said to the duchess, after the funeral, was—'Change of scene, your grace, change of scene; nothing like change of scene when the mind has received a sudden blow.' The sweet duchess's physician actually

echoed my words, though he had never heard them; and within a week of the sad ceremony we started for the Continent, where we remained a year; at the end of which period the dear duchess was united to the Marquis of Purpeltown."

"The duchess was speedily consoled," replied Lady Eversleigh, with a smile which was not without bitterness. "No doubt the variety and excitement of a Continental tour did much towards blotting out all memory of her dead husband. But I do not wish to forget. I am in no hurry to obliterate the image of one who was most dear to me."

Jane Payland looked very searchingly at the pale, earnest face reflected in the glass.

"For me, that which the world calls pleasure never possessed any powerful fascination," continued Honoria, gravely. "My childhood and youth were steeped in sorrow—sorrow beyond anything you can imagine, Jane Payland; though I have heard you say that you have seen much trouble. The remembrance of it comes back to me more vividly than ever now. Thus it is that I shrink from society, which can give me no real pleasure. Had I no special reason for remaining at Raynham, I should not care to leave it"

"But you have a special reason, my lady?" inquired Jane, eagerly.

"I have."

"May I presume to ask—"

"You may, Jane; and I think I may venture to trust you fully, for I believe you are my friend. I mean to stay at Raynham, because, in this hour of sorrow and desolation, Providence has not abandoned me entirely to despair. I have one bright hope, which renders the thought of my future endurable to me. I stay at Raynham, because I hope next spring an heir will be born to Raynham Castle."

"Oh, what happiness! And you wish the heir to be born at the castle, my lady?"

"I do! I have been the victim of one plot, but I will not fall blindfold into a second

snare; and there is no infamy which my enemies are not base enough to attempt. There shall be no mystery about my life. From the hour of my husband's death to the hour of his child's birth, the friends of that lost husband shall know every act of my existence. They shall see me day by day. The old servants of the family shall attend me. I will live in the old house, surrounded by all who knew and loved Sir Oswald. No vile plotters shall ever be able to say that there was trick or artifice connected with the birth of that child. If I live to protect and watch over it, that infant life shall be guarded against every danger, and defended from every foe. And there will be many foes ready to assail the inheritor of Raynham."

"Why so, my lady?"

"Because that young life, and my life, will stand between a villain and a fortune. If I and my child were both to die, Reginald Eversleigh would become possessor of the wealth to which he once was the acknowledged heir. By the terms of Sir Oswald's will, he receives very little in the present, but the future has many chances for him. If I die childless, he will inherit the Raynham estates. If his two cousins, the Dales, die without direct heirs, he will inherit ten thousand a year."

"But that seems only a poor chance after all, my lady. There is no reason why Sir Reginald Eversleigh should survive you or the two Mr. Dales."

"There is no reason, except his own villany," answered Honoria, thoughtfully. "There are some men capable of anything. But let us talk no further on the subject. I have confided my secret to you, Jane Payland, because I think you are faithfully devoted to my interests. You know now why I am resolved to remain at Raynham Castle; and you think my decision wise, do you not?"

"Well, yes; I certainly do, my lady," answered Jane, after some moments of hesitation.

"And now leave me. Good night! I have kept you long this evening, I see by that timepiece. But my thoughts were wandering, and I was unconscious of the progress

of time. Good night!"

Jane Payland took a respectful leave of her mistress, and departed, absorbed in thought.

"Is she a good woman or a bad one?" she wondered, as she sat by the fire in her own comfortable apartment. "If she is a bad woman, she's an out-and-outer; for she looks one in the face, with those superb black eyes of hers, as bright and clear as the image of truth itself. She must be good and true. She must! And yet that night's absence, and that story about Yarborough Tower—that seems too much for anybody on earth to believe."

CHAPTER XIV.

A GHOSTLY VISITANT.

For nearly three years Thomas Milsom had been far away from London. He had been arrested on a charge of burglary, within a month of Valentine Jernam's death, and condemned to five years' transportation. In less than three years, by some kind of artful management, and by the exercise of consummate hypocrisy, Mr. Milsom had contrived to get himself free again, and to return to England his own master.

He landed in Scotland, and tramped from Granton to Yorkshire, where an accidental encounter with an old acquaintance tempted him to linger at Raynham. The two tramps, scoundrels both, and both alike penniless and shoeless, had stood side by side at the gates of the park, to see the stately funeral train pass out.

And thus Thomas Milsom had beheld her whom he called his daughter,—the girl who had fled, with her old grandfather, from the shelter of his fatal roof three years before.

After that unprofitable interview with Honoria, Thomas Milsom his face Londonwards.

"The day will come when you and I will square accounts, my lady," he muttered, as

he looked up to those battlemented turrets, with a blasphemous curse, and then turned his back upon Raynham Castle, and the peaceful little village beneath it.

The direction in which Mr. Milsom betook himself, after he passed the border-land of waste ground and newly-built houses which separates London from the country, was the direction of Ratcliff Highway. He walked rapidly through the crowded streets, in which the crowd grew thicker as he approached the regions of the Tower. But rapidly as he walked, the steps of Time were faster. It had been bright noon when he entered the quiet little town of Barnet. It was night when he first heard the scraping fiddles and stamping feet of Ratcliff Highway. He went straight to the 'Jolly Tar'.

Here all was unchanged. There were the flaring tallow candles, set in a tin hoop that hung from the low ceiling, dropping hot grease ever and anon on the loungers at the bar. There was the music—the same Scotch reels and Irish jigs, played on squeaking fiddles, which were made more inharmonious by the accompaniment of shrill Pandean pipes. There was the same crowd of sailors and bare-headed, bare-armed, loud-voiced women assembled in the stifling bar, the same cloud of tobacco-smoke, the same Babel of voices to be heard from the concert-room within; while now and then, amongst the shouts and the laughter, the oaths and the riot, there sounded the tinkling of the old piano, and the feeble upper notes of a very poor soprano voice.

Black Milsom had drawn his hat over his eyes before entering the "Jolly Tar."

The bar of that tavern was sunk considerably below the level of the street, and standing on the uppermost of the steps by which Mr. Wayman's customers descended to his hospitable abode, Black Milsom was able to look across the heads of the crowd to the face of the landlord busy behind his bar.

In that elevated position Black Milsom waited until Dennis Wayman happened to look up and perceive the stranger on the threshold.

As he did so, Thomas Milsom drew the back of his hand rapidly across his mouth,

with a gesture that was evidently intended as a signal.

The signal was answered by a nod from Wayman, and then Black Milsom descended the three steps, and pushed his way to the bar.

"Can I have a bed, mate, and a bit of supper?" he asked, in a voice that was carefully disguised.

"Ay, ay, to be sure you can," answered Wayman; "you can have everything that is comfortable and friendly by paying for it. This house is one of the most hospitable places there is—to those that can pay the reckoning."

This rather clumsy joke was received with an applauding guffaw by the sailors and women next the bar.

"If you'll step through that door yonder, you'll find a snug little room, mate," said Dennis Wayman, in the tone which he might have used in speaking to a stranger; "I'll send you a steak and a potato as soon as they can be cooked."

Thomas Milsom nodded. He pushed open the rough wooden door which was so familiar to him, and went into the dingy little den which, in the 'Jolly Tar', was known as the private parlour.

It was the room in which he had first seen Valentine Jernam. Two years and a half had passed since he had last entered it; and during that time Mr. Milsom had been paying the penalty of his misdeeds in Van Dieman's Land. This dingy little den, with its greasy walls and low, smoky ceiling, was a kind of paradise to the returned wanderer. Here, at least, was freedom. Here, at least, he was his own master: free to enjoy strong drinks and strong tobacco—free to be lazy when he pleased, and to work after the fashion that suited him best.

He seated himself in one chair, and planted his legs on another. Then he took a short clay pipe from his pocket, filled and lighted it, and began to smoke, in a slow meditative manner, stopping every now and then to mutter to himself, between the puffs of tobacco.

Mr. Milsom had finished his second pipe of shag tobacco, and had given utterance to more than one exclamation of anger and impatience, when the door was opened, and Dennis Wayman made his appearance, bearing a tray with a couple of covered dishes and a large pewter pot.

"I thought I'd bring you your grub myself, mate," he said; "though I'm precious busy in yonder. I'm uncommonly glad to see you back again. I've been wondering where you was ever since you disappeared."

"You'd have left off wondering if you'd known I was on the other side of this blessed world of ours. I thought you knew I was—"

Mr. Milsom's delicacy of feeling prevented his finishing this speech.

"I knew you had got into trouble," answered Mr. Wayman. "At least, I didn't know for certain, but I guessed as much; though sometimes I was half inclined to think you had turned cheat, and given me the slip."

"Bolted with the swag, I suppose you mean?"

"Precisely!" answered Dennis Wayman, coolly.

"Which shows your suspicious nature," returned Milsom, in a sulky tone. "When an unlucky chap turns his back upon his comrades, the worst word in their mouths isn't half bad enough for him. That's the way of the world, that is. No, Dennis Wayman; I didn't bolt with the swag—not sixpence of Valentine Jernam's money have I had the spending of; no even what I won from him at cards. I was nobbled one day, without a moment's warning, on a twopenny-halfpenny charge of burglary—never you mind whether it was true, or whether it was false—that ain't worth going into. I was took under a false name, and I stuck to that false name, thinking it more convenient. I should have sent to let you know, if I could have found a safe hand to take my message; but I couldn't find a living creature that was anything like safe—so there I was, remanded on a Monday, tried on a Tuesday, and then a fortnight after shipped off like a bullock, along of so many other bullocks; and that's the long and the short

of it."

After having said which, Mr. Milsom applied himself to his supper, which consisted of a smoking steak, and a dish of still more smoking potatoes.

Dennis Wayman sat watching him for some minutes in thoughtful silence. The intent gaze with which he regarded the face of his friend, was that of a man who was by no means inclined to believe every syllable he had heard. After Milsom had devoured about a pound of steak, and at least two pounds of potatoes, Mr. Wayman ventured to interrupt his operations by a question.

"If you didn't collar the money, what became of it?" he asked.

"Put away," returned the other man, shortly; "and as safe as a church, unless my bad luck goes against me harder than it ever went yet."

"You hid it?" said Wayman, interrogatively.

"I did."

"Where?"

Mr. Milsom looked at his friend with a glance of profound cunning.

"Wouldn't you like to know—oh, wouldn't you just like to know, Mr. Wayman?" he said. "And wouldn't you just dose me with a cup of drugged coffee, and cut off to ransack my hiding-place while I was lying helpless in your hospitable abode. That's the sort of thing you'd do, if I happened to be a born innocent, isn't it, Mr. Wayman? But you see I'm not a born innocent, so you won't get the chance of doing anything of the kind."

"Don't be a fool," returned Dennis Wayman, in a surly tone. "You'll please to remember that one half of Valentine Jernam's money belongs to me, and ought to have been in my possession long before this. I was an idiot to trust it in your keeping."

"You trusted it in my keeping because you were obliged to do so," answered Black

Milsom, "and I owe you no gratitude for your confidence. I happened to know a Jew who was willing to give cash for the notes and bills of exchange; and you trusted them to me because it was the only way to get them turned into cash."

The landlord of the 'Jolly Tar' nodded a surly assent to this rather cynical statement.

"I saw my friend the Jew, and made a very decent bargain," resumed Milsom. "I hid the money in a convenient place, intending to bring you your share at the earliest opportunity. I was lagged that very night, and had no chance of touching the cash after I had once stowed it away. So, you see, it was no fault of mine that you didn't get the money."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Wayman. "It has been rather hard lines for me to be kept out of it so long. And now you have come back, I suppose you can take me at once to the hiding place. I want money very badly just now."

"Do you?" said Thomas Milsom, with a sneer. "That's a complaint you're rather subject to, isn't it—the want of money? Now, as I've answered your questions, perhaps you'll answer mine. Has there been much stir down this way while I've been over the water?"

"Very little; things have been as dull as they well could be."

"Ah! so you'll say, of course. Can you tell me whether any one has lived in my old place while my back has been turned?"

The landlord of the 'Jolly Tar' started with a gesture of alarm.

"It wasn't there you hid the money, was it?" he asked, eagerly.

"Suppose it was, what then?"

"Why every farthing of it is lost. The place has been taken by a man, who has pulled the best part of it down, and rebuilt it. If you hid your money there, there's little chance of your ever seeing it again," said Wayman.

Black Milsom's dark face grew livid, as he started from his chair and dragged on the

crater coat which he had taken off on entering the room.

"It would be like my luck to lose that money," he said; "it would be just like my luck. Come, Wayman. What are you staring at, man?" he cried impatiently. "Come."

"Where?"

"To my old place. You can tell me all about the changes at we go. I must see to this business at once."

The moon was shining over the masts and rigging in the Pool, and over the house-tops of Bermondsey and Wapping, as Black Milsom and his companion started on their way to the old house by the water.

They went, as on a former occasion, in that vehicle which Mr. Wayman called his trap; and as they drove along the lonely road, across the marshy flat by the river, Dennis Wayman told his companion what had happened in his absence.

"For a year the house stood empty," he said; "but at the end of that time an old sea-captain took a fancy to it because of the water about it, and the view of the Pool from the top windows. He bought it, and pulled it almost all to pieces, rebuilt it, and I doubt if there is any of the old house standing. He has made quite a smart little place of it. He's a queer old chap, this Cap'en Duncombe, I'm told, and rather a tough customer."

"I'll see the inside of his house, however tough he may be," answered Milsom, in a dogged tone. "If he's a tough customer, he'll find me a tougher. Has he got any family?"

"One daughter—as pretty a girl as you'll see within twenty miles of London!"

"Well, we'll go and have a look at his place to-night. We'd better put up your trap at the 'Pilot Boat.'"

Mr. Wayman assented to the wisdom of this arrangement. The "Pilot Boat" was a dilapidated-looking, low-roofed little inn, where there were some tumble-down

stables, which were more often inhabited by bloated grey water-rats than by horses. In these stables Mr. Wayman lodged his pony and vehicle, while he and Milsom walked on to the cottage.

"Why I shouldn't have known the place!" cried Milsom, as his companion pointed to the captain's habitation.

The transformation was, indeed, complete. The dismal dwelling, which had looked as if it were, in all truth, haunted by a ghost, had been changed into one of the smartest little cottages to be seen in the suburbs of eastern London.

The ditch had been narrowed and embanked, and two tiny rustic bridges, of fantastical wood-work, spanned its dark water. The dreary pollard-willows had vanished, and evergreens occupied their places. The black rushes had been exchanged for flowers. A trim little garden appeared where all had once been waste ground; and a flag-staff, with a bit of bunting, gave a naval aspect to the spot.

All was dark; not one glimmer of light to be seen in any of the windows.

The garden was secured by an iron gate, and surrounded by iron rails on all sides, except that nearest the river. Here, the only boundary was a hedge of laurels, which were still low and thin; and here Dennis Wayman and his companion found easy access to the neatly-kept pleasure-ground.

With stealthy footsteps they invaded Captain Duncombe's little domain, and walked slowly round the house, examining every door and window as they went.

"Is the captain a rich man?" asked Milsom.

"Yes; I believe he's pretty well off—some say uncommonly well off. He spent over a thousand pounds on this place."

"Curse him for his pains!" returned Black Milsom, savagely. "He knows how to take care of his property. It would be a very clever burglar that would get into that house. The windows are all secured with outside shutters, that seem as solid as if they were

made of iron, and the doors don't yield the twentieth part of an inch."

Then, after completing his examination of the house, Milsom exclaimed, in the same savage tone—

"Why, the man has swept away every timber of the place I lived in."

"I told you as much," answered Wayman; "I've heard say there was nothing left of old Screwton's house but a few solid timbers and a stack of chimneys."

Screwton was the name of the miser whose ghost had been supposed to haunt the old place.

Black Milsom gave a start as Dennis uttered the words "stack of chimneys."

"Oh!" he said, in an altered tone; "so they left the chimney-stack, did they?"

Mr. Wayman perceived that change of tone.

"I begin to understand," he said; "you hid that money in one of the chimneys."

"Never you mind where I hid it. There's little chance of its being found there, after bricklayers pulling the place to pieces. I must get into that house, come what may."

"You'll find that difficult," answered Wayman.

"Perhaps. But I'll do it, or my name's not Black Milsom."

* * * * *

Captain Joseph Duncombe, or Joe Duncombe, as he generally called himself, was a burly, rosy-faced man of fifty years of age; a hearty, honest fellow. He was a widower, with only one child, a daughter, whom he idolized.

Any father might have been forgiven for being devotedly fond of such a daughter as Rosamond Duncombe.

Rosamond was one of those light-hearted, womanly creatures who seem born to make home a paradise. She had a sweet temper; a laugh which was like music; a manner which was fascination itself.

When it is also taken into consideration that she had a pretty little nose, lips that were fresh and rosy as ripe red cherries, cheeks that were like dewy roses, newly-gathered, and large, liquid eyes, of the deepest, clearest blue, it must be confessed that Rosamond Duncombe was a very charming girl.

If Joseph Duncombe doted on this bright-haired, blue-eyed daughter, his love was not unrecompensed. Rosamond idolized her father, whom she believed to be the best and noblest of created beings.

Rosamond's remembrance of her mother was but shadowy. She had lost that tender protector at a very early age.

Within the last year and a half her father had retired from active service, after selling his vessel, the "Vixen," for a large price, so goodly a name had she borne in the merchant service.

This retirement of Captain Duncombe's was a sacrifice which he made for his beloved daughter.

For himself, the life of a seaman had lost none of its attractions. But when he saw his fair young daughter of an age to leave school, he determined that she should have a home.

He had made a very comfortable little fortune during five-and-thirty years of hard service. But he had never made a sixpence the earning of which he need blush to remember. He was known in the service as a model of truth and honesty.

Driving about the eastern suburbs of London, he happened one day to pass that dreary plot of waste ground on which the miser's tumble-down dwelling had been built. It was a pleasant day in April, and the place was looking less dreary than usual. The spring sunshine lit up the broad river, and the rigging of the ships stood out in sharp black lines against a bright blue sky.

A board against the dilapidated palings announced that the ground was to be sold.

Captain Duncombe drew up his horse suddenly.

"That's the place for me!" he exclaimed; "close by the old river, whose tide carried me down to the sea on my first voyage five-and-thirty years ago—within view of the Pool, and all the brave old ships lying at anchor. That's the place for me! I'll sweep away that old ramshackle hovel, and build a smart water-tight little cottage for my pet and me to live in; and I'll stick the Union Jack on a main-top over our heads, and at night, when I lie awake and hear the water rippling by, I shall fancy I'm still at sea."

A landsman would most likely have stopped to consider that the neighbourhood was lonely, the ground damp and marshy, the approach to this solitary cross-road through the most disreputable part of London. Captain Duncombe considered nothing, except two facts—first the river, then the view of the ships in the Pool.

He drove back to Wapping, where he found the house-agent who was commissioned to sell old Screwton's dwelling. That gentleman was only too glad to get a customer for a place which no one seemed inclined to have on any terms. He named his price. The merchant-captain did not attempt to make a bargain; but agreed to buy the place, and to give ready money for it, as soon as the necessary deeds were drawn up and signed. In a week this was done, and the captain found himself possessor of a snug little freehold on the banks of the Thames.

He lost no time in transforming the place into an abode of comfort, instead of desolation. It was only when the transformation was complete, and Captain Duncombe had spent upwards of a thousand pounds on his folly, that he became acquainted with the common report about the place.

Sailors are proverbially superstitious. After hearing that dismal story, Joseph Duncombe was rather inclined to regret the choice he had made; but he resolved to keep the history of old Screwton a secret from his daughter, though it cost him perpetual efforts to preserve silence on this subject.

In spite of his precaution, Rosamond came to know of the ghost. Visiting some poor cottagers, about a quarter of a mile from River View, she heard the whole story—told her unthinkingly by a foolish old woman, who was amongst the recipients of her charity.

Soon after this, the story reached the ears of the two servants—an elderly woman, called Mugby, who acted as cook and housekeeper; and a smart girl, called Susan Trott.

Mrs. Mugby pretended to ridicule the idea of Screwton's ghost.

"I've lived in a many places, and I've heard tell of a many ghostes," she said; "but never yet did I set eyes on one, which my opinion is that, if people will eat cold pork for supper underdone, not to mention crackling or seasoning, and bottled stout, which is worse, and lies still heavier on the stomach—unless you take about as much ground ginger as would lie on a sixpence, and as much carbonate of soda as would lie on a fourpenny-bit—and go to bed upon it all directly afterwards, they will see no end of ghostes. I have never trifled with my digestion, and no ghostes have I ever seen."

The girl, Susan Trott, was by no means so strong-minded. The idea of Miser Screwton's ghost haunted her perpetually of an evening; and she would no more have gone out into the captain's pretty little garden after dark, than she would have walked straight to the mouth of a cannon.

Rosamond Duncombe affected to echo the heroic sentiments of the housekeeper, Mrs. Mugby. There never had been such things as ghosts, and never would be; and all the foolish stories that were told of phantoms and apparitions, had their sole foundation in the imaginations of the people who told them.

Such was the state of things in the household of Captain Duncombe at the time of Black Milsom's return from Van Diemen's Land.

It was within two nights after that return, that an event occurred, never to be

forgotten by any member of Joseph Duncombe's household.

The evening was cold, but fine; the moon, still at its full, shone bright and clear upon the neat garden of River View Cottage. Captain Duncombe and his daughter were alone in their comfortable sitting-room, playing the Captain's favourite game of backgammon, before a cheery fire. The housekeeper, Mrs. Mugby, had complained all day of a touch of rheumatism, and had gone to bed after the kitchen tea, leaving Susan Trott, the smart little parlour-maid, to carry in the pretty pink and gold china tea-service, and hissing silver tea-kettle, to Miss Rosamond and her papa in the sitting-room.

Thus it was that, after having removed the tea-tray, and washed the pretty china cups and saucers, Susan Trott seated herself before the fire, and set herself to trim a new cap, which was designed for the especial bewilderment of a dashing young baker.

The dashing young baker had a habit of lingering at the gate of River View Cottage a good deal longer than was required for the transaction of his business; and the dashing young baker had more than once hinted at an honourable attachment for Miss Susan Trott.

Thinking of the baker, and of all the tender things and bright promises of a happy future which he had murmured in her ear, as they walked home from church on the last Sunday evening, Susan found the solitary hours pass quickly enough. She looked up suddenly as the clock struck ten, and found that she had let the fire burn out.

It was rather an awful sensation to be alone in the lower part of the house after every one else had gone to bed; but Susan Trott was very anxious to finish the making of the new cap; so she went back to the kitchen, and seated herself once more at the table.

She had scarcely taken up her scissors to cut an end of ribbon, when a low, stealthy tapping sounded on the outer wooden shutter of the window behind her.

Susan gave a little shriek of terror, and dropped the scissors as if they had been red-hot. What could that awful sound mean at ten o'clock at night?

For some moments the little parlour-maid was completely overcome by terror. Then, all at once, her thoughts flew back to the person whose image had occupied her mind all that evening. Was it not just possible that the dashing young baker might have something very particular to say to her, and that he had come in this mysterious manner to say it?

Again the same low, stealthy tapping sounded on the shutter.

This time Susan Trott plucked up a spirit, took the bright brass candlestick in her hand, and went to the little door leading from the scullery to the back garden.

She opened the door and peered cautiously out. No one was to be seen—that tiresome baker was indulging in some practical joke, no doubt, and trying to frighten her.

Susan was determined not to be frightened by her sweet-heart's tricks, so she tripped boldly out into the garden, still carrying the brass candlestick.

At the first step the wind blew out the candle; but, of course, that was of very little consequence when the bright moonlight made everything as clearly visible as at noon.

"I know who it is," cried Susan, in a voice intended to reach the baker; "and it's a great shame to try and frighten a poor girl when she's sitting all alone by herself."

She had scarcely uttered the words when the candlestick fell from her extended hand, and she stood rooted to the gravel pathway—a statue of fear.

Exactly opposite to her, slowly advancing towards the open door of the scullery, she saw an awful figure—whose description was too familiar to her.

There it was. The ghost—the shadowy image of the man who had destroyed himself in that house. A tall, spectral figure, robed in a long garment of grey serge; a scarlet

handkerchief twisted round the head rendered the white face whiter by contrast with it.

As this awful figure approached, Susan Trott stepped backwards on the grass, leaving the pathway clear for the dreadful visitant.

The ghostly form stalked on with slow and solemn steps, and entered the house by the scullery door. For some minutes Susan remained standing on the grass, horror-struck, powerless to move. Then all at once feminine curiosity got the better even of terror, and she followed the phantom figure into the house.

From the kitchen doorway she beheld the figure standing on the hearth, his arms stretched above the fireplace, as if groping for something in the chimney.

Doubtless this had been the miser's hiding-place for his hoarded gold, and the ghost returned to the spot where the living man had been accustomed to conceal his treasures.

Susan darted across the hall, and ran upstairs to her master's room. She knocked loudly on the door, crying,—

"The ghost, master! the ghost! the old miser's ghost is in the kitchen!"

"What?" roared the captain, starting suddenly from his peaceful slumbers.

The girl repeated her awful announcement. The captain sprang out of bed, dressed himself in trousers and dressing-gown, and ran down-stairs, the girl close behind him.

They were just in time to see the figure, in the red head-gear and long grey dressing-gown, slowly stalking from the scullery door.

The captain followed the phantom into the garden; but held himself at a respectful distance from the figure, as it slowly paced along the smooth gravel pathway leading towards the laurel hedge.

The figure reached the low boundary that divided the garden from the river bank,

crossed it, and vanished amongst the thick white mists that rose from the water.

Joseph Duncombe trembled. A ghost was just the one thing which could strike terror to the seaman's bold heart.

When the figure had vanished, Captain Duncombe went to the spot where it had passed out of the garden.

Here he found the young laurels beaten and trampled down, as if by the heavy feet of human intruders.

This was strange.

He then went to the kitchen, accompanied by Susan Trott, who, although shivering like an aspen tree, had just sufficient strength of mind to find a lucifer and light her candle.

By the light of this candle Captain Buncombe examined the kitchen.

On the hearth, at his feet, he saw something gleaming in the uncertain light. He stooped to pick up this object, and found that it was a curious gold coin—a foreign coin, bent in a peculiar manner.

This was even yet more strange.

The captain put the coin in his pocket.

"I'll take good care of this, my girl," he said. "It isn't often a ghost leaves anything behind him."

* * * * *

CHAPTER XV.

A TERRIBLE RESOLVE.

When the hawthorns were blooming in the woods of Raynham, a new life dawned in the stately chambers of the castle.

A daughter was born to the beautiful widow-lady—a sweet consoler in the hour of her loneliness and desolation. Honoria Eversleigh lifted her heart to heaven, and rendered thanks for the priceless treasure which had been bestowed upon her. She had kept her word. From the hour of her husband's death she had never quitted Raynham Castle. She had lived alone, unvisited, unknown; content to dwell in stately solitude, rarely extending her walks and drives beyond the boundary of the park and forest.

Some few of the county gentry would have visited her; but she would not consent to be visited by a few. Honoria Eversleigh's was a proud spirit; and until the whole county should acknowledge her innocence, she would receive no one.

"Let them think of me or talk of me as they please," she said; "I can live my own life without them."

Thus the long winter months passed by, and Honoria was alone in that abode whose splendour must have seemed cold and dreary to the friendless woman.

But when she held her infant in her arms all was changed She looked down upon the baby-girl, and murmured softly—

"Your life shall be bright and peaceful, dearest, whatever mine may be. The future looks bleak and terrible for me; but for you, sweet one, it may be bright and fair."

The young mother loved her child with a passionate intensity; but even that love could not exclude darker passions from her breast.

There was much that was noble in the nature of this woman; but there was also much that was terrible. From her childhood she had been gifted with a power of intellect—a strength of will—that lifted her high above the common ranks of womanhood.

A fatal passion had taken possession of her soul after the untimely death of Sir Oswald; and that passion was a craving for revenge. She had been deeply wronged, and she could not forgive. She did not even try to forgive. She believed that revenge

was a kind of duty which she owed, not only to herself, but to the noble husband whom she had lost.

The memory of that night of anguish in Yarborough Tower, and that still darker hour of shame and despair in which Sit Oswald had refused to believe her innocent, was never absent from the mind of Honoria Eversleigh. She brooded upon these dark memories. Time could not lessen their bitterness. Even the soft influence of her infant's love could not banish those fatal recollections.

Time passed. The child grew and flourished, beautiful to her mother's enraptured eyes; and yet, even by the side of that fair baby's face arose the dark image of Victor Carrington.

For a long time the county people had kept close watch upon the proceedings of the lady at the castle.

The county people discovered that Lady Eversleigh never left Raynham; that she devoted herself to the rearing of her child as entirely as if she had been the humblest peasant-woman; and that she expended more money upon solid works of charity than had ever before been so spent by any member of the Eversleigh family, though that family had been distinguished by much generosity and benevolence.

The county people shrugged their shoulders contemptuously. They could not believe in the goodness of this woman, whose parentage no one knew, and whom every one had condemned.

She is playing a part, they thought; she wishes to impress us with the idea that she is a persecuted martyr—a suffering angel; and she hopes thus to regain her old footing amongst us, and queen it over the whole county, as she did when that poor infatuated Sir Oswald first brought her to Raynham. This was what the county people thought; until one day the tidings flew far and wide that Lady Eversleigh had left the castle for the Continent, and that she intended to remain absent for some years.

This seemed very strange; but what seemed still more strange, was the fact that the devoted mother was not accompanied by her child.

The little girl, Gertrude, so named after the mother of the late baronet, remained at Raynham under the care of two persons.

These two guardians were Captain Copplestone, and a widow lady of forty years of age, Mrs. Morden, a person of unblemished integrity, who had been selected as protectress and governess of the young heiress.

The child was at this time two and a half years of age. Very young, she seemed, to be thus left by a mother who had appeared to idolize her.

The county people shook their heads. They told each other that Lady Eversleigh was a hypocrite and an actress. She had never really loved her child—she had played the part of a sorrowing widow and a devoted mother for two years and a half, in the hope that by this means she would regain her position in society.

And now, finding that this was impossible, she had all of a sudden grown tired of playing her part, and had gone off to the Continent to spend her money, and enjoy her life after her own fashion.

This was what the world said of Honoria Eversleigh; but if those who spoke of her could have possessed themselves of her secrets, they would have discovered something very different from that which they imagined.

Lady Eversleigh left the castle in the early part of November accompanied only by her maid, Jane Payland.

A strange time of the year in which to start for the Continent, people said. It seemed still more strange that a woman of Lady Eversleigh's rank and fortune should go on a Continental journey with no other attendant than a maid-servant.

If the eyes of the world could have followed Lady Eversleigh, they would have made startling discoveries.

While it was generally supposed that the baronet's widow was on her way to Rome or Naples, two plainly-dressed women took possession of unpretending lodgings in Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road.

The apartments were taken by a lady who called herself Mrs. Eden, and who required them only for herself and maid. The apartments consisted of two large drawing-rooms, two bedrooms on the floor above, and a dressing-room adjoining the best bedroom.

The proprietor of the house was a Belgian merchant, called Jacob Mulck—a sedate old bachelor, who took a great deal of snuff, and Disquieted himself very little about the world in general, so long as life went smoothly for himself.

The remaining occupant of the house was a medical student, who rented one of the rooms on the third floor. Another room on the same floor was to let.

Such was the arrangement of the house when Mrs. Eden and her maid took possession of their apartments.

Mr. Jacob Mulck thought he had never seen such a beautiful woman as his new lodger, when he entered her apartment, to ascertain whether she was satisfied with the accommodation provided for her.

She was sitting in the full light of an unshaded lamp as he entered the room. Her black silk dress was the perfection of simplicity; its sombre hues relieved only by the white collar which encircled her slender throat. Her pale face looked of an ivory whiteness, in contrast to the dark, deep eyes, and arched brows of sombre brown.

The lady pronounced herself perfectly satisfied with all the arrangements that had been made for her comfort.

"I am in London on business of importance," she said; "and shall, therefore, receive very little company; but I may have to hold many interviews with men of business, and I trust that my affairs may not be made the subject of curiosity or gossip, either in this house or outside it."

Mr. Mulck declared that he was the last person in the world to talk; and that his two servants were both elderly women, the very pink of steadiness and propriety.

Having said this, he took his leave; and as he did so, stole one more glance at the beautiful stranger.

She had fallen into an attitude which betrayed complete abstraction of mind. Her elbow rested on the table by her side; her eyes were shaded by her hand.

Upon that white, slender hand, Jacob Mulck saw diamonds such as are not often seen upon the fingers of the inhabitants of Percy Street. Mr. Mulck occasionally dealt in diamonds; and he knew enough about them to perceive at a glance that the rings worn by his lodger were worth a small fortune.

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Mulck, as he returned to his comfortable sitting-room; "those diamonds tell a tale. There's something mysterious about this lodger of mine. However, my rent will be safe—that's one comfort."

While the landlord was musing thus, the lodger was employed in a manner which might well have awakened his curiosity, could he have beheld her at that moment.

She had fallen on her knees before a low easy-chair—her face buried in her hands, her slender frame shaken by passionate sobs.

"My child!" she exclaimed, in almost inarticulate murmurs; "my beloved, my idol!—it is so bitter to be absent from you! so bitter! so bitter!"

* * * * *

Early on the morning after her arrival in London, Honoria Eversleigh, otherwise Mrs. Eden, went in a cab to the office of an individual called Andrew Larkspur, who occupied dingy chambers in Lyon's Inn.

The science of the detective officer had not, at that time, reached its present state of perfection; but even then there were men who devoted their lives to the work of private investigations, and the elucidation of the strange secrets and mysteries of

social life.

Such a man was Andrew Larkspur, late Bow Street runner, now hanger-on of the new detective police. He was renowned for his skill in the prosecution of secret service; and it was rumoured that he had amassed a considerable fortune by his mysterious employment.

He was not a man who openly sought employers. His services were in great request among a certain set of people, and he had little idle time on his hands. His name was painted in dirty white letters on the black door of his dingy chambers on a fourth story. On this door he called himself, "Andrew Larkspur, Commission Agent."

It will be seen by-and-by how Honoria Eversleigh had become acquainted with the fact of this man's existence.

She went alone to seek an interview with him. She had found herself compelled to confide in Jane Payland to a very considerable extent; but she did not tell that attendant more than she was obliged to tell of the dark business which had brought her to London.

She was fortunate enough to find Mr. Andrew Larkspur alone, and disengaged. He was a little, sandy-haired man, of some sixty years of age, spare and wizened, with a sharp nose, like a beak, and thin, long arms, ending in large, claw-like hands, that were like the talons of a bird of prey. Altogether, Mr. Lark spur had very much of the aspect of an elderly vulture which had undergone partial transformation into a human being.

Honoria was in no way repelled by the aspect of this man. She saw that he was clever; and fancied him the kind of person who would be likely to serve her faithfully.

"I have been informed that you are skilled in the prosecution of secret investigations," she said; "and I wish to secure your services immediately. Are you at liberty to devote yourself to the task I wish to be performed by you?"

Mr. Larkspur was a man who rarely answered even the simplest question until he had turned the subject over in his mind, and carefully studied every word that had been said to him.

He was a man who made caution the ruling principle of his life, and he looked at every creature he encountered in the course of his career as an individual more or less likely to take him in.

The boast of Mr. Larkspur was, that he never had been taken in.

"I've been very near it more than once," he said to his particular friends, when he unbent so far as to be confidential.

"I've had some very narrow escapes of being taken in and done for as neatly as you please. There are some artful dodgers, whose artful dodging the oldest hand can scarcely guard against; but I'm proud to say not one of those artful dodgers has ever yet been able to get the better of me. Perhaps my time is to come, and I shall be bamboozled in my old age."

Before replying to Honoria's inquiry, Andrew Larkspur studied her from head to foot, with eyes whose sharp scrutiny would have been very unpleasant to anyone who had occasion for concealment.

The result of the scrutiny seemed to be tolerably satisfactory, for Mr. Larkspur at last replied to his visitor's question in a tone which for him was extremely gracious.

"You want to know whether you can engage my services," he said; "that depends upon circumstances."

"Upon what circumstances?"

"Whether you will be able to pay me. My hands are very full just now, and I've about as much business as I can possibly get through."

"I shall want you to abandon all such business, and to devote yourself exclusively to my service," said Honoria.

"The deuce you will!" exclaimed Mr. Larkspur. "Do you happen to know what my time is worth?"

Mr. Larkspur looked positively outraged by the idea that any one could suppose they could secure a monopoly of his valuable services.

"That is a question with which I have no concern," answered Honoria, coolly. "The work which I require you to do will most likely occupy all your time, and entirely absorb your attention. I am quite prepared to pay you liberally for your services, and I shall leave you to name your own terms. I shall rely on your honour as a man of business that those terms will not be exorbitant, and I shall accede to them without further question."

"Humph!" muttered the suspicious Andrew. "Do you know, ma'am, that sounds almost too liberal? I'm an old stager, ma'am, and have seen a good deal of life, and I have generally found that people who are ready to promise so much beforehand, are apt not to give anything when their work has been done."

"The fact that you have been cheated by swindlers is no reason why should insult me," answered Honoria. "I wished to secure your services; but I cannot continue an interview in which I find my offers met by insolent objections. There are, no doubt, other people in London who can assist me in the business I have in hand. I will wish you good morning."

She rose, and was about to leave the room. Mr. Larkspur began to think that he had been rather too cautious; and that perhaps, this plainly-attired lady might be a very good customer.

"You must excuse me, ma'am," he said, "if I'm rather a suspicious old chap. You see, it's the nature of my business to make a man suspicious. If you can pay me for my time, I shall be willing to devote myself to your service; for I'd much rather give my whole mind to one business, than have ever so many odds and ends of affairs jostling each other in my brain. But the fact of it is, ladies very seldom have any idea

what business is: however clever they may be in other matters—playing the piano, working bead-mats and worsted slippers, and such like. Now, I dare say you'll open your eyes uncommon wide when I tell you that my business is worth nigh upon sixteen pound a week to me, taking good with bad; and though you mayn't be aware of it, ma'am, having, no doubt, given your mind exclusive to Berlin wool, and such like, sixteen pound a week is eight hundred a year."

Mr. Larkspur, though not much given to surprise, was somewhat astonished to perceive that his lady-visitor did not open her eyes any wider on receiving this intelligence.

"If you have earned eight hundred a year by your profession," she returned, quietly, "I will give you twenty pounds a week for your exclusive services, and that will be a thousand and forty pounds a year."

This time, Andrew Larkspur was still more surprised, though he was so completely master of himself as to conceal the smallest evidence of his astonishment.

Here was a woman who had not devoted her mind to Berlin wool-work, and whose arithmetic was irreproachable!

"Humph!" he muttered, too cautious to betray any appearance of eagerness to accept an advantageous offer. "A thousand a year is very well in its way; but how long is it to last? If I turn my back upon this business here, it'll all tumble to pieces, and then, where shall I be when you have done with me?"

"I will engage you for one year, certain."

"That won't do, ma'am; you must make it three years, certain."

"Very well; I am willing to do that," answered Honoria. "I shall, in all probability, require your services for three years."

Mr. Larkspur regretted that he had not asked for an engagement of six years.

"Do you agree to those terms?" asked Honoria.

"Yes," answered the detective, with well-assumed indifference; "I suppose I may as well accept those terms, though I dare say I might make more money by leaving myself free to give my attention to anything that might turn up. And now, how am I to be paid? You see, you're quite a stranger to me."

"I am aware of that, and I do not ask you to trust me," replied Honoria. "I will pay you eighty pounds a month."

"Eighty pounds a month of four weeks," interposed the cautious Larkspur; "eighty pounds for the lunar month. That makes a difference, you know, and it's just as well to be particular."

"Certainly!" answered Lady Eversleigh, with a half-contemptuous smile. "You shall not be cheated. You shall receive your payment monthly, in advance; and if you require security for the future, I can refer you to my bankers. My name is Mrs. Eden—Harriet Eden, and I bank with Messrs. Coutts."

The detective rubbed his hands with a air of gratification.

"Nothing could be more straightforward and business-like," he said. "And when shall you require my services, Mrs. Eden?"

"Immediately. There is an apartment vacant in the house in which I lodge. I should wish you to occupy that apartment, as you would thus be always at hand when I had any communication to make to you. Would that be possible?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, it would certainly be possible," replied Mr. Larkspur, after the usual pause for reflection; "but I'm afraid I should be obliged to make that an extra."

"You shall be paid whatever you require."

"Thank you, ma'am. You see, when a person of my age has been accustomed to live in one place for a long time, it goes against him to change his habits. However, to oblige you, I'll get together my little traps, and shift my quarter to the lodging you speak of."

"Good. The house in question is No. 90, Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road."

Mr. Larkspur was surprised to find that a lady who could afford to offer him more than a thousand a year, was nevertheless contented to live in such a middle-class situation as Percy Street.

"Can you go to the new lodging to-morrow?" asked Honoria.

"Well, no, ma'am; you must give me a week, if you please. I must wind up some of the affairs I have been working upon, you see, and hand over my clients to other people; and I must set my books in order. I've a few very profitable affairs in hand, I assure you. There's one which might have turned out a great prize, if I had been only able to carry it through. But those sort of things all depend on time, you see, ma'am. They're very slow. I have been about this one, off and on, for over three years; and very little has come of it yet."

The detective was turning over one of his books mechanically as he said this. It was a large ledger, filled with entries, in a queer, cramped handwriting, dotted about, here and there, with mysterious marks in red and blue ink. Mr. Larkspur stopped suddenly, as he turned the leaves, his attention arrested by one particular page.

"Here it is," he said; "the very business I was speaking of. Five hundred pounds for the discovery of the murderer, or murderers, of Valentine Jernam, captain and owner of the 'Pizarro', whose body was found in the river, below Wapping, on the third of April, 1836. That's a very queer business, that is, and I've never had leisure to get very deep into the rights and wrongs of it yet."

Mr. Larkspur looked up presently, and saw that his visitor's face had grown white to the very lips.

"You knew Captain Jernam?" he said.

"No—yes, I knew him slightly; and the idea of his murder is very shocking to me," answered Honoria, struggling with her agitation. "Do you expect to discover the secret of that dreadful crime?"

"Well, I don't know about that," said Andrew Larkspur, with the careless and business-like tone of a man to whom a murder is an incident of trade. "You see, when these things have gone by for a long time, without anything being found out about them, the secret generally comes out by accident, if it ever comes out at all. There are cases in which the secret never does come out; but there are not many such cases. There's a deal in accident; and a man of my profession must be always on the look-out for accident, or he'll lose a great many chances. You see those red marks stuck here and there, among all that writing in blue ink. Those red marks are set against the facts that seem pretty clear and straightforward; the blue marks are set against facts that seem dark. You see, there's more blue marks than red. That means that it's a dark case."

Honoria Eversleigh bent over the old man's shoulder, and read a few fragmentary lines, here and there, in the page beneath her.

"Seen at the 'Jolly Tar', Ratcliff Highway, a low public-house frequented by sailors. Seen with two men, Dennis Wayman, landlord of the 'Jolly Tar,' and a man called Milson, or Milsom. The man Milson, or Milsom, has since disappeared. Is believed to have been transported, but is not to be heard of abroad."

A little below these entries was another, which seemed to Honoria Eversleigh to be inscribed in letters of fire:—

"Valentine Jernam was known to have fallen in love with a girl who sang at the 'Jolly Tar' public-house, and it is supposed that he was lured to his death by the agency of this girl. She is described as about seventeen years of age, very handsome, dark eyes, dark hair—"

Mr. Larkspur closed the volume before Lady Eversleigh could read further. She returned to her seat, still terribly pale, and with a sickening pain at her heart.

All the shame and anguish of her early life, the unspeakable horror of her girlhood, had been brought vividly back to her by the perusal of the memoranda in the

detective's ledger.

"I mean to try my luck yet at getting at the bottom of the mystery," said Andrew Larkspur. "Five hundred pounds reward is worth working for. I—I've a notion that I shall lay my hands upon Valentine Jernam's murderer sooner or later."

"Who offers the reward?" asked Honoria.

"Government offers one hundred of it; George Jernam four hundred more."

"Who is George Jernam?"

"The captain's younger brother—a merchant-captain himself—the owner of several vessels, and, I believe, a rich man. He came here, accompanied by a queer-looking fellow, called Joyce Harker—a kind of clerk, I believe—who was very much attached to the murdered man."

"Yes—yes, I know," murmured Honoria.

She had been so terribly agitated by the mention of Valentine Jernam's name, that her presence of mind had entirely abandoned her.

"You knew that humpbacked clerk!" exclaimed Mr. Larkspur.

"I have heard of him," she faltered.

There was a pause, during which Lady Eversleigh recovered in some degree from the painful emotion caused by memories so unexpectedly evoked.

"I may as well give you some preliminary instructions to-day," she said, re-assuming her business-like tone, "and I will write you a cheque for the first month of your service."

Mr. Larkspur lost no time in providing his visitor with pen and ink. She took a cheque-book from her pocket, and filled in a cheque for eighty pounds in Andrew Larkspur's favour.

The cheque was signed "Harriet Eden."

"When you present that, you will be able to ascertain that your future payments will

be secure," she said.

She handed the cheque to Mr. Larkspur, who looked at it with an air of assumed indifference, and slipped it carelessly into his waistcoat pocket.

"And now, ma'am," he said, "I am ready to receive your instructions."

"In the first place," said Honoria, "I must beg that you will on no occasion attempt to pry into my motives, whatever I may require of you."

"That, ma'am, is understood. I have nothing to do with the motives of my employers, and I care nothing about them."

"I am glad to hear that," replied Honoria. "The business in which I require your aid is a very strange one; and the time may come when you will be half-inclined to believe me mad. But, whatever I do, however mysterious my actions may be, think always that a deeply rooted purpose lies beneath them; and that every thought of my brain—every trivial act of my life, will shape itself to one end."

"I ask no questions, ma'am."

"And you will serve me faithfully—blindly?"

"Yes, ma'am; both faithfully and blindly."

"I think I may trust you," replied Honoria, very earnestly "And now I will speak freely. There are two men upon whose lives I desire to place a spy. I want to know every act of their lives, every word they speak, every secret of their hearts—I wish to be an unseen witness of their lonely hours, an impalpable guest at every gathering in which they mingle. I want to be near them always in spirit, if not in bodily presence. I want to track them step by step, let their ways be never so dark and winding. This is the purpose of my life; but I am a woman—powerless to act freely—bound and fettered as women only are fettered. Do you begin to understand now what I require of you."

"I think I do."

"Mr. Larkspur," continued Honoria, with energy. "I want you to be my second self. I want you to be the shadow of these two men. Wherever they go, you must follow—in some shape or other you must haunt them, by night and day. It is, of course, a difficult task which I demand of you. You have to decide whether it is impossible."

"Impossible! ma'am—not a bit of it. Nothing is impossible to a man who has served twenty years' apprenticeship as a Bow Street runner. You don't know what we old Bow Street hands can do when we're on our mettle. I've heard a deal of talk about Fooshay, that was at the head of Bonaparty's police—but bless your heart, ma'am, Fooshay was a fool to us. I've done as much and more than what you talk of before to-day. All you have to do is to give me the names and descriptions of the two men I am to watch, and leave all the rest to me."

"One of these two men is Sir Reginald Eversleigh, Baronet, a man of small fortune—a bachelor, occupying lodgings in Villiers Street. I have reason to believe that he is dissipated, a gamester, and a reprobate."

"Good," said Mr. Larkspur, who jotted down an occasional note in a greasy little pocket-book.

"The second person is a medical practitioner, called Victor Carrington—a Frenchman, but a perfect master of the English language, and a man whose youth has been spent in England. The two men are firm friends and constant associates. In keeping watch upon the actions of one, you cannot fail to see much of the other.

"Very good, ma'am; you may make your mind easy," answered the detective, as coolly as if he had just received the most common-place order.

He escorted Honoria to the door of his chambers, and left her to descend the dingy staircase as best as she might.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAITING AND WATCHING.

Valentine Jernam's younger brother, George, had journeyed to and fro on the high seas five years since the murder of the brave and generous-hearted sea-captain.

Things had gone well with Captain George Jernam, and in the whole of the trading navy there were few richer men than the owner of the 'Pizarro', 'Stormy Petrel', and 'Albatross'.

With these three vessels constantly afloat. George Jernam was on the high road to fortune.

His life had not been by any means uneventful since the death of his brother, though that mysterious calamity had taken away the zest from his success for many a day, and though he no longer cherished the same visions of a happy home in England, when his circumstances should have become so prosperous as to enable him to "settle down." This same process of settling down was one by no means congenial to George Jernam's disposition at any time; and he was far less likely to take to it kindly now, than when "dear old Val"—as he began to call his brother in his thoughts once more, when the horror of the murder had begun to wear off, and the lost friend seemed again familiar—had been the prospective sharer of the retirement which was to be so tranquil, so comfortable, and so well-earned. It had no attraction for George at all; for many a long day after Joyce Harker's letter had reached him he never dwelt upon it; he set his face hard against his grief, and worked on, as men must work, fortunately for them, under all chances and changes of this mortal life, until the last change of all. At first, the thirst for revenge upon his brother's murderers had been hot and strong upon George Jernam—almost as hot and strong as it had been, and continued to be, upon Joyce Harker; but the natures of the men differed materially. George Jernam had neither the dogged persistency nor the latent fierceness of his dead brother's friend and protégé; and the long, slow, untiring watching to which Harker devoted himself would have been a task so uncongenial

as to be indeed impossible to the more open, more congenial temperament of the merchant-captain.

He had responded warmly to Harker's letters; he had more than sanctioned the outlay which he had made, in money paid and money promised, to the skilled detective to whom Harker had entrusted the investigation of the murder of Valentine Jernam. He had awaited every communication with anxious interest and suspense, and he had never landed after a voyage, and received the letters which awaited his arrival, without a keen revival of the first sharp pang that had smote him with the tidings of his brother's fate.

Happily George Jernam was a busy man, and his life was full of variety, adventure, and incident. In time he began, not to forget, indeed, but to remember less frequently and less painfully, the manner of his brother's death, and to regard the fixed purpose of Joyce Harker's life as more or less of a harmless delusion. A practical man in his own way, George Jernam had very vague ideas concerning the lives of the criminal classes, and the faculties and facilities of the science of detection; and the hope of finding out the secret of his brother's fate had long ago deserted him.

Only once had he and Joyce Harker met since the murder of Valentine Jernam. George had landed a cargo at Hamburg, and had given his brother's friend rendezvous there. Then the two men had talked of all that had been done so vainly, and all that remained to be done, Harker hoped, so effectively. Joyce had never been able to bring his suspicions concerning Black Milsom to the test of proof. Unwearied search had been made for the old man who had played the part of grandfather to the beautiful ballad-singer; but it had been wholly ineffectual. All that could be ascertained concerning him was, that he had died in a hospital, in a country town on the great northern road, and that the girl had wandered away from there, and never more been heard of. Of Black Milsom, Joyce Harker had never lost sight, until his career received a temporary check by the sentence of transportation, which

had sent the ruffian out of the country. But all efforts of the faithful watcher had failed to discover the missing link in the evidence which connected Black Milsom with Valentine Jernam's death. All his watching and questioning—all his silent noting of the idle talk around him—all his eager endeavour to take Dennis Wayman unawares, failed to enable him to obtain evidence of that one fact of which he was convinced—the fact that Valentine Jernam had been at the public-house in Ratcliff Highway on the day of his death.

When the inutility of his endeavours became clear to Joyce Harker, he gave up his lodging in Wayman's house, and located himself in modest apartments at Poplar, where he transacted a great deal of business for George Jernam, and maintained a constant, though unprofitable, communication with the detective officer to whom he had confided the task of investigation, and who was no other than Mr. Andrew Larkspur.

In one of the earliest of the numerous letters which George Jernam addressed to Harker, after the death of Valentine, the merchant-captain had given his zealous friend and assistant certain instructions concerning the old aunt to whom the two desolate boys had owed so much in their ill-treated childhood, and whom they had so well and constantly requited in their prosperous manhood. These instructions included a request that Joyce Harker would visit Susan Jernam in person, and furnish George with details relative to that venerable lady's requirements, looks, health, and general circumstances.

"I should have seen the good old soul, you know," wrote George, "when I was to have seen poor Val; but it didn't please God that the one thing should come off any more than the other, and it can't be helped. But I should like you to run down to Allanbay and look her up, and let her know that she is neither neglected nor forgotten by her vagabond nephew."

So Joyce Harker went down to the Devonshire village, and introduced himself to

George Jernam's aunt. The old lady was much altered since she had last welcomed a visitor to her pretty, cheerful cottage, and had listened with simple surprise and pleasure to her nephew Valentine's tales of the sea, and they had talked together over the troublous days of his unhappy childhood. The untimely and tragic death of the merchant-captain had afflicted her deeply, and had filled her mind with sentiments which, though they differed in degree, closely resembled in their nature those of Joyce Harker. The determination to be revenged upon the murderers of "her boy" which Harker expressed, found a ready echo in the breast of his hearer, and she thanked him warmly for his devotion to the master he had lost. Strong mutual liking grew up between these two, and when her visitor left her—after having carried out all George's wishes in respect to her, on the scale of liberality which the grateful nephew had dictated—Susan Jernam gave him a cordial invitation to pass any leisure time he might have at the cottage, though, as she remarked—

"I am not very lively company, Mr. Harker, for you or anybody, for I can't talk of anything but George and poor Valentine."

"And I don't care to talk of much else either, Mrs. Jernam," said Harker, in reply; "so, you see, we couldn't possibly be better company for each other."

Thus it happened that a second tie between George Jernam and Joyce Harker arose, in the person of the sole surviving relative of the former, and that Joyce had made three visits to the pretty sea-side village in which the childhood of his dead friend and his living patron had been passed, before he and George Jernam met again on English ground.

When at length that long-deferred meeting took place, Valentine Jernam's murder was a mystery rather more than five years old, and Mr. Andrew Larkspur had made no progress towards its solution. He had been obliged to acknowledge to Joyce Harker that he had not struck the right trail, and to confess that he had begun to despond. The disappearance of Black Milsom from among the congenial society of

thieves and ruffians which he frequented was, of course, easily accounted for by Mr. Larkspur, and the absence of any, even the slightest, additional clue to the fate of Jernam, confirmed that astute person in the conviction, which he had reached early in the course of his confabulations with Harker, that the convict was the guilty man. There was, on this hypothesis, nothing for it but to wait until the worthy exile should have worked out his time and once more returned to grace his mother-country, and then to resume the close watch which, though hitherto ineffectual, might in time bring some of his former deeds to light.

Such was the state of affairs when Captain Duncombe bought the deserted house which had had such undesirable tenants, first in the person of old Screwton, the miser, and, secondly, of Black Milsom. Joyce Harker was aware of the transaction, and had watched with some interest the transformation of the dreary, dismal, doomed place, into the cheery, comfortable, middle-class residence it had now become. If he had known that the last hours of Valentine Jernam's life had been passed on that spot, that there his beloved master had met with a violent and cruel death, with what different feelings he would have watched the work! But though, as the former dwelling of Black Milsom, the cottage had a dreary attraction for him, he was far from imagining that within its walls lay hidden one infallible clue to the secret for which he had sought so long and so vainly.

The new occupant of River View Cottage was acquainted with Joyce Harker, and held the solitary old man in some esteem. Captain Joe Duncombe and the protégé of the Jernams had nothing whatever in common in character, disposition, or manners, and the distance in the social scale which divided the prosperous merchant-captain from the poor, though clever, dependent, was considerable, even according to the not very strict standard of manners observed by persons of their respective classes. But Joe Duncombe knew and heartily liked George Jernam. He had been in England at the time of Valentine's murder, and he had then learned the faithful and active part played by Harker. He had lost sight of the man for some time, but when he had

bought the cottage, and during the progress of the changes and improvements he had made in that unprepossessing dwelling, accident had thrown Harker in his way, and they had found much to discuss in George Jernam's prosperity, in his generous treatment of Harker, in the general condition of the merchant service, which the two men declared to be going to the dogs, after the manner of all professions, trades, and institutions of every age and every clime, when contemplated from a conversational point of view; and in the honest captain's plans, hopes, and prospects concerning his daughter.

Joyce Harker had seen Rosamond Duncombe occasionally, but had not taken much notice of her. Nor had Miss Duncombe been much impressed by that gentleman. Joyce was not a lady's man, and Rosamond, who entertained a rather disrespectful notion of her father's acquaintances in general, classing them collectively as "old fogies," contented herself with distinguishing Mr. Harker as the ugliest and grimmest of the lot. Joyce came and went, not very often indeed, but very freely to River View Cottage, and there was much confidence and good-fellowship between the bluff old seaman and the more acute, but not less honest, adventurer.

There was, however, one circumstance which Captain Duncombe never mentioned to Harker. That circumstance was the apparition of old Screwton's ghost. Joe Duncombe was, to tell the truth, a little ashamed of his credulity on that occasion. He entertained no doubt that he had been victimized by a clever practical joke, and while he chuckled over the recollection that it had been an expensive jest to the perpetrator, who had lost a valuable gold coin by the transaction, he had no fancy for exposing himself to any further ridicule on the occasion. So the bluff, imperious, soft-hearted captain issued an ukase commanding silence on the subject; and silence was observed, not in the least because Rosamond Duncombe or Susan Trott were afraid of him, but because Rosamond loved her father, and Susan Trott respected her master too much to disobey his lightest wish.

There was also one circumstance which Joyce Harker never mentioned to Captain Duncombe. This circumstance was the identity of the former occupant of the cottage with the man whom he believed to be the murderer of Valentine Jernam.

"It is bad enough to live in a place that's said to be haunted," said Harker to himself, when he visited the cottage for the first time; "without my telling him that he comes after a man who is certainly a convict, and probably a murderer."

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CHAPTER XVII.

DOUBTFUL SOCIETY.

Victor Carrington still lived in the little cottage on the outskirts of London. Here, with his mother for his only companion, he led a simple, studious life, which, to any one ignorant of his character, would have seemed the life of a good and honourable man.

The few neighbours who passed to and fro beneath the wall which surrounded the cottage, knew nothing of the inner life of its occupants. They knew only that of all the houses in the neighbourhood this was the quietest. Yet those who happened to pass the house late at night always saw a glimmer of light in an upper chamber, and the blue vapour of smoke rising from one particular chimney.

Those who had occasion to pass the house frequently after dark perceived that the smoke from this chimney was different from the common smoke of common chimneys. Sometimes vivid sparks glittered and flashed upon the darkness. At other times a semi-luminous, green vapour was seen to issue from the mouth of the chimney.

These facts were spoken about by the neighbours; and by and by people discovered that the smoke issued from the chimney of Victor Carrington's laboratory, where the

surgeon was frequently employed, long after midnight, making experiments in the science of chemistry.

The nature of these experiments was known to no one. The few neighbours who had ever conversed with the French surgeon had heard him declare that he was a student of the mysteries of electricity. It was, therefore, supposed that all his experiments were in some manner connected with that wondrous science.

No one for a moment suspected evil of a young man whose life was sober, respectable, and laborious, and who went to the little Catholic chapel every Sunday, with his mother leaning on his arm.

Those who really knew Victor Carrington knew that he was without one ray of belief in a Divine Ruler, and that he laughed to scorn those terrors of heavenly vengeance which will sometimes restrain the hand of the most hardened criminal. He was a wretch who seemed to have been created without those natural qualities which, in some degree, redeem the worst of humanity. He was a creature without a conscience—without a heart.

And yet he seemed the most dutiful and devoted of sons.

Is it possible that filial love could hold any place in a soul so lost as his? It is difficult to solve this enigma.

Victor Carrington was ambitious; and to gain the object of his ambition he was willing to steep his soul in guilt. But he was also cautious and calculating, and he knew that to commit crime with impunity he must so shape his life as to escape suspicion.

He knew that a devoted and affectionate son is always respected by good men and women; and he had studied human nature too closely not to be aware that there is more goodness than wickedness in the world, base though some of earth's inhabitants may be.

The world is easily hoodwinked; and those who watched the life of the young

surgeon were ready to declare that he was a most deserving young man.

He had his reward for this apparent excellence. Patients came to him without his seeking; and at the time of Honoria Eversleigh's arrival in London he had obtained a small but remunerative practice. The money earned thus enabled him to live. The money he won by his pen in the medical journals he was able to save.

He knew how necessary money was in all the turning-points of life, and he denied himself every pleasure and every luxury in order to save a sum which should serve him in time of need.

Matilda Carrington was one of those quiet women who seem to take no interest in the world around them, and to be happy without the pleasures which delight other women. She lived quite alone, without one female friend or acquaintance, and she saw little of her son, whose midnight studies and medical practice absorbed almost every hour of his existence.

Her life, therefore, was one long solitude, and but for the companionship of her birds and two Angora cats, she would have been almost as much alone as a prisoner in a condemned cell.

There was but one visitor who came often to the cottage, and that was Sir Reginald Eversleigh. The young baronet contrived to exist, somehow or other, upon his income of five hundred a year; but, as he had neither abandoned his old haunts, nor put aside his old vices, the income, which to a good man would have seemed a handsome competence, barely enabled him to stave off the demands of his most pressing creditors by occasional payments on account.

He lived a dark and strange existence, occupying a set of shabby-genteel apartments in a street leading out of the Strand; but spending a great part of his life in a house on the banks of the Thames—a house that stood amidst grounds of some extent, situated midway between Chelsea and Fulham.

The mistress of this house was a lady who called herself a widow, but of whose real

position the world knew very little.

She was said to be of Austrian extraction, and the widow of an Austrian officer. Her name was Paulina Durski. She had bade farewell to the fresh bloom of early youth; for at her best she looked thirty years of age. But her beauty was of that brilliant order which does not need the charm of girlhood. She was a woman—a grand, queen-like creature. Those who admired her most compared her to a tall white lily, alike stately and graceful.

She was fair, with that snowy purity of complexion which is so rare a charm. Her hair was of the palest gold—darker than flaxen, lighter than auburn—hair that waved in sunny undulations on the broad white forehead, and imparted an unspeakable innocence to the beautiful face.

Such was Paulina Durski. One charm alone was wanting to render this woman as lovable as she was lovely, and that wan the charm of expression.

There was a lack of warmth in that perfect face. The bright blue eyes were hard; the rosy lips had been trained to smile on friend or foe, on stranger or kinsman, with the same artificial smile.

Hilton House was the name of the villa by the river-bank. It had belonged originally to a nobleman; but, on the decay of his fortunes, had fallen into the hands of a speculator, who intended to occupy it, but who failed almost immediately after becoming its owner. After this man's bankruptcy, the house had for a long time been tenantless. It was too expensive for some, too lonely for others; and when Madame Durski saw and took a fancy to the place, she was able to secure it for a moderate rent. The grounds and the house had been neglected. The rare and costly shrubs in the gardens were rank and overgrown; the exquisite decorations of the interior were spoiled by damp.

Madame Durski was a person who lived in a certain style; but it speedily became evident that she was very often at a loss for ready money. Her furniture arrived from

Paris, and her household came also from that brilliant city. It was the household of a princess; but of a princess not unfamiliar with poverty.

There was a Spanish courier, one Carlo Toas—a strange, silent creature, whose stately and solemn movements seemed fitted for a courtly assembly, rather than for the unceremonious gatherings of modern society. The next person in importance in the household of Madame Durski was an elderly woman, who attended on the fair Austrian widow. She was a native of Paris, and her name was Sophie Elser. There were three other servants, all foreigners, and apparently devoted to their mistress.

The furniture was of a bygone fashion, costly and beautiful of its kind; but it was furniture which had seen better days. The draperies in every chamber were of satin or velvet; but the satin was worn and faded, the velvet threadbare. The pictures, china, plate, the bronzes and knick-knacks which adorned the rooms, all bore evidence of a refined and artistic taste. But much of the china was imperfect, and the plate was of very small extent.

The existence of Paulina Durski was one which might well excite curiosity in the minds of the few neighbours who had the opportunity of observing her mode of life.

This beautiful widow had no female acquaintances, save a humble friend who lived with her, an Englishwoman, who subsisted upon the charity of the lovely Paulina.

This person never quitted her benefactress. She was constant as her shadow; a faithful watch-dog, always at hand, yet never obtrusive. She was a creature who seemed to have been born without eyes and without ears; so careless was the widow of her presence, so reckless what secrets were disclosed in her hearing.

By daylight the life of Madame Durski and her companion, Miss Brewer, seemed the dullest existence ever endured by womankind. Paulina rarely left her own apartment until six in the evening; at which hour, she and Miss Brewer dined together in her boudoir.

They always dined alone. After dinner Paulina returned to her apartment to dress for

the evening, while Miss Brewer retired to her own bedroom on the upper story, where she arrayed herself invariably in black velvet.

She had never been seen by the visitors at Hilton House in any other costume than this lustreless velvet. Her age was between thirty and forty. She might once have had some pretensions to beauty; but her face was pinched and careworn, and there was a sharp, greedy look in the small eyes, whose colour was that neutral, undecided tint, that seems sometimes a pale yellowish brown, anon a blueish green.

All day long the two women at Hilton House lived alone. No carriage approached the gates; no foot-passenger was seen to enter the grounds. Within and without all was silent and lifeless.

But with nightfall came a change. Lights shone in all the lower windows, music sounded on the still night air, many carriages rolled through the open gateway—broughams with flashing lamps dashed up to the marble portico, and hack cabs mingled with the more stylish equipages.

There were very few nights on which Paulina Durski's saloons were not enlivened by the presence of many guests. Her visitors were all gentlemen; but they treated the mistress of the house with as much respect as if she had been surrounded by women of the highest rank. Night after night the same men assembled in those faded saloons; night after night the carriages rolled along the avenue—the flashing lamps illuminated the darkness. Those who watched the proceedings of the Austrian widow had good reason to wonder what the attraction was which brought those visitors so constantly to Hilton House. Many speculations were formed, and the fair widow's reputation suffered much at the hands of her neighbours; but none guessed the real charm of those nightly receptions.

That secret was known only to those within the mansion; and from those it could not be hidden.

The charm which drew so many visitors to the saloons of Madame Durski was the

fatal spell of the gaming-table. The beautiful Paulina opened a suite of three spacious chambers for the reception of her guests. In the outer apartment there was a piano; and it was here Paulina sat—with her constant companion, Matilda Brewer. In the second apartment were small green velvet-covered tables, devoted to whist and écarté. The third, and inner, apartment was much larger than either of the others, and in this room there was a table for rouge et noir.

The door of this inner apartment was papered so as to appear when closed like a portion of the wall. A heavy picture was securely fastened upon this papered surface, and the door was lined with iron. Once closed, this door was not easily to be discovered by the eye of a stranger; and, even when discovered, it was not easily to be opened.

It was secured with a spring lock, which fastened of itself as the door swung to.

This inner apartment had no windows. It was never used in the day-time. It was a secret chamber, hidden in the very centre of the house; and only an architect or a detective officer would have been likely to have discovered its existence. The walls were hung with red cloth, and Madame Durski always spoke of this apartment as the Red Drawing-room. Her servants were forbidden to mention the chamber in their conversation with the neighbours, and the members of the Austrian widow's household were too well trained to disobey any such orders.

By the laws of England, the existence of a table for rouge et noir is forbidden. All these precautions were therefore necessary to insure safety for the guests of Madame Durski.

Paulina, herself, never played. Sometimes she sat with Miss Brewer in the outer chamber, silent and abstracted, while her visitors amused themselves in the two other rooms; sometimes she seated herself at the piano, and played soft, plaintive German sonatas, or Leider ohne Worte, for an hour at a time; sometimes she moved slowly to and fro amongst the gamblers—now lingering for a few moments behind

the chair of one, now glancing at the cards of another.

One of her most constant visitors was Reginald Eversleigh. Every night he drove down to Hilton House in a hack cab. He was generally the first to arrive and the last to depart.

It was also to be observed that almost all the men who assembled in the drawing-rooms of Hilton House were friends and acquaintances of Sir Reginald.

It was he who introduced them to the lovely widow. It was he who tempted them to come night after night, when prudence should have induced them to stay away.

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The association between Reginald Eversleigh and Paulina Durski was no new alliance.

Immediately after the death of Sir Oswald Eversleigh, Reginald turned his back upon London, disgusted with the scene of his poverty and humiliation, eager to find forgetfulness of his bitter disappointments in the fever and excitement of a more brilliant city than any to be found in Great Britain. He went to Paris, that capital which he had shunned since the death of Mary Goodwin, but whither he returned eagerly now, thirsting for riot and excitement—any opiate by which he might lull to rest the bitter memories of the past month.

He was familiar with the wildest haunts of that city of dissipation, and he was speedily engulphed in the vortex of vice and folly. If he had been a rich man, this life might have gone on for ever; but without money a man counts for very little in such a circle as that wherein Reginald alone could find delight, and to the inhabitants of that region five hundred a year would seem a kind of pauperism.

Sir Reginald contrived to keep the actual amount of his income a secret locked in his own breast. His acquaintances and associates knew that he was not rich; but they knew no more.

At the French opera-house he saw Paulina Durski for the first time. She was seated in one of the smaller boxes, dressed in pure white, with white camellias in her hair. Her faithful companion, Matilda Brewer, was seated in the shadow of the curtains, and formed a foil for the beautiful Austrian.

Reginald Eversleigh entered the house with a dissipated and fashionable young Parisian—a man who, like his companion, had wasted youth, character, and fortune in the tainted atmosphere of disreputable haunts and midnight assemblies. The two young men took their places in the stalls, and amused themselves between the acts by a scrutiny of the occupants of the house.

Hector Leonce, the Parisian, was familiar with the inmates of every box.

"Do you see that beautiful, fair-haired woman, with the white camellias in her hair?" he said, after he had drawn the attention of the Englishman to several distinguished people. "That is Madame Durski, the young and wealthy widow of an Austrian officer, and one of the most celebrated beauties in Paris."

"She is very handsome," answered Reginald, carelessly; "but hers is a cold style of loveliness—too much like a face moulded out of wax."

"Wait till you see her animated," replied Hector Leonce. "We will go to her box presently."

When the curtain fell on the close of the following act the two men left the stalls, and made their way to Madame Durski's box.

She received them courteously, and Reginald Eversleigh speedily perceived that her beauty, fair and wax-like as it was, did not lack intellectual grace. She talked well, and her manner had the tone of good society. Reginald was surprised to see her attended only by the little Englishwoman, in her dress of threadbare black velvet.

After the opera Sir Reginald and Hector Leonce accompanied Madame Durski to her apartments in the Rue du Faubourg, St. Honoré; and there the baronet beheld higher play than he had ever seen before in a private house presided over by a woman. On

this occasion the beautiful widow herself occupied a place at the rouge et noir table, and Reginald beheld enough to enlighten him as to her real character. He saw that with this woman the love of play was a passion: a profound and soul-absorbing delight. He saw the eyes which, in repose, seemed of so cold a brightness, emit vivid flashes of feverish light; he saw the fair blush-rose tinted cheek glow with a hectic crimson—he beheld the woman with her mask thrown aside, abandoned to the influence of her master-passion.

After this night, Reginald Eversleigh was a frequent visitor at the apartments of the Austrian widow. For him, as for her, the fierce excitement of the gaming-table was an irresistible temptation. In her elegantly appointed drawing-rooms he met rich men who were desperate players; but he met few men who were likely to be dupes. Here neither skill nor bribery availed him, and he was dependent on the caprices of chance. The balance was tolerably even, and he left Paris neither richer nor poorer for his acquaintance with Paulina Durski.

But that acquaintance exercised a very powerful influence over his destiny, nevertheless. There was a strange fascination in the society of the Austrian widow—a nameless, indefinable charm, which few were able to resist. A bitter experience of vice and folly had robbed Reginald Eversleigh's heart and mind of all youth's freshness and confidence, and for him this woman seemed only what she was, an adventuress, dangerous to all who approached her.

He knew this, and yet he yielded to the fascination of her presence. Night after night he haunted the rooms in the Rue du Faubourg, St. Honoré. He went there even when he was too poor to play, and could only stand behind Paulina's chair, a patient and devoted cavalier.

For a long time she seemed to be scarcely aware of his devotion. She received him as she received her other guests. She met him always with the same cold smile; the same studied courtesy. But one evening, when he went to her apartments earlier than

usual, he found her alone, and in a melancholy mood.

Then, for the first time, he became aware that the life she led was odious to her; that she loathed the hateful vice of which she was the slave. She was wont to be very silent about herself and her own feelings; but that night she cast aside all reserve, and spoke with a passionate earnestness, which made her seem doubly charming to Reginald Eversleigh.

"I am so degraded a creature that, perhaps, you have never troubled yourself to wonder how I became the thing I am," she said; "and yet you must surely have marvelled to see a woman of high birth fallen to the depths in which you find me; fallen so low as to be the companion of gamesters, a gamester myself. I will tell you the secret of my life."

Reginald Eversleigh lifted his hand with a deprecating gesture.

"Dear madame, tell me nothing, I implore you. I admire and respect you," he said. "To me, you must always appear the most beautiful of women, whatever may be the nature of your surroundings."

"Yes, the most beautiful!" echoed Paulina, with passionate scorn. "You men think that to praise a woman's beauty is to console her for every humiliation. I have long held that which you call my beauty as the poorest thing on earth, so little, happiness has its possession won for me. I will tell you the story of my life. It is the only justification I have."

"I am ready to listen. So long as you speak of yourself, your words must have the deepest interest for me."

"I was reared amongst gamesters, Reginald Eversleigh," continued Paulina Durski, with the same passionate intensity of manner, "My father was an incorrigible gambler; and before I had emerged from childhood to girlhood, the handsome fortune which should have been mine had been squandered. As a girl the rattle of the dice, the clamour of the rouge et noir table were the most familiar sounds to my ears.

Night after night, night after night, I have kept watch at my own window, and have seen the lighted windows of my father's rooms, and have known that grim poverty was drawing nearer and nearer as the long hours of those sleepless nights went by."

"My poor Paulina!"

"My mother died young, exhausted by the perpetual fever of anxiety which the gambler's wife is doomed to suffer. She died, and I was left alone—a woman; beautiful if you will, and, as the world supposed, heiress to a large fortune; for none knew how entirely the wealth which should have been mine had melted away in those nights of dissipation and folly. People knew that my father played, and played desperately; but few knew the extent of his losses. After my mother's death, my father insisted on my doing the honours of his house. I received his friends; I stood by his chair as he played écarté, or sat by his side and noted the progress of the game at the rouge et noir table. Then first I felt the fatal passion which I can but believe to be a taint in my very blood. Slowly and gradually the fascinating vice assumed its horrible mastery. I watched the progress of the play. I learned to understand that science which was the one all-absorbing pursuit of those around me. Then I played myself, first taking a hand at écarté with some of the younger guests, half in sport, and then venturing a small golden coin at the rouge et noir table, while my admirers praised my daring, as if I had been some capricious child. In those assemblies I was always the only woman, except Matilda Brewer, who was then my governess. My father would have no female guests at these nightly orgies. The presence of women would have been a hindrance to the delights of the gaming-table. At first I felt all the bitterness of my position. I looked forward with unspeakable dread to the dreary future in which I should find destitution staring me in the face. But when once the gamester's madness had seized upon me, I thought no more of that dreary future; I became as reckless as my father and his guests; I forgot everything in the excitement of the moment. To be lucky at the gaming-table was to be happy; to lose was despair. Thus my youth went by, till the day when my father told me that Colonel

Durski had offered me his hand and fortune, and that I had no alternative but to accept him."

"Oh, then, your first marriage was no love-match?" cried Reginald, eagerly.

"A love-match!" exclaimed Paulina, contemptuously. "No; it was a marriage of convenience, dictated by a father who set less value on his daughter's happiness than on a good hand of cards. My father told me I must choose between Leopold Durski and ruin. 'This house cannot shelter you much longer,' he said. 'For myself there is flight. I can go to America, and lose my identity in strange cities. I cannot remain in Vienna, to be pointed at as the beggared Count Veschi. But with you for my companion I should be tied hand and foot. As a wanderer and an adventurer, I may prosper alone; but as a wanderer, burdened with a helpless woman, failure would be certain. It is not a question of choice, Paulina,' he said, resolutely; 'there is no alternative. You must become the wife of Leopold Durski.'"

"And you consented?"

"I ask you, Reginald Eversleigh, could I refuse? For me, love was a word which had no meaning. Leopold Durski was more than double my age; but in outward seeming he was a gentleman. He was reported to be wealthy; he had a high position at the Austrian Court. I was so utterly helpless, so desolate, so despairing, that it is scarcely strange if I accepted the fate my father pressed upon me, careless as to a future which held no joy for me, beyond the pleasure of the gaming-table. I left the house of one gambler to ally myself to the fortunes of another, for Leopold Durski was my father's companion and friend, and the same master-passion swayed both. It was strange that my father, himself a ruined gamester, should have become the dupe of a man whose reported wealth was as great a sham as his own. But so it was. I exchanged poverty with one master for poverty with another master. My new life was an existence of perpetual falsehood and trickery. I occupied a splendid house in the most fashionable quarter of Vienna; but that house was maintained by my

husband's winnings at the gaming-table; and it was my task to draw together the dupes whose money was to support the false semblance of grandeur which surrounded me. The dupes came. I had my little court of flatterers; but the courtiers paid dearly for their allegiance to their queen. I was the snare which was set to entrap the birds whose feathers my husband was to pluck. If I had been like other women, my position would have been utterly intolerable to me. I should have found some means of escape from a life so hateful—a degradation so shameful."

"And you made no attempt to escape?"

"None. I was a gambler; the vice which had degraded my husband had degraded me. We had both sunk to the same level, and I had no right to reproach him for infamy which I shared. We had little affection for each other. Colonel Durski had sought me only because I was fitted to adorn his reception-rooms, and attract the dupes who were to suffer by their acquaintance with him. But if there was little love between us, we at least never quarrelled. He treated me always with studied courtesy, and I never upbraided him for the deception by which he had obtained my hand. My father disappeared suddenly from Vienna, and only after his departure was it discovered that his fortune had long vanished, and that he had for several years been completely insolvent. His creditors tittered a cry of execration; but in great cities the cries of such victims are scarcely heard. My reception-rooms were still thronged by aristocratic guests, and no one cared to remember my father's infamy. This life had lasted three years, when my husband died and left me penniless. I sold my jewels, and came to this city, where for a year and a half I have lived, as my husband lived in Vienna, on the fortune of the gaming-table. I am growing weary of Paris, and it may be that Paris is growing weary of me. I suppose I shall go to London next. And next? Who knows? Ah, Reginald Eversleigh, believe me there are many moments of my life in which I think that the little walk from here to the river would cut the knot of all my difficulties. To-night I am surrounded with anxieties, steeped in degradation, hemmed in by obstacles that shut me out of all peaceful resting-places.

To-morrow I might be lying very quietly in the Morgue."

"Paulina, for pity's sake—"

"Ah, me! these are idle words, are they not?" said Madame Durski, with a weary sigh. "And now I have told you my history, Reginald Eversleigh, and it is for you to judge whether there is any excuse for such a creature as I am."

Sir Reginald pitied this hopeless, friendless, woman as much as it was in him to pity any one except himself, and tried to utter some words of consolation.

She looked up at him, as he spoke to her, with a glance in which he saw a deeper feeling than gratitude.

Then it was that Reginald declared himself the devoted lover of the woman who had revealed to him the strange story of her life. He told her of the influence which she exercised over him, the fascination which he had sought in vain to resist. He declared himself attached to her by an affection which would know no change, come what might. But he did not offer this friendless woman the shelter of his name, the ostensible position which would have been hers had she become his wife.

Even when beneath the sway of a woman's fascination Reginald Eversleigh was cold and calculating. Paulina Durski was poor, and doubtless deeply in debt. She was a gambler, and the companion of gamblers. She was, therefore, no fitting wife for a man who looked upon marriage as a stepping-stone by which he might yet redeem his fallen fortunes.

Paulina received his declaration with an air of simulated coldness; but Reginald Eversleigh could perceive that it was only simulated, and that he had awakened a real affection in the heart of this desolate woman.

"Do not speak to me of love," she said; "to me such words can promise no happiness. My love could only bring shame and misery on the man to whom it was given. Let me tread my dreary pathway alone, Reginald—alone to the very end."

Much was said after this by Reginald and the woman who loved him, and who was yet too proud to confess her love. Paulina Durski was not an inexperienced girl, to be persuaded by romantic speeches. She had acquired knowledge of the world in a hard and bitter school. She could fully fathom the base selfishness of the man who pretended to love her, and she understood why it was that he shrank from offering her the only real pledge of his truth.

"I will speak frankly to you, Paulina," he said. "I am too poor to marry."

"Yes," she answered, bitterly; "I comprehend. You are too poor to marry a penniless wife."

"And I am not likely to find a rich one. But, believe me, that my love is none the less sincere because I shrink from asking you to ally yourself to misery."

"So be it, Sir Reginald. I am willing to accept your love for what it is—a wise and prudent affection—such as a man of the world may freely indulge in without fear that his folly may cost him too dearly. You will come to my house; I shall see you night after night amongst the reckless idlers who gather round me; you will pay me compliments all the year round, and bring me bon-bons on New Year's Day; and some day, when I have grown old and haggard, you will all at once forget the fact of our acquaintance, and I shall see you no more. Let it be so. It is pleasant for a woman to fancy herself beloved, however false the fancy may be. I will shut my eyes, and dream that you love me, Reginald."

And this was all. No more was ever said of love between these two; but from that hour Reginald was more constant than ever in his attendance on the beautiful widow. The time came when she grew weary of Paris, and when those who had lost money began to shun the seductive delights of her nightly receptions. Reginald Eversleigh was not slow to perceive that the brilliant throng grew thin—the most distinguished guests "conspicuous by their absence." He urged Paulina to leave Paris for London; and he himself selected the lonely villa on the banks of the Thames, in

which he found a billiard-room, lighted from the roof, that was easily converted into a secret chamber.

It was by his advice that Paulina Durski altered her line of conduct on taking up her abode in England, and refrained altogether from any active share in the ruinous amusements for which men frequented her receptions.

"It was all very well for you to take a hand at écarté, or to take your place at the rouge et noir table, in Paris," Reginald said, when he discussed this question; "but here it will not do. The English are full of childish prejudices, and to see a woman at the gaming-table would shock these prejudices. Let me play for you. I will find the capital, and we will divide the profits of each night's speculation. For your part, you will have only to look beautiful, and to lure the golden-feathered birds into the net; and sometimes, perhaps, when I am playing écarté with one of your admirers, behind whose chair you may happen to be standing, you may contrive to combine a flattering interest in his play with a substantial benefit to mine."

Paulina's eyelids fell, and a crimson flush dyed her face: but she uttered no exclamation of anger or disgust. And yet she understood only too well the meaning of Sir Reginald's words. She knew that he wished her to aid him in a deliberate system of cheating. She knew this, and she did not withdraw her friendship from this man.

Alas, no! she loved him. Not because she believed him to be good and honourable—not because she was blinded to the baseness of his nature. She loved him in spite of her knowledge of his real character—she yielded to the influence of an infatuation which she was so powerless to resist that she might almost be pardoned for believing herself the victim of a baleful destiny.

"It is my fate," she murmured to herself, after this last revelation of her lover's infamy. "It must needs be my fate, since women with less claim to be loved than I possess are so happy as to win the devotion of good and brave men. It is my fate to

love a cheat and trickster, on whose constancy I have so poor a hold that a breath may sever the miserable bond that unites us."

Victor Carrington was one of the first persons whom Reginald Eversleigh introduced to Madame Durski after her arrival in England. She was pleased with the quiet and graceful manners of the Frenchman; but she was at a loss to understand Sir Reginald's intimate association with a man who was at once poor and obscure.

She told Sir Reginald as much the next time she saw him alone.

"I know that in most of your friendships convenience and self-interest reign paramount over what you call sentimentality; and yet you choose for your friend this Carrington, whom no one knows; and who is, you tell me, even poorer than yourself. You must have a hidden motive, Reginald; and a strong one."

A dark shade passed over the face of the baronet.

"I have my reasons," he said. "Victor Carrington was once useful to me—at least he endeavoured to be so. If he failed, the obligation is none the less; and he is a man who will have his bond."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT ANCHOR.

The current of life flowed on at River View Cottage without so much as a ripple in the shape of an event, after the appalling midnight visit of Miser Screwton's ghost, until one summer evening, when Captain Duncombe came home in very high spirits, bringing with him an old friend, of whom Miss Duncombe had heard her father talk very often; but whom she had hitherto never seen.

This was no other than George Jernam, the captain of the "Albatross," and the owner of the "Stormy Petrel" and "Pizarro."

In London the captain of the "Albatross" found plenty of business to occupy him. He had just returned from an African cruise, and though he had not forgotten the

circumstances which had made his last intended visit to England only a memorable and melancholy failure, he was in high spirits.

The first few days hardly sufficed for the talks between George Jernam and Joyce Harker, who aided him vigorously in the refitting of his vessel. He had been in London about a week before he fell in with honest Joe Duncombe. The two men had been fast friends ever since the day on which George, while still a youngster, had served as second-mate under the owner of the "Vixen."

They met accidentally in one of the streets about Wapping. Joseph Buncombe was delighted to encounter a sea-faring friend, and insisted on taking George Jernam down to River View Cottage to eat what he called a homely bit of dinner.

The homely bit of dinner turned out to be a very excellent repast; for Mrs. Mugby prided herself upon her powers as a cook and housekeeper, and to produce a good dinner at a short notice was a triumph she much enjoyed.

Susan Trott waited at table in her prettiest cotton gown and smartest cap.

Rosamond Duncombe sat by her father's side during the meal; and after dinner, when the curtains were drawn, and the lamp lighted, the captain of the "Vixen" set himself to brew a jorum of punch in a large old Japanese china bowl, the composition of which punch was his strong point.

Altogether that little dinner and cheerful evening entertainment seemed the perfection of home comfort. George Jernam had been too long a stranger to home and home pleasures not to feel the cheerful influence of that hospitable abode.

For Joseph Duncombe the companionship of his old friend was delightful. The society of the sailor was as invigorating to the nostrils of a seaman as the fresh breeze of ocean after a long residence inland.

"You don't know what a treat it is to me to have an old shipmate with me once more, George," he said. "My little Rosy and I live here pretty comfortably, though I keep a tight hand over her, I can tell you," he added, with pretended severity; "but it's dull

work for a man who has lived the best part of his life on the sea to find himself amongst a pack of spooney landsmen. Never you marry a landsman, Rosy, if you don't want me to cut you off with a shilling," he cried, turning to his daughter.

Of course Miss Rosamond Duncombe blushed on hearing herself thus apostrophized, as young ladies of eighteen have a knack of blushing when the possibility of their falling in love is mentioned.

George Jernam saw the blush, and thought that Miss Duncombe was the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

George Jernam stayed late at the cottage, for its hospitable owner was loth to let his friend depart.

"How long do you stay in London, George?" he asked, as the young man was going away.

"A month, at least—perhaps two months."

"Then be sure you come down here very often. You can dine with us every Sunday, of course, for I know you haven't a creature belonging to you in London except Harker; and you can run down of an evening sometimes, and bring him with you, and smoke your cigar in my garden, with the bright water rippling past you, and all the ships in the Pool spreading their rigging against the calm grey sky; and I'll brew you a jorum of punch, and Rosy shall sing us a song while we drink it."

It is not to be supposed that George Jernam, who had a good deal of idle time on his hands, could refuse to oblige his old captain, or shrink from availing himself of hospitality so cordially pressed upon him.

He went very often in the autumn dusk to spend an hour or two at River View Cottage, where he always found a hearty welcome. He strolled in the garden with Captain Duncombe and Rosamond, talking of strange lands and stranger adventures.

Harker did not always accompany him; but sometimes he did, and on such occasions

Rosamond seemed unaccountably glad to see him. Harker paid her no more attention than usual, and invariably devoted himself to Joe Duncombe, who was frequently lazy, and inclined to smoke his cigar in the comfortable parlour. On these occasions George Jernam and Rosamond Duncombe strolled side by side in the garden; and the sailor entertained his fair companion by the description of all the strangest scenes he had beheld, and the most romantic adventures he had been engaged in. It was like the talk of some sea-faring Othello; and never did Desdemona more "seriously incline" to hear her valiant Moor than did Miss Duncombe to hear her captain.

One of the windows of Joseph Duncombe's favourite sitting-room commanded the garden; and from this window the captain of the "Vixen" could see his daughter and the captain of the "Albatross" walking side by side upon the smoothly kept lawn. He used to look unutterably sly as he watched the two figures; and on one occasion went so far as to tap his nose significantly several times with his ponderous fore-finger.

"It's a match!" he muttered to himself; "it's a match, or my name is not Joe Duncombe."

Susan Trott was not slow to notice those evening walks in the garden. She told the dashing young baker that she thought there would be a wedding at the cottage before long.

"Yours, of course," cried the baker.

"For shame, now, you impitent creature!" exclaimed Susan, blushing till she was rosier than the cherry-coloured ribbons in her cap; "you know what I mean well enough."

Neither Captain Duncombe nor Susan Trott were very far wrong. The "Albatross" was not ready for her next cruise till three months after George Jernam's first visit to River View Cottage, nor did the captain of the vessel seem particularly anxious to

hasten the completion of the repairs.

When the "Albatross" did drop down into the Channel, she sailed on a cruise that was to last less than six months; and when George Jernam touched English ground again, he was to return to claim Rosamond Duncombe as his plighted wife. This arrangement had Joyce Harker's hearty approbation; but when he, too, had taken leave of George Jernam, he turned away muttering, "I think he really has forgotten Captain Valentine now; but I have not, I have not. No, I remember him better than ever now, when there's no one but me."

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The "Albatross" came safely back to the Pool in the early spring weather. George Jernam had promised Rosamond that she should know of his coming before ever he set foot on shore, and he contrived to keep his word.

One fine March day she saw a vessel sailing up the river, with a white flag flying from the main-mast. On the white flag blazed, in bright red letters, the name, "Rosamond!"

When Miss Duncombe saw this, she knew at once that her lover had returned. No other vessel than the "Albatross" was likely to sport such a piece of bunting.

George Jernam came back braver, truer, handsomer even than when he went away, as it seemed to Rosamond. He came back more devoted to her than ever, she thought; and a man must have been indeed cold of heart who could be ungrateful for the innocent, girlish affection which Rosamond revealed in every word and look.

The wedding took place within a month of the sailor's return; and, after some discussion, George Jernam consented that he and his wife should continue to live at the cottage.

"I can't come here to take possession of your house," he had said, addressing himself to his future father-in-law; "that would be rather too much of a good thing. I know you'd like to keep Rosy in the neighbourhood, and so you shall. I'll do as you did. I'll

find a little bit of ground near here, and build myself a comfortable crib, with a view of the river."

"Stuff and nonsense!" replied Captain Duncombe. "If that's what you are going to do, you shall not have my Rosy. I've no objection to her having a husband on the premises; but the day she leaves my roof for the sake of any man in Christendom, I'll cut her off with a shilling—and the shilling shall be a bad one."

The captain of the "Albatross" took his young wife into Devonshire for a brief honeymoon; and during this pleasant spring-time holiday, Rosamond made the acquaintance of her husband's aunt. Susan Jernam was pleased with the bright-eyed, pure-minded, modest girl, and in the few days they were together, learned to regard her with a motherly feeling, which was destined to be of priceless value to Rosy at an unforeseen crisis of the new life that began so fairly.

Never did a married couple begin their new life with a fairer prospect than that which lay before George Jernam and his wife when they returned to River View Cottage. Captain Duncombe received his son-in-law with the hearty welcome of a true seaman; but a few days after George Jernam's return, the old sailor took him aside, and made an announcement which filled him with surprise.

"You know how fond I am of Rosy," he said, "and you know that if Providence had blessed me with a son of my own, he couldn't have been much dearer to me than you are; so come what may, neither you or Rosy must doubt my affection for both of you. Come now, George, promise me you won't."

"I promise, with all my heart," answered Captain Jernam; "I should no more think of doubting your goodness or your love for us, than I should think of doubting that there's a sun shining up aloft yonder. But why do you speak of this?"

"Because, George, the truth of the matter is, I'm going to leave you."

"You are going to leave us?"

"Yes, old fellow. You see, a lazy, land-lubber's life doesn't suit me. I've tried it, and

it don't answer. I thought the sound of the water washing against the bank at the bottom of my garden, and the sight of the ships in the Pool, would be consolation enough for me, but they ain't, and I've been sickening for the sea for the last six mouths. As long as my little Rosy had nobody in the world but me to take care of her, I stayed with her, and I should have gone on staying with her till I died at my post. But she's got a husband now, and two trust-worthy women-servants, who would protect her if you left her—as I suppose you must leave her, sooner or later—so there's no reason why I should stop on shore any longer, pining for a sight of blue water."

"And you really mean to leave us!" exclaimed George Jernam. "I am afraid your going will break poor Rosy's heart."

"No it won't, George," answered Captain Duncombe. "When a young woman's married, her heart is uncommonly tough with regard to everybody except her husband. I dare say poor little Rosy-posy will be sorry to lose her old father; but she'll have you to console her, and she won't grieve long. Besides, I'm not going away for ever, you know. I'm only just going to take a little cruise to the Indies, with a cargo of dry goods, make a bit of money for my grandchildren that are to be, and then come home again, fresher than ever, and settle down in the bosom of my family. I've seen a neat little craft that will suit me to a T; and I shall fit her out, and be off for blue water before the month is ended."

It was evident that the old sailor was in earnest, and George Jernam did not attempt to overrule his determination. Rosamond pleaded against her father's departure, but she pleaded in vain. Early in June Captain Duncombe left England on board a neat little craft, which he christened the "Young Wife," in compliment to his daughter.

Before he went, George promised that he would himself await the return of his father-in-law before he started on a new voyage.

"I can afford to be idle for twelve months, or so," he said; "and my dear little wife

shall not be left without a protector."

So the young couple settled down comfortably in the commodious cottage, which was now all their own.

To Rosamond, her new existence was all unbroken joy. She had loved her husband with all the romantic devotion of inexperienced girlhood. To her poetic fancy he seemed the noblest and bravest of created beings; and she wondered at her own good fortune when she saw him by her side, fond and devoted, consent to sacrifice all the delights of his free, roving life for her sake.

"I don't think such happiness can last, George," she said to him one day.

That vague foreboding was soon to be too sadly realized! The sunshine and the bright summer peace had promised to last for ever; but a dark cloud arose which in one moment overshadowed all that summer sky, and Rosamond Jernam's happiness vanished as if it had been indeed a dream.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FAMILIAR TOKEN.

Joseph Duncombe had been absent from River View Cottage little more than a month, and the life of its inmates had been smooth and changeless as the placid surface of a lake. They sought no society but that of each other. Existence glided by, and the eventless days left little to remember except the sweet tranquillity of a happy home.

It was on a wet, dull, unsettled July day that Rosamond Jernam found her life changed all at once, while the cause for that dark change remained a mystery to her.

After idling away half the morning, Captain Jernam discovered that he had an important business letter to write to the captain of his trading ship, the "Pizarro."

On opening his portfolio, the captain found himself without a single sheet of foreign letter-paper. He told this difficulty to his wife, as it was his habit to tell her all his

difficulties; and he found her, as usual, able to give him assistance.

"There is always foreign letter-paper in papa's desk," she said; "you can use that."

"But, my dear Rosy, I could not think of opening your father's desk in his absence."

"And why not?" cried Rosamond, laughing. "Do you think papa has any secrets hidden there; or that he keeps some mysterious packet of old love-letters tied up with a blue ribbon, which he would not like your prying eyes to discover? You may open the desk, George. I give you my permission; and if papa should be angry, the blame shall fall upon me alone."

The desk was a large old-fashioned piece of furniture, which stood in the corner of Captain Duncombe's favourite sitting-room.

"But how am I to open this ponderous piece of machinery?" asked George. "It seems to be locked."

"It is locked," answered his wife. "Luckily I happen to have a key which precisely fits it. There, sir, is the key; and now I leave you to devote yourself to business, while I go to see about dinner."

She held up her pretty rosy lips to be kissed, and then tripped away, leaving the captain to achieve a duty for which he had no particular relish.

He unlocked the desk, and found a quire of letter-paper. He dipped a pen in ink, tried it, and then began to write.

He wrote, "London, July 20th," and "My Dear Boyd;" and having written thus much, he came to a stop. The easiest part of the letter was finished.

Captain Jernam sat with his elbows resting on the table, looking straight before him, in pure absence of mind. As he did so, his eyes were caught suddenly by an object lying amongst the pens and pencils in the tray before him.

That object was a bent gold coin.

His face grew pale as he snatched up the coin, and examined it closely. It was a

small Brazilian coin, bent and worn, and on one side of it was scratched the initial "G."

That small battered coin was very familiar to George Jernam's gaze, and it was scarcely strange if the warm life-blood ebbed from his cheeks, and left them ashy pale.

The coin was a keepsake which he had given to his murdered brother, Valentine, on the eve of their last parting.

And he found it here—here, in Joseph Duncombe's desk!

For some moments he sat aghast, motionless, powerless even to think. He could not realize the full weight of this strange discovery. He could only remember the warm breath of the tropical night on which he and his brother had bidden each other farewell—the fierce light of the tropical stars beneath which they had stood when they parted.

Then he began to ask himself how that farewell token, the golden coin, which he had taken from his pocket in that parting hour, and upon which he had idly scratched his own initial, had come into the possession of Joseph Duncombe.

He was not a man of the world, and he was not able to reason calmly and logically on the subject of his brother's untimely fate. He shared Joyce's rooted idea, that the escape of Valentine's murderer was only temporary, and that, sooner or later, accident would disclose the criminal.

It seemed now as if the eventful moment had come. Here, on this spot, near the scene of his brother's disappearance, he came upon this token—this relic, which told that Valentine had been in some manner associated with Joseph Duncombe.

And yet Joseph Duncombe and George had talked long and earnestly on the subject of the murdered sailor's fate, and in all their talk Captain Duncombe had never acknowledged any acquaintance with its details.

This was strange.

Still more incomprehensible to George Jernam was the fact that Valentine should have parted with the farewell token, except with his life, for his last words to his brother had been—

"I'll keep the bit of gold, George, to my dying day, in memory of your fidelity and love."

There had been something more between these two men than a common brotherhood: there had been the bond of a joyless childhood spent together, and their affection for each other was more than the ordinary love of brothers.

"I don't believe he would have parted with that piece of gold," cried George, "not if he had been without a sixpence in the world."

"And he was rich. It was the money he carried about him which tempted his murderer. It was near here that he met his fate—on this very spot, perhaps. Joyce told me that before my father-in-law built this house, there was a dilapidated building, which was a meeting-place for the vilest scoundrels in Ratcliff Highway. But how came that coin in Joseph Duncombe's desk?—how, unless Joseph Duncombe was concerned in my brother's murder?"

This idea, once aroused in the mind of George Jernam, was not to be driven away. It seemed too hideous for reality; but it took possession of his mind, nevertheless, and he sat alone, trying to shut horrible fancies out of his brain, but trying uselessly.

He remembered Joseph Duncombe's wealth. Had all that wealth been honestly won?

He remembered the captain's restlessness—his feverish desire to run away from a home in which he possessed so much to render life happy.

Might not that eagerness to return to the sailor's wild, roving life have its root in the tortures of a guilty conscience?

"His very kindness to me may be prompted by a vague wish to make some paltry

atonement for a dark wrong done my brother," thought George.

He remembered Joseph Duncombe's seeming goodness of heart, and wondered if such a man could possibly be concerned in the darkest crime of which mankind can be guilty. But he remembered also that the worst and vilest of men were often such accomplished hypocrites as to remain unsuspected of evil until the hour when accident revealed their iniquity.

"It is so, perhaps, with this man," thought George Jernam. "That air of truth and goodness may be but a mask. I know what a master-passion the greed of gain is with some men. It has doubtless been the passion of this man's heart. The wretches who lured Valentine Jernam to this house were tools of Joseph Duncombe's. How otherwise could this token have fallen into his hands?"

He tried to find some other answer to this question; but he tried in vain. That little piece of gold seemed to fasten the dark stigma of guilt upon the absent owner of the house.

"And I have shaken this man's hand!" cried George. "I am the husband of his daughter. I live beneath the shelter of his roof—in this house, which was bought perhaps with my brother's blood. Great heavens! it is too horrible."

For two long hours George Jernam sat brooding over the strange discovery which had changed the whole current of his life. Rosamond came and peeped in at the door.

"Still busy, George?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, in a strange, harsh tone, "I am very busy."

That altered voice alarmed the loving wife. She crept into the room, and stood behind her husband's chair.

"George," she said, "your voice sounded so strange just now; you are not ill, are you, darling?"

"No, no; I only want to be alone. Go, Rosamond."

The wife could not fail to be just a little offended by her husband's manner. The pretty rosy lips pouted, and then tears came into the bright blue eyes.

George Jernam's head was bent upon his clasped hands, and he took no heed of his wife's sorrow. She could not leave him without one more anxious question.

"Is there anything amiss with you, George?" she asked.

"Nothing that you can cure."

The harshness of his tone, the coldness of his manner, wounded her heart. She said no more, but went quietly from the room.

Never before had her beloved George spoken unkindly to her—never before had the smallest cloud obscured the calm horizon of her married life.

After this, the dark cloud hung black and heavy over that once happy household; the sun never shone again upon the young wife's home.

She tried to penetrate the secret of this sudden change, but she could not do so. She could complain of no unkindness from her husband—he never spoke harshly to her after that first day. His manner was gentle and indulgent; but it seemed as if his love had died, leaving in its place only a pitiful tenderness, strangely blended with sadness and gloom.

He asked Rosamond several questions about her father's past life; but on that subject she could tell him very little. She had never lived with her father until after the building of River View Cottage, and she knew nothing of his existence before that time, except that he had only been in England during brief intervals, and that he had always come to see her at school when he had an opportunity of doing so.

"He is the best and dearest of fathers," she said, affectionately.

George Jernam asked if Captain Duncombe had been in England during that spring in which Valentine met his death.

After a moment's reflection, Rosamond replied in the affirmative.

"I remember his coming to see me that spring," she said. "He came early in March, and again in April, and it was then he began first to talk of settling in England."

"And with that assurance my last hope vanishes," thought George.

He had asked the question in the faint hope of hearing that Joseph Duncombe was far away from England at the time of the murder.

A fortnight after the discovery of the Brazilian coin, George Jernam announced to his wife that he was about to leave her. He was going to the coast of Africa, he said. He had tried to reconcile himself to a landsman's life, and had found it unendurable.

The blow fell very heavily on poor Rosamond's loving heart.

"We seemed so happy, George, only two short weeks ago," she pleaded.

"Yes," he answered, "I tried to be happy; but you see, the life doesn't suit me. Tour father couldn't rest in this house, though he had made himself such a comfortable home. No more can I rest here. There is a curse upon the house, perhaps," he added, with a bitter laugh.

Rosamond burst into tears.

"Oh, George, you will break my heart," she cried. "I thought our lives were to be so happy; and now our happiness ends all at once like a broken dream. It is because you are weary of me, and of my love, that you are going away. You promised my father that you would remain with me till his return."

"I did, Rosamond," answered her husband, gravely, "and, as I am an honest man, I meant to keep that promise! I am not weary of your love—that is as precious to me as ever it was. But you must not continue to reside beneath this roof. I tell you there is a curse upon this house, Rosamond, and neither peace nor happiness can be the lot of those who dwell within its fatal walls. You must go down to Allanbay, where you may find kind friends, where you may be happy, dear, while I am away."

"But, George, what is all this mystery?"

"Ask me no questions, Rosamond, for I can answer none. Believe me when I tell you that you have no share in the change that has come upon me. My feelings towards you remain unaltered; but within the last few weeks I have made a discovery which has struck a death-blow to my happiness. I go out once more a homeless wanderer, because the quiet of domestic life has become unbearable to me. I want bustle, danger, hard work. I want to get away from my own thoughts."

Rosamond in vain implored her husband to tell her more than this. He, so yielding of old, was on this point inflexible.

Before the leaves had begun to fall in the dreary autumn days the "Albatross" was ready for a new voyage. The first mate took her down to Plymouth Harbour, there to wait the coming of her captain, who travelled into Devonshire by mail-coach, taking Rosamond to her future abode.

At any other time Rosamond would have been delighted with the romantic beauty of that Devonian village, where her husband had selected a pleasant cottage for her, near his aunt's abode; but a settled melancholy had taken possession of the once joyous girl. She had brooded continually over her husband's altered conduct, and she had at last arrived at a terrible conclusion.

She believed that he was mad. What but sudden insanity could have produced so great a change?—a change for which it was impossible to imagine a cause.

"If he had been absent from me for some time, and had returned an altered creature, I should not be so much bewildered by the change," Rosamond said to herself. "But the transformation occurred in an hour. He saw no strange visitor; he received no letter. No tidings of any kind could possibly have reached him. He entered my father's sitting-room a light-hearted, happy man; he came out of it gloomy and miserable. Can I doubt that the change is something more than any ordinary alteration of feeling or character?"

Poor Rosamond remembered having heard of the fatal effects of sunstrokes—effects which have sometimes revealed themselves long after the occurrence of the calamity that caused them; and she told herself that the change in George Jernam's nature must needs be the result of such a calamity.

She entreated her husband to consult an eminent physician as to the state of his health; but she dared not press her request, so coldly was it received.

"Who told you that I was ill?" he asked; "I am not ill. All the physicians in Christendom could do nothing for me."

After this, Rosamond could say no more. For worlds she would not have revealed to a stranger her sad suspicion of George Jernam's insanity. She could only pray that Providence would protect and guide him in his roving life.

"The excitement and hard work of his existence on board ship may work a cure," she thought, trying to be hopeful. "It is very possible that the calm monotony of a landsman's life may have produced a bad effect upon his brain. I can only trust in Providence—I can only pray night and day for the welfare of him I love so fondly."

And so they parted. George Jernam left his wife with sadness in his heart; but it was a kind of sadness in which love had little share.

"I have thought too much of my own happiness," he said to himself, "and I have left my brother's death unavenged. Have I forgotten the time when he carried me along the lonely sea-shore in his loving arms? Have I forgotten the years in which he was father, mother—all the world to me? No; by heaven! I have not. The time has come when the one thought of my life must be revenge—revenge upon the murderer of my brother, whosoever he may be."

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CHAPTER XX.

ON GUARD.

Mr. Andrew Larkspur, the police-officer, took up his abode in Percy Street a week after his interview with Lady Eversleigh.

For a fortnight after he became an occupant of the house in which she lived, Honoria received no tidings from him. She knew that he went out early every morning, and that he returned late every night, and this was all that she knew respecting his movements.

At the end of the fortnight, he came to her late one evening, and begged to be favoured with an audience.

"I shall want at least two hours of your time, ma'am," he said; "and, perhaps, you may find it fatiguing to listen to me so late at night. If you'd rather defer the business till to-morrow morning—"

"I would rather not defer it," answered Lady Eversleigh; "I am ready to listen to you for as long a time as you choose. I have been anxiously expecting some tidings of your movements."

"Very likely, ma'am," replied Mr. Larkspur, coolly; "I know you ladies are given to impatience, as well as Berlin wool work, and steel beads, and the pianoforte, and such like. But you see, ma'am, there's not a living creature more unlike a race-horse than a police-officer. And it's just like you ladies to expect police-officers to be Flying Dutchmen, in a manner of speaking. I've been a hard worker in my time, ma'am; but I never worked harder, or stuck to my work better, than I have these last two weeks; and all I can say is, if I ain't dead-beat, it's only because it isn't in circumstances to dead-beat me."

Lady Eversleigh listened very quietly to this exordium; but a slight, nervous twitching of her lips every now and then betrayed her impatience.

"I am waiting to hear your news," she said, presently.

"And I'm a-going to tell it, ma'am, in due course," returned the police-officer, drawing a bloated leather book from his pocket, and opening it. "I've got all down here in regular order. First and foremost, the baronet—he's a bad lot, is the baronet."

"I do not need to hear that from your lips."

"Very likely not, ma'am. But if you set me to watch a gentleman, you must expect I shall form an opinion about him. The baronet has lodgings in Villiers Street, uncommon shabby ones. I went in and took a good survey of him and his lodgings together, in the character of a bootmaker, taking home a pair of boots, which was intended for a Mr. Everfield in the next street, says I, and, of course, Everfield and Eversleigh being a'most the same names, was calculated to lead to inconvenient mistakes. In the character of the bootmaker, Sir Reginald Eversleigh tells me to get out of his room, and be—something uncommonly unpleasant, and unfit for the ears of ladies. In the character of the bootmaker, I scrapes acquaintance with a young person employed as housemaid, and very willing to answer questions, and be drawed out. From the young person employed as housemaid, I gets what I take the liberty to call my ground-plan of the baronet's habits; beginning with his late breakfast, consisting chiefly of gunpowder tea and cayenne pepper, and ending with the scroop of his latch-key, to be heard any time from two in the morning to day-break. From the young person employed as housemaid, I discover that my baronet always spends his evenings out of doors, and is known to visit a lady at Fulham very constant, whereby the young person employed as housemaid supposes he is keeping company with her. From the same young person I obtain the lady's address—which piece of information the young person has acquired in the course of taking letters to the post. The lady's address is Hilton House, Fulham. The lady's name has slipped my young person's memory, but is warranted to begin with a D."

Mr. Larkspur paused to take breath, and to consult the memoranda in the bloated leather book.

"Having ascertained this much, I had done with the young person, for the time being," he continued, glibly; "and I felt that my next business would be at Hilton House. Here I presented myself in the character of a twopenny postman; but here I found the servants foreign, and so uncommonly close that they might as well have been so many marble monuments, for any good that was to be got out of them. Failing the servants, I fell back upon the neighbours and the tradespeople; and from the neighbours and the tradespeople I find out that my foreign lady's name is Durski, and that my foreign lady gives a party every night, which party is made up of gentlemen. That is queer, to say the least of it, thinks I. A lady who gives a party every night, and whose visitors are all gentlemen, is an uncommonly queer customer. Having found out this much, my mouth watered to find out more; for a man who has his soul in his profession takes a pleasure in his work, ma'am; and if you were to offer to pay such a man double to waste his time, he couldn't do it. I tried the neighbours, and I tried the tradespeople, every way; and work 'em how I would, I couldn't get much out of 'em. You see, ma'am, there's scarcely a human habitation within a quarter of a mile of Hilton House, so, when I say neighbours, I don't mean neighbours in the common sense of the word. There might be assassination going on every night in Hilton House undiscovered, for there's no one lives near enough to hear the victims' groans; and if there was anything as good for our trade as pork-pie making out of murdered human victims going nowadays, ma'am, Hilton House would be the place where I should look for pork-pies. Well, I was almost beginning to lose patience, when I sat down in a fancy-stationer's shop to rest myself. I sat down in this shop because I was really tired, not with any hope of making use of my time, for I was too far away from Hilton House to expect any luck in the way of information from the gentleman behind the counter. However, when a man has devoted his life to ferreting out information, the habit of ferreting is apt to be very strong upon him; so I pass the time of day to my fancy-stationer, and then begins to ferret. 'Madame Durski, at Hilton House yonder, is an uncommonly

handsome woman,' I throw out, by way of an opening. 'Uncommonly,' replies my fancy-stationer, by which I perceive he knows her. 'A customer of yours, perhaps?' I throw out, promiscuous. 'Yes,' answers my fancy-stationer. 'A good one, too, I'll be bound,' I throw out, in a lively, conversational way. My fancy-stationer smiles, and being accustomed to study smiles, I see significance in his smile. 'A very good one in some things,' replies my fancy-stationer, laying a tremendous stress upon the word some. 'Oh,' says I, 'gilt-edged note-paper and cream-coloured sealing-wax, for instance.' 'I don't sell her a quire of paper in a month,' answers my stationer. 'If she was as fond of writing letters as she is of playing cards, I think it would be better for her.' 'Oh, she's fond of card-playing is she?' I ask. 'Yes,' replies my fancy-stationer, 'I rather think she is. Your hair would stand on end if I were to tell you how many packs of playing-cards I've sold her lady-companion within the last three months. The lady-companion comes here at dusk with a thick black veil over her face, and she thinks I don't know who she is; but I do know her, and know where she lives, and whom she lives with.' After this I buy myself a quire of writing-paper, which I don't want, and I wish my fancy-stationer good afternoon. 'Oh, oh,' I say to myself when I get outside, 'I know the meaning of Madame Durski's parties now. Madame Durski's house is a flash gambling crib, and all those fine gentlemen in cabs and broughams go there to play cards.'"

"The mistress of a gaming-house!" exclaimed Honoria. "A fitting companion for Reginald Eversleigh!"

"Just so, ma'am; and a fitting companion for Mr. Victor Carrington likewise."

"Have you found out anything about him?" cried Lady Eversleigh, eagerly.

"No, ma'am, I haven't. At least, nothing in my way. I've tried his neighbours, and his tradespeople also, in the character of a postman, which is respectable, and calculated to inspire confidence. But out of his tradespeople I can get nothing more than the fact that he is a remarkably praiseworthy young man, who pays his debts regular,

and is the very best of sons to a highly-respectable mother. There's nothing much in that, you know, ma'am."

"Hypocrite!" murmured Lady Eversleigh. "A hypocrite so skilled in the vile arts of hypocrisy that he will contrive to have the world always on his side. And this is all your utmost address has been able to achieve?"

"All at present, ma'am; but I live in hopes. And now I've got a bit of news about the baronet, which I think will astonish you. I've been improving my acquaintance with the young person employed as housemaid in Villiers Street for the last fortnight, and I find from her that my baronet is on very friendly terms with his first cousin, Mr. Dale, of the Temple."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Honoria. "These two men are the last between whom I should have imagined a friendship impossible."

"Yes, ma'am; but so it is, notwithstanding. Mr. Douglas Dale, barrister-at-law, dined with his cousin, Sir Reginald, twice last week; and on each occasion the two gentlemen left Villiers Street together in a hack cab, between eight and nine o'clock. My friend, the housemaid, happened to hear the address given to the cabmen on both occasions; and on both occasions the address was Hilton House, Fulham."

"Douglas Dale a gambler!" cried Honoria; "the companion of his infamous cousin! That is indeed ruin."

"Well, certainly, ma'am, it does not seem a very lively prospect for my friend, D. D.," answered Mr. Larkspur, with irrepressible flippancy.

"Do you know any more respecting this acquaintance?" asked Honoria.

"Not yet, ma'am; but I mean to know more."

"Watch then," she cried; "watch those two men. There is danger for Mr. Dale in any association with his cousin, Sir Reginald Eversleigh. Do not forget that. There is peril for him—the deadliest it may be. Watch them, Mr. Larkspur; watch them by

day and night."

"I'll do my duty, ma'am, depend upon it," replied the police officer; "and I'll do it well. I take a pride in my profession, and to me duty is a pleasure."

"I will trust you."

"You may, ma'am. Oh, by-the-bye, I must tell you that in this house my name is Andrews. Please remember that, ma'am."

"Mr. Andrews, lawyer's clerk. The name of Larkspur smells too strong of Bow Street."

* * * * *

The information acquired by Andrew Larkspur was perfectly correct. An intimacy and companionship had arisen between Douglas Dale and his cousin, Reginald Eversleigh, and the two men spent much of their time together.

Douglas Dale was still the same simple-minded, true-hearted young man that he had been before his uncle Oswald's death endowed him with an income of five thousand a year; but with the accession of wealth the necessity for industry ceased; and instead of a hard-working student, Douglas became one of the upper million, who have nothing to think of but the humour of the moment—now Alpine tourist, now Norwegian angler; anon idler in clubs and drawing-rooms; anon book collector, or amateur litterateur.

He still occupied chambers in the Temple; he still called himself a barrister; but he had no longer any desire to succeed at the bar.

His brother Lionel had become rector of Hallgrove, a village in Dorsetshire, where there was a very fine old church and a very small congregation. It was one of those fat livings which seem only to fall to the lot of rich men.

Lionel had the tastes of a typical country gentleman, and he found ample leisure to indulge in his favourite amusement of hunting, after having conscientiously

discharged his duties.

The poor of Hallgrove had good reason to congratulate themselves on the fact that their rector was a rich man. Mr. Dale's charities seemed almost boundless to his happy parishioners.

The rectory was a fine old house, situated in one of those romantic spots which one scarcely hopes to see out of a picture. Hill, wood, and water combined to make the beauty of the landscape; and amid verdant woods and fields the old red-brick mansion looked the perfection of an English homestead. It had been originally a manor-house, and some portions of it were very old.

Douglas Dale called Hallgrove the Happy Valley. Neither of the brothers had yet married, and the barrister paid frequent visits to the rector. He was glad to find repose after the fatigue and excitement of London life. Like his brother, he delighted in the adventures and perils of the hunting field, and he was rarely absent from Hallgrove during the hunting season.

In London he had his clubs, and the houses of friends. The manoeuvring mammas of the West End were very glad to welcome Mr. Dale at their parties. He might have danced with the prettiest girls in London every night of his life had he pleased.

To an unmarried man, with unlimited means and no particular occupation, the pleasures of a life of fashionable amusement are apt to grow "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable," after a certain time. Douglas Dale was beginning to be very tired of balls and dinner parties, flower-shows and morning concerts, when he happened to meet his cousin, Reginald Eversleigh, at a club to which both men belonged.

Eversleigh could make himself very agreeable when he chose; and on this occasion he exerted himself to the utmost to produce a good impression upon the mind of Douglas Dale. Hitherto Douglas had not liked his cousin, Reginald; but he now began to fancy that he had been prejudiced against his kinsman. He felt that Reginald had some reason to consider himself ill-used; and with the impulsive

kindness of a generous nature, he was ready to extend the hand of friendship to a man who had been beaten in the battle of life.

The two men dined together at their club; they met again and again; sometimes by accident—sometimes by appointment. The club was one at which there was a good deal of quiet gambling amongst scientific whist-players; but until his meeting with Reginald Eversleigh, Douglas Dale had never been tempted to take part in a rubber.

His habits changed gradually under the influence of his cousin and Victor Carrington. He consented to take a hand at écarté after dinner on one day; on another day to join at a whist-party. Three months after his first meeting with Reginald, he accompanied the baronet to Hilton House, where he was introduced to the beautiful Austrian widow.

Sir Reginald Eversleigh played his cards very cautiously. It was only after he had instilled a taste for gambling into his kinsman's breast that he ventured to introduce him to the fashionable gaming-house presided over by Paulina Durski.

The introduction had a sinister effect upon his destiny. He had passed unscathed through the furnace of London life; many women had sought to obtain power over him; but his heart was still in his own keeping when he first crossed the threshold of Hilton House.

He saw Paulina Durski, and loved her. He loved her from the very first with a deep and faithful affection, as far above the selfish fancy of Reginald Eversleigh as the heaven is above the earth.

But she was no longer mistress of her heart. That was given to the man whose baseness she knew, and whom she loved despite her better reason.

Sir Reginald speedily discovered the state of his cousin's feelings. He had laid his plans for this result. Douglas Dale, as the adoring slave of Madame Durski, would be an easy dupe, and much of Sir Oswald's wealth might yet enrich his disinherited nephew. Victor Carrington looked on, and shared his spoils; but he watched

Eversleigh's schemes with a half-contemptuous air.

"You think you are doing wonders, my dear Reginald," he said; "and certainly, by means of Mr. Dale's losses, you and I contrive to live—to say nothing of our dear Madame Durski, who comes in for her share of the plunder. But after all, what is it? a few hundreds more or less, at the best. I think you may by-and-by play a better and a deeper game than that, Reginald, and I think I can show you how to play it."

"I do not want to be mixed up in any more of your schemes," answered Sir Reginald, "I have had enough of them. What have they done for me?"

The two men were seated in Sir Reginald's dingy sitting-room in Villiers Street when this conversation took place.

They were sitting opposite to each other, with a little table between them. Victor Carrington rested his folded arms upon the table, and leaned across them, looking full in the face of his companion.

"Look you, Reginald Eversleigh," he said, "because I have failed once, there is no reason that I am to fail always. The devil himself conspired against me last time; but the day will come when I shall have the devil on my side. It is yet on the cards for you to become owner of ten thousand a-year; and it shall be my business to make you owner of that income."

"Stay, Carrington, do you think I would permit—?"

"I ask your permission for nothing: I know you to be a weak and wavering coward, who of your own volition would never rise from the level of a ruined spendthrift and penniless vagabond. You forget, perhaps, that I hold a bond which gives me an interest in your fortunes. I do not forget. When my own wisdom counsels action, I shall act, without asking your advice. If I am successful, you will thank me. If I fail, you will reproach me for my folly. That is the way of the world. And now let us change the subject. When do you go down to Dorsetshire with your cousin, Douglas Dale?"

"Why do you ask me that question?"

"My curiosity is only prompted by a friendly interest in your welfare, and that of your relations. You are going to hunt with Lionel Dale, are you not?"

"Yes; he has invited me to spend the remainder of the hunting season with him?"

"At his brother's request, I believe?"

"Precisely. I have not met Lionel since—since my uncle's funeral—as you know." Sir Reginald pronounced these last words with considerable hesitation. "Douglas spends Christmas with his brother, and Douglas wishes me to join the party. In order to gratify this wish, Lionel has written me a very friendly letter, inviting me down to Hallgrove Rectory, and I have accepted the invitation."

"Nothing could be more natural. There is some talk of your buying a hunter for Lionel, is there not, by-the-bye?"

"Yes. They know I am a tolerable judge of horseflesh, and Douglas wishes me to get his brother a good mount for the winter."

"When is the animal to be chosen?" asked Victor, carelessly.

"Immediately. We go down to Hallgrove next week, I shall select the horse whenever I can get Douglas to go with me to the dealer's, and send him down to get used to his new quarters before his hard work begins."

"Good. Let me know when you are going to the horse-dealer's: but if you see me there, take no notice of me beyond a nod, and be careful not to attract Douglas Dale's attention to me or introduce me to him."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Reginald, looking suspiciously at his companion.

"What should I mean except what I say? I do not see how even your imagination can fancy any dark meaning lurking beneath the common-place desire to waste an afternoon in a visit to a horse-dealer's yard."

"My dear Carrington, forgive me," exclaimed Reginald. "I am irritable and impatient. I cannot forget the misery of those last days at Raynham."

"Yes," answered Victor Carrington: "the misery of failure."

No more was said between the two men. The sway which the powerful intellect of the surgeon exercised over the weaker nature of his friend was omnipotent. Reginald Eversleigh feared Victor Carrington. And there was something more than this ever-present fear in his mind; there was the lurking hope that, by means of Carrington's scheming, he should yet obtain the wealth he had forfeited.

The conversation above recorded took place on the day after Mr. Larkspur's interview with Honoria.

Three days afterwards, Reginald Eversleigh and his cousin met at the club, for the purpose of going together to inspect the hunters on sale at Mr. Spavin's repository, in the Brompton Road.

Dale's mail-phaeton was waiting before the door of the club, and he drove his cousin down to the repository.

Mr. Spavin was one of the most fashionable horse-dealers of that day. A man who could not afford to give a handsome price had but a small chance of finding himself suited at Mr. Spavin's repository. For a poor customer the horse-dealer felt nothing but contempt.

Half a dozen horsey-looking men came out of stables, loose boxes, and harness-rooms to attend upon the gentlemen, whose dashing mail-phaeton and stylish groom commanded the respect of the whole yard. The great Mr. Spavin himself emerged from his counting-house to ask the pleasure of his customers.

"Carriage-horses, sir, or 'acks?" he asked. "That's a very fine pair in the break yonder, if you want anything showy for a mail-phaeton. They've been exercising in the park. All blood, sir, and not an ounce too much bone. A pair of hosses that would do credit to a dook."

Reginald asked to see Mr. Spavin's hunters, and the grooms and keepers were soon busy trotting out noble-looking creatures for the inspection of the three gentlemen. There was a tan-gallop at the bottom of the yard, and up and down this the animals were paraded.

Douglas Dale was much interested in the choice of the horse which he intended to present to his brother; and he discussed the merits of the different hunters with Sir Reginald Eversleigh, whose eye had lighted, within a minute of their entrance, upon Victor Carrington. The surgeon stood at a little distance from them, absorbed by the scene before him; but it was to be observed that his attention was given less to the horses than the men who brought them out of their boxes.

At one of these men he looked with peculiar intensity; and this man was certainly not calculated to attract the observation of a stranger by any personal advantages of his own. He was a wizened little man, with red hair, a bullet-shaped head, and small, rat-like eyes.

This man had very little to do with the display of the horses; but once, when there was a pause in the business, he opened the door of a loose-box, went in, and presently emerged, leading a handsome bay, whose splendid head was reared in a defiant attitude, as the fiery eyeballs surveyed the yard.

"Isn't that 'Wild Buffalo?'" asked Mr. Spavin.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you ought to know better than to bring him out," exclaimed the horse-dealer, angrily. "These gentlemen want a horse that a Christian can ride, and the 'Buffalo' isn't fit to be ridden by a Christian; not yet awhile at any rate. I mean to take the devil out of him before I've done with him, though," added Mr. Spavin, casting a vindictive glance at the horse.

"He is rather a handsome animal," said Sir Reginald Eversleigh.

"Oh, yes, he's handsome enough," answered the dealer. "His looks are no discredit to

him; but handsome is as handsome does—that's my motter; and if I'd known the temper of that beast when Captain Chesterly offered him to me, I'd have seen the captain farther before I consented to buy him. However, there he is; I've got him, and I must make the best of him. But Jack Spavin is not the man to sell such a beast to a customer until the wickedness is taken out of him. When the wickedness is taken out of him, he'll be at your service, gentlemen, with Jack Spavin's best wishes."

The horse was taken back to his box. Victor watched the animal and the groom with an intensely earnest gaze as they disappeared from his sight.

"That's a curious-looking fellow, that groom of yours," Sir Reginald said to the horse-dealer.

"What, Hawkins—Jim Hawkins? Yes; his looks won't make his fortune. He's a hard-working fellow enough in his way; but he's something like the horse in the matter of temper. But I think I've taken the devil out of him," said Mr. Spavin, with an ominous crack of his heavy riding-whip.

More horses were brought out, examined, discussed, and taken back to their boxes. Mr. Spavin knew he had to deal with a good customer, and he wished to show off the resources of his stable.

"Bring out 'Niagara,'" he said, presently, and in a few minutes a groom emerged from one of the stables, leading a magnificent bay. "Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Spavin, "that animal is own brother to 'Wild Buffalo,' and if it had not been for my knowledge of that animal's merits I should never have bought the 'Buffalo.' Now, there's apt to be a good deal of difference between human beings of the same family; but perhaps you'd hardly believe the difference there can be between horses of the same blood. That animal is as sweet a temper as you'd wish to have in a horse—and 'Buffalo' is a devil; yet, if you were to see the two horses side by side, you'd scarcely know which was which."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sir Reginald; "I should like, for the curiosity of the thing, to see the two animals together."

Mr. Spavin gave his orders, and presently Jim Hawkins, the queer-looking groom, brought out "Wild Buffalo."

The two horses were indeed exactly alike in all physical attributes, and the man who could have distinguished one from the other must have had a very keen eye.

"There they are, gents, as like as two peas, and if it weren't for a small splash of white on the inner side of 'Buffalo's' left hock, there's very few men in my stable could tell one from the other."

Victor Carrington, observing that Dale was talking to the horse-dealer, drew near the animal, with the air of an interested stranger, and stooped to examine the white mark. It was a patch about as large as a crown-piece.

"'Niagara' seems a fine creature," he said.

"Yes," replied a groom; "I don't think there's many better horses in the place than 'Niagara.'"

When Douglas Dale returned to the examination of the two horses, Victor Carrington drew Sir Reginald aside, unperceived by Dale.

"I want you to choose the horse 'Niagara' for Lionel Dale," he said, when they were beyond the hearing of Douglas.

"Why that horse in particular?"

"Never mind why," returned Carrington, impatiently. "You can surely do as much as that to oblige me."

"Be it so," answered Sir Reginald, with assumed carelessness; "the horse seems a good one."

There was a little more talk and consultation, and then Douglas Dale asked his cousin which horse he liked best among those they had seen.

"Well, upon my word, if you ask my opinion, I think there is no better horse than that bay they call 'Niagara;' and if you and Spavin can agree as to price, you may settle the business without further hesitation."

Douglas Dale acted immediately upon the baronet's advice. He went into Mr. Spavin's little counting-house, and wrote a cheque for the price of the horse on the spot, much to that gentleman's satisfaction. While Douglas Dale was writing this cheque, Victor Carrington waited in the yard outside the counting-house.

He took this opportunity of addressing Hawkins, the groom.

"I want a job done in your line," he said, "and I think you'd be just the man to manage it for me. Have you any spare time?"

"I've an hour or two, now and then, of a night, after my work's over," answered the man.

"At what time, and where, are you to be met with after your work?"

"Well, sir, my own home is too poor a place for a gentleman like you to come to; but if you don't object to a public—and a very respectable public, too, in its way—there's the 'Goat and Compasses,' three doors down the little street as you'll see on your left, as you leave this here yard, walking towards London."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Victor, impatiently; "you are to be found at the 'Goat and Compasses'?"

"I mostly am, sir, after nine o'clock of an evening—summer and winter—"

"That will do," exclaimed Victor, with a quick glance at the door of the counting-house. "I will see you at the 'Goat and Compasses' to-night, at nine. Hush!"

Eversleigh and his cousin were just emerging from the counting-house, as Victor Carrington gave the groom a warning gesture.

"Mum's the word," muttered the man.

Sir Reginald Eversleigh and Douglas Dale took their places in the phaeton, and

drove away.

Victor Carrington arrived at half-past eight at the "Goat and Compasses"—a shabby little public-house in a shabby little street. Here he found Mr. Hawkins lounging in the bar, waiting for him, and beguiling the time by the consumption of a glass of gin.

"There's no one in the parlour, sir," said Hawkins, as he recognized Mr. Carrington; "and if you'll step in there, we shall be quite private. I suppose there ain't no objection to this gent and me stepping into the parlour, is there, Mariar?" Mr. Hawkins asked of a young lady, in a very smart cap, who officiated as barmaid.

"Well, you ain't a parlour customer in general, Mr. Hawkins; but I suppose if the gent wants to speak to you, there'll be no objection to your making free with the parlour, promiscuous," answered the damsel, with supreme condescension. "And if the gent has any orders to give, I'm ready to take 'em," she added, pertly.

Victor Carrington ordered a pint of brandy.

The parlour was a dingy little apartment, very much the worse for stale tobacco smoke, and adorned with gaudy racing-prints. Here Mr. Carrington seated himself, and told his companion to take the place opposite him.

"Fill yourself a glass of brandy," he said. And Mr. Hawkins was not slow to avail himself of the permission. "Now, I'm a man who does not care to beat about the bush, my friend Hawkins," said Victor, "so I'll come to business at once. I've taken a fancy to that bay horse, 'Wild Buffalo,' and I should like to have him; but I'm not a rich man, and I can't afford a high price for my fancy. What I've been thinking, Hawkins, is that, with your help, I might get 'Wild Buffalo' a bargain?"

"Well, I should rather flatter myself you might, guv'nor," answered the groom, coolly, "an uncommon good bargain, or an uncommon bad one, according to the working out of circumstances. But between friends, supposing that you was me, and supposing that I was you, you know, I wouldn't have him at no price—no, not if Spavin sold him to you for nothing, and threw you in a handsome pair of tops and a

bit of pink gratis likewise."

Mr. Hawkins had taken a second glass of brandy by this time; and the brandy provided by Victor Carrington, taken in conjunction with the gin purchased by himself was beginning to produce a lively effect upon his spirits.

"The horse is a dangerous animal to handle, then?" asked Victor.

"When you can ride a flash of lightning, and hold that well in hand, you may be able to ride 'Wild Buffalo,' guv'nor," answered the groom, sententiously; "but till you have got your hand in with a flash of lightning, I wouldn't recommend you to throw your leg across the 'Buffalo.'"

"Come, come," remonstrated Victor, "a good rider could manage the brute, surely?"

"Not the cove as drove a mail-phaeton and pair in the skies, and was chucked out of it, which served him right—not even that sky-larking cove could hold in the 'Buffalo.' He's got a mouth made of cast-iron, and there ain't a curb made, work 'em how you will, that's any more to him than a lady's bonnet-ribbon. He got a good name for his jumping as a steeple-chaser; but when he'd been the death of three jocks and two gentlemen riders, folks began to get rather shy of him and his jumping; and then Captain Chesterly come and planted him on my guv'nor, which more fool my governor to take him at any price, says I. And now, sir, I've stood your friend, and give you a honest warning; and perhaps it ain't going too far to say that I've saved your life, in a manner of speaking. So I hope you'll bear in mind that I'm a poor man with a fambly, and that I can't afford to waste my time in giving good advice to strange gents for nothing."

Victor Carrington took out his purse, and handed Mr. Hawkins a sovereign. A look of positive rapture mingled with the habitual cunning of the groom's countenance as he received this donation.

"I call that handsome, guv'nor," he exclaimed, "and I ain't above saying so."

"Take another glass of brandy, Hawkins."

"Thank you kindly, sir; I don't care if I do," answered the groom; and again he replenished his glass with the coarse and fiery spirit.

"I've given you that sovereign because I believe you are an honest fellow," said the surgeon. "But in spite of the bad character you have given the 'Buffalo' I should like to get him."

"Well, I'm blest," exclaimed Mr. Hawkins; "and you don't look like a hossey gent either, guv'nor."

"I am not a 'horsey gent.' I don't want the 'Buffalo' for myself. I want him for a hunting-friend. If you can get me the brute a dead bargain, say for twenty pounds, and can get a week's holiday to bring him down to my friend's place in the country, I'll give you a five-pound note for your trouble."

The eyes of Mr. Hawkins glittered with the greed of gold as Victor Carrington said this; but, eager as he was to secure the tempting prize, he did not reply very quickly.

"Well, you see, guv'nor, I don't think Mr. Spavin would consent to sell the 'Buffalo' yet awhile. He'd be afraid of mischief, you know. He's a very stiff 'un, is Spavin, and he comes it uncommon bumptious about his character, and so on. I really don't think he'd sell the 'Buffalo' till he's broke, and the deuce knows how long it may take to break him." "Oh, nonsense; Spavin would be glad to get rid of the beast, depend upon it. You've only got to say you want him for a friend of yours, a jockey, who'll break him in better than any of Spavin's people could do it."

James Hawkins rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, perhaps if I put it in that way it might answer," he said, after a meditative pause. "I think Spavin might sell him to a jock, where he would not part with him to a gentleman. I know he'd be uncommon glad to get rid of the brute." "Very well, then," returned Victor Carrington; "you manage matters well, and you'll be able to earn your fiver. Be sure you don't let Spavin think it's a gentleman who's sweet upon the horse. Do you think you are able to manage the business?"

The groom laid his finger on his nose, and winked significantly.

"I've managed more difficult businesses than that, guv'nor," he said. "When do you want the animal?"

"Immediately."

"Could you make it convenient to slip down here to-morrow night, or shall I wait upon you at your house, guv'nor?"

"I will come here to-morrow night, at nine."

"Very good, guv'nor; in which case you shall hear news of 'Wild Buffalo.' But all I hope is, when you do present him to your friend, you'll present the address-card of a respectable undertaker at the same time."

"I am not afraid."

"As you please, sir. You are the individual what comes down with the dibbs; and you are the individual what's entitled to make your choice."

Victor Carrington saw that the brandy had by this time exercised a potent influence over Mr. Spavin's groom; but he had full confidence in the man's power to do what he wanted done. James Hawkins was gifted with that low cunning which peculiarly adapts a small villain for the service of a greater villain.

At nine o'clock on the following evening, the two met again at the "Goat and Compasses." This time their interview was very brief and business-like.

"Have you succeeded?" asked Victor.

"I have, guv'nor, like one o'clock. Mr. Spavin will take five-and-twenty guineas from my friend the jock; but wouldn't sell the 'Buffalo' to a gentleman on no account."

"Here is the money," answered Victor, handing the groom five bank-notes for five pounds each, and twenty-five shillings in gold and silver. "Have you asked for a holiday?"

"No, guv'nor; because, between you and me, I don't suppose I should get it if I did ask. I shall make so bold as to take it without asking. Sham ill, and send my wife to say as I'm laid up in bed at home, and can't come to work."

"Hawkins, you are a diplomatist," exclaimed Victor; "and now I'll make short work of my instructions. There's a bit of paper, with the name of the place to which you're to take the animal—Frimley Common, Dorsetshire. You'll start to-morrow at daybreak, and travel as quickly as you can without taking the spirit out of the horse. I want him to be fresh when he reaches my friend."

Mr. Hawkins gave a sinister laugh.

"Don't you be afraid of that, sir. 'Wild Buffalo' will be fresh enough, you may depend," he said.

"I hope he may," replied Carrington, calmly. "When you reach Frimley Common—it's little more than a village—go to the best inn you find there, and wait till you either see me, or hear from me. You understand?"

"Yes, guv'nor."

"Good; and now, good-night."

With this Carrington left the "Goat and Compasses." As he went out of the public-house, an elderly man, in the dress of a mechanic, who had been lounging in the bar, followed him into the street, and kept behind him until he entered Hyde Park, to cross to the Edgware Road; there the man fell back and left him.

"He's going home, I suppose," muttered the man; "and there's nothing more for me to do to-night."

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXI.

DOWN IN DORSETSHIRE.

There were two inns in the High Street of Frimley. The days of mail-coaches were not yet over, and the glory of country inns had not entirely departed. Several coaches passed through Frimley in the course of the day, and many passengers stopped to eat and drink and refresh themselves at the quaint old hostelries; but it was not often that the old-fashioned bed-chambers were occupied, even for one night, by any one but a commercial traveller; and it was a still rarer occurrence for a visitor to linger for any time at Frimley.

There was nothing to see in the place; and any one travelling for pleasure would have chosen rather to stay in the more picturesque village of Hallgrove.

It was therefore a matter of considerable surprise to the landlady of the "Rose and Crown," when a lady and her maid alighted from the "Highflyer" coach and demanded apartments, which they would be likely to occupy for a week or more.

The lady was so plainly attired, in a dress and cloak of dark woollen stuff, and the simplest of black velvet bonnets, that it was only by her distinguished manner, and especially graceful bearing, that Mrs. Tippets, the landlady, was able to perceive any difference between the mistress and the maid.

"I am travelling in Dorsetshire for my health," said the lady, who was no other than Honoria Eversleigh, "and the quiet of this place suits me. You will be good enough to prepare rooms for myself and my maid."

"You would like your maid's bed-room to be adjoining your own, no doubt, madam?" hazarded the landlady.

"No," answered Honoria; "I do not wish that; I prefer entire privacy in my own apartment."

"As you please, madam—we have plenty of bedrooms."

The landlady of the "Rose and Crown" ushered her visitors into the best sitting-room the house afforded—an old-fashioned apartment, with a wide fire-place, high wooden mantel-piece, and heavily-timbered ceiling—a room which seemed to

belong to the past rather than the present.

Lady Eversleigh sat by the table in a thoughtful attitude, while the fire was being lighted and a tray of tea-things arranged for that refreshment which is most welcome of all others to an Englishwoman. Jane Payland stood by the opposite angle of the mantel-piece, watching her mistress with a countenance almost as thoughtful as that of Honoria herself.

It was in the wintry dusk that these two travellers arrived at Frimley. Jane Payland walked to one of the narrow, old-fashioned windows, and looked out into the street, where lights were burning dimly here and there.

"What a strange old place, ma'am," she said.

Honoria had forbidden her to say "my lady" since their departure from Raynham.

"Yes," her mistress answered, absently; "it is a world-forgotten old place."

"But the rest and change will, no doubt, be beneficial, ma'am," said Miss Payland, in her most insinuating tone; "and I am sure you must require change and fresh country air after being pent up in a London street."

Lady Eversleigh shook off her abstraction of manner, and turned towards her servant, with a calm, serious gaze.

"I want change of scene, and the fresh breath of country air, Jane," she said, gravely; "but it is not for those I came to Frimley, and you know that it is not. Why should we try to deceive each other? The purpose of my life is a very grave one; the secret of my coming and going is a very bitter secret, and if I do not choose to share it with you, I withhold nothing that you need care to know. Let me play my part unwatched and unquestioned. You will find yourself well rewarded by and by for your forbearance and devotion. Be faithful to me, my good girl; but do not try to discover the motive of my actions, and believe, even when they seem most strange to you, that they are justified by one great purpose."

Jane Payland's eyelids drooped before the serious and penetrating gaze of her mistress.

"You may feel sure of my being faithful, ma'am," she answered, promptly; "and as to curiosity, I should be the very last creature upon this earth to try to pry into your secrets."

Honoria made no reply to this protestation. She took her tea in silence, and seemed as if weighed down by grave and anxious thoughts. After tea she dismissed Jane, who retired to the bed-room allotted to her, which had been made very comfortable, and enlivened by a wood fire, that blazed cheerily in the wide grate.

Jane Payland's bedroom opened out of a corridor, at the end of which was the door of the sitting-room occupied by Honoria. Jane was, therefore, able to keep watch upon all who went to and fro from the sitting-room to the other part of the house. She sat with her door a little way open for this purpose.

"My lady expects some one to-night, I know," she thought to herself, as she seated herself at a little table, and began some piece of fancy-work.

She had observed that during tea Lady Eversleigh had twice looked at her watch. Why should she be so anxious about the time, if she were not awaiting some visitor, or message, or letter?

For a long time Jane Payland waited, and watched, and listened, without avail. No one went along the corridor to the blue parlour, except the chambermaid who removed the tea-things.

Jane looked at her own watch, and found that it was past nine o'clock. "Surely my lady can have no visitor to-night?" she thought.

A quarter of an hour after this, she was startled by the creaking sound of a footstep on the uncarpeted floor of the corridor. She rose hastily and softly from her chair, crept to the door, and peeped put into the passage. As she did so, she saw a man approaching, dressed like a countryman, in a clumsy frieze coat, and with his chin so

muffled in a woollen scarf, and his felt hat drawn so low over his eyes, that there was nothing visible of him but the end of a long nose.

That long, beak-like nose seemed strangely familiar to Miss Payland; and yet she could not tell where she had seen it before.

The countryman went straight to the blue parlour, opened the door, and went in. The door closed behind him, and then Jane Payland heard the faint sound of voices within the apartment.

It was evident that this countryman was Lady Eversleigh's expected guest.

Jane's wonderment was redoubled by this extraordinary proceeding.

"What does it all mean?" she asked herself. "Is this man some humble relation of my lady's? Everyone knows that her birth was obscure; but no one can tell where she came from. Perhaps this is her native place, and it is to see her own people she comes here."

Jane was obliged to be satisfied with this explanation, for no other was within her reach; but it did not altogether allay her curiosity. The interview between Lady Eversleigh and her visitor was a long one. It was half-past ten o'clock before the strange-looking countryman quitted the blue parlour.

This occurred three days before Christmas-day. On the following evening another stranger arrived at Frimley by the mail-coach, which passed through the quiet town at about seven o'clock.

This traveller did not patronise the "Rose and Crown" inn, though the coach changed horses at that hostelry. He alighted from the outside of the coach while it stood before the door of the "Rose and Crown," waited until his small valise had been fished out of the boot, and then departed through the falling snow, carrying this valise, which was his only luggage.

He walked at a rapid pace to the other end of the long, straggling street, where there

was a humbler inn, called the "Cross Keys." Here he entered, and asked for a bed-room, with a good fire, and something or other in the way of supper.

It was not till he had entered the room that the traveller took off the rough outer coat, the collar of which had almost entirely concealed his face. When he did so, he revealed the sallow countenance of Victor Carrington, and the flashing black eyes, which to-night shone with a peculiar brightness.

After he had eaten a hasty meal, he went out into the inn-yard, despite the fast-falling snow, to smoke a cigar, he said, to one of the servants whom he encountered on his way.

He had not been long in the yard, when a man emerged from one of the adjacent buildings, and approached him in a slow and stealthy manner.

"All right, guv'nor," said the man, in a low voice; "I've been on the look-out for you for the last two days."

The man was Jim Hawkins, Mr. Spavin's groom.

"Is 'Wild Buffalo' here?" asked Victor.

"Yes, sir; as safe and as comfortable as if he'd been foaled here."

"And none the worse for his journey?"

"Not a bit of it, sir. I brought him down by easy stages, knowing you wanted him kept fresh. And fresh he is—oncommon. P'raps you'd like to have a look at him."

"I should."

The groom led Mr. Carrington to a loose box, and the surgeon had the pleasure of beholding the bay horse by the uncertain light of a stable lantern.

The animal was, indeed, a noble specimen of his race.

It was only in the projecting eye-ball, the dilated nostril, the defiant carriage of the head, that his evil temper exhibited itself. Victor Carrington stood at a little distance from him, contemplating him in silence for some minutes.

"Have you ever noticed that spot?" asked Victor, presently, pointing to the white patch inside the animal's hock.

"Well, sir, one can't help noticing it when one knows where to look for it, though p'raps a stranger mightn't see it. That there spot's a kind of a blemish, you see, to my mind; for, if it wasn't for that, the brute wouldn't have a white hair about him."

"That's just what I've been thinking," answered Victor. "Now, my friend is just the sort of man to turn up his nose at a horse with anything in the way of a blemish about him, especially if he sees it before he has tried the animal, and found out his merits. But I've hit upon a plan for getting the better of him, and I want you to carry it out for me."

"I'm your man, guv'nor, whatever it is."

The surgeon produced a phial from his pocket, and with the phial a small painters' brush.

"In this bottle there's a brown dye," he said; "and I want you to paint the white spot with that brown dye after you've groomed the 'Buffalo,' so that whenever my friend comes to claim the horse the brute may be ready for him. You must apply the dye three or four times, at short intervals. It's a pretty fast one, and it'll take a good many pails of water to wash it out."

Jim Hawkins laughed heartily at the idea of this manoeuvre.

"Why you are a rare deep one, guv'nor," he exclaimed; "that there game is just like the canary dodge, what they do so well down Seven Dials way. You ketches yer sparrer, and you paints him a lively yeller, and then you sells him to your innocent customer for the finest canary as ever wabbled in the grove—a little apt to be mopish at first, but warranted to sing beautiful as soon as ever he gets used to his new master and missus. And, oh! don't he just sing beautiful—not at all neither."

"There's the bottle, Hawkins, and there's the brush. You know what you've got to do."

"All right, guv'nor."

"Good night, then," said Victor, as he left the stable.

He did not stay to finish his cigar under the fast-falling snow; but walked back to his own room, where he slept soundly.

He was astir very early the next morning. He went down stairs, after breakfasting in his own room, saw the landlord, and hired a good strong horse, commonly used by the proprietor of the "Cross Keys" on all his journeys to and from the market-town and outlying villages.

Victor Carrington mounted this horse, and rode across the Common to the village of Hallgrove.

He stopped to give his horse a drink of water before a village inn, and while stopping to do this he asked a few questions of the ostler.

"Whereabouts is Hallgrove Rectory?" he asked.

"About a quarter of a mile farther on, sir," answered the man; "you can't miss it if you keep along that road. A big red house, by the side of a river."

"Thanks. This is a great place for hunting, isn't it?"

"Yes, that it be, sir. The Horsley foxhounds are a'most allus meeting somewheres about here."

"When do they meet next?"

"The day arter to-morrow—Boxing-day, sir. They're to meet in the field by Hallgrove Ferry, a mile and a quarter beyond the rectory, at ten o'clock in the morning. It's to be a reg'lar grand day's sport, I've heard say. Our rector is to ride a new horse, wot's been given to him by his brother."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir; I war down at the rectory stables yesterday arternoon, and see the animal—a splendid bay, rising sixteen hands."

Carrington turned his horse's head in the direction of Hallgrove Rectory. He knew enough of the character of Lionel Dale to be aware that no opposition would be made to his loitering about the premises. He rode boldly up to the door, and asked for the rector. He was out, the servant said, but would the gentleman walk in and wait, or would he leave his name. Mr. Dale would be in soon; he had gone out with Captain and Miss Graham. Victor Carrington smiled involuntarily as he heard mention made of Lydia. "So you are here, too," he thought; "it is just as well you should not see me on this occasion, as I am not helping your game now, as I did in the case of Sir Oswald, but spoiling it."

No, the stranger gentleman thanked the man; he would not wait to see Mr. Dale (he had carefully ascertained that he was out before riding up to the house); but if the servant would show him the way, he would be glad, to get out on the lower road; he understood the rectory grounds opened upon it, at a little distance from the house. Certainly the man could show him—nothing easier, if the gentleman would take the path to the left, and the turn by the shrubbery, he would pass by the stables, and the lower road lay straight before him. Victor Carrington complied with these directions, but his after-conduct did not bear out the impression of his being in a hurry, which his words and manner had conveyed to the footman. It was at least an hour after he had held the above-mentioned colloquy, when Victor Carrington, having made himself thoroughly acquainted with the topography of the rector's premises, issued from a side-gate, and took the lower road, leading back to Frimley.

Then he went straight to the stable-yard, saw Mr. Spavin's groom, and dismissed him.

"I shall take the 'Buffalo' down to my friend's place this afternoon," he said to Hawkins. "Here's your money, and you can get back to London as soon as you like. I think my friend will be very well pleased with his bargain."

"Ay, ay," said Mr. Hawkins, whose repeated potations of execrable brandy had

rendered him tolerably indifferent to all that passed around him, and who was actuated by no other feeling than a lively desire to obtain, the future favours of a liberal employer; "he's got to take care of hisself, and we've got to take care of ourselves, and that's all about it."

And then Mr. Hawkins, with something additional to the stipulated reward in his pocket, and a pint bottle of his favourite stimulant to refresh him on the way, took himself off, and Carrington saw no more of him. The people about the inn saw very little of Carrington, but it was with some surprise that the ostler received his directions to saddle the horse which stood in the stable, just when the last gleam of the short winter's daylight was dying out on Christmas-day. Carrington had not stirred beyond the precincts of the inn all the morning and afternoon. The strange visitor was all uninfluenced either by the devotional or the festive aspects of the season. He was quite alone, and as he sat in his cheerless little bedroom at the small country inn, and brooded, now over a pocket volume, thickly noted in his small, neat handwriting, now over the plans which were so near their accomplishment, he exulted in that solitude—he gave loose to the cynicism which was the chief characteristic of his mind. He cursed the folly of the idiots for whom Christmas-time had any special meaning, and secretly worshipped his own idols—money and power.

The horse was brought to him, and Carrington mounted him without any difficulty, and rode away in the gathering gloom. "Wild Buffalo" gave him no trouble, and he began to feel some misgivings as to the truth of the exceedingly bad character he had received with the animal. Supposing he should not be the unmanageable devil he was represented,—supposing all his schemes came to grief, what then? Why, then, there were other ways of getting rid of Lionel Dale, and he should only be the poorer by the purchase of a horse. On the other hand, "Wild Buffalo," plodding along a heavy country road, almost in the dark, and after the probably not too honestly dispensed feeding of a village inn, which Carrington had not personally

superintended, was no doubt a very different animal to what he might be expected to prove himself in the hunting-field. Pondering upon these probabilities, Victor Carrington rode slowly on towards Hallgrove. He had taken accurate observations; he had nicely calculated time and place. All the servants, tenants, and villagers were gathered together under Lionel Dale's hospitable roof. To the feasting had succeeded games and story-telling, and the absorbing gossip of such a reunion. That which Victor Carrington had come to do, he did successfully; and when he returned to his inn, and gave over his horse to the care of the ostler, no one but he, not even the man who was there listening to every word spoken among the servants at the rectory, and eagerly scanning every face there, knew that "Niagara" was in the inn-stable, and "Wild Buffalo" in the stall at Hallgrove.

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CHAPTER XXII.

ARCH-TRAITOR WITHIN, ARCH-PLOTTER WITHOUT.

The guests at Hallgrove Rectory this Christmas-time were Douglas Dale, Sir Reginald Eversleigh, a lady and gentleman called Mordaunt, and their two pretty, fair-faced daughters, and two other old friends of the rector's, one of whom is very familiar to us.

Those two were Gordon Graham and his sister Lydia—the woman whose envious hatred had aided in that vile scheme by which Sir Oswald Eversleigh's happiness had been suddenly blighted. The Dales and Gordon Graham had been intimate from boyhood, when they had been school-fellows at Eton. Since Sir Oswald's death had enriched the two brothers, Gordon Graham had taken care that his acquaintance with them should not be allowed to lapse, but should rather be strengthened. It was by means of his manoeuvring that the invitation for Christmas had been given, and that he and his sister were comfortable domiciled for the winter season beneath the

rector's hospitably roof.

Gordon Graham had been very anxious to secure this invitation. Every day that passed made him more and more anxious that his sister should make a good marriage. Her thirtieth birthday was alarmingly near at hand. Careful as she was of her good looks, the day must soon come when her beauty would fade, and she would find herself among the ranks of confirmed old maids.

If Gordon Graham found her a burden now, how much greater burden would she be to him then! As the cruel years stole by, and brought her no triumph, no success, her temper grew more imperious, while the quarrels which marred the harmony of the brother and sister's affection became more frequent and more violent.

Beyond this one all-sufficient reason, Gordon Graham had his own selfish motives for seeking to secure his sister a rich husband. The purse of a wealthy brother-in-law must, of course, be always more or less open to himself; and he was not the man to refrain from obtaining all he could from such a source.

In Lionel Dale he saw a man who would be the easy victim of a woman's fascinations, the generous dupe of an adventurer. Lionel Dale was, therefore, the prize which Lydia should try to win.

The brother and sister were in the habit of talking to each other very plainly.

"Now, Lydia," said the captain, after he had read Lionel Dale's letter for the young lady's benefit, "it will be your fault if you do not come back from Hallgrove the affianced wife of this man. There was a time when you might have tried for heavier stakes; but at thirty, a husband with five thousand a year is not to be sneezed at."

"You need not be so fond of reminding me of my age," Lydia returned with a look of anger. "You seem to forget that you are five years my senior."

"I forget nothing, my dear girl. But there is no parallel between your case and mine. For a man, age is nothing—for a woman, everything; and I regret to be obliged to remember that you are approaching your thirtieth birthday. Fortunately, you don't

look more than seven-and-twenty; and I really think, if you play your cards well, you may secure this country rector. A country rector is not much for a woman who has set her cap at a duke, but he is better than nothing; and as the case is really growing rather desperate, you must play your cards with unusual discrimination this time, Lydia. You must, upon my word."

"I am tired of playing my cards," answered Miss Graham, contemptuously. "It seems as if life was always to be a losing game for me, let me play my cards how I will. I begin to think there is a curse upon me, and that no act of mine will ever prosper. Who was that man, in your Greek play, who guessed some inane conundrum, and was always getting into trouble afterwards? I begin to think there really is a fatality in these things."

She turned away from her brother impatiently, and seated herself at her piano. She played a few bars of a waltz with a listless air, while the captain lighted a cigar, and stepped out upon the little balcony, overhanging the dull, foggy street.

The brother and sister occupied lodgings in one of the narrow streets of Mayfair. The apartments were small, shabbily furnished, inconvenient, and expensive; but the situation was irreproachable, and the haughty Lydia could only exist in an irreproachable situation.

Captain Graham finished his cigar, and went out to his club, leaving his sister alone, discontented, gloomy, sullen, to get through the day as best she might.

The time had been when the prospect of a visit to Hallgrove Rectory would have seemed very pleasant to her. But that time was gone. The haughty spirit was soured by disappointment, the selfish nature embittered by defeat.

There was a glass over the mantel-piece. Lydia leaned her arms upon the marble slab, and contemplated the dark face in the mirror.

It was a handsome face: but a cloud of sullen pride obscured its beauty.

"I shall never prosper," she said, as she looked at herself. "There is some mysterious

ban upon me, and on my beauty. All my life I have been passed by for the sake of women in every attribute my inferiors. If I was unloved in the freshness of my youth and beauty, how can I expect to be loved now, when youth is past and beauty is on the wane? And yet my brother expects me to go through the old stage-play, in the futile hope of winning a rich husband!"

She shrugged her shoulders with a contemptuous gesture, and turned away from the glass. But, although she affected to despise her brother's schemes, she was not slow to lend herself to them. She went out that morning, and walked to her milliner's house. There was a long and rather an unpleasant interview between the milliner and her customer, for Lydia Graham had sunk deeper in the mire of debt with every passing year, and it was only by the payment of occasional sums of money on account that she contrived to keep her creditors tolerably quiet.

The result of to-day's interview was the same as usual. Madame Susanne, the milliner, agreed to find some pretty dresses for Miss Graham's Christmas visit—and Miss Graham undertook to pay a large instalment of an unreasonable bill without inspection or objection.

On this snowy Christmas morning Miss Graham stood by the side of her host, dressed in the stylish walking costume of dark gray poplin, and with her glowing face set off by a bonnet of blue velvet, with soft gray plumes. Those were the days in which a bonnet was at once the aegis and the sanctuary of beauty. If you offended her, she took refuge in her bonnet. The police-courts have only become odious by the clamour of feminine complainants since the disappearance of the bonnet. It was awful as the helmet of Minerva, inviolable as the cestus of Diana. Nor was the bonnet of thirty-years ago an unbecoming headgear—a pretty face never looked prettier than when dimly seen in the shadowy depths of a coal-scuttle bonnet.

Miss Graham looked her best in one of those forgotten headdresses; the rich velvet, the drooping feathers, set off her showy face, and Laura and Ellen Mordaunt, in their

fresh young beauty and simple costume, lost by contrast with the aristocratic belle.

The poor of Hallgrove parish looked forward eagerly to the coming of Christmas.

Lionel Dale's parishioners knew that they would receive ample bounty from the hand of their wealthy and generous rector.

He loved to welcome old and young to the noble hall of his mansion, a spacious and lofty chamber, which had formed part of the ancient manor-house, and had been of late years converted into a rectory. He loved to see them clad in the comfortable garments which his purse had provided—the old women in their gray woollen gowns and scarlet cloaks, the little children brightly arrayed, like so many Red Riding hoods.

It was a pleasant sight truly, and there was a dimness in the rector's eyes, as he stood at the head of a long table, at two o'clock on Christmas-day, to say grace before the dinner spread for those humble Christmas guests.

All the poor of the parish had been invited to dine with their pastor on Christmas-day, and this two o'clock dinner was a greater pleasure to the rector of Hallgrove than the repast which was to be served at seven o'clock for himself and the guests of his own rank.

There were some people in Hallgrove and its neighbourhood who said that Lionel Dale took more pleasure in this life than a clergyman and a good Christian should take; but surely those who had seen him seated by the bed of sickness, or ministering to the needs of affliction, could scarcely have grudged him the innocent happiness of his hours of relaxation. The one thing in which he himself felt that he was perhaps open to blame, was in his passion for the sports of the field.

No one who had stood amongst the little group at the top of the long table in Hallgrove Manor-house on this snowy Christmas morning could have doubted that the heart of Lionel Dale was true to the very core.

He was not alone amongst his poor parishioners. His guests had requested

permission to see the two o'clock dinner-party in the refectory. Lydia affected to be especially anxious for this privilege.

"I long to see the dear things eating their Christmas plum-pudding," she said, with almost girlish enthusiasm.

Mr. Dale's parishioners did ample justice to the splendid Christmas fare provided for them.

Lydia Graham declared she had never witnessed anything that gave her half so much pleasure as this humble gathering.

"I would give up a whole season of fashionable dinner-parties for such a treat as this, Mr. Dale," she exclaimed, with an eloquent glance at the rector. "What a happy life yours must be! and how privileged these people ought to think themselves!"

"I don't know that, Miss Graham," answered Lionel Dale. "I think the privilege is all on my side. It is the pleasure of the rich to minister to the wants of the poor."

Lydia Graham made no reply; but her eyes expressed an admiration which womanly reserve might have forbidden her lips to utter.

While the pudding was being eaten, Mr. Dale walked round amongst his humble guests, to exchange a few kindly words here and there; to shake hands; to pat little children's flaxen heads; to make friendly inquiries for the sick and absent.

As he paused to talk to one of his parishioners, his attention was attracted by a strange face. It was the face of an old man, who sat at the opposite side of the table, and seemed entirely absorbed by the agreeable task of making his way through a noble slice of plum-pudding.

"Who is that old man opposite?" asked Lionel of the agricultural labourer to whom he had been talking. "I don't think I know his face."

"No, sir," answered the farm-labourer; "he don't belong to these parts. Gaffer Hayfield brought 'un. I suppose as how he's a relation of Gaffer's. It seems a bit of a

liberty, sir; but Gaffer Hayfield always war a cool hand."

"I don't think it a liberty, William. If the man is a relation of Hayfield's, there is no reason why he should not be here with the Gaffer," answered Lionel, good-naturedly, "I am glad to Bee that he is enjoying his dinner."

"Yes, sir," replied the farm-labourer, with a grin; "he seems to have an oncommon good twist of his own, wheresoever he belongs to."

No more was said about the strange guest—who was an old man, with very white hair, which hung low over his eyebrows; and very white whiskers, which almost covered his cheeks. He had a queer, bird-like aspect, and a nose that was as sharp as the beak of any of the rooks cawing hoarsely amongst the elms of Hallgrove that snowy Christmas-day.

After the dinner in the old hall, Lionel Dale and his guests returned to their own quarters; Mrs. Mordaunt and the three younger ladies walked in the grounds, with Douglas Dale and Sir Reginald Eversleigh in attendance upon them.

Miss Graham was the last woman in the world to forget that the income of Douglas Dale was almost as large as that of his brother, the rector; and that in this instance she might have two strings to her bow. She contrived to be by the side of Douglas as they walked in the shrubberies, and lingered on the rustic bridge across the river; but she had not been with him long before she perceived that all her fascinations were thrown away upon him; and that, attentive and polite though he was, his heart was far away.

It was indeed so. In that pleasant garden, where the dark evergreens glistened in the red radiance of the winter sunset, Douglas Dale's thoughts wandered away from the scene before him to the lovely Austrian woman—the fair widow, whose life was so strange a mystery to him; the woman whom he could neither respect nor trust; but whom, in spite of himself, he loved better than any other creature upon earth.

"I had rather be by her side than here," he said to himself. "How is she spending this

season, which should be so happy? Perhaps in utter loneliness; or in the midst of that artificial gaiety which is more wretched than solitude."

* * * * *

The rector of Hallgrove and his guests assembled in the old-fashioned drawing-room of the manor-house rectory at seven o'clock on that snowy Christmas-night. The snowflakes fell thick and fast as night closed in upon the gardens and shrubberies, the swift-flowing river, and distant hills.

The rectory drawing-room, beautified by the soft light of wax-candles, and the rich hues of flowers, was a pleasant picture—a picture which was made all the more charming by the female figures which filled its foreground.

Chief among these, and radiant with beauty and high spirits, was Lydia Graham.

She had contrived to draw Lionel Dale to her side. She was seated by a table scattered with volumes of engravings, and he was bending over her as she turned the leaves.

Her smiles, her flatteries, her cleverly simulated interest in the rector's charities and pensioners, had exercised a considerable influence upon him—an influence which grew stronger with every hour. There was a sweetness and simplicity in the manners of the two Misses Mordaunt which pleased him; but the country-bred girls lost much by contrast with the brilliant Lydia.

"I hope you are going to give us a real old-fashioned Christmas evening, Mr. Dale," said Miss Graham.

"I don't quite know what you mean by an old-fashioned Christmas evening."

"Nor am I quite clear as to whether I know what I mean myself," answered the young lady, gaily. "I think, after dinner, we ought to sit round that noble old fire-place and tell stories, ought we not?"

"Yes, I believe that is the sort of thing," replied the rector. "For my own part, I am

ready to be Miss Graham's slave for the whole of the evening; and in that capacity will hold myself bound to perform her behests, however tyrannical she may be."

When dinner was announced, Lionel Dale was obliged to leave the bewitching Lydia in order to offer his arm to Mrs. Mordaunt, while that young lady was fain to be satisfied with the escort of the disinherited Sir Reginald Eversleigh.

At the dinner-table, however, she found herself seated on the left hand of her host; and she took care to secure to herself the greater share of his attention during the progress of dinner.

Gordon Graham watched his sister from his place near the foot of the table, and was well satisfied with her success.

"If she plays her cards well she may sit at the head of this table next Christmas-day," he said to himself.

After less than half-an-hour's interval, the gentlemen followed the ladies into the drawing-room, and the usual musical evening set in. Lydia Graham had nothing to fear from comparison with the Misses Mordaunt. They were tolerable performers. She was a brilliant proficient in music, and she had the satisfaction of observing that Lionel Dale perceived and appreciated her superiority. She could afford, therefore, to be as amiable to the girls as she was captivating to the gentlemen.

The Misses Mordaunt were singing a duet, when a servant entered, and approached Lionel Dale.

"There is a person in the hall who asks to see you, sir," said the man, "on most particular business."

"What kind of person?" asked the rector.

"Well, sir, she looks like an old gipsy woman."

"A gipsy woman! The gipsies about here do not bear the best character."

"No, sir," replied the man. "I bore that in mind, sir, with a view to the plate, and I

told John Andrew to keep an eye upon her while I came to speak to you; and John Andrew is keeping an eye upon her at this present moment, sir."

"Very good, Jackson. You can tell the gipsy woman that, if she needs immediate help of any kind, she can apply in the village, to Rawlins, but that I cannot see her to-night."

"Yes, sir."

The man departed; and the Misses Mordaunt finished their duet, and rose from the piano, to receive the usual thanks and acknowledgments from their hearers.

Again Miss Graham was asked to sing, and again she seated herself before the instrument, triumphant in the consciousness that she could excel the timid girls who had just left the piano.

But this time Lionel Dale did not place himself beside the instrument. He stood near the door of the apartment, ready to receive the servant, if he should return with a second message from the gipsy woman.

The servant did return, and this time he begged his master to step outside the room before he delivered his message. Lionel complied immediately, and followed the man into the corridor without.

"I was almost afraid to speak in there, sir," said the man, in an awe-stricken whisper; "folks have such ears. The woman says she must see you, sir, and this very night. It is a matter of life and death, she says."

"Then in that case I will see this woman. Go into the drawing-room, Jackson, and tell Mrs. Mordaunt, with my compliments, that I find myself compelled to receive one of my parishioners; and that she and the other ladies must be so good as to excuse my absence for half an hour."

"Yes, sir."

The rector went to the hall, where, cowering by the fire, he found an old gipsy

woman.

She was so muffled from head to foot in her garments of woollen stuff, strange and garish in colour, and fantastical in form, that it was almost impossible to discover what she really was like. Her shoulders were bent and contracted as if with extreme age. Loose tresses of gray hair fell low over her forehead. Her skin was dark and tawny; and contrasted strangely with the gray hair and the dark lustrous eyes.

The gipsy woman rose as Lionel Dale entered the hall. She bent her head in response to his kindly salutation; but she did not curtsey as before a superior in rank and station.

"Come with me, my good woman," said the rector, "and let me hear all about this very important business of yours."

He led the way to the library—a low-roofed but spacious chamber, lined from ceiling to floor with books. A large reading-lamp, with a Parian shade, stood on a small writing-table near the fire, casting a subdued light on objects near at hand, and leaving the rest of the room in shadow. A pile of logs burnt cheerily on the hearth. On one side of the fire was the chair in which the rector usually sat; on the other, a large, old-fashioned, easy-chair.

"Sit down, my good woman," said the rector, pointing to the latter; "I suppose you have some long story to tell me."

He seated himself as he spoke, and leaned upon the writing-table, playing idly with a carved ivory paper-knife.

"I have much to say to you, Lionel Dale," answered the old woman, in a voice which had a solemn music, that impressed the hearer in spite of himself; "I have much to say to you, and it will be well for you to mark what I say, and be warned by what I tell you."

The rector looked at the speaker earnestly, and yet with a half-contemptuous smile upon his face. She was seated in shadow, and he could only see the glitter of her

dark eyes as the fitful light of the fire flashed on them.

There was something almost supernatural, it seemed to him, in the brilliancy of those eyes.

He laughed at himself for his folly in the next instant. What was this woman but a vulgar impostor, who was doubtless trying to trade upon his fears in some manner or other?

"You have come here to give some kind of warning, then?" he said, after a few moments of consideration.

"I have—a warning which may save your life—if you hear me patiently, and obey when you have heard."

"That is the cant of your class, my good woman; and you can scarcely expect me to listen to that kind of thing. If you come here to me, hoping to delude me by the language with which you tell the country people their fortunes at fairs and races, the sooner you go away the better. I am ready to listen to you patiently: if you need help, I am ready to give it you; but it is time and labour lost to practise gipsy jargon upon me."

"I need no help from you," cried the gipsy woman, scornfully; "I tell you again, I come here to serve you."

"In what manner can you serve me? Speak out, and speak quickly!" said Lionel; "I must return to my guests almost immediately."

"Your guests!" cried the gipsy, with a mocking laugh; "pleasant guests to gather round your hearth at this holy festival-time. Sir Reginald Eversleigh is amongst them, I suppose?"

"He is. You know his name very well, it seems."

"I do."

"Do you know him?"

"Do you know him, Lionel Dale?" demanded the old woman with sudden intensity.

"I have good reason to know him—he is my first-cousin," answered the rector.

"You have good reason to know him—a reason that you are ignorant of. Shall I tell you that reason, Mr. Dale?"

"I am ready to hear what you have to say; but I must warn you that I shall be but little affected by it."

"Beware how you regard my solemn warning as the raving of a lunatic. It is your life that is at stake, Lionel Dale—your life! The reason you ought to know Reginald Eversleigh is, that in him you have a deadly enemy."

"An enemy! My cousin Reginald, a man whom I never injured by deed or word in my life! Has he ever tried to injure me?"

"He has."

"How?"

"He schemed and plotted against you and others before your uncle Sir Oswald's death. His dearest hope was to bring to pass the destruction of the will which left you five thousand a year."

"Indeed! You seem familiar with my family history," exclaimed Lionel.

"I know the secrets of your family as well as I know those of my own."

"Then you pretend to be a sorceress?"

"I pretend to be nothing but your friend. Sir Reginald Eversleigh has been your foe ever since the day which disinherited him and made you rich. Your death would make him master of the wealth which you now enjoy; your death would give him fortune, position in the world—all which he most covets. Can you doubt, therefore, that he wishes your death?"

"I cannot believe it!" cried Lionel Dale; "it is too horrible. What! he, my first cousin! he can profess for me the warmest friendship, and yet can wish to profit by my

death!"

"He can do worse than that," said the gipsy woman, in an impressive voice; "he can try to compass your death!"

"No! no! no!" cried the rector. "It is not possible!"

"It is true. Sir Reginald Eversleigh is a coward; but he is helped by one who knows no human weakness—whose cruel heart was never softened by one touch of pity—whose iron hand never falters. Sir Reginald Eversleigh is little more than the tool of that man, and between those two there is ruin for you."

"Your words have the accent of truth," said the rector, after a long pause; "and yet their meaning is so terrible that I can scarcely bring myself to believe in them. How is it that you, a stranger, are so familiar with the private details of my life?"

"Do not ask me that, Mr. Dale," replied the gipsy woman, sternly; "when a stranger comes to you to warn you of a great danger, accept the warning, and let your nameless friend depart unquestioned. I have told you that an unseen danger menaces you. I know not yet the exact form which that danger may take. To-morrow I expect to know more."

"I can pledge myself to nothing."

"As you will," answered the gipsy, proudly. "I have done my duty. The rest is with Providence. If in your blind obstinacy you disregard my warning, I cannot help it. Will you, for your own sake, not for mine, let me see you to-morrow; or will you promise to see anyone who shall ask to see you, in the name of the gipsy woman who was here to-night? Promise me this, I entreat you. I have nothing to ask of you, nothing to gain by my prayer; but I do entreat you most earnestly to do this thing. I am working in the dark to a certain extent. I know something, but not all, and I may have learned much more by to-morrow. I may bring or send you information then, which will convince you I am speaking the truth. Stay, will you promise me this, for my sake, for the sake of justice? You will, Mr. Dale, I know you will; you are a just,

a good man. You suspect me of practising upon you a vulgar imposition. To-morrow I may have the power of convincing you that I have not done so. You will give me the opportunity, Mr. Dale?"

The pleading, earnest voice, the mournful, dark eyes, stirred Lionel Dale's heart strangely. An impulse moved him towards trust in this woman, this outcast,—curiosity even impelled him to ask her, in such terms as would ensure her compliance, for a full explanation of her mysterious conduct. But he checked the impulse, he silenced the promptings of curiosity, sacrificing them to his ever-present sense of his professional and personal dignity. While the momentary struggle lasted, the gipsy woman closely scanned his face. At length he said coldly:

"I will do as you ask. I place no reliance on your statements, but you are right in asking for the means of substantiating them. I will see you, or any one you may send to-morrow."

"You will be at home?" she asked, anxiously. "The hunt?"

"The hunt will hardly take place; the weather is too much against us," replied Lionel Dale. "Except there should be a very decided change, there will be no hunt, and I shall be at home." Having said this, Lionel Dale rose, with a decided air of dismissal. The gipsy rose too, and stood unshrinkingly before him, as she said:

"And now I will leave you. Good night. You think me a mad woman, or an impostor. This is the second occasion on which you have misjudged me, Mr. Dale."

As the rector met the earnest gaze of her brilliant eyes, a strange feeling took possession of his mind. It seemed to him, as if he had before encountered that earnest and profound gaze.

"I must have seen such a face in a dream," he thought to himself; "where else but in a dream?"

The fancy had a powerful influence over him, and occupied his mind as he preceded the gipsy woman to the hall, and opened the door for her to pass out.

The snow had ceased to fall; the bright wintry moon rode high in the heaven, amidst black, hurrying clouds. That cold light shone on the white range of hills sleeping beneath a shroud of untrodden snow.

On the threshold of the door the gipsy woman turned and addressed Lionel Dale—

"There will be no hunting while this weather lasts."

"None."

"Then your grand meeting of to-morrow will be put off?"

"Yes, unless the weather changes in the night."

"Once more, good night, Mr. Dale."

"Good night."

The rector stood at the door, watching the gipsy woman as she walked along the snow-laden pathway. The dark figure moving slowly and silently across the broad white expanse of hidden lawn and flower-beds looked almost ghost-like to the eyes of the watcher.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself, as he watched that receding figure. "Is this woman a common impostor, who hopes to enrich herself, or her tribe, by playing upon my fears? She asked nothing of me to-night; and yet that may be but a trick of her trade, and she may intend to extort all the more from me in the future. What should she be but a cheat and a trickster, like the rest of her race?"

The question was not easy to settle.

He returned to the drawing-room. His mind had been much disturbed by this extraordinary interview, and he was in no humour for empty small-talk; nor was he disposed to meet Reginald Eversleigh, against whom he had received so singular, so apparently groundless, a warning.

He tried to shake off the feeling which he was ashamed to acknowledge to himself.

He re-entered the drawing-room, and he saw Miss Graham's face light up with

sudden animation as she saw him. He was not skilled in the knowledge of a woman's heart, and he was flattered by that bright look of welcome. He was already half-enmeshed in the web which she had spread for him, and that welcoming smile did much towards his complete subjugation.

He went to a seat near the fascinating Lydia. Between them there was a chess-table. Lydia laid her jewelled hand lightly on one of the pieces.

"Would you think it very wicked to play a game of chess on a Christmas evening, Mr. Dale?" she asked.

"Indeed, no, Miss Graham. I am one of those who can see no sinfulness in any innocent enjoyment."

"Shall we play, then?" asked Lydia, arranging the pieces.

"If you please."

They were both good players, and the game lasted long. But ever and anon, while waiting for Lydia to move, Lionel glanced towards the spot where Sir Reginald Eversleigh stood, engaged in conversation with Gordon Graham and Douglas Dale.

If the rector himself had known no blot on the character of Reginald Eversleigh, the gipsy's words would not have had a feather's weight with him; but Lionel did know that his cousin's youth had been wild and extravagant, and that he, the beloved, adopted son, the long-acknowledged heir of Raynham, had been disinherited by Sir Oswald—one of the best and most high-principled of men.

Knowing this, it was scarcely strange if Lionel Dale was in some degree influenced by the gipsy's warning. He scanned the face of his cousin with a searching gaze.

It was a handsome face—almost a perfect face; but was it the face of a man who might be trusted by his fellow-men?

A careworn face—handsome though it was. There was a nervous restlessness about the thin lips, a feverish light in the dark blue eyes.

More than once during the prolonged encounter at chess, Reginald Eversleigh had drawn aside one of the window-curtains, to look out upon the night.

Mr. Mordaunt, a devoted lover of all field-sports, was also restless and uneasy about the weather, peeping out every now and then, and announcing, in a tone of disappointment, the continuance of the frost.

In Mr. Mordaunt this was perfectly natural; but Lionel Dale knew that his cousin was not a man who cared for hunting. Why, then, was he so anxious about the meet which was to have taken place to-morrow?

His anxiety evidently was about the meet; for after looking out of the window for the third time, he exclaimed, with an accent of triumph—

"I congratulate you, gentlemen; you may have your run to-morrow. It no longer freezes, and there is a drizzling rain falling."

Mr. Mordaunt ran out of the drawing-room, and returned in about five minutes with a radiant face.

"I have been to look at the weathercock in the stable-yard," he said; "Sir Reginald Eversleigh is quite right. The wind has shifted to the sou'-west; it is raining fast, and we may have our sport to-morrow."

Lionel Dale's eyes were fixed on the face of his cousin as the country squire made this announcement. To his surprise, he saw that face blanch to a death-like whiteness.

"To-morrow!" murmured Sir Reginald, with a sigh.

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXIII.

"ANSWER ME, IF THIS BE DONE?"

All through the night the drizzling rain fell fast, and on the morning of the 26th,

when the gentlemen at the manor-house rectory went to their windows to look out upon the weather, they were gratified by finding that southerly wind and cloudy sky so dear to the heart of a huntsman.

At half-past eight o'clock the whole party assembled in the dining-room, where breakfast was prepared.

Many gentlemen living in the neighbourhood had been invited to breakfast at the rectory; and the great quadrangle of the stables was crowded by grooms and horses, gigs and phaetons, while the clamour of many voices rang out upon the still air.

Every one seemed to be thoroughly happy—except Reginald Eversleigh. He was amongst the noisiest of the talkers, the loudest of the laughers; but the rector, who watched him closely, perceived that his face was pale, his eyes heavy as the eyes of one who had passed a sleepless night, and that his laughter was loud without mirth, his talk boisterous, without real cheerfulness of spirit.

"There is mischief of some kind in that man's heart," Lionel said to himself. "Can there be any truth in the gipsy's warning after all?"

But in the next moment he was ready to fancy himself the weak dupe of his own imagination.

"I dare say my cousin's manner is but what it always is," he thought; "the weary manner of a man who has wasted his youth, and sacrificed all the brilliant chances of his life, and who, even in the hour of pleasure and excitement, is oppressed by a melancholy which he strives in vain to shake off."

The gathering at the breakfast-table was a brilliant one.

Lydia Graham was a superb horsewoman; and in no costume did she look more attractive than in her exquisitely fitting habit of dark blue cloth. The early hour of the meet justified her breakfasting in riding-costume; and gladly availing herself of this excuse, she made her appearance in her habit, carrying her pretty little riding-hat and dainty whip in her hand.

Her cheeks were flushed with a rich bloom—the warm flush of excitement and the consciousness of success. Lionel's attention on the previous evening had seemed to her unmistakeable; and again this morning she saw admiration, if not a warmer feeling, in his gaze.

"And so you really mean to follow the hounds, Miss Graham?" said Mrs. Mordaunt, with something like a shudder.

She had a great horror of fast young ladies, and a lurking aversion to Miss Graham, whose dashing manner and more brilliant charms quite eclipsed the quiet graces of the lady's two daughters. Mrs. Mordaunt was by no means a match-making mother; but she would have been far from sorry to see Lionel Dale devoted to one of her girls.

"Do I mean to follow the hounds?" cried Lydia. "Certainly I do, Mrs. Mordaunt. Do not the Misses Mordaunt ride?"

"Never to hounds," answered the matron. "They ride with, their father constantly, and when they are in London they ride in the park; but Mr. Mordaunt would not allow his daughters to appear in the hunting-field."

Lydia's face flushed crimson with anger; but her anger changed to delight when Lionel Dale came to the rescue.

"It is only such accomplished horsewomen as Miss Graham who can ride to hounds with safety," he said. "Your daughters ride very well, Mrs. Mordaunt; but they are not Diana Vernons."

"I never particularly admired the character of Diana Vernon," Mrs. Mordaunt answered, coldly.

Lydia Graham was by no means displeased by the lady's discourtesy. She accepted it as a tribute to her success. The mother could not bear to see so rich a prize as the rector of Hallgrove won by any other than her own daughter.

Douglas Dale was full of his brother's new horse, "Niagara," which had been paraded before the windows. The gentlemen of the party had all examined the animal, and pronounced him a beauty.

"Did you try him last week, Lionel, as I requested you to do?" asked Douglas, when the merits of the horse had been duly discussed.

"I did; and I found him as fine a temper as any horse I ever rode. I rode him twice—he is a magnificent animal."

"And safe, eh, Lio?" asked Douglas, anxiously. "Spavin assured me the horse was to be relied on, and Spavin is a very respectable fellow; but it's rather a critical matter to choose a hunter for a brother, and I shall be glad when to-day's work is over."

"Have no fear, Douglas," answered the rector. "I am generally considered a bold rider, but I would not mount a horse I couldn't thoroughly depend upon; for I am of opinion that a man has no right to tempt Providence."

As he said this, he happened by chance to look towards Reginald Eversleigh. The eyes of the cousins met; and Lionel saw that those of the baronet had a restless, uneasy look, which was utterly unlike their usual expression.

"There is some meaning in that old woman's dark hints of wrong and treachery," he thought; "there must be. That was no common look which I saw just now in my cousin's eyes."

The horses were brought round to the principal door; a barouche had been ordered for Mrs. Mordaunt and the two young ladies, who had no objection to exhibit their prettiest winter bonnets at the general meeting-place.

The snow had melted, except here and there, where it still lay in great patches; and on the distant hills, which still wore their pure white shroud.

The roads and lanes were fetlock-deep in mud, and the horses went splashing through pools of water, which spurted up into the faces of the riders.

There was only one lady besides Lydia Graham who intended to accompany the huntsmen, and this lady was the dashing young wife of a cavalry officer, who was spending a month's leave of absence with his relatives at Hallgrove.

The hunting-party rode out of the rectory gates in twos and threes. All had passed out into the high road before the rector himself, who was mounted on his new hunter.

To his extreme surprise he found a difficulty in managing the animal. He reared, and jibbed, and shied from side to side upon the broad carriage-drive, splashing the melted snow and wet gravel upon the rector's dark hunting-coat.

"So ho, 'Niagara,'" said Lionel, patting the animal's arched neck; "gently, boy, gently."

His voice, and the caressing touch of his hand seemed to have some little effect, for the horse consented to trot quietly into the road, after the rest of the party, and Lionel quickly overtook his friends. He rode shoulder by shoulder with Squire Mordaunt, an acknowledged judge of horseflesh, who watched the rector's hunter with a curious gaze for some minutes.

"I'll tell you what it is, Dale," he said, "I don't believe that horse of yours is a good-tempered animal."

"You do not?"

"No, there's a dangerous look in his eye that I don't at all like. See how he puts his ears back every now and then; and his nostrils have an ugly nervous quiver. I wish you'd let your man bring you another horse, Dale. We're likely to be crossing some stiffish timber to-day; and, upon my word, I'm rather suspicious of that brute you're riding."

"My dear squire, I have tested the horse to the uttermost," answered Lionel. "I can positively assure you there is not the slightest ground for apprehension. The animal is a present from my brother, and Douglas would be annoyed if I rode any other

horse."

"He would be more annoyed if you came to any harm by a horse of his choosing," answered the squire. "However I'll say no more. If you know the animal, that's enough. I know you to be both a good rider and a good judge of a horse."

"Thank you heartily for your advice, notwithstanding, squire," replied Lionel, cheerily; "and now I think I'll ride on and join the ladies."

He broke into a canter, and presently was riding by the side of Miss Graham, who did not fail to praise the beauty of "Niagara" in a manner calculated to win the heart of Niagara's rider.

In the exhilarating excitement of the start, Lionel Dale had forgotten alike the gipsy's warning and those vague doubts of his cousin Reginald which had been engendered by that warning. He was entirely absorbed by the pleasure of the hour, happy to see his friends gathered around him, and excited by the prospect of a day's sport.

The meeting-place was crowded with horsemen and carriages, country squires and their sons, gentlemen-farmers on sleek hunters, and humbler tenant-farmers on their stiff cobs, butchers and innkeepers, all eager for the chase. All was life, gaiety excitement, noise; the hounds, giving forth occasional howls and snappish yelpings, expressive of an impatience that was almost beyond endurance; the huntsman cracking his whip, and reproving his charges in language more forcible than polite; the spirited horses pawing the ground; the gentlemen exchanging the compliments of the season with the ladies who had come up to see the hounds throw off.

At last the important moment arrived, the horn sounded, the hounds broke away with a rush, and the business of the day had begun.

Again the rector's horse was seized with sudden obstinacy, and again the rector found it as much as he could do to manage him. An inferior horseman would have been thrown in that sharp and short struggle between horse and rider; but Lionel's firm hand triumphed over the animal's temper for the time at least; and presently he

was hurrying onward at a stretching gallop, which speedily carried him beyond the ruck of riders.

As he skimmed like a bird over the low flat meadows, Lionel began to think that the horse was an acquisition, in spite of the sudden freaks of temper which had made him so difficult to manage at starting.

A horseman who had not joined the hunt, who had dexterously kept the others in sight, sheltering himself from observation under the fringe of the wood which crowned a small hill in the neighbourhood of the meet, was watching all the evolutions of Lionel Dale's horse closely through a small field-glass, and soon, perceived that the animal was beyond the rider's skill to manage. The stretching gallop which had reassured Mr. Dale soon carried the rector beyond the watcher's ken, and then, as the hunt was out of sight too, he turned his horse from the shelter he had so carefully selected, and rode straight across country in an opposite direction.

In little more than half an hour after the horseman who had watched Lionel Dale so closely left the post of observation, a short man, mounted on a stout pony, which had evidently been urged along at unusual speed, came along the road, which wound around the hill already mentioned. This individual wore a heavy, country-made coat, and leather leggings, and had a handkerchief tied over his hat. This very unbecoming appendage was stained with blood on the side which covered the right cheek and the wearer was plentifully daubed and bespattered with mud, his sturdy little steed being in a similar condition. As he urged the pony on, his sharp, crafty eyes kept up an incessant scrutiny, in which his beak-like nose seemed to take an active part. But there was nothing to reward the curiosity, amounting to anxiety, with which the short man surveyed the wintry scene around. All was silent and empty. If the horseman had designed to see and speak with any member of the hunting-party, he had come too late. He recognized the fact very soon, and very

discontentedly. Without being so great a genius, as he believed and represented himself, Mr. Andrew Larkspur was really a very clever and a very successful detective, and he had seldom been foiled in a better-laid plan than that which had induced him to follow Lionel Dale to the meet on this occasion. But he had not calculated on precisely the exact kind of accident which had befallen him, and when he found himself thrown violently from his pony, in the middle of a road at once hard, sloppy, and newly-repaired with very sharp stones, he was both hurt and angry. It did not take him a great deal of time to get the pony on its legs, and shake himself to rights again; but the delay, brief as it was, was fatal to his hopes of seeing Lionel Dale. The meet had taken place, the hunt was in full progress, far away, and Mr. Andrew Larkspur had nothing for it but to sit forlornly for awhile upon the muddy pony, indulging in meditations of no pleasant character, and then ride disconsolately back to Frimley.

In the meantime, Nemesis, who had perversely pleased herself by thwarting the designs of Mr. Larkspur, had hurried those of Victor Carrington towards fulfilment with incredible speed. He had ridden at a speed, and for some time in a direction which would, he calculated, bring him within sight of the hunt, and had just crossed a bridge which traversed a narrow but deep and rapid river, about three miles distant from the place where he Andrew Larkspur had taken sad counsel with himself, when he heard the sound of a horse's approach, at a thundering, apparently wholly ungoverned pace. A wild gleam of triumphant expectation, of deadly murderous hope, lit up his pale features, as he turned his horse, rendered restive by the noise of the distant galloping, into a field, close by the road, dismounted, and tied him firmly to a tree. The hedge, though bare of leaves, was thick and high, and in the angle which it formed with the tree, the animal was completely hidden.

In a moment after Victor Carrington had done this, and while he crouched down and looked through the hedge, Lionel Dale appeared in sight, borne madly along by his unmanageable horse, as he dashed heedlessly down the road, his rider holding the

bridle indeed, but breathless, powerless, his head uncovered, and one of his stirrup-leathers broken. Victor Carrington's heart throbbed violently, and a film came over his eyes. Only for a moment, however; in the next his sight cleared, and he saw the furious animal, frightened by a sudden plunge made by the horse tied to the tree, swerve suddenly from the road, and dash at the swollen, tumbling river. The horse plunged in a little below the bridge. The rider was thrown out of the saddle head foremost. His head struck with a dull thud against the rugged trunk of an ash which hung over the water, and he sank below the brown, turbid stream. Then Victor Carrington emerged from his hiding-place, and rushed to the brink of the water. No sign of the rector was to be seen; and midway across, the horse, snorting and terrified, was struggling towards the opposite bank. In a moment Carrington, drawing something from his breast as he went, had run across the bridge, and reached the spot where the animal was now attempting to scramble up the steep bank. As Carrington came up, he had got his fore-feet within a couple of feet of the top, and was just making good his footing below; but the surgeon, standing close upon the brink, a little to the right of the struggling brute, stooped down and shot him through the forehead. The huge carcase fell crashing heavily down, and was sucked under, and whirled away by the stream. Victor Carrington placed the pistol once more in his breast, and for some time stood quite motionless gazing oh the river. Then he turned away, saying,—

"They'll hardly look for him below the bridge—I should say the fox ran west;" and he letting loose the horse he had ridden, walked along the road until he reached the turn at which Lionel Dale had come in sight. There he found the unfortunate rector's hat, as he had hoped he might find it, and having carried it back, he placed it on the brink of the river, and then once more mounted him, and rode, not at any remarkable speed, in the opposite direction to that in which Hallgrove lay.

His reflections were of a satisfactory kind. He had succeeded, and he cared for nothing but success. When he thought of Sir Reginald Eversleigh, a contemptuous

smile crossed his pale lips. "To work for such a creature as that," he said to himself, "would indeed be degrading; but he is only an accident in the case—I work for myself."

Victor Carrington had discharged his score at the inn that morning, and sent his valise to London by coach. When the night fell, he took the saddle off his horse, steeped it in the river, replaced it, quietly turned the animal loose, and abandoning him to his fate, made his way to a solitary public-house some miles from Hallgrove, where he had given a conditional, uncertain sort of rendezvous to Sir Reginald Eversleigh.

* * * * *

The night had closed in upon the returning huntsmen as they rode homewards. Not a star glimmered in the profound darkness of the sky. The moon had not yet risen, and all was chill and dreary in the early winter night.

Miss Graham, her brother Gordon, and Sir Reginald Eversleigh rode abreast as they approached the manor-house. Lydia had been struck by the silence of Sir Reginald, but she attributed that silence to fatigue. Her brother, too, was silent; nor did Lydia herself care to talk. She was thinking of her triumphs of the previous evening, and of that morning. She was thinking of the tender pressure with which the rector had clasped her hand as he bade her good-night; the soft expression of his eyes as they dwelt on her face, with a long, earnest gaze. She was thinking of his tender care of her when she mounted her horse, the gentle touch of his hand as he placed the reins in hers. Could she doubt that she was beloved?

She did not doubt. A thrill of delight ran through her veins as she thought of the sweet certainty; but it was not the pure delight of a simple-hearted girl who loves and finds herself beloved. It was the triumph of a hard and worldly woman, who has devoted the bright years of her girlhood to ambitious dreams; and who, at last, has reason to believe that they are about to be realized.

"Five thousand a year," she thought; "it is little, after all, compared to the fortune that would have been mine had I been lucky enough to captivate Sir Oswald Eversleigh. It is little compared to the wealth enjoyed by that low-born and nameless creature, Sir Oswald's widow. But it is much for one who has drained poverty's bitter cup to the very dregs as I have. Yes, to the dregs; for though I have never known the want of life's common necessaries, I have known humiliations which are at least as hard to bear."

The many windows of the manor-house were all a-blaze with light as the hunting-party entered the gates. Fires burned brightly in all the rooms, and the interior of that comfortable house formed a very pleasant contrast to the cheerless darkness of the night, the muddy roads, and damp atmosphere.

The butler stood in the hall ready to welcome the returning guests with stately ceremony; while the under-servants bustled about, attending to the wants of the mud-bespattered huntsmen.

"Mr. Dale is at home, I suppose?" Douglas said, as he warmed his hands before the great wood fire.

"At home, sir!" replied the butler; "hasn't he come home with you, sir?"

"No; we never saw him after the meet. I imagine he must have been called away on parish business."

"I don't know, sir," answered the butler; "my master has certainly not been home since the morning."

A feeling of vague alarm took possession of almost everyone present.

"It is very strange," exclaimed Squire Mordaunt. "Did no one come here to inquire after your master this morning?"

"No one, sir," replied the butler.

"Send to the stables to see if my brother's horse has been brought home," cried

Douglas, with alarm very evident in his face and manner. "Or, stay, I will go myself."

He ran out of the hall, and in a few moments returned.

"The horse has not been brought back," he cried; "there must be something wrong."

"Stop," cried the squire; "pray, my dear Mr. Douglas Dale, do not let us give way to unnecessary alarm. There may be no cause whatever for fear or agitation. If Mr. Dale was summoned away from the hunt to attend the bed of a dying parishioner, he would be the last man to think of sending his horse home, or to count the hours which he devoted to his duty."

"But he would surely send a messenger here to prevent the alarm which his absence would be likely to cause amongst us all," replied Douglas; "do not let us deceive ourselves, Mr. Mordaunt. There is something wrong—an accident of some kind has happened to my brother. Andrews, order fresh horses to be saddled immediately. If you will ride one way, squire, I will take another road, first stopping in the village to make all possible inquires there. Reginald, you will help us, will you not?"

"With all my heart," answered Reginald, with energy, but in a voice which was thick and husky.

Douglas Dale looked at his cousin, startled, even in the midst of his excitement, by the strange tone of Reginald's voice.

"Great heavens! how ghastly pale you look, Reginald!" he cried; "you apprehend some great misfortune—some dreadful accident?"

"I scarcely know," gasped the baronet; "but I own that I feel considerable alarm—the—the river—the current was so strong after the thaw—the stream so swollen by melted snow. If—if Lionel's horse should have tried to swim the river—and failed—"

"And we are lingering here!" cried Douglas, passionately; "lingering here and

talking, instead of acting! Are those horses ready there?" he shouted, rushing out to the portico.

His voice was heard in the darkness without, urging on the grooms as they led out fresh horses from the quadrangle.

"Gordon!" cried Lydia Graham, "you will go out with the others. You will do your uttermost in the search for Mr. Lionel Dale!"

She said this in a loud, ringing voice, with the imperious tone of a woman accustomed to command. She was leaning against one angle of the great chimney-piece, pale as ashes, breathless, but not fainting. To her, the idea that any calamity had befallen Lionel Dale was very dreadful—almost as dreadful as it could be to the brother who so truly loved him; for her own interest was involved in this man's life, and with her that was ever paramount.

She was well-nigh fainting; but she was too much a woman of the world not to know that if she had given way to her emotion at that moment, she would have given rise to disgust and annoyance, rather than interest, in the minds of the gentlemen present. She knew this, and she wished to please every one; for in pleasing the many lies the secret of a woman's success with the few.

Even in that moment of confusion and excitement, the scheming woman determined to stand well in the eyes of Douglas Dale.

As he appeared on the threshold of the great hall-door, she went up to him very quietly, with her head uncovered, and her pale, clearly-cut face revealed by the light of the lamp above her. She laid her hand gently on the young man's arm.

"Mr. Dale." she said, "command my brother Gordon; he will be proud to obey you. I will go out myself to aid in the search, if you will let me do so."

Douglas Dale clasped her hand in both his with grateful emotion.

"You are a noble girl," he cried; "but you cannot help me in this. Your brother

Gordon may, perhaps, and I will call upon his friendship without reserve. And now leave us, Miss Graham; this is no fitting scene for a lady. Come, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, "the horses are ready. I go by the village, and thence to the river; you will each take different roads, and will all meet me on the river-bank, at the spot where we crossed to-day."

In less than five minutes all had mounted, and the trampling of hoofs announced their departure. Reginald was amongst them, hardly conscious of the scene or his companions.

Sight, hearing, perception of himself, and of the world around him, all seemed annihilated. He rode on through dense black shadows, dark clouds which hemmed him in on every side, as if a gigantic pall had fallen from heaven to cover him.

How he became separated from his companions he never knew; but when his senses awoke from that dreadful stupor, he found himself alone, on a common, and in the far distance he saw the glimmer of lights—very feeble and wan beneath the starless sky.

It seemed as if the horse knew his desolate ground, and was going straight towards these lights. The animal belonged to the rector, and was, no doubt, familiar with the country.

Reginald Eversleigh had just sufficient consciousness of surrounding circumstances to remember this. He made no attempt to guide the horse. What did it matter whither he went? He had forgotten his promise to meet the other men on the river-brink; he had forgotten everything, except that the work of a demon had progressed in silence, and that its fatal issue was about to burst like a thunder-clap upon him.

"Victor Carrington has told me that this fortune shall be mine; he has failed once, but will not fail always," he said to himself.

The disappearance of Lionel Dale had struck like a thunderbolt on the baronet; but it was a thunderbolt whose falling he had anticipated with shuddering horror during

every day and every hour since his arrival at Hallgrove.

The lights grew more distinct—feeble lamps in a village street, glimmering candles in cottage windows scattered here and there. The horse reached the edge of the common and turned into a high road. Five minutes afterwards Reginald Eversleigh found himself at the beginning of a little country town.

Lights were burning cheerily in the windows of an inn. The door was open, and from within there came the sound of voices that rang out merrily on the night air.

"Great heaven!" exclaimed Reginald, "how happy these peasants are—these brutish creatures who have no care beyond their daily bread!"

He envied them; and at that moment would have exchanged places with the humblest field-labourer carousing in the rustic tap-room. But it was only now and then the anguish of a guilty conscience took this shape. He was a man who loved the pleasures and luxuries of this world better than he loved peace of mind; better than he loved his own soul.

He drew rein before the inn-door, and called to the people within. A man came out, and took the bridle as he dismounted.

"What is the name of this place?" he asked.

"Frimley, sir—Frimley Common it's called by rights. But folks call it Frimley for short."

"How far am I from the river-bank at the bottom of Thorpe Hill?"

"A good six miles, sir."

"Take my horse and rub him down. Give him a pail of gruel and a quart of oats. I shall want to start again in less than an hour."

"Sharp work, sir," answered the ostler. "Your horse seems to have done plenty already."

"That is my business," said Sir Reginald, haughtily.

He went into the inn.

"Is there a room in which I can dry my coat?" he asked at the bar.

He had only lately become aware of a drizzling rain which had been falling, and had soaked through his hunting-coat.

"Were you with the Horsely hounds to-day, sir?" asked the landlord.

"Yes."

"Good sport, sir?"

"No," answered Sir Reginald, curtly.

"Show the way to the parlour, Jane," said the landlord to a chambermaid, or barmaid, or girl-of-all-work, who emerged from the tap-room with a tray of earthenware mugs. "There's one gentleman there, sir; but perhaps you won't object to that, Christmas being such a particularly busy time," added the landlord, addressing Reginald. "You'll find a good fire."

"Send me some brandy," returned Sir Reginald, without deigning to make any further reply to the landlord's apologetic speech.

He followed the girl, who led the way to a door at the end of a passage, which she opened, and ushered Sir Reginald into a light and comfortable room.

Before a large, old-fashioned fire-place sat a man, with his face hidden by the newspaper which he was reading.

Sir Reginald Eversleigh did not condescend to look at this stranger. He walked straight to the hearth; took off his dripping coat, and hung it on a chair by the side of the roaring wood fire. Then he flung himself into another chair, drew it close to the fender, and sat staring at the fire, with a gloomy face, and eyes which seemed to look far away into some dark and terrible region beyond those burning logs.

He sat in this attitude for some time, motionless as a statue, utterly unconscious that his companion was closely watching him from behind the sheltering newspaper. The

inn servant brought a tray, bearing a small decanter of brandy and a glass. But the baronet did not heed her entrance, nor did he touch the refreshment for which he had asked.

Not once did he stir till the sudden crackling of his companion's newspaper startled him, and he lifted his head with an impatient gesture and an exclamation of surprise.

"You are nervous to-night, Sir Reginald Eversleigh," said the man, whose voice was still hidden by the newspaper.

The sound of the voice in which those common-place words were spoken was, at this moment, of all sounds the most hateful to Reginald Eversleigh.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "But I ought to have known that."

The newspaper was lowered for the first time; and Reginald Eversleigh found himself face to face with Victor Carrington.

"You ought, indeed, considering I told you you should find me, or hear from me here, at the 'Wheatsheaf,' in case you wished to do so, or I wished you should do so either. And I presume you have come by accident, not intentionally. I had no idea of seeing you, especially at an hour when I should have thought you would have been enjoying the hospitality of your kinsman, the rector of Hallgrove."

"Victor Carrington!" cried Reginald, "are you the fiend himself in human shape? Surely no other creature could delight in crime."

"I do not delight in crime, Reginald Eversleigh; and it is only a man with your narrow intellect who could give utterance to such an absurdity. Crime is only another name for danger. The criminal stakes his life. I value my life too highly to hazard it lightly. But if I can mould accident to my profit, I should be a fool indeed were I to shrink from doing so. There is one thing I delight in, my dear Reginald, and that is success! And now tell me why you are here to-night?"

"I cannot tell you that," answered the baronet. "I came hither, unconscious where I

was coming. There seems a strange fatality in this. I let my horse choose his own road, and he brought me here to this house—to you, my evil genius."

"Pray, Sir Reginald, be good enough to drop that high tragedy tone," said Victor, with supreme coolness. "It is all very well to be addressed by you as a fiend and an evil genius once in a way; but upon frequent repetition, that sort of thing becomes tiresome. You have not told me why you are wandering about the country instead of eating your dinner in a Christian-like manner at the rectory?"

"Do you not know the reason, Carrington?" asked the baronet, gazing fixedly at his companion.

"How should I know anything about it?"

"Because to-day's work has been your doing," answered Reginald, passionately; "because you are mixed up in the dark business of this day, as you were mixed up in that still darker treachery at Raynham Castle. I know now why you insisted upon my choosing the horse called 'Niagara' for my cousin Lionel; I know now why you were so interested in the appearance of that other horse, which had already caused the death of more than one rider; I know why you are here, and why Lionel Dale has disappeared in the course of the day."

"He has disappeared!" exclaimed Victor Carrington; "he is not dead?"

"I know nothing but that he has disappeared. We missed him in the midst of the hunt. We returned to the rectory in the evening, expecting to find him there."

"Did you expect that, Eversleigh?"

"Others did, at any rate."

"And did you not find him ?"

"No. We left the house, after a brief delay, to seek for him; I among the others. We were to ride by different roads; to make inquiries of every kind; to obtain information from every source. My brain was dazed. I let my horse take his own

road."

"Fool! coward!" exclaimed Victor Harrington, with mingled scorn and anger. "And you have abandoned your work; you have come here to waste your time, when you should seem most active in the search—most eager to find the missing man. Reginald Eversleigh, from first to last you have trifled with me. You are a villain; but you are a hypocrite. You would have the reward of guilt, and yet wear the guise of innocence, even before me; as if it were possible to deceive one who has read you through and through. I am tired of this trifling; I am weary of this pretended innocence; and to-night I ask you, for the last time, to choose the path which you mean to tread; and, once chosen, to tread it with a firm step, prepared to meet danger—to confront destiny. This very hour, this very moment, I call upon you to make your decision; and it shall be a final decision. Will you grovel on in poverty—the worst of all poverty, the gentleman's pittance? or will you make yourself possessor of the wealth which your uncle Oswald bequeathed to others? Look me in the face, Reginald, as you are a man, and answer me, Which is it to be—wealth or poverty?"

"It is too late to answer poverty," replied the baronet, in a gloomy and sullen tone. "You cannot bring my uncle back to life; you cannot undo your work."

"I do not pretend to bring the dead to life. I am not talking of the past—I am talking of the future."

"Suppose I say that I will endure poverty rather than plunge deeper into the pit you have dug—what then?"

"In that case, I will bid you good speed, and leave you to your poverty and—a clear conscience," answered Victor, coolly. "I am a poor man myself; but I like my friends to be rich. If you do not care to grasp the wealth which might be yours, neither do I care to preserve our acquaintance. So we have merely to bid each other good night, and part company."

There was a pause—Reginald Eversleigh sat with his arms folded, his eyes fixed on the fire. Victor watched him with a sinister smile upon his face.

"And if I choose to go on," said Reginald, at last; "if I choose to tread farther on the dark road which I have trodden so long—what then? Can you ensure me success, Victor Carrington?"

"I can," replied the Frenchman.

"Then I will go on. Yes; I will be your slave, your tool, your willing coadjutor in crime and treachery; anything to obtain at last the heritage out of which I have been cheated."

"Enough! You have made your decision. Henceforward let me hear no repinings, no hypocritical regrets. And now, order your horse, gallop back as fast as you can to the neighbourhood of Hallgrove, and show yourself foremost amongst those who seek for Lionel Dale."

"Yes, yes; I will obey you—I will shake off this miserable hesitation. I will make my nature iron, as you have made yours."

Sir Reginald rang, and ordered his horse to be brought round to the door of the inn.

"Where and when shall I see you again?" he asked Victor, as he was putting on the coat which had hung before the fire to be dried.

"In London, when you return there."

"You leave here soon?"

"To-morrow morning. You will write to me by to-morrow night's post to tell me all that has occurred in the interval."

"I will do so," answered Reginald.

"Good, and now go; you have already been too long out of the way of those who should have witnessed your affectionate anxiety about your cousin."

* * * * *

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I AM WEARY OF MY PART."

Reginald mounted his horse, questioned the ostler respecting the way to the appointed spot on the river-bank, and rode away in the direction indicated. He had no difficulty in discovering the scene of the appointed meeting. The light of the torches in the hands of the searchers guided him to the spot.

Here he found gentlemen and grooms, huntsmen and farmers, on horseback, riding up and down the river-bank; some carrying lighted torches, whose lurid glare shone red against the darkness of the night; all busy, all excited.

Amongst these the baronet found Douglas Dale, who rode up to meet his cousin, as the other approached.

"Any news, Reginald?" he asked, in a voice that was hoarse with fatigue and excitement.

"None," answered Sir Reginald: "I have ridden miles, and made many inquiries, but have been able to discover no traces. Have you no tidings?"

"None but evil ones," replied Douglas Dale, in a tone of despair "we have found a battered hat on the edge of the river—hat which my brother's valet identifies as that worn by his master. We fear the worst, Reginald—the very worst. All inquiries have been made in the village, at every farm-house in the parish, and far beyond the parish. My brother has been seen nowhere. Since we rode down the hill, it seems as if no human eye had rested on him. In that moment he vanished as utterly as if the earth had opened to swallow him up alive."

"What is it that you fear?"

"We fear that he tried to cross the river at some point higher up, where the stream is swollen to a perilous extent, and that both horse and rider were swept away by the current."

"In that case both horse and rider must be found—alive or dead."

"Ultimately, perhaps, but not easily," answered Douglas; "the bed of the stream is a mass of tangled weeds. I have heard Lionel say that men have been drowned in that river whose bodies have never been discovered."

"It is horrible!" exclaimed Reginald; "but let us still hope for the best. All this may be needless misery."

"I fear not, Reginald," answered Douglas; "my brother Lionel is not a man to be careless about giving anxiety to those who love him."

"I will ride farther along the bank," said the baronet; "I may hear something."

"And I will wait here," replied Douglas, with the dull apathy of despair. "The news of my brother's death will reach me soon enough."

Reginald Eversleigh rode on by the river brink, following a group of horsemen carrying torches. Douglas waited, with his ear on the alert to catch every sound, his heart beating tumultuously, in the terrible expectation that each moment would bring him the news he dreaded to hear.

Endless as that interval of expectation and suspense appeared to Douglas Dale, in reality it was not of very long duration. The cold of the winter's night did not affect him, the burning fever of fear devoured him. Soon he lost sight of the glimmering of the torches, as the bearers followed the bend of the river, and the sound of the men's voices died out of his ears. But after a while he heard a shout, then another, and then two men came running towards him, as fast as they could in the darkness. Douglas Dale knew them both, and called out, "What is it, Freeman? What is it, Carey? Bad news, I fear."

"Yes, Mr. Douglas, bad news. We've found the rector's hunting-whip."

"Where?" stammered Douglas.

"Below the bridge, sir, close by the ash-tree; and the bank is broken. I'm afraid it's

all up, sir; if he went in there, the horse and he are both gone, sir."

Like a man walking in a dream, Douglas Dale accompanied the bearers of the evil tidings to the spot where the group of searchers was collected together. In the midst stood Squire Mordaunt, holding in his hand a heavy hunting-whip, which all present recognized, and many had seen in the rector's hand only that morning. They all made way for Douglas Dale; they were very silent now, and hopeless conviction was on every face.

"This makes it too plain, Douglas," said Squire Mordaunt, as he handed the whip to the rector's brother; "bear it as well as you can, my dear fellow. There's nothing to be done now till daylight."

"Nothing more?" said Reginald, while Douglas covered his face, and groaned in unrestrained anguish; "the drags can surely be used? the—"

"Wait a minute, Sir Reginald," said the squire, holding up his hand; "of course your impatience is very natural, but it would only defeat itself. To drag the river by torchlight would be equally difficult and vain. It shall be done as soon as ever there is light. Till then, there is nothing for any of us to do but to wait. And first, let us get poor Douglas home."

Douglas Dale made no resistance; he knew the squire spoke truth and common-sense. The melancholy group broke up, the members of the rectory returned to its desolate walls, and Douglas at once shut himself up in his room, leaving to Sir Reginald Eversleigh and Squire Mordaunt the task of making all the arrangements for the morrow, and communicating to the ladies the dire intelligence which must be imparted.

Early in the morning, Squire Mordaunt went to Douglas Dale's room. He found him stretched upon the bed in his clothes. He had made no change in his dress, and had evidently intended to prolong his vigil until the morning, but nature had been exhausted, and in spite of himself Douglas? Dale slept. His old friend stole softly

from the room, and cautioning the household not to permit him who must now be regarded as their master to be disturbed, he went out, and proceeded to the search.

Douglas Dale did not awake until nine o'clock, and then, starting up with a terrible consciousness of sorrow, and a sense of self-reproach because he had slept, he found Squire Mordaunt standing by his bed. The good old gentleman took the young man's hand in silence, and pressed it with a pressure which told all.

They laid the disfigured dead body of him who but yesterday had been the beloved and honoured master of the house in the library, where he had received the ineffectual warning of the gipsy. It was while Douglas Dale was contemplating the pale, still features of his brother, with grief unutterable, that a servant tapped gently at the door, and called Mr. Mordaunt out.

"'Niagara' is come home, sir," said the man. "He were found, just now, on the lower road, a-grazing, and he ain't cut, nor hurt in any way, sir."

"He's dirty and wet, I suppose?"

"Well, sir, he's dirty, certainly; and the saddle is soaking; but he's pretty dry, considering."

"Are the girths broken?"

"No, sir, there's nothing amiss with them."

"Very well. Take care of the horse, but say nothing about him to Mr. Dale at present."

The visitors at Hallgrove Rectory had received the intelligence which Sir Reginald Eversleigh had communicated to them with the deepest concern. Arrangements were made for the immediate departure of the Grahams, and of Mrs. Mordaunt and her daughters. The squire and Sir Reginald were to remain with Douglas Dale until the painful formalities of the inquest and the funeral should be completed.

Douglas Dale was not a weak man, and no one more disliked any exhibition of

sentiment than he. Nevertheless, it was a hard task for him to enter the breakfast-room, and bid farewell to the guests who had been so merry only yesterday. But it had to be done, and he did it. A few sad and solemn words were spoken between him and the Mordaunts, and the girls left the room in tears. Then he advanced to Lydia Graham, who was seated in an arm-chair by the fire, still, and pale as a marble statue. There were no tears in her eyes, no traces of tears upon her cheeks, but in her heart there was angry, bitter, raging disappointment—almost fury, almost despair.

Douglas Dale could not look at her without seeing that in very truth the event which was so terrible to him was terrible to her also, and his manly heart yearned towards the woman whom he had thought but little of until now; who had perhaps loved, and certainly now was grieving for, his beloved brother.

"Shall we ever meet again, Mr. Dale?" she said, wonderingly.

"Why should we not?"

"You will not be able to endure England, perhaps, after this terrible calamity. You will go abroad. You will seek distraction in change of scene. Men are such travellers now-a-days."

"I shall not leave England, Miss Graham," answered Douglas, quietly; "I am a man of the world—I venture to hope that I am also a Christian—and I can nerve myself to endure grief as a Christian and a man of the world should endure it. My brother's death will make no alteration in the plan of my life. I shall return to London almost immediately."

"And we may hope to see you in London?"

"Captain Graham and I are members of the same club. We are very likely to meet occasionally."

"And am I not to see you as well as my brother?" asked Lydia, in a low voice.

"Do you really wish to see me?"

"Can you wonder that I do so—for the sake of old times. We are friends of long standing, remember, Mr. Dale."

"Yes," answered Douglas, with marked gravity. "We have known each other for a long time."

Captain Graham entered the room at this moment.

"The carriage which is to take us to Frimley is ready, Lydia," he said; "your trunks are all on the roof, and you have only to wish Mr. Dale good-bye."

"A very sad farewell," murmured Miss Graham. "I can only trust that we may meet again under happier circumstances."

"I trust we may," replied Douglas, earnestly.

Miss Graham was bonneted and cloaked for the journey. She had dressed herself entirely in black, in respectful regard of the melancholy circumstances attending her departure. Nor did she forget that the sombre hue was peculiarly becoming to her. She wore a dress of black silk, a voluminous cloak of black velvet trimmed with sables, and a fashionable bonnet of the same material, with a drooping feather.

Douglas conducted his guests to the carriage, and saw Miss Graham comfortably seated, with her shawls and travelling-bags on the seat opposite.

It was with a glance of mournful tenderness that Miss Graham uttered her final adieu; but there was no responsive glance in the eyes of Douglas Dale. His manner was serious and subdued; but it was a manner not easy to penetrate.

Gordon Graham flung himself back in his seat with a despairing groan.

"Well, Lydia," he said, "this accident in the hunting-field has been the ruin of all our hopes. I really think you are the most unlucky woman I ever encountered. After angling for something like ten years in the matrimonial fisheries, you were just on the point of landing a valuable fish, and at the last moment your husband that is to

be goes and gets drowned during a day's pleasure."

"What should you say if this accident, which you think unlucky, should, after all, be a fortunate event for us?" asked Lydia, with significance.

"What the deuce do you mean?"

"How very slow of comprehension you are to-day, Gordon!" exclaimed the lady, impatiently; "Lionel Dale's income was only five thousand a year—very little, after all, for a woman with my views of life."

"And with your genius for running into debt," muttered her brother.

"Do you happen to remember the terms of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's will?" "I should think I do, indeed," replied the captain; "the will was sufficiently talked about at the time of the baronet's death."

"That will left five thousand a year to each of the two brothers, Lionel and Douglas. If either should die unmarried, the fortune left to him was to go to the survivor. Lionel Dale's death doubles Douglas Dale's income. A husband with ten thousand a year would suit me very well indeed. And why should I not win Douglas as easily as I won Lionel?"

"Because you are not likely to have the same opportunities."

"I have asked Douglas to visit us in London."

"An invitation which must be very flattering to him, but which he may or may not accept. However, my dear Lydia, I have the most profound respect for your courage and perseverance; and if you can win a husband with ten thousand a year instead of five, so much the better for you, and so much the better for me, as I shall have a richer brother-in-law to whom to apply when I find myself in difficulties."

The carriage had reached Frimley by this time. The brother and sister took their places in the coach which was to convey them to London.

Lydia drew down her veil, and settled herself comfortably in a corner of the vehicle,

where she slept through the tedium of the journey.

At thirty years of age a woman of Miss Graham's character is apt to be studiously careful of her beauty; and Lydia felt that she needed much repose after the fever and excitement of her visit to Hallgrove Rectory.

* * * * *

Sir Reginald Eversleigh played his part well during the few days in which he remained at the rectory. No mourner could have seemed more sincere than he, and everybody agreed that the spendthrift baronet exhibited an unaffected sorrow for his cousin's fate, which proved him to be a very noble-hearted fellow, in spite of all the dark stories that had been told of his youth.

Before leaving Hallgrove, Reginald took care to make himself thoroughly acquainted with his cousin's plans for the future. Douglas, with ten thousand a year, was, of course, a more valuable acquaintance than he had been as the possessor of half that income, even if there had been no dark influence ever busy weaving its secret and fatal web.

"You will go back to your old life in London, Douglas, I suppose?" said Sir Reginald. "There you will soonest forget the sad affliction that has befallen you. In the hurrying whirlpool of modern life there is no leisure for sorrow."

"Yes, I shall come to London," answered Douglas.

"And you will occupy your old quarters?"

"Decidedly."

"And we shall see as much of each other as ever—eh, Douglas?" said Sir Reginald. "You must not let poor Lionel's fate prey upon your mind, you know, my dear fellow; or your health, as well as your spirits, will suffer. You must go down to Hilton House, and mix with the old set again. That sort of thing will cheer you up a little."

"Yes," answered Douglas. "I know how far I may rely upon your friendship, Reginald. I shall place myself quite in your hands."

"My dear fellow, you will not find me unworthy of your confidence."

"I ought not to find you so, Reginald."

Sir Reginald looked at his kinsman thoughtfully for a moment, fancying there was some hidden meaning in Douglas Dale's words. But the tone in which he had uttered them was perfectly careless; and Reginald's suspicion was dispelled by the frank expression of his face.

Sir Reginald left Hallgrove a few days after the fatal accident in the hunting-field, and went back to his London lodging, which seemed very shabby and comfortless after the luxury of Hallgrove Rectory. He did not care to spend his evenings at Hilton House, for he shrank from hearing Paulina's complaints about her loneliness and poverty. The London season had not yet begun, and there were few dupes whom the gamester could victimize by those skilful manoeuvres which so often helped him to success. It may be that some of the victims had complained of their losses, and the villa inhabited by the elegant Austrian widow had begun to be known amongst men of fashion as a place to be avoided.

Reginald Eversleigh feared that it must be so, when he found the few young men he met at his club rather disinclined to avail themselves of Madame Durski's hospitality.

"Have you been to Fulham lately, Caversham?" he asked of a young lordling, who was master of a good many thousands per annum, but not the most talented of mankind.

"Fulham!" exclaimed Lord Caversham; "what's Fulham? Ah, to be sure, I remember—place by the river—very nice—villas—boat-races, and that kind of thing. Let me see, bishops, and that kind of church-going people live at Fulham, don't they?"

"I thought you would have remembered one person who lives at Fulham—a very handsome woman, who made a strong impression upon you."

"Did she—did she, by Jove?" cried the viscount; "and yet, upon my honour, Eversleigh, I can't remember her. You see, I know so many splendid women; and splendid women are perpetually making an impression upon me—and I am perpetually making an impression upon splendid women. It's mutual, by Jove, Eversleigh, quite mutual. And pray, who is the lady in question?"

"The beautiful Viennese, Paulina Durski."

The lordling made a wry face.

"Paulina Durski! Yes, Paulina is a pretty woman," he murmured, languidly; "a very pretty woman; and you're right, Eversleigh—she did make a profound impression upon me. But, you see, I found the impression cost me rather too much. Hilton House is the nicest place in the world to visit; but if a fellow finds himself losing two or three hundred every time he crosses the threshold, you can be scarcely surprised if he prefers spending his evenings where he can enjoy himself a little more cheaply. However, perhaps you'll hardly understand my feelings on this subject, Eversleigh; for if I remember rightly you were always a winner when I played at Madame Durski's."

"Was I?" said Sir Reginald, with the air of a man who endeavours to recall circumstances that are almost forgotten.

The lordling was not altogether without knowledge of the world and of his fellow-men, and there had been a certain significance in his speech which had made Eversleigh wince.

"Did I win when you were there?" he asked, carelessly. "Upon my word, I have forgotten all about it."

"I haven't," answered Lord Caversham. "I bled pretty freely on several occasions when you and I played écarté; and I have not forgotten the figures on the cheques I

had the pleasure of signing in your favour. No, my dear Eversleigh, although I consider Madame Durski the most charming of women, I don't feel inclined to go to Hilton House again."

"Ah!" said Sir Reginald, with a sneer; "there are so few men who have the art of losing with grace. We have no Stavordales now-a-days. The man who could win eleven thousand at a coup, and regret that he was not playing high, since in that case he would have won millions, is an extinct animal."

"No doubt of it, dear boy; the gentlemanly art of losing placidly is dying out; and I confess that, for my part, I prefer winning," answered Lord Caversham, coolly.

This brief conversation was a very unpleasant one for Sir Reginald Eversleigh. It told him that his career as a gamester must soon come to a close, or he would find himself a disgraced and branded wretch, avoided and despised by the men he now called his friends.

It was evident that Viscount Caversham suspected that he had been cheated; nor was it likely that he would keep his suspicions secret from the men of his set.

The suspicion once whispered would speedily be repeated by others who had lost money in the saloons of Madame Durski. Hints and whispers would swell into a general cry, and Sir Reginald Eversleigh would find himself tabooed.

The prospect before him looked black as night—a night illumined by one lurid star, and that was the promise of Victor Carrington.

"It is time for me to have done with poverty," he said to himself. "Lord Caversham's insolent innuendoes would be silenced if I had ten thousand a year. It is clear that the game is up at Hilton House. Paulina may as well go back to Paris or Vienna. The pigeons have taken fright, and the hawks must seek a new quarry."

Sir Reginald drove straight from his club to the little cottage beyond Malda Hill. He scarcely expected to find the man whom he had last seen at an inn in Dorsetshire; but, to his surprise, he was conducted immediately to the laboratory, where he

discovered Victor Carrington bending over an alembic, which was placed on the top of a small furnace.

The surgeon looked up with a start, and Reginald perceived that he wore the metal mask which he had noticed on a former occasion.

"Who brought you here?" asked Victor, impatiently.

"The servant who admitted me," answered Reginald. "I told her I was your intimate friend, and that I wanted to see you immediately. She therefore brought me here."

"She had no right to do so. However, no matter. When did you return? I scarcely expected to see you in town as soon."

"I scarcely expected to find you hereafter our meeting at Frimley," replied the baronet.

"There was nothing to detain me in the country. I came back some days ago, and have been busy with my old studios in chemistry."

"You still dabble with poisons, I perceive," said Sir Reginald, pointing to the mask which Victor had laid aside on a table near him.

"Every chemist must dabble in poisons, since poison forms an element of all medicines," replied Victor. "And now tell me to what new dilemma of yours do I owe the honour of this visit. You rarely enter this house except when you find yourself desperately in need of my humble services. What is the last misfortune?"

"I have just come from the Phoenix, where I met Caversham, I thought I should be able to get a hundred or so out of him at écarté to-night; but the game is up in that quarter."

"He suspects that he has been—singularly unfortunate?"

"He knows it. No man who was not certain of the fact would have dared to say what he said to me. He insulted me, Carrington-insulted me grossly; and I was not able to resent his insolence."

"Never mind his insolence," answered Victor; "in six months your position will be such that no man will presume to insult you. So the game is up at Hilton House, is it? I thought you were going on a little too fast. And pray what is to be the next move?"

"What can we do? Paulina's creditors are impatient, and she has very little money to give them. My own debts are too pressing to permit of my helping her; and such being the case, the best thing she can do will be to get back to the Continent as soon as she can."

"On no account, my dear Reginald!" exclaimed Carrington. "Madame Durski must not leave Hilton House."

"Why not?"

"Never mind the why. I tell you, Reginald, she must stay. You and I must find enough money to stave off the demands of her sharpest creditors."

"I have not a sixpence to give her," answered the baronet; "I can scarcely afford to pay for the lodging that shelters me, and can still less afford to lend money to other people."

"Not even to the woman who loves you, and whom you profess to love?" said Victor, with a sneer. "What a noble-minded creature you are, Sir Reginald Eversleigh—a pattern of chivalry and devotion! However, Madame Durski must remain; that is essential to the carrying out of my plans. If you will not find the money, I know who will."

"And pray who is this generous knight-errant so ready to rush to the rescue of beauty in distress?"

"Douglas Dale. He is over head and ears in love with the Austrian widow, and will lend her the money she wants. I shall go at once to Madame Durski and give her a few hints as to her line of conduct."

There was a pause, during which the baronet seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Do you think that a wise course?" he asked, at last.

"Do I think what course wise?" demanded his friend.

"The line of conduct you propose. You say Douglas is in love with Paulina, and I myself have seen enough to convince me that you are right. If he is in love with her, he is just the man to sacrifice every other consideration for her sake. What if he should marry her? Would not that be a bad look-out for us?"

"You are a fool, Reginald Eversleigh," cried Victor contemptuously; "you ought to know me better than to fear my discretion. Douglas Dale loves Paulina Durski, and is the very man to sacrifice all worldly interests for her sake; the man to marry her, even were she more unworthy of his love than she is. But he never will marry her, notwithstanding."

"How will you prevent such a marriage?"

"That is my secret. Depend upon it I will prevent it. You remember our compact the night we met at Frimley."

"I do," answered Reginald, in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper.

"Very well; I will be true to my part of that compact, depend upon it. Before this new-born year is out you shall be a rich man."

"I have need of wealth, Victor," replied the baronet, eagerly; "I have bitter need of it. There are men who can endure poverty; but I am not one of them. If my position does not change speedily I may find myself branded with the stigma of dishonour—an outlaw from society. I must be rich at any cost—at any cost, Victor."

"You have told me that before," answered the Frenchman, coolly, "and I have promised that you shall be rich. But if I am to keep my promise, you must submit yourself with unquestioning faith to my guidance. If the path we must tread together is a dark one, tread it blindly. The end will be success. And now tell me when you

expect to see Douglas Dale in London."

Sir Reginald explained his cousin's plans, and after a brief conversation left the cottage. He heard Mrs. Carrington's birds twittering in the cold January sunshine, and a passing glimpse through the open doorway of the drawing-room revealed to him the exquisite neatness and purity of the apartment, which even at this season was adorned with a few flowers.

"Strange!" he thought to himself, as he left the house; "any stranger entering that abode would imagine it the very shrine of domestic peace and simple happiness, and yet it is inhabited by a fiend."

He went back to town. He dined alone in his dingy lodging, scarcely daring to show himself at his club—Lord Caversham had spoken so plainly; and had, no doubt, spoken to others still more plainly. Reginald Eversleigh's face grew hot with shame as he remembered the insults he had been obliged to endure with pretended unconsciousness.

He feared to encounter other men who also had been losers at Hilton House, and who might speak as significantly as the viscount had spoken. This man, who violated the laws of heaven and earth with little terror of the Divine vengeance, feared above all to be cut by the men of his set.

This is the slavery which the man of fashion creates for himself—these are the fetters which such men as Reginald Eversleigh forge for their own souls.

But before we trace the progress of Sir Reginald from step to step in this terrible career, we must once more revert to the strange visitors at Frimley.

Jane Payland by no means approved of passing Christmas-day in the uninteresting seclusion of a country inn, with nothing more festive to look forward to than a specially ordered, but lonely dinner, and nothing to divert her thoughts but the rural spectacle afforded by the inn-yard. As to going out for a walk in such weather, she would not have thought of such a thing, even if she had any one to walk out with;

and to go alone—no—Jane Payland had no fancy for amusement of that order. The day had been particularly dreary to the lady's maid, because the lady had been busily engaged in affairs of which she had no cognizance, and this ignorance, not a little exasperating even in town, became well-nigh intolerable to her in the weariness, the idleness, and the dullness of Frimley. When Lady Eversleigh went out in the dark evening, accompanied by the mysterious personage in whom Jane Payland had recognized their fellow-lodger, the amazement which she experienced produced an agreeable variety in her sensations, and the fact that the man with the vulture-like beak carried a carpet-bag intensified her surprise.

"Now I'm almost sure she is something to him; and she has come down here with him to see her people," said Jane Payland to herself, as she sat desolately by the fire in her mistress's room, a well-thumbed novel lying neglected on her knee; "and she's mean enough to be ashamed of them. Well, I don't think I should be that of my own flesh and blood, if I was ever so great and so grand. I suppose the bag is full of presents—I'm sure she might have told me if it was clothes she was going to give away; I shouldn't have grudged 'em to the poor things."

Grumbling a good deal, wondering more, and feasting a little, Jane Payland got through the time until her mistress returned. But for all her grumbling, and all her suspicion, the girl was daily growing more and more attached to her mistress, and her respect was increasing with her liking. Lady Eversleigh returned to the inn alone late on that dismal Christmas-night, and she looked worn, troubled, and weary. After a few kind words to Jane Payland, she dismissed the girl, and went to bed, very tired and heart-sick. "How am I to prove it?" she asked herself, as she lay wearily awake. "How am I to prove it? in my borrowed character I am suspected; in my own, I should not be believed, or even listened to for a moment. He is a good man, that Lionel Dale, and he is doomed, I fear."

On the morning of the twenty-sixth Mr. Andrew Larkspur had another long private

conference with Lady Eversleigh, the immediate result of which was his setting out, mounted on the stout pony which we have seen in difficulties in a previous chapter, and vainly endeavouring to come up with Lionel Dale at the hunt. When Mr. Andrew Larkspur arrived at the melancholy conviction that his errand was a useless one, and that he must only return to Frimley, and concert with Lady Eversleigh a new plan of action, he also became aware that he was more hurt and shaken by his fall than he had at first supposed. When he reached Frimley he felt exceedingly sick and weak, ("queer," he expressed it), and was constrained to tell his anxious and unhappy client that he must go away and rest if he hoped to be fit for anything in the evening, or on the next day. "I will see Mr. Dale to-night, if he and I are both alive," said Mr. Larkspur; "but if he was there before me I could not say a word to him now. I don't mean to say I have not had a hurt or two in the course of my life before now, but I never was so regularly dead-beat; and that's the truth."

Thus it happened that the acute Mr. Larkspur was hors de combat just at the time when his acuteness would have found most employment, and thus Lady Eversleigh's project of vengeance received, unconsciously, the first check. The game of reprisals was, indeed, destined to be played, but not by her; Providence would do that, in time, in the long run. Meanwhile, she strove, after her own fashion, to become the executor of its decrees.

The news of Lionel Dale's sudden disappearance, and the alarm to which it gave rise, reached the little town of Frimley in due course; but it was slow to reach the lonely lady at the inn. Lady Eversleigh had taken counsel with herself after Mr. Larkspur had left her, and had come to the determination that she would tell Lionel Dale the whole truth. She resolved to lay before him a full statement of all the circumstances of her life, to reveal all she knew, and all she suspected concerning Sir Reginald Eversleigh, and to tell him of Carrington's presence in her neighbourhood, as well as the designs which she believed him to cherish. She told herself that her dead husband's kinsman could scarcely refuse to believe her

statement, when she reminded him that she had no object to serve in this revelation but the object of truth and respect for her husband's memory. When he, Lionel Dale, could have rehabilitated her in public opinion by taking his place beside her, he had not done so; it was too late now, no advance on his part could undo that which had been done, and he could not therefore think that in taking this step she was trying to curry favour with him in order to further her own interest. After debating the question for some time, she resolved to write a letter, which Larkspur could carry to the rectory.

A great deal of time was consumed by Lady Eversleigh in writing this letter, and the darkness had fallen long before it was finished. When she rang for lights, she took no notice of the person who brought them, and she directed that her dinner should not be served until she rang for it. Thus no interruption of her task occurred, until Mr. Larkspur, looking very little the better for his rest and refreshment, presented himself before her. Lady Eversleigh was just beginning to tell him what she had done, when he interrupted her, by saying, in a tone which would have astonished any of his intimates, for there was a touch of real feeling in it, apart from considerations of business—

"I'm afraid we're too late. I'm very much afraid Carrington has been one too many for us, and has done the trick."

"What do you mean?" asked Lady Eversleigh, rising, in extreme agitation, and turning deadly pale. "Has any harm come to Lionel Dale?"

Then Mr. Andrew Larkspur told Lady Eversleigh the report which had reached the town, and of whose truth a secret instinct assured them both, only too completely. They were, indeed, powerless now; the enemy had been too strong, too subtle, and too quick for them. Mr. Larkspur did not remain long with Lady Eversleigh; but having counselled her to keep silence on the subject, to ask no questions of any one, and to preserve the letter she had written, which Mr. Larkspur, for reasons of his

own, was anxious to see, he left her, and set off for the rectory. He reached his destination before the return of the party who had gone to search for the missing man. He mingled freely, almost unnoticed, with the servants and the villagers who had crowded about the house and lodges, and all he heard confirmed him in his belief that the worst had happened, that Lionel Dale had, indeed, come by his death, either through the successful contrivance of Carrington, or by an extraordinary accident, coincident with his enemy's fell designs. Mr. Larkspur asked a great many questions of several persons that night, and as talking to a stranger helped the watchers and loiterers over some of the time they had to drag through until the genuine apprehension of some, and the curiosity of others, should be realized or satisfied, he met with no rebuffs. But, on the other hand, neither did he obtain any information of value. No stranger had been seen to join the hunt that day, or noticed lurking about Hallgrove that morning, and Mr. Larkspur's own reliable eyes had assured him that Carrington was not among the recipients of the rector's hospitality on Christmas-day. The footman, who had directed the unknown visitor by the way past the stables to the lower road, did not remember that circumstance and so it did not come to Mr. Larkspur's knowledge. When the party who had led the search for Lionel Dale returned to the rectory, and the worst was known, Mr. Larkspur went away, after having arranged with a small boy, who did odd jobs for the gardener at Hallgrove, that if the body was brought home in the morning, he should go over to Frimley, on consideration of half-a-crown, and inquire at the inn for Mr. Bennett.

"It's no good thinking about what's to be done, till the body's found, and the inquest settled," thought Mr. Larkspur. "I don't think anything can be done then, but it's clear there's no use in thinking about it to-night. So I shall just tell my lady so, and get to bed. Confound that pony!"

At a reasonably early hour on the following morning, the juvenile messenger arrived from Hallgrove, and, on inquiring for Mr. Bennett, was ushered into the presence of Mr. Larkspur. The intelligence he brought was brief, but important. The rector's

body had been found, much disfigured; he had struck against a tree, the doctors said, in falling into the river, and been killed by the blow, "as well as drownded," added the boy, with some appreciation of the additional piquancy of the circumstance. He was laid out in the library. The fine folks were gone, or going, except Squire Mordaunt and Sir Reginald, the rector's cousin. Mr. Douglas took on about it dreadfully; the bay horse had come home, with his saddle wet, but he was not hurt or cut about, as the boy knew of. This was all the boy had to tell.

Mr. Larkspur dismissed the messenger, having faithfully paid him the stipulated half-crown, and immediately sought the presence of Lady Eversleigh. The realization of all her fears shocked her deeply, and in the solemnity of the dread event which had occurred she almost lost sight of her own purpose, it seemed swallowed up in a calamity so appalling. But Mr. Larkspur was of a tougher and more practical temperament. He lost no time in setting before his client the state of the case as regarded herself, and the purpose with which she had gone to Frimley, now rendered futile. Mr. Larkspur entertained no doubt that Carrington had been in some way accessory to the death of Lionel Dale, but circumstances had so favoured the criminal that it would be impossible to prove his crime.

"If I told you all I know about the horse and about the man," said Mr. Larkspur, "what good would it do? The man bought a horse very like Mr. Dale's, and he rode away from here mounted on that horse, on the same day that Mr. Dale was drowned. I believe he changed the horses in Mr. Dale's stable; but there's not a tittle of proof of it, and how he contrived the thing I cannot undertake to say, for no mortal saw him at the rectory or at the meet; and the horse that every one would be prepared to swear was the horse that Mr. Dale rode, is safe at home at the rectory now, having evidently been in the river. Seeing we can't prove the matter, it's my opinion we'd better not meddle with it, more particularly as nothing that we can prove will do Sir Reginald Eversleigh any harm, and, if either of this precious pair of rascals is to escape, you don't want it to be him."

"Oh, no, no!" said Lady Eversleigh, "he is so much worse than the other as his added cowardice makes him."

"Just so. Well, then, if you want to punish him and his agent, this is certainly not the opportunity. Next to winning, there's nothing like thoroughly understanding and acknowledging what you've lost, and we have lost this game, beyond all question. Let us see, now, if we cannot win the next. If I understand the business right, Mr. Douglas Dale is his brother's heir?"

"Yes," said Lady Eversleigh; "his life only now stands between Sir Reginald and fortune."

"Then he will take that life by Carrington's agency, as I believe he has taken Lionel Dale's," said Mr. Larkspur; "and my idea is that the proper way to prevent him is to go away from this place, where no good is to be done, and where any movement will only defeat our purpose, by putting him on his guard—letting him know he is watched (forewarned, forearmed, you know)—and set ourselves to watch Carrington in London."

"Why in London? How do you know he's there?"

Mr. Larkspur smiled.

"Lord bless your innocence!" he replied. "How do I know it? Why, ain't London the natural place for him to be in? Ain't London the place where every one that has done a successful trick goes to enjoy it, and every one that has missed his tip goes to hide himself? I'll take my davy, though it's a thing I don't like doing in general, that Carrington's back in town, living with his mother, as right as a trivet."

So Lady Eversleigh and Jane Payland travelled up to town again, and took up their old quarters. And Mr. Larkspur returned, and resumed his room and his accustomed habits. But before he had been many hours in London, he had ascertained, by the evidence of his own eyes, that Victor Carrington was, as he had predicted, in town, living with his mother, and "as right as a trivet."

CHAPTER XXV.

A DANGEROUS ALLIANCE.

In the afternoon of the day following that on which Sir Reginald paid a visit to Victor Carrington, the latter gentleman presented himself at the door of Hilton House. The frost had again set in, and this time with more than usual severity. There had been a heavy fall of snow, and the park-like grounds surrounding Madame Durski's abode had an almost fairy-like appearance, the tracery of the leafless trees defined by the snow that had lodged on every branch, the undulating lawn one bed of pure white.

He knocked at the door and waited. The woman at the lodge had told him that it was very unlikely he would be able to see Madame Durski at this hour of the day, but he had walked on to the house notwithstanding.

It was already nearly four o'clock in the afternoon; but at that hour Paulina had rarely left her own apartments.

Victor Carrington knew this quite as well as the woman at the lodge, but he had business to do with another person as well as Paulina Durski. That other person was the widow's humble companion.

The door was opened by Carlo Toas, Paulina's confidential courier and butler. This man looked very suspiciously at the visitor.

"My mistress receives no one at this hour," he said.

"I am aware that she does not usually see visitors so early," replied Carrington; "but as I come on particular business, and as I come a long way to see her, she will perhaps make an exception in my favour."

He produced his card-case as he spoke, and handed the man a card, on which he had written the following words in pencil:

"Pray see me, dear madame. I come on really important business, which will bear no

delay. If you cannot see me till your dinner-hour, I will wait."

The Spaniard ushered Victor into one of the reception-rooms, which looked cold and chill in the winter daylight. Except the grand piano, there was no trace of feminine occupation in the room. It looked like an apartment kept only for the reception of visitors—an apartment which lacked all the warmth and comfort of home.

Victor waited for some time, and began to think his message had not been taken to the mistress of the house, when the door was opened, and Miss Brewer appeared.

She looked at the visitor with an inquisitive glance as she entered the room, and approached him softly, with her light, greenish-grey eyes fixed upon his face.

"Madame Durski has been suffering from nervous headache all day," she said, "and has not yet risen. Her dinner-hour is half-past six. If your business is really of importance, and if you care to wait, she will be happy to see you then."

"My business is of real importance; and I shall be very glad to wait," answered Victor. "Since Madame Durski is, unhappily, unable to receive me for some time, I shall gladly avail myself of the opportunity, in order to enjoy a little conversation with you, Miss Brewer," he said, courteously, "always supposing that you are not otherwise engaged."

"I have no other engagement whatever," answered the lady, in a cold, measured voice.

"I wish to speak to you upon very serious business," continued Victor, "and I believe that I can venture to address you with perfect candour. The business to which I allude concerns the interests of Madame Durski, and I have every reason to suppose that you are thoroughly devoted to her interests."

"For whom else should I care?" returned Miss Brewer, with a bitter laugh. "Madame Durski is the only friend I can count in this world. I have known her from her childhood—and if I can believe anything good of my species, which is not very easy for me to do, I can believe that she cares for me—a little—as she might care for

some piece of furniture which she had been accustomed to see about her from her infancy, and which she would miss if it were removed."

"You wrong your friend," said Victor. "She has every reason to be sincerely attached to you, and I have little doubt that she is so."

"What right have you to have little doubt or much doubt about it?" exclaimed Miss Brewer, contemptuously; "and why do you try to palm off upon me the idle nonsense which senseless people consider it incumbent on them to utter? You do not know Paulina Durski—I do. She is a woman who never in her life cared for more than two things."

"And these two things are—"

"The excitement of the gaming-table, and the love of your worthless friend, Sir Reginald Eversleigh."

"Does she really love my friend?"

"She does. She loves him as few men deserve to be loved—and least of all that man. She loves him, although she knows that her affection is unreturned, unappreciated. For his sake she would sacrifice her own happiness, her own prosperity. Women are foolish creatures, Mr. Carrington, and you men do wisely when you despise them."

"I will not enter into the question of my friend's merits," said Victor; "but I know that Madame Durski has won the love of a man who is worthy of any woman's affection—a man who is rich, and can elevate her from her present—doubtful—position."

The Frenchman uttered these last words with a great appearance of restraint and hesitation.

"Say, miserable position," exclaimed Miss Brewer; "for Paulina Durski's position is the most degraded that a woman—whose life has been comparatively sinless—ever occupied."

"And every day its degradation will become more profound," said Victor. "Unless Madame Durski follows my advice, she cannot long remain in England. In her native city she has little to hope for. In Paris, her name has acquired an evil odour. What, then, lies before her?"

"Ruin!" exclaimed Miss Brewer, abruptly; "starvation it may be. I know that our race is nearly run, Mr. Carrington. You need not trouble yourself to remind me of our misery."

"If I do remind you of it, I only do so in the hope that I may be able to serve you," answered Victor. "I have tasted all the bitterness of poverty, Miss Brewer. Forgive me, if I ask whether you, too, have been acquainted with its sting?"

"Have I felt its sting?" cried the poor faded creature. "Who has felt the tooth of the serpent, Poverty, more cruelly than I? It has pierced my very heart. From my childhood I have known nothing but poverty. Shall I tell you my story, Mr. Carrington? I am not apt to speak of myself, or of my youth; but you have evoked the demon, Memory, and I feel a kind of relief in speaking of that long-departed time."

"I am deeply interested in all you say, Miss Brewer. Stranger though I am, believe me that my interest is sincere."

As Victor Carrington said this, Charlotte Brewer looked at him with a sharp, penetrating glance. She was not a woman to be fooled by shallow hypocrisies. The light of the winter's day was fading; but even in the fading light Victor saw the look of sharp suspicion in her pinched face.

"Why should you be interested in me?" she asked, abruptly.

"Because I believe you may be useful to me," answered Victor, boldly. "I do not want to deceive you, Miss Brewer. Great triumphs have been achieved by the union of two powerful minds."

I know you to possess a powerful mind; I know you to be a woman above ordinary

prejudices; and I want you to help me, as I am ready to help you. But you were about to tell me the story of your youth.

"It shall be told briefly," said Miss Brewer, speaking in a rapid, energetic manner that was the very reverse of the measured tones she was wont to use. "I am the daughter of a disgraced man, who was a gentleman once; but I have forgotten that time, as he forgot it long before he died.

"My father passed the last ten years of his life in a prison. He died in that prison, and within those dingy smoke-blackened walls my childhood was spent—a joyless childhood, without a hope, without a dream, haunted perpetually by the dark phantom, Poverty. I emerged from that prison to enter a new one, in the shape of a West-end boarding-school, where I became the drudge and scape-goat of rich citizens' daughters, heiresses presumptive to the scrapings of tallow-chandlers and coal-merchants, linen-drapers and cheesemongers. For six years I endured my fate patiently, uncomplainingly. Not one creature amongst that large household loved me, or cared for me, or thought whether I was happy or miserable.

"I worked like a slave. I rose early, and went to bed late, giving my youth, my health, my beauty—you will smile, perhaps, Mr. Carrington, but in those days I was accounted a handsome woman—in exchange for what? My daily bread, and the education which was to enable me to earn a livelihood hereafter. Some distant relations undertook to clothe me; and I was dressed in those days about as shabbily as I have been dressed ever since. In all my life, I never knew the innocent pleasure which every woman feels in the possession of handsome clothes.

"At eighteen, I left the boarding-school to go on the Continent, where I was to fill a situation which had been procured for me. That situation was in the household of Paulina Durski's father. Paulina was ten years of age, and I was appointed as her governess and companion. From that day to this, I have never left her. As much as I am capable of loving any one, I love her. But my mind has been embittered by the

miseries of my girlhood, and I do not pretend to be capable of much womanly feeling."

"I thank you for your candour," said Victor. "It is of importance for me to understand your position, for, by so doing, I shall be the better able to assist you. I may believe, then, that there is only one person in the world for whom you care, and that person is Paulina Durski?"

"You may believe that."

"And I may also believe that you, who have drained to the dregs the bitter cup of poverty, would do much, and risk much, in order to be rich?"

"You may."

"Then, Miss Brewer, let me speak to you openly, as one sincerely interested in you, and desirous of serving you and your charming but infatuated friend. May I hope that we shall be uninterrupted for some time longer, for I am anxious to explain myself at once, and fully, now that the opportunity has arisen?"

"No one is likely to enter this room, unless summoned by me," said Miss Brewer. "You may speak freely, and at any length you please, Mr. Carrington; but I warn you, you are speaking to a person who has no faith in any profession of disinterested regard."

As she spoke, Miss Brewer leaned back in her chair, folded her hands before her, and assumed an utterly impassible expression of countenance. No less promising recipient of a confidential scheme could have been seen: but Victor Carrington was not in the least discouraged. He replied, in a cheerful, deferential, and yet business-like tone:

"I am quite aware of that, Miss Brewer; and for my part, I should not feel the respect I do feel for you if I believed you so deficient in sense and experience as to take any other view. I don't offer myself to you in the absurd disguise of a preux chevalier, anxious to espouse the unprofitable cause of two unprotected women in an equivocal

position, and in circumstances rapidly tending to desperation."

Here Victor Carrington glanced at his companion; he wanted to see if the shot had told. But Miss Brewer cared no more for the almost open insult, than she had cared for the implied interest conveyed in the exordium of his discourse. She sat silent and motionless. He continued:

"I have an object to gain, which I am resolved to achieve. Two ways to the attainment of this object are open to me; the one injurious, in fact destructive, to you and Madame Durski, the other eminently beneficial. I am interested in you. I particularly like Madame Durski, though I am not one of the legion of her professed admirers."

Miss Brewer shook her head sadly. That legion was much reduced in its numbers of late.

"Therefore," continued Carrington, without seeming to observe the gesture, "I prefer to adopt the latter course, and further your interests in securing my own. I suppose you can at least understand and credit such very plain motives, so very plainly expressed, Miss Brewer?"

"Yes," she said, "that may be true; it does not seem unlikely; we shall see."

"You certainly shall. My explanation will not, I hope, be unduly tedious, but it is indispensable that it should be full. You know, Miss Brewer, that Sir Reginald Eversleigh and I are intimate friends?"

Miss Brewer smiled—a pale, prolonged, unpleasant smile, and then replied, speaking very deliberately:

"I know nothing of the kind, Mr. Carrington. I know you are much together, and have an air of familiar acquaintance, which is the true interpretation of friendship, I take it, between men of the world—of your world in particular."

The hard and determined expression of her manner would have discouraged and

deterred most men. It did not discourage or deter Victor Carrington.

"Put what interpretation you please upon my words," he said, "but recognize the facts. There is a strict alliance, if you prefer that phrase, between me and Sir Reginald Eversleigh, and his present intimacy, with his seeming devotion to Madame Durski, prevents him from carrying out the terms of that alliance to my satisfaction. I am therefore resolved to break off that intimacy. Do you comprehend me so far?"

"Yes, I comprehend you so far," answered Miss Brewer, "perfectly."

"Considering Madame Durski's feelings for Sir Reginald—feelings of which, I assure you, I consider him, even according to my own unpretending standard, entirely unworthy—this intimacy cannot be broken off without pain to her, but it might be destroyed without any profit, nay, with ruinous loss. Now, I cannot spare her the pain; that is necessary, indispensable, both for her good, and—which I don't pretend not to regard more urgently—my own. But I can make the pain eminently profitable to her, with your assistance—in fact, so profitable as to secure the peace and prosperity of her whole future life."

He paused, and Miss Brewer looked steadily at him, but she did not speak.

"Reginald Eversleigh owes me money, Miss Brewer, and I cannot afford to allow him to remain in my debt. I don't mean that he has borrowed money from me, for I never had any to lend, and, having any, should never have lent it." He saw how the tone he was taking suited the woman's perverted mind, and pursued it. "But I have done him certain services for which he undertook to pay me money, and I want money. He has none, and the only means by which he can procure it is a rich marriage. Such a marriage is within his reach; one of the richest heiresses in London would have him for the asking—she is an ironmonger's daughter, and pines to be My Lady—but he hesitates, and loses his time in visits to Madame Durski, which are only doing them both harm. Doing her harm, because they are deceiving her,

encouraging a delusion; and doing him harm, because they are wasting his time, and incurring the risk of his being 'blown upon' to the ironmonger. Vulgar people of the kind, you know, my dear Miss Brewer, give ugly names, and attach undue importance to intimacies of this kind, and—and—in short, it is on the cards that Madame Durski may spoil Sir Reginald's game. Well, as that game is also mine, you will find no difficulty in understanding that I do not intend Madame Durski shall spoil it."

"Yes, I understand that," said Miss Brewer, as plainly as before; "but I don't understand how Paulina is to be served in the affair, and I don't understand what my part is to be in it."

"I am coming to that," he said. "You cannot be unaware of the impression which Madame Durski has made upon Sir Reginald's cousin, Douglas Dale."

"I know he did admire her," said Miss Brewer, "but he has not been here since his brother's death. He is a rich man now."

"Yes, he is—but that will make no change in him in certain respects. Douglas Dale is a fool, and will always remain so. Madame Durski has completely captivated him, and I am perfectly certain he would marry her to-morrow, if she could be brought to consent."

"A striking proof that Mr. Douglas Dale deserves the character you have given him, you would say, Mr. Carrington?"

"Madam, I am at the mercy of your perspicuity," said Victor, with a mock bow; "however, a truce to badinage—Douglas Dale is a rich man, and very much in love with Madame Durski; but he is the last man in the world to interfere with his cousin, by trying to win her affections, if he believes her attached to Sir Reginald. He is a fool in some things, as I have said before, and he is much more likely, if he thinks it a case of mutual desperation, to contribute a thousand a year or so to set the couple up in a modest competence, like a princely proprietor in a play, than to advance his

own claims. Now, this modest competence business would not suit Sir Reginald, or Madame Durski, or me, but the other arrangement would be a capital thing for us all."

"H—m, you see she really loves your friend, Sir Reginald," said Miss Brewer.

"Tush," ejaculated Victor Carrington, contemptuously; "of course I know she does, but what does it matter? She would be the most wretched of women if Reginald married her, and he won't,—after all, that's the great point, he won't. Now Dale will, and will give her unlimited control of his money—a very nice position, not so elevated as to ensure an undesirable raking-up of her antecedents, and the means of proving her gratitude to you, by providing for you comfortably for life."

"That is all possible," replied Miss Brewer, as calmly as before; "but what am I to do towards bringing about so desirable a state of affairs."

"You have to use the influence which your position auprès de Madame Durski gives you. You can keep her situation constantly before her, you can perpetually harp upon its exigencies—they are pressing, are they not? Yes—then make them more pressing. Expose her to the constant worry and annoyance of poverty, make no effort to hide the inconvenience of ruin. She is a bad manager, of course—all women of her sort are bad managers. Don't help her—make the very worst of everything. Then, you can take every opportunity of pointing out Reginald's neglect, all his defalcations, the cruelty of his conduct to her, the evidence of his never intending to marry her, the selfishness which makes him indifferent to her troubles, and unwilling to help her. Work on pride, on pique, on jealousy, on the love of comfort and luxury, and the horror of poverty and privation, which are always powerful in the minds of women like Madame Durski. Don't talk much to her at first about Douglas Dale, especially until he has come to town and has resumed his visiting here; but take care that her difficulties press heavily upon her, and that she is kept in mind that help or hope from Reginald there is none. I have no doubt

whatever that Dale will propose to her, if he does not see her infatuation for Reginald."

"But suppose Mr. Dale does not come here at all?" asked Miss Brewer; "he has broken through the habit now, and he may have thought it over, and determined to keep away."

"Suppose a moth flies away from a candle, Miss Brewer," returned Carrington, "and makes a refreshing excursion out of window into the cool evening air! May we not calculate with tolerable certainty on his return, and his incremation? The last thing in all this matter I should think of doubting would be the readiness of Douglas Dale to tumble head-foremost into any net we please to spread for him."

A short pause ensued—interrupted by Miss Brewer, who said, "I suppose this must all be done quickly—on account of that wealthy Philistine, the ironmonger?"

"On account of my happening to want money very badly, Miss Brewer, and Madame Durski finding herself in the same position. The more quickly the better for all parties. And now, I have spoken very plainly to you so far, let me speak still more plainly. It is manifestly for your advantage that Madame Durski should be rich and respectable, rather than that she should be poor and—under a cloud. It is no less manifestly, though not so largely, for your advantage, that I should get my money from Reginald Eversleigh, because, when I do, get it, I will hand you five hundred pounds by way of bonus."

"If there were any means by which you could be legally bound to the fulfilment of that promise, Mr. Carrington," said Miss Brewer, "I should request you to put it in writing. But I am quite aware that no such means exist. I accept it, therefore, with moderate confidence, and will adopt the course you have sketched, not because I look for the punctual payment of the money, but because Paulina's good fortune, if secured, will secure mine. But I must add," and here Miss Brewer sat upright in her chair, and a faint colour came into her sallow cheek, "I should not have anything to

do with your plots and plans, if I did not believe, and see, that this one is for Paulina's real good."

Victor Carrington smiled, as he thought, "Here is a rare sample of human nature. Here is this woman, quite pleased with herself, and positively looking almost dignified, because she has succeeded in persuading herself that she is actuated by a good motive."

The conversation between Miss Brewer and Victor Carrington lasted for some time longer, and then he was left alone, while Miss Brewer went to attend the levée of Madame Durski. As he paced the room, Carrington smiled again, and muttered, "If Dale were only here, and she could be persuaded to borrow money of him, all would be right. So far, all is going well, and I have taken the right course. My motto is the motto of Danton—'De l'audace, de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace.'"

* * * * *

Victor Carrington dined with Madame Durski and her companion. The meal was served with elegance, but the stamp of poverty was too plainly impressed upon all things at Hilton House. The dinner served with such ceremony was but a scanty banquet—the wines were poor—and Victor perceived that, in place of the old silver which he had seen on a previous occasion, Madame Durski's table was furnished with the most worthless plated ware.

Paulina herself looked pale and haggard. She had the weary air of a woman who finds life a burden almost too heavy for endurance.

"I have consented to see you this evening, Mr. Carrington, in accordance with your very pressing message," she said, when she found herself alone in the drawing-room with Victor Carrington after dinner, Miss Brewer having discreetly retired; "but I cannot imagine what business you can have with me."

"Do not question my motives too closely, Madame Durski," said Victor; "there are some secrets lying deep at the root of every man's existence. Believe me, when I

assure you that I take a real interest in your welfare, and that I came here to-night in the hope of serving you. Will you permit me to speak as a friend?"

"I have so few friends that I should be the last to reject any honest offer of friendship," answered Paulina, with a sigh. "And you are the friend of Reginald Eversleigh. That fact alone gives you some claim to my regard."

The widow had admitted Victor Carrington to a more intimate acquaintance than the rest of her visitors; and it was fully understood between them that he knew of the attachment between herself and Sir Reginald.

"Sir Reginald Eversleigh is my friend," replied Victor; "but do not think me treacherous, Madame Durski, when I tell you he is not worthy of your regard. Were he here at this moment, I would say the same. He is utterly selfish—it is of his own interest alone that he thinks; and were the chance of a wealthy marriage to offer itself, I firmly believe that he would seize it—ay! even if by doing so he knew that he was to break your heart. I think you know that I am speaking the truth, Madame Durski?"

"I do," answered Paulina, in a dull, half despairing tone. "Heaven help me! I know that it is the truth. I have long known as much. We women are capable of supreme folly. My folly is my regard for your friend Reginald Eversleigh."

"Let your pride work the cure of that wasted devotion, madame," said Victor, earnestly. "Do not submit any longer to be the dupe, the tool, of this man. Do you know how dearly your self-sacrifice has cost you? I am sure you do not. You do not know that this house is beginning to be talked about as a place to be shunned. You have observed, perhaps, that you have had few visitors of late. Day by day your visitors will grow fewer. This house is marked. It is talked of at the clubs; and Reginald Eversleigh will no longer be able to live upon the spoils won from his dupes and victims. The game is up, Madame Durski; and now that you can no longer be useful to Reginald Eversleigh, you will see how much his love is worth."

"I believe he loves me," murmured Paulina, "after his own fashion."

"Yes, madame, after his own fashion, which is, at the best, a strange one. May I ask how you spent your Christmas?"

"I was very lonely; this house seemed horribly cold and desolate. No one came near me. There were no congratulations; no Christmas gifts. Ah! Mr. Carrington, it is a sad thing to be quite alone in the world."

"And Reginald Eversleigh—the man whom you love—he who should have been at your side, was at Hallgrove Rectory, among a circle of visitors, flirting with the most notorious of coquettes—Miss Graham, an old friend of his boyish days."

Victor looked at Paulina's face, and saw the random shot had gone home. She grew even paler than she had been before, and there was a nervous working of the lips that betrayed her agitation.

"Were there ladies amongst the guests at Hallgrove?" he asked.

"Yes, Madame Durski, there were ladies. Did you not know that it was to be so?"

"No," replied Paulina. "Sir Reginald told me it was to be a bachelors' party."

Victor saw that this petty deception on the part of her lover stung Paulina keenly.

She had been deeply wounded by Reginald's cold and selfish policy; but until this moment she had never felt the pangs of jealousy.

"So he was flirting with one of your fashionable English coquettes, while I was lonely and friendless in a strange country," she exclaimed. And then, after a brief pause, she added, passionately, "You are right, Mr. Carrington; your friend is unworthy of one thought from me, and I will think of him no more."

"You will do wisely, and you will receive the proof of what I say ere long from the lips of Reginald Eversleigh himself. Tell me the truth dear madame, are not your pecuniary difficulties becoming daily more pressing?"

"They have become so pressing," answered Paulina, "that, unless Reginald lends me

money almost immediately, I shall be compelled to fly from this country in secret, like a felon, leaving all my poor possessions behind me. Already I have parted with my plate, as you no doubt have perceived. My only hope is in Reginald."

"A broken reed on which to rely, madame. Sir Reginald Eversleigh will not lend you money. Since this house has become a place of evil odour, to be avoided by men who have money to lose, you are no longer of any use to Sir Reginald. He will not lend you money. On the contrary he will urge your immediate flight from England; and when you have gone—"

"What then?"

"There will be an obstacle removed from his pathway; and when the chance of a rich marriage arises, he will be free to grasp it."

"Oh, what utter baseness!" murmured Paulina; "what unspeakable infamy!"

"A selfish man can be very base, very infamous," replied Victor. "But do not let us speak further of this subject, dear Madame Durski. I have spoken with cruel truth; but my work has been that of the surgeon, who uses his knife freely in order to cut away the morbid spot which is poisoning the very life-blood of the sufferer. I have shown you the disease, the fatal passion, the wasted devotion, to which you are sacrificing your life; my next duty is to show you where your cure lies."

"You may be a very clever surgeon," replied Paulina, scornfully; "but in this case your skill is unavailing. For me there is no remedy."

"Nay, madame, that is the despairing cry of a romantic girl, and is unworthy the lips of an accomplished woman of the world. You complained just now of your loneliness. You said that it was very sad to be without a friend. How if I can show you that you possess one attached and devoted friend, who would be as willing to sacrifice himself for your interests as you have been willing to devote yourself to Reginald Eversleigh?"

"Who is that friend?"

"Douglas Dale."

"Douglas Dale!" exclaimed Paulina. "Yes, I know, that Mr. Dale admires me, and that he is a good and honourable man; but can I take advantage of his admiration? Can I trade upon his love? I—who have no heart to give, no affection to offer in return for the honest devotion of a good man? Do not ask me to stoop to such baseness—such degradation."

"I ask nothing from you but common sense," answered Victor impatiently. "Instead of wasting your love upon Reginald Eversleigh, who is not worthy a moment's consideration from you, give at least your esteem and respect to the honourable and unselfish man who truly loves you. Instead of flying from England, a ruined woman, branded with the name of cheat and swindler, remain as the affianced wife of Douglas Dale—remain to prove to Reginald Eversleigh that there are those in the world who know how to value the woman he has despised."

"Yes, he has despised me," murmured Paulina, speaking to herself rather than to her companion; "he has despised me. He left me alone in this dreary house; in the Christmas festival time, when friends and lovers draw nearer together all the world over, united by the sweet influences of the season; he left me to sit alone by this desolate hearth, while he made merry with his friends—while he sunned himself in the smiles of happier women. What truth can he claim from me—he who has been falsehood itself?"

She remained silent for some minutes after this, with her eyes fixed on the fire, her thoughts far away. Victor did not arouse her from that reverie. He knew that the work he had to do was progressing rapidly.

He felt that he was moulding this proud and passionate woman to his will, as the sculptor moulds the clay which is to take the form of his statue.

At last she spoke.

"I thank you for your good advice, Mr. Carrington," she said, calmly; "and I will

avail myself of your worldly wisdom. What would you have me do?"

"I would have you tell Douglas Dale, when he returns to town and comes to see you, the position in which you find yourself with regard to money matters, and ask the loan of a few hundreds. The truth and depth of his love for you will be proved by his response to this appeal."

"How came you to suspect his love for me?" asked Paulina. "It has never yet shaped itself in words. A woman's own instinct generally tells her when she is truly loved; but how came you, a bystander, a mere looker-on, to discover Douglas Dale's secret?"

"Simply because I am a man of the world, and somewhat of an observer, and I will pledge my reputation as both upon the issue of your interview with Douglas Dale."

"So be it," said Paulina; "I will appeal to him. It is a new degradation; but what has my whole life been except a series of humiliations? And now, Mr. Carrington, this interview has been very painful to me. Pardon me, if I ask you to leave me to myself."

Victor complied immediately, and took leave of Madame Durski with many apologies for his intrusion. Before leaving the house he encountered Miss Brewer, who came out of a small sitting-room as he entered the hall.

"You are going away, Mr. Carrington?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered; "but I shall call again in a day or two. Meantime, let me hear from you, if Dale presents himself here. I have had some talk with your friend, and am surprised at the ease with which the work we have to do may be done. She despises Reginald now; she won't love him long. Good night, Miss Brewer."

CHAPTER XXVI.

MOVE THE FIRST.

After the lapse of a few days, during which Victor Carrington carefully matured his

plans, while apparently only pursuing his ordinary business, and leading his ordinary life of dutiful attention to his mother and quiet domestic routine, he received a letter in a handwriting which was unfamiliar to him. It contained the following words:

"In accordance with your desire, and my promise, I write to inform you that, D. D. has notified his return to London and his intention to visit P. He did not know whether she was in town, and, therefore, wrote before coming. She seemed much affected by his letter, and has replied to it, appointing Wednesday after-noon for receiving him, and inviting him to luncheon. No communication has been received from R. E., and she takes the fact easily. If you have any advice, or I suppose I should say instructions, to give me, you had better come here to-morrow (Tuesday), when I can see you alone.—C. B."

Victor Carrington read this note with a smile of satisfaction, which faithfully interpreted the feelings it produced. There was a business-like tone in his correspondent's letter which exactly suited his ideas of what it was advisable his agent should be.

"She is really admirable," he said, as he destroyed Miss Brewer's note; "just clever enough to be useful, just shrewd enough to understand the precise force and weight of an argument, but not clever enough, or shrewd enough, to find out that she is used for any purpose but the one for which she has bargained."

And then Victor Carrington wrote a few lines to Miss Brewer, in which he thanked her for her note, and prepared her to receive a visit from him on the following day. This written and posted, he walked up and down his laboratory, in deep thought for some time, and then once more seated himself at his desk. This time his communication was addressed to Sir Reginald Eversleigh, and merely consisted of a request that that gentleman should call upon him—Victor Carrington—on a certain day, at a week's distance from the present date.

"I shall have more trouble with this shallow fool than with all the rest of them," said

Victor to himself, as he sealed his letter; and, as he said it, he permitted his countenance to assume a very unusual expression of vexation; "his vanity will make him kick against letting Paulina turn him off; and he will run the risk of destroying the game sooner than suffer that mortification. But I will take care he shall suffer it, and not destroy the game.

"No, no, Sir Reginald Eversleigh, you shall not be my stumbling-block in this instance. How horribly afraid he is of me," thought Victor Carrington, and a smile of cruel satisfaction, which might have become a demon, lighted his pale face at the reflection; "he is dying to know exactly how that business of Dale the elder was managed; he has the haziest notions in connection with it, and, by Jove, he dare not ask me. And yet, I am only his agent,—his to be paid agent,—and he shakes in his shoes before me. Yes, and I will be paid too, richly paid, Sir Reginald, not only in money, but in power. In power—the best and most enjoyable thing that money has to buy."

Victor Carrington sent his letter to the post, and joined his mother in her sitting-room, where her life passed placidly away, among her birds and her flowers. Mrs. Carrington had none of the vivacity about her which is so general an attribute of French women. She liked her quiet life, and had little sympathy with her son's restless ambition and devouring discontent. A cold, silent, self-contained woman, she shut herself up in her own occupations, and cared for nothing beyond them. She had the French national taste and talent for needlework, and generally listened to her son, as he talked or read to her, with a piece of elaborate embroidery in her hand. On the present occasion, she was engaged as usual, and Victor looked at her work and praised it, according to his custom.

"What is it for, mother?" he asked.

"An altar-cloth," she replied. "I cannot give money, you know, Victor, and so I am glad to give my work."

The young man's dark eyes flashed, as he replied;—

"True, mother, but the time will come—it is not far off now—when you and I shall both be set free from poverty, when we shall once more take our place in our own rank—when we shall be what the Champfontaines were, and do as the Champfontaines did—when this hateful English name shall be thrown aside, and this squalid English home abandoned, and the past restored to us, we to the past." He rose as he spoke, and walked about the room. A faint flush brightened his sallow face, an unwonted light glittered in his deep-set eyes. His mother continued to ply her needle, with downcast eyes, and a face which showed no sign of sympathy with her son's enthusiasm.

"Industry and talent are good, my Victor," she said, "and they bring comfort, they bring le bienêtre in their train; but I do not think all the industry and talent you can display as a surgeon in London will ever enable you to restore the dignity and emulate the wealth of the old Champfontaines."

Victor Carrington glanced at his mother almost angrily, and for an instant felt the impulse rise within him which prompted him to tell her that it was not only by the employment of means so tame and common-place that he designed to realize the cherished vision of his ambition. But he checked it instantly, and only said, with the reverential inflection which his voice never failed to take when he addressed his mother, "What, then, would you advise me to try, in addition?"

"Marry a rich woman, my Victor; marry one of these moneyed English girls, who are, for the most part, permitted to follow their inclinations—inclinations which would surely, if encouraged, lead many of them your way." Mrs. Carrington spoke in the calmest tone possible.

"Marry—I marry?" said Victor, in a tone of surprise, in which a quick ear would have noticed something also of disappointment. "I thought you would never like that, mother. It would part us, you know, and then what would you do?"

"There is always the convent for me, Victor," said his mother, "if you no longer needed me." And she composedly threaded her needle, and began a very minute leaf in the pattern of her embroidery.

Victor Carrington looked at his mother with surprise, and some vague sense of pain. She could make up her mind to part with him—she had thought of the possibility, and with complacence. He muttered something about having something to do, and left her, strangely moved, while she calmly worked in at her embroidery.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"WEAVE THE WARP, AND WEAVE THE WOOF."

On the following day Victor Carrington presented himself at Hilton House, and was received by Miss Brewer alone. She was pale, chilly, and ungracious, as usual, and the understanding which had been arrived at between Carrington and herself did not move her to the manifestation of the smallest additional cordiality in her reception of him.

"I have to thank you for your prompt compliance with my request, Miss Brewer," said Victor.

She made no sound nor sign of encouragement, and he continued. "Since I saw you, another complication has arisen in this matter, which makes our game doubly safe and secure. In order to explain this complication thoroughly, I must ask you to let me put you through a kind of catechism. Have I your permission, Miss Brewer?"

"You may ask me any questions you please," returned Miss Brewer, in a hard, cold, even voice; "and I will answer them as truthfully as I can."

"Do you know anything of Douglas Dale's family connections and antecedents?"

"I know that his mother was Sir Oswald Eversleigh's sister, and that he and Lionel Dale, who was drowned on St. Stephen's day, were left large incomes by their uncle, in addition to some inconsiderable family property which they inherited from their

father, Mr. Melville Dale, who was a lawyer, and, I believe, a not very successful one."

"Did you ever hear anything of the family history of this Mr. Melville Dale, the father of Lionel and Douglas?"

"I never heard more than his name, and the circumstance I have already mentioned."

"Listen, then. Melville Dale had a sister, towards whom their father conceived undue and unjust partiality (according to the popular version) from their earliest childhood. This sister, Henrietta Dale, married, when very young, a country baronet of good fortune, one Sir George Verner, and thereby still further pleased her father, and secured his favour. Melville Dale, on the contrary, opposed the old gentleman in everything, and ultimately crowned the edifice of his offences by publishing a deistical treatise, which made a considerable sensation at the time of its appearance, and caused the author's expulsion from Balliol, where he had already attained a bad eminence by numerous escapades of the Shelley order. This proceeding so incensed his father that he made a will, in the heat of his anger, by which he disinherited Melville Dale, and left the whole of his fortune to his daughter, Lady Verner. If he repented this summary and vindictive proceeding, neither I nor any one else can tell. The disinherited son reformed his life very soon after the breach between himself and his father, and was lucky enough to win the affections of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's sister. But he was too proud to ask for his father's forgiveness, and the father died a year after Douglas Dale's birth—never having seen Mrs. Dale or his grandchildren. At the time of her father's death, Lady Verner had no children, and she was, I believe, disposed to treat her brother very generously; but he was an obstinate, headstrong man, and persisted in believing that she had purposely done him injury with his father. He would not see her. He refused to accept any favour at her hands, and a complete estrangement took place. The brother and sister never met again; and it was only through the medium of the newspapers that Lionel and

Douglas Dale learned, some time after their father's death (Melville Dale died young), that severe affliction had befallen their aunt, Lady Verner. The bitter and deadly breach between father and son, and between brother and sister, was destined never to be healed. Lionel and Douglas grew up knowing nothing of their father's family, but treated always with persistent kindness by their uncle, Sir Oswald Eversleigh, who insisted upon their making Raynham Castle a second home."

"Their cousin Reginald must have liked that, I fancy," remarked Miss Brewer, in her coldest tone.

"He did, as you suppose," said Carrington; "he hated the Dales, and I fancy they had but little intimacy with him. He was early taken up by Sir Oswald, and acknowledged and treated as his heir. You know, of course, how all that came to grief, and how Sir Oswald married a nobody, and left her the bulk of his fortune?"

"Yes, I have heard all that," said Miss Brewer. "Sir Reginald did not spare us the details of the injustice Sir Oswald had done him, or the expression of his feelings regarding it. Sir Reginald is the most egotistical man I know."

"Well, then, as you are in possession of the family relations so far, let me return to Lady Verner, of whom her nephews knew nothing during their father's lifetime. She had lost her husband shortly after the birth of her only child, and continued to live at Naples, whither Sir George had been taken, in the vain hope of prolonging his life. A short time after Sir George Verner's death, and while his child was almost an infant, Lady Verner's villa was robbed, and the little girl, with her nurse, disappeared. The general theory was, that the nurse had connived at the robbery, and gone off with the thieves; and being, after the fashion of Italian nurses, extraordinarily fond of the child, had refused to be parted from her. Be that as it may, the nurse and child were never heard of again, and though the case was put into the hands of the cleverest of the police, in Paris and London, no discovery has ever been made. Lady Verner fell into a state of hopeless melancholy, in which she

continued for many years, and during that period, of course, her wealth accumulated, and is now very great indeed. I see by your face, Miss Brewer, that you are growing impatient, and are disposed to wonder what the family history of the Dales, and the troubles of Lady Verner, have to do with Paulina Durski and our designs for her future. Bear with my explanation a little longer, and you will perceive the importance of the connection between them."

Miss Brewer gave her shoulders a slight shrug, expressive of supreme resignation, and Victor continued.

"Lady Verner has now recovered, under the influence of time and medical skill, and has come to London with the avowed purpose of arranging the affairs of her large property. She has heard of Lionel Dale's death, and, therefore, knows that there is a candidate the less in the field. Sir Reginald Eversleigh has obtained access to this lady, and he has carefully nipped in the bud certain symptoms of interest which she betrayed in the fate of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's widow and orphan daughter. Lady Verner is an exceedingly proud woman, and you may suppose her maternal instincts are powerful, when the loss of her child caused her years of melancholy madness. My gifted friend speedily discovered these characteristics, and practised on them. Lady Verner was made aware that the widow of Sir Oswald Eversleigh was a person of low origin, and dubious reputation, and cared so little for her child that she had gone abroad, for an indefinite time, leaving the little girl at Raynham, in the care of servants. The result of this representation was, that Lady Verner felt and expressed extreme disgust, and considerable satisfaction that she had not committed herself to a course from which she must have receded, by opening any communication with Lady Eversleigh. One danger thus disposed of—and I must say I think Reginald did it well—he was very enthusiastic, he tells me, on the virtues of his uncle, and his inextinguishable regret for that benefactor of his youth."

Miss Brewer's cold smile, and glittering, baleful eye, attracted Carrington's attention

at this point.

"That shocks you, does it, Miss Brewer?" he asked.

"Shock me? Oh no! It rather interests me; there's an eminence of baseness in it."

"So there is," said Carrington, with pleased assent, "especially to one who knows, as I do, how Reginald hated his uncle, living-how he hates his memory, dead. However, he did this, and did it well; but it was only half his task. Lady Verner would keep herself clear of Lady Eversleigh, but she must be kept clear of Douglas Dale."

"Ha!" said Miss Brewer, with a slight change of attitude and expression, "I see now; she must be turned against him by means of Paulina—poor Paulina! She says she is fatal to him; she says he ought to fly from her. This looks still more like her being right."

"It does, indeed, Miss Brewer," said Carrington, gravely. "You are right. It was by means of Madame Durski that the trick was done; but neither you nor I—and I assure you I like your friend immensely—can afford to take objection to the manner of doing it. Lady Verner was made to understand that by extending her countenance to, or enriching Douglas Dale, she would only be giving additional security and eclât to a marriage scarcely less disgraceful than that which Sir Oswald Eversleigh had contracted. The device has been successful, so far. And now comes the third portion of Sir Reginald's game—the substitution of himself in Lady Verner's good graces for the nephew he has ousted. This is only fair, after all. Dale cut him out with his uncle—he means to cut Dale out with his aunt. You understand our programme now, Miss Brewer, don't you?"

"Yes," she replied, slowly, "but I don't see why I should lend him any assistance. It would be more to my interest that Douglas Dale should inherit this lady's fortune; the richer Paulina's husband is, the better for me."

"Unquestionably, my dear Miss Brewer," said Carrington. "But Dale will not marry

Paulina if Sir Reginald Eversleigh chooses to prevent it; and Douglas Dale will not give you five hundred pounds for any services whatever, because there are none which you can render him. I think you can see that pretty plainly, Miss Brewer. And you can also see, I presume, that, provided I get my money from Eversleigh, it is a manner of total indifference to me whether he gets Lady Verner's money, or whether Dale gets it. The only means by which I can get my money is by detaching Sir Reginald from Paulina, and making him marry the ironmonger's heiress. When that is done, and the money is paid, I am perfectly satisfied that Dale should get the fortune, and I think it very likely he will; but you must perceive that I cannot play my own game except by appearing to play Reginald's."

"Is Lady Verner likely to think the ironmonger's heiress a good match for Sir Reginald Eversleigh?" Miss Brewer asked, in a coldly sarcastic tone.

"How is she to know anything of her origin?" returned Carrington, who was, however, disconcerted by the question. "She lives a most retired life; no one but Reginald has any access to her, and he can make her believe anything he likes."

"That's fortunate," said Miss Brewer, drily; "pray proceed."

"Well, then, you see these points as clearly as I do—the next thing to be done is to secure Paulina's marriage with Douglas Dale."

"I don't think that needs much securing," said Miss Brewer. "Judging from his manner before he left town, and from the tone of his letter, I should think very little encouragement from her would ensure a proposal of marriage from him."

"And will she give him that encouragement?"

"Undoubtedly—I fully believe she will marry Douglas Dale. She has certainly learned to despise Sir Reginald Eversleigh, and I think Mr. Dale has caught her heart in the rebound."

"Have you attended to my instructions about impressing her money difficulties on her mind—have you made things as bad as possible?"

"Certainly," answered Miss Brewer. "Only this morning I have sent into her room several pressing and impertinent letters from her tradespeople, and I put some accounts of the most dispiriting character before her last night. She is in dreadfully low spirits."

"So much the better! If we can but induce her to borrow money from Dale, all will be well; he will take that as a convincing proof of regard and confidence, and will propose to her at once. I am sure of it. So sure, that I will pass that matter by, and take it for granted. And now—if this comes to pass, and Douglas Dale is here as the accepted lover of Paulina, I must have constant access to the house, and he must not know me as Victor Carrington. He has never seen me, though I am familiar with his appearance."

"Why?" asked Miss Brewer, in a tone of suspicious surprise.

"I will tell you, by-and-by. Suffice it for the present that it must be so. Then again, it would not do to have a man, who is not a relative, established l'ami de la maison. That it is not the sort of thing that an affianced lover could be expected to like. You must introduce me to Douglas Dale as your cousin, and by the name of Carton. It is sufficiently like my real name to prevent the servants knowing my name is changed, since they always bungle over the 'Carrington.' As Victor Carrington, Dale might refuse to know me, and certainly would not form any intimacy with me, and that he should form an intimacy with me is essential to my purpose."

"Why?" said Miss Brewer, in exactly the same tone as before.

"I will tell you by-and-by," said Carrington. "You consent, do you not?"

"I am not sure," she answered. "But, even supposing I do consent, there is Paulina to be consulted. How is she to be induced to call you Mr. Carton and my cousin?"

"I will undertake to persuade Madame Durski that it will be for her best interests to consent," said Carrington. "And now to my explanation. Reginald Eversleigh is a man who is not to be trusted for a moment, even where his own interests are closely

concerned. He cares nothing for Paulina; he knows the best thing that can happen to him would be her marriage with Dale, for he calculates upon his hold over the wife giving him the chance of a good share of the husband's money in some way. Yet, such is his vanity, so unmanageable is his temper, that if he were not too much afraid of me, too much in my power, he would indulge them both at the cost of destroying our plan. If he knew me to be absent, or unable to present myself freely here, he would persecute Paulina—she would never be free from him. He would compromise his own chance with the heiress, which is, naturally, my chief consideration, and compromise her with Douglas Dale. Again, I do not mind admitting to you, Miss Brewer, that I am of a cautious and suspicious temperament; and when I pay an agent liberally, as I intend to pay you, I always like to see for myself how the work is done."

"That argument, at least, is unanswerable," she replied. "You shall, so far as I can answer for it, pass as my cousin and Mr. Carton, and have a free entré here."

"Good," said Carrington, rising. "And now there is nothing more to be said just at present."

"Pardon me; you have not told me why an intimacy with Mr. Dale is essential to your purpose."

"Because I must watch his proceedings and intentions—in fact, know all about him—in order to discover whether it will suit my interests best to forward Eversleigh's plans with respect to Lady Verner, or to betray them to Dale."

Miss Brewer looked at him with something like admiration. She thought she understood him so perfectly now, that she need ask nothing farther. So they parted with the understanding that she was to report fully on Douglas Dale's visit, and Carrington was to call on Paulina on the day succeeding it. When she was alone, Miss Brewer remembered that Carrington had not explained why it was he felt certain Dale would not form any intimacy with him as Victor Carrington. As he

walked homewards, Victor muttered to himself—

"Heavens, what a clever fool that woman is. Once more I have won, and by boldness."

* * * * *

The feelings with which Douglas Dale prepared for his visit to Hilton House on the day following that on which Victor Carrington had made his full and candid explanation to Miss Brewer, were such as any woman—the purest, the noblest, the best—might have been proud of inspiring. They were full of love, trust, pity, and hope. Douglas Dale had by no means ceased to feel his brother's loss. No, the death of Lionel, and, even more, the terrible manner of that death, still pursued him in every waking hour—still haunted him in his dreams; but sorrow, and especially its isolating tendency, does but quicken and intensify feelings of tenderness in true and noble hearts.

He drove up to Hilton House with glad expectancy, and his eyes were dim as he was ushered into the drawing-room in which Paulina sat.

Madame Durski's emotions on this occasion were unspeakably painful. So well had Miss Brewer played her part, that she had persuaded Paulina her only chance of escape from immediate arrest lay in borrowing money, that very day, from Douglas Dale. Paulina's pride revolted; but the need was pressing, and the unhappy woman yielded.

As she rose to return her visitor's greeting, and stood before him in the cold January sunset, she was indeed, in all outward seeming, worthy of any man's admiration.

Remorse and suffering had paled her cheeks; but they had left no disfiguring traces on her perfect face.

The ivory whiteness of her complexion was, perhaps, her greatest charm, and her beauty would scarcely have been enhanced by those rosy tints so necessary to some faces.

To-day she had dressed herself to perfection, fully conscious of the influence which a woman's costume is apt to exercise over the heart of the man who loves her.

Half an hour passed in conversation of a general nature, and then luncheon was announced. When Paulina and her visitor returned to the dreary room, they were alone; Miss Brewer had discreetly retired.

"My dear Madame Durski!" exclaimed Douglas, when the widow had seated herself and he had placed himself opposite to her, "I cannot tell you what intense pleasure it gives me to see you again, and most of all because it leads me to believe that I can in some manner serve you. I know how secluded your habits have been of late, and I fancy you would scarcely so depart from them in my favour if you had not some real need of my service."

This speech was peculiarly adapted to smoothe away the difficulties of Paulina's position. Douglas had long guessed the secret of her poverty, and had more than half divined the motive of her letter. He was eager to save her, as far as possible, from the painfulness of the request which he felt almost sure she was about to make to him.

"Your cordial kindness affects me deeply, Mr. Dale," said Paulina, with a blush that was the glow of real shame. "You are right; I should be the last woman in the world to appeal to you thus if I had not need of your help—bitter need. I appeal to you, because I know the goodness and generosity of your nature. I appeal to you as a beggar."

"Madame Durski, for pity's sake, do not speak thus," cried Douglas, interrupting her. "Every penny that I possess in the world is at your command. I am ready to begin life again, a worker for my daily bread, rather than that you should suffer one hour's pain, one moment's humiliation, that money can prevent."

"You are too generous, too noble," exclaimed Paulina, in a broken voice. "The only way in which I can prove my gratitude for your delicate goodness is by being

perfectly candid. My life has been a strange one, Mr. Dale—a life of apparent prosperity, but of real poverty. Before I was old enough to know the value of a fortune, I was robbed of that which should have been mine, and robbed by the father who should have protected my interests. From that hour I have known little except trouble. I was married to a man whom I never loved—married at the command of the father who had robbed me. If I have not fallen, as many other women so mated have fallen, I take no pride in my superior strength of mind. It may be that temptation such as lures other women to their ruin never approached me. Since my husband died, my life, as you too well know, has been a degraded one. I have been the companion and friend of gamesters. It is, indeed, only since I came to England that I have myself ceased to be a gambler. Can you remember all this, Mr. Dale, and yet pity me?"

"I can remember it all, and yet love you, Paulina," answered Douglas, with emotion. "We are not masters of our own affections. From the hour in which I first saw you I have loved you—loved you in spite of myself. I will admit that your life has not been that which I would have chosen for the woman I love; and that to remember your past history is pain to me. But, in spite of all, I ask you to be my wife; and it shall be the business of my future life to banish from your remembrance every sorrow and every humiliation that you have suffered in the past. Say that you will be my wife, Paulina. I love you as few women are loved. I am rich, and have the power to remove you far from every association that is painful to you. Tell me that I may be the guardian of your future existence."

Paulina contemplated her lover for a few moments with singular earnestness. She was deeply impressed by his generous devotion, and she could not but compare this self-sacrificing love with the base selfishness of Reginald Eversleigh's conduct.

"You do not ask me if I can return your affection," she said, after that earnest look. "You offer to raise me from degradation and poverty, and you demand nothing in

return."

"No, Paulina," replied Douglas; "I would not make a bargain with the woman I love. I know that you have not yet learned to love me, and yet I do not fear for the future, if you consent to become my wife. True love, such as mine, rarely fails to win its reward, sooner or later. I am content to wait. It will be sufficient happiness to me to know that I have rescued you from a miserable and degrading position."

"You are only too generous," murmured Paulina, softly; "only too generous."

"And now tell me the immediate object of this most welcome summons. I will not press you for a prompt reply to my suit; I will trust that time may be my friend. Tell me how I can serve you, and why you sent for me to-day?"

"I sent for you that I might ask you for the loan of two hundred pounds, to satisfy the claims of my most urgent creditors, and to prevent the necessity of an ignominious flight."

"I will write you a cheque immediately for five hundred," said Douglas. "You can drive to my banker's, and get it cashed there. Or stay; it would not be so well for my banker to know that I lent you money. Let me come again to you this evening, and bring ink sum in bank-notes. That will give me an excuse for coming."

"How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

"Do not thank me at all. Only let me love you, looking forward hopefully to the day in-which you may learn to love me." "That day must surely come ere long," replied Paulina, thoughtfully. "Gratitude so profound as mine, esteem so sincere, must needs grow into a warmer feeling."

"Yes, Paulina," said Douglas, "if your heart is free. Forgive me if I approach a subject painful to you and to me. Reginald Eversleigh—my cousin—have you seen him often lately?"

"I have not seen him since he left London for Hallgrove. I am not likely to see him

again."

"I am very glad of that. There is but one fear in my mind when I think of our future, Paulina."

"And that is?"

"The fear that Reginald Eversleigh may come between you and me."

"You need no longer fear that," replied Madame Durski. "You have been so noble, so devoted in your conduct to me, that I must be indeed a worthless wretch if I shrink from the painful duty of laying my heart bare before you. I have loved your cousin Reginald, foolishly, blindly; but there must come an end to all folly; there must come a day when the bandage falls from the eyes that have obstinately shunned the light. That day has come for me; and Sir Reginald Eversleigh is henceforward nothing more to me than the veriest stranger."

"A thousand thanks, dearest, for that assurance," exclaimed Douglas; "and now trust in me. Tour future shall be so bright and happy that the past will seem to you no more than a troubled dream."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PREPARING THE GROUND.

Black Milsom made his appearance in the little village of Raynham immediately after Lady Eversleigh's departure from the castle. But on this occasion it would have been very difficult for those who had seen him at the date of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's funeral to recognize, in the respectable-looking, well-dressed citizen of to-day, the ragged tramp of that period.

While Honoria Eversleigh was living under a false name in Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road, the man who called himself her father, established himself in a little river-side public-house, under the shadow of Raynham Castle. The house in question had never borne too good a character; and its reputation was in nowise

improved when, on the death of its owner, it passed into the custody of Mr. Milsom, who came down to Raynham one November morning, almost immediately after Lady Eversleigh's departure, saw the "Cat and Fiddle" public-house vacant, and went straight to the attorney who had the letting of it, to offer himself as a tenant, announcing himself to the lawyer as Thomas Maunders.

The attorney at first looked rather suspiciously at the gentleman who had earned for himself the ominous nickname of Black Milsom; but when the would-be tenant offered to pay a year's rent in advance down on the nail, the man of law melted, and took the money.

Thomas Milsom lost no time in taking possession of his new abode. It was the haunt of the lower class of agricultural labourers, and of the bargemen, who moored their barges sometimes beneath the shadow of Raynham Bridge, while they dawdled away a few lazy hours in the village public-house.

Any one who had cared to study Mr. Milsom's face and manners during his residence at Raynham, would have speedily perceived that the life did not suit him. He lounged at the door of the low-gabled cottage, looking out into the village street with a moody and sullen countenance.

He drank a great deal, and swore not a little, and led altogether as dissolute a life as it was possible to lead in that peaceful village.

No sooner had Mr. Milsom established himself at Raynham, than he made it his business to find out the exact state of affairs at the castle. He contrived to entice one of the under-servants into his bar-parlour, and entertained the man so liberally, with a smoking jorum of strong rum-punch, that a friendly acquaintance was established between the two on the spot.

"There's nothing in my place you ain't welcome to, James Harwood," he said. "You're uncommonly like a favourite brother of mine that died young of the measles; and I've taken a fancy to you on account of that likeness. Come when you

like, and as often as you like, and call for what you like; and there shan't be no talk of scores between you and me. I'm a bitter foe, and a firm friend. When I like a man there's nothing I couldn't do to prove my liking; when I hate him—"

Here Mr. Milsom's speech died away into an ominous growl; and James Harwood, who was rather a timid young man, felt as if drops of cold water had been running down his back. But the rum-punch was very nice; and he saw no reason why he should refuse Mr. Milsom's offer of friendship.

He did drop in very often, having plenty of leisure evenings in which to amuse himself; and through him Thomas Milsom was enabled to become familiar with every detail of the household at Raynham Castle.

"No news of your lady, I suppose, Mr. Harwood?" Milsom said to him one Sunday evening in January. "Not coming home yet, I suppose?"

"No, Mr. Maunders," answered the groom; "not to my knowledge. And as to news, there ain't anymore news of her than if she and Miss Payland had gone off to the very wildest part of Africa, where, if you feel lonesome, and want company, your only choice lies between tigers and rattlesnakes."

"Never mind Africa! What was it that you were going to say about your lady?"

"Well, I was about to inform you," replied the groom, with offended dignity, "when you took me up so uncommon short as to prevent me—I was about to observe that, although we haven't received no news whatsoever from my lady direct, we have received a little bit of news promiscuous that is rather puzzling, in a manner of speaking."

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Maunders," began James Harwood, with extreme solemnity, "it is given out that Lady Eversleigh is gone abroad to the Continent—wherever that place may be situated—and a very nice place I dare say it is, when you get there; and it is likewise given out that Miss Payland have gone with her."

"Well, what then?"

"I really wish you hadn't such a habit of taking people up short, Mr. Maunders," remonstrated the groom. "I was on the point of telling you that our head-coachman had a holiday this Christmas; and where does he go but up to London, to see his friends, which live there; and while in London where does he go but to Drury Lane Theatre; and while coming out of Drury Lane Theatre who does he set his eyes on but Miss Payland, Lady Eversleigh's own maid, as large as life, and hanging on the arm of a respectable elderly man, which might be her father. Our head-coachman warn't near enough to her to speak to her; and though he tried to catch her eye he couldn't catch it; but he'll take his Bible oath that the young woman he saw was Jane Payland, Lady Eversleigh's own maid. Now, that's rather a curious circumstance, is it not, Mr. Maunders?"

"It is, rather," answered the landlord; "but it seems to me your mistress, Lady Eversleigh, is rather a strange person altogether. It's a strange thing for a mother to run away to foreign parts—if she has gone to foreign parts—and leave her only child behind her."

"Yes; and a child she was so fond of too; that's the strangest part of the whole business," said the groom. "I'm sure to see that mother and child together, you'd have thought there was no power on earth would part them; and yet, all of a sudden, my lady goes off, and leaves Miss Gertrude behind her. But if Miss Gertrude was a royal princess, she couldn't be more watched over, or taken more care of, than she is. To see Mrs. Morden, the governess, with her, you'd think as the little girl was made of barley-sugar, and would melt away with a drop of rain; and to see Captain Copplestone with her, you'd think as she was the crown-jewels of England, and that everybody was on the watch to get the chance of stealing her."

Black Milsom smiled as the groom said this. It was a grim smile, not by any means pleasant to see; but James Harwood was not an observer, and he was looking

tenderly at his last spoonful of rum-punch, and wondering within himself whether Mr. Milsom was likely to offer him another glass of that delicious beverage.

"And pray what sort of a customer is Captain Copplestone?" asked Milsom, thoughtfully.

"An uncommonly tough customer," replied James Harwood; "that's what he is. If it wasn't for his rheumatic gout, he's a man that would be ready to fight the champion of England any day in the week. There's very few things the captain wouldn't do in the way of downright pluck; but, you see, whatever pluck a man may have, it can't help him much when he's laid by the heels with the rheumatic gout, as the captain is very often."

"Ha! and who takes care of little missy then?"

"Why, the captain. He's like a watch-dog, and his kennel is at little missy's door. That's what he says himself, in his queer way. Miss Gertrude and her governess live in three handsome rooms in the south wing—my lady's own rooms—and the principal way to these rooms is along a wide corridor. So what does the captain do when my lady goes away, but order a great iron door down from London, and has the corridor shut off with this iron door, bolted, and locked, and barred, so that the cleverest burglar that ever were couldn't get it open."

"But how do people get to the little girl's rooms, then?" asked Thomas Milsom.

"Why, through a small bed-room, intended for Lady Eversleigh's maid; and a little bit of a dressing-room, that poor Sir Oswald used to keep his boots, and hat-boxes, and such like in. These rooms open on to the second staircase; and what does the captain do but have these two small rooms fitted up for hisself and his servant, Solomon Grundy, with a thin wooden partition, with little glass spy-holes in it, put across the two rooms, to make a kind of passage to the rooms beyond; so that night and day he can hear every footstep that goes by to Miss Gertrude's rooms. Now, what do you think of such whims and fancies?"

"I think the captain must be stark staring mad," answered Milsom; but it was to be observed that he said this in rather an absent manner, and appeared to be thinking deeply.

"Oh no, he ain't," said James Harwood; "there ain't a sharper customer going."

And then, finding that the landlord of the "Cat and Fiddle" did not offer anything more in the way of refreshment, Mr. Harwood departed.

There was a full moon that January night, and when Mr. Milsom had attended to the wants of his customers, seen the last of them to the door a little before twelve o'clock, shut his shutters, and extinguished the lights, he stole quietly out of his house, went forth into the deserted street, and made his way towards the summit of the hill on which the castle stood, like an ancient fortress, frowning darkly upon the humble habitations beneath it.

He passed the archway and the noble gothic gates, and crept along by the fine old wall that enclosed the park, where the interlaced branches of giant oaks and beeches were white under the snow that had fallen upon them, and formed a picture that was almost like a scene in Fairyland.

He climbed the wall at a spot where a thick curtain of ivy afforded him a safe footing, and dropped softly upon the ground beneath, where the snow had drifted into a heap, and made a soft bed for him to fall on.

"There will be more snow before daylight to-morrow," he muttered to himself, "if I'm any judge of the weather; and there'll be no trace of my footsteps to give the hint of mischief." He ran across the park, leaped the light, invisible fence dividing the park from the gardens, and crept cautiously along a shrubberied pathway, where the evergreens afforded him an impenetrable screen.

Thus concealed from the eyes of any chance watcher, he contrived to approach one end of the terraced slope which formed the garden front of the castle. Each terrace was adorned with stone balustrades, surmounted by large vases, also of stone; and,

sheltered by these vases, Milsom ascended to the southern angle of the great pile of building.

Seven lighted windows at this southern end of the castle indicated the apartments occupied by the heiress of Raynham and her eccentric guardian. The lights burned but dimly, like the night-lamps left burning during the hours of rest; and Milsom had ascertained from Mr. Harwood that the household retired before eleven o'clock, at the latest.

The apartments occupied by the little girl were on the first floor. The massive stone walls here were unadorned with ivy, nor were there any of those elaborate decorations in stonework which might have afforded a hold for the foot of the climber. The bare stone wall frowned down upon Thomas Milsom, impregnable as the walls of Newgate itself.

"No," he muttered to himself, after a long and thoughtful scrutiny; "no man will ever get at those rooms from the outside; no, not if he had the power of changing himself into a cat or a monkey. Whoever wants to have a peep at the heiress of Raynham must go through this valiant captain's chamber. Well, well, I've heard of tricks played upon faithful watch-dogs before to-day. There's very few things a man can't do, if he only tries hard enough; and I mean to be revenged upon my Lady Eversleigh!" He paused for a few moments, standing close against the wall of the castle, sheltered by its black shadow, and looking down upon the broad domain beneath.

"And this is all hers, is it P—lands and houses; horses and carriages; powdered footmen to fetch and carry for her; jewels to wear; plates and dishes of solid gold to eat her dinner off, if she likes! All hers! And she refuses me a few hundred pounds, and defies me, does she? We'll see whether that's a safe game. I've sworn to have my revenge, and I'll have it," he muttered, shaking his brawny fist, as if some phantom figure were standing before him in the wintry moonlight. "I can afford to wait; I

wouldn't mind waiting years to get it; but I'll have it, if I grow old and gray while I'm watching and plotting for it. I'll be patient as Time, but I'll have it. She has refused me a few hundreds, has she? I'll see her there, on the ground at my feet, grovelling like a beaten dog, offering me half her fortune—all her fortune—her very life itself! I'll humble her proud spirit! I'll bring her grandeur down to the the dust. She won't own me for a father, won't she! Why, if I choose, she shall tramp barefoot through the mud after me, singing street-ballads in every town in England, and going round with my battered old hat to beg for halfpence afterwards. I'll humble her! I'll do it—I'll do it—as sure as there's a moon in the sky!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT WATCH.

Sanguine as Victor Carrington had been, confidently as he had calculated upon the fascination which Paulina had exerted over Douglas Dale, he was not prepared for the news contained in Miss Brewer's promised letter, which reached him punctually, a few hours after Paulina had become the affianced wife of Douglas Dale. This was indeed success beyond his hopes. He had not expected this result for some days, at the very earliest, and the surprise and pleasure with which he learned it were almost equal. Carrington did not believe in good; he absolutely distrusted and despised human nature, and he never dreamed of imputing Madame Durski's conduct to anything but coquetry and fickleness. "She's on with the new love, beyond a doubt," said he to himself, as he read Miss Brewer's letter; "whether she's off with the old is quite another question, and rests with him rather than with her, I fancy."

Victor Carrington's first move was to present himself before Madame Durski on the following day, at the hour at which she habitually received visitors. He took up the confidential conversation which they had had on the last occasion of their meeting, as if it had not been dropped in the interval, and came at once to the subject of Douglas Dale. This plan answered admirably; Paulina was naturally full of the

subject, and the ice of formalism had been sufficiently broken between her and Victor Carrington, to enable her to refer to the interview which had taken place between herself and Douglas Dale without any impropriety. When she had done so, Carrington began to play his part. He assured Paulina of his warm interest in her, of the influence which he possessed over Sir Reginald Eversleigh, and the fears which he entertained of some treacherous proceeding on Reginald's part which might place her in a most unpleasant position.

"Reginald has no real love for you," said Carrington; "he would not hesitate to sacrifice you to the meanest of his interests, but his vanity and his temper are such that it is impossible to calculate upon what sort of folly he may be guilty."

Paulina Durski was a thorough woman; and, therefore, having utterly discarded Reginald from her heart, having learned to substitute utter contempt for love, she was not averse to receiving any information, to learning any opinion, which tended to justify her change of feeling.

"What harm can he do me with Douglas?" asked Paulina, in alarm.

"Who can tell that, Madame Durski?" replied Carrington. "But this is not to the purpose. I don't pretend to be wholly disinterested in this matter. I tell you plainly I am not so; it is very important to me that Sir Reginald should marry a woman of fortune, and should not marry you."

"He never had any intention of marrying me," said Paulina, hastily and bitterly.

"No, I don't believe he had; but he would have liked very well to have compromised you in the eyes of society, so that no other man would have married you, to have bragged of relations existing between you which never did exist, and to have effectually ruined your fortunes in any other direction than the gaming-table. Now this I am determined he shall not do, and as I have more power over him than any one else, it lies with me to prevent it. What that power springs from, or how I have hitherto exercised it, you need not inquire, Madame Durski; I only wish you to

believe that I exercise it in this instance for your good, for your protection."

Paulina murmured some vague words of acknowledgment. He continued—

"If Reginald Eversleigh knows I am here, constantly cognizant of the state of affairs, and prepared to act for your advantage, he will not dare to come here and compromise you by his violent and unreasonable jealousy; he will be forced—it is needless to explain how—to keep his envy and rage to himself, and to suppress the enmity with which he regards Douglas Dale. Let me tell you, Madame Durski, Reginald's enmity is no trifling rock ahead in life, and your engaged lover has that rock to dread."

Paulina turned very pale.

"Save him from it, Mr. Carrington," she said, appealingly. "Save him from it, and let me have a little happiness in this weary world, if such a thing there be."

"I will, Madame Durski," replied Victor. "You have already done as I have counselled you, and you have no reason to regret the result."

The soft, dreamy smile of happy love stole over Paulina's face as she listened to him.

"Let me be here with you as much as possible, and you will have no reason to fear Reginald. He is capable of anything, but he is afraid of me, and if he knows that I am determined to advance the marriage of yourself and Douglas Dale, he will not venture to oppose it openly. But there is one condition which I must append to my frequent presence here"—he spoke as though he were conferring the greatest favour on her—"Mr. Dale must not know me as Victor Carrington."

With an expression in which there was something of the suspicious quickness which Miss Brewer had manifested when Carrington made a similar statement to her, Paulina asked him why.

Then Victor told her his version of the story of Honoria Eversleigh, the "unfortunate woman," whom Douglas Dale's unhappy and misguided uncle had raised to such

undoubted rank and fortune, and the wild and absurd accusations the wretched woman had made against him.

"Mr. Dale never saw me," said Victor, "and I know not whether he was thoroughly aware of the absurdity, the insanity of this woman's accusations. At all events, I don't wish to recall any unpleasantness to his mind, and therefore I venture to propose that I should visit here, and be introduced to him as Mr. Carton. The fraud is a very harmless one; what do you say, Madame Durski?"

Paulina had her full share of the feminine love of mystery and intrigue, and she consented at once. "What can the name matter," she thought, "if it is really necessary for this man to be here?"

"And there is another consideration which we must take into account," said Victor; "it is this. Mr. Dale may not like to find any man established here, in the degree of intimacy to which (in your interests) I aspire; and therefore I propose, with your leave, to pass as a relation of Miss Brewer's—say, her cousin. This will thoroughly account for my intimacy here. What do you say, Madame Durski?"

"As you please," said Paulina, carelessly. "I am sure you are right, Mr. Carrington—Carton, I mean, and I am sure you mean kindly and well by me. But how odd it will seem to Charlotte and me, lonely creatures, waifs and derelicts as we have been so long, to have any one with whom we can claim even a pretended kinship!"

She spoke with a mingled bitterness and levity which have been painful to any man of right feelings, but which was pleasant to Victor Carrington, because it showed him how helpless and ignorant she was, how her mind had been warped, how ready a tool he had found in her. When the interview between them came to an end, it had been arranged that Mr. Dale was to be introduced on the following day at Hilton House to Miss Brewer's cousin, Mr. Carton.

The introduction took place. A very short time, well employed in close observation,

sufficed to assure Victor that Douglas Dale was as much in love as any man need be to be certain of committing any number of follies, and that Paulina was a changed woman under the influence of the same soul-subduing sentiment which, though not so strong in her case, was assuming strength and intensity as each day taught her more and more of her lover's moral and intellectual excellence. Douglas Dale was much pleased with Mr. Carton; and that gentleman did all in his power to render himself agreeable, and so far succeeded that, before the close of the evening, he had made a considerable advance towards establishing a very pleasant intimacy with Sir Reginald Eversleigh's cousin.

Victor Carrington, always an observant man, had peculiarly the air of being on the watch that day during dinner. He noticed everything that Paulina ate and drank, and he took equal note of Miss Brewer's and Douglas Dale's choice of meats and wines. Miss Brewer drank no wine, Paulina very little, and Douglas Dale exclusively claret. When the dinner had reached its conclusion, a stand of liqueurs was placed upon the table, one of the few art-treasures left to the impoverished adventuress, rare and fragile Venetian flacons, and tiny goblets of opal and ruby glass. These glasses were the especial admiration of Douglas Dale, and Paulina filled the ruby goblet with curaçoa. She touched the edge of the glass playfully with her lips as she handed it to her lover; but Victor observed that she did not taste the liqueur.

"You do not affect curaçoa, madame?" he asked, carelessly.

"No; I never take that, or indeed, any other liqueur."

"And yet you drink scarcely any wine?"

"No," replied Paulina, indifferently; "I take very little wine."

"Indeed!"

There was the faintest possible significance in Carrington's tone as he said this. He had watched Madame Durski closely during dinner, and he had noted an excitement in her manner, a nervous vivacity, such as are generally inspired by something

stronger than water. And yet this woman had taken little else than water during the dinner. And it was to be observed that the almost febrile gaiety which distinguished her manner this evening had been as apparent when she first entered the drawing-room as it was now. This was a physiological or psychological enigma, extremely interesting to Mr. Carrington. He was not slow to find a solution that was, in his opinion, sufficiently satisfactory. "That woman takes opium in some form or other," he said to himself.

Miss Brewer did not touch the liqueur in question, and her cousin took Maraschino. After a very short interval, Douglas Dale and his new friend rose to join the ladies. They crossed the hall together, but as they reached the drawing-room door, Mr. Carrington discovered that he had dropped a letter in the dining-room, and returned to find it, first opening the drawing-room door that Dale might pass through it.

All was undisturbed in the dining-room; the table was just as they had left it. Victor approached the table, took up the carafon containing curaçoa, and, holding it up to the light with one hand, poured the contents of a small phial into it with the other. He watched the one liquid mingling with the other until no further traces of the operation were visible; and then setting the carafon softly down where he had found it, went smiling across the hall and joined the ladies.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND WANTING.

Reginald Eversleigh was in complete ignorance of Victor Carrington's proceedings, when he received the letter summoning him to an interview with his friend at a stated time. Carrington's estimate of Reginald's character was quite correct. All this time his vanity had been chafing under Paulina's silence and apparent oblivion of him.

He had not received any letter from Paulina, fond as she had been of writing to him

long, half-despairing letters, full of complaint against destiny, and breathing in every line that hopeless love which the beautiful Austrian woman had so long wasted on the egotist and coward, whose baseness she had half suspected even while she still clung to him.

Sir Reginald had been in the habit of receiving these letters as coolly as if they had been but the fitting tribute to his transcendant merits.

"Poor Paulina!" he murmured sometimes, as he folded the perfumed pages, after running his eyes carelessly over their contents; "poor Paulina! how devotedly she loves me. And what a pity she hasn't a penny she can call her own. If she were a great heiress, now, what could be more delightful than this devotion? But, under existing circumstances, it is nothing but an embarrassment—a bore. Unfortunately, I cannot be brutal enough to tell her this plainly: and so matters go on. And I fear, in spite of all my hints, she may believe in the possibility of my ultimately making a sacrifice of my prospects For her sake."

This was how Reginald Eversleigh felt, while Paulina was scattering at his feet the treasures of a disinterested affection.

He had been vain and selfish from boyhood, and his vices grew stronger with increasing years. His nature was hardened, and not chastened, by the trials and disappointments which had befallen him.

In the hour of his poverty and degradation it had been a triumph for him to win the devotion of a woman whom many men—men better than himself—had loved in vain.

It was a rich tribute to the graces of him who had once been the irresistible Reginald Eversleigh, the favourite of fashionable drawing-rooms.

Thus it was that, when Paulina's letters suddenly ceased, Sir Reginald was at once mortified and indignant. He had made up his mind to obey Victor's suggestion, or rather, command, by abstaining from either visiting or writing to Paulina; but he had

not been prepared for a similar line of proceeding on her part, and it hurt his vanity much. She had ceased to write. Could she have ceased to care for him? Could any one else, richer—more disinterested—have usurped his place in her heart?

The baronet remembered what Victor Carrington had said about Douglas Dale; but he could not for one moment believe that his cousin—a man whom he considered infinitely beneath him—had the power to win Paulina Durski's affection.

"She may perhaps encourage him," he said to himself, "especially now that his income is doubled. She might even accept him as a husband—women are so mercenary. But her heart will never cease to be mine."

Sir Reginald waited a week, a fortnight, but there came no letter from Paulina. He called on Carrington, according to appointment, but his friend had changed his mind, or his tactics, and gave him no explanation.

Victor had been a daily visitor at Hilton House during the week which had intervened since the day he had dined there and been introduced to Douglas Dale. His observation had enabled him to decide upon accelerating the progress of his designs. The hold which Paulina had obtained upon Douglas Dale's affection was secure; he had proposed to her much sooner than Victor had anticipated; the perfect understanding and confidence subsisting between them rendered the cautious game which he had intended to play unnecessary, and he did not now care how soon a final rupture between Paulina and Reginald should take place. Indeed, for two of his purposes—the establishment of an avowed quarrel between Douglas Dale and his cousin, Sir Reginald, and the infliction of ever-growing injury on Paulina's reputation,—the sooner such a rupture could be brought about the better. Therefore Victor Carrington assumed a tone of reserve and mystery, which did not fail to exasperate Sir Reginald.

"Do not question me, Reginald," he said. "You are afflicted with a lack of moral courage, and your want of nerve would only enfeeble my hand. Know

nothing—expect nothing. Those who are at work for you know how to do their work quietly. Oh, by the way, I want you to sign a little document—very much the style of thing you gave me at Raynham Castle."

Nothing could be more careless than the Frenchman's tone and manner as he said this; but the document in question was a deed of gift, by which Reginald Eversleigh bestowed upon Victor Carrington the clear half of whatever income should arise to him, from real or personal property, from the date of the first day of June following.

"I am to give you half my income?"

"Yes, my dear Reginald, after the first of next June. You know that I am working laboriously to bring about good fortune for you. You cannot suppose that I am working for nothing. If you do not choose to sign this document, neither do I choose to devote myself any longer to your interest."

"And what if you fail?"

"If I fail, the document in question is so much waste paper, since you have no income at present, nor are likely to have any income between this and next June, unless by my agency."

The result was the same as usual. Reginald signed the deed, without even taking the trouble to study its full bearing.

"Have you seen Paulina lately?" he asked, afterwards.

"Not very lately."

"I don't know what's amiss with her," exclaimed Reginald, peevishly; "she has not written to me to ask explanation of my absence and silence."

"Perhaps she grew tired of writing to a person who valued her letters so lightly."

"I was glad enough to hear from her," answered Reginald; "but I could not be expected to find time to answer all her letters. Women have nothing better to do than to scribble long epistles."

"Perhaps Madame Durski has found some one who will take the trouble to answer her letters," said Victor.

After this, the two men parted, and Reginald Eversleigh called a cab, in which he drove down to Hilton House.

He might have stayed away much longer, in self-interested obedience to Carrington, had he been sure of Paulina's unabated devotion; but he was piqued by her silence, and he wanted to discover whether there was a rival in the field.

He knew Madame Durski's habits, and that it was not till late in the afternoon that she was to be seen.

It was nearly six o'clock when he drove up to the door of Hilton House. Carlo Toas admitted him, and favoured him with a searching and somewhat severe scrutiny, as he led the way to the drawing-room in which Paulina was wont to receive her guests.

Here Sir Reginald felt some little surprise, and a touch of mortification, on beholding the aspect of things. He had expected to find Paulina pensive, unhappy, perhaps ill. He had expected to see her agitated at his coming. He had pondered much upon the cessation of her letters; and he had told himself that she had ceased to write because she was angry with him—with that anger which exists only where there is love.

To his surprise, he found her brilliant, radiant, dressed in her most charming style.

Never had he seen her looking more beautiful or more happy.

He pressed the widow's hand tenderly, and contemplated her for some moments in silence.

"My dear Paulina," he said at last, "I never saw you looking more lovely than to-night. And yet to-night I almost feared to find you ill."

"Indeed; and why so?" she asked. Her tone was the ordinary tone of society, from which it was impossible to draw any inference.

"Because it is so long since I heard from you."

"I have grown tired of writing letters that were rarely honoured by your notice."

"So, so," thought the baronet; "I was right. She is offended."

"To what do I owe this visit?" asked Madame Durski.

"She is desperately angry," thought the baronet. "My dear Paulina," he said, aloud, "can you imagine that your letters were indifferent to me? I have been busy, and, as you know, I have been away from London."

"Yes," she said; "you spent your Christmas very agreeably, I believe."

"Not at all, I assure you. A bachelors' party in a country parsonage is one of the dullest things possible, to say nothing of the tragical event which ended my visit," added Reginald, his cheek paling as he spoke.

"A bachelors' party!" repeated Paulina; "there were no ladies, then, at your cousin's house?"

"None."

"Indeed!"

Paulina Durski's lip curled contemptuously, but she did not openly convict Sir Reginald of the deliberate falsehood he had uttered.

"I am very glad you have come to me," she said, presently, "because I have urgent need of your help."

"My dear Paulina, believe me—" began the baronet

"Do not make your protest till you have heard what I have to ask," said Madame Durski. "You know how troublesome my creditors had become before Christmas. The time has arrived when they must be paid, or when I—"

She stopped, and looked searchingly at the face of her companion.

"When you—what?" he asked. "What is the alternative, Paulina?"

"I think you ought to know as well as I," she answered. "I must either pay those debts or fly from this place, and from this country, disgraced. I appeal to you in this bitter hour of need. Can you not help me—you, who have professed to love me?"

"Surely, Paulina, you cannot doubt my love," replied Sir Reginald; "unhappily, there is no magical process by which the truest and purest love can transform itself into money. I have not a twenty-pound note in the world."

"Indeed; and the four hundred and fifty pounds you won from Lord Caversham just before Christmas—is that money gone?"

"Every shilling of it," answered Reginald, coolly.

He had notes to the amount of nearly two hundred pounds in his desk; but he was the last man in Christendom to sacrifice money which he himself required, and his luxurious habits kept him always deeply in debt.

"You must have disposed of it very speedily. Surely, it is not all gone, Reginald. I think a hundred would satisfy my creditors, for a time at least."

"I tell you it is gone, Paulina. I gave you a considerable sum at the time I won the money—you should remember."

"Yes, I remember perfectly. You gave me fifty pounds—fifty pounds for the support of the house which enabled you to entrap your dupes, while I was the bait to lure them to their ruin. Oh, you have been very generous, very noble; and now that your dupes are tired of being cheated—now that your cat's paw has become useless to you—I am to leave the country, because you will not sacrifice one selfish desire to save me from disgrace."

"This is absurd, Paulina," exclaimed the baronet, impatiently; "you talk the usual nonsense women indulge in when they can't have everything their own way. It is not in my power to help you to pay your creditors, and you had much better slip quietly away while you are free to do so, and before they contrive to get you into prison. You know what Sheridan said about frittering away his money in paying his debts.

There's no knowing where to leave off if you once begin that sort of thing."

"You would have me steal away in secret, like what you English call a swindler!"

"You needn't dwell upon unpleasant names. Some of the best people in England have been obliged to cross the water for the same reasons that render your residence here unpleasant. There's nothing to be gained by sentimental talk about the business, my dear Paulina. My friends at the clubs have begun to grow suspicious of this house, and I don't think there's a chance of my ever winning another sovereign in these rooms. Why, then, should you remain to be tormented by your creditors? Return to Paris, where you have twice as many devoted slaves and admirers as in this detestable straight-laced land of ours. I will slip across as soon as ever I can settle my affairs here some way or other, and once more you may be queen of a brilliant salon, while I—"

"While you may find a convenient cat's paw for getting hold of new plunder," cried Paulina, with unmitigated scorn. Then, with a sudden burst of passion, she exclaimed, "Oh, Sir Reginald Eversleigh, I thank Providence for this interview. At last—at last, I understand you completely. I have been testing you, Sir Reginald—I have been sounding your character. I have stooped to beg for help from you, in order that I might know the broken reed on which I have leaned. And now I can laugh at you, and despise you. Go, Sir Reginald Eversleigh; this house is mine—my home—no longer a private gambling-house—no longer a snare for the delusion of your rich friends. I am no longer friendless. My debts have been paid—paid by one who, if he had owned but one sixpence, would have given it to me, content to be penniless himself for my sake. I have no need of your help. I am not obliged to creep away in the night like a felon, from the house that has sheltered me. I can now dare to call myself mistress of this house, unfettered by debt, untrammelled by the shameful secrets that made my life odious to me; and my first act as mistress of this house shall be to forbid its doors to you."

"Indeed, Madame Durski!" cried Reginald, with a sneer; "this is a wonderful change."

"You thought, perhaps, there were no limits to a woman's folly," said Paulina; "but you see you were wrong. There is an end even to that. And now, Sir Reginald Eversleigh, I will wish you good evening, and farewell."

"Is this a farce, Paulina?" asked the baronet, in a voice that was almost stifled by rage.

"No, Sir Reginald, it is a stern reality," answered Madame Durski, laying her hand on the bell.

Her summons was speedily answered by Carlo Toas.

"Carlo, the door," she said, quietly.

The baronet gave her one look—a dark and threatening glance—and then left the room, followed by the Spaniard, who conducted him to his cab with every token of grave respect.

"Curse her!" muttered Sir Reginald, between his set teeth, as he drove away from Hilton House. "It must be Douglas Dale who has given her the power to insult me thus, and he shall pay for her insolence. But why did Victor bring those two together? An alliance between them can only result in mischief to me. I must and will fathom his motive for conduct that seems so incomprehensible."

* * * * *

Sir Reginald and his fatal ally, Carrington, met on the following day, and the former angrily related the scene which had been enacted at Hilton House.

"Your influence has been at work there," he exclaimed. "You have brought about an alliance between this woman and Douglas Dale."

"I have," answered Victor, coolly. "Mr. Dale has offered her his hand and fortune, as well as his heart, and has been accepted."

"You are going to play me false, Victor Carrington!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes, or else why take such pains to bring about this marriage?"

"You are a fool, Reginald Eversleigh, and an obstinate fool, or you would not harp upon this subject after what I have said. I have told you that the marriage which you fear will never take place."

"How will you prevent it?"

"As easily as I could bring it about, did I choose to do so. Pshaw! my dear boy, the simple, honest people in this world are so many puppets, and it needs but the master-mind to pull the strings."

"If this marriage is not intended to take place, why have you brought about an engagement between Paulina and Douglas?" asked the baronet, in nowise convinced by what his ally had said. "I have my reasons, and good ones, though you are too dull of brain to perceive them," replied Victor, impatiently. "You and your cousin, Douglas Dale, have been fast friends, have you not?"

"We have."

"Listen to me, then. If he were to die without direct heirs you are the only person who would profit by his death; and if he, a young; man, powerful of frame, in robust health, no likely subject for disease, were to die, leaving you owner of ten thousand a year, and were to die while in the habit of holding daily intercourse with you, known to be your friend and companion, is it not just possible that malevolent and suspicious people might drop strange hints as to the cause of his death? They might harp upon your motives for wishing him out of the way. They might dwell upon the fact that you were so much together, and that you had such opportunities—mark me, Reginald, opportunities—for tampering with the one solitary life which stood between you and fortune. They might say all this, might they not?"

"Yes," replied Reginald, in his gloomiest tone, "they might."

"Very well, then, if you take my advice, you will cut your cousin's acquaintance from this time. You will take care to let your friends of the clubs know that he has supplanted you in the affections of the woman you loved, and that you and he are no longer on speaking terms. You will cut him publicly at one of your clubs; so that the fact of the coldness between you may become sufficiently notorious. And when you have done this, you will start for the Continent."

"Go abroad? But why?"

"That is my secret. Remember, you have promised to obey me blindly," answered Victor. "You will go abroad; you will let the world know that you and Douglas Dale are divided by the width of the Channel; you will leave him free to devote himself to the woman he has chosen for his wife; and if, while engaged to her, an untimely fate should overtake this young man—if he, like his elder brother, should be removed from your pathway, the most malicious scandal-monger that ever lived could scarcely say that you had any hand in his fate."

"I understand," murmured Reginald, in a low voice; "I understand."

He said no more. He had grown white to the very lips; and those pale lips were dry and feverish. But the conversation changed abruptly, and Douglas Dale's name was not again mentioned.

In the meantime, the betrothed lovers had been very happy and this interview, which she had always dreaded but felt she could not avoid, having passed over, Paulina was more at liberty to realize her changed position, and dwell on her future prospects. She was really happy, but in her happiness there was some touch of fever, something too much of nervous excitement. It was not the calm happiness which makes the crowning joy of an untroubled life. A long career of artificial excitement, of alternate fears and hopes, the mad delight and madder despair which makes the gambler's fever, had unfitted Paulina for the quiet peace of a spirit at rest. She

yearned for rest, but the angel of rest had been scared away by the long nights of dissipation, and would not answer to her call.

Victor Carrington had fathomed the mystery of her feverish gaiety—her intervals of dull apathy that was almost despair. In the depth of her misery she had lulled herself to a false repose by the use of opium; and even now, when the old miseries were no more, she could not exist without the poisonous anodyne.

"Douglas Dale must be blinded by his infatuation, or he would have found out the state of the case by this time," Victor said to himself. "Circumstances could not be more favourable to my plans. A man who is blind and deaf, and utterly idiotic under the influence of an absurd infatuation, one woman whose brains are intoxicated by opium, and another who would sell her soul for money."

* * * * *

These incidents, which have occupied so much space in the telling, in reality did not fill up much time. Only a month had elapsed since Lionel Dale's death, when Reginald Eversleigh and Paulina had the interview described above. And now it seemed as though Fate itself were conspiring with the conspirators, for the watch kept upon them by Andrew Larkspur was perforce delayed, and Lady Eversleigh's designs of retributive punishment were suspended. A few days after the return of Mr. Larkspur to town, that gentleman was seized with serious illness, and for three weeks was unable to leave his bed. Mr. Andrew lay ill with acute bronchitis, in the lodging-house in Percy Street, and Mrs. Eden was compelled to wait his convalescence with what patience she might.

* * * * *

Sir Reginald Eversleigh and Douglas Dale met at the Phoenix Club soon after Reginald's interview with Madame Durski.

Douglas met his cousin with a quiet and courteous manner, in which there was no trace of unfriendly feeling: a manner that expressed so little of any feeling whatever

as to be almost negative.

It was not so, however, with Sir Reginald. He remembered Victor Carrington's advice as to the wisdom of a palpable estrangement between himself and his cousin, and he took good care to act upon that counsel.

This course was, indeed, the only one that would have been at all agreeable to him.

He hated Douglas Dale with all the force of his evil nature, as the innocent instrument of Sir Oswald's retribution upon the destroyer of Mary Goodwin.

He envied the young man the advantages which his own bad conduct had forfeited; and he now had learned to hate him with redoubled intensity, as the man who had supplanted him in the affections of Paulina Durski.

The two men met in the smoking-room of the club at the most fashionable hour of the day.

Nothing could have been more conspicuous than the haughty insolence of the spendthrift baronet as he saluted his wealthy cousin.

"How is it I have not seen you at my chambers in the Temple, Eversleigh?" asked Douglas, in that calm tone of studied courtesy which expresses so little.

"Because I had no particular reason for calling on you; and because, if I had wished to see you, I should scarcely have expected to find you in your Temple chambers," answered Sir Reginald. "If report does not belie you, you spend the greater part of your existence at a certain villa at Fulham."

There was that in Sir Reginald Eversleigh's tone which attracted the attention of the men within hearing—almost all of whom were well acquainted with the careers of the two cousins, and many of whom knew them personally.

Though the club loungers were too well-bred to listen, it was nevertheless obvious that the attention of all had been more or less aroused by the baronet's tone and manner.

Douglas Dale answered, in accents as audible, and a tone as haughty as the accents and tone of his cousin.

"Report is not likely to belie me," he said, "since there is no mystery in my life to afford food for gossip. If by a certain villa at Fulham you mean Hilton House, you are not mistaken. I have the honour to be a frequent guest at that house."

"It is an honour which many of us have enjoyed," answered Reginald, with a sneer.

"An honour which I used to find deuced expensive, by Jove!" exclaimed Viscount Caversham, who was standing near Douglas Dale.

"That was at the time when Sir Reginald Eversleigh usurped the position of host in Madame Durski's house," replied Douglas. "You would find things much changed there now, Caversham, were the lady to favour you by an invitation. When Madame Durski first came to England she was so unfortunate as to fall into the hands of evil counsellors. She has learned since to know her friends from her enemies."

"She is a very charming woman," drawled the viscount, laughingly; "but if you want to keep a balance at your banker's, Dale, I should strongly advise you to refuse her hospitality."

"Madame Durski will shortly be my wife," replied Douglas, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the bystanders; "and the smallest word calculated to cast a slur on her fair fame will be an insult to me—an insult which I shall know how to resent."

This announcement fell like a thunderbolt in the assembly of fashionable idlers. All knew the history of the house at Fulham. They knew of Paulina Durski only as a beautiful, but dangerous, syren, whose fatal smiles lured men to their ruin. That Douglas Dale should unite himself to such a woman seemed to them little short of absolute madness.

Love must be strong indeed which will face the ridicule of mankind unflinchingly. Douglas Dale knew that, in redeeming Paulina from her miserable situation, in elevating her to a position that many blameless and well-born Englishwomen would

have gladly accepted, he was making a sacrifice which the men amongst whom he lived would condemn as the act of a fool. But he was willing to endure this, painful though it was to him, for the sake of the woman he loved.

"Better that I should have the scorn of shallow-brained worldlings than that the blight on her life should continue," he said to himself. "When she is my wife, no man will dare to question her honour—no woman will dare to frown upon her when she enters society leaning on my arm."

This is what Douglas Dale repeated to himself very often during his courtship of Paulina Durski. This is what he thought as he stood erect and defiant in the crowded room of the Pall Mall club, facing the curious looks of his acquaintances.

After the first shock there was a dead silence; no voice murmured the common-place phrases of congratulation which might naturally have followed such an announcement. If Douglas Dale had just announced that some dire misfortune had befallen him, the faces of the men around him could not have been more serious. No one smiled; no one applauded his choice; not one voice congratulated him on having won for himself so fair a bride.

That ominous silence told Douglas Dale how terrible was the stigma which the world had set upon her he so fondly loved. The anguish which rent his heart during those few moments is not to be expressed by words. After that most painful silence, he walked to the table at which it was his habit to sit, and began to read a newspaper. Sir Reginald watched him furtively for a few moments in silence, and then left the room.

After this the two cousins met frequently; but they never spoke. They passed each other with the coldest and most ceremonious salutation. The idlers of the club perceived this, and commented on the fact.

"Douglas Dale and his cousin are not on speaking terms," they said: "they have quarrelled about that beautiful Austrian widow, at whose house there used to be such

high play."

In Paulina's society, Douglas tried to forget the cruel shadow which darkened, and which, in all likelihood, would for ever darken, her name; and while in her society he contrived to banish from his mind all bitter thought of the world's harsh verdict and cruel condemnation.

But away from Paulina he was tortured by the recollection of that scene at the Phoenix Club; tormented by the thought that, let him make what sacrifice he might, he could never wipe out the stain which those midnight assemblies of gamesters had left on his future wife's reputation.

"We will leave England for ever after the marriage," he said to himself sometimes. "We will make our home in some fair Italian city, where my Paulina will be respected and admired as if she were a queen, as well as the loveliest and sweetest of women."

If he asked Paulina where their future life was to be spent she always replied to him in the same manner.

"Wherever you take me I shall be content," she said. "I can never be grateful enough for your goodness; I can never repay the debt I owe you. Let our future be your planning, not mine."

"And you have no wish, no fancy, that I can realize, Paulina?"

"None. Prom my earliest girlhood I have sighed for only one blessing—peace! You have given me that. What more can I ask at your hands? Ah! Douglas, I fear my love has already cost you too dearly. The world will never forgive you for your choice; you, who might make so brilliant a marriage!"

Her generous feelings once aroused, Paulina could be almost as noble as her lover. Again and again she implored him to withdraw his promise—to leave, and to forget her.

"Believe me, Douglas, our engagement is a mistake," she said. "Consider this before it is too late. You are a proud man where honour is concerned, and the past life of her whom you marry should be without spot or blemish. It is not so with me. If I have not sinned as other women have sinned, I have stooped to be the companion of gamblers and roués; I have allowed my house to become the haunt of reckless and dissipated men. Society revenges itself cruelly upon those who break its laws. Society will neither forget nor forgive my offence."

"I do not live for society, but for you, Paulina," replied Douglas, passionately; "you are all the world to me. Let me never hear these arguments again, unless you would have me think that you are weary of me, and that you only want an excuse for getting rid of me."

"Weary of you!" exclaimed Paulina; "my friend, my benefactor. How can I ever prove my gratitude for your goodness—your devotion?"

"By learning to love me a little," answered Douglas, tenderly.

"The lesson ought not to be difficult," Paulina murmured.

Could she do less than love this noble friend, this pure-minded and unselfish adorer?

He came to her one day, accompanied by a solicitor; but before introducing the man of law, he asked for a private interview with Paulina, and in this interview gave her a new proof of his devotion.

"In thinking much of our position, dearest, I have been struck with a sudden terror of the uncertainty of life. What would be your fate, Paulina, if anything were to happen—if—well, if I were to die suddenly, as men so often die in this high-pressure age, before marriage had united our interests? What would be your fate, alone and helpless, assailed once more by all the perplexities of poverty, and, perhaps, subject to the mean spite of my cousin, Reginald Eversleigh, who does not forgive me for having robbed him of his place in your heart, little as he was worthy of your love?"

"Oh, Douglas!" exclaimed Paulina, "why do you imagine such things? Why should death assail you?"

"Why, indeed, dearest," returned Douglas, with a smile. "Do not think that I anticipate so sad a close to our engagement. But it is the duty of a man to look sharply out for every danger in the pathway of the woman he is bound to protect. I am a lawyer, remember, Paulina, and I contemplate the future with the eye of a lawyer. So far as I can secure you from even the possibility of misfortune, I will do it. I have brought a solicitor here to-day, in order that he may read you a will which I have this morning executed in your favour."

"A will!" repeated Madame Durski; "you are only too good to me. But there is something horrible to my mind in these legal formalities."

"That is only a woman's prejudice. It is the feminine idea that a man must needs be at the point of death when he makes his will. And now let me explain the nature of this will," continued Douglas. "I have told you that if I should happen to die without direct heirs, the estate left me by Sir Oswald Eversleigh will go to my cousin Reginald. That estate, from which is derived my income, I have no power to alienate; I am a tenant for life only. But my income has been double, and sometimes treble, my expenditure, for my habits have been very simple, and my life only that of a student in the Temple. My sole extravagance, indeed, has been the collection of a library. I have, therefore, been able to save twelve thousand pounds, and this sum is my own to bequeath. I have made a will, leaving this amount to you, Paulina—charged only with a small annuity to a faithful old servant—together with my personal property, consisting only of a few good Italian pictures, a library of rare old books, and the carvings and decorations of my roams—all valuable in their way. This is all the law allows me to give you, Paulina; but it will, at least, secure you from want."

Madame Durski tried to speak; but she was too deeply affected by this new proof of

her lover's generosity. Tears choked her utterance; she took Douglas Dale's hand in both her own, and lifted it to her lips; and this silent expression of gratitude touched his heart more than the most eloquent speech could have affected it.

He led her into the room where the attorney awaited her.

"This gentleman is Mr. Horley," he said, "a friend and adviser in whom you may place unbounded confidence. My will is to remain in his possession; and should any untimely fate overtake me, he will protect your interests. And now, Mr. Horley, will you be good enough to read the document to Madame Durski, in order that she may understand what her position would be in case of the worst?"

Mr. Horley read the will. It was as simple and concise as the law allows any legal document to be; and it made Paulina Durski mistress of twelve thousand pounds, and property equal to two or three thousand more, in the event of Douglas Dale's death.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

"A WORTHLESS WOMAN, MERE COLD CLAY."

Neither Lydia Graham nor her brother were quick to recover from the disappointment caused by the untimely fate of Lionel Dale. Miss Graham endeavoured to sustain her failing spirits with the hope that in Douglas she might find a wealthier prize than his brother; but Douglas was yet to be enslaved by those charms which Lydia herself felt were on the wane, and by fascinations which twelve years of fashionable existence had rendered somewhat stale even to the fair Lydia's most ardent admirers.

It was very bitter—the cup had been so near her lips, when an adverse destiny had dashed it from her. The lady's grief was painfully sincere. She did not waste one

lamentation on her lover's sad fate, but she most bitterly regretted her own loss of a rich husband.

She watched and hoped day after day for the promised visit from Douglas Dale, but he did not come. Every day during visiting hours she wore her most becoming toilets; she arranged her small drawing-room with the studied carelessness of an elegant woman; she seated herself in her most graceful attitudes every time the knocker heralded the advent of a caller; but it was all so much wasted labour. The only guest whom she cared to see was not among those morning visitors; and Lydia's heart began to be oppressed by a sense of despair.

"Well, Gordon, have you heard anything of Douglas Dale?" she asked her brother, day after day.

One day he came home with a very gloomy face, and when she uttered the usual question, he answered her in his gloomiest tone.

"I've heard something you'll scarcely care to learn," he said, "as it must sound the death-knell of all your hopes in that quarter. You know, Douglas Dale is a member of the Phoenix, as well as the Forum. I don't belong to the Phoenix, as you also know, but I meet Dale occasionally at the Forum. Yesterday I lunched with Lord Caversham, a member of the Phoenix, and an acquaintance of Dale's; and from him I learned that Douglas Dale has publicly announced his intended marriage with Paulina Durski."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lydia.

She had heard of Paulina and the villa at Fulham from her brother, and she hated the lovely Austrian for the beauty and the fascination which won her a kind of renown amongst the fops and lordlings—the idlers and spendthrifts of the fashionable clubs.

"It cannot be true," cried Miss Graham, flushing crimson with anger. "It is one of Lord Caversham's absurd stories; and I dare say is without the slightest foundation. I cannot and will not believe that Douglas Dale would throw himself away upon such

a woman as this Madame Durski."

"You have never seen her?"

"Of course not."

"Then don't speak so very confidently," said Captain Graham, who was malicious enough to take some pleasure in his sister's discomfiture. "Paulina Durski is one of the handsomest women I ever saw; not above five-and-twenty years of age—elegant, fascinating, patrician—a woman for whose sake a wiser man than Douglas Dale might be willing to sacrifice himself."

"I will see Mr. Dale," exclaimed Lydia. "I will ascertain from his own lips whether there is any foundation for this report."

"How will you contrive to see him?" "You must arrange that for me. You can invite him to dinner."

"I can invite him; but the question is whether he will come. Perhaps, if you were to write him a note, he would be more flattered than by any verbal invitation from me."

Lydia was not slow to take this hint. She wrote one of those charming and flattering epistles which an artful and self-seeking woman of the world so well knows how to pen. She expressed her surprise and regret at not having seen Mr. Dale since her return to town—her fear that he might be ill, her hope that he would accept an invitation to a friendly dinner with herself and her brother, who was also most anxious about him.

She was not destined to disappointment. On the following day she received a brief note from Mr. Dale, accepting her invitation for the next evening.

The note was very stiffly—nay, almost coldly worded; but Lydia attributed the apparent lack of warmth to the reserved nature of Douglas Dale, rather than to any failure of her own scheme.

The fact that he accepted her invitation at all, she considered a proof of the

falsehood of the report about his intended marriage, and a good omen for herself.

She took care to provide a recherché little dinner for her important guest, low as the finances of herself and her brother were—and were likely to be for some time to come. She invited a dashing widow, who was her obliging friend and neighbour, and who was quite ready to play propriety for the occasion. Lydia Graham looked her handsomest when Douglas Dale was ushered into her presence that evening; but she little knew how indifferent were the eyes that contemplated her bold, dark beauty; and how, even as he looked at her, Douglas Dale's thoughts wandered to the fair, pale face of Paulina Durski—that face, which for him was the loveliest that had ever beamed with light and beauty below the stars.

The dinner was to all appearance a success. Nothing could be more cordial or friendly, as it seemed, than that party of four, seated at a prettily decorated circular table, attended by a well-trained man-servant—the dashing widow's butler and factotum, borrowed for the occasion.

Mrs. Marmaduke, the dashing widow, made herself very agreeable, and took care to engage Captain Graham in conversation all the evening, leaving Lydia free to occupy the entire attention of Douglas Dale.

That young lady made excellent use of her time. Day by day her chances of a rich marriage had grown less and less, and day by day she had grown more and more anxious to secure a position and a home. She had a very poor opinion of Mr. Dale's intellect, for she believed only in the cleverness of those bolder and more obtrusive men who make themselves prominent in every assembly. She thought him a man easily to be beguiled by honeyed words and bewitching glances, and she had, therefore, determined to play a bold, if not a desperate game. While Mrs. Marmaduke and Captain Graham were talking in the front drawing-room, Lydia contrived to detain her guest in the inner apartment—a tiny chamber, just large enough to hold a small cottage piano, a stand of music-books, and a couple of chairs.

Miss Graham seated herself at the piano, and played a few bars with an absent and somewhat pensive air.

"That is a mournful melody," said Douglas. "I don't think I ever heard it before."

"Indeed!" murmured Lydia; "and yet I think it is very generally known. The air is pretty, is it not? But the words are ultra-sentimental."

And then she began to sing softly—

"I do not ask to offer thee A timid love like mine; I lay it, as the rose is laid, On some immortal shrine."

"I think the words are rather pretty," said Douglas.

"Do you?" murmured Miss Graham; and then she stopped suddenly, looking downward, with one of those conscious blushes which were always at her command.

There was a pause. Douglas Dale stood by the music-stand, listlessly turning over a volume of songs.

Lydia was the first to break the silence.

"Why did you not come to see us sooner, Mr. Dale?" she asked. "You promised me you would come."

"I have been too much engaged to come," answered Douglas.

This reply sounded almost rude; but to Lydia this unpolished manner seemed only the result of extreme shyness, and, indeed, embarrassment, which to her appeared proof positive of her intended victim's enthralment.

Her eyes grew bright with a glance of triumph.

"I shall win," she thought to herself; "I shall win."

"Have you really wished to see me?" asked Douglas, after another pause.

"I did indeed wish to see you," she murmured, in tremulous tones.

"Indeed!" said Douglas, in a tone that might mean astonishment, delight, or anything

else. "Well, Miss Graham, that was very kind of you. I go out very little, and never except to the houses of intimate friends."

"Surely you number us—my brother, I mean—among that privileged class," said Lydia, once more blushing bewitchingly.

"I do, indeed," said Douglas Dale, in a candid, kind, unembarrassed tone, which, if she had been a little less under the dominion of that proverbially blinding quality, vanity, would have been the most discouraging of all possible tones, to the schemes which she had formed; "I never forget how high you stood in my poor brother's esteem, Miss Graham; indeed, if you will pardon my saying so, I thought there was a much warmer feeling than that, on his part."

Lydia hardly knew how to take this observation. In one sense it was flattering, in another discouraging. If the belief brought Douglas Dale into easier relations with her, if it induced him to feel that a bond of friendship, cemented by the memory of the past, subsisted between them, so much the better for her purpose; but if he believed that this supposed love of Lionel's had been returned, and proposed to cultivate her on the mutual sympathy, or "weep with thee, tear for tear," principle, so much the worse. The position was undeniably embarrassing even to a young lady of Miss Lydia Graham's remarkable strength of mind, and savoir faire. But she extricated herself from it, without speaking, by some wonderful management of her eyes, and a slight deprecatory movement of her shoulders, which made even Douglas Dale, a by no means ready man, though endowed with deep feelings and strong common sense, understand, as well as if she had spoken, that Lionel had indeed entertained feelings of a tender nature towards her, but that she had not returned them by any warmer sentiment than friendship. It was admirably well done; and the next sentence which Douglas Dale spoke was certainly calculated to nourish Lydia's hopes.

"He might have sustained a terrible grief, then, had he lived longer," said Douglas;

"but I see this subject pains you, Miss Graham; I will touch upon it no more. But perhaps you will allow the recollection of what we must both believe to have been his feelings and his hopes, to plead with you for me."

"For you, Mr. Dale!" and Lydia Graham's breast heaved with genuine emotion, and her voice trembled with no artificial faltering.

"Yes, Miss Graham, for me. I need a friend, such a friend as you could be, if you would, to counsel and to aid me. But, pardon me, I am detaining you, and you have another guest." (How ardently Lydia Graham wished she had not invited the accommodating widow to play propriety!) "You will permit me to visit you soon again, and we will speak of much which cannot now be discussed. May I come soon?"

As he spoke these hope-inspiring words, there was genuine eagerness in the tone of Douglas Dale's voice, there was brightness in his frank eyes. No wonder Lydia held the story her brother had told her in scornful disbelief; no wonder she felt all the glow of the fulfilment of long-deferred hope. What would have been her sensations had she known that Douglas Dale's only actuating motive in the proposed friendly alliance, was to secure a female friend for his adored Paulina, to gain for her the countenance and protection of a woman whose place in society was recognized and unassailable?

"You will excuse my joining your brother and your friend now, will you not, Miss Graham? I must, at all events, have taken an early leave of you, and this conversation has given me much to think of. I shall see you soon again. Good night!"

He moved hastily, passed through the door of the small apartment which, opened on the staircase, and was gone. Lydia Graham remained alone for a few moments, in a triumphant reverie, then she joined Gordon Graham and the bewitching widow, who had been making the most of the opportunity for indulging in her favourite florid

style of flirtation.

"I have won," Lydia said to herself; "and how easily! Poor fellow; his agitation was really painful. He did not even stop to shake hands with me."

Mrs. Marmaduke took leave of her dearest Lydia, and her dearest Lydia's brother, soon after Douglas Dale had departed, and Miss Graham and her brother were left tête-à-tête.

"Well," said Gordon Graham, with rather a sulky air, "you don't seem to have done much execution by your dinner-party, my young lady. Dale went off in a great hurry, which does not say much for your powers of fascination."

Lydia gave her head a triumphant little toss as she looked at her brother.

"You are remarkably clever, my dear Gordon," she said; "but you are apt to make mistakes occasionally, in spite of your cleverness. What should you say if I were to tell you that Mr. Dale has this evening almost made me an offer of his hand?"

"You don't mean to say so?"

"I do mean to say so," answered Lydia, triumphantly. "He is one of that eccentric kind of people who have their own manner of doing things, and do not care to tread the beaten track; or it may be that it is only his reserved nature which renders him strange and awkward in his manner of avowing himself."

"Never mind how awkwardly the offer has been made, provided it is genuine," returned the practical Captain Graham. "But I don't like 'almosts.' Besides, you really must mind what you are about, Lydia; for I assure you there is no doubt at all about the fact of his engagement. He stated it himself."

"Well, and suppose he did," said Lydia, "and suppose some good-for-nothing woman, in an equivocal position, has trapped him into an offer. Is he the first man who has got into a dilemma of that kind, and got out of it? He thought I cared for Lionel, and that so there was no hope for him. I can quite understand his getting

himself into an entanglement of the kind, under such circumstances."

Gordon Graham smiled, a certain satirical smile, intensely irritating to his sister's temper (which she called her nerves), and which it was rather fortunate she did not see. He was perfectly alive to the omnivorous quality of his sister's vanity, and perfectly aware that it had on many occasions led her into a fool's paradise, whence she had been ejected into the waste regions of disappointment and bitterness of spirit. He had been quite willing that she should try the experiment upon Douglas Dale, to which that gentleman had just been subjected; but he had not been sanguine as to its results, and he did not implicitly confide in the very exhilarating statement now made to him by Lydia. If Douglas Dale's "almost" proposal meant nothing more than that he would be glad, or implied that he would be glad to be off with Paulina and on with Lydia, he did not think very highly of the chances of the latter. A man of the world, in the worst sense of that widely significant word, Gordon Graham was inclined to think that Douglas Dale was merely trifling with his sister, indulging in a "safe" flirtation, under the aegis of an avowed engagement. Graham felt very anxious to know the particulars of the conversation between Dale and his sister, in order to discover how far they bore out his theory; but he knew Lydia too well to place implicit reliance on any statement of them he might elicit from her.

"Well, but," said he, "supposing you are right in all this, the 'entanglement,' as you call it, exists. How did he explain, or excuse it?"

Lydia smiled, a self-satisfied, contemptuous smile. She was not jealous of Madame Durski; she despised her. "He did not excuse it; he did not explain; he knows he has no severity to fear from me. All he needs is to induce me to acknowledge my affection for him, and then he will soon rid himself of all obstacles. Don't be afraid, Gordon; this is a great falling off from the ambitions I once cherished, the hopes I once formed; this is a very different kind of thing from Sir Oswald Eversleigh and Raynham Castle, but I have made up my mind to be content with it."

Lydia spoke with a kind of virtuous resignation and resolution, infinitely assuring to her brother. But he was getting tired of the discussion, and desirous to end it. Anxious as he was to be rid of his sister, and to effect the riddance on the best possible terms, he did not mean to be bored by her just then. So he spoke to the point at once.

"That's rather a queer mode of proceeding," he said. "You are to avow your affection for this fine gentleman, and then he is to throw over another lady in order to reward your devotion. There was a day when Miss Graham's pride would have been outraged by a proposition which certainly seems rather humiliating."

Lydia flushed crimson, and looked at her brother with angry eyes. She felt the sting of his malicious speech, and knew that it was intended to wound her.

"Pride and I have long parted company," she answered, bitterly. "I have learnt to endure degradation as placidly as you do when you condescend to become the toady and flatterer of richer men than yourself."

Captain Graham did not take the trouble to resent this remark. He smiled at his sister's anger, with the air of a man who is quite indifferent to the opinion of others.

"Well, my dear Lydia," he said, good-humouredly, "all I can say is, that if you have caught the brother of your late admirer, you are very lucky. The merest schoolboy knows enough arithmetic to be aware that ten thousand a year is twice as good as five. And it certainly is not every woman's fortune to be able to recover a chance which seemed so nearly lost as yours when we left Hallgrove. By all means nail him to his proposition, and let him throw over the lovely Paulina. What a fool the man must be not to know his mind a little better!"

"Madame Durski entrapped him into the engagement," said Lydia, scornfully.

"Ah, to be sure, women have a way of laying snares of the matrimonial kind, as you and I know, my dear Lydia. And now, good night. Go and think about your trousseau in the silence of your own apartment."

Lydia Graham fell asleep that night, secure in the certainty that the end and aim of her selfish life had been at last attained, and disposed to regard the interval as very brief that must elapse before Douglas Dale would come to throw himself at her feet.

For a day or two unwonted peace and serenity were observable in Lydia Graham's demeanour and countenance. She took even more than the ordinary pains with her dress; she arranged her little drawing-room more than ever effectively and with sedulous care, and she remained at home every afternoon, in spite of fine weather and an unusual number of invitations. But Douglas Dale made no sign, he did not come, he did not write, and all his enthusiastic declarations seemed to have ended in nothing. The truth was that Paulina Durski was ill, and in his anxiety and uneasiness, Douglas forgot even the existence of Lydia Graham.

A vague alarm began to fill Lydia's mind, and she felt as if the good establishment, the liberal allowance of pin-money, the equipages, the clever French maid, the diamonds, and all the other delightful things which she had looked upon almost as already her own, were suddenly vanishing away like a dream.

Miss Graham was in no very amiable humour when, after a week's watching and suspense, she descended to the dining-room, a small and shabbily furnished apartment, which bore upon it the stamp peculiar to London lodging-houses—an aspect which is just the reverse of everything we look for in a home.

Gordon Graham was already seated at the breakfast-table.

A letter for Miss Graham lay by the side of her breakfast-cup—a bulky document, with four stamps upon the envelope.

Lydia knew the hand too well. It was that of her French milliner, Mademoiselle Susanne, to whom she owed a sum which she knew never could be paid out of her own finances. The thought of this debt had been a perpetual nightmare to her. There was no such thing as bankruptcy for a lady of fashion in those days; and it was in the power of Mademoiselle Susanna to put her high-bred creditor into a common prison,

and detain her there until she had passed the ordeal of the Insolvent Debtors' Court.

Lydia opened the packet with a sinking heart. There it was, the awful bill, with its records of elegant dresses—every one of which had been worn with the hope of conquest, and all of which had, so far, failed to attain the hoped-for victory. And at the end of that long list came the fearful total—close upon three hundred pounds!

"I can never pay it!" murmured Lydia; "never! never!"

Her involuntary exclamation sounded almost like a cry of despair.

Gordon Graham looked up from the newspaper in which he had been absorbed until this moment, and stared at his sister.

"What's the matter?" he exclaimed. "Oh, I see! it's a bill—Susanne's, I suppose? Well, well, you women will make yourselves handsome at any cost, and you must pay for it sooner or later. If you can secure Douglas Dale, a cheque from him will soon settle Mademoiselle Susanne, and make her your humble slave for the future. But what has gone wrong with you, my Lydia? Your brow wears a gloomy shade this morning. Have you received no tidings of your lover?"

"Gordon," said Lydia, passionately, "do not taunt me. I don't know what to think. But I have played a desperate game—I have risked all upon the hazard of this die—and if I have failed I must submit to my fate. I can struggle no longer; I am utterly weary of a life that has brought me nothing but disappointment and defeat."

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CHAPTER XXXII.

A MEETING AND AN EXPLANATION.

For George Jernam's young wife, the days passed sadly enough in the pleasant village of Allanbay. Fair as the scene of her life was, to poor Rosamond it seemed as if the earth were overshadowed by dark clouds, through which no ray of sunlight

could penetrate. The affection which had sprung up between her and Susan Jernam was deep and strong, and the only gleam of happiness which Rosamond experienced in her melancholy existence came from the affection of her husband's aunt.

If Rosamond's existence was not happy, it was, at least in all outward seeming, peaceful. But the heart of the deserted wife knew not peace. She was perpetually brooding over the strange circumstances of George's departure—perpetually asking herself why it was he had left her.

She could shape no answer to that constantly repeated question.

Had he ceased to love her? No! surely that could not be, for the change which arises in the most inconstant heart is, at least, gradual. George Jernam had changed in a day—in an hour.

Reason upon the subject as she might, the conviction at which Rosamond arrived at last was always the same. She believed that the mysterious change that had arisen in the husband she so fondly loved was a change in the mind itself—a sudden monomania, beyond the influence of the outer world—a wild hallucination of the brain, not to be cured by any ordinary physician.

Believing this, the wife's heart was tortured as she thought of the perils that surrounded her husband's life—perils that were doubly terrible for one whose mind had lost its even balance.

She watched every alteration in the atmosphere, every cloud in the sky, with unspeakable anxiety. As the autumn gave place to winter, as the winds blew loud above the broad expanse of ocean, as the foam-crests of the dark waves rose high, and gleamed white and silvery in the dim twilight, her heart sank with an awful fear for the absent wanderer.

Night and day her prayers arose to heaven—such prayers as only the loving heart of woman breathes for the object of all her thoughts.

While Rosamond occupied the abode which Captain Jernam had chosen for her,

River View Cottage was abandoned entirely to the care of Mrs. Mugby and Susan Trott, and the trim house had a desolate look in the dismal autumn days, and the darkening winter twilights, carefully as it was kept by Mrs. Mugby, who aired the rooms, and dusted and polished the furniture every day, as industriously as if she had been certain of the captain's return before night-fall.

"He may come this night, or he may not come for a year," she said to Susan very often, when Miss Trott was a little disposed to neglect some of her duties, in the way of dusting and polishing; "but mark my words, Susan, when he does come, he'll come sudden, without so much as one line of warning, or notice enough to get a bit of dinner ready for him."

The day came at last when the housekeeper was gratified to find that all her dusting and polishing had not been thrown away. Captain Duncombe returned exactly as she had prophesied he would return, without sending either note or message to give warning of his arrival.

He rang the bell one day, and walked into the garden, and from the garden into the house, with the air of a man who had just come home from a morning's walk, much to the astonishment of Susan Trott, who admitted him, and who stared at him with eyes opened to their widest extent, as he strode hurriedly past her.

He went straight into the parlour he had been accustomed to sit in. A fire was burning brightly in the polished steel grate, and everything bore the appearance of extreme comfort.

The merchant-captain looked round the room with an air of satisfaction.

"There's nothing like a trip to the Indies for making a man appreciate the comforts of his own home," he exclaimed. "How cheery it all looks; and a man must be a fool who couldn't enjoy himself at home after tossing about in a hurricane off Gibraltar for a week at a stretch. But where's your mistress?" cried Joe Duncombe, suddenly, turning to the astonished Susan. "Where's Mrs. Jernam?—where's my daughter?

Doesn't she hear her old father's gruff voice? Isn't she coming to bid me welcome after all I've gone through to earn more money for her?"

Before Susan could answer, Mrs. Mugby had heard the voice of her master, and came hurrying in to greet him.

"Thank you for your hearty welcome," said the captain, hurriedly; "but where's my daughter? Is she out of doors this cold winter day, gadding about London streets?—or how the deuce is it she doesn't come to give her old father a kiss, and bid him welcome home?"

"Lor', sir," cried Mrs. Mugby, "you don't mean to say as you haven't heard from Miss Rosa—begging your pardon, Mrs. Jernam—but the other do come so much more natural?"

"Heard from her!" exclaimed the captain. "Not I, I haven't had a line from her. But heaven have mercy on us! how the woman does stare! There isn't anything wrong with my daughter, is there? She's well—eh?"

The captain's honest face grew pale, as a sudden fear arose in his mind.

"Don't tell me my daughter is ill," he gasped; "or worse—"

"No, no, no, captain," cried Mrs. Mugby. "I heard from Mrs. Jernam only a week ago, and she was quite well; but she is residing down in Devonshire, where she removed with her husband last July; and I made sure you would have received a letter telling you of the change."

"What!" roared Joseph Duncombe; "did my daughter go and turn her back upon the comfortable little box her father built for her—the place he spent his hard-won earnings upon for her sake? So Rosy got tired of the cottage, did she? It wasn't good enough for her, I suppose. Well, well, that does seem rather hard somehow—it does seem hard."

The captain dropped heavily down into the chair nearest him. He was deeply

wounded by the idea that his daughter had deserted the home which he had made for her.

"Begging your pardon, sir," interposed Mrs. Mugby, in her most insinuating tone, "which I am well aware it's not my place to interfere in family matters; but knowing as devotion itself is a word not strong enough to express Mrs. Jernam's feelings for her pa, I cannot stand by and see her misunderstood by that very pa. It was no doings of hers as she left River View, Captain Buncombe, for the place was very dear to her; but Captain Jernam, he took it into his head all of a sudden he'd set off for foreign parts in his ship the 'Albert's horse'; and before he went, he insisted on taking Mrs. Jernam down to Devonshire, which burying her alive would be too mild a word for such cruelty, I think."

"What! he deserted his post, did he?" exclaimed the captain. "Ran away from his pretty young wife, after promising to stop with her till I came back! Now, I don't call that an honest man's conduct," added the captain, indignantly.

"No more would any one, sir," answered the housekeeper. "A wild, roving life is all very well in its way, but if a man who is just married to a pretty young wife, that worships the very ground he walks on, can't stay at home quiet, I should like to know who can?"

"So he went to sea himself, and took his wife down to Devonshire before he sailed, eh?" said the captain. "Very fine goings on, upon my word! And did Miss Rosy consent to leave her father's home without a murmur?" he asked, angrily.

"Begging your pardon, sir," pleaded Mrs. Mugby, "Miss Rosamond was not the one to murmur before servants, whatever she might feel in her heart. I overheard her crying and sobbing dreadful one night, poor dear, when she little thought as there was any one to overhear her."

"Did she say anything to you before she left?"

"Not till the night before she went away, and then she came to me in my kitchen,

and said, 'Mrs. Mugby, it's my husband's wish I should go down to Devonshire and live there, while he's away with his ship. Of course, I am very sorry to leave the house that my dear father made such a happy home for me, and in which he and I lived so peaceably together; but I am bound to obey my husband, let him ask what he will. I shall write to my dear father, and tell him how sorry I am to leave my home.'"

"Did she say that?" said the captain, evidently touched by this proof of his child's affection. "Then I won't belie her so much as to doubt her love for me. I never got her letter; and why George Jernam should kick up his heels directly I was gone, and be off with his ship goodness knows where, is more than I can tell. I begin to think the best sailor that ever roamed the seas is a bad bargain for a husband. I'm sorry I ever let my girl marry a rover. However, I'll just settle my business in London, and be off to Devonshire to see my poor little deserted Rosy. I suppose she's gone to live at that sea-coast village where Jernam's aunt lives?"

"Yes, sir, Allandale—or Allanbay—or some such name, I think, they call the place."

"Yes, Allanbay—I remember," answered the captain. "I'll try and get through the business I've got on hand to-night, and be off to Devonshire to-morrow."

Mrs. Mugby exerted herself to the uttermost in her endeavour to make the captain's first dinner at home a great culinary triumph, but the disappointment he had experienced that morning had quite taken away his appetite. He had anticipated such delight from his unannounced return to River View Cottage; he had pictured to himself his daughter's rapturous welcome; he had fancied her rushing to greet him at the first sound of his voice; and had almost felt her soft arm clasped around his neck, her kisses on his face.

Instead of the realization of this bright dream, he had found only disappointment.

Susan Trott placed the materials for the captain's favourite punch upon the table after she had removed the cloth; but Joseph Duncombe did not appear to see the

cherry preparations for a comfortable evening. He rose hastily from his chair, put on his hat, and went out, much to the discomfiture of the worthy Mrs. Mugby.

"After what I went through with standing over that roaring furnace of a kitchen-range, it does seem hard to see my sole just turned over and played with, like, and my chicking not so much as touched," said the dame. "Oh, Miss Rosamond, Miss Rosamond, you've a deal to answer for!"

Captain Duncombe walked along the dark road between the cottage and Ratcliff Highway at a rapid pace. He soon reached the flaring lights of the sailors' quarter, through which he made his way as fast as he could to a respectable and comfortable little tavern near the Tower, much frequented by officers of the merchant service.

He had promised to meet an old shipmate at this house, and was very glad of an excuse for spending his evening away from home.

In the little parlour he found the friend he expected to see, and the two sailors took their glasses of grog together in a very friendly manner, and then parted, the captain's friend going away first, as he had a long distance to walk, in order to reach his suburban home.

The captain was sitting by the fire meditating, and sipping his last glass of grog, when the door was opened, and some one came into the room.

Joseph Duncombe looked up with a start as the new-comer entered, and, to his intense astonishment, recognized George Jernam.

"Jernam!" he cried; "you in London? Well, this is the greatest surprise of all."

"Indeed, Captain Duncombe," answered the other, coolly; "the 'Albatross' only entered the port of London this afternoon. This is the first place I have come to, and of all men on earth I least expected to meet you here."

"And from your tone, youngster, it seems as if the surprise were by no means a pleasant one," cried Joseph Duncombe. "May I ask how Rosamond Duncombe's

husband comes to address his wife's father in the tone you have just used to me?"

"You are Rosamond's father," answered George; "that is sufficient reason that Valentine Jernam's brother should keep aloof from you."

"The man's mad," muttered Captain Duncombe; "undoubtedly mad."

"No," answered George Jernam, "I am not mad—I am only too acutely conscious of the misery of my position. I love your daughter, Joseph Duncombe; love her as fondly and truly as ever a man loved the wife of his choice. And yet here am I skulking in London, alone and miserable, at the hour when I should be hurrying back to the home of my darling. Dear though she is to me—truly as I love her—I dare not go back to her; for between her and me there rises the phantom of my murdered brother Valentine!"

"What on earth has my daughter Rosamond to do with the wretched fate of your brother?" asked the captain.

"In her own person, nothing; but it is her misfortune to be allied to one who was in league with the assassin, or assassins, of my unhappy brother."

"What, in heaven's name, do you mean?" asked the bewildered captain of the "Vixen."

"Do not press me for my meaning, Captain Duncombe," answered George, in a repellant tone; "you are my father-in-law. The knowledge which accident revealed to me of one dark secret in your life of seeming honesty came too late to prevent that tie between us. When the fatal truth revealed itself to me I was already your daughter's husband. That secures my silence. Do not force yourself upon me. I shall do my duty to your daughter as if you and your crime had never been upon this earth. But you and I can never meet again except as foes. The remembrance of my brother Valentine is part and parcel of my life, and a wrong done to him is twice a wrong to myself."

The captain of the "Vixen" had arisen from his chair. He stood before his

son-in-law, breathless, crimson with passion.

"George Jernam," he cried, "do you want me to knock you down? Egad, my fine gentleman, you may consider yourself lucky that I have not done it before this. What do you mean by all that balderdash you've been talking? What does it all mean, I say? Are you drunk, or mad, or both?"

"Captain Duncombe," said George, calmly, "do you really wish me to speak plainly?"

"It will be very much the worse for you if you don't," retorted the infuriated captain.

"First, then, let me tell you that before I left River View Cottage last July, your daughter pressed me to avail myself of the contents of your desk one day when I was in want of foreign letter-paper."

"Well, what then?"

"Very much against my own inclination, I consented to open that desk with a key in Rosamond's possession. I did not pry into the secrets of its contents; but before me, in the tray intended for pens, I saw an object which could not fail to attract my attention—which riveted my gaze as surely as if I had 'lighted on a snake."

"What in the name of all that's bewildering could that object have been?" cried the captain. "I don't keep many curiosities in my writing-desk!"

"I will show you what I found that day," answered George. "The finding of it changed the whole current of my life, and sent me away from that once happy home a restless and miserable wanderer."

"The man's mad," muttered Captain Duncombe to himself; "he must be mad!"

George Jernam took from his waistcoat pocket a tiny parcel, and unfolding the paper covering, revealed a gold coin—the bent Brazilian coin—which he placed in the captain's hands.

"Why! heaven have mercy on us!" cried Joseph Duncombe, "if that isn't the ghost's

money!"

There was astonishment plainly depicted on his countenance; but no look of guilt. George Jernam watched his face as he contemplated the token, and saw that it was not the face of a guilty man.

"Oh, captain, captain!" he exclaimed, remorsefully, "if I have suspected you all this time for nothing?"

"Suspected me of what?"

"Of being concerned, more or less, in my brother's murder. That piece of gold which you now hold in your hand was a farewell token, given by me to him; you may see my initials scratched upon it. I found it in your desk."

"And therefore suspected that I was the aider and abettor of thieves and murderers!" exclaimed the captain of the "Vixen." "George Jernam, I am ashamed of you."

There was a depth of reproach in the words, common-place though they were.

George Jernam covered his face with his hands, and sat with bent head before the man he had so cruelly wronged.

"If I was a proud man," said Joseph Duncombe, "I shouldn't stoop to make any explanation to you. But as I am not a proud man, and as you are my daughter's husband, I'll tell you how that bit of gold came into my keeping; and when I've told you my story, I'll bring witnesses to prove that it's true. Yes, George, I'll not ask you to believe my word; for how can you take the word of a man you have thought base enough to be the accomplice of a murderer? Oh, George, it was too cruel—too cruel!"

There was a brief silence; and then Captain Duncombe told the story of the appearance of old Screwton's ghost, and the coin found in the kitchen at River View Cottage after the departure of that apparition.

"I've faced many a danger in my lifetime, George Jernam," said Captain Duncombe;

"and I don't think there's any man who ever walked the ship's deck beside me that would call me coward; and yet I'll confess to you I was frightened that night. Flesh and blood I'll face anywhere and anyhow; I'll stand up alone, and fight for my life, one against six—one against twenty, if needs be; but when it comes to a visit from the other world, Joseph Duncombe is done. He shuts up, sir, like an oyster."

"And do you really believe the man you saw that night was a visitant from the other world?"

"What else can I believe? I'd heard the description of old Screwton's ghost, and what I saw answered to the description as close as could be."

"Visitors from the other world do not leave substantial evidences of their presence behind them," answered George. "The man who dropped that gold coin was no ghost. We'll see into this business, Captain Duncombe; we'll fathom it, mysterious as it is. I expect Joyce Harker back from Ceylon in a month or so. He knows more of my brother's fate than any man living, except those who were concerned in the doing of the deed. He'll get to the bottom of this business, depend upon it, if any man can. And now, friend—father, can you find it in your heart to forgive me for the bitter wrong I have done you?"

"Well, George," answered Joseph Duncombe, gravely, "I'm not an unforgiving chap; but there are some things try the easiest of men rather hard, and this is one of them. However, for my little Rosy's sake, and out of remembrance of the long night-watches you and I have kept together out upon the lonesome sea, I forgive you. There's my hand and my heart with it."

George's eyes were full of tears as he grasped his old captain's strong hand.

"God bless you," he murmured; "and heaven be praised that I came into this room to-night! You don't know the weight you've lifted off my heart; you don't know what I've suffered."

"More fool you," cried Joe Duncombe; "and now say no more. We'll start for

Devonshire together by the first coach that leaves London to-morrow morning."

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

"TREASON HAS DONE HIS WORST."

Black Milsom, otherwise Mr. Maunders, kept a close watch on Raynham Castle, through the agency of his friend, James Harwood, whose visits he encouraged by the most liberal treatment, and for whom he was always ready to brew a steaming jorum of punch.

Mr. Maunders showed a great deal of curiosity concerning the details of life within the castle, and was particularly fond of leading Harwood to talk about the excessive care taken of the baby-heiress, and the precautions observed by Lady Eversleigh's orders. One day, when he had led the conversation in the accustomed direction, he said:

"One would think they were afraid somebody would try to steal the child."

"So you would, Mr. Maunders. But you see every situation in life has its trials, and a child can't be a great heiress for nothing. One day, when I was sitting in the rumble of the open carriage, I heard Captain Copplestone let drop in his conversation with Mrs. Morden as how the child has enemies—bitter enemies, he said, as might try to do her harm, if she wern't looked after sharp."

"I've known you a good long time now, Mr. Harwood, and you've partaken of many a glass of rum-punch in my parlour," said Black Milsom, otherwise Mr. Maunders, of the "Cat and Fiddle "; "and in all that time you've never once offered to introduce me to one of your fellow-servants, or asked me to take so much as a cup of tea in your servants'-hall."

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Maunders," said the groom, in an insinuating tone; "as to

askin' a friend to take a cup of tea, or a little bit of supper, without leave from Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper, is more than my place is worth."

"But you might get leave I should think, eh, James Harwood?" returned Milsom; "especially if your friend happened to be a respectable householder, and able to offer a comfortable glass to any of your fellow-servants."

"I'm sure if I had thought as you'd accept a invitation to the servants'-'all, I'd have asked leave before now," replied James Harwood; "but I'm sure I thought as you wouldn't demean yourself to take your glass of ale, or your cup of tea, any-wheres below the housekeeper's room—and she's a rare starched one is Mrs. Smithson."

"I'm not proud," said Mr. Milsom. "I like a convivial evening, whether it's in the housekeeper's room or the servants'-hall."

"Then I'll ask leave to-night," answered James Harwood.

He sent a little scrawl to Milsom next day, by the hands of a stable-boy, inviting that gentleman to a social rubber and a friendly supper in the servants'-hall that evening at seven o'clock.

To spend a few hours inside Raynham Castle was the privilege which Black Milsom most desired, and a triumphant grin broke out upon his face, as he deciphered James Harwood's clumsy scrawl.

"How easy it's done," he muttered to himself; "how easy it's done, if a man has only the patience to wait."

The servants'-hall was a pleasant place to live in, but if Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper, was liberal in her ideas she was also strict, and on some points especially severe; and the chief of these was the precision with which she required the doors of the castle to be locked for the night at half-past ten o'clock.

On more than one occasion, lately, Mrs. Smithson had a suspicion that there was one offender against this rule. The offender in question was Matthew Brook, the

head-coachman, a jovial, burly Briton, with convivial habits and a taste for politics, who preferred enjoying his pipe and glass and political discussion in the parlour of the "Hen and Chickens" public-house to spending his evenings in the servants'-hall at Raynham Castle.

He was rarely home before ten; sometimes not until half-past ten; and one never-to-be-forgotten night, Mrs. Smithson had heard him, with her own ears, enter the doors of the castle at the unholy hour of twenty minutes to eleven!

There was one appalling fact of which Mrs. Smithson was entirely ignorant. And that was the fact that Matthew Brook had entered the castle by a little half-glass door on several occasions, half an hour or more after the great oaken door leading into the servants'-hall had been bolted and barred with all due solemnity before the approving eyes of the housekeeper herself.

The little door in question opened into a small ground-floor bed-room, in which one of the footmen slept; and nothing was more easy than for this man to shelter the nightly misdoings of his fellow-servant by letting him slip quietly through his bedroom, unknown to any member of the household.

James Harwood, the groom was a confirmed gossip; and, of course, he had not failed to inform his friend, Mr. Maunders, otherwise Black Milsom, of Matthew Brook's little delinquencies. Mr. Maunders listened to the account with interest, as he did to everything relating to affairs in the household of which Harwood was a member.

It was some little time after this conversation that Mr. Milsom was invited to sup at the castle.

Several friendly rubbers were played by Mrs. Trimmer, the cook; Matthew Brook, the coachman; James Harwood, and Thomas Milsom, known to the company as Mr. Maunders. Honest Matthew and he were partners; and it was to be observed, by any one who had taken the trouble to watch the party, that Milsom paid more attention to

his partner than to his cards, whereby he lost the opportunity of distinguishing himself as a good whist-player.

The whist-party broke up while the cloth was being laid on a large table for supper, and the men adjourned to the noble old stone quadrangle, on which the servant's-hall abutted. James Harwood, Brook, Milsom, and two of the footmen strolled up and down, smoking under a cold starlit sky. The apartments occupied by the family were all on the garden front, and the smoking of tobacco in the quadrangle was not forbidden.

Milsom, who had until this time devoted his attention exclusively to the coachman, now contrived to place himself next to James Harwood, as the party paced to and fro before the servants' quarters.

"Which is the little door Brook slips in at when he's past his time?" he asked, carelessly, of Harwood, taking care, however, to drop his voice to a whisper.

"We're just coming to it," answered the groom; "that little glass door on my right hand. Steph's a good-natured fellow, and always leaves his door unfastened when old Mat is out late. The room he sleeps in was once a lobby, and opens into the passage; so it comes very convenient to Brook. Everybody likes old Mat Brook, you see; and there isn't one amongst us would peach if he got into trouble."

"And a jolly old chap he is as ever lived," answered Black Milsom, who seemed to have taken a wonderful fancy to the convivial coachman.

"You come down to my place whenever you like, Mr. Brook," he said, presently, putting his arm through that of the coachman, in a very friendly manner. "You shall be free and welcome to everything I've got in my house. And I know how to brew a decent jorum of punch when I give my mind to it, don't I, Jim?"

Mr. James Harwood protested that no one else could brew such punch as that concocted by the landlord of the "Cat and Fiddle."

The supper was a very cheery banquet; ponderous slices of underdone roast beef

disappeared as if by magic, and the consumption of pickles, from a physiological or sanitary point of view, positively appalling. After the beef and pickles came a Titanic cheese and a small stack of celery; while the brown beer pitcher went so often to the barrel that it is a matter of wonder that it escaped unbroken.

At a quarter past ten Mr. Maunders bade his new acquaintance good night; but before departing he begged, as a great favour, to be permitted one peep at the grand oak hall.

"You shall see it," cried good-natured Matthew Brook. "It's a sight worth coming many a mile to see. Step this way."

He led the way along a dark passage to a door that opened into the great entrance-hall. It was indeed a noble chamber. Black Milsom stood for some moments contemplating it in silence, with a reverential stare.

"And which may be the back staircase, leading to the little lady's rooms?" he asked, presently.

"That door opens on to the foot of it," replied the coachman. "Captain Coppletone sleeps in the room you come to first, on the first floor; and the little missy's rooms are inside his'n."

Gertrude Eversleigh, the heiress of Raynham, was one of those lovely and caressing children who win the hearts of all around them, and in whose presence there is a charm as sweet as that which lurks in the beauty of a flower or the song of a bird. Her mother idolized her, as we know, even though she could resign herself to a separation from this loved child, sacrificing affection to the all-absorbing purpose of her life. Before leaving Raynham Castle, Honoria had summoned the one only friend upon whom she could rely—Captain Copplestone—the man whose testimony alone had saved her from the hideous suspicion of murder—the man who had boldly declared his belief in her innocence.

She wrote to him, telling him that she had need of his friendship for the only child of

his dead friend, Sir Oswald; and he came promptly in answer to her summons, pleased at the idea of seeing the child of his old comrade.

He had read the announcement of the child's birth in the newspapers, and had rejoiced to find that Providence had sent a consolation to the widow in her hour of desolation.

"She is like her father," he said, softly, after he had taken the child in his arms, and pressed his shaggy moustache to her pure young brow." Yes, the child is like my old comrade, Oswald Eversleigh. She has your beauty, too, Lady Eversleigh, your dark eyes—those wonderful eyes, which my friend loved to praise."

"I wish to heaven that he had never seen them!" exclaimed Honoria; "they brought him only evil fortune—anguish—untimely death."

"Come, come!" cried the captain, cheerily; "this won't do. If the workings of two villains brought about a breach between you and my poor friend, and resulted in his untimely end, the sin rests on their guilty heads, not on yours."

"And the sin shall not go unpunished even upon this earth!" exclaimed Honoria, with intensity of feeling. "I only live for one purpose, Captain Copplestone, and that is to strip the masks from the faces of the two hypocrites and traitors, who, between them, compassed my disgrace and my husband's death; and I implore you to aid me in the carrying out of my purpose."

"How can I do that?" cried the captain. "When I begged you to let me challenge that scoundrel, Carrington, and fight him—in spite of our cowardly modern fashion, which has exploded duelling—you implored me not to hazard my life. I was your only friend, you told me, and if my life were sacrificed you would be helpless and friendless. I gave way in order to satisfy you, though I should have liked to send a bullet through that French scoundrel's plotting brains."

"And I thank you for your goodness," answered Lady Eversleigh. "It is not by the bullet of a brave soldier that Victor Carrington should die. I will pursue the two

villains silently, stealthily, as they pursued me; and when the hour of my triumph comes, it shall be a real triumph, not a defeat like that which ended their scheming. But if I stoop to wear a mask, I ask no such service from you, Captain Copplestone. I ask you only to take up your abode in this house, and to protect my child while I am away from home."

"You are really going to leave home?"

"For a considerable time."

"And you will tell me nothing about the nature of your schemes?"

"Nothing. I shall do no wrong; though I am about to deal with men so base that the common laws of honour can scarcely apply to any dealings with them."

"And your mind is set upon this strange scheme?"

"My mind is fixed. Nothing on earth can alter my resolution—not even my love for this child."

Captain Copplestone saw that her determination was not to be reasoned away, and he made no further attempt to shake her resolve. He promised that, during her absence from the castle, he would guard Sir Oswald's daughter, and cherish her as tenderly as if she had been his own child.

It was by the captain's advice that Mrs. Morden was engaged to act as governess to the young heiress during her mother's absence. She was the widow of one of his brother-officers—a highly accomplished woman, and a woman of conscientious feelings and high principle.

"Never had any creature more need of your protection than my child has," said Honoria. "This young life and mine are the sole obstacles that stand between Sir Reginald Eversleigh and fortune. You know what baseness and treachery he and his ally are capable of committing. You cannot, therefore, wonder if I imagine all kinds of dangers for my darling."

"No," replied the captain; "I can only wonder that you consent to leave her."

"Ah, you do not understand. Can you not see that, so long as those two men exist, their crimes undiscovered, their real nature unsuspected in the world in which they live, there is perpetual danger for my child? The task which I have set myself is the task of watching these two men; and I will do it without flinching. When the hour of retribution approaches, I may need your aid; but till then let me do my work alone, and in secret."

This was the utmost that Lady Eversleigh told Captain Copplestone respecting the motive of her absence from the castle. She placed her child in his care, trusting in him, under Providence, for the guardianship of that innocent life; and then she tore herself away.

Nothing could exceed the care which the veteran soldier bestowed upon his youthful charge.

It may be imagined, therefore, that nothing short of absolute necessity would have induced him to leave the neighbourhood of Raynham during the absence of Lady Eversleigh.

Unhappily this necessity arose. Within a fortnight after the night on which Black Milsom had been invited to supper in the servants'-hall, Captain Copplestone quitted Raynham Castle for an indefinite period, for the first time since Lady Eversleigh's departure.

He was seated at breakfast in the pretty sitting-room in the south wing, which he occupied in common with the heiress and her governess, when a letter was brought to him by one of the castle servants.

"Ben Simmons has just brought this up from the 'Hen and Chickens,' sir," said the man. "It came by the mail-coach that passes through Raynham at six o'clock in the morning."

Captain Copplestone gazed at the superscription of the letter with considerable

surprise. The handwriting was that of Lady Eversleigh, and the letter was marked Immediate and important.

In those days there was no electric telegraph; and a letter conveyed thus had pretty much the same effect upon the captain's mind that a telegram would now-a-days exercise. It was something special—out of the common rule. He tore open the missive hastily. It contained only a few lines in Honoria's hand; but the hand was uncertain, and the letter scrawled and blotted, as if written in extreme haste and agitation of mind.

"Come to me at once, I entreat. I have immediate need of your help. Pray come, my dear friend. I shall not detain you long. Let the child remain in the castle during your absence. She will be safe with Mrs. Morden.

"Clarendon Hotel, London."

This, and the date, was all.

Captain Copplestone sat for some moments staring at this document with a look of unmitigated perplexity.

"I can't make it out," he muttered to himself.

Presently he said aloud to Mrs. Morden—

"What a pity it is you women all write so much alike that it's uncommonly difficult to swear to your writing. I'm perplexed by this letter. I can't quite understand being summoned away from my pet. I think you know Lady Eversleigh's hand?"

"Yes," answered the lady; "I received two letters from her before coming here. I could scarcely be mistaken in her handwriting."

"You think not? Very well, then, please tell me if that is her hand," said the captain showing Mrs. Morden the address of the missive he had just received.

"I should say decidedly, yes, that is her hand."

"Humph!" muttered the captain; "she said something about wanting me when the

hour of retribution drew near. Perhaps she has succeeded in her schemes more rapidly than she expected, and the time is come."

The little girl had just quitted the room with her nurse, to be dressed for her morning run in the gardens. Mrs. Morden and the captain were alone.

"Lady Eversleigh asks me to go up to London," he said, at last; "and I suppose I must do what she wishes. But, upon my word, I've watched over little Gertrude so closely, and I've grown so foolishly fond of her, that I don't like the idea of leaving her, even for twenty-four hours, though, of course, I know I leave her in the best possible care."

"What danger can approach her here?"

"Ah; what danger, indeed!" returned the captain, thoughtfully. "Within these walls she must be secure."

"The child shall not leave the castle, nor shall she quit my sight during your absence," said Mrs. Morden. "But I hope you will not stay away long."

"Rely upon it that I shall not remain away an hour longer than necessary," answered the captain.

An hour afterwards he departed from Raynham in a post-chaise.

He left without having taken any farewell of Gertrude Eversleigh. He could not trust himself to see her.

This grim, weather-beaten old soldier had surrendered his heart entirely to the child of his dead friend. He travelled Londonwards as fast as continual relays of post-horses could convey him; and on the morning after he had received the letter from Lady Eversleigh, a post-chaise covered with the dust of the roads, rattled up to the Clarendon Hotel, and the traveller sprang out, after a sleepless night of impatience and anxiety.

"Show me to Lady Eversleigh's rooms at once," he said to one of the servants in the

hall.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the man; "what name did you say?"

"Lady Eversleigh—Eversleigh—a widow-lady, staying in this house."

"There must be some mistake, sir. There is no one of that name at present staying in the hotel," answered the man.

The housekeeper had emerged from a little sitting-room, and had overheard this conversation.

"No, sir," she said, "we have no one here of that name."

Captain Copplestone's dark face grew deadly pale.

"A trap!" he muttered to himself; "a snare! That letter was a forgery!"

And without a word to the people of the house, he darted back to the street, sprang into the chaise, crying to the postillions,

"Don't lose a minute in getting a change of horses. I am going back to Yorkshire."

The intimacy with the household of Raynham Castle, begun by Mr. Maunders at the supper in the servants'-hall, strengthened as time went by, and there was no member of the castle household for whom Mr. Maunders entertained so warm a friendship as that which he felt for Matthew Brook, the coachman. Matthew began to divide his custom between the rival taverns of Raynham, spending an evening occasionally at the "Cat and Fiddle," and appearing to enjoy himself very much at that Inferior hostelry.

About a fortnight had elapsed after the comfortable supper-party at the castle, when Mr. Milsom took it into his head to make a formal return for the hospitalities he had received on that occasion.

It happened that the evening chosen for this humble but comfortable entertainment was the evening after Captain Copplestone's departure from the castle.

The supper was well cooked, and neatly placed on the table. A foaming tankard of

ale flanked the large dish of hissing steaks; and the gentlemen from the castle set to work with a good will to do justice to Mr. Maunders's entertainment.

When the table had been cleared of all except a bowl of punch and a tray of glasses, it is scarcely a matter for wonder if the quartette had grown rather noisy, with a tendency to become still louder in its mirth with every glass of Mr. Milsom's excellent compound.

They were enjoying themselves as much as it is in the power of human nature to enjoy itself; they had proposed all manner of toasts, and had drunk them with cheers, and the mirth was at its loudest when the clock of the village church boomed out solemnly upon the stillness of night, and tolled the hour of ten.

The three men staggered hastily to their feet.

"We must be off, Maunders, old fellow," said the coachman, with a certain thickness of utterance.

"Right you are, Mat," answered Stephen. "You've had quite enough of that 'ere liquor, and so have we all. Good night, Mr. Maunders, and thank you kindly for a jolly evening. Come, Jim. Come, Mat, old boy—off we go!"

"No, no," cried Mr. Maunders, the hospitable; "I'm not a-going to let Matthew Brook leave my house at ten o'clock when he can stay as long as he likes. You and he beat me at whist, but I mean to be even with him at cribbage. We'll have a friendly hand and a friendly glass, and I'll see him as far as the gates afterwards. You'll let him in, Plumpton, come when he will, I know. If he can stay over his time at the other house, he can stay over his time with me. Come, Brook, you won't say no, will you, to a friend?" asked Milsom.

Matthew Brook looked at Mr. Milsom, and at his fellow-servants, in a stupid half-drunken manner, and rubbed his big head thoughtfully with his big hand.

"I'm blest if I know what to do," he said; "I've promised Stephen I wouldn't stay out after time again—and—"

"Not as a rule, perhaps," answered Mr. Milsom; "but once in a way can't make any difference, I'm sure, and Stephen Plumpton is the last to be ill-natured."

"That I am," replied the good-tempered footman. "Stay, if you like to stay, Mat. I'll leave my door unfastened, and welcome."

On this, the two other men took a friendly leave of their host and departed, walking through the village street with legs that were not by any means too steady.

There was a triumphant grin upon Mr. Milsom's face as he shut the door on these two departing guests.

"Good night, and a good riddance to you," he muttered; "and now for Matthew Brook. You'll sleep sound enough to-night, Stephen Plumpton, I'll warrant. So sound that if Old Nick himself went through your room you'd scarcely be much wiser."

He went back to the little parlour in which he had left his guest, the coachman. As he went, he slipped his forefinger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket, where they closed upon a tiny phial. It contained a pennyworth of laudanum, which he had purchased a week or so before from the Raynham chemist, as a remedy for the toothache.

Here he found Matthew Brook seated with his arms folded on the table, and his eyes fixed on the cribbage-board with that stolid, unseeing gaze peculiar to drunkenness.

"He's pretty far gone, as it is," Mr. Milsom thought to himself, as he looked at his guest; "it won't take much to send him further. Take another glass of punch before we begin, eh, Brook?" he asked, in that tone of jolly good-fellowship which had made him so agreeable to the castle servants.

"So I will," cried Matthew; "'nother glass—punish the punch—eh—old boy? We'll punish glass—'nother punch—hand cribbage—glorious evenin'—uproarious—happy—glorious—God save—'nother glass."

While Mr. Brook attempted to shuffle the cards, dropping them half under the table

during the process, Black Milsom moved the bowl and glasses to a table behind the coachman's back.

Here he filled a glass for Mr. Brook, which the coachman emptied at a draught; but after having done so he made a wry face, and looked reproachfully at his host.

"What the deuce was that you gave me?" he asked, with some indignation.

"What should it be but rum-punch?" answered Milsom; "the same as you've been drinking all the evening."

"I'll be hanged if it is," answered Mr. Brook; "you've been playing off some of your publican's tricks upon me, Mr. Maunders, pouring the dregs of some stale porter into the bowl, or something of that kind. Don't you do it again. I'm a 'ver goo'-temper' chap, ber th' man tha' takes—hic—libert' with—hic—once don't take—hic—libert' with m' twice. So, don't y' do that 'gen!"

This was said with tipsy solemnity; and then Mr. Brook made another effort to shuffle the cards, and stooped a great many times to pick up some of those he had dropped, but seemed never to succeed in picking up all of them.

"I'll tell you what it is, Maunders," he said, at last; "I'm getting an old man; my sight isn't what it used to be. I'm bless' if—can tell a king from—queen."

Before he could complete the shuffling of the cards to his own satisfaction, Mr. Brook's eyelids began to droop over his watery eyes, and all at once his head fell forward on the table, amongst the scattered cards, his hair flopping against a fallen candlestick and smoking tallow candle.

Mr. Milsom's air of jolly good-fellowship disappeared: he sprang up suddenly, went to his friend, and shook him, rather roughly for such friendship.

Matthew snored a little louder, but slept on.

"He's fast as a rock," muttered Black Milsom; "but I must wait till it's likely Stephen Plumpton will be as sound asleep as this one."

Mr. Milsom went to his kitchen and ordered his only servant—a sturdy young native of the village—to go off to bed at once.

"I've got a friend in the parlour: but I'll see him out myself when he goes," said Mr. Milsom. "You pack off to bed as soon as you've put out the lights in the bar, and shut the back-door."

Mr. Milsom then returned to the apartment where his sleeping guest reposed.

The coachman's capacious overcoat hung on a chair near where its owner slept.

Mr. Milsom deliberately put on this coat, and the hat which Mr. Brook had worn with it. There was a thick woollen scarf of the coachman's lying on the floor near the chair, and this Black Milsom also put on, twisting it several times round his neck, so as to completely muffle the lower part of his face.

He was of about the same height as Matthew, and the thick coat gave him bulk.

Thus attired he might, in an uncertain light, have been very easily mistaken for the man whose clothes he wore.

Mr. Milsom gave one last scrutinizing look at the sleeping coachman, and then extinguished the candle.

The fire he had allowed to die out while he sat smoking: the room was, therefore, now in perfect darkness.

He paused by the door to look about him. All was alike still and lonely. The village street could have been no more silent and empty if the two rows of houses had been so many vaults in a cemetery.

Black Milsom walked rapidly up the village street, and entered the gardens of the castle by a little iron gate, of which Matthew Brook, the reprobate and offender, had a key. This key Black Milsom had often heard of, and knew that it was always carried by Brook in a small breast-pocket of his overcoat.

From the garden he made his way quickly, silently, to the quadrangle on which

Stephen Plumpton's bed-chamber opened.

Here all was dark and silent.

Milsom went straight to the little half-glass door which served both as door and window for the small sleeping-chamber of Stephen Plumpton.

He opened this door with a cautious hand, and stepped softly into the room. Stephen lay with his head half covered with the bed-clothes, and his loud snoring resounded through the chamber.

"The rum-punch has done the trick for you, my friend," Mr. Milsom said to himself.

He crossed the room with slow and stealthy footsteps, opened the door communicating with the rest of the house, and went along the passage leading to the hall.

With cautious steps he groped his way to the door opening on the secondary staircase, and ascended the thickly carpeted staircase within.

Here a lamp was left dimly burning all night, and this lamp showed him another cloth-covered door at the top of the first flight of stairs.

Black Milsom tried this door, and found it also unfastened.

This door, which Black Milsom opened, communicated with the little passage that had been made across the room usually tenanted by Captain Copplestone. Within this room there was a still smaller chamber—little more, indeed, than a spacious closet—in which slept the faithful old servant, Solomon Grundy.

Both the doors were open, and Black Milsom heard the heavy breathing of the old man—the breathing of a sound sleeper.

Beyond the short passage was the door opening into the sitting-room used by the young heiress of Raynham.

Black Milsom had only to push it open. The intruder crept softly across the room, drew aside a curtain, and opened the massive oak door which divided the

sitting-room from the bed-room.

Mr. Milsom had taken care to make himself familiar with the smallest details of the castle household, and he had even heard of Mrs. Morden's habit of sleeping within closely drawn curtains, from his general informant, James Harwood, the groom, who had received his information from one of the housemaids, in that temple of gossip—the servants' hall.

Gertrude Eversleigh slept in a white-curtained cot, by the side of Mrs. Morden's bed.

Black Milsom lifted the coverlet, threw it over the face of the sleeping child, and with one strong hand lifted her from her cot, her face still shrouded by the thick down coverlet, which must effectually prevent her cries. With the other hand he snatched up a blanket, and threw it round the struggling form, and then, bundled in coverlet and blanket, he carried the little girl away.

Only when his feet were on the turf, and the castle stood up black behind him, did he withdraw the coverlet from the mouth of the half-suffocated child.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CAUGHT IN THE TOILS.

Captain Copplestone did not waste half an hour on the road between London and Raynham.

No words can paint his agony of terror, the torture of mind which he endured, as he sat in the post-chaise, watching every landmark of the journey, counting every minute of the tedious hours, and continually putting his head out of the front window, and urging the postillions to greater speed.

He hated himself for having been duped by that forged letter.

"I had no business to leave the child," he kept repeating to himself; "not even to obey her mother. My place was by little Gertrude, and I have been a fool to desert my post. If any harm has come to her in my absence, by the heaven above me, I

think I shall be tempted to blow out my brains."

Once having decided that the letter, purporting to be written by Lady Eversleigh, was a forgery, he could not doubt that it formed part of some plot against the household of Raynham Castle.

To Captain Copplestone, who knew that the life of his friend had been sacrificed to the dark plottings of a traitor, this idea was terrible.

"I knew the wretches I had to deal with; I was forewarned that treachery and cunning would be on the watch to do that child wrong," he said to himself, during those hours of self-reproach; "and yet I allowed myself to be duped by the first trick of those hidden foes. Oh, great heaven! grant that I may reach Raynham before they can have taken any fatal advantage of my absence."

It was daybreak when the captain's post-chaise dashed into the village street of Raynham. He murmured a thanksgiving and a prayer, almost in the same breath, as he saw the castle-turrets dark against the chill gray sky.

The vehicle ascended the hill, and stopped before the arched entrance to the castle. An old woman, who acted as portress, opened the carved iron gates. He glanced at her, but did not stop to question her. One word from her would have put an end to all suspense; but in this last moment the soldier had not courage to utter the question which he so dreaded to have answered—Was Gertrude safe?

In another moment that question was answered for Captain Copplestone—answered completely, without the utterance of a word.

The principal door of the castle was open, and in the doorway stood two men.

One was Mr. Ashburne, the magistrate; the other was Christopher Dimond, the constable of Raynham.

The sight of these two men told Captain Copplestone that his fears were but too surely realized. Something had happened amiss—something of importance—or

Gilbert Ashburne, the magistrate, would not be there.

"The child!" gasped the captain; "is she dead—murdered?"

"No, no, not dead," answered Mr. Ashburne.

"Not dead! Thank God!" exclaimed the soldier, in a devout whisper. "What then? What has happened?" he asked, scarcely able to command himself so far as to utter these few words with distinctness. "For pity's sake speak plainly. Can't you see that you are keeping me in torture? What has happened to the child?"

"She has disappeared."

"She has disappeared!" echoed the captain. "I left strict orders that she should not be permitted to stir beyond the castle walls. Who dared to disobey those orders?"

"No one," answered Mr. Ashburne. "Miss Eversleigh was not allowed to quit her own apartments. She disappeared in the night from her own cot, while that cot was in its usual place, beside Mrs. Morden's bed."

"But who could penetrate into that room in the night, when the castle doors are secured against every one? Where is Mrs. Morden? Let me see her; and let every servant of the house be assembled in the great dining-room."

Captain Copplestone gave this order to the butler, who had come out to the hall on hearing the arrival of the post-chaise. The man bowed, and departed on his errand.

"I fear you will gain nothing by questioning the household," said Mr. Ashburne. "I have already made all possible inquiries, assisted by Christopher Dimond here, but can obtain no information that throws the smallest ray of light upon this most mysterious business."

"I thank you," replied the captain; "I am sure you have done all that friendship could suggest; but I should like to question those people myself. This business is a matter of life and death for me."

He went into the great dining-room—the room in which the inquiry had been held

respecting the cause of Sir Oswald's death. Mr. Ashburne and Christopher Dimond accompanied him, and the servants of the household came in quietly, two and three at a time, until the lower end of the room was full. Mrs. Morden was the last to come. She made no protestations of her grief—her self-reproach—for she never for a moment imagined that any one could doubt the intensity of her feelings. She stood before the captain, calm, collected, ready to answer his questions promptly and conscientiously.

He questioned the servants one by one, beginning with Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper, who was ready to declare that no living creature, except the members of the household, could have been within the castle walls on the night of Gertrude Eversleigh's disappearance.

"That anybody could have come into this house and gone out of it in a night, unknown to me, is a moral impossibility," said the housekeeper; "the doors were locked at half-past ten, and the keys were brought in a basket to my room. So, you see it's quite impossible that any one could have come in or gone out before the doors were open in the morning."

"What time was the child's disappearance discovered?"

"At a quarter to five in the morning," answered Mrs. Morden; "before any one in the house was a-stir. My darling has always been in the habit of waking at that hour, to take a little milk, which is left in a glass by her bedside. I woke at the usual time, and rose, in order to give her the milk, and when I looked at her cot, I saw that it was empty. The child was gone. The silk coverlet and one blanket had disappeared with her. I gave the alarm immediately, and in a quarter of an hour the whole household was a-stir."

"And did you hear nothing during that night?" asked the captain, turning suddenly to address Solomon Grundy, who had entered amongst the rest of the servants.

"Nothing, captain."

"Humph," muttered the old soldier, "a sorry watch-dog."

"There is only one entrance to the castle which is at all weakly guarded," said the magistrate, presently; "and that is a small door belonging to the bed-room occupied by one of the footmen. But this man tells me that he was in his room that night at his usual hour, and that the door was locked and bolted in the usual way."

As he said this, the magistrate looked towards the end of the apartment, where Stephen Plumpton stood amongst his fellow servants. The young man had been weak enough, or guilty enough, to commit himself to a false statement; first, because he did not want to betray the misdoings of Matthew Brook, and secondly, because he feared to admit his own culpable carelessness.

"My telling the truth won't bring the child back," he argued with himself. "If it would, I'd speak out fast enough."

"You say that it is impossible that any one can have entered this house, and left it, during that night," said Captain Copplestone to the housekeeper; "and yet some one must have left the house, even if no one entered it, or Gertrude Eversleigh must be hidden within these walls. Has the castle been thoroughly searched? There are stories of children who have hidden themselves in sport, to find the sport end in terrible earnest."

"The castle has been searched from garret to cellar," answered Mrs. Morden. "Mrs. Smithson and I have gone together into every room, and opened every cupboard."

The captain dismissed the assembly, after having asked many questions without result. When this was done, he went alone to the library, where he shut himself in, and seated himself at the writing-table, with pen and ink before him, to meditate upon, the steps which should be first taken in the work that lay before him.

That work was no less painful a task than the writing of a letter to Lady Eversleigh, to inform her of the calamity which had taken place—of the terrible realization of her worst fears. Captain Copplestone's varied and adventurous life had never

brought him a severer or more painful duty, but he was not the man to shirk or defer it, because it involved suffering to himself.

The letter was written, and despatched by the evening post, and then the captain shut himself up in his own room, and gave way to the bitterest grief he had ever experienced.

Who shall describe the agony which Lady Eversleigh suffered when Captain Copplestone's letter reached her? For the first half-hour after she read it, a blight seemed to fall upon her senses, and she sat still in her chair, stupefied; but when she rallied, her first impulse was to send for Andrew Larkspur, who was now nearly restored to his usual state of sound health.

She rang the bell, and summoned Jane Payland.

"There is a lawyer's clerk living in this house," she said; "Mr. Andrews. Go to him immediately, and ask him to favour me with an interview. I wish to consult him on a matter of business."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Miss Payland, looking inquisitively at the ashen face of her mistress. "There's something fresh this morning," she muttered to herself, as she tripped lightly up the stairs to do her bidding.

Mr. Larkspur—or Mr. Andrews—presented himself before Lady Eversleigh a few minutes after he received her message. He found her pacing the room in a fever of excitement.

"Good gracious me, ma'am!" he exclaimed; "is there anything amiss?"

"Yes," she answered, handing him the letter.

Mr. Larkspur read the letter to the end, and then read it again.

"This is a bad job," he said, calmly; "what's to be done now?"

"You must accompany me to Raynham Castle—you must help me to find my child!" cried Honoria, in wild excitement. "You are better now, Mr. Larkspur, you can bear

the journey? For Heaven's sake, do not say you cannot aid me. You must come with me, Andrew Larkspur. I do not offer to bribe you—I say you must come! Bring me my darling safe to my arms, and you may name your own reward for that priceless service."

"No, no," said Mr. Larkspur; "I don't say that. I am well enough, so far as that goes, but how about our little schemes in London?"

"Never mind them—never think of them! What are they to me now?"

"Very well, my lady," answered Mr. Larkspur; "if it must be so, it must be. I must turn my back upon the neatest business that ever a Bow Street officer handled, just as it's getting most interesting to a well-regulated mind."

"And you'll come with me at once?"

"Give me one hour to make my plans, ma'am, and I'm your man," replied Mr. Larkspur. "I'll pack a carpet-bag, leave it down stairs, take a hackney coach to Bow Street, see my deputy, and arrange some matters for him, and be ready one hour from this time, when you'll be so kind as to call for me in a post-chaise—not forgetting to bring my carpet-bag with you in the boot, if you please. And now you be so good as to keep up your spirits, ma'am, like a Trojan—which I've heard the Trojans had an uncommon hard time of it in their day. If the child is to be found, Andrew Larkspur is the man to find her; and as to reward, we won't talk about that, if you please, my lady. I may be a hard-fisted one, but I'm not the individual to trade upon the feelings of a mother that has lost her only child."

Having said this, Mr. Larkspur departed, and in less than two hours he and Lady Eversleigh were seated in a post-chaise, behind four horses, tearing along the road between London and Barnet.

And thus additional security attended the schemes of Victor Carrington.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LARKSPUR TO THE RESCUE.

The journey of Lady Eversleigh and her companion, the Bow Street officer, was as rapid as the journey of Captain Copplestone. Along the same northern road as that which he had travelled a few days before flew the post-chaise containing the anguish-stricken mother and her strange ally. In this hour of agony and suspense, Honoria Eversleigh looked to the queer, wizened little police-officer, Andrew Larkspur, as the best friend she had on earth.

"You'll find my child for me?" she cried many times during the course of that long journey, appealing to Mr. Larkspur, with clasped hands and streaming eyes. "Oh, tell me that you'll find her for me. For pity's sake, give me some comfort—some hope."

"I'll give you plenty of comfort, and plenty of hope, too, mum, if you'll only cheer up and trust in me," answered the luminary of Bow Street, with that stolid calmness of manner which seemed as if it would scarcely have been disturbed by an earthquake. "You keep up your spirits, and don't give way. If the little lady is alive, I'll bring her back to you safe and sound. If—if—so be as she's—contrarywise," added Mr. Larkspur, alarmed by the wild look in his companion's eyes, as he was about to pronounce the terrible word she so much feared to hear, "why, in that case I'll find them as have done the deed, and they shall pay for it."

"Oh, give her back to me!" exclaimed Honoria; "give her back! Let me hold her in my arms once more. I abandon all thought of revenge upon those who have so basely wronged me. Let Providence alone deal with them and their crime. It may be this punishment has come to me, because I have sought to usurp the office of Providence. Let me have my darling once more, and I will banish from my heart every feeling which a Christian should abjure."

Bitter remorse was mingled with the agony which rent the mother's heart in those terrible hours. All at once her eyes were opened to the deep and dreadful guilt involved in those vengeful feelings she had so long nourished, to the exclusion of all

tender emotions, all generous instincts.

Bitterly did the mother upbraid herself as she sat, with her hands clasped tightly together, her pale face turned to the window, her haggard eyes looking out at every object on the road, eager to behold any landmark that would tell her that she was so many miles nearer the end of her journey.

She had concluded that, as a matter of course, the disappearance of the child had been directly or indirectly the work of Sir Reginald Eversleigh; and she said as much to Mr. Larkspur. But, to her surprise, she found that he did not share her opinion upon this subject.

"If you ask me whether Sir Reginald is in it, I'll tell you candidly, no, my lady, I don't think he is. I don't need to tell you that I've had a deal of experience in my time; and, if that experience is worth a brass button, Sir Reginald hasn't any hand in this business down in Yorkshire."

"Not directly, perhaps, but indirectly," interrupted Honoria.

"Neither one nor the other," answered the great man of Bow Street. "I've had my eye upon the baronet ever since you put me up to watching him; and there's precious little he could do without my spotting him. I know what letters he has written, and I know more or less what has been in those letters. I know what people he has seen, and more or less what he has said to them; and I don't see that it's possible he could have carried on such a game as this abduction of Missy without my having an inkling of it."

"But what of his ally—his bosom-friend and confederate—Victor Carrington? May not his treacherous hand have struck this blow?"

"I think not, my lady," replied Mr. Larkspur. "I've had my eye upon that gentleman likewise, as per agreement; for when Andrew Larkspur guarantees to do a thing, he ain't the man to do it by halves. I've kept a close watch upon Mr. Carrington; and with the exception of his parleyvous francais-ing with that sharp-nosed,

shabby-genteel lady-companion of Madame Durski's, there's very few of his goings-on I haven't been able to reckon up to a fraction. No, my lady, there's some one else in this business; and who that some one else is, it'll be my duty to find out. But I can't do anything till I get on the ground. When I get on the ground, and have had time to look about me, I shall be able to form an opinion."

Honoria was fain to be patient, to put her trust in heaven, and, beneath heaven, in this pragmatical little police-officer, who really felt as much compassion for her sorrow as it was possible for a man so steeped in the knowledge of crime and iniquity, and so hardened by contact with the worst side of the world, to feel for any human grief. She was compelled to be patient, or, at any rate, to assume that outward aspect of calmness which seems like patience, while the heart within her breast throbbed tumultuously as storm-driven waves.

At last the wearisome journey came to an end. She entered the arched gateway of Raynham Castle; and, as she looked out of the carriage window, she saw the big black letters, printed on a white broadside, offering a reward of three hundred pounds for the early restoration of the missing child.

Mr. Larkspur gave a scornful sniff as he perceived this bill.

"That won't bring her back," he muttered. "Those who've taken her away will play a deeper game than to bring her back for the first reward that's offered, or the second, or the third. She'll have to be found by those that are a match for the scoundrel that stole her from her home; and perhaps he will find his match before long, clever as he is."

The meeting between Honoria and Captain Copplestone was a very quiet one. She was far too noble, far too just to reproach the friend in whom she had trusted, even though he had failed in his trust.

He had heard the approach of the post-chaise, and he awaited her on the threshold of the door. He had gone forth to many a desperate encounter; but he had never felt so

heart-piercing a pang as that which he endured this day when he went to meet Lady Eversleigh.

She held out her hand to him as she crossed the threshold. "I have done my duty," he said, in low, earnest tones, "as I am a man of honour and a soldier, Lady Eversleigh; I have done my duty, miserable as the result has been."

"I can believe that," answered Honoria, gravely. "Your face tells me there are no good tidings to greet me here. She is not found?"

The captain shook his head sadly.

"And there are no tidings of any kind?—no clue, no trace?"

"None. The constable of this place, and other men from the market-town, are doing their utmost; but as yet the result has been only new mystification—new conjecture."

"No; nor wouldn't be, if the constables were to have twenty years to do their work in, instead of three days," interrupted Mr. Larkspur. "Perhaps you don't know what country police-officers are? I do; and if you expect to find the little lady by their help, you may just as well look up to the sky yonder, and wait till she drops down from it, for of the two things that's by far the most likely. I can believe in miracles," added Mr. Larkspur, piously; "but I can't believe in rural police-constables."

The captain looked at the speaker with a bewildered expression, and Lady Eversleigh hastened to explain the presence of her ally.

"This is Mr. Larkspur, a well-known Bow Street officer," she said: "and I rely on his aid to find my precious one. Pray tell me all that has happened in connection with this event. He is very clever, and he may strike out some plan of action that will be better than anything which has yet been attempted."

They had passed into a small sitting-room, half ante-room, half study, leading out of the great hall, and here the police-officer seated himself, as much at home as if he

had spent half his life within the walls of Raynham, and listened quietly while Captain Copplestone gave a circumstantial account of the child's disappearance, taking care not to omit the smallest detail connected with that event.

Mr. Larkspur made occasional pencil-notes in his memorandum-book; but he did not interrupt the captain's narration by a single remark.

When all was finished, Lady Eversleigh looked at him with anxious, inquiring eyes, as if from his lips she expected to receive the sentence of fate itself.

"Well?" she muttered, breathlessly, "is there any hope? Do you see any clue?"

"Half a dozen clues," answered the police-officer, "if they're properly handled. The first thing we've got to do is to offer a reward for that silk coverlet that was taken away with the little girl."

"Why offer a reward for the coverlet?" asked Captain Copplestone.

"Bless your innocent heart!" answered Mr. Larkspur, contemplating the soldier with a pitying smile; "don't you see that, if we find the coverlet, we're pretty sure to find the child? The man who took her away made a mistake when he carried off the coverlet with her, unless he was deep enough to destroy it before he had taken her far. If he didn't do that—if he left that silk coverlet behind him anywhere, I consider his game as good as up. That is just the kind of thing that a police-officer gets his clue from. There's been more murders and burglaries found out from an old coat, or a pair of old shoes, or a walking-stick, or such like, than you could count in a day. I shan't make any stir about the child just yet, my lady: but before forty-eight hours are over our heads, I'll have a handbill posted in every town in England, and an advertisement in every newspaper, offering five pounds reward for that dark blue silk coverlet you talk of, lined with crimson."

"There seems considerable wisdom in the idea," said the captain, thoughtfully. "It would never have occurred to me to advertise for the coverlet."

"I don't suppose it would," answered the great Larkspur, with a slight touch of

sarcasm in his tone. "It has took me a matter of thirty years to learn my business; and it ain't to be supposed as my knowledge will come to other folks natural."

"You are right, Mr. Larkspur," replied the captain, smiling at the police-officer's air of offended dignity; "and since you seem to be thoroughly equal to the difficulties of the situation, I think we can scarcely do better than trust ourselves entirely to your discretion."

"I don't think you'll have any occasion to repent your confidence," said Mr. Larkspur. "And now, if I may make so bold as to mention it, I should be glad to get a morsel of dinner, and a glass of brandy-and-water, cold without; after which I'll take a turn in the village and look about me. There may be something to be picked up in that direction by a man who keeps his eyes and ears open."

Mr. Larkspur was consigned to the care of the butler, who conducted him at once to the housekeeper's room, where that very important person, Mrs. Smithson, received him with almost regal condescension.

Mrs. Smithson and the butler both would have been very glad to converse with Mr. Larkspur, and to find out from that gentleman's conversation who he was, and all about him; but Mr. Larkspur himself had no inclination to be communicative. He responded courteously, but briefly, to all Mrs. Smithson's civilities; and after eating the best part of a cold roast chicken, and a pound or so of ham, and drinking about half a pint of cognac, he left the housekeeper's room, and retired to an apartment to which the butler ushered him—a very comfortable little sitting-room, leading into a small bedchamber, which two rooms were to be occupied by Mr. Larkspur during his residence at the castle.

Here he employed himself until dark in writing short notes to the chief police-officers of all the principal towns in England, ordering the printing and posting of the handbills of which he had spoken to Lady Eversleigh and the captain. When this was done he put on his hat, and went out at the great arched gateway of

the castle, whence he made his way to the village street. Here he spent the rest of the evening, and he made very excellent use of his time, though he passed the greater part of it in the parlour of the "Hen and Chickens," drinking very weak brandy-and-water, and listening to the conversation of the gentry who patronized that house of entertainment.

Among those gentry was the good-tempered, but somewhat weak-minded, Matthew Brook, the coachman.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mat Brook," said a stout, red-faced individual, who was butler at one of the mansions in the neighbourhood of Raynham, "you've not been yourself for the last week; not since little Missy was stolen from the castle yonder. You must have been uncommonly fond of that child."

"I was fond of her, bless her dear little heart," replied Matthew.

But though this assertion, so far as it went, was perfectly true, there was some slight hesitation in the coachman's manner of uttering it—a hesitation which Andrew Larkspur was not slow to perceive.

"And you've lost your new friend down at the 'Cat and Fiddle,' where you was beginning to spend more of your evenings than you spent here. What's become of that man Maunders—eh, Brook?" asked the butler. "That was a rather queer thing—his leaving Raynham so suddenly, leaving his house to take care of itself, or to be taken care of by a stupid country wench, who doesn't know her business any more than a cow. Do you know why he went, or where he's gone, Mat?"

"Not I," Mr. Brook answered, rather nervously, and reddening as he spoke.

The police-officer watched and listened even more intently than before. The conversation was becoming every moment more interesting for him.

"How should I know where Mr. Maunders has gone?" asked Matthew Brook, rather peevishly, as he paused from smoking to refill his honest clay pipe. "How should I know where he's gone, or how long he means to stay away? I know nothing of him,

except that he seems a jolly, good-hearted sort of a chap in his own rough-and-ready way. James Harwood brought him up to the castle one night for a hand at whist and a bit of supper, and he seemed to take a regular fancy to some of us, and asked us to take a glass now and then down at his place, which we did; and that's all about it; and I don't mean to stand any more cross-questioning."

"Why, Brook," cried his friend, the butler, "what's come to you? It isn't like you to answer any man in that way, least of all such on old friend as me."

Mr. Brook took no notice of this reproach. He went on smoking silently.

"I say, Harris," said the butler, presently, when the landlord of the "Hen and Chickens" came into the room to attend upon his customers, "do you know whether the landlord of the 'Cat and Fiddle' has come back yet?"

"No, he ain't," answered Mr. Harris; "and folks complain sadly of being served by that awkward lass he's left in charge of the house. I've had a many of his old customers come up here for what they want."

"Does anybody know where he's gone?"

"That's as may be," answered Mr. Harris. "Anyhow, I don't. Some say he's gone to London for a fortnight's pleasure; but if he has, he's a very queer man of business; and it strikes me, when he comes back he will find his customers all left him."

"Do you think he's cut and run?"

"Well, you see, he might be in debt, and want to give his creditors the slip."

"But folks down the village say he didn't owe a five-pound note," returned the landlord, who was a great authority with regard to all local gossip. "It's rather a queer business altogether, that chap taking himself off without why or wherefore, and just about the time as the little girl disappeared from the castle."

"Why, you don't think he had anything to do with that, Joe Harris?" exclaimed the butler.

Andrew Larkspur took occasion to look at Matthew Brook at this moment; and he saw the coachman's honest face grow pallid, as if under the influence of some sudden terror.

"You don't believe as Maunders had a hand in stealing the child, eh, Joe Harris?" repeated the butler.

Joe Harris shook his head solemnly.

"I don't think nothing, and I don't believe nothing," he answered, with a mysterious air. "It ain't my place to give an opinion upon this here subjick. It might be said as I was jealous of the landlord of the 'Cat and Fiddle,' and owed him a grudge. All I says is this: it's a very queer circumstance as the landlord of the 'Cat and Fiddle' should disappear from the village directly after little Miss Eversleigh disappeared from the castle. You may put two and two together, and you may make 'em into four, if you like," added Mr. Harris, with profound solemnity; "or you may leave it alone. That's your business."

"I'll tell you what it is," said the butler; "I've had a chat with old Mother Smithson since the disappearance of the young lady; and from what I've heard, it's pretty clear to my mind that business wasn't managed by any one outside the castle. It couldn't be. There was some one inside had a hand in it. I wouldn't mind staking a twelvemonth's wages on that, Matthew and you musn't be offended if I seem to go against your fellow-servants."

"I ain't offended, and I ain't pleased," answered Matthew, testily; "all I can say is, as I don't like so much cross-questioning. There's a sort of a lawyer chap has come down to-day with my lady, I hear, though I ain't set eyes on him yet; and I suppose he'll find out all about it."

No more was said upon the subject of the lost heiress, or the landlord of the "Cat and Fiddle."

The subject was evidently, for some reason or other, unpleasant to Mr. Brook, the

coachman; and as Matthew Brook was a general favourite, the subject was dropped. Mr. Larkspur devoted the next morning to a careful examination of all possible entrances to the castle. When he saw the half-glass door opening from the quadrangle into the little bedchamber occupied by Stephen Plumpton, the footman, he gave a long, low whistle, and smiled to himself, with the triumphant smile of a man who has found a clue to the mystery he wishes to solve.

Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper, conducted Andrew Larkspur from room to room during this careful investigation of the premises; and she and Stephen Plumpton alone were present when he examined this half-glass door.

"Do you always bolt your door of a night?" Mr. Larkspur asked of the footman.

"A ways, sir."

The tone of the man's voice and the man's face combined to betray him to the skilled police-officer.

Andrew Larkspur knew that the man had told him a deliberate falsehood.

"Are you certain you bolted this door on that particular night?"

"Oh, quite certain, sir."

The police-officer examined the bolt. It was a very strong one; but it moved so stiffly as to betray the fact that it was very rarely used.

Mrs. Smithson did not notice this fact; but Mr. Larkspur did. It was his business to take note of small facts.

"Can you remember what you were doing on that particular night?" he asked, presently, turning again to the embarrassed Stephen.

"No, sir; I can't say I do remember exactly," faltered the footman.

"Were you at home that night?"

"Well, yes, sir, I think I was."

"You are not certain?"

"Well, yes, sir; perhaps I might venture to say as I'm certain," answered the miserable young man, who in his desire to screen his fellow-servant, found himself led on from one falsehood to another.

He knew that he could rely on the honourable silence of the servants; and that none among them would betray the secret of the party at the "Cat and Fiddle."

After completing the examination of the premises, Mr. Larkspur dined comfortably in the housekeeper's room, and then once more sallied forth to the village to finish his afternoon. But on this occasion it was to the "Cat and Fiddle," and not the "Hen and Chickens," that the police-officer betook himself. Here he found only a few bargemen and villagers, carousing upon the wooden benches of a tap-room, drinking their beer out of yellow earthenware mugs, and enjoying themselves in an atmosphere that was almost suffocating from the fumes of strong tobacco.

Mr. Larkspur did not trouble himself to listen to the conversation of these men; he looked into the room for a few minutes and then returned to the bar, where he ordered a glass of brandy-and-water from the girl who served Mr. Maunders's customers in the absence of that gentleman.

"So your master is away from home, my lass," he said, in his most insinuating tone, as he slowly stirred his brandy-and-water.

"Yes, he be, sir."

"Do you know when he's coming back?" inquired Larkspur.

"Lawks, no, sir."

"Or where he's gone?"

"No, sir, I don't know that neither. My master's a good one to hold his tongue, he is. He never tells nobody nothing, in a manner of speaking."

"When did he go away?"

The girl named the morning on which had been discovered the disappearance of Sir

Oswald's daughter.

"He went away pretty early, I suppose?" said Mr. Larkspur, with assumed indifference.

"I should rather think he did," answered the girl. "I was up at six that morning, but my master had gone clean off when I came down stairs. There weren't a sign of him."

"He must have gone very early."

"That he must; and the strangest part of it is that he was up very late the night before," added the girl, who was one of those people who ask nothing better than the privilege of telling all they know about anything or anybody.

"Oh," said Mr. Larkspur; "he was up late the night before, was he?"

"Yes. It was eleven when he sent me to bed, ordering me off as sharp as you please, which is just his way. And he couldn't have gone to bed for above an hour after that, for I lay awake, on the listen, as you may say, wondering what he was up to downstairs. But though I lay awake above an hour, I didn't hear him come up stairs at all; so goodness knows what time he went to bed. You see he had a party that night."

"Oh, he had a party, had he?" remarked the police-officer, who saw that he had no occasion to question this young lady, so well-inclined was she to tell him all she knew.

"Yes, sir. His friends came to have a hand at cards and a hot supper; and didn't it give me plenty of trouble to get it all ready, that's all. You see, master's friends are some of the gentlemen up at the castle; and they live so uncommon well up there, that they're very particular what they eat. It must be all of the best, and done to a turn, master says to me; and so it was. I'm sure the steak was a perfect picture when I laid it on the dish, and the onions were fried a beautiful golden brown, as would have done credit to the Queen of England's head-cook, though I says it as shouldn't

perhaps," added the damsel, modestly.

"And which of the gentlemen from the castle came to supper with your master that night?" Mr. Larkspur asked, presently.

"Well, sir, you see there was three of them. Mr. Brook, the coachman, a good-natured, civil-spoken man as you'd wish to meet, but a little given to drink, folks say; and there was James Harwood, the under-groom; and Stephen Plumpton, the footman, a good-looking, fresh-coloured young man, which is, perhaps, beknown to you."

"Oh, yes," answered Mr. Larkspur, "I know Stephen, the footman."

Mr. Larkspur and the damsel conversed a good deal after this; but nothing of particular interest transpired in this conversation. The gentleman departed from the "Cat and Fiddle" very well satisfied with his evening's work, and returned to the castle in time to take a comfortable cup of tea in the housekeeper's room.

He was quite satisfied in his own mind as to the identity of the delinquent who had stolen the child.

The next thing to be discovered was the manner in which the landlord of the "Cat and Fiddle" had left Raynham. It must have been almost impossible for him to leave in any public vehicle, carrying the stolen child with him, as he must have done, without attracting the attention of his fellow-passengers. Andrew Larkspur had taken care to ascertain all possible details of the man's habits from the communicative barmaid, and knew that he had no vehicle or horse of his own. He must, therefore, have either gone in a public vehicle, or on foot.

If he had left the village on foot, under cover of darkness, he might have left unseen; but he must have entered some other village at daybreak; he must sooner or later have procured some kind of conveyance; and wherever he went, carrying with him that stolen child, it was more than probable his appearance would attract attention.

After a little trouble, the astute Andrew ascertained that Mr. Maunders had certainly

not left the village by any public conveyance.

It was late when Mr. Larkspur returned to the castle, after having mastered this fact. He found that Lady Eversleigh had been inquiring for him; and he was told that she had requested he might be sent to her apartments at whatever time he returned.

In obedience to this summons, he followed a servant to the room occupied by the mistress of Raynham Castle.

"Well, Mr. Larkspur," Honoria asked, eagerly, "do you bring many hope?"

"I don't exactly know about that, my lady," answered the ever-cautious Andrew; "but I think I may venture to say that things are going on pretty smoothly. I ain't wasting time, depend upon it; and I hope in a day or two I may have something encouraging to tell you."

"But you will tell me nothing yet?" murmured Honoria, with a despairing sigh.

"Not yet, my lady."

No more was said. Lady Eversleigh was obliged to be content with this small comfort.

Early the next morning Mr. Larkspur set out on his voyage of discovery to the villages within two, three, four, and five hours' walk of Raynham.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE TRACK.

The next day Mr. Larkspur spent in the same manner, and returned to the castle late at night, and very much out of sorts. He had of late been spoiled by tolerably easy triumphs, and the experience of failure was very disagreeable to him.

On both evenings he was summoned to Lady Eversleigh's apartments, and on each occasion declined going. He sent a respectful message, to the effect that he had nothing to communicate to her ladyship, and would not therefore intrude upon her.

But early on the morning after the second day's wasted labour, the post brought Mr. Larkspur a communication which quite restored him to his accustomed good humour.

It was neither more nor less than a brief epistle from one of the officials of the police-staff at Murford Haven, informing Mr. Larkspur that an old woman had produced the silken coverlet advertised for, and claimed the offered reward.

Mr. Larkspur sent a servant to inquire if Lady Eversleigh would be pleased to favour him with a few minutes' conversation that morning. The man came back almost immediately with a ready affirmative.

"My lady will be very happy to see Mr. Larkspur."

"Oh, Mr. Larkspur!" exclaimed Honoria, as the police-officer entered the room, "I am certain you bring me good news; I can see it in your face."

"Well, yes, my lady; certainly I've got a little bit of good news this morning."

"You have found a clue to my child?"

"I have found out something about the coverlet," answered Andrew; "and that's the next best thing, to my mind. That has turned up at Murford Haven, thirty miles from here; though how the man who stole Miss Eversleigh can have got there without leaving a single trace behind him is more than I can understand."

"At Murford Haven!—my darling has been taken to Murford Haven!" cried Honoria.

"So I conclude, my lady, by the coverlet turning up there," replied Mr. Larkspur. "I told you the handbills would do the trick. Murford Haven is a large manufacturing town, and the sort of place a man who wanted to keep himself out of sight of the police might be likely enough to choose. Now, with your leave, my lady, I'll be off to Murford Haven as soon as I can have a post-chaise got ready for me."

"And I will go with you," exclaimed Lady Eversleigh; "I shall feel as if I were

nearer my child if I go to the town where you hope to find the clue to her hiding-place."

"I, too, will accompany you," said Captain Copplestone.

"Begging you pardon, sir," remonstrated Mr. Larkspur, "if three of us go, and one of those three a lady, we might attract attention, even in such a busy place as Murford Haven. And if those that have got little missy should hear of it, they'd smell a rat. No, my lady, you let me go alone. I'm used to this sort of work, and you ain't, and the captain ain't either. I can slip about on the quiet anywhere like an eel; and I've got the eye to see whatever is to be seen, and the ear to pick up every syllable that's to be heard. You trust matters to me, and depend upon it, I'll do my duty. I've got a clue, and a clue is all I ever want. You keep to this spot, my lady, and you, too, captain; for there may come some kind of news in my absence, and you may have to act without me. I shan't waste time, you may rely upon it; and all you've got to do, my lady, is to trust to me, and hope that I shall bring you back good news from Murford Haven."

Very little more was said, and half an hour after this interview, the police-officer left Raynham in a post-chaise, on the first stage of the journey to Murford Haven.

Words are too weak to describe the sufferings of the mother of the lost child, and of the friends to whom she was hardly less dear. They waited very quietly, with all outward show of calmness, but the pain of suspense was not less keen. They sat silent, unoccupied, counting the hours—the minutes even—during the period which must elapse before the return of the police-officer.

He came earlier than Honoria had dared to expect him, and he brought with him so much comfort that she could almost have fallen on her knees, like Thetis at the feet of Jove, in the extremity of her gratitude for his services.

"I've got the coverlet," said Mr. Larkspur, dragging the little silken covering from his carpet-bag, and displaying it before those to whom it was so familiar. "That's

about the ticket, I think, my lady. Yes, just so. I found a nice old hag waiting to claim her five pounds reward; for, you see, the men at the police-office at Murford Haven contrived to keep her dancing attendance backward and forwards—call again in an hour, and so on—till I was there to cross-question her. A precious deep one she is, too; and a regular jail-bird, I'll wager. I soon reckoned her up; and I was pretty sure that whatever she knew she'd tell fast enough, if she was only paid her price. So, after a good deal of shilly-shally, and handing her over five-and-twenty pounds in solid cash, and telling her that she'd better beware how she trifled with a gentleman belonging to Bow Street, she consented to tell me all about the little girl. The man that stole little missy had been to her precious hovel, and old Mother Brimstone had found a change of clothes for little missy, in token of which, and on payment of another sovereign, the old harpy gave me little missy's own clothes; and there they are."

Hereupon Mr. Larkspur dragged from his capacious carpet-bag the delicate little garments of lawn and lace which had been worn by the cherished heiress of Raynham. Ah! who can describe the anguish of the mother's heart as she gazed upon those familiar garments, so associated with the form of the lost one?

"Well," gasped Honoria, "go on, I entreat! She told you the child had been there. But with whom? Did she tell you that?"

"She did," returned Andrew Larkspur. "She told me that the scoundrel who holds little missy in his keeping is no other than the man suspected of a foul murder—a man I have long been looking for—a man who is well known amongst the criminal classes of London by the name of Black Milsom."

Black Milsom! the face of Lady Eversleigh, pale before, grew almost ghastly in its pallor, as that hated name sounded in her ears, ominous as a death-knell.

"Black Milsom!" she exclaimed at last. "If my child is in the power of that man, she is, indeed, lost."

"You know him, my lady?" cried Andrew Larkspur, with surprise. "Ah, I remember, you seemed familiar with the details of the Jernam murder. You know this man, Milsom?"

"I do know him," answered Honoria, in a tone of utter despair. "Do not ask me where or when that man and I have met. It is enough that I know him. My darling could not be in worse hands."

"He can have but one motive, and that to extort money," said Captain Copplestone. "No harm will come to our darling's precious life. You have reason to rejoice that your child has not fallen into the hands of Sir Reginald Eversleigh."

"Tell me more," said Honoria to Mr. Larkspur. "Tell me all you have discovered."

"All I could discover was that the man Milsom had taken the child to London by a certain coach. I went to the inn from which that particular coach always starts; and here, after much trouble and delay, I was lucky enough to see the guard. From him I derived some valuable information; or perhaps, I ought to say some information that I think may turn up trumps. He perfectly remembered the man Milsom by my description of him, I having got the description from old Mother Brimstone; and he remembered the child, because of her crying a deal, and the passengers pitying her, and being pleased with her pretty looks, and trying to comfort her, and so on. The guard himself took a deal of notice of the child, and thought the man was not much good; and when they got to London, he felt curious like, he said, to know where the two would go, and what would become of them."

"And did he find out?" gasped Lady Eversleigh.

"As good luck would have it, he did. The man got into a hackney-coach, and the guard heard the driver tell him to go to Ratcliff Highway—that was all."

"Then I will find him," exclaimed Honoria, with feverish excitement. "I know the place well—too well! I will go with you to London, Mr. Larkspur, and I myself will help you to find my treasure."

In the extremity of her excitement she was reckless what secrets she betrayed. She had but one thought, one consideration, and that to her was life or death.

"Don't question me," she said to Captain Copplestone, who stared at her in amazement; "my girlhood was spent in a den of thieves—my womanhood has been one long struggle against pitiless enemies. I will fight bravely to the last. And now, in this most bitter trial of my life, the experience of my miserable youth shall serve in the contest with that villain."

She would brook no delay; she would explain nothing.

"Do not question me," she repeated. "You have counselled me to trust in the experience of Mr. Larkspur, and I will confide myself to his wisdom; but I must and will accompany him in his search for my child. Let a post-chaise be ordered immediately. Can you dispense with rest, and take a hurried dinner before you start, Mr. Larkspur?" she added, turning to her ally.

"Dispense with rest? Bless your innocent heart, my lady, I don't know the meaning of rest when I'm in business; and as for dinner, a ham sandwich and a glass of brandy out of a pocket-pistol is as much as I ask for when my blood's up." "You shall be richly rewarded for your exertions."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am. The promise of a reward is very encouraging, of course; but, upon my word, my heart's more in this business than it ever was before in anything under a murder; and I feel as if it was in me to do wonders."

No more was said. Andrew Larkspur hurried away to eat as good a dinner as he could get through in ten minutes, and Honoria went to her dressing-room to prepare herself for her journey.

"Pray for me, kind and faithful friend," she said, earnestly, as she bade adieu to the captain.

In a few minutes more she was once again speeding along the familiar road which she had travelled under such different circumstances, and with such different

feelings. She remembered the first time she had driven through those rustic villages, past those swelling uplands, those woods and hills.

Then she had come as a bride, beloved, honoured, seated by the side of an adoring husband—a happy future shining before her, a bright horizon without one cloud.

Only one shadow to come between her and the sunshine, and that the shadow of a cruel memory—the haunting recollection of that foul deed which had been done beneath the shelter of the darkness, by the side of the ever-flowing river. Even to-day, when her heart was full of her child's sweet image, that dark memory still haunted her. It seemed to her as if some mystic influence obliged her to recall the horrors of that night.

"The curse of innocent blood has been upon me," she thought to herself. "I shall never know rest or peace till the murder of Valentine Jernam has been avenged."

Lady Eversleigh went at once to her rooms in Percy Street, and Mr. Andrew Larkspur betook himself to certain haunts, in which he expected to glean some information. That he was not entirely unsuccessful will appear from his subsequent conversation with Lady Eversleigh. After an absence, in reality short, but which, to her suspense and impatience appeared of endless duration, Mr. Larkspur presented himself before her.

"Well, Mr. Larkspur, what news?" she cried, eagerly, as he entered the room.

"Not much, my lady; but there's something done, at any rate. I've found out one fact."

"And what is that?"

"That the little lady has not been taken out of the country. Now, you seem to know something of the man Milsom, my lady. Have you any idea whether there is any particular place where he'd be likely to take little missy?"

For some minutes Lady Eversleigh remained silent, evidently lost in thought.

"Yes," she said, at last, "I do know something of that man's past career; so much, that the very mention of his name sends a thrill of horror through my heart. Yes, Mr. Larkspur, it is my misfortune to have known Black Milsom only too well in the bitter past."

"If your ladyship wouldn't consider it a liberty," said the police-officer, with some hesitation, "I should very much like to put a question."

"You are free to ask me what questions you please."

"What I should like to ask is this," replied Mr. Larkspur, "when and where did your ladyship happen to meet Black Milsom? If you would only be so kind as to speak freely, it might be a great help to me in the work I've got in hand."

Honoria did not answer him for some moments. She had risen from her chair, and was walking up and down the room in deep thought.

"Will it help you in your search for my child," she said, at length, "if I tell you all I know?"

"It may help me. I cannot venture to say more than that, my lady."

"If there is even a chance, I must speak," replied Honoria. "I will tell you, then," she said, throwing herself into a chair, and fixing her grave, earnest eyes upon the face of her companion. "In order to tell you what I know of Black Milsom, I must go back to the days of my childhood. My first memories are bright ones; but they are so vague, so shadowy, that it is with difficulty I can distinguish realities from dreams; and yet I believe the things which I remember must have been real. I have a faint recollection of a darkly beautiful face, that bent over me as I lay in some bed or cradle, softer and more luxurious than any bed I ever slept in for many years after that time. I remember a soft, sweet voice, that sang me to sleep. I remember that in the place I called home everything was beautiful."

"And do you not even know where this home was?"

"I know nothing of its locality. I was too young to remember the names of persons or places. But I have often fancied it was in Italy."

"In Italy!"

"Yes; for the first home which I really remember was a fisherman's hut, in a little village within a few miles of Naples. I was the only child in that miserable hovel—lonely, desolate, miserable, in the power of two wretches, whose presence filled me with loathing."

"And they were—?"

"An old woman, called Andrinetta—I know that, though I called her 'nurse' when she was with me in the beautiful home I so dimly remember—and the man whom you have heard of under the name of Black Milsom."

"Is he an Italian?" asked Andrew, astonished.

"I don't know," replied Honoria. "In England he calls himself an Englishman—in Italy he is supposed to be an Italian. What his real calling was in those days I do not know; but I feel assured that it must been dark and unlawful as all his actions have been since that time. He pretended to get his living like the other fishermen in the neighbourhood; but he was often idle for a week at a time, and still more often, absent. I have seen him count over gold and jewels with old Andrinetta on his return from some expedition. To me he was harsh and cruel. I hated him, and he knew that I hated him. He ordered me to call him father, and I was more than once savagely beaten by him because I refused to do so. Under such treatment, in such a wretched home, deprived of all natural companionship, I grew wild and strange. My will was indomitable as the will of my tyrant; and on many occasions I resisted him boldly. Sometimes I ran away, and wandered for days together among the neighbouring hills and woods; but I returned always sooner or later to my miserable shelter, for I knew not where else to go. My lonely life had made me shrink from all human creatures, except the two wretches with whom I lived; and when the few neighbours

would have shown me some kindness, I ran from them in wild, unreasoning terror."

"Strange!" muttered the police-officer.

"Yes; a strange history, is it not?" returned Lady Eversleigh. "And you wonder, no doubt, to hear of such a childhood from the lips of Sir Oswald Eversleigh's widow. One day I heard a neighbour reproaching the man with his cruel treatment of me. 'It is bad enough to have stolen the child,' he said; 'you shouldn't beat her as well.' From that hour I knew that I was a stolen child. I told him as much one night, and the next morning he took me to Naples, where, in the most obscure and yet most crowded part of the city, I lived for some years. 'Nobody will trouble himself about you here, my young princess,' my tyrant said to me. 'Children swarm by hundreds in all the alleys; you will only be one more drop of water in the ocean.'"

There was a pause, during which Honoria sat in a meditative attitude, with her eyes fixed upon vacancy. It seemed as if she was looking back into the shadowy past.

"I cannot tell you how wretched my life was for some time. Andrinetta had accompanied us to Naples; and soon I saw she was very ill, and she had fits of violence that approached insanity. Within doors she was my sole companion. The man only slept in the house, and at times was absent for months. How he earned his livelihood I knew no more than I had known in the little sea-side village. I now rarely saw jewels or gold in his possession; but at night, after he had gone to his chamber, I often heard the chink of golden coin through the thin partition which divided my room from his. I think in these days I must have perished body and soul if Providence had not sent me a friend in the person of a good Catholic priest—a noble and saintly old man—who visited the wretched dens of poverty and crime, and who discovered my desolate state. I need not dwell on that man's goodness to me; it is, doubtless, remembered in heaven, whither he may have gone before this time. He taught me, he comforted me, he rescued me from the abyss of wretchedness into which I had fallen. I took care to conceal his visits from my tyrant, for I knew how

that wicked heart would revolt against my redemption from ignorance and misery. When I was fifteen years of age, Andrinetta died. One day, soon after her death—for me a most sorrowful day—Tomaso (as they called him there) told me that he was going to bring me to England, I came with him, and for two years I remained his companion. I will not speak of that time. I have told you now all that I can tell."

"But the murder of Valentine Jernam!" exclaimed Andrew. "Suspicion pointed to this man; and you—you know something of that?"

"I will not speak of that now," replied Honoria. "I have said enough. The day may come when I may speak more freely; but it has not yet arrived. Trust me that I will not impede the course of justice where this man is concerned. And now tell me, does my revelation afford one ray of light which may help to dispel the darkness that surrounds my Gertrude's fate?"

"No, I cannot say it does. I cannot find out anything to indicate that she has been taken far away. I am sure she is in England, and that one of Milsom's pals, a man named Wayman—"

Lady Eversleigh started, and exclaimed, "I know him! I know him! Go on! go on!"

Larkspur directed a glance of keen and eager curiosity towards Lady Eversleigh. "You know Wayman?" he said.

"Well, well," she repeated. "I know him to be an unscrupulous ruffian. If he knows where my child is, he will sell the secret for money, and we will give him money—any sum; do you think I shall count the cost of her safety?"

"No, no," said Andrew Larkspur, "but you must not get so excited; keep quiet—tell me all you know of Wayman, and then we shall see our way."

At this point of the conversation Jane Payland knocked at the door of her mistress's sitting-room, and the interview between Honoria and the police-officer was interrupted.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"O, ABOVE MEASURE FALSE!"

Victor Carrington was very well content with the state of affairs at Hilton House in all but one respect. The fulfilment of his purpose was not approaching with sufficient rapidity. The rich marriage which he had talked about for Reginald was a pure figment; the virtuous ironmonger, with the richly dowered daughter, existed only in his prolific brain—the need of money was growing pressing. He had done much, but there was still much to do, and he must make haste to do it. He had also been mistaken on one point of much importance to his success; he had not calculated on the strength of Douglas Dale's constitution. Each day that he dined with Paulina—and the days on which he did not were exceedingly few—Dale drank a small quantity of curaçoa, into which Carrington had poured poison of a slow but sure nature. As the small carafon in which the liquor was placed upon the table was emptied, the poisoner never found any difficulty in gaining access to the fresh supply.

The antique liquor-chest, with its fittings of Venetian glass was always kept on the side-board in the dining-room, and was never locked. Paulina had a habit of losing anything that came into her hands, and the key of the liquor-chest had long been missing.

But the time was passing, and the poison was not telling, as far as he, the poisoner, could judge from appearances, on Douglas Dale. He never complained of illness, and beyond a slight lassitude, he did not seem to have anything the matter with him. This would not do. It behoved Carrington to expedite matters. His project was to accomplish the death of Douglas Dale by poison, throwing the burthen of suspicion—should suspicion arise—upon Paulina. To advance this purpose, he had industriously circulated reports of the most injurious character respecting her; so that Douglas Dale, if he had not been blinded and engrossed by his love, must have seen

that he was regarded by the men whom he was in the habit of meeting even more coldly and curiously than when he had first boldly announced his engagement to Madame Durski. He made it known that Douglas Dale had made a will, by which the whole of his disposable property was bequeathed to Paulina, and circulated a rumour that the Austrian widow was utterly averse to the intended marriage, in feeling, and was only contracting it from interested motives.

"If Dale was only out of the way, and his heir had come into the money, she would rather have Reginald," was a spiteful saying current among those who knew the lady and her suitor, and which had its unsuspected origin with Carrington. Supposing Dale to come to his death by poison, and that fact to be ascertained, who would be suspected but the woman who had everything to gain by his death, whose acknowledged lover was his next heir, and who succeeded by his will to all the property which did not go immediately into the possession of that acknowledged lover? The plan was admirably laid, and there was no apparent hitch in it, and it only remained now for Carrington to accelerate his proceedings. He still maintained reserve with Reginald Eversleigh, who would go to his house, and lounge purposelessly about, sullen and gloomy, but afraid to question the master-mind which had so completely subjugated his weak and craven nature.

The engagement between Paulina and Douglas had lasted nearly two months, when a cloud overshadowed the horizon which had seemed so bright.

Madame Durski became somewhat alarmed by a change in her lover's appearance, which struck her suddenly on one of his visits to the villa. For some weeks past she had seen him only by lamplight—that light which gives a delusive brightness to the countenance.

To-day she saw him with the cold northern sunlight shining full upon his face; and for the first time she perceived that he had altered much of late.

"Douglas," she said, earnestly, "how ill you are looking!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes; I see it to-day for the first time, and I can only wonder that I never noticed it before. You have grown so much paler, so much thinner, within the last few weeks. I am sure you cannot be well."

"My dearest Paulina, pray do not look at me with such alarm," said Douglas, gently. "Believe me, there is nothing particular the matter. I have not been quite myself for the last few weeks, I admit—a touch of low fever, I think; but there is not the slightest occasion for fear on your part."

"Oh, Douglas," exclaimed Paulina, "how can you speak so carelessly of a subject so vital to me? I implore you to consult a physician immediately."

"I assure you, my dearest, it is not necessary. There is nothing really the matter."

"Douglas, I beg and entreat you to see a physician directly. I entreat it as a favour to me."

"My dear Paulina, I am ready to do anything you wish."

"You will promise me, then, to see a doctor you can trust, without an hour's unnecessary delay?"

"I promise, with all my heart," replied Douglas. "Ah, Paulina, what happiness to think that my life is of some slight value to her I love so fondly!"

No more was said upon the subject; but during dinner, and throughout the evening, Paulina's eyes fixed themselves every now and then with an anxious, scrutinizing gaze upon her lover's face.

When he had left her, she mentioned her fears to her confidante and shadow, Miss Brewer.

"Do you not see a change in Mr. Dale?" she asked.

"A change! What kind of change?"

"Do you not perceive an alteration in his appearance? In plainer words, do you not

think him looking very ill?"

Miss Brewer, generally so impassive, started, and looked at her patroness with a gaze in which alarm was plainly visible.

She had hazarded so much in order to bring about a marriage between Douglas and her patroness; and what if mortality's dread enemy, Death, should forbid the banns?

"Ill!" she exclaimed; "do you think Mr. Dale is ill?"

"I do, indeed; and he confesses as much himself, though he makes light of the matter. He talks of low fever. I cannot tell you how much he has alarmed me."

"There may be nothing serious in it," answered Miss Brewer, with some hesitation. "One is so apt to take alarm about trifles which a doctor would laugh at. I dare say Mr. Dale only requires change of air. A London life is not calculated to improve any one's health."

"Perhaps that is the cause of his altered appearance," replied Paulina, only too glad to be reassured as to her lover's safety. "I will beg him to take change of air. But he has promised to see a doctor to-morrow: when he comes to me in the afternoon I shall hear what the doctor has said."

Douglas Dale was very much inclined to make light of the slight symptoms of ill-health which had oppressed him for some time—a languor, a sense of thirst and fever, which were very wearing in their effect, but which he attributed to the alternations of excitement and agitation that he had undergone of late.

He was, however, too much a man of honour to break the promise made to Paulina.

He went early on the following morning to Savile Row, where he called upon Dr. Harley Westbrook, a physician of some eminence, to whom he carefully described the symptoms of which he had complained to Paulina.

"I do not consider myself really ill," he said, in conclusion; "but I have come to you in obedience to the wish of a friend."

"I am very glad that you have come to me," answered Dr. Westbrook, gravely.

"Indeed! do you, then, consider the symptoms alarming?"

"Well, no, not at present; but I may go so far as to say that you have done very wisely in placing yourself under medical treatment. It is a most interesting case," added the doctor with an air of satisfaction that was almost enjoyment.

He then asked his patient a great many questions, some of which Douglas Dale considered frivolous, or, indeed, absurd; questions about his diet, his habits: questions even about the people with whom he associated, the servants who waited upon him.

These latter inquiries might have seemed almost impertinent, if Dr. Westbrook's elevated position had not precluded such an idea.

"You dine at your club, or in your chambers, eh, Mr. Dale?" he asked.

"Neither at my club, nor my chambers; I dine every day with a friend."

"Indeed; always with the same friend?"

"Always the same."

"And you breakfast?"

"At my chambers."

Here followed several questions as to the nature of the breakfast.

"These sort of ailments depend so much on diet," said the physician, as if to justify the closeness of his questioning. "Your servant prepares your breakfast, of course—is he a person whom you can trust?"

"Yes; he is an old servant of my father's. I could trust him implicitly in far more important matters than the preparation of my breakfast."

"Indeed! Will you pardon me if I ask rather a strange question?"

"Certainly, if it is a necessary one."

"Answered like a lawyer, Mr. Dale," replied Dr. Westbrook, with a smile. "I want to know whether this old and trusted servant of yours has any beneficial interest in your death?"

"Interest in my death—"

"In plainer words, has he reason to think that you have put him down in your will—supposing that you have made a will; which is far from probable?"

"Well, yes," replied Douglas, thoughtfully; "I have made a will within the last few months, and Jarvis, my old servant knows that he is provided for, in the event of surviving me—not a very likely event, according to the ordinary hazards; but a man is bound to prepare for every contingency."

"You told your servant that you had provided for him?"

"I did. He has been such an excellent creature, that it was only natural I should leave him comfortably situated in the event of my death."

"No; to be sure," answered the physician, with rather an absent manner. "And now I need trouble you with no further questions this morning. Come to me in a few days, and in the meantime take the medicine I prescribe for you."

Dr. Westbrook wrote a prescription, and Mr. Dale departed, very much perplexed by his interview with the celebrated physician.

Douglas went to Fulham that evening as usual, and the first question Paulina asked related to his interview with the doctor.

"You have seen a medical man?" she asked.

"I have; and you may set your mind at rest, dearest. He assures me that there is nothing serious the matter."

Paulina was entirely reassured, and throughout that evening she was brighter and happier than usual in the society of her lover—more lovely, more bewitching than ever, as it seemed to Douglas.

He waited a week before calling again on the physician; and he might, perhaps, have delayed his visit even longer, had he not felt that the fever and languor from which he suffered increased rather than abated.

This time Dr. Westbrook's manner seemed graver and more perplexed than on the former visit. He asked even more questions, and at last, after a thoughtful examination of the patient, he said, very seriously—

"Mr. Dale, I must tell you frankly that I do not like your symptoms."

"You consider them alarming?"

"I consider them perplexing, rather than alarming. And as you are not a nervous subject I think I may venture to trust you fully."

"You may trust in the strength of my nerve, if that is what you mean."

"I believe I may, and I shall have to test your moral courage and general force of character."

"Pray be brief, then," said Douglas with a faint smile. "I can almost guess what you have to say. You are going to tell me that I carry the seeds of a mortal disease; that the shadowy hand of death already holds me in its fatal grip."

"I am going to tell you nothing of the kind," answered Dr. Westbrook. "I can find no symptoms of disease. You have a very fair lease of life, Mr. Dale, and may enjoy a green old age, if other people would allow you to enjoy it."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that if I can trust my own judgment in a matter which is sometimes almost beyond the reach of science, the symptoms from which you suffer are those of slow poisoning."

"Slow poisoning!" replied Douglas, in almost inaudible accents. "It is impossible!" he exclaimed, after a pause, during which the physician waited quietly until his patient should have in some manner recovered his calmness of mind. "It is quite

impossible. I have every confidence in your skill, your science; but in this instance, Dr. Westbrook, I feel assured that you are mistaken."

"I would gladly think so, Mr. Dale," replied the doctor, gravely; "but I cannot. I have given my best thought to your case. I can only form one conclusion—namely, that you are labouring under the effects of poison."

"Do you know what the poison is?"

"I do not; but I do know that it must have been administered with a caution that is almost diabolical in its ingenuity—so slowly, by such imperceptible degrees, that you have scarcely been aware of the change which it has worked in your system. It was a most providential circumstance that you came to me when you did, as I have been able to discover the treachery to which you are subject while there is yet ample time for you to act against it. Forewarned is forearmed, you know, Mr. Dale. The hidden hand of the secret poisoner is about its fatal work; it is for you and me to discover to whom the hand belongs. Is there any one about you whom you can suspect of such hideous guilt?"

"No one—no one. I repeat that such a thing is impossible."

"Who is the person most interested in your death?" asked Dr. Westbrook, calmly.

"My first cousin, Sir Reginald Eversleigh, who would succeed to a very handsome income in that event. But I have not met him, or, at any rate, broke bread with him, for the last two months. Nor can I for a moment believe him capable of such infamy."

"If you have not been in intimate association with him for the last two months, you may absolve him from all suspicion," answered Dr. Westbrook. "You spoke to me the other day of dining very frequently with one particular friend; forgive me if I ask an unpleasant question. Is that friend a person whom you can trust?"

"That friend I could trust with a hundred lives, if I had them to lose," Douglas replied, warmly.

The doctor looked at his patient thoughtfully. He was a man of the world, and the warmth of Mr. Dale's manner told him that the friend in question was a woman.

"Has the person whom you trust so implicitly any beneficial interest in your death?" he asked.

"To some amount; but that person would gain much more by my continuing to live."

"Indeed; then we must needs fall back upon my original idea and painful as it may be to you, the old servant must become the object of your suspicion."

"I cannot believe him capable—"

"Come, come, Mr. Dale," interrupted the physician. "We must look at things as men of the world. It is your duty to ascertain by whom this poison has been administered, in order to protect yourself from the attacks of your insidious destroyer. If you will follow my advice, you will do this; if, on the other hand, you elect to shut your eyes to the danger that assails you, I can only tell you that you will most assuredly pay for your folly by the forfeit of your life."

"What am I to do?" asked Douglas.

"You say that your habits of life are almost rigid in their regularity. You always breakfast in your own chambers; you always dine and take your after-dinner coffee in the house of one particular friend. With the exception of a biscuit and a glass of sherry taken sometimes at your club, these two meals are all you take during the day. It is, therefore, an indisputable fact, that poison has bee a administered at one or other of these two meals. Your old butler serves one—the servants of your friend prepare the other. Either in your own chambers, or in your friend's house, you have a hidden foe. It is for you to find out where that foe lurks."

"Not in her house," gasped Douglas, unconsciously betraying the depth of his feeling and the sex of his friend; "not in hers. It must be Jarvis whom I have to fear—and yet, no, I cannot believe it. My father's old servant—a man who used to carry me in his arms when I was a boy!"

"You may easily set the question of his guilt or innocence at rest, Mr. Dale," answered Dr. Westbrook. "Contrive to separate yourself from him for a time. If during that time you find your symptoms cease, you will have the strongest evidence of his guilt; if they still continue, you must look elsewhere."

"I will take your advice," replied Douglas, with a weary sigh; "anything is better than suspense."

Little more was said.

As Douglas walked slowly from the physician's house to the Phoenix Club, he meditated profoundly on the subject of his interview with Dr. Westbrook.

"Who is the traitor?" he asked himself. "Who? Unhappily there can be no doubt about it. Jarvis is the guilty wretch."

It was with unspeakable pain that Douglas Dale contemplated the idea of his old servant's guilt: his old servant, who had seemed a model of fidelity and devotion!

This very man had attended the deathbed of the rector—Douglas Dale's father—had been recommended by that father to the care of his two sons, had exhibited every appearance of intense grief at the loss of his master.

What could he think, except that Jarvis was guilty? There was but one other direction in which he could look for guilt, and there surely it could not be found.

Who in Hilton House had any interest in his death, except that one person who was above the possibility of suspicion?

He sat by his solitary breakfast-table on the morning after his interview with the physician, and watched Jarvis as he moved to and fro, waiting on his master with what seemed affectionate attention.

Douglas ate little. A failing appetite had been one of the symptoms that accompanied the low fever from which he had lately suffered.

This morning, depression of spirits rendered him still less inclined to eat.

He was thinking of Jarvis and of the past—those careless, happy, childish days, in which this man had been second only to his own kindred in his boyish affection.

While he meditated gravely upon this most painful subject, deliberating as to the manner in which he should commence a conversation that was likely to be a very serious one, he happened to look up, and perceived that he was watched by the man he had been lately watching. His eyes met the gaze of his old servant, and he beheld a strange earnestness in that gaze.

The old man did not flinch on meeting his master's glance.

"I beg your pardon for looking at you so hard, Mr. Douglas," he said; "but I was thinking about you very serious, sir, when you looked up."

"Indeed, Jarvis, and why?"

"Why you see, sir, it was about your appetite as I was thinking. It's fallen off dreadful within the last few weeks. The poor breakfastes as you eats is enough to break a man's heart. And you don't know the pains as I take, sir, to tempt you in the way of breakfastes. That fish, sir, I fetched from Grove's this morning with my own hands. They comes up in a salt-water tank in the bottom of their own boat, sir, as lively as if they was still in their natural eleming, Grove's fish do. But they might be red herrings for any notice as you take of 'em. You're not yourself, Mr. Douglas, that's what it is. You're ill, Mr. Douglas, and you ought to see a doctor. Excuse my presumption, sir, in making these remarks; but if an old family servant that has nursed you on his knees can't speak free, who can?"

"True," Douglas answered with a sigh; "I was a very small boy when you carried me on your shoulders to many a country fair, and you were very good to me, Jarvis."

"Only my dooty, sir," muttered the old man.

"You are right, Jarvis, as to my health—I am ill."

"Then you'll send for a doctor, surely, Mr. Douglas."

"I have already seen a doctor."

"And what do he say, sir?"

"He says my case is very serious."

"Oh, Mr. Douglas, don't 'ee say that, don't 'ee say that," cried the old man, in extreme distress.

"I can only tell you the truth, Jarvis," answered Douglas: "but there is no occasion for despair. The physician tells me that my case is a grave one, but he does not say that it is hopeless."

"Why don't 'ee consult another doctor, Mr. Douglas," said Jarvis; "perhaps that one ain't up to his work. If it's such a difficult case, you ought to go to all the best doctors in London, till you find the one that can cure you. A fine, well-grown young gentleman like you oughtn't to have much the matter with him. I don't see as it can be very serious."

"I don't know about that, Jarvis; but in any case I have resolved upon doing something for you."

"For me, sir! Lor' bless your generous heart, I don't want nothing in this mortal world."

"But you may, Jarvis," replied Douglas. "You have already been told that I have provided for you in case of my death."

"Yes, sir, you was so good as to say you had left me an annuity, and it was very kind of you to think of such a thing, and I'm duly thankful. But still you see, sir, I can't help looking at it in the light of a kind of joke, sir; for it ain't in human nature that an old chap like me is going to outlive a young gentleman like you; and Lord forbid that it should be in human nature for such a thing to happen."

"We never know what may happen, Jarvis. At any rate, I have provided against the worst. But as you are getting old, and have worked hard all your life, I think you

must want rest; so, instead of putting you off till my death, I shall give you your annuity at once, and you may retire into a comfortable little house of your own, and live the life of an elderly gentleman, with a decent little income, as soon as you please."

To the surprise of Douglas Dale, the old man's countenance expressed only grief and mortification on hearing an announcement which his master had supposed would have been delightful to him.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he faltered; "but have you seen a younger servant as you like better and as could serve you better, than poor old Jarvis?"

"No, indeed," answered Douglas, "I have seen no such person. Nor do I believe that any one in the world could serve me as well as you."

"Then why do you want to change, sir?"

"I don't want to change. I only want to make you happy, Jarvis."

"Then make me happy by letting me stay with you," pleaded the old servant. "Let me stay, sir. Don't talk about annuities. I want nothing from you but the pleasure of waiting on my dear old master's son. It's as much delight to me to wait upon you now as it was to me twenty years ago to carry you to the country fairs on my shoulder. Ah, we did have rare times of it then, didn't we, sir? Let me stay, and when I die give me a grave somewhere hard by where you live; and if, once in a way, when you pass the churchyard where I lay, you should give a sigh, and say, 'Poor old Jarvis!' that will be a full reward to me for having loved you so dear ever since you was a baby."

Was this acting? Was this the perfect simulation of an accomplished hypocrite? No, no, no; Douglas Dale could not believe it.

The tears came into his eyes; he extended his hand, and grasped that of his old servant.

"You shall stay with me, Jarvis," he said; "and I will trust you with all my heart."

Douglas Dale left his chambers soon after that conversation, and went straight to Dr. Westbrook, to whom he gave a fall account of the interview.

"I have tested the old man thoroughly," he said, in conclusion; "and I believe him to be fidelity itself."

"You have tested him, Mr. Dale! stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the practical physician. "You surely don't call that sentimental conversation a test? If the man is capable of being a slow poisoner, he is, of course, capable of acting a part, and shedding crocodile's tears in evidence of his devoted affection for the master whose biliary organs he is deranging by the administration of antimony, or aconite. If you want to test the man thoroughly, test him in my way. Contrive to eat your breakfast elsewhere for a week or two; touch nothing, not so much as a glass of water, in your own chambers; and if at the end of that time the symptoms have ceased, you will know what to think of that pattern of fidelity—Mr. Jarvis."

Douglas promised to take the doctor's advice. He was convinced of his servant's innocence; but he wanted to put that question beyond doubt.

But if Jarvis was indeed innocent, where was the guilty wretch to be found?

Douglas Dale dined at Hilton House upon the evening after his interview with Dr. Westbrook, as he had done without intermission for several weeks. He found Paulina tender and affectionate, as she had ever been of late, since respect and esteem for her lover's goodness had developed into a warmer feeling.

"Douglas," she said, on this particular evening, when they were alone together for a few minutes after dinner, "your health has not improved as much as I had hoped it would under the treatment of your doctor. I wish you would consult some one else."

She spoke lightly, for she feared to alarm the patient by any appearance of fear on her part. She knew how physical disease may be augmented by mental agitation. Her tone, therefore, was one of assumed carelessness.

To-night Douglas Dale's mind was peculiarly sensitive to every impression. Something in that assumed tone struck strangely upon his ear. For the first time since he had known her, the voice of the woman he loved, seemed to him to have a false sound in its clear, ringing tones.

An icy terror suddenly took possession of his mind.

What if this woman—this woman, whom he loved with such intense affection—what if she were something other than she seemed! What if her heart had never been his—her love never withdrawn from the reprobate upon whom she had once bestowed it! What if her tender glances, her affectionate words, her graceful, caressing manner, were all a comedy, of which he was the dupe! What if—

"I am the victim of treachery," he thought to himself; "but the traitor cannot be here. Oh, no, no! let me find the traitor anywhere rather than here."

Paulina watched her lover as he sat with his eyes fixed on the ground, absorbed in gloomy meditation.

Presently he looked up suddenly, and addressed her.

"I am going on a journey, Paulina, on business," he said; "business, which I can only transact myself. I shall, therefore, be compelled to be absent from you for a week; it may be even more. Perhaps we shall never meet again. Will that be very distressing to you?"

"Douglas," exclaimed Paulina, "how strangely you speak to me to-night! If this is a jest, it is a very cruel one."

"It is no jest, Paulina," answered her lover. "Life is very precarious, and within the last week I have learnt to consider my existence in imminent peril."

"You are ill, Douglas," said Paulina; "and illness has unnerved you. Pray do not give way to these depressing thoughts. Consult some other physician than the man who is now your adviser."

"Yes, yes; I will do so," answered Douglas, with, a sudden change of tone; "you are right, Paulina. I will not be so weak as to become the prey of these distressing fancies, these dark forebodings. What have I to fear? Death is no terrible evil. It is but the common fate of all. I can face that common doom as calmly as a Christian should face it. But deceit, treachery, falsehood from those we love—those are evils far more terrible than death. Oh, Paulina! tell me that I have no need to fear those?"

"From whom should you fear them, Douglas!"

"Aye, from whom, that is the question! Not from you, Paulina?"

"From me!" she echoed, with a look of wonder. "Are you mad?"

"Swear—swear to me that there is no falsehood in your heart, Paulina; that you love me as truly as you have taught me to believe; that you have not beguiled me with false words, as false as they are sweet!" cried the young man, in wild excitement.

"My dear Douglas, this is madness!" exclaimed Madame Durski; "folly too wild for reproof. This passionate excitement must be surely the effect of fever. What can I say to you except that I love you truly and dearly; that my heart has been purified, my mind elevated by your influence; that I have now no thought which is not known to you—no hope that does not rest itself upon your love. You ought to believe this, Douglas, for my every word, my every look, should speak the truth, which I do not care to reiterate in protestations such as these. It is too painful to me to be doubted by you."

"And if I have wronged you, I am a base wretch," said Douglas, in a low voice.

Early the following morning he paid another visit to Dr. Westbrook.

"I will not trespass on your time this morning," he said, after shaking hands with the physician. "I have only come here in order to ask one question. If the poison were discontinued for a week, would there be any cessation of the symptoms?"

"There would," replied the doctor. "Nature is quick to reassert herself. But if you are

about to test your butler, I should recommend you to remain away longer than a week—say a fortnight."

But it was not to test his old servant that Douglas Dale absented himself from London, though he had allowed the physician to believe that such was his intention. He started for Paris that night; but he took Jarvis with him.

His health improved day by day, hour by hour, from the day of his parting from Paulina Durski. The low fever had left him before he had been ten days in Paris; the perpetual thirst, the wearisome debility, left him also. He began to be his old self again; and to him this recovery was far more terrible than the worst possible symptoms of disease could have been, for it told him that the hidden foe who had robbed him of health and strength, was to be found at Hilton House.

In that house there was but one person who would profit by Douglas Dale's death, and she would profit largely.

"She has never loved me," he thought to himself. "She still loves Reginald Eversleigh. My death will give her both fortune and liberty; it will leave her free to wed the man she really loves."

He no longer trusted his own love. He believed that he had been made the dupe of a woman's treachery; and that the hand which had so often been pressed passionately to his lips, was the hand which, day by day, had mingled poison with his cup, sapping his life by slow degrees. Against the worldly wisdom of his friends he had opposed the blind instinct of his love; and now that events conspired to condemn this woman, he wondered that he could ever have trusted her.

At the end of a fortnight Douglas Dale returned from Paris, and went immediately to Paulina. He believed that he had been the dupe of an accomplished actress—the vilest and most heartless of women—and he was now acting a part, in order to fathom the depth of her iniquity.

"Let me know her—let me know her in all her baseness," he said to himself. "Let me

tax the murderess with her crime! and then, surely, this mad love will be plucked for ever from my heart, and I shall find peace far from the false syren whose sorcery has embittered my life."

Douglas had received several letters from Paulina during his visit to Paris—letters breathing the most devoted and disinterested love; but to him every word seemed studied, every expression false. Those very letters would, a few short weeks ago, have seemed to Douglas the perfection of truth and artlessness.

He returned to England wondrously restored to health. Jarvis had been his constant attendant in Paris, and had brought him every morning a cup of coffee made by his own hands.

At the Temple, he found a note from Paulina, telling him that he was expected hourly at Hilton House.

He lost no time in presenting himself. He endeavoured to stifle all emotion—to conquer the impatience that possessed him; but he could not.

Madame Durski was seated by one of the windows in the drawing-room when Mr. Dale was announced.

She received her lover with every appearance of affection, and with an emotion which she seemed only anxious to conceal.

But to the jaundiced mind of Douglas Dale this suppressed emotion appeared only a superior piece of acting; and yet, as he looked at his betrothed, while she stood before him, perfect, peerless, in her refined loveliness, his heart was divided by love and hate. He hated the guilt which he believed was hers. He loved her even yet, despite that guilt.

"You are very pale, Douglas," she said after the first greetings were over. "But, thank heaven, there is a wonderful improvement. I can see restored health in your face. The fever has gone—the unnatural brightness has left your eyes. Oh, dearest, how happy it makes me to see this change! You can never know what I suffered

when I saw you drooping, day by day."

"Yes, day by day, Paulina," answered the young man, gravely. "It was a gradual decay of health and strength—my life ebbing slowly—almost imperceptibly—but not the less surely."

"And you are better, Douglas? You feel and know yourself that there is a change?"

"Yes, Paulina. My recovery began in the hour in which I left London. My health has improved from that time."

"You required change of air, no doubt. How foolish your doctor must have been not to recommend that in the first instance! And now that you have returned, may I hope to see you as often as of old? Shall we renew all our old habits, and go back to our delightful evenings?"

"Were those evenings really pleasant to you, Paulina?" asked Mr. Dale, earnestly.

"Ah, Douglas, you must know they were!"

"I cannot know the secrets of your heart, Paulina," he replied, with unspeakable sadness in his tone. "You have seemed to me all that is bright, and pure, and true. But how do I know that it is not all seeming? How do I know that Reginald Eversleigh's image may not still hold a place in your heart?"

"You insult me, Douglas!" exclaimed Madame Durski, with dignity. "But I will not suffer myself to be angry with you on the day of your return. I see your health is not entirely restored, since you still harbour these gloomy thoughts and unjust suspicions."

His most searching scrutiny could perceive no traces of guilt in the lovely face he looked at so anxiously. For a while his suspicions were almost lulled to rest. That soft white hand, which glittered with gems that had been his gift, could not be the hand of an assassin.

He began to feel the soothing influence of hope. Night and day he prayed that he

might discover the innocence of her he so fondly loved. But just as he had begun to abandon himself to that sweet influence, despair again took possession of him. All the old symptoms—the fever, the weakness, the unnatural thirst, the dry, burning sensation in his throat—returned; and this time Jarvis was far away. His master had sent him to pay a visit to a married daughter, comfortably settled in the depths of Devonshire.

Douglas Dale went to one of the most distinguished physicians in London. He was determined to consult a new adviser, in order to discover whether the opinion of that other adviser would agree with the opinion of Dr. Harley Westbrook.

Dr. Chippendale, the new physician, asked all the questions previously asked by Dr. Westbrook, and, after much deliberation, he informed his patient, with all proper delicacy and caution, that he was suffering from the influence of slow poison.

"Is my life in danger, Dr. Chippendale?" he asked.

"Not in immediate danger. The poison has evidently been administered in infinitesimal doses. But you cannot too soon withdraw yourself from all those who now surround you. Life is not to be tampered with. The poisoner may take it into his head to increase the doses."

Douglas Dale left his adviser after a long conversation. He then went to take his farewell of Paulina Durski.

There was no longer the shadow of doubt in his mind. The horrible certainty seemed painfully clear to him. Love must be plucked for ever from his breast, and only contempt and loathing must remain where that divine sentiment had been enthroned.

Since his interview with the physician, he had carefully recalled to memory all the details of his life in Paulina's society.

She had given him day by day an allotted portion of poison.

How had she administered it?

This was the question which he now sought to solve, for he no longer asked himself whether she was guilty or innocent. He remembered that every evening after dinner he had, in Continental fashion, taken a single glass of liqueur; and this he had received from Paulina's own hand. It had pleased him to take the tiny, fragile glass from those taper fingers. The delicate liqueur had seemed sweeter to him because it was given by Paulina.

He now felt convinced that it was in this glass of liqueur the poison had been administered to him.

On more than one occasion he had at first declined taking it; but Paulina had always persuaded him, with some pretty speech, some half coquettish, half caressing action.

He found her waiting him as usual: her toilet perfection itself; her beauty enhanced by the care with which she always strove to render herself charming in his eyes. She said playfully that it was a tribute which she offered to her benefactor.

They dined together, with Miss Brewer for their sole companion. She seemed self-contained and emotionless as ever; but if Douglas had not been so entirely absorbed by his thoughts of Paulina, he might have perceived that she looked at him ever and anon with furtive, but searching glances.

There was little conversation, little gaiety at that dinner. Douglas was absent-minded and gloomy. He scarcely ate anything; but the constant thirst from which he suffered obliged him to drink long draughts of water.

After dinner, Miss Brewer brought the glasses and the liqueur to Madame Durski, after her customary manner.

Paulina filled the ruby-stemmed glass with curaçoa, and handed it to her lover.

"No, Paulina, I shall take no liqueur to-night."

"Why not, Douglas?"

"I am not well," he replied, "and I am growing rather tired of curaçoa."

"As you please," said Paulina, as she replaced the delicate glass in the stand from which she had just taken it.

Miss Brewer had left the room, and the lovers were alone together. They were seated face to face at the prettily decorated table—one with utter despair in his heart.

"Shall I tell you why I would not take that glass from your hands just now, Paulina Durski?" asked Douglas, after a brief pause, rising to leave the table as he spoke. "Or will you spare me the anguish of speaking words that must cover you with shame?"

"I do not understand you," murmured Paulina, looking at her lover with a gaze of mingled terror and bewilderment.

"Oh, Paulina!" cried Douglas; "why still endeavour to sustain a deception which I have unmasked? I know all."

"All what?" gasped the bewildered woman.

"All your guilt—all your baseness. Oh, Paulina, confess the treachery which would have robbed me of life; and which, failing that, has for ever destroyed my peace. If you are human, let some word of remorse, some tardy expression of regret, attest your womanhood."

"I can only think that he is mad," murmured Paulina to herself, as she gazed on her accuser with wondering eyes.

"Paulina, at least do not pretend to misunderstand me."

"Your words," replied Madame Durski, "seem to me the utterances of a madman. For pity's sake, calm yourself, and speak plainly."

"I think that I have spoken, very plainly."

"I can discover no meaning in your words. What is it you would have me regret? Of what crime do you accuse me?"

"The worst and darkest of all crimes," replied Douglas; "the crime of murder."

"Murder?"

"Yes; the crime of the secret poisoner!"

"Douglas!" cried Paulina, with a stifled shriek of terror; and then, recoiling from him suddenly, she fell half fainting into a chair. "Oh, why do I try to reason with him?" she murmured, piteously; "he is mad—he is mad! My poor Douglas!" continued Paulina, sobbing hysterically, "you are mad yourself, and you will drive me mad. Do not speak to me. Leave me to myself. You have terrified me by your wild denunciations. Leave me, Douglas: for pity's sake, leave me."

"I will leave you, Paulina," answered her lover, in a grave, sad voice; "and our parting will be for ever. You cannot deny your guilt, and you can no longer deceive me."

"Do as you please," replied Madame Durski, her passionate indignation changing suddenly to an icy calmness. "You have wronged me so deeply, you have insulted me so shamefully, that it matters little what further wrong or insult I suffer at your hands. In my own justification, I will say but this—I am as incapable of the guilt you talk of as I am of understanding how such a wild and groundless accusation can come from you, Douglas Dale, my affianced husband—the man I have loved and trusted, the man whom I have believed the very model of honour and generosity. But this must be madness, and I am not bound to endure the ravings of a lunatic. You have said our farewell was to be spoken to-night. Let it be so. I could not endure a repetition of the scene with which you have just favoured me. I regret most deeply that your generosity has burthened me with, pecuniary obligations which I may never be able to repay, and has, in some measure, deprived me of independence. But even at the hazard of being considered ungrateful, I must tell you that I trust we may meet no more."

No one can tell the anguish which Paulina Durski endured as she uttered these words in cold, measured accents. It was the supreme effort of a proud, but

generous-minded woman, and there was a kind of heroism in that subjugation of a stricken and loving heart.

"Let it be so, Paulina," answered Douglas, with emotion. "I have no wish to see your fair, false face again. My heart has been broken by your treachery; and my best hope lies in the chance that your hand may have already done its wicked work, and that my life may be forfeited to my confidence in your affection. Let no thought of my gifts trouble you. The fortune which was to have been shared with you is henceforth powerless to purchase one blessing for me. And of the law which you have outraged you need have no few; your secret will never be revealed to mortal ears by me. No investigation will drag to light the details of your crime."

"You may seek no investigation, Douglas Dale," cried Paulina, with sudden passion; "but I shall do so, and without delay. You have accused me of a foul and treacherous crime—on what proof I know not. It is for me to prove myself innocent of that black iniquity; and if human ingenuity can fathom the mystery, it shall be fathomed. I will bring you to my feet—yes, to my feet; and you shall beseech my pardon for the wicked wrong you have done me. But even then this breach of your own making shall for ever separate us. I may learn to forgive you, Douglas, but I can never trust you again. And now go."

She pointed to the door with an imperious gesture. There was a quiet dignity in her manner and her bearing which impressed her accuser in spite of himself.

He bowed, and without another word left the presence of the woman who for so long had been the idol of his heart.

He went from her presence bowed to the very dust by a sorrow which was too deep for tears.

"She is an accomplished actress," he said to himself; "and to the very last her policy has been defiance. And now my dream is ended, and I awake to a blank, joyless life. A strange fatality seems to have attended Sir Oswald Eversleigh and the inheritors

of his wealth. He died broken-hearted by a woman's falsehood; my brother Lionel bestowed his best affections on the mercenary, fashionable coquette, Lydia Graham, who was ready to accept another lover within a few weeks of her pretended devotion to him; and lastly comes my misery at the hands of a wicked adventuress."

Douglas Dale resolved to leave London early next day. He returned to his Temple chambers, intending to start for the Continent the next morning.

But when the next day came he did not carry out his intention. He found himself disinclined to seek change of scene, which he felt could bring him no relief of mind. Go where he would, he could not separate himself from the bitter memories of the past few months.

He determined to remain in London; for, to the man who wishes to avoid the companionship of his fellow-men, there is no hermitage more secure than a lodging in the heart of busy, selfish London. He determined to remain, for in London he could obtain information as to the conduct of Paulina.

What would she do now that the stage-play was ended, and deception could no longer avail? Would she once more resume her old habits—open her saloons to the patrician gamblers of West-end London, and steep her weary, guilt-burdened soul in the mad intoxication of the gaming-table?

Would Sir Reginald Eversleigh again assume his old position in her household?—again become her friend and flatterer? She had affected to despise him; but that might have been only a part of the great deception of which Douglas had been the victim.

These were the questions the lonely, heartbroken man asked himself that night, as he sat brooding by his solitary hearth, no longer able to find pleasure in the nightly studies which had once been so delightful to him.

Ah! how deeply he must have loved that woman, when the memory of her guilt poisoned his existence! How madly he still clung to the thought of her!—how

intensely he desired to penetrate the secrets of her life!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"THY DAY IS COME!"

"What is it, Jane?" asked Lady Eversleigh, rather impatiently, of her maid, when her knock at the door of her sitting-room in Percy Street interrupted the conversation between herself and the detective officer, a conversation intensely and painfully interesting.

"A person, ma'am, who wants to see Mr. Andrews, and will take no denial."

"Indeed," said Mr. Larkspur; "that's very odd: I know of nothing up at present for which they should send any one to me here. However," and he rose as he spoke, "I suppose I had better see this person. Where is he?"

"In the hall," replied Jane.

But Lady Eversleigh interposed to prevent Mr. Larkspur's departure. "Pray do not go," she said, "unless it concerns this business, unless it is news of my child. This may be something to rob me of your time and attention; and remember I alone have a right to your services."

"Lor' bless you, my lady," said Mr. Larkspur, "I haven't forgot that; and that's just what puzzles me. There's only one man who knows the lay I'm on, and the name I go by, and he knows I would not take anything else till I have reckoned up this; and it would be no good sending anybody after me, unless it were something in some way concerning this business."

In an instant Lady Eversleigh was as anxious that Mr. Larkspur should see the unknown man as she had been unwilling he should do so. "Pray go to him at once," she urged; "don't lose a moment."

Mr. Larkspur left the room, and Lady Eversleigh dismissed Jane Payland, and awaited his return in an agony of impatience. After the lapse of half an hour, Mr.

Larkspur appeared. There were actually some slight traces of emotion in his face, and the colour had lessened considerably in his vulture-like beak. He was followed by a tall, stalwart, fine-looking man, with the unmistakeable gait and air of a sailor. As Lady Eversleigh looked at him in astonishment, Mr. Larkspur said:—

"I ain't much of a believer in Fate in general, but there's surely a Fate in this. My lady, this is Captain George Jernam!"

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The time had passed slowly and wearily for Rosamond Jernam, and all the efforts conscientiously made by her husband's aunt, who liked the girl better the more she saw of her, and entirely acquitted her of blame in the mysterious estrangement of the young couple, failed to make her cheerful. She was wont to roam disconsolately for hours about the secluded coast, giving free course to her sadness, and cherishing one dear secret. Rosamond was so much changed in appearance of late that Susan Jernam began to feel seriously uneasy about her. She had lost her pretty fresh colour, and her face wore a haggard, weary look; it was plain to every eye that some hidden grief was preying on her mind. Mrs. Jernam, though a quiet person, and given to the minding of her own affairs, was not quite without "cronies," and to one of these she confided her anxiety about her niece. The confidante was a certain Mrs. Miller, a respectable person, but lower in the social scale than Mrs. Jernam. She was a widow, and lived in a tiny cottage, close to the beach at Allanbay; she kept no servant, but her trim little dwelling was always the very pink and pattern of neatness. She was of a silent, though not a morose temperament. It was generally understood that Mrs. Miller's husband had been a seafaring man, and had been drowned many years before she went to live at Allanbay. She had no relatives, and no previous acquaintances in that quiet nook; and if she had been a little higher in the social scale, belonging to that class which requires introductions, she might have lived a life of unbroken solitude. As it was, the neighbours made friends with her by

degrees, and the poor widow's life was not an unhappy or solitary one. Mrs. Jernam had early learned the particulars of her case, and a friendship had grown up between them, of which Mrs. Miller duly acknowledged the condescension on Mrs. Jernam's part.

Mrs. Jernam called on her humble friend one day, to bestow some small favour, and, to her surprise, found her, not alone as usual, but in the act of taking leave of a man whose appearance was by no means prepossessing, and who was apparently very much disconcerted by Mrs. Jernam's arrival. Mrs. Jernam immediately proposed to go away and return on another occasion, but the man, who did not hear her name mentioned, said, gruffly:

"No call, ma'am, no call; I'm going away. Good-bye, Polly. Remember what you've got to do, and do it." Then he turned off from the cottage-door, and was out of sight in a few moments.

Mrs. Miller stood looking at her guest, rather awkwardly, but said at length:

"Pray sit down, ma'am. That's my brother; the only creature I have belonging to me in the world." And here Mrs. Miller sighed, and looked as if the possession were not an unqualified advantage.

"Has he been here long?" asked Mrs. Jernam.

"No, ma'am; he only came last night, and is gone again. He came to bring me a child to take care of, and a great tax it is."

"A child!" said Mrs. Jernam, "whose child?"

"That's more than I can tell you, ma'am," replied Mrs. Miller; "and more than he told me. She's an orphan, he says, and her father was a seafaring man, like your nephew, as I've heard you speak of. And I'm to have the charge of her for a year, and thirty pounds—it's handsome, I don't deny, but he knows that I'd take good care of any child—and she's a pretty dear, to tell the truth, as sweet a little creature as ever walked. She don't talk very plain yet, and she says, as well as I can make it out, as

her name is Gerty."

And then Mrs. Miller asked Mrs. Jernam to walk into her little bedroom, and showed her, lying on a neat humble bed, carefully covered with a white coverlet, and in the deep sleep of childhood, the infant heiress of Raynham! If either of the women had only known at whom she was looking, as they scrutinized the child's fair face and talked of her beauty and her innocence in tearful whispers, looking away from the sleeping form, pitifully, at a little heap of black clothes on a chair by the bed!

"I suppose she's the child of one of my brother's old shipmates, as rose to be better off," said Mrs. Miller, "for she's fretted about a captain, and cried bitter to go to him when I put her to bed." Then the two returned to the little parlour, and talked long and earnestly about the child, about the necessity for Mrs. Miller's now employing the services of "a girl," and about Rosamond Jernam.

Rosamond was greatly delighted with the child left in Mrs. Miller's care. The little girl interested her deeply, and every day she passed many hours with her, either at Mrs. Miller's house or her own. The grace and beauty of the child were remarkable; and as, with the happy facility of childhood, she began to recover from the first feeling of strangeness and fear, the little creature was soon happy in her new, humble home. She was too young to appreciate and lament the change in her lot; and, as she was well fed, well cared for, and treated with the most caressing affection, she was perfectly happy. Rosamond began to feel hopeful under the influence of the child's smiles and playful talk. The time must pass, she told herself, her husband must return to her, and soon there would be for them a household angel like this one, to bring peace and happiness permanently to their home.

Susan Jernam and Rosamond were much puzzled about this lovely child, Gerty Smith, as she was called. Not only her looks, but certain little ways she had, contradicted Mrs. Miller's theory of her birth, and though they fully credited the

good woman's statement, and believed her as ignorant of the truth as themselves, they became convinced that there was some mystery about this child. Mrs. Miller had never spoken of her brother until he made his sudden and brief appearance at Allanbay; and unsuspicious and unlearned in the ways of the world as Mrs. Jernam was, she had perceived that he belonged to the doubtful classes. The truth was, that Mrs. Miller could have told them nothing about her brother beyond the general fact of his being "a bad lot." She had heard of him only at rare intervals since he had left his father's honest home, in his scampish, incorrigible boyhood, and ran away to sea. She had heard little good of him, and years had sometimes passed over during which she knew nothing of his fate. But even in Black Milsom—thief, murderer, villain, though he was—there was one little trace of good left. He did care a little for his sister; he did "look her up" at intervals in his career of crime; he did send her small sums of money—whence derived she had, happily, no suspicion—when he was "flush;" and he did hope "Old Polly" would never find out how bad a fellow he had been. Mrs. Miller's nature was a very simple and confiding one, and she never speculated much upon her brother's doings. She was pleased to have the charge of the child, and she fulfilled it to the best of her ability; but those signs and tokens of a higher station, which Susan Jernam and Rosamond recognized, were quite beyond her ken.

One morning the little household at Susan Jernam's cottage, consisting only of the mistress and her maid, was roused by a violent knocking at the door. Mrs. Jernam was the first to open it, and to her surprise and alarm, she found Mrs. Miller standing at the door, her face expressing alarm and grief, and little Gerty, wrapped in a large woollen shawl, in her arms. Her explanation of what had occurred thus to upset her was at first incoherent enough, but by degrees Mrs. Jernam learned that Mrs. Miller had come to entreat her to take care of the child for a day or two as she was obliged to go to Plymouth at once.

"To Plymouth!" said Mrs. Jernam—"how's that?—but come in, come in"—and they

went into Mrs. Jernam's spotlessly neat parlour, that parlour in which Valentine Jernam had been permitted to smoke, and had told his aunt all his adventures, little recking of the final one then so close upon him. In the parlour, Mrs. Miller set little Gerty down, and the child, giddy and confused with her sudden waking, and being thus carried through the chill morning air, climbed up on the trim little sofa, and curling herself into a corner of it, sat quite motionless. Then, her agitation finding vent in tears, Mrs. Miller told Susan Jernam what had befallen. It was this:—

Just as day was dawning, a dog-cart, driven by a gentleman's servant, had come to her door—the dog-cart was now standing at a little distance from Mrs. Jernam's house—and she had been called out by the servant, and told that he had been sent to bring her over to Plymouth, with as little delay as possible. It appeared that her brother, who had gone to Plymouth after depositing the child with her, had been run over in the street by a heavy coal-waggon, and severely injured. He had been carried to a hospital, and was for some time insensible. When he recovered his speech he was delirious, and the surgeons pronounced his case hopeless. He was now in a dying state, but conscious; and had been visited by a clergyman named Colburne, the man's master, who had induced him to express contrition for his past life, and to make such reparation as now lay in his power. The first step towards this, as he informed Mr. Colburne, was seeing his sister. There was no time to be lost; the man's life was fast ebbing; it was only a matter of hours; and the good clergyman, who had been with the dying man far into the night before he had succeeded in inducing him to consent to this step, hurried home, and sent his servant off to Allanbay before daybreak.

There was little delay. A few words of earnest sympathy from Mrs. Jernam, an assurance that the child should be well cared for, and Mrs. Miller left the house, ran down the road to the dog-cart, climbed into it, and was driven away.

Rosamond came in from her own little dwelling to her aunt's, at an early hour that

day, and when the first surprise and pleasure of finding the child there had passed away, the two women fell to speculating on what kind of revelation it might be which awaited Mrs. Miller.

"Depend upon it, aunt," said Susan, "we shall hear the truth about little Gerty now."

* * * * *

The hours wore solemnly away in the great building, consecrated to suffering and its relief, in which Black Milsom lay dying, with his sister kneeling by his bed, while the good clergyman, who had had pity on the soul of the sinner, sat on the other side, gravely and compassionately looking at them both. The meeting between the brother and sister had been very distressing, and the agony exhibited by the poor woman when she was made aware that her brother had acknowledged himself a criminal of the deepest dye, was intense. Calm—almost stupor—had succeeded to her wild grief, and the clergyman had spoken words of consolation and hope to the dying and the living. The surgeons had seen the man for the last time; there was nothing more to be done for him now—nothing to do but to wait for the equal foot approaching with remorseless tread.

It was indeed a fearful catalogue of crime to which the Rev. Philip Colburne had listened, and had written with his own hand at the dying man's dictation. Not often has such a revelation been made to mortal ears, and the two who heard it—the Christian minister and the trembling, horrified sister—felt that the scene could never be effaced from their memories.

With only two items in that awful list this story has to do.

The first is, the murder of Valentine Jernam. As Mrs. Miller heard her brother, with gasping breath and feeble utterance, tell that horrible story, her heart died within her. She knew it well. Who at Allanbay had not heard of the murder of Mrs. Jernam's darling nephew, the bright, popular, kind-hearted seaman, whose coming had been a jubilee in the little port; whose disappearance had made so painful a sensation? She

had heard the story from his aunt, and Rosamond had told her how her husband lived in the hope of finding out and punishing his brother's murderer. And now he was found, this murderer, this thief, this guilt-burdened criminal: and he was her only brother, and dying. Ah, well, Valentine Jernam was avenged. Providence had exacted George Jernam's vengeance: the wrath of man was not needed here.

The second crime with which this story has to do was one of old date, one of the earliest in Black Milsom's dreadful career. The dying wretch told Mr. Colburne how he had headed a gang of thieves, chiefly composed of sailors who had deserted their ships, some twenty-one or two years before this time, when retribution had come upon him, and in their company had robbed the villa of an English lady at Florence. This crime had been committed with the connivance and assistance of the Italian woman who was nurse to the English lady's child. Milsom, then a handsome young fellow, had offered marriage to the woman, which offer was accepted; and she had made his taking her and the child with him—for nothing would induce her to leave the infant—a condition of her aid. He did so; but the hardship of her new life soon killed the Italian woman; and the child was left to the mercy of Milsom and an old hag who acted as his drudge and accomplice. What mercy she met with at those hands the reader knows, for that child was the future wife of Sir Oswald Eversleigh. Mr. Colburne listened to this portion of Milsom's confession with intense interest.

"The name?" he asked; "the name of the lady who lived at Florence, the mother of the child? Tell me the name!"

"Verner," said the dying man, in a hoarse whisper, "Lady Verner; the child's name was Anna."

He was very near his end when he finished his terrible story. While Mr. Colburne was trying to speak peace to the poor darkened, frightened, guilty soul, Mrs. Miller knelt by the bedside, sobbing convulsively. Suddenly she remembered the child she had the care of. Had his account of her been true? Was she also the victim of a

crime? She waited, with desperate impatience, but with the habitual respect of her class, until Mr. Colburne had ceased to speak. Then she put her lips close to the dying man's ear, and said—

"Thomas, Thomas, for God's sake tell me about the child—who is she? Is what you told me true? If not, set it right—oh, brother, brother, set it right—before it is too late."

The imploring tone of her voice reached her brother's dull ear; a faint spasm, as though he strove in vain to speak, crossed his white drawn lips. But the disfigured head in its ghastly bandages was motionless; the shattered arm in its wrappings made no gesture. In terror, in despair, his sister started to her feet, and looked eagerly, closely, into his face. In vain the white lips parted, the eyelids quivered, a shiver shook the broad, brawny chest—then all was still, and Black Milsom was dead!

On the following morning Mr. Colburne took Mrs. Miller back to Allanbay, after giving her a night's rest in his own hospitable home. He left her at her own cottage, and went to Mrs. Jernam's house, as he had promised the afflicted woman he would save her the pain of telling the terrible story which was to clear up the mystery surrounding the merchant captain's fate. When the clergyman reached the house, and lifted his hand to the bright knocker, he heard a sound of many and gleeful voices within—a sound which died away as he knocked for admittance.

Presently the door was opened by Mrs. Jernam's trim maid, who replied, when Mr. Colburne asked if he could see Mrs. Jernam, and if she were alone—as a hint that he did not wish to see any one beside—

"Please, sir, missus is in, but she ain't alone; Captain George and Mrs. George's father have just come—not half an hour ago."

* * * * *

And so Joyce Harker's self-imposed task was at an end, and George Jernam's long

brooding upon his brother's fate was over. A solemn stillness came upon the happy party at Allanbay, and Rosamond's tears fell upon little Gerty, as she slept upon her bosom—slept where George's child was soon to slumber. Mr. Colburne asked no questions about the child. Mrs. Miller had said nothing to him respecting her charge, and Milsom's death, ensuing immediately on her question, had caused it to pass unnoticed. George Jernam, his wife, and Captain Duncombe started for London early the next day. They had come to a unanimous conclusion, on consultation with Mrs. Miller, that there was a mystery about the child, and that the best thing to be done was to communicate with the police at once. "Besides," said George, "I must see Mr. Larkspur, and tell him he need not trouble himself farther; now that accident, or, as I believe Providence, has done for us what all his skill failed to do."

When George Jernam presented himself at Mr. Larkspur's office he underwent a rigid inspection by that gentleman's "deputy," and having, by a few hints as to the nature of his business, led that astute person to think that it bore on his principal's present quest, he was entrusted with the address of Mr. Andrews, in Percy Street.

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"So, you see, I don't get my five hundred, because I didn't find out Captain Jernam's murderer," said Mr. Larkspur, after a long and agitating explanation had put Lady Eversleigh in possession of all the foregoing circumstances. "And here's Captain Jernam's brother comes and takes the job of finding little missy out of my hands—does my work for me as clean as a whistle."

"But I did not know I was doing it, Mr. Larkspur," said George. "I did not know the little Gerty that my Rosamond is so sorry to part with, was Miss Eversleigh; you found it out, from what I told you."

"As if any fool could fail to find out that," said Mr. Larkspur good-humouredly. He had a strong conviction that neither the relinquishment of Lady Eversleigh's designs of punishing her enemies, nor the finding of the heiress by other than his agency,

would inflict any injury upon him—a conviction which was amply justified by his future experience.

"My good friend," said Lady Eversleigh, "if I do not need your aid to restore my child to me, I need it to restore me to my mother. I cannot realize the truth that I have a mother, I can only feel it. I can only feel how she must have suffered by remembering my own anguish. And hers, how much more cruel, how prolonged, how hopeless! You will see to this at once, Mr. Larkspur, while I go to my child."

"Lord bless you, my lady," said Mr. Larkspur, cheerily, "there's no occasion to look very far. You have not forgotten the lady, she that lives so quiet, yet so stylish, near Richmond, and that Sir Reginald Eversleigh pays such attention to? You remember all I told you about her, and how I found out that she was Mr. Dale's aunt, and he know nothing about her?"

"Yes, yes," said Lady Eversleigh, breathlessly, "I remember."

"Well, my lady, that party near Richmond is Lady Verner, your ladyship's mother."

Lady Eversleigh was well nigh overwhelmed by the throng of feelings which pressed upon her. She, the despised outcast, the first-cousin of the man who had scorned her, a connection of the great family into which she had married, her husband's equal in rank, and in fortune! She, the woman whose beauty had been used to lure Valentine Jernam to his death, she who had almost witnessed his murder; she owed to Valentine's brother the discovery of her parentage, the defeat of her calumniators, her restoration to a high place in society, and to family ties, the destruction of Reginald Eversleigh's designs on Lady Verner's property, and—greatest, best boon of all—the recovery of her child. Her own devices, her own wilfulness had but led her into deeper danger, into more bitter sorrow; but Providence had done great things for her by the hands of this stranger, between whom and herself there existed so sinister a link.

"Can you ever forgive me, Captain Jernam," she said, "for my share in your brother's

fate? Must I always be hateful in your sight? Will Mrs. Jernam ever permit me to thank her for her goodness to my child?"

For the answer, George Jernam stooped and kissed her hand, with all the natural grace inspired by natural good-feeling, and Lady Eversleigh felt that she had gained a friend where she had feared to meet a relentless foe. The little party remained long in consultation, and it was decided that nothing was to be done about Lady Verner until Lady Eversleigh had reclaimed her child. George Jernam entreated her to permit him to go to Allanbay and bring the little girl to her mother, but she would not consent. She insisted upon George's bringing his wife to see her immediately, as the preparations for departure did not admit of her calling upon Mrs. Jernam. The gentle, happy Rosamond complied willingly, and so thoroughly had the beautiful lady won the girl's heart before they were long together, that Rosamond herself proposed that George should accompany Lady Eversleigh to Allanbay. With pretty imperiousness she bore down Lady Eversleigh's grateful scruples, and the result was, that the two started that same evening, travelled as fast as post-horses could carry them, and arrived at Allanbay before even Lady Eversleigh's impatience could find the journey long. Susan Jernam had kept the child with her, and she it was who put little Gerty into her mother's arms. Rarely in her life had Lady Eversleigh lain down to rest with do tranquil a heart as that with which she slept under the humble roof of Captain Jernam's aunt.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"CONFUSION WORSE THAN DEATH."

Sir Reginald Eversleigh had paid Victor Carrington a long visit, at the cottage at Maida Hill, on the day which had witnessed the distressing interview and angry parting between Douglas Dale and Madame Durski. They had talked a great deal, and Reginald had been struck by the strange excitement—the almost feverish exultation—in Carrington's tone and manner. He was not more openly

communicative as to his plans than usual, but he expressed his expectation of triumph in a way which Eversleigh had never heard him do before.

"You seem quite sanguine, Victor," said Sir Reginald. "Mind, I don't ask questions, but you really are sure all is going well?"

"Our affairs march, mon ami. And you are making your game with the old lady at Richmond admirably, are you not?"

"Nothing could be better, and indeed I ought to succeed, for it's dull work, I can tell you, especially when she begins talking resignedly about the child that was stolen a few centuries ago, and her hopes of meeting it in a better world. Horrid bore—dreadful bosh; but anything is worth bearing if money is to be made of it—good, sure, sterling money. I think it will do me good to see some real money—bank-notes and gold, and that sort of thing—for an accommodation bill is the only form of cash I've handled since I came of age. How happy we shall be when it all comes right—your game and mine!" continued the baronet. "My plans are very simple. I shall only exchange my shabby lodgings in the Strand for apartments in Piccadilly, overlooking the Park, of course. I shall resume my old position among my own set, and enjoy life after my own fashion; and when once I am possessor of a handsome fortune, I dare say I shall have no difficulty in getting a rich wife. And you, Victor, how shall you employ our wealth?"

"In the restoration of my name," replied the Frenchman, with suppressed intensity. "Yes, Sir Reginald, the one purpose of my life is told in those words. I have been an outcast and an adventurer, friendless, penniless; but I am the last scion of a noble house, and to restore to that house some small portion of its long-lost splendour has been the one dream of my manhood. I am not given to talk much of that which lies nearest my heart, and never until to-night have I spoken to you of my single ambition; but you, who have watched me toiling upon a weary road, wading through a morass of guilt, must surely have guessed that the pole-star must needs be a bright

one which could lure me onward upon so hideous a pathway. The end has come at last, and I now speak freely. My name is not Carrington. I am Viscomte Champfontaine, of Champfontaine, in the department of Charente, and my name was once the grandest in western France; but the Revolution robbed us of lands and wealth, and there remain now but four rugged stone towers of that splendid chateau which once rose proudly above the woods of Champfontaine, like a picture by Gustave Doré. The fountain in the field still flows, limpid as in those days when the soldier-Gaul pitched his tent beside its waters, and took for himself the name of Champfontaine. To restore that name, to rebuild that chateau—that is the dream which I have cherished."

Excited by this unwonted revelation of his feelings, and by the anticipation of the realization of all his hopes, the Frenchman rose, and paced rapidly up and down the room.

"I will go to Champfontaine," he said. "I will look once more upon the crumbling towers, so soon to be restored to their primitive strength and grandeur."

Reginald watched him wonderingly. This enthusiasm about an ancient name was beyond his comprehension. He too, bore a name that had been honourable for centuries, and he had recklessly degraded that name. He had begun life with all the best gifts of fortune in his hands, and had squandered all.

"I hear your cousin Douglas is very ill," said Carrington, checking his excited manner, and speaking with a sudden change of tone, which produced a strange thrill of Sir Reginald's somewhat weak nerves. "I should recommend you to go and call upon him at his chambers. Never mind any coolness there may have been between you. You needn't see him, you know; in fact it will be much better for you to avoid doing so. But just call and make the inquiry. I am really anxious to know if there is anything the matter with him."

Sir Reginald Eversleigh looked at the Frenchman with a half doubtful, half

horror-stricken look—such a look as Faust may have cast at Mephistopheles, when Gretchen's soldier-brother fell, stricken by the invisible sword of the demon.

"I'll tell you what it is, Victor," he said, after a pause, "unless our luck changes pretty quickly, I shall throw up the sponge some fine morning, and blow my brains out. Affairs have been desperate with me for a long time, and your fine schemes have not made me a halfpenny richer. I begin to think that, in spite of all your cleverness, you're no better than a bungler."

"I shall begin to think so myself," answered Victor, between his set teeth, "unless success comes to us speedily. We have been working underground, and the work has been slow and wearisome; but the end cannot be far distant," he added, with a heavy sigh. "Go and inquire after your cousin's health."

And so Reginald Eversleigh strove to dismiss the subject from his mind. So powerful is self-deception, that he almost succeeded in persuading himself that he had no part in Carrington's plots—that he did not know at what he was aiming and that he was, personally, absolved from any share in the crime that was being perpetrated, if crime there was; but that there was, he even affected himself to doubt.

After Sir Reginald left him, Victor Carrington threw himself into a chair in a fit of deep despondency. After a time that mood passed away, and he roused himself, and thought of what he had to do that day. He had seen Miss Brewer only the previous day. He had learned how much alarmed Paulina was about her lover's health, and with what good reason. Victor Carrington came to a resolution that this day should be the last of waiting—of suspense. He took a phial from the press where he kept all deadly drugs, placed it in his breast-pocket, and went to his mother's sitting-room. The widow was sitting, as usual, at her embroidery-frame. She counted some stitches before she raised her head to look at her son. But when she did look up, her own face changed, and she said,—

"Victor, you are ill. I know you are. You look very ill—not like yourself. What ails

you?"

"Nothing, mother," replied Victor; "nothing that a little fresh air and exercise will not remove. I have been a little over-excited, that is all. I have been thinking of the old home that sheltered my grandfather before the sequestrations of '93—the home that could be bought back to-day for an old song, and which a few thousands, judiciously invested, might restore to something of its old grandeur. One of the Champfontaines received Francis I. and his sister Marguerite in the old chateau which they burnt during the Terror. Mother, I will tell you a secret to-day: ever since I can remember having a wish, the one great desire of my life has been the desire to restore the place and the name; and I hope to accomplish that desire soon, mother—very soon."

"Victor, this is the talk of a madman!" exclaimed the Frenchwoman, alarmed by her son's unwonted vehemence.

"No, mother, it is the talk of a man who feels himself on the verge of a great success—or—a stupendous failure."

"I cannot understand—"

"There is no need for you to understand any more than this: I have been playing a bold game, and I believe it will prove a winning one."

"Is this game an honest one, Victor?"

"Honest? oh, yes!" answered the surgeon, with an ominous laugh, "why should I be not honest? Does not the world teach a man to be honest? See what noble rewards it offers for honesty."

He took a crumpled letter from his pocket as he spoke, and threw it across the table to his mother.

"Read that, mother," he said; "that is my reward for ten years' honest toil in a laborious profession. Captain Halkard, the inaugurator of an Arctic expedition for

scientific purposes, writes to invite me to join his ship as surgeon. He has heard of my conscientious devotion to my profession—my exceptional talents—see, those are his exact words, and he offers me the post of ship's surgeon, with a honorarium of fifty pounds. The voyage is supposed to last six months; it is much more likely to last a year; it is most likely to last for ever—for, from the place to which these men are going, the chances are against any man's return. And for unutterable hardship, for the hazard of my life, for my exceptional talents, my conscientious devotion, he offers me fifty pounds. That, mother, is the price which honesty commands in the great market of life."

"But it might lead to something, Victor," murmured the mother, as she put down the letter, pleased by the writer's praises of her son.

"Oh, yes, it might lead to a few words of commendation in a scientific journal; possibly a degree of F.R.G.S.; or very probably a grave under the ice, with a grizzly bear for sexton."

"You will not accept the offer?"

"Not unless my great scheme fails at the last moment—as it cannot fail—as it cannot!" he repeated, with the air of a man who tries to realize a possibility too horrible for imagination.

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It was very late that night before Paulina Durski, worn out by the emotion she had undergone, could be persuaded to retire to rest. After Douglas had left her, all the firmness forsook her, all her pride was overthrown. Despair unutterable took possession of her. With him went her last hope—her one only chance of happiness. She flung herself, face downwards, on her sofa, and gave way to the wildest, most agonizing grief. Thus Miss Brewer found her, and eagerly questioned her concerning the cause of her distress. But she could obtain no explanation from Paulina, who only answered, in a voice broken by convulsive sobs, "Some other

time, some other time; don't ask me now." So Miss Brewer was forced to be silent, if not content, and at length she persuaded Paulina to go to bed.

The faithful friend arranged everything with her own hands for Madame Durski's comfort, and would not consent to leave her till she had lain down to rest. The broken-hearted woman bade her friend good night calmly enough, but before Miss Brewer reached the door, she heard Paulina's sobs burst forth again, and saw that she had covered her face with her hands, and buried it in the pillow.

* * * * *

It was late on the following morning when Miss Brewer entered Paulina's room, and having softly opened the shutters, drew near the bed with a noiseless step. The bed-clothes, which were wont to be tossed and tumbled by the restless sleeper, were smooth and undisturbed. Never had Miss Brewer seen her mistress in an attitude so expressive of complete repose.

"Poor thing! she has had a good night after all," thought the companion.

She bent over the quiet figure, the pale face, so statuesque in that calm sleep, and gently touched the white, listless hand.

Yes—this indeed was perfect repose; but it was the repose of death. The bottle from which Paulina had habitually taken a daily modicum of opium, lay on the ground by the bedside, empty.

Whether the luckless, hopeless, heart-broken woman, overwhelmed by the sense of an inscrutable Fate that forbade her every chance of peace or happiness, had, in her supreme despair, committed the sin of the suicide, who shall say? It is possible that she had only taken an over-dose of the perilous compound unconsciously, in the dull apathy of her despair.

She was dead. Life for her had been one long humiliation, one long struggle. And at last, when the cup of happiness had been offered to her lips, a cruel hand had snatched it away from her.

* * * * *

When Miss Brewer recovered her senses and her power of action, she sent for Douglas Dale. News of the awful event had got abroad by that time, through the terrified servants; and two doctors and a policeman were on the premises. A messenger was easily procured, who tore off in a hansom to the Temple. As the man ran up the steps leading to Dr. Johnson's Buildings, where Dale's new chambers were situated, he encountered two ladies on the first landing.

"I beg your pardon," he said, pushing them, however, very decidedly aside as he spoke, "I must see Mr. Dale; please do not detain him. It is most important." The ladies stood aside exchanging frightened and curious looks, but made no attempt to make their presence known to Mr. Dale, who came out of his rooms in a few minutes, attended by the messenger, and passed them without seeming in the least aware of their presence, and wearing the ghastliest face that ever was seen on mortal man. That face struck them dumb and motionless, and it was not until Jarvis had twice asked them their names and business, that the elder lady replied. "They would call again," she told him, and handed him cards bearing the names of "Lady Verner," "Lady Eversleigh."

* * * * *

Victor Carrington appeared at Hilton House early in the afternoon. He had calculated that his work must needs be very near its completion, and he came prepared to hear of Douglas Dale's mortal illness.

The blow that awaited him was a death-blow. Miss Brewer had told Douglas all: the lies, the artifices, by which the man Carton had contrived to make himself a constant visitor in that house. In a moment, without the mention of the schemer's real name, Heaven's light was let in upon the mystery; the dark enigma was solved, and the woman, so tenderly loved and so cruelly wronged, was exonerated.

Too late—too late! That was the agonizing reflection which smote the heart of

Douglas Dale, with a pain more terrible than the sharpest death-pang. "I have broken her heart!" he cried. "I have broken that true, devoted heart!"

The appearance of Victor Carrington was the signal for such a burst of rage as even his iron nature could scarcely brook unshaken.

"Miscreant! devil! incarnate iniquity!" cried Douglas, as he grasped and grappled with the baffled plotter. "You have tried to murder me—and you have tried to murder her! I might have forgiven you the first crime—I will drag you to the halter for the second, and think myself poorly revenged when I hear the rabble yelling beneath your scaffold!"

Happily for Carrington, the effects of the poison had reduced his victim to extreme weakness. The convulsive grasp loosened, the hoarse voice died into a whisper, and Douglas Dale swooned as helplessly as a woman.

"What does it mean?" asked Victor. "Is this man mad?"

"We have all been mad!" returned Miss Brewer, passionately. "The blind, besotted dupes of your demoniac wickedness! Paulina Durski is dead!"

"Dead!"

"Yes. There was a quarrel, yesterday, between these two—and he left her. I found her this morning—dead! I have told him all—the part I have played at your bidding. I shall tell it again in a court of justice, I pray God!"

"You can tell it when and where you please," replied Victor, with horrible calmness. "I shall not be there to hear it."

He walked out of the house. Douglas Dale had not yet recovered consciousness, and there was no one to hinder Carrington's departure.

For some time he walked on, unconscious whither he went, unable to grasp or realize the events that had befallen. But at last-dimly, darkly, grim shapes arose out of the chaos of his brain.

There would be a trial—some kind of trial!—Douglas Dale would not be baffled of vengeance if the law could give it him. His crime—what was it, if it could be proved? An attempt to murder—an attempt the basest, the most hideous, and revolting. What hope could he have of mercy—he, utterly merciless himself, expected no such weakness from his fellow-men.

But in this supreme hour of utter defeat, his thoughts did not dwell on the hazards of the future. The chief bitterness of his soul was the agony of disappointment—of baffled hope—of humiliation, degradation unspeakable. He had thought himself invincible, the master of his fellow-men, by the supremacy of intellectual power, and remorseless cruelty. And he was what? A baffled trickster, whose every move upon the great chessboard had been a separate mistake, leading step by step to the irrevocable sentence—checkmate!

The ruined towers of Champfontaine arose before him, as in a vision, black against a blood-red sky.

"I can understand those mad devils of '93—I can understand the roll-call of the guillotine—the noyades—the conflagrations—the foul orgies of murderous drunkards, drunken with blood. Those men had schemed as I have schemed, and worked as I have worked, and waited as I have waited—to fail like me!"

He had walked far from the West-end, into some dreary road eastward of the City, choosing by some instinct the quietest streets, before he was calm enough to contemplate the perils of his position, or to decide upon the course he should take.

A few minutes' reflection told him that he must fly—Douglas Dale would doubtless hunt him as a wild beast is hunted. Where was he to go? Was there any lair, or covert, in all that wide city where he might be safely hidden from the vengeance of the man he had wronged so deeply?

He remembered Captain Halkard's letter. He dragged the crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket, and read a few lines. Yes: it was as he had thought. The "Pandion"

was to leave Gravesend at five o'clock next morning.

"I will go to the ice-graves and the bears!" he exclaimed. "Let them track me there!"

Energetic always, no less energetic even in this hour of desperation, he made his way down to the sailors' quarter, and spent his few last pounds in the purchase of a scanty outfit. After doing this, he dined frugally at a quiet tavern, and then took the steamer for Gravesend.

He slept on board the "Pandion." The place offered him had not been filled by any one else. It was not a very tempting post, or a very tempting expedition. The men who had organized it were enthusiasts, imbued with that fever-thirst of the explorer which has made many martyrs, from the age of the Cabots to the days of Franklin.

The "Pandion" sailed in that gray cheerless morning, her white sails gleaming ghastly athwart the chill mists of the river, and so vanished for ever Victor Carrington from the eyes of all men, save those who went with him. The fate of that expedition was never known. Beneath what iceberg the "Pandion" found her grave none can tell. Brave and noble hearts perished with her, and to die with those good men was too honourable a doom for such a wretch as Victor Carrington.

CHAPTER XL.

"SO SHALL YE REAP."

Little now remains to be told of this tale of crime and retribution, of suffering and compensation. Miss Brewer told her dreadful story, as far as she knew it, with perfect truth; and her evidence, together with the evidence of the chemist who had supplied Madame Durski from time to time with the fatal consoler of all her pains and sorrows, made it clear that the luckless woman, lying quietly in the darkened room at Hilton House, had died from an over-dose of opium.

Douglas Dale could not attend that inquest. He was stricken down with fever; the fate of the woman he had so loved, so unjustly suspected, nearly cost him his life,

and when he recovered sufficiently, he left England, not to return for three years. Before his departure he saw Lady Eversleigh and her mother, and established with them a bond of friendship as close as that of their kin. He provided liberally for Miss Brewer, but her rescue from poverty brought her no happiness: she was a broken-hearted woman.

Victor Carrington's mother retired into a convent, and was probably as happy as she had ever been. She had loved him but little, whose only virtue was that he had loved her much.

Captain Copplestone's rapture knew no bounds when he clasped little Gertrude in his arms once more. He was almost jealous of Rosamond Jernam, when he found how great a hold she had obtained on the heart of her charge; but his jealousy was mingled with gratitude, and he joined Lady Eversleigh in testifying his friendship for the tender-hearted woman who had protected and cherished the heiress of Raynham in the hour of her desolation.

It is not to be supposed that the world remained long in ignorance of this romantic episode in the common-place story of every-day life.

Paragraphs found their way into the newspapers, no one knew how, and society marvelled at the good fortune of Sir Oswald's widow.

"That woman's wealth must be boundless," exclaimed aristocratic dowagers, for whom the grip of poverty's bony fingers had been tight and cruel. "Her husband left her magnificent estates, and an enormous amount of funded property; and now a mother drops down from the skies for her benefit—a mother who is reported to be almost as rich as herself."

* * * * *

Amongst those who envied Lady Eversleigh's good fortune, there was none whose envy was so bitter as that of her husband's disappointed nephew, Sir Reginald.

This woman had stood between him and fortune, and it would have been happiness

to him to see her grovelling in the dust, a beggar and an outcast. Instead of this, he heard of her exaltation, and he hated her with an intense hatred which was almost childish in its purposeless fury.

He speedily found, however, that life was miserable without his evil counsellor. The Frenchman's unabating confidence in ultimate success had sustained the penniless idler in the darkest day of misfortune. But now he found himself quite alone; and there was no voice to promise future triumph. He knew that the game of life had been played to the last card, and that it was lost.

His feeble character was not equal to support the burden of poverty and despair.

He dared not show his face at any of the clubs where he had once been so distinguished a member; for he knew that the voice of society was against him.

Thus hopeless, friendless, and abandoned by his kind, Sir Reginald Eversleigh had recourse to the commonest form of consolation. He fled from a country in which his name had become odious, and took up his abode in Paris, where he found a miserable lodging in one of the narrowest alleys in the neighbourhood of the Luxembourg, which was then a labyrinth of narrow streets and lanes.

Here he could afford to buy brandy, for at that date brandy was much cheaper in France than it is now. Here he could indulge his growing propensity for strong drink to the uttermost extent of his means, and could drown his sorrows, and drink destruction to his enemies, in fiery draughts of cognac.

For some years he inhabited the same dirty garret, keeping the key of his wretched chamber, going up and down the crumbling old staircase uncared for and unnoticed. Few who had known him in the past would have recognized the once elegant young man in this latter stage of his existence. Form and features, complexion and expression, were alike degraded. The garments worn by him, who had once been the boasted patron of crack West-end tailors, were now shapeless and hideous. The dandy of the clubs had become a perambulating mass of rags.

Every day when the sun shone he buttoned his greasy, threadbare overcoat across his breast, and crawled to the public garden of the Luxembourg, where he might be seen shuffling slipshod along the sunniest walk, an object of contempt and aversion in the eyes of nursery-maids and grisettes—a butt for the dare-devil students of the quarter.

Had he any consciousness of his degradation?

Yes; that was the undying vulture which preyed upon his entrails—the consuming fire that was never quenched.

During the brief interval of each day in which he was sober, Sir Reginald Eversleigh was wont to reflect upon the past. He knew himself to be the wretch and outcast he was; and, looking back at his start in life, he could but remember how different his career might have been had he so chosen.

In those hours the slow tears made furrows in his haggard cheeks—the tears of remorse, vain repentance, that came too late for earth; but not, perhaps, utterly too late for heaven, since, even for this last and worst of sinners, there might be mercy.

Thus his life passed—a changeless routine, unbroken by one bright interval, one friendly visit, one sign or token to show that there was any link between this lonely wretch and the rest of humanity.

One day the porter, who lived in a little den at the bottom of the lodging-house staircase, suddenly missed the familiar figure which had gone by his rabbit-hutch every day for the last six years; the besotted face that had stared at him morning and evening with the blank, unseeing gaze of the habitual drunkard.

"What has become of the old toper who lives up yonder among the chimney-pots?" cried the porter, suddenly, to the wife of his bosom. "I have not seen him to-day nor yesterday, nor for many days. He must be ill. I will go upstairs and make inquiries by-and-by, when I have leisure."

The porter waited for a leisure half-hour after dark, and then tramped wearily up the steep old staircase with a lighted candle to see after the missing lodger. He might

have waited even longer without detriment to Sir Reginald Eversleigh.

The baronet had been dead many days, suffocated by the fumes of his poor little charcoal stove. A trap-door in the roof, which he had been accustomed to open for the ventilation of his garret, had been closed by the wind, and the baronet had passed unconsciously from sleep to death.

He had died, and no one had been aware of his death. The people of the house did not know either his name or his country. His burial was that of an unknown pauper; and the bones of the last male scion of the house of Eversleigh were mingled with the bones of Parisian paupers in the cemetery of Père la Chaise.

While Sir Reginald Eversleigh dragged out the wretched remnant of his existence in a dingy Parisian alley, there was perfect peace and tranquil happiness for the woman against whose fair fame he and Victor Carrington had so basely conspired.

Yes, Anna was at peace; surrounded by friends; delighted day by day to watch the budding loveliness, the sportive grace of Gertrude Eversleigh, the idolized heiress of Raynham. As Lady Eversleigh paced the terraces of an Italian garden, her mother by her side, with Gertrude clinging to her side; as she looked out over the vast domain which owned her as mistress—it might seem that fortune had lavished her fairest gifts into the lap of her who had been once a friendless stranger, singing in the taverns of Wapping.

Wonderful indeed had been the transitions which had befallen her; but even now, when the horizon seemed so fair before her, there were dark shadows upon the past which, in some measure, clouded the brightness of the present, and dimmed the radiance of the future.

She could not forget her night of agony in the house amongst the marshes beyond Ratcliff Highway; she could not cease to lament the loss of that noble friend who had rescued her in the hour of her despair.

The world wondered at the prolonged widowhood of the mistress of Raynham.

People were surprised to find that a woman in the golden prime of womanhood and beauty could be constant to the memory of a husband old enough to have been her father. But in due time society learned to accept the fact as a matter of course, and Lady Eversleigh was no longer the subject of hopes and speculations.

Her constant gratitude and friendship for the Jernams suffered no diminution as time went on. The difference in their social position made no difference to her; and no more frequent or more welcome guests were seen at Raynham than Captain Duncombe, his daughter and son-in-law, and honest Joyce Harker. Lady Eversleigh had a particular regard for the man who had so true and faithful a heart, and she would often talk to him; but she never mentioned the subject of that miserable night on which he had seen her down at Wapping. That subject was tacitly avoided by both. There was a pain too intense, a memory too dark, associated with the events of that period.

And so the story ends. There is no sound of pleasant wedding bells to close my record with their merry, jangling chorus. Is it not the fate of the innocent to suffer in this life for the sins of the wicked? Lady Eversleigh's widowhood, Douglas Dale's lonely life, are the work of Victor Carrington—a work not to be undone upon this earth. If he has failed in all else, he has succeeded at least in this: he has ruined the happiness of two lives. For both his victims time brings peace—a sober gladness that is not without its charm. For one a child's affection—a child's growing grace of mind and form, bring a happiness on, clouded at intervals by the dark shadows of past sorrow. But in the heart of Douglas Dale there is an empty place which can never be filled upon earth.

"Will the Eternal and all-seeing One forgive her for her reckless, useless life, and shall I meet her among the blest in heaven?" he asks himself sometimes, and then he remembers the holy words of comfort unspeakable: "Come unto me, ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Had not Paulina been "weary, and heavy laden," bowed down by the burden of a false accusation, friendless, hopeless, from her very cradle?

He thought of the illimitable Mercy, and he dared to hope for the day in which he should meet her he loved "Beyond the Veil."

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