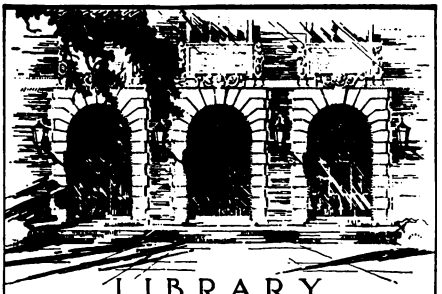
THE GREAT WESTERN MYSTERY

J. MANNERS ROMANIS



W. A. S. Hewins.

THE GREAT WESTERN MYSTERY;

OR,

FROM THE CAUCASUS TO THE "CAUCUS."

THE

GREAT WESTERN MYSTERY

OR,

From the Caucasus to the "Caucus."

BY

J. MANNERS ROMANIS,

Author of "ALIRABI," &c., &c.

"Is our civilisation a failure?
And is the Caucasian played out?"
—BRET HARTE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE AUTHOR

Affectionately Dedicates

THIS WORK

TO HIS SISTER.

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AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

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"Blumenbach had a solitary Georgian skull; and that solitary Georgian skull was the finest in his collection, that of a Greek being the next. Hence it was taken as the type of the skull of the more organised division of our species. More than this, it gave its name to the type, and introduced the term *Caucasian*. Never has a single head done more harm to science than was done, in the way of posthumous mischief, by the head of this well-shaped female from Georgia."

—LATHAM.

"The fact is, you cannot destroy a pure race of the Caucasian Organisation. It is a physiological fact; a simple law of nature, which has baffled Egyptian and Assyrian kings, Roman Emperors, and Christian Inquisitors. No penal laws, no physical tortures, can effect that a superior race should be absorbed in an inferior, or be destroyed by it. The mixed persecuting races disappear; the pure persecuted race remains . . . . .

"'You must study physiology, my dear child. Pure races of Caucasus may be persecuted, but they cannot be despised, except by the brutal ignorance of some mongrel breed, that brandishes faggots, and howls extermination, but is itself exterminated without persecution by that irresistible law of Nature, which is fatal to Curs.'

"'But I also come from Caucasus,' said Coningsby.

"'Verily; and thank your Creator for such a destiny.'"

—BEACONSFIELD.

THE GREAT WESTERN MYSTERY;

OR,

FROM THE CAUCUS TO THE CAUCASUS.

BOOK FIRST.

"Most Holy Father: The youth who will deliver to you this is a pilgrim who aspires to penetrate the great Asian mystery. Be to him what you were to me."

—BEACONSFIELD.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

MOUNT CAUCASUS.

Scene.—A lovely vale in the Indian Caucasus.

ASIA. From all the blasts of Heaven thou hast descended
Yes, like a spirit, like a thought which makes
Unwonted tears throng to the horny eyes,
And beatings haunt the desolated heart
Which should have learnt repose, thou hast descended,
Cradled in tempests; thou dost wake,
O child of many winds!

—SHELLEY.

DARK clouds obscured the midday sun; dense black clouds that hung like a pall in the sky. A gloomy darkness was settling over the face of Nature. It seemed as if the sun had gone down while yet it was day.

The solemn silence which abides upon Mount Caucasus was becoming doubly

solemn by reason of the state of the elements. Not a breath moved; not a twig fluttered; not a blade rustled. The living, breathing things seemed dead; the birds nestled in the boughs, the shrews shivered in their holes, the mountain goats crouched in the clefts of the rocks far up towards the eternal snows.

A dazzling, blinding flash shone forth from out of the gloom. Quick beyond thought, it lightened the black profound from one side to the other, and as it closed in darkness once more, the hissing and crackling of its fury still lingered on the ear. Heaven had spoken, and earth replied. From every peak, from every mountain mass, from every crag, from every snow-clad summit, there rose a loud and angry cry. Peal on peal, voice on voice, in every tone and accent there echoed and re-echoed one long, loud and reverberating cry, blended from the harmony of ten thousand hills. It seemed as if there were a Prometheus on each of these ten thousand hills of Caucasus, and each sent back his loud and defiant shout towards high heaven. The first flash of lightning which shone forth revealed a party of horsemen who had just reached the *col* or neck of a pass in the mountains.

While the storm was yet gathering they might have been seen ascending the track leading out of the valley over the pass, and so onward to the extended plains beyond. The track was steep, narrow and rough, and progress along it was but slow. The horses, bred in the mountains and cunning in the knowledge of the weather, felt the approach of a storm. They now pricked up their ears, and now laid them in affright; they quickened their steps, and their breathing became more rapid. Their instinct urged them to seek a place of shelter; nor did they require the application to their sides of the sharp edge of the stirrup, which does duty among the mountaineers for spurs. Proud man, whose intelligence lords it over all creation, and who oppresses whatever is regarded as lacking in that intelligence, is too often at a loss before the subtile signs of nature—which are yet read easily by his despised subjects—for him to sustain his exalted pride rightfully: the most dumb, most blind, most senseless of created things, yet knows something which is secret to his lord.

The exertions put forth by the panting steeds had been so far successful that the summit of the pass had been reached before the lightning flashed forth. Once on level

ground the speed could be quickened, and in another minute the horsemen were rattling down the further side of the mountain into the lowering gloom of the storm. Presently they turned aside from the path into the skirting wood, beyond which rose a sheer precipice of white limestone. Crashing through the thick under-growth, they made straight for the cliff, in the face of which numerous large holes or caves were to be seen. To make fast the horses in the midst of a clump of hazel was the work of but a moment to the accomplished horsemen, while flash upon flash lighted up the strange mid-day gloom. 'Ere the next moment had fled they had already scaled the rocky wall and reached a cavern, where they were safe from the inclemency of the weather.

It did not require more than a casual glance to show that the cavern in which they found themselves was not produced by natural means, but had been quarried by the hand of man. Its walls were plane surfaces, its roof and floor were flat. A bench was carved out of the substance of the rock on one side, and in the centre of the chamber was an opening in the floor about a foot deep, and about a foot square, which had once served as a fire-place. For the habita-

tion of man had this cavern been constructed, nor was it solitary of its kind, for many others of various sizes, and placed at various elevations, could be descried. This was the situation of a rock-hewn village; it had once been inhabited by those mysterious men and women who lived in the morning of the race and have left no history behind them. Were they coloured or white? Were they savage or gentle? Were they brave or cowardly? Were they ruled by despots, or did they live in freedom? Had they the same passions and sentiments as we? Such questions receive no answer. Nature is silent; the rustling leaves seem to sneer in response, and the light rills laugh in gentle mockery. The Troglodytes lived and passed away—could they have lived in vain? Do we owe them nothing more than a few caverns in the face of a limestone cliff?

The answer to such questions given by the party taking refuge from the storm, would not have been couched in the spirit of the ethnologist or the archæologist; they were content that they had shelter. When Nature deigns to display something of the majesty of her power, proud man, the lord of the creation, is glad of a hole for refuge like the most craven dormouse. Is man's boast worth

the breath on which it is borne, when the breath of man may be quenched by the too harsh breathing of Nature?

The men who now stood or reclined in the interior of the cavern were among the finest of the descendants of Adam. They were six in number. Two of them, from their bearing and from the reverence paid them by the others, seemed to be of superior rank. One of these was a tall and well-proportioned man of advanced age, though few of the signs of failing strength and vigour were visible in his countenance or his frame. The other was much younger, not having yet reached middle age, and was of more slender build. The former was dressed in the garb of the mountaineers; a long, brown, closely-fitting coat, reaching almost to the feet, drawn in at the waist by a belt, and ornamented with a row of gold cartridge cases on each side of the breast. Where the coat opened at the throat a crimson silk waistcoat could be remarked. The white fur cap with crimson silk top, as well as the appearance of the arms he bore, the *shashka* or sword without guard, the *kinshal* or dagger, and the brace of pistols in his belt, bespoke the rank of the possessor, for these weapons were richly mounted, and their ivory handles were

inlaid with gold. His noble bearing, as well as the marked deference of his followers towards him, indicated that he was a chieftain. His name was Zenghis Zeraba Beg. His younger companion likewise wore the long coat of the Caucasus; but his other garments were of the less picturesque shape usual in the West. He had an easy carriage which told of his high birth, though the dignity which marked the older mountain chieftain was lacking. His manner was rather that of the jaunty self-possession and of the complete self-satisfaction of youth, than of the unruffled serenity of unquestioned superiority which distinguished his aged companion. He was blessed with a handsome face, long, pale, rather sallow; his nose was well, but not too fully developed; his eyes were brown, his hair dark, and he had a pensive cast; though, when he was moved his mobile features became expressive of many and varied emotions; then his eyes flashed or were calmed to tenderness, and the lines of his face were either rigid with passion or excitement, or were softened to gentleness or impassibility.

Such was Merlin Prester Beg, as he was known in the Caucasus, and who will be the chief personage in the following pages. Of

the four followers, three were plainly mountaineers; their dress, their stalwart frames, their independent bearing, and their manners plainly told so much. That the fourth was more at home in cities than on the mountain-side, might be surmised at a glance. He was under middle height, but over middle breadth. His inferior size might allow of his being subject to insult and oppression from the more powerful; but his cunning eye, and its malicious twinkle, told that he would pursue dire revenge. His nationality was an enigma; he was probably one of those nondescript Levantines, who can speak fragments of many languages, though no ingenious piecing of these fragments can make one whole. He was voluble in very bad grammar when occasion required him to speak; but his silence was more expressive than the many and varied expressions from different languages which made up his speech. Such was Sidonia-ben-Joseph, who was the last to reach the cavern; and the raindrops were already falling fast and furious, when his portly figure was hauled into the place of refuge by the strong arms of two of the mountaineers.

People are variously affected by the bright lightning and the awful thunder: innocent

children are awe-struck, and guilty sinners are conscience-struck; the timid creep away into darkness, and the emotional go into hysterics and become subject to a moral earthquake. Nor are race distinctions exempt from this diversified effect; the Russian becomes pious and crosses himself, the Caucasian mountaineer becomes glad and he drinks wine. It is left to the Western people to initiate a novelty in experience—and what novelties are not initiated in the West? —they become inquisitive. Franklin insulting thunderstorms with kites, could hardly have shown less reverence for Almighty Nature than did Merlin Prester Beg when he called out to his servant, Sidonia-ben-Joseph:

"The instruments!"

In obedience to the command, that worthy drifted out of the dark recesses of the chamber into which he had instinctively crept from the danger, and he placed before his master a leathern case, from which a mahogany box was produced. On opening the box a series of scientific instruments was displayed.

Merlin Prester Beg, with deft fingers, like one accustomed to the work, proceeded to take observations of the wild turmoil of the elements.

His movements were regarded by the elder

chieftain with polite nonchalance, perhaps even with contempt, which was sufficiently veiled by that Oriental courtesy which respects the feelings of others, from a proper respect for self. His followers were less able to conceal their interest in the strange operations, and their natural gravity was less than proof against their surprise, their admiration, and their awe.

Flash after flash darted across the black vault of the firmament, and pierced the gloom of the cave of the Troglodytes; peal after peal thundered in the great profound, and made the everlasting hills tremble; the rain fell in torrents, beating heavily on the leaves, and converting the tiny rills into roaring streams; but Merlin Prester Beg, with an unmoved countenance, proceeded calmly to apply his instruments to the wrathful face of Nature.

So filled was he with the scientific spirit, and so absorbed in his occupation, which evidently required manual dexterity and concentrated thought, that he was unconscious of the effect his actions were producing upon the superstitious mountaineers. Simple vanes to record the wind-speed were transmuted by their fancy into unholy contrivances, and the manipulation of a thermometer was regarded

as the waving of an enchanted wand. Blending with their awe was a spirit of angry resentment. But Merlin Prester Beg seemed oblivious of the sentiments of the followers, and he opened not his lips.

"Do your instruments afford you satisfaction? Do they bring light to your eyes and joy to your heart?" inquired Zenghis Zeraba Beg, presently. Sitting on the stone bench, with his arms folded, and with a cigar in his mouth, he could both remark the movements of Merlin Prester Beg, who stood at the mouth of the cavern, and the attitudes and expressions of his own followers who were in a line behind.

"The wise man keeps his eyes open and his heart closed," was the reply of the younger Beg.

"The eyes should let in nothing but pleasure, and the heart should be kept closed to retain it."

"The words of wisdom drop like pearls from your lips," replied Merlin Prester Beg, whose glance had been fixed for some moments upon a point in the prospect outside, which was invisible, from their position, to the other members of the party.

From their highly strung nervous condition, the senses of the mountaineers had

become particularly acute, and at such times the emotions felt by one are communicated in a rapid yet mysterious manner to others. As they had been awed by his movements which they could not understand, and out of which their superstitions had evolved ideas of terror, so they were now in an agonised suspense. Their master, Zenghis Zeraba Beg, while he felt not their emotions, saw that they were deeply agitated, and sought to remove the cause, by hinting to Merlin Prester Beg the advisability of ending his labours.

"Do the stars tell of the cessation of the storm?" he asked. "When shall we resume our journey? In the name of Allah (on whom be praise!), canst thou tell us that?"

"God is merciful. The storm will cease. Do those deserve mercy who are not vigilant? Can those journey who lose their steeds?"

The effect of this oracular utterance was magical. It seemed as if each had been struck by the electric fluid which had hitherto raged tumultuously, though harmlessly, outside. For a moment the mountaineers appeared to be overcome by a stupor, but they instantly recovered their self-possession. In another moment the leather case had been removed from each gun, and the mouth of the cavern bristled with deadly

weapons. Listlessness and indifference had been suddenly exchanged for life and activity.

Zenghis Zeraba, as it became him, was the first to understand the mystic words, to prepare his gun, and to direct it towards the clump of hazel where the horses were secured. Each of his three followers speedily followed his example; and then they waited in breathless silence with their fingers on their triggers, and a smile of warlike joy upon their faces.

The suspense lasted hours, as it seemed to them in their condition of nervous tension. They waited and watched; but, save the pattering of the rain, now gradually becoming less heavy, and the roll of the thunder in the mountains behind, they heard no sound. The horses remained in their refuge; their number was not diminished; they seemed at peace, save for an occasional pricking of the ears as if they felt that someone was near.

But hark! Crack went the rifle of the chief! Simultaneously each of his followers brought his to the shoulder, and directed it towards a certain spot, but refrained from firing.

A yell rang through the air; a man started up out of the grass, to fall again with a groan. One or two more men started up

further off. The rifles rang out. Then the mountaineers, following their chief, sprang from the cave, drew their *shashkas*, and made the air ring again with their shouts as they hurried off in pursuit.

They had not gone far when the voice of their chief bade them return. It was but a natural precaution, for the robbers were familiar with each spot, and mayhap only sought to lead them apart where they could be slain more securely, and thus they should be able to return in peace for the plunder. It was an incident of every-day occurrence, and its only effect was to enliven the spirits of the men.

The rain had now almost ceased, and preparation was made for continuing the journey. Girths were tightened, snaffles were replaced in the horses' mouths, and the cushions were turned upon the high and peculiarly formed saddles that the dry part might be uppermost. Sidonia-ben-Joseph descended from the cavern with the case of instruments, and joined his master. The thoughts of the company were thus recalled to the former subject.

"The gift of divination is yours," solemnly remarked Zenghis Zeraba Beg, as if he now felt ashamed of the indifference he had

evinced and of his barely veiled scepticism concerning the instruments.

"Fools scorn the signs which Nature sends to man, but wise men study them," returned Merlin Prester in a tone of lofty humility.

"How blessed among men are those who can read those signs of Nature," observed the chief as he mounted his horse.

"Tis easy to read the signs of Nature, but who can read the spirit of man?" muttered Merlin Prester as he too mounted his horse. "He was a man, he is now clay," he continued, as he pointed to the corpse of the robber stretched upon the ground. "The spirit has fled! Where has it gone? What signs has it left?" Then, noticing that the chieftain and his followers paid no heed to his words, but prepared to go, he resumed: "Shall we not replace this clay within its mother clay? Shall we leave man to be the sport of Nature, whom he ought to rule?"

"We shall leave the body, his friends will return and bury it. It is the Caucasian fashion," he replied with indifference, almost with brusqueness. He set his horse in motion, and he seemed in no way desirous of pursuing the conversation. He was unable to hide the annoyance which the occurrence had caused him, for he knew

that blood would have to be requited by blood, and it might be that many lives would yet be sped before the consequences of the shot were ended.

With watchful eyes, and with prepared guns, they resumed their journey through the threatening land. The sun was beginning once more to shine before them; but behind, the snowy peaks of the great range were hidden in mist, out of which the distant thunder still issued at intervals. It echoed from the wall-like precipices which closed in the valleys; it rolled along the summits of the lower mountains and eddied round the giant pinnacles. From the lofty brow of Elbrouz it was reflected with mighty volume; round Ushba's jagged peaks it crashed. By Dichtan and Koshtantan it rose and fell. Even distant Kazbeck caught its mutterings, and travellers by the Pass of Dariel, far beyond, urged on their steeds that they might gain the sheltering station before the bursting of the storm.

Out of the solemn mystery of the mountains and out of the sultry gloom the cavalcade emerged; through bloodshed witnessed by the memorials of the Troglodytes they had to pass; and so they descended to the plains below.

CHAPER II.

CAUCASIANS.

"The chief was met by Sidonia the *Mamasaklysy*. . . *The Mamasaklysy* pointed out two stones by the side of a brook, which, he said, bore the impression of a man's foot and an ass's hoof, thought to have been printed when the Saviour went through the country in his flight. Sidonia scarcely looked as if he himself believed the story."

—BUCHAN TELFER.

CAUCASIAN rivers partake somewhat of the mystery of the land. Descending from out of darkness and mist and eternal snows they bear the white glacier-mud upon their bosoms as they slowly wind through the plains. Here they become changed. Their virgin purity feels the influence of the degradation of the low-lying flats and marshy straths. The pollution from the villages and the drainings from rotten bogs combine to corrupt them. And their language is changed also. No longer is heard the roystering and brawling sounds which seem the very accents of the freedom of the mountains; but the waters now are slow, still and deep, and have the

hushed tones suggestive of vice, cunning and intrigue.

Chief among Caucasian rivers, and world-famous, is the Rion, anciently called the Phasis. It was up this river that the myth makes Jason travel with his inquisitive and enterprising crew, as he searched for the Golden Fleece. And here it was, probably, that Circe weaved her spells over Ulysses, and made him her infatuated slave, while his companions were rooting up tubers from the Colchian marshes—and mayhap the swine that now haunt the place are the lineal descendants of forgotten companions—those who had strayed, and whose conversion had consequently been omitted. And here, too, Medea learned the Caucasian Mystery, by which she was able to play upon Jason whatever tune she listed.

But this famous and mysterious river bears a curse upon it; for while presenting fair scenes of luxuriant growth, where climbing plants fall in thick festoons and clusters from the supporting trees, it yet glides through weltering corruption. It is hemmed in by swamps of boundless extent. The rank vegetation rises from black slime and ooze. The shrubs and trees seem to rot as they grow; they draw in death and corrup-

tion from every rootlet, and their juices stagnate in their veins. The dropsical twigs hang heavily in the dank air, and the pendant leaves droop mournfully before the vaporous sun. In the tranquillity of nature the zephyrs sigh, while in her more severe moods the winds howl, above the gurgling mud. Adders bask in the daytime; and the midnight hour is made lurid by the glancing fire-flies which disport as if the infernal crew had been let loose from Tartarus. In this fever-stricken land, where corruption festers below, and miasmas float above, stands Poti, the chief port of the Caucasus. This was the destination of the cavalcade whose movements have been described.

It was late in the afternoon of the day following their descent from the mountains that they reached Poti. Lines of shanties raised above the mud on stakes, with a few more substantial erections for public offices, would in few countries be held to represent a town. But to the Caucasian mountaineers, Poti was a city—did it not contain shops where articles of Western manufacture could be purchased? The row of booths—which is called in every Eastern town, however trifling, a bazaar—was sufficient to afford them material for conversation for a lifetime,

and to make their eyes stand out with wonder, and their breasts expand with envy. Powder was to be purchased there, and match-boxes, and even paper and pens, and so were song books and newspapers—marvellous things to the illiterate Caucasians—and all this represented civilisation! It was with swelling bosoms that they followed their chief through the streets to the hotel.

An hour or two afterwards Zenghis Zeraba Beg and Merlin Prester sat at dinner. The viands may not have been choice—but this is an attribute of food made by those who have never known hunger—yet they were plentiful and suitable for appetites sharpened in the Caucasus. It was a calm evening; and deep was the repose of nature. The crescent moon hung in the grey sky, out of which the light of day had not yet entirely faded. A few thin clouds floated in from the sea, and with them came the fresh breath of the Euxine. Through the still night air rose the never-ceasing chant of the frogs; the hoarse croak from myriads of thoats was blended into one long wail which rose and fell with the sighing of the night breeze. Across the courtyard, in a lighted room, the stalwart mountaineers were shown as they sat at meat and talked and quaffed with

boisterous merriment the red wine of the country. Nominal followers of the Prophet though they were, they could not yield him that implicit obedience given by others, for the Koran was not written to suit Caucasians. What could be the infatuation of the Prophet when he wrote that believers were to abstain from the flesh of the bristly beast he called unclean, and from the red juice of the grape? Total abstention was death. No, they fed well, and they drank with all the gusto of a Hans Breitmann:—

> "Gling glang gloria
> We'll drink until we burst."

Zenghis Zeraba Beg and Merlin Prester Beg were too accustomed to such scenes to pay attention to the doings of their followers. A wise commander does not inquire too closely into the minutes of relaxation of those who yield him implicit obedience in the hour of toil and danger. The highest discipline in the ranks is quite compatible with the wildest vagaries when at liberty.

"It is a great land to which you are going; full of great ships and great guns," said Zenghis Zeraba Beg, as he filled another glass. This was uttered with the air of one who gives forth the result of deep thought.

"And of great men," replied the other.

"When I was at Roum (Constantinople) I saw that they feared the English more than the Russian," continued Zenghis Zeraba Beg, in a tone of musing. "And yet we were conquered by the Russian. Why did the English not come to our rescue?"

"The deeds of men and of nations are written in the book of destiny. Who can turn back destiny?"

"Destiny makes a nation great—and destiny can make it small."

"May Allah prevent England from ever becoming small!" ejaculated Merlin Prester.

The other acquiesced in his wish, and presently resumed:

"When you get to England will you become a great man?"

The smile of banter which perpetually hung about the lips of Merlin Prester vanished. In a moment his mood was changed. Other thoughts came coursing through his brain. It was evident even to the elder Beg that he had touched a sensitive chord in the bosom of his friend. Merlin Prester remained silent for a moment; his composure returned, and with it his light mocking laugh.

"Listen," he said, as he lifted his finger for

silence; and they listened together to the sounds borne in on the evening air.

"Nothing but the croaking of the frogs," replied the other presently.

"Just so. When all croak together, can you tell which is the greatest?—which is the leader?"

"There can be no leader among frogs," laughed Zenghis Zeraba Beg, as the strangeness of the idea tickled his fancy.

"Or say rather that they drown the voice of the leader with their own croaking? So in England; they all croak, no one listens to his neighbour."

"Such a land will not gratify you. You will soon get tired and come back. When you speak you need someone to listen—and you like to speak."

Merlin Prester smiled.

"You think they will not hear me? Let me explain. If one frog more were added, and he were to croak louder than all others, he would still be unheard. But they are not always croaking—they have moments of rest. In the evening if you go by the lake before the sun has set, all is quite still. As the sun goes down one voice is heard rising—one croak is heard ringing above the smooth surface of the lake. What happens then?

Others which are near begin too, and ever circling outwards the noisy cries extend. The frog that knows *when* to croak so as to make the others hear, will lead them in their concert."

"And how does he learn the '*when*'?"

Merlin Prester did not reply.

At that moment a movement among the mountaineers attracted their notice. Simultaneously they turned towards the scene of revelry and mirth. The men had risen from their seats and stood with arms outstretched, and the right hand of each contained a glass which was filled by an attendant with wine from a *boor-dook* or goatskin. When all glasses were filled they stood silent a moment and then burst forth with one accord into a loud chant, which rang throughout the court-yard, was heard over the town of Poti, and drowned the song of the frogs in the swamp beyond. The chorus contained the words

"Merlin Prester Beg! Merlin Prester Beg!
Life and strength to Merlin Prester Beg!"

As they sang these words twice, silence fell upon the group. Their forms seemed swelled into giant size as they loomed out of the darkness, and the feeble light of the lamp fell

upon their upturned faces, and sparkled in the glasses now being rapidly emptied. A deep sigh told of the excellence of the liquor, and of the ending of the draught. Then, still in unison, they dashed the glasses at their feet, and the crashing and smashing told that no more liquid would ever be drunk from these vessels.

"Allah! Allah! Allah!" they cried once more, and uttered the usual refrain which closes a day's work in some districts of the Caucasus. Then they seized their arms, and sortied out with shout, and laugh, and rattle of steel, and they crossed the courtyard towards the room in which Zenghis Zeraba Beg and Merlin Prester Beg were seated.

"They are going to dance in your honour," observed Zenghis Zeraba Beg. "Our parting must be truly Caucasian."

It was even as he had said. The men according to the custom of the country were about to entertain, by their songs and dances, their chief and his friend, who was to depart on the morrow. Their number had been increased by that strange process by which the arrival of visitors from the mountains gets announced throughout the town so honoured, and kinsmen and clansmen come flocking to share in the good cheer. Mountaineers are

ever clannish; and as among the Highlanders of Scotland, cousinship extends very far and very wide. A drop of kindred blood was a sufficient qualification to allow the possessor to drink to the health and prosperity of the chief, and to allow him to enter fully into the enjoyments of the occasion. Thus, instead of being displeased at the uninvited presence of these extra guests, the chief greeted them cordially as his kinsmen and followers, and he was proud to find those who acknowledged him as lord, so far from his mountain home. After the congratulations were over, he seated himself by Merlin Prester in the courtyard outside his window, and signed that he was ready. Sidonia-ben-Joseph stood beside his master, for though he could feast with the mountaineers, he knew nothing of the mystery of their Caucasian dances.

The men, who were now nine in number, formed themselves in a chain, linking their arms together, so that they were firmly united. Then they commenced to sing a monotonous song about their great Queen Tamara, and her wonderful eyes, ears, nose, mouth, teeth, and so on, through all her exquisite charms. The chorus was a wild yell of untranslatable power. The catalogue of the charms of Queen Tamara being ended,

and hardly taking time for breath, they formed a circle again in a somewhat similar fashion, and they commenced another song, to which they danced round the circle with a strange sidling motion. Quicker and quicker they went, as they became more excited, partly by the wine, and partly by their enthusiasm. Then, when the noise and motion was at its climax, with a loud shout they broke the ring, and separated from each other with laughter and noisy conversation.

"And now let us see your skill with the crossed swords," said the chief.

One or two of the men immediately complied. Drawing their swords, they laid them on the ground and crossed them with their scabbards. But this done, they hesitated; to dance was a different matter; they had drunk their own stability away in drinking to the continued stability of Merlin Prester Beg.

One of them, prompted by the mockery of his comrades, and the amused smile of his chief, essayed to foot it; but before he made two or three steps the sword and its scabbard were sent flying into the darkness on either side. The man retreated before the jeers of the audience.

Before the laughter caused by this incident

had subsided, Merlin Prester Beg, to the surprise of all, rose from his seat, entered the arena, and in the presence of all, laid down his sword and scabbard, over which, after a graceful bow, he was seen executing bold figures, and throwing his body into a variety of elegant attitudes, while his foot went in and out between the ends of the blade and scabbard.

Great was the delight of the audience at the dexterity of the dance, as well as the condescension of the dancer. Cheers rent the air, and shouts of "Health and strength to Merlin Prester Beg!"

But soon whispers were heard and ominous looks that told that everything was not well. Zenghis Zeraba Beg looked surprised, and Merlin Prester Beg stopped for a moment to see what was the cause of the sudden change of behaviour of the men.

"An omen! An omen!" they cried.

"How so?" demanded the chief.

"The sword is reversed! He is turned to the point of the sword! An enemy is near!"

The attention of all was directed to the sword which had been so placed in the darkness, or through haste, in the position which was regarded by the superstitious sons of the mountains with distrust and fear. Merlin

Prester Beg saw his mistake, but was equal to the occasion.

"They dance so in England. This is the first part; now for the second," he cried, and without further ado he turned his face to the opposite direction, and recommenced the dance with even greater vigour and success than before. The superstitious fears of the men seemed allayed, and when the dance was finished they were loud in their praises.

"Now for the *Lesghinka*," cried the chief, and at his word the whole of the party, including even Sidonia, commenced that picturesque Georgian dance which represents the wooing of a maid, who ever slips past her lover just as he seems at the point of reaching her.

During the course of this dance, a messenger entered and whispered in the ear of the chief, whose eye darkened for a moment and then resumed its wonted serenity.

Presently as the *Lesghinka* terminated and before the men had breathed, he urged them on by ordering their favourite dance, one that no hardy mountaineer can unmovedly regard, but one that he must join in all its wildness and vigour.

"The mêlée!" he cried. And instantly each man rushed for his weapons. Sword,

dagger and pistol, they were suddenly exhibited in the hands of the excited warriors, who seemed as if about to enter into a deadly combat, so fierce, and so wild, and so defiant an expression each wore. In another moment swords were clashing, daggers glinting, and the pistols were flashing amidst the roar and hubbub of a wild mêlée. So sudden and fierce was the onslaught, that it seemed as if an ambuscade had been roused and the enemy were engaged in slaughter. The hotel servants started back with affright, and hid in the corners of the rooms from the bullets which were flying about—for Caucasian pistols are always loaded with bullets.

It was useless to attempt to stay the strife till the energies of the combatants had been worn out, and the ammunition expended. Then the hoarse shouts died down and silence was restored in the courtyard. The hour for repose had arrived.

"See that precautions against a surprise are taken," said the chief to one of his followers. "See that you place a guard all night. *The avenger of blood has followed us from the mountains.*"

CHAPTER III.

DIVINATION.

"As Merlin was plentifully endued with the spirit of divination; so, by some authors, it is affirmed of him, that he was skilful in dark and hidden arts, as magic, necromancy, and the like."

—LIFE OF MERLIN, SURNAMED AMBROSIUS.

THE *vendetta* or custom of blood revenge, holds very generally throughout the Caucasus. As in the Scottish Highlands in days long gone past, when no law was recognised by which crimes might be judged, and no system of police by which they might be punished, each man became a law unto himself—and he by no means showed that the principles of the law were engraven in his heart—so is it now in the Caucasus. Public sentiment goes with the "good old plan," by which those take who can take, and those keep who can keep. "Thou shalt want ere I want," is the basis of such a society. It is the struggle for existence, which, we are told, obtains in every kingdom of Nature. It belongs to the normal state of men, unimproved or unvitiated by

civilisation. It is a tradition descended from a most hoary antiquity. And the *vendetta* is an institution belonging to this "good old plan," which is at once venerable and simple, beset with no thorny questions of abstract right, troubled by no subtle distinctions of equity, and eminently practical. Every kinsman of the slain man has the privilege of pursuing the blood relatives of the slayer, till the price of blood has been paid, or the expiatory blood has been shed. No consideration of guilt or innocence is admitted, moral questions and judicial are beside the matter, the only thought is that of blood. Thus families are bound together in close ties where each member is responsible for the brawls (if ending in bloodshed) of his kinsmen. And so clans are strengthened through their lawlessness.

Thus the announcement of Zenghis Zeraba Beg that the avenger of blood was upon their track was full of significance, the more so that the robber, or rather the man who had been killed in the act of robbing, was the subject of a powerful chieftain who would exert the utmost of his might to requite the injury to his honour. It was not of the slightest consequence that the man had been guilty of theft—the folly of allowing goods

to be exposed to theft was almost as great as the guilt of shedding the blood of the stealer. So, with the chief's announcement still ringing in their ears, they retired to rest: the followers to stretch themselves upon the floor, wrapped in their thick *boorkas*, and Merlin Prester Beg to his chamber. Nor was the rest of the soft bed to be preferred to the less luxuriant surface of the floor, as Merlin Prester Beg found out before long. Many and varied are the insects which haunt the Caucasian hotels and inns, and a sound naturalist might compose a voluminous treatise on the *fauna* of his bedchamber.

Merlin Prester Beg, not being a naturalist, but a fatigued Caucasian traveller, after prolonged inconvenience, fell asleep.

On the morrow at the close of the morning repast, and just before setting out for the pier, where lay the vessel with steam already up, which should bear away Merlin Prester Beg, his comrade thus addressed him:

"Before we part let us give each other words of farewell."

"My word shall be that of gratitude," returned Merlin Prester, laying his hand on his heart. "May your life be long, may your form continue erect, and may your step be firm on the mountains."

"Be brave, my son," said the other, as he drew Merlin Prester to his bosom, and his eyes sparkled with joy through the tears of parting.

A moment's silence followed the warm embrace.

"The parting words we seek should be those of the Holy Book," remarked Zenghis Zeraba Beg presently, and as he spoke he drew forth from his breast a small copy of the Koran, richly bound.

The custom of divining future events in the sacred volume holds in many places in the Caucasus. After a prayer for direction is inaudibly offered, the Book is opened, and an answer from on High is supposed to be given by the first sentence upon which the eye falls. This habit is not, however, confined to the Caucasus, for there are people dwelling in the remote country districts—and perhaps even in the towns—of the United Kingdom, who would be forced to confess the deed if pressed. And it has even been urged in an apologetic manner that the great statesman of the Continent is not free from the habit, but this assertion, if based upon any fact, would be found probably to apply to the amusement of an idle hour—the relaxation from the laborious studies and cal-

culations of affairs—for political combinations are made through toil and not through divination.

But Zenghis Zeraba Beg on the present occasion acted according to his usual custom, and Merlin Prester Beg assumed an air of deferential curiosity while the ceremony was gone through of seeking the sentence in which the mysterious utterance was wrapped. The chieftain lifted up the sacred volume to a level with his head, exhibited a devout demeanour, and after a short silence of expectancy, he opened the book and read the following words:

"*The countenance of others, on that day, shall be joyful; well pleased with their past endeavour: they shall be placed in a lofty garden, wherein thou shalt hear no vain discourse: therein shall be a running fountain: therein shall be raised beds, and goblets placed before them, and cushions laid in order, and carpets ready spread.*" *

These words were read in a solemn tone, as if the reader was fully alive to the deep significance of the act he was engaged in: he

* Sale's Koran.

felt that he was the humble instrument through which a communication was being delivered from the unseen world. He was intensely in earnest. His look, his attitude, his gesture, his tone, all declared that he believed in the reality of the contact between the creature and the Creator, between Time and Eternity. Nothing is more astonishing to the student of man than to note how in modern times the spirit of enlightenment has endeavoured to sunder this contact, which in every region and in every age has hitherto seemed unbroken. Until our own day the faith has been universal in the Power or Powers, good or evil, who surround, and know, and influence man. In our own day a blast has passed over the earth, and the gods have been blown away. Man stands in magnificent isolation. His existence may be brief, but it is glorious. Alone he stands; he is not enthralled by the Infinite Power which once was imagined to modify every act, aid or thwart every wish, and judge every thought. His old gods were only his clay models from which he was in later days to create his grand and noble work—his self-existent Self.

The simple faith of the elder chieftain seemed so beautiful and yet so imposing,

that Merlin Prester was touched to the secret recesses of his soul. He was silent; he waited for his friend to continue. Nor had he long to wait, for the other after reading the words a second time to himself inaudibly, proceeded to expound them.

"Destiny is in the hand of the Almighty alone! Yet the future is revealed in dark words to those who can receive it. Listen to the words of the Book." Here he repeated the sentence once more and then resumed. "There shall be heavy labours not unmixed with strife; there shall be a day of reckoning; there shall be joy. The labours shall be long and shall seem barren; the reckoning shall be sudden and short; the joy shall be sweet and tranquil. Let these words be imprinted on your heart." So saying Zenghis Zeraba Beg reverently closed the book and replaced it in his bosom.

"I shall never forget what you have said," observed Merlin Prester.

"That you may the better remember the words I shall get a learned scribe to write them out, and I shall send them to you in the country to which you go."

"A thousand thanks, my dear friend, you are ever attentive to my desires. I would that I could render a like service to you. I

would that I could pronounce some sweet words, perfumed by the odours of Gulistan, upon your future. My everlasting gratitude, my constant recollection, my thoughts, my wishes, my prayers, my supplications, these offered at the shrine of friendship must express my parting words."

Once more the elder chieftain clasped the younger to his breast in loving embrace.

"And yet why should you not open the Book for a word also?" asked Zenghis Zeraba Beg.

"Can an unbeliever touch the Holy Book?"

"The Book was given that all should believe."

"And yet I remain as I have always been. Accept the wishes of my heart. Who knows that destiny will be revealed through *my* searching the Book?"

"You have a Book; does it not speak to you? Is the Book of the Nazarene then silent?"

"No, it is not silent. But, alas! I——" Merlin Prester did not finish the sentence. He felt that he would lower himself in the eye of his friend by a confession that he did not possess the Book.

"Draw it forth and let us hear it. I know

it well. You study it on the mountain side and on the house top. It is covered with brown paper."

"You mistake—ah, indeed—It is another —Is this it?"

Merlin Prester was for the moment almost at a loss what to reply to his importunate friend; but he ended his hesitancy by drawing a book from his pocket, which was immediately recognised by the other.

"That is the Book. Let us hear what it says at our parting. It is the Caucasian method."

"It is the Caucasian method," muttered Merlin Prester as he turned the book over and over in his hand; and as the book was turned the eye might catch in the Latin characters the words: "The Letters . . . Chesterf . . ."

Zenghis Zeraba Beg looked on reverently; he waited till the murmured invocation was concluded that he might listen to the mystic sentence.

Merlin Prester glanced at him furtively, there was no mistaking the earnest curiosity of his air and attitude. Then he glanced in the face of Nature for inspiration. "'Tis the Caucasian method," he murmured. Through the open window and far across the plain he

saw the distant Caucasus faintly looming through the clouds. Yonder was the abode of the chief. He withdrew his eyes from the scene, he opened the book and read:

"The mountains stretch towards the sky, they abide in everlasting strength."

The other showed himself glad that his request had been complied with, and he stood attentively that the explanation of the sentence should be given also.

"I am not learned in such lore. I cannot read the signs which are revealed to us," explained Merlin Prester. "Yet I presume that these words tell how you are great among all your people, towering high above them, and that your life will be prolonged, and that your strength will last."

The eyes of the elder chieftain sparkled for a moment at this pleasing exposition, but presently a wistful air stole over his countenance. He felt that the words had been stretched, yet he doubted not their power.

"No, no, I fear that you have put your heart into your interpretation," he said. "'The mountains stretch towards the sky.' What is it but that the soul of man flies upwards? 'They abide in everlasting strength.' What is it but that the soul shall remain in Paradise

where no enemy can come? My days are being numbered."

"No, no, by Allah," exclaimed Merlin Prester, clasping his hand warmly. "Say not so. Destiny directs our life; we cannot go before our time." So saying he put the unfortunate volume in his pocket and endeavoured to change the conversation.

But the other was not to be so easily repulsed; he had Caucasian tenacity and perseverance, and he proposed:

"We have heard what the Book of our religion says about your future, now let us hear what your Book says:

Excuses and expostulations were vain. Merlin Prester was induced once more to draw forth his Book to divine upon it his own destiny.

"'Tis the Caucasian method, I must comply," he muttered as he again looked out of the window for inspiration. It was a glorious morning; the sun was chasing away the mists and pouring his genial rays over all.

He opened his Book once more, and he read: "All night long darkness and mist cling to the earth; the sun rises from the mountains and it is day; and man rejoices in his horses and his cattle."

"The words are true," said Zenghis Zeraba

Beg eagerly. "They seem as the reflection of our Book. A long night of darkness; a sudden opening of day; and then there is joy. The omen for your journey is good."

"I accept the omen. My sun is rising and it will shine in the perfect day," observed Merlin Prester calmly, as if he also would declare futurity, and with no more to guide him than his wishes and his will.

The other was inclined to resent what seemed to him a slight upon his method of forecasting what was to happen, and he remarked—"Each sun that rises must set, and then follows the long night"

"But the sun does not set till his light has gone through the world and has lighted every corner. And when it sets it bears with it to the West the stores of knowledge, of experience of wisdom, and of glory."

Zenghis Zeraba Beg beheld not without emotion the enthusiasm of his friend, whose bearing was generally so calm and even frigid. But at that moment the warning whistle of the steamer sounded shrilly throughout the little town, and called the curious and the idle to witness its departure. "I go," continued Merlin Prester, donning his hat, "I go to seek the Mystery of the West."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE WEST.

"The ear, the voice, the fancy teeming with combinations the imagination fervent with picture and emotion that came from Caucasus, and which we have preserved unpolluted, have endowed us with almost the exclusive privilege of MUSIC; that science of harmonious sounds, which the ancients recognised as most divine, and deified in the person of their most beautiful creation."

—BEACONSFIELD.

THE steamer (which was merely a tender and was used to carry the passengers to join the large steamer at Batoum, where there is sufficient depth for ocean-going vessels) was lying by the side of the jetty at Poti, and was the scene of great bustle and excitement. The third and last whistle had been sounded several times, and the porters—Greeks, Turks, Russians, Mingrelians, and others—were swarming all over the deck, carrying loads and bawling at one another and everything. The last moments, which had been much prolonged, were apparently about to terminate. Merlin Prester Beg was ready to take a final farewell of his friend.

"And we, also, would bid you farewell, Merlin Prester Beg. We hope that you may prosper, and that you may return soon," thus spake one of the three mountaineers who had evidently been chosen a spokesman by the others.

Merlin Prester thanked them heartily for their kind wishes, and shook hands with them cordially, but each of them as he grasped the proffered hand put it to his lips and to his heart.

They did not seem, however, satisfied, and Merlin Prester invited them by a sympathetic expression to unburden themselves of what lay upon their hearts. After several interchanges of looks of intelligence, of mutual urgings and promptings, and of expressive gestures, which only mystified, Merlin Prester sought to end their doubt and misgiving, and to satisfy his curiosity, by demanding point blank if he could do anything further for them. Thus appealed to the spokesman no longer hesitated to reply.

"Before we part we wish to exchange arms, that we may have souvenirs of you when you are far away. It is the Caucasian method."

Merlin Prester involuntarily glanced downwards at his handsome dagger, and his fingers mechanically fell upon the massive silver

bosses of his belt, for he had arrayed himself in the full Caucasian costume as was befitting such an occasion. He had anticipated the triumph he should win in the West in such finery, which had been manufactured by the most renowned of Caucasian silversmiths—and now!——

"Nothing will delight me more—if anything can delight me on such a sorrowful occasion," was his reply.

Sidonia stood close by, hardly concealing the indignation he felt at the audacity of the proposal, and with his eyes full of envy and avarice, and his hands ready to clutch whatever might be lying loose. The spokesman having the first choice, selected, as was most meet in a warrior, the dagger, and immediately thereafter became the owner of a beautful damascened weapon in lieu of the one of common Tiflis manufacture which he had before possessed. The second most naturally chose the next important article, and became the happy possessor of a belt which was weighted by two or three pounds of richly chased silver. For the third nothing valuable remained, and he satisfied himself by demanding the exchange of pipes. As Merlin Prester only smoked cigarettes this exchange demanded little self-sacrifice, and the man was one of

those rare simple souls to whom greed is utterly unknown, so he was satisfied with the small silver cigarette-holder he received. But Merlin Prester added an English knife with many blades to the gift to make it more worthy, and everything was amicably settled as he thought.

But no; Sidonia, whose brain was active in devising reprisals as his natural passions were inflamed through the unfair exchange, or even waste, as he regarded it, of so much valuable material, found a happy issue out of his trials.

"And I, also, wish to exchange gifts at parting," he struck in as the bargain was concluded.

"Most willingly," replied the Caucasian mountaineer as his eye wandered over the person of the Caucasian of the haunts of civilisation in search for something of value.

Laying his hands on the massive silver belt which the second mountaineer had just obtained and was now proceeding to affix to his person with undisguised satisfaction, Sidonia claimed it as the article he selected to be given to him as a parting gift, while at the same time he prepared to take off his own belt, the chief value of which lay in the goodwill with which it was offered, for it was a

rough strap of leather with an iron buckle. The mountaineer protested violently against the spoliation; and his companions joined in, and together they chattered vehemently upon the injustice, to say nothing of the want of gentility, of such conduct. But Sidonia was unconvinced. He was never moved by thoughts concerning the first charge—still further from him were meditations on the second. Out-numbered and out-talked, he had to give way. And now he discovered in what a dangerous position he had placed himself.

"We cannot return gifts we have received," said the third of his opponents, who being less warmly attacked found means to make a diversion into the enemy's territory. "But we are willing to exchange gifts. Behold, what have we? We are poor. Yet our hearts are warm. Here is my purse. It contains little gold, but it is precious; was it not wrought by the fair hands of the Rose of our Valley? We are willing to exchange it for thine——"

Sidonia was so startled and taken aback by the new turn which affairs had assumed, that after a moment's hesitation he turned round and fled. He literally scampered away and sought the refuge of the ship, and left the

mountaineers talking in unison upon the jetty. Change his well-lined purse for the empty one made by the Rose of the Valley!

But now the really last third whistle had been blown, and there was a still more hasty scrambling, at the end of which Merlin Prester found himself in the steamer, and the last of the porters just managed to rush along the gangway suspended over the black waters of the Rion. There was a trembling of the ship, a churning of the waters, a waving of farewells, and they were off!

Almost at the same moment the discharge of a gun flashed forth; the white curling of its smoke and the crack of its report startled the gazers and stilled them into silence! A hush settled down on them. What could be the significance of the strange event?

Merlin Prester, who stood on the deck, felt a whizzing sensation through the air. A crash close beside him told that the bullet had lodged in the framework of the bridge. Had it been meant for him? This was the first thought which rushed upon him; and the second was a recollection of the warning against the robber prince and blood-avenger given him by Zenghis Zeraba Beg the previous evening.

Even while these thoughts were forcing

themselves upon him he watched with heightened interest the movements of the crowd upon the beach. Weapons were being drawn, shouts were raised, men were hurrying, women were shrieking, dogs were barking, pistol shots were sounding, daggers were gleaming—a tussle was in progress. Foremost in the strife was Zenghis Zeraba Beg.

But the vessel stayed not. Onwards towards the bar it glided; the sounds of commotion gradually died away in the distance, and the struggling forms became diminished, and then disappeared.

So they passed out to the calmness and beauty of the peaceful glassy sea. Behind them upon the shore now sinking down below the horizon, man was warring with man; beyond rose the long line of snow-clad mountains, bold and erect like the barrier of a world; above them stretched the divine beauty and harmony of the blue sky, unsullied by a cloud, unmoved by a breeze; and it was with a breast swelling with the deepest, wildest, sweetest and most sacred emotions that Merlin Prester set out from the Caucasus to tear from the West its mystery.

Day by day Merlin Prester Beg walked the deck in silence and in deep meditation. Night by night he paced backwards and forwards,

while above in the black vault of heaven the glimmering stars mocked in silent sarcasm the puny efforts of man to steal from them the slightest atom of knowledge worth knowing. Dreadful is the irony of night; the wisest, the greatest, the proudest intellect feels crushed, bewildered, maddened before the solution of infinitude.

Alone amidst the silence and the darkness Merlin Prester Beg felt neither solitude nor gloom. His musings were bright, his hopes were high; he was young. Before him was a new world of thought, and feeling, and action, upon which his fancy lingered joyfully. Wide as infinitude had been the sphere of Nature through which he could wander in his Caucasian home; but man is greater than Infinite Nature; he has passions and sentiments, aspirations and affections, which move in a world of their own, invisible and intangible, but more real and lasting than the tangible and visible, and which is the world of soul and of spirit. Visible nature is great because it is the infinite shadow of an infinite invisible substance, and the substance is greater than its shadow.

His imagination peopled the new world to which he was bound with fanciful creations among which he took his place, not timidly,

but boldly. He had felt cramped and confined amongst the simple people of the Caucasus, and he had longed for the larger world of men and their deeds which now arose before him. "There shall be heavy labours not unmixed with strife," he muttered to himself as he recalled the words of the prophecy of the chieftain, and he did not repine. His eye kindled at the prospect. His heart leaped. The clashing of swords was the music of the Caucasus. Hardihood and daring formed the training of its people. "Adventures are to the adventurous" was the legend told from sire to son in the cottages far up the mountain side.

Fancy and speculation were to give way to reality and experience. All that he had read, all that had been told him, all that his imagination had pictured, was to be revealed to his expectant ken. It was not without reverence that he anticipated the day of revelation. Mixed with his exultant fancy, was a deep feeling of awe. It is not the reckless and thoughtless neophyte who lives to win distinction and honour, but he who with reverent and trembling step approaches the mysteries, and dreads lest he might sully them, dishonour the sanctuary, and degrade himself.

So he journeyed on over the halcyon calm of that summer sea. The waters of the Euxine where the dolphins played, never seemed so blue since the host of Xenophon cried "The Sea! the Sea!" nor the Anatolian coast so lovely since the Milesian and Heraclian settlers journeyed thither; nor the stars so bright and mysterious, since man first looked on them with wonder and inquiry. But his thoughts did not linger upon the present scene, but were fixed far beyond upon the distant goal where populous cities were built, where men gathered riches, where eloquence and poetry were heard, where books and newspapers were printed, where railways carried men, and telegraphs their thoughts, with the speed of lightning. Great and mysterious was the West.

It was eventide, the hour of inspiration. The huge round sun, blood-red, hung over the glassy surface of the sea, before the vessel's prow. The sun had visited the world in all its phases of morning, noon, and evening, and at every hour had witnessed some new operation of man, had suggested some new thought, had directed some new work of the daily round. It bore with it the gratitude of man for the assistance given to his labours; it bore with it the recollection of moving

scenes, joyful and sad, pathetic and ludicrous; and with these memories, it was about to disappear. Day by day was this task repeated. From the East to the West it went. From the East to the West was carried the stores of experience, of knowledge, of joy, of rapture, but also of sorrow and weeping. To the insatiable West everything was borne. These thoughts crowded upon Merlin Prester. Something of the spirit of the ancient dwellers in Eastern Caucasus entered into him; they who worshipped the fire, the Sun, the source of light and heat, the Creator and Sustainer of visible nature, the symbol of the One Great First Cause, whose descendants have for ages kept alight the sacred fire near Baku on the Apsheron peninsula; and thus inspired, he burst into song. His servant, Sidonia, who sat cross-legged on the deck dozing over his evening *tchibouk*, with a basketful of cherries by his side, listened luxuriously to the strains in which his master, in a sweet-toned voice, thus expressed the thoughts that were surging within him:

"Nature's king, the glorious Sun,
His labours ended, his shining done,
Knows, declining to his rest,
The Mystery of the West!

"List'ning, watching, all day long
Now man's work, now woman's song,
The hidden care of every breast,
The Mystery of the West.

"He has been o'er Russian plains,
Where is heard the clank of chains
A nation 'neath a crownèd pest;
A Mystery of the West.

"Over scenes of battles won,
Where war's glory bright has shone,
Soldiers slain for a tyrant's jest;
A Mystery of the West.

"Paris laughs, and Berlin drills,
London ships with commerce fills,
Which can show of all that's best,
The Mystery of the West?

"Is it wit? or warlike power?
Bales?—but see, the waters cover
The Sun—his secret unconfessed!
The Mystery of the West."

The voice died away as the sun sank beneath the waves, and the stars emerged out of the grey sky. The dying of the day was full of awe. The stroke of the screw, the vibration of the machinery, the splash of the water at the bow, the tread of the captain on the bridge, the snoring of Sidonia, whose head had fallen forwards on his breast, these,

the only sounds throughout the limitless expanse, fell unheeded upon Merlin Prester's ear. It was the solemn influences of the hour that bowed him down, and the intensity of his meditation. So he journeyed on towards that land where the Mystery of the West should become mysterious no longer.

BOOK SECOND.

"Oh calmless calm! The heaving 'Clown'
Reels like a drunkard up and down.
You cannot eat, you cannot drink,
You cannot talk, you cannot think.
You cannot stand, nor yet repose,
You cannot walk, you cannot doze;
And, Oh, what cuts me to the quick,
You cannot—No, you can't—be sick."

—Lord John Manners.

BOOK SECOND.

CHAPTER V.

OUR MOTHER TONGUE.

"True politeness is perfect ease and freedom. It simply consists in treating others just as you love to be treated yourself."

—LORD CHESTERFIELD.

"A VERY extraordinary thing! Demmy, if I can understand it." These words came from an elderly gentleman, standing with his hands in his trousers pockets and his back to the fireplace of a room in a hotel in Constantinople.

"It is more than extraordinary—it is disappointing—it is disheartening," replied his wife, looking up from the pile of newspapers lying on the table before her. She did not rebuke the modified oath of her lord, for they were alone, and no one could possibly know that she had listened to it.

"It is as you say, my love, it *is* disheartening. Then think of the expense, too, to say nothing of the trouble and the worry."

"The money will be well laid out if they take us in the yacht. From here they may go direct to England, to be in time for the first Drawing-room. They did not go once all last year—the doctor forbade them," and here the lady looked knowingly to her husband, "but this year they have got permission. It was all through the Duchess of Dettingen—a dear old creature—who can do what she likes at Court for those who play their cards well. A dear, dear, scheming old witch."

"Can they have gone straight home?" asked the husband suddenly, as if the thought had just struck him.

"No, no, Henry. Quite impossible. *Quite* impossible. They were at Smyrna on the 27th of last month. Then they were at Mitylene on the 30th, and reached Besika Bay (from whence this message was sent) on the 1st. They intended to remain there three days, to visit Troy, and then to come on here. Ten days have passed away and there are no signs of them. I can't make it out at all." With these words the lady threw down the paper—from which she had read the dates—with evident vexation.

"If I thought that the editor——"

"Had put it in to spite us?" suggested the lady as her husband paused.

"As sure as my name is Henry Creeper I'd break every bone in his confounded body, —— him." And Henry Creeper made several mystic passes with his fists in the air with such fury, that it was fortunate for the Editor that his confounded body was not present in the flesh.

Mrs. Creeper did not rebuke her husband for the unmodified oath because she was not less vexed than he, and she could enjoy the relief which a good round oath brings to the jaded feelings without taking upon her shoulders any of the guilt. Oh husbands, not the least of the many privileges ye enjoy in the holy bond is that of relieving the partners of your bosoms, through your oaths, of much mutual discontent! And, oh, wives, how delightful to sin by deputy!

"Every day I have called three times at the likely hotels, so that the porters know me and answer before I ask. If I have been making myself ridiculous for nothing——"

The threat rightly remained unuttered, for by the expression of Mr. Henry Creeper's face it must have been quite unutterable.

"By-the-bye," interrupted Mrs. Creeper,

"who is this foreigner who arrived last night? They told me he was a Prince."

"Yes, that is so."

"A Russian Prince, I suppose?"

"No, a Georgian. He comes from the Caucasus."

"A Georgian? That's ten times worse," laughed Mrs. Creeper.

"He is called something Beg."

"Was it not beggar?"

"They say he is a personage in his own land——"

"A Prince of beggars? Well, let's hear no more about him. It is time for you to go to the Hotel London, to see if they have arrived; while I have many letters to write. I must let Mrs. Ponsonby know about the scrape Lady Seymour's nephew has got into. And my dear old friend Lady Fitzgoby will be dying to know what was said, and done, and worn at the Ambassador's last ball. And Sir John Jones's wife, and the Honourable Mrs. Jumper and a host more, I must write to—so you had better go at once."

And the obedient husband departed to inquire at the hotels if the expected visitors had arrived.

It was a beautiful morning in April, and

the air was clear and bright. The sounds which stole in by the open window announced that the work of the day had begun. The chirping of the sparrows over the crumbs they found in the courtyards, the barking of the street-dogs, the loud cries of the wandering vendors, and the rattle of carriages on the stones, told that man and the lower animals alike had gone forth to seek their daily food. So also husband and wife, or, as perhaps it might be more correctly put, wife and husband, proceeded to their respective daily occupations, and forgot the Georgian Prince they had spoken of till, some hours afterwards, on entering the spacious and well-furnished *salle-à-manger*, their eyes fell upon him sitting at table, partaking of the *déjeûner-à-la-fourchette* ready at that hour according to the rules of the *table-d'hôte*. As the reader might guess, this was no other than Merlin Prester Beg, who still wore the Caucasian dress, being accustomed to it from habitual usage. The Creepers were cross that day, this was undeniable. Mrs. Creeper was cross from purest caprice; she was cross because she was not in a good humour. Mr. Creeper was cross because he had been trotting round Pera and down to Galata over the rough uneven stones, and his pilgrimage had

brought him no satisfaction—the expected vessel had not yet arrived.

"*Look at the Georgian, my dear, he will swallow his fork immediately,*" said Mrs. Creeper in English.

"*I wish he would, and that would be an end of him, my love,*" replied the husband. "*He's picking out the best bits, demmy.*"

So saying, Mr. Creeper placed himself near the Georgian; perhaps it was because he wished to vent his crossness on someone, perhaps it was because he desired to save some of the best bits of what was going, perhaps it was from pure accident. At any rate as he sat and ate, he did not fail to observe the movements of his neighbour, and to make remarks upon them in English to his wife, while he addressed polite, common-place phrases in French, with a seeming cordiality to others present, and even to Merlin Prester Beg.

"Have you tasted our native wine, that of St. George, for instance? I should like to know what you think of it, compared to your Caucasian wines," said Mr. Creeper, addressing Merlin Prester in French, with a patronising manner, as he picked his teeth.

"*For Heaven's sake, Henry, don't ask him*

to drink any more," ejaculated Mrs. Creeper, in English.

"Yours is, without doubt, much superior to ours. Civilisation is more highly advanced here."

"With us, people sometimes say that civilisation has not improved natural products, such as wine, and that the grape is only used to make wine in very exceptional cases. Do you believe this in the Caucasus? I suppose you have not too much civilisation there?" This was said in French; and then in English Mr. Creeper added for the benefit of his wife: "*Let us draw him out a little.*"

"Caucasian civilisation is the most ancient. May I ask if you ever heard this before?" returned Merlin Prester blandly, as he emptied his glass. "Allow me to fill up your glass —with a wine produced by modern civilisation."

"*You are a devilish cool customer*," said Mr. Creeper, in English, for the remark was intended for his wife's ear. "With pleasure, sir," he continued in French.

"*Don't make a beast of yourself*," said Mrs. Creeper to her husband.

"*I'll be d—d if this fellow will beat me*," returned Mr. Creeper testily. "Your very good

health," he continued in French, a remark which he now made for the fifteenth time.

"And yours, sir. And may we become better acquainted," replied Merlin Prester, filling up both glasses once more.

"*You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Henry. I won't sit here and see you making a beast of yourself—a beast of yourself.*"

"*I don't keep you here, my love,*" replied Mr. Creeper, who, for a moment, seemed to forget himself. There was a peculiar charm in the manners of Merlin Prester which fascinated him, and kept him from withdrawing according to the wish of his wife.

Mrs. Creeper was deeply vexed; it was with difficulty that she restrained herself from a burst of hysterical weeping. But she did restrain herself, and presently became calm enough to utter one word, which acted in a magical way.

"Henry!"

Mr. Creeper was immediately subdued. He was brought to a recollection of his being a husband, and the husband of Mrs. Creeper.

"You will permit me to leave you," he said to Merlin Prester as he rose. "We are English; and it is not an English custom to drink wine in the morning. We drink in the evening, and after dinner. If you will honour

me this evening—as an Englishman——" Mr. Creeper made a flourish with his hand, that might mean anything from a friendly glass of wine to the national honour.

"Adieu. Then as Englishmen we shall meet."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Creeper, as he slapped the other on the shoulder. "You are going to become an Englishman? You like our customs? That's right, the more the merrier. England is not very large, but we have room for all and to spare. Let me show you how Englishmen shake hands."

"You recall to me old times."

"Then you have been in England?"

"I was born there."

"And you speak English?"

"It is my mother tongue."

Mr. Creeper felt an involuntary thrill pass through his members. He was startled. He was flabbergasted. He was effectually quelled. He had some dim recollection of having said or done something by which this strange Englishman might feel insulted. He knew not what he had done, but felt that it was something dreadful. He was dumbfounded.

His wife, blessed helpmeet, could be subdued by no adverse circumstance. She had a

mighty spirit; she was fruitful in resources; she delighted in difficult and delicate conjunctures; she rose superior to them all.

"Then you speak English?" she commenced in that language, with a smile of winning sweetness. No trace of irritation, of doubt or misgiving, of hesitation or discomposure, but the most supreme joy and satisfaction. She was radiant. "Then you speak English?" and as Merlin Prester nodded in reply she resumed: "What a delight it must be for you to hear your own language after so long a deprivation. The first words; how sweet they must sound! A rapture, which one cannot express, steals over one, as the dear old familiar sounds strike upon the ear, and sink down into the soul! What tender memories they call up! What sweet joys they bring back to us! It is delicious to think of it!"

Mr. Creeper caught the rapture of his wife, and his face, which had visibly lengthened, now became broad and beaming. He looked upon her with unfeigned admiration. He felt that he was only fit to fall down before her and kiss the hem of her robe. It *was* delicious to think of the tender memories, the sweet joys brought back by the first words of a mother tongue—what had they been?—could they

really have been "he will swallow his fork?" oh horror! or were they, "I wish he would," and "he's picking out the best bits, demmy?" No it was impossible. The face of Mrs. Creeper affirmed it to be impossible, quite impossible

Mrs. Creeper and her husband turned to leave the room with many smiles and joyous nods. In a moment they seemed to have made the friendship of years with the Caucasian Englishman. He accompanied them to the door.

"Who would have thought to have met an Englishman in the dress of the Caucasus—beautiful though it is—so far from home? It is like a romance," said Mrs Creeper halting on the threshold.

"Stranger things than that may happen," said Mr. Creeper with a knowing wink. "Some ship may some day come upon some savage island, far away in the midst of some ocean, and there come upon some English savage without any dress at all—that is to say without any to speak of," he explained as he saw a blush suffusing the pure cheek of his wife.

"For shame Henry," she said modestly.

But Mr. Creeper laughed heartily at his joke, and poked Merlin Prester in the ribs.

"My Caucasian dress, and to-day is the last day that I wear it, will be always remembered by me, for it has brought me the pleasure of your friendship," said Merlin Prester as he bowed to the Creepers, now on the landing, and there was a something in the words or in the manner of uttering them that made Mrs. Creeper wince. But the next moment the door was shut.

"Mr. Creeper," said Mrs. Creeper solemnly, when they had reached the sacredness of their own chamber, "you have put your foot in it."

Mr. Creeper expressed contrition, and was in reality so humbled that his wife had no need to exert her sway over him, nor make him shrink under it. She magnanimously refrained from torturing her victim after he was down, or mutilating him after he was slain. With a practical mind she turned to the bearings of the case.

"What is the real name of this Englishman or Beg or whatever he is? Nothing but your carelessness could have caused such an error to be made."

"They told me he was a Beg. They said they knew it by his dress. Lots of Circassians come here."

"I have nothing to do with Circassians. I want to know his real name."

"I shall go and ask. I noticed that he had some servant or other—a little fat man—perhaps he can tell us."

"Go and ask him, my love, and if he really knows anything try to bring him here."

Thus adjured, Mr. Creeper went away to inquire into the personality and antecedents of Merlin Prester Beg, now turned Englishman, while Mrs. Creeper applied herself to her papers and her letters.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

"I know also, at Constantinople, the son of a physician, aged two years, who was born with a tail an inch long; he belonged to the white Caucasian race. One of his grandfathers possessed the same appendage."

—Dr. Hubsch, quoted by S. Baring Gould.

Long experience in the art of extracting information from servants had taught Mr. Creeper discretion, and he therefore made preliminary inquiries concerning the habits of master as well as man. The master having gone out unattended, and not being expected back immediately, he found the coast clear. So he could prosecute his search, joining caution with boldness.

"Was Sidonia in his room? Yes, Sidonia was in his room," but the answer was given in a tone that was not reassuring.

However, he followed the hotel servant to the small room on the top storey, where Sidonia made his bed. On knocking at the door there was no reply. A second knock, and a third, likewise failed to elicit a response. Then the door was tried, and it opened on the

handle being turned. There was Sidonia sitting cross-legged, his head on his breast, his *tchibook* by his side, his hands on his lap, and a smell of tobacco smoke pervading the room. That he had fallen asleep, soundly asleep, there could be no doubt, for his snoring, not loud and harsh like that of a robust man, not thick and gurgling like that of a drunken man, but soft, regular, and modulated to a voluptuous tone, sounded like the buzzing of blue-bottles over a muck-heap on a genial sunshiny afternoon in the month of June.

"He is asleep," was the remark of the hotel servant, after watching for a silent minute the burly figure of Sidonia.

"So I see, and, demmy, he takes it very easy up here."

"Hush, Sir, you will wake him."

"Wake him? That's just what I want."

"If you please, Sir," said the hotel servant in a low but awful tone as he quietly withdrew, motioning Mr. Creeper to follow. Mr. Creeper was a man of no mean force of character, few people could urge him to take any path he did not choose; fewer could make him withdraw from a path he had chosen; save from the lofty mind of Mrs. Creeper he would tacitly acknowledge direction from none. Yet the thrill it might be of awe, or

of foreboding, or of terror, or of weird superstition, which moved in the words of that hotel-servant was such as to command obedience. And he retired.

Once the door was closed, an explanation was forthcoming.

"Did you see him, Sir?"

Mr. Creeper nodded.

"He was sleeping."

Mr. Creeper nodded impatiently—this was trifling with him.

"He is terrible."

Mr. Creeper was reduced to docility by the same mystic force he had just experienced contained in the thrill in the voice, the earnestness of the look, and the subjection of the soul of the waiter.

"He sleeps; and he sleeps; and he sleeps. This morning his master wanted him to arrange his clothes downstairs. I went in to wake him." The man paused that Mr. Creeper might take in the significance of the act; and the pause did not fail in its effect. "He was hard to wake, Sir" (another pause) "But when he was awake, Sir" (another pause) "there was no mistake about it."

"What did he do?" Mr. Creeper ventured to ask after another long pause.

"Do, Sir? He just drew his dagger, Sir!

and if it were not for the most trifling circumstance I should have been——"

"Francis, Francis," called a voice in the corridor.

"Coming, Sir," shouted Francis. "Excuse me, Sir," he continued to Mr. Creeper, and then he vanished, leaving the trifling circumstance floating large and indefinite in the air, and Mr. Creeper, in a state of perturbation, to descend to a lower storey. Mr. Creeper's first prompting to return to his wife was suppressed—how could he make *her* feel the difficulty of the mission which had been too much for him?—and he wandered forth to visit the hotels and ask after the expected yacht, and to inspect his watchmen who were stationed at various points of vantage in Stamboul and Torphaneh that the first approach of the vessel might be announced to him. An hour or two later Mr. Creeper returned, and, as usual, disappointed. His luck, however, had not altogether forsaken him, for while he stood in front of the board containing the names of the visitors, searching fruitlessly for the name of the Caucasian Englishman—Mr. Creeper seemed always to be searching for something—he happened to glance aside, when he saw the fat servant, Sidonia. Mr. Creeper looked on him with

some reverence—such was the effect of the shock he had sustained—but no shape was less horrific in outline than that of Sidonia. Horror sits enthroned in jagged and fantastic outlines—Sidonia's was round and smooth, and a perfect specimen of what naturalists call "bilateral symmetry."

"I don't see the Beg's name here," Mr. Creeper observed in his frank winning way and in the French language.

"I would not contradict you, Sir. I agree with you, Sir," retorted Sidonia not less blandly.

"Perhaps they did not know it ? suggested Mr. Creeper.

"Who can say, in truth, Sir ?"

Mr. Creeper saw that it was a case in which he required all his skill, nor was this inconsiderable, for he had lived much in the East and had learned—he was always learning, inquiring and searching. It was out of the question to think of requesting him to go into the presence of Mrs. Creeper, the man's evident cunning would rouse his suspicions, so he enticed him into the smoking-room—which was almost deserted at that hour—and sent a note to inform Mrs. Creeper of the fact. A little later, while passing the open door, that lady caught sight of her husband in the

smoking-room, and she came to speak to him, and found him engaged in conversation with Sidonia. "My love, I am having a most interesting chat. This is the gentleman of our friend. He has travelled much. In fact, there does not seem to be a country which he has not visited."

"In company with our friend?"

"No, that was before he knew me," replied Sidonia. "Since that time I have not travelled. We have lived quietly. I have smoked the pipe of contemplation and have partaken of the cup of satisfaction. Who can oppose destiny? It was written in the book of destiny that I should wander, and I went forth. I saw people, great crowds of people, everywhere. And I found peace in the pipe of contemplation while the crowds were passing—always passing—in the busy streets. A little corner where I could sit and meditate was all I wanted, then I was satisfied."

"You have thought much; you must be very wise," remarked Mrs. Creeper.

"We must not boast of wisdom. We must give thanks to Allah," said Sidonia, who always looked complacent while receiving compliments, and who never contradicted them.

"And now you are again beginning to travel?" asked Mrs. Creeper.

"We must obey destiny," remarked Sidonia. He seemed destined to evade questions, though he might occasionally volunteer information if the humour of confession descended upon him.

"And does the Beg like to travel?"

"What was it that sent him from his own country? Destiny. How could a boy have a wish or intention of his own? What made him live among his kindred in the mountains? Destiny. It was there that we were destined to meet. I had been robbed—it was the will of Allah—when destiny sent me relief and I saw Merlin Beg——"

"Merlin Beg?" were the words which hung a moment on the lips of Mr. Creeper, but were suppressed, as he saw Sidonia was still speaking.

"And it is destiny that directs him over the long road over which run the fire-horses to his own country. Who can resist destiny?"

"And so you go with Mr. Merlin to England?" asked Mrs. Creeper, whose practical mind grasped the situation at once.

At this point the voice of Mr. Merlin was heard in the passage, asking for Sidonia, who slowly rose from his seat, stretched himself, and then replied to the question.

"We both go under the guidance of destiny. Merlin Beg goes to his country, where he will

be great. Did he not read it in the Book? And I go too. There may be storehouses in England. Who knows? Are there not storehouses in England?"

"Yes, there are storehouses in England," replied Mrs. Creeper. "But what of them?"

Sidonia's face brightened. Then he shook his head mysteriously. "Who can oppose destiny?" he muttered as he salaamed and went to join his master.

The Creepers waited impatiently for the hour of dinner. During the interval many wild suggestions were made and brilliant speculations hazarded as to the identity of Mr. Merlin. Mrs. Creeper once more went over her Debrett and her Burke and the other lists of fashionable names and pedigrees with which she was so familiar—she would have passed a creditable examination on the British families, though she must have pleaded ignorance to a request for an approximate pedigree of the Jewish kings through the line upon which the Christian Church is founded—but she could not decide to which branch of the Merlins the subject of her thoughts belonged. The direct line was exceedingly ancient—its root was lost in the mists of antiquity, but it had never been ennobled; this was a favour bestowed upon a very young

twig—so young in fact that the buds upon it might be almost deemed upstart Merlins—yet the title was a solid fact which was worth much blood. Mrs. Creeper was not a little exercised on the subject; her conjectures were wild and varied; and she became confused. She hardly knew whether she preferred her Merlin to belong to the ancient Merlins or the titled Merlins. She had not reached any definite conclusion by the time the dinner bell rang, beyond the resolution to satisfy her curiosity by asking the subject of it himself. But no external sign of her eager curiosity was visible as, smiling and irresistible, she entered the dining-room with her husband. Mr. Merlin was late, and she began to fear many things. He was a stranger in a great and wicked city; who could say what might not happen to him? But her speculations were ended before she had suggested half a dozen different styles of murder by which he might have been got rid of, for the possible victim, in good health, and with an appearance as if he would relish his dinner, entered the room. She rose and signalled to him to take the seat she had reserved for him. He obeyed with a gallant air. He had discarded the Caucasian costume of the morning and appeared for the first time in the strange

black thing with two tails known as a Western dress coat. His form was elegant, and his bearing graceful, that even the strange and unusual black garment with two tails became him well—as Mrs. Creeper very soon told him.

Mrs. Creeper could become fascinating when it was her wish to do so; but on the present occasion, when she was conscious of being the first of his countrywomen that Mr. Merlin had seen for many a long year, her conduct was superb. It was tender, sweet, pathetic, charming, irresistible. The table was fascinated, the room was enravished, the waiters were intoxicated, the manager was alarmed. And within her pure matronly bosom Mrs. Creeper felt the mild joys of indisputable triumph, while her husband looked on in the transports of admiration—now solemnly silent—now wildly enthusiastic.

And Merlin Prester?

Where is a young man from the mountains before a married English lady, who with the purest intentions, in the very presence of her admiring husband, wishes to travel over the gamut of feeling and of passion, wishes to please, to delight, to intoxicate?

Far up along the mountain side the dying echo gasps, Where?

Merlin Prester did not know where he was, and could not have done more than whisper: "Where?"

To be called by his Christian name by that lovely creature! This was heavenly in itself! He could not correct her, he could not explain, he could not even believe that she had mistaken his Christian for his family name, that she was not intentionally addressing him thus.

But it came at last. It was impossible to avert the terrible crisis, for Mrs Creeper had herself determined to put the crucial question.

"To what family of Merlins do you belong? To the Merlins of Merlin, or of Merlinville?"

Merlin Prester blushed; he became confused, he stammered, he became incoherent.

But Mrs. Creeper was unconscious, with true womanly tact, of his confusion. And as she proceeded to enlarge on the history of the branches of his family, putting each in its proper order, and referring each either to the elder line or the titled branch, her admirer, who was also her victim and her slave, gradually was restored to composure. Then he gathered courage to say that his family was Prester, and that Merlin was his Christian name.

With what tact did Miss Creeper now turn and apologise for the liberty she had taken in calling him by his Christian name. But they seemed to have become such old friends that she was almost ashamed to apologise. And Merlin Prester, now gaining confidence, replied, with charming *naïveté*, that he liked best to hear her call him by that name, and hoped she would not change. He regretted that he had informed her.

But Mrs. Creeper had a cool head amidst that fire which she darted on all around to inflame them, and she now sought to follow up the new track, Prester. Of course she had never thought of looking up this name in the books of families, and she had to proceed with caution.

"Your family has been living in comparative retirement during the last season or two?" She put out this as a feeler. This was safe ground to go upon. Suspecting that there are a few people out of the many millions composing the British Empire who do not come up to town in May and June, and during part of July, she left herself ground for retreat without being forced to confess her ignorance of the Presters.

"Yes, I have been living for many years

abroad with my relatives?" returned Merlin Prester simply.

Mrs. Creeper glanced at her husband. Did he notice the implication? Mr. Merlin Prester was *the* Presters; but her husband had a pre-occupied air, and was not listening to the conversation.

"For many years? Then you will find very many changes when you return," she said sympathetically.

"I have been away so long that I shall be almost a stranger."

"Then you will have the delight of meeting with your old friends. And you will see the places that have lingered in your memory with delicious sweetness. How I envy you your good fortune."

"Yes, it will be a novel experience. The charm of life is novelty? Do you not think so?"

"Yes, how true! And your family, your circle of friends—I hope I may speak for them—are to be envied, too." There was a tremor in the voice of Mrs. Creeper as she dropped these sweet words. Then she continued: "You have been away many years? You must have been quite a young man when you left?"

"Yes, I was a mere boy. My father had

strong faith in the advantage of a foreign education. He used to say that those appreciated home best who had travelled most—who had been longest away; that man was the true study for man; that Race was the secret of knowledge, of thought, of domination; and that language was the root of Race."

"How I wish that I knew him. But you used the past tense?"

"Yes. He is no more."

"Alas! What a loss to his country! How I agree with him in everything. I speak feelingly upon this subject," said Mrs. Creeper passionately, as she seized Merlin Prester's hand.

"Yes. I speak feelingly. What have I not suffered? Am I not a mother? Are maternal feelings not real? Would I have sacrificed my Henry?" And tears stood in the beautiful eyes which spoke so eloquently to Merlin Prester.

Mr. Creeper fidgetted; his wife's agitation recalled his wandering thoughts. He dreaded a scene, and he knew not what object the partner of his joys could have in creating one at the present time. It is true that there were few people in the room, for the majority had slipped away gradually to read the news-

papers in the smoking-room—a large amount of liberty being conceded to the movements of each visitor at the hotel.

"Don't excite yourself, my love, Harry is all right," said Mr. Creeper, soothingly.

His wife seemed to feel comforted by the support of his sympathy.

"Forgive my weakness," she said to Merlin Prester.

"My wife is so very sensitive," remarked Mr. Creeper.

"And let me explain the cause of—the cause of—my—my—weakness," said Mrs. Creeper. Being encouraged by the attention of Merlin Prester she continued: "I have a son—I wish you would not call him Harry, my dear"—the parenthesis was not addressed to Merlin Prester, but to her husband; "a son, whom I have placed with friends in the neighbourhood of this great city—which is so very cosmopolitan—where he may obtain the best education — the education which you have so graphically described. It was very painful to part with him, but should I have been a true and faithful mother if I had allowed my feelings to militate against the good of my son? What I suffered no one who is not a mother can tell," here Mrs. Creeper's voice grew tremulous, and her hus-

band grew fidgetty, but it was only for a moment; "and was it right of some of my friends to judge me harshly? But my conscience supported me, and so did my husband."

"Yes, my love," mournfully and dubiously came from Mr. Creeper.

"But why should I make you listen to the anxieties of a fond mother? Were it not for the affinity of soul which I see between us—your account of your father's opinions on education proved this—I should not have referred to the subject so close to my heart—my first-born son."

Here a commotion on the stairs attracted the notice of Mr. Creeper, and he listened attentively.

"A fond mother is never tired of talking of her children." Here Mrs. Creeper smiled a matronly smile. "But I shall not weary you by talking about my son. You must come some day with me to visit him. You will be delighted with him, I am sure." Mr. Creeper's whole soul seemed now to be fixed upon the door, like a man in the dock might be supposed to regard the door closed upon the twelve honest and faithful countrymen, sworn to deliberate truly and justly on his acts. "You will find him so frank and

open, so full of playfulness, yet with no trace of mischievousness in his nature, and so very attached to one he trusts, so very affectionate —so—so just like a British schoolboy ought to be——"

"Good heavens! The yacht has arrived," exclaimed Mr. Creeper.

"How you startled me, my love!"

"It is come! I know it. Here is Hassan!"

"Let's hear what he says. You will excuse us, Mr. Prester?" And without waiting for a reply, the Creepers hastened off to hear what Hassan had to say.

The man, who was out of breath, owing to the haste with which he had come, informed them with much deliberation and many words that the yacht *Victoria* had just rounded the Seraglio Point, and was now somewhere in the Golden Horn. Mr. Creeper was greatly excited at the news, and hurried upstairs to his room to don his hat and gloves, and to change his coat for dining for a coat for walking (or running), and he told Hassan to wait for him in the hall below.

Merlin Prester imagined he could detect an eagerness in the manner of Mrs. Creeper as she rejoined him, and a certain flashing in her eyes which was different from the flashing which had dazzled him at dinner-time—for

he had gained boldness to observe her closely—but probably his eyes deceived him, for she addressed him calmly and without the least trace of feeling—so different from her manner when talking of her son—and proceeded to explain the cause of the hasty departure of her husband.

"We have been expecting friends to arrive in their yacht every day for several days. We have been invited to join them, for they are going home for the season. They have been so long delayed that we feared they had changed their minds, and had gone straight home without coming here."

"But they had promised to come?"

"Of course it was very wrong of us to have imagined this. It looks like distrusting their word. But then, you see, they belong to people who move in a very high circle."

Merlin Prester looked as if he understood the explanation.

"They move in a very high circle, and of course it is a great privilege, and an honour——"

At this moment another man, in the dress of the lower orders, was brought to the threshold by a waiter, who evidently disliked the task of accompanying anyone so low. It was another watcher. And what details

had Abdullah to bring? Mr. Creeper hurried downstairs from his room above (but stopped on the landing) without his coat.

The yacht *Victoria* had entered the Golden Horn.

"Were the passengers on board?"

Abdullah was younger than Hassan, and was of a more hasty temperament. He was eager to gain the approval of his employer, and answered at a venture "No."

The face of Mr. Creeper lengthened, and an oath slipped out without his knowledge.

The question was repeated, "Were the passengers—the people who lived on the yacht—on board of her?"

Abdullah had gained the necessary hint.

"Certainly, they were there. Like the drops of the ocean in number."

Abdullah was sent downstairs to wait, and Mr. Creeper hurried upstairs, his face full of excitement and full of hope.

Mrs. Creeper became thoughtful, and made a few commonplace remarks about the beautiful evening, the hot room, the steep staircase, the carved ceiling.

Presently another messenger arrived with even greater eagerness and assurance than Abdullah. He was an old man, Ahmed.

The yacht *Victoria* had arrived in the

Golden Horn, and all the passengers were on board. They were as the leaves of the forest.

These three stories agreeing so well in all the details, there could be no doubt that the long expected yacht had at length arrived, and Mr. Creeper hurried off to welcome the passengers who had been reported so numerous.

CHAPTER VII.

OUR OLD NOBILITY.

"New nobility is but the act of power, but ancient nobility is the act of time."

—LORD BACON.

"He valued ancient nobility, and he was not disinclined to augment it with new honours."

—BURKE.

THERE is a mysterious union, a sort of uncovenanted secret society, between members of the same calling in the large cities of the East, like Constantinople. The bonds of this union seem weaker the higher the social position of its members, and stronger amongst the more lowly. The jealousy of professional rivals has much to do with this on the one hand, and, on the other, adversity unites people subjected to it in common as nothing else can. An illustration of this truth may be found in the very humblest of all callings, that below even the level of man, that of the pariah dogs. Those occupying certain streets and districts are friendly with each other, but are terrible enemies to those of the neighbour-

ing streets and quarters. And the rapidity and unerring certainty with which strange dogs are detected intruding, must astonish even those who are best acquainted with the fact. Somewhat similar to this was the brotherhood of the watchers employed by Mr. Creeper to tell him of the approach of the yacht *Victoria*. Though dwelling far apart in that great city, they had become acquainted with the fact that they were employed by the same master upon the same quest. What was more natural than that they should unite together to execute the common task? And what was more natural than that they should depute to one of their number the duty of watching while the others enjoyed that idleness for which the Oriental temperament seems peculiarly constituted? That the watcher deputed by the others should in turn find the hours hang idly, and depute someone else to do his work, and he, in turn, find a substitute for himself, and so on, till the responsibility was so far removed that it concerned no one, was also very natural. To one following out this process in imagination it would not be difficult to understand how the information regarding the yacht *Victoria* might arrive from different sources at the same moment, and agree in

every particular, yet be altogether out of date, or perhaps, out of harmony with the real facts which it purported to announce.

So when Mr. Creeper darted off in all haste to the Golden Horn in the darkness of the evening, it was an assumption, rather than a sound induction, that the yacht had but newly arrived.

The hour most trying to the fibre of a general is when, leaving some very critical operation to a lieutenant, he is forced to remain in a state of inactivity. Forced inaction to an active temperament, and forced helplessness to one who rejoices only in the conscious exercise of power, offer the very highest ordeal to try the stamina of the will; and this stamina may almost be said to be the measure of the genius of leadership. This was the position of Mrs. Creeper, when her husband was commissioned to board the yacht *Victoria;* and she remained behind, calm and composed, and showing no indication of the anxieties agitating her bosom. She even resumed, not now as a quest, but as a pastime, the inquiry into the antecedents of Merlin Prester. But she did so with a lofty air, which told that she stooped in giving herself up to the pastime. Merlin Prester's quick observation detected the difference in

her behaviour towards him, though he might not be able to trace its true cause. From the dining-room they passed to a lounge with a wealth of carved wood-work and mystic Egyptian lamps above, and a mass of soft cushions and luxurious ottomans below. A delicately tinted light pervaded the room dedicated to conversation and coffee.

"I suppose you take little interest in our newspapers?" remarked Mrs. Creeper, lifting up a number of one of the great illustrated weeklies—those triumphs of civilisation—and turning over the leaves with well-bred indifference.

"On the contrary I regard the press of England as the palladium of its rights."

Mrs. Creeper smiled at the eagerness of the youth before her.

"Does the *Times* reach the Caucasus?"

"Certainly. I have been a regular subscriber to it from my youth. I am of opinion that no man can have a thorough knowledge of his country who has not given his days and his nights to a conscientious study of the *Times* from its first column to its last."

"And have you done so?" Mrs. Creeper smiled again.

"I have," replied Merlin Prester simply, and not without a tinge of pride. "To gain

a knowledge of his country and of his countrymen, I have ever regarded as the highest duty of an Englishman."

"What noble sentiments! They honour your heart as much as your intelligence!"

"And how is this knowledge to be gained?" continued Merlin Prester warmly, while Mrs. Creeper regarded him with new interest. "Is it from the low valleys that you gain the best view of the wide and rich champaign? Do not mists gather there? And prejudices hang over the depths where the national life stagnates? Is it not rather from the distant heights, as of the Caucasus, that you gaze over the greatest prospect and learn the configuration of the abode of man. So, too, from the calm distance, undistorted by prejudice, unwarped by conflicting interests, one can regard the great current of national life sweep grandly by through the newspaper press."

"You speak eloquently! These are my sentiments also. My son, my Henry! This is the education I have planned for him. And which of the many papers do you recommend?" Mrs. Creeper was becoming thoughtful; and Merlin Prester receiving the compliment of attentive listening continued:

"The newspaper press, that is the mirror of

the Spirit of the Day, divides itself into three sections—History, Criticism and Satire. In the first we must have a perfect record of every thought, word and act which has played its part among men. No selection ought to be allowed by the fastidious and generally erroneous taste of an editor. The thought of the poet and philosopher, the word of the statesman, the intrigue of the politician and diplomatist, the motions of the army and navy, the froth of the demagogue, and the deed of the criminal should be recorded in simple language. No picturesque description should be admitted, this belongs to the historian who gathers up the material. Every act should be plainly recorded, from the walks of the sovereign to the running of the favourite, from the acts of the executive to the accidents of the streets. Where can you meet anything so complete in its details as the record given in the *Times?*"

"Where indeed?"

"But the knowledge of the facts simply falls short of the knowledge which we require. Order and arrangement must be introduced. The true must be separated from the false in sentiment and feeling. Shams must be exposed. Improvements must be projected. Opinion must be educated. Thought must

be directed. Baseness and depravity must be eliminated. The noble and the just must be held up to admiration before the people. This is the function of criticism; and where does the spirit of it breathe purer and finer than in the *Saturday Review*?"

"Where indeed?" echoed Mrs. Creeper, though rather absently.

Merlin Prester warmed on his subject.

"But you find foibles, weakness and peccadilloes among men, and even women," Merlin Prester blushed as he made the admission. The slight pause which he made had the effect of removing Mrs. Creeper's waning attention. She started and re-assumed her listening attitude. "You want a sharp eye, and loving heart and keen wit to detect, judge and correct these. One in whom there is no guile, whose motives are pure, whose affections are warm, whose thoughts are chaste, whose appreciation of good is quick, and whose influence upon his fellows is irresistible. Where do such qualities meet save in *Punch?*"

"I marvel at your acumen," said Mrs. Creeper after regarding him attentively for a moment. "How lofty, and yet, I hope, how true an estimate you have formed of

our country! Tell me the secret of your knowledge—you who have lived so far away, and yet have thought so deeply and truly?"

"By thinking, on the frosty Caucasus," returned Merlin Prester modestly.

"And yet I notice you have missed out—"

"Indeed?" interrupted Merlin Prester eagerly, for he had regarded the definition of his opinions with some complacency. "Tell me! Oh, tell me what?"

"Where have you found place for Society?"

Merlin Prester was speechless.

"What would you say about the Aristocracy? About Fashionable People? You have missed out the *Morning Post!*"

Merlin Prester's countenance fell; no complacency was left; his philosophy of the Caucasus was tried and found wanting

But Mrs. Creeper, who had overturned his philosophy, did so simply and naturally. There was no triumph in her manner. She seemed unconscious of the great truth she had uttered; it had no greatness in her estimation, for it had no novelty; it had been a common-place from her cradle.

"Ah, what have I done?" she exclaimed in terrified accents as a slight click attracted her

attention. She had been toying with her bracelet and the catch was broken. "How unfortunate I am! What *shall* I do?"

Merlin Prester hastened to offer consolation.

"Will you permit me to retire for a moment?" she said. "Our dear friends may arrive at any time, and I must get another bracelet."

On receiving permission she retired, leaving Merlin Prester buried in profound meditation.

On reaching her room she threw aside her bracelet and rushed eagerly to "her Book." This was her resort in any time of doubt or difficulty. On the present occasion she confessed herself puzzled—nay, even at her wit's end. Who was Merlin Prester?

The mistake which had set her off on the search for him among the Merlins had unsettled her. How foolish of her to do this! Were not all the Merlins of every branch on her finger ends? But how much more stupid of her to be in complete ignorance of the Presters. The name was not unknown to her, but it suggested nothing and no one. And yet he spoke with authority—not with the boisterous self-assertion of an upstart—but with the well-bred humility of blood and

breeding. The errors which he had made, and the ignorance of which she had convicted him, serious no doubt in themselves, were to be attributed to his long residence in the Caucasus, which, notwithstanding its obvious advantages, was attended, like every earthly good, with some drawbacks. To settle this question—Who is he?—she rushed to "her Book."

Happy matrons of England, that have a Book of Life given them! A book, which, in their hours of solitude, is unfailing company. A book which tells them of their noble countrymen and countrywomen. A book which can answer the questions—Who is he? Who is she?

Amidst the growing troubles of life, as child after child—brought into being through pain and travail—grows up to manhood and womanhood, the anxiety concerning them becomes more profound, the care increases, the brow becomes more furrowed. These children must be corrected, trained, directed. They will be inclined to follow too much the desires of their own hearts, they will wander like lost sheep. Each step astray must be checked—each step after natural inclination. Each desire must be curbed—the desire after appreciation, sympathy and love. Nature

must be repressed by training; birth must be corrected by breeding. The artificial must supplant the natural. Maternal wisdom must determine the partner for life of each child brought into being through maternal sorrow; maternal skill must direct the means which shall consummate the plan. This prerogative is divinely instituted, for Marriages are made in Heaven.

A source of information to instruct maternal wisdom is demanded. A Book is required. Great is the power of a Book. In lowly households, a Book is found, which is honoured and reverenced. From this Book issues a pure, refreshing stream. During the intervals of the battle of life, or when the heavy load can be laid down momentarily for a breathing space, or amidst the agony of sorrow and sickness, there are myriads in every clime who still seek sweet inspiration from the blessed pages of "The Book"—and seek it not in vain.

But the Book from which Mrs. Creeper and those like her, found light shine forth on their daily path, was of different stamp. It was a revelation of a Faith whose head was a King, whose symbol was a Coronet, and whose Evangelists were Barristers-at-law. Honest, worthy men were these Burkes and Debretts!

And what disciples they have produced! How industrious, how diligent, how docile! How numerous, and how genteel!

After consulting her Book, Mrs. Creeper, with a new light dawning on her soul, imagining that a certain thing might be, yet not decided that it is, descended the broad flight of stairs to rejoin Merlin Prester. Before half way down, however, she became conscious that she had omitted to bring the bracelet for which she had retired. With an exclamation of annoyance at her forgetfulness, she went back to her own chamber.

In the meantime Merlin Prester, his coffee getting cold, had been pacing the room in profound agitation. It was a solemn hour. It was the birth-struggle of a new life. The fructifying idea had entered into his receptive mind, and he had conceived a larger hope. He could say with Herr Teufelsdrökh, that it was "from this hour that I incline to date my spiritual New Birth, or Baphometic Fire-baptism; perhaps I directly thereupon began to be a man." Could it be that he had already found out the Mystery of the West?

At this instant Mrs. Creeper returned, and seemed to him to be changed. Greater intelligence sat upon her brow, brighter light

flashed from her eyes, a lovelier beauty was upon her countenance, a sweeter aroma floated in her presence. Had she changed, or had he? He waited not to solve the philosophic problem, but went forth to meet her; seizing her hand and looking earnestly in her eyes, he exclaimed: "How much I have to thank you for! You have revealed to me a new sphere of being. I stand, as it were, upon the Peak in Darien. Before me lies an untroubled ocean, upon which one may sail happily, and of whose presence I was ignorant. Much that was mysterious has become plain. Many difficulties which troubled me are removed. And I owe all this to you, my dear Mrs. Creeper."

Mrs. Creeper was surprised yet pleased at his warm appreciation of her friendship for him—but his enthusiasm disconcerted her. Accustomed to strict decorum and well-bred languor in conversation—only in presence of babies could gushing be tolerated—she felt in a false position; she hesitated, she almost blushed.

"I owe all this to you, my dear Mrs. Creeper!" he repeated.

"Pray don't mention it," she replied, and an awkward pause ensued

Merlin Prester appeared about to speak;

something hung upon his lips; but he seemed ashamed to frame the words.

Mrs. Creeper, resuming her ascendancy, encouraged him.

"There are words with which I have been familiar from my childhood; words, whose harmonious ring have often fallen from my lips; but whose meaning has been dark and mysterious. The thoughts contained in them have been so fugitive; I seem to grasp them and, lo! they are gone. Now they have a new meaning."

"Pray let me hear them," said Mrs. Creeper.

"They are poetry," returned Merlin Trester doubtfully.

"I adore poetry."

Thus encouraged, even urged, by his audience, he assumed a graceful attitude, and commenced to recite the following lines from one of England's fashionable authors—one belonging to the cream of the nobility—an inspired scion of a ducal house.

"Must we then hearken to the furious cry
Of those who clamour for 'equality'?
Have not the people learnt how vain the trust
On props like that which crumble into dust?
Are the gradations that have marked our race,
Since God first stamped His likeness on its face,

Gradations hallowed by a thousand ties,
Of faith and love, and holiest sympathies,
Seen in the Patriarch's rule, the Judge's sway,
When God himself was Israel's present stay,
Now in the old world's dotage to be cast
As weak pretences to the howling blast?
No! by the names inscribed on History's page,
Names that are England's noblest heritage,
Names that shall live for yet unnumbered years,
Shrined in our hearts with Creçy and Poictiers,
Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,
But leave us still our old Nobility."

So artistic was his elocution, his rendering of the questions so scornful, his utterance of the historical illustrations so impressive, his invocation so lofty, and his whole manner so appreciative, so sympathetic, that Mrs, Creeper was overcome.

"Thank you, thank you," she murmured. "How beautiful, how very beautiful! I adore Tennyson."

Merlin Prester bit his lip, and was silent! By Heaven! could it be possible that she did not know the author? Confound him with Tennyson! When had Tennyson reached the height of appreciating a peerage? Merlin Prester was humbled.

"Your recitation of these noble lines have shown you to be blessed with blood and with feeling. You do not spring from the common orders. Let me hear you explain the mystery.

Let me hear you confess with your own lips that you can appreciate a title?"

"They call me Beg or Prince in the Caucasus," returned Merlin Prester after a pause.

"But I mean in England? It is the English aristocracy which is marked by hallowed gradations. It is the English aristocracy of which the Poet sings. Is it not true that you are related to Sir John Prester? I am sure you must be. I feel it!"

"He was my father."

"I thought so! How birth and breeding show themselves in one's sentiments and feelings! Well, what now?" This last remark was addressed to a waiter who had presumed to interrupt the conversation. He bore a card on a salver. Mrs. Creeper took it, asked permission of Merlin Prester to read it, then glanced at the back, where a few words were written in a strange hand. "Good heavens!" she exclaimed.

"What has happened?" cried Merlin Prester, noticing the strange pallor which overspread her countenance. "Has anything befallen your husband? Your son?"

"No, no," she murmured. "It is not that. They have arrived and have gone to the * * * Hotel."

"Who has arrived?"

"Lord Strand and his party. It is such a disappointment. And I had engaged—almost engaged—the best rooms in this Hotel for them. How happy we should have been."

"But you can visit them there?" humbly suggested Merlin Prester.

"Ah, that's quite different. I wished that we might form one party. But it is not too late," she said, as if a sudden thought had seized her. "I shall go there at once. How I wish my husband would come! He must have missed them. How I wish he would come! It is hardly safe—not quite proper—to travel through Constantinople at night. Yet we must risk something for one's friends."

Merlin Prester offered to accompany her.

After some hesitation, and many excuses and apologies, she accepted his offer on the condition that her husband had not returned within half-an-hour. Then she withdrew to dress.

"Will you allow me to see your best suite of rooms," said Merlin Prester to the manager of the Hotel a little later.

"They are very comfortable, very nice indeed," he said, as his eyes wandered over the rich furniture.

"They are not engaged?"

"No, your Excellency," the manager unhesitatingly replied.

"Then I engage them," said Merlin Prester, and retired to prepare himself to accompany Mrs. Creeper.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAUCASIANS CROSS SWORDS.

"For cruel 'tis, said she,
To steal my Basil-pot away from me."

—KEATS.

THE half hour given by the treaty had nearly elapsed; Merlin Prester was already putting on his gloves; Mrs. Creeper was hiding her anxiety in her charming innocent prattle about the beauty of the Bosphorus, a theme about which she had prattled for years, and had echoed the sentiments of her friends, the gushing, the moderately enthusiastic, the intellectually appreciative, the calmly retrospective, the demurely admiring, the coldly critical, sentiments for each of which there was ample justification in the wonderful beauty of that majestic strait and its fairy shores in all the varied aspects of morning, noon and night—when a puffing and loud breathing and a stormy step announced the approach of a hasty man—no other than Mr. Creeper. The look which passed between

husband and wife showed that each knew all, and that there was no occasion to enter into any lengthened explanations, seeing that a third person was present.

"My dear," said Mr. Creeper, laying his hat on a chair as he took one for himself. "My dear, I have had a long chase for nothing. Those villains! The yacht arrived this afternoon, and only now have they told me!"

"I have been informed that Lord and Lady Strand have gone to * * * Hotel, where I intend to visit them at once. I was only waiting for you to return. Mr. Prester was kind enough——"

"Mr. Prester?" repeated Mr. Creeper.

"Mr. Prester—who is a son of our old friend Sir John Prester—you remember him, my dear?"—was kind enough to promise to accompany me in case you should be delayed."

"Bless my soul! Son of Sir John Prester! I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

"Time is passing, my love. If we have to go this evening we ought to go at once. Lady Strand will be fatigued——"

"Lady Strand has not come ashore, my dear——" interrupted Mr. Creeper.

"Yes, but she is, and has gone to the * * * Hotel."

"My dear, haven't I——"

"My love, haven't I——"

"I have just come from——"

"I have just heard from——"

"Let me explain, my dearest," said Mr. Creeper in desperation. "When these villains, double dyed d—d rascals——"

"Oh, my dear!" interrupted Mrs. Creeper, with a horrified air. Her husband's oath shocked her in the hearing of Merlin Prester.

Mr. Creeper stood rebuked, and recommenced his story.

"When I went down to the quay, I found the dingy belonging to the yacht, but there was nobody in attendance. I had to send to all the beer-houses in the neighbourhood before I could rout out the men who had come ashore. Then I found out that the *Victoria* had arrived early this afternoon, and those—well, my dear, I shall not—" interpolated Mr. Creeper, in answer to his wife's warning glance, "those — those fellows had not come for hours afterwards. Well, the men told me that his lordship and his friends had come ashore immediately after dinner—they dined early—and that they did not know where his lordship had gone. He

had got a porter *(hamal)* to carry his traps, and had gone off for a spree, I suppose." Another warning look from Mrs. Creeper made him weigh his words. "So I gave them something to drink his lordship's health with, and they rowed me to the *Victoria*. And do you know what Lady Strand said, when she heard I had come?—she screamed!—and then she said, 'See that he is fumigated before he comes on board!'"

"What?"

"Fumigated, my dear."

"Fumigated?"

"Yes, fumigated. Then they brought a squirt, and squirted me all over with some sort of stuff. Then they brought another which was filled with rose-water, or some scent, and they scented me all over with that——"

"But what in the name of goodness was the use of all that stupidity?"

"You shall hear presently. Then they said that I could enter the cabin. When I got in I went to shake hands with her ladyship, but she waved me off. 'Excuse my not shaking hands with you, for you have just come from the shore,' she said. I bowed and said that I was ready to obey her at all times. Then she pointed to a chair in the

corner of the room near the door, and I sat down."

"But what was the reason of all that?"

"Don't be impatient, my dear. She asked me if the fever was worse. 'What fever, your ladyship?' I then said. 'The fever at Pera,' she replied. 'Pera was never more free from fever than at present,' I said. Then she smiled, and said to the lady she called Victoria—a very fine girl with wonderful eyes—that it was 'surprising how people could live in a town without knowing what was going on.' I thought that was rather hard of her, if she meant me."

"Someone has been poisoning her mind," remarked Mrs. Creeper sadly.

"Then she said that Lord Strand and his friends had gone to the * * * Hotel, but that as for her, she would not put her foot on shore at Constantinople, and that she did not think her husband would remain here more than a single night."

"A single night!" echoed Mrs. Creeper.

"And then she asked me if I thought that there was fever at the * * * Hotel. I told her I was afraid there was."

"Of course, if it is anywhere it is there," observed Mrs. Creeper.

"So I thought, my dear."

Merlin Prester had withdrawn slightly during this colloquy, and sat near, with a newspaper in his hand.

"I told her ladyship that I had caused rooms to be kept for her party in this hotel —it is the suite which was occupied by the Duke of Smithfield, and a whole host more of distinguished people. 'But are you sure there is no fever there?' she asked. 'We were never in better health,' I replied, and I told her how the manager was telling me that his bill for butcher's beef had never been so high during all the time he was here—and if that looks like fever—well, I don't know what doesn't. 'How I wish, Mr. Creeper, that you could have been down at the pier to meet him and put him right!' she said it as if the blame of his death—if he dies—will rest upon me. It was annoying—it was very annoying —D—n those rascals."

Mrs. Creeper did not correct her husband— she also felt exasperated—and she could make allowance for his ebullition.

"But it is not too late for him to come here even now," observed Mrs. Creeper, after a pause.

"So I told her, my dear, so I told her," said Mr. Creeper, with a triumphant air.

Mrs. Creeper smiled approval.

"And what is more, I got her to write to him."

"To write to him!"

"Yes, to write to him; and I have got the letter. She asks him, for her sake, to leave the fever-haunted hotel, to go to the rooms which she had found for him." Mr. Creeper produced the letter, as witness to what he had affirmed.

"Then you ought to deliver it at once," remarked Mrs. Creeper, after she had read the superscription.

"Certainly, my dear; only I thought you would like to know."

"You did right, my love. I *am* very much pleased."

"Then I shall now go to the * * * Hotel?" asked Mr. Creeper.

"Yes," replied his wife absently.

"You are thinking of something, my dear."

"Don't you think that I ought to go and see Lady Strand?"

"To-night?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"You can't go alone."

"Oh, no, to be sure. I forgot."

"Then I had better make haste," said Mr. Creeper, rising.

"Do you think it would be too late when you return?"

"For what?"

"How obtuse you are, to-night, my dear. To go and see Lady Strand."

"We shall have to entertain his lordship."

"He will have his friends. I shall be out of place."

"Then what can be done?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Mr. Creeper moved towards the door; but his lady still lingered doubtfully.

"I have to thank you, Mr. Prester, for your kind offer, but my husband will go alone."

Merlin Prester, thus addressed, threw down his paper.

"You must feel thankful that your husband can be your substitute. It would be anything but pleasant to a lady to be out here at night."

"Oh, that's nothing. I never think of that. If it were not that my husband is engaged, I should go for a sail on the Bosphorus," and she laughed.

"I wish that I could accompany you on such an occasion."

"You like to make compliments. You have learned that in the Caucasus."

"It is no compliment, but the fact."

"What if I took you at your word?"
"I should be delighted."
"But I will not put you to the test."
"That is cruel."
"Then I shall."
"I feel honoured as well as delighted."

Thus Mr. Creeper went to the * * * Hotel to seek for Lord Strand and his friends, that he might bring them within his own sphere, while Mrs. Creeper went off to the yacht in the charge of Merlin Prester, to come within the sphere of Lady Strand.

Mrs. Creeper had not received in vain the hint about fumigation, so that when she reached the yacht, she willingly and gracefully submitted to the process. Nor did Merlin Prester refuse either the odorising or the de-odorising chemicals to which he was subjected, but was expeditiously deprived of the germs of disease, which might be sheltered within his clothes, and then plunged in a spray of rose-water, to fit him for the presence of Lady Strand.

A second visit from the shore! Lady Strand was cross at the very thought of this; even the most perfect of squirts might fail in removing the source of contagion. But the delicate tact and humility of Mrs. Creeper saved her from further ignominy in scientific

preventive treatment. Like the leper of former days, she cried "unclean" from a distance; she did not descend the "companion ladder" to the cabin, but smote upon her breast afar off, and called through the sky-lights. Lady Strand was touched at this thoughtfulness, and bade her guest "come up higher," that is to say—descend lower, to the cabin. Merlin Prester was introduced in due form, and Lady Strand so far relaxed the severity of her rule, as to shake hands with the possible bearers of deadly disease. The light of the lamp on the central table of the handsomely furnished cabin was toned by a paper shade to a colour of exquisite softness. Nothing harsh, nor any gaudy tint might linger there. It was a scene of voluptuous repose. One's voice naturally became subdued while speaking, for it seemed sacrilege to disturb the gentle harmony of the place. The rustle of silk, the shiver of satin, the love-whisper of a man, or the silvery laugh of a woman, were the only sounds that seemed appropriate there, and the gentle current of the Bosphorus laved with its mellowed gurgle the sides of the yacht.

Lady Strand, a woman of surpassing loveliness, magnificently attired, and adorned with priceless jewels, sat upon a low ottoman and

cooled herself with a large fan of ivory and feathers of Oriental manufacture. She was in the zenith of her beauty; her complexion had never been so fair, her shape so rounded in the perfect model of womanhood, her eye so bright, her smile so enchanting. She was tall, but her shape was so harmoniously developed that she did not seem above the average height. She was a blonde of the type Rubens at his best loved to portray; but the changing expression of her mobile features, the darting of her eye, the fine curling of her lip, and her light look of mockery, these were features which could be transferred to canvas from no Dutch model. She was purely English.

Near her sat another lady, yet in the first blush of womanhood. Dressed in rich heavy silks from Oriental looms, which admirably suited the place and the occasion, though they might be too sombre for so young a wearer in a Western clime, she yet wore almost no jewellery but the dazzling splendour of her eye. In some respects she was a contrast to Lady Strand. Her dark hair and eyebrows formed a setting for a complexion which was lovely in its delicate tints—so pure was the white of the brow, so soft was the pink of the cheek, so luscious the red of the lip.

She was of a distinctly intellectual type;

Lady Strand of a sensuous. The flame of passion might burn within her, warm and fierce, but it was far in the recesses of her bosom like the slumbering fires of a volcano, while Lady Strand seemed to allow her warm feelings to glow continually, scorning to hide them from the gaze of the world.

These were the chief figures of the group. There was a motherly lady whose existence centred in sweet dishes, and the latest three-volumed thing which Heaven—in the shape of Mudie—sent her. There was an elderly gentleman, her husband, whose power lay in cigars, billiards and burning censure of the government management of naval affairs. There was a scientific professor, who was the best-humoured man in the world and who had an endless fund of anecdote. There was his wife, elderly, with a sepulchral tone, and a volume of sermons always in her hands. There was a stout little Cockney clergyman, who seemed to be the yacht's appendage for reading prayers and saying grace.

Lady Strand talked of the inconveniences of the various places she had visited, for whose names she appealed to the young lady, whom she called Victoria, and her references were always replied to by the Professor. Her languor and his wit seemed the bread and tongue

of a sandwich, and they nourished the company. The guests were particularly welcome, because all the old stories could be repeated into new ears without the stigma of boredom being attached to them.

Merlin Prester received full attention. Lady Strand said she had heard of his father, and the elderly gentleman, great in cigars, and who never came to an end of a story if he was once allowed to begin, seemed to be several times on the point of beginning, but the Professor, who knew his cue, came to the rescue. In the presence of so many ladies, Mrs. Creeper seemed to drift out of the notice which was her right. On other occasions her superiority to Merlin Prester was undeniable; here it was not so. Due perhaps to the peculiar interest of his origin, the mysterious Caucasus, and the fact of his returning to his native land after so long an absence, he threw Mrs. Creeper into the shade in that company.

"And so you are living in the same hotel with my dear friend Mrs. Creeper? How charming that must be!" Lady Strand meandered on, as was her wont, through varied scenes of commonplace and compliment.

"And you are comfortable and are not afraid of the fever? The hotel is all that can be desired?"

"This is the hotel you know to which Lord Strand is now being conducted by my husband," explained Mrs. Creeper. "The rooms are on the first floor and are most sumptuously furnished—four rooms in the suite—they look towards the Bosphorus, perhaps we may see them from here. There is the pink room, which will do admirably for Lord Strand. And the blue—"

"Excuse my interrupting you, Mrs Creeper. Have they many such suites in the hotel on that floor?" asked Merlin Prester.

"No, one only of the character I describe."

"Then it strikes me you are describing the rooms which I have the pleasure of occupying."

"Not the first on the left as you reach the top of the first flight?"

"The same."

"How very annoy—I mean—how extraordinary! I can hardly believe my senses! Are you sure you occupy these rooms?" Mrs. Creeper did seem as if her senses were becoming defective, for she listened blankly to the assurance Merlin Prester gave her that he occupied his rooms.

"They gave us to understand that this suite was unoccupied, and we as good as engaged them for Lord Strand."

A frigid silence settled down. Mrs. Creeper required all her tact to extricate herself from the difficulty. Merlin Prester alone was collected; he seemed much concerned to listen to Mrs Creeper's complaints, and anxious to sift the matter to the bottom.

"This is a very unfortunate misunderstanding," said Merlin Prester after they had discussed the matter further. "But I hope your ladyship will allow me to give up the rooms to Lord Strand. I am an old traveller. We are often acquainted with hard beds in the Caucasus. To me it will be no hardship —none in the least, I assure your ladyship—to give up the rooms. Permit me to write a note to the manager of the hotel, directing him to put them at the disposal of his lordship. I am sure that one of the men can run up to the hotel in a few minutes—and the boat is ready to take him ashore."

Lady Strand was profuse in her acknowledgments of his kindness as she accepted the offer. She was so very anxious about the fever—the relief to her mind was so very great. Mrs. Creeper joined her ladyship in these utterances, but in her heart blackness was gathering—for she had been outmanœuvred—and by the Caucasian—her *protégé*, Merlin Prester.

CHAPTER IX.

HONOUR TO WHOM HONOUR IS DUE.

"Caucasian fleas, no matter in what strength, never deliver the 'general assault' until you have turned in."

—WANDERER.

"That they were to be more patient than angels—(*laughter*) — to be meeker than Quakers (*renewed laughter*)—that they were never to use a naughty word, and never to think a nasty thought—(*laughter*)—when he recollected the one, and when he read the other, he was filled with indignation."

—Report of Speech of LORD RANDOLPH CHURCHILL.

CONFIDENT that his wife, that woman among women, would do her duty, and that if it were in the power of woman to command success, success would be commanded, Mr. Creeper—likewise following the path of duty—made all haste to reach the * * * Hotel. Good luck favoured him, and he found Lord Strand in the company of jolly comrades who were making the spacious smoking-room ring with their laughter and loud merriment.

"Here comes Creeper, creeping in like a snail or a consumptive black beetle," cried an officer, formerly of the British army.

"Foot it like a man, old Creeper, we have got wine here that will do your old heart good."

"I shall be delighted to drink with you, Major Catskill," returned Mr. Creeper with suavity.

"Of course you will. You're not going to become a Mahommedan in your old age," observed a young man from the Embassy.

"When you are in Roum you must do as the Roumans do," remarked the editor of a paper, letting off an old joke of his upon a new audience.

"Then you ought to give him some rum," observed the officer.

"You are a rum'un, Major," remarked Lord Strand.

"Drum-Major, you ought to say, Strand," added Lord Thames, with a loud laugh.

Among people elevated by the effect of deep potations, so that a loud guffaw greeted every remark, it was plain that Mr. Creeper had an uphill task before him. Of what consequence was it to men thus elevated by liquor if there were a thousand cases of cholera, small-pox, fever and every infectious and contagious disease imaginable in the surrounding rooms? Pour out another glass, we must live while we may! Lady Strand's letter (which seemed of such consequence to his wife), had he been

foolish enough to have produced it, Mr. Creeper would have seen ridiculed by each of the roystering companions. He called for wine in the most lordly manner, and pretended to drink it like a lord, but all the while sought to preserve himself from that maudlin condition into which the others were gradually sinking after several delightful hours of wine and mirth. Mr. Creeper had several motives for his abstinence, the thought of his wife at home being not the least powerful of them. The malicious had sometimes hinted of Mr. Creeper that his wife had made a slave of him; but that she had at least saved him from the habit of allowing himself to become occasionally a beast, this the malicious did not add. As the only creature in the room possessed of reasoning faculties he was meditating a retreat, for he deemed it impossible to persuade Lord Strand that evening to accompany him back to his hotel.

That unwearied patience and perseverance meet with some sort of reward in the long run, is the truth contained in many a motto, trite phrase, and worn proverb, and it daily receives confirmation. Mr. Creeper knew this well, but even he on the present occasion meditated a retreat; it was not that he despaired of ultimate success, but that he felt

a delicacy (on account of his own reputation for respectability) in bringing his patron home completely intoxicated, along with the usual horde of midnight revellers. But an opportunity at length arose when even this achievement, though he was not enamoured of it, seemed within his reach, and he determined to make the most of it.

The conversation had run much upon actresses (and no part of it will sully these pages—like the older writers of fiction, the author protests that he records nothing but the truth, and must be allowed the discretion of omitting what seems to him to be unfit to be recorded in these days of superior cleanliness), and one of the most shameless members of the party proposed going to one of the *cafés chantants* where orgies are carried on the whole night through. They rose from the table, therefore, each as drunk, almost, as a lord. During the confusion which ensued on the adjournment of their debauch, Mr. Creeper managed to isolate Lord Strand, get him to his bedroom, assure some of the jolly comrades that his lordship had gone on ahead and would be found waiting for them, and others that his lordship was on the point of following, and so he skilfully got rid of them all.

Only part of his task was done, not the

least easy part remained—how to convey Lord Strand to the hotel? No cabs were procurable (few wheeled vehicles exist in that great city), and to trust to his being able to walk was attended with risk. There was no other course, he must throw all upon the hazard. He was aided by the event, for Lord Strand, after losing his comrades, became sobered with a suddenness which surprised even Mr. Creeper. A load seemed to fall from off each of them.

"Have those fellows gone at last, Creeper?" he asked with a hiccup. His eyes were heavy, his voice thick, and his temper cross. He seemed conscious of having passed through a debauch of which he was already ashamed; yet his mood being still quarrelsome he was ready to visit his slip upon anyone with whom he might fall foul.

"They have all gone. I heard them singing in the street just now, and then they went away. Your lordship will not be troubled with them—"

"Troubled with them? D—n you, Creeper, why do you apply such words to friends of mine?" exclaimed Lord Strand fiercely.

"By their singing, my lord. I thought you would not like them to sing all night beneath your window—"

"Troubled with them—troubled with them —friends of mine," repeated Lord Strand as if the idea which had reached his troubled brain still remained there, but that its vividness was gradually fading as his voice died away.

After a silence, during which Lord Strand muttered inaudibly to himself, Mr. Creeper poured out some water into a basin, and suggested that cold water applied to his lordship's noble brow would alleviate the heat caused by the closeness of the evening and allay his excitement.

"Excitement? Creeper. What do you mean by that? Do you say that I am excited? Never was calmer in my life. Excitement, indeed!" Mr. Creeper explained that nothing was further from his intention. And so on he continued for some time to soothe his lordship's irritation, till his patience was rewarded, and he could propose that they should proceed to the other hotel. His mind had been at work seeking some argument more strong than fever or the mere desire of Lady Strand by which his lordship's will might be influenced. One of the most natural came to hand. He suggested doubts about the beds.

"Hang it, Creeper, can't one trust the

cleanliness of a first-class hotel?" asked Lord Strand, whose face lengthened at the prospect suggested.

"You are in the East, my lord. You can trust nothing and no one."

"I would rather go back to the yacht than—"

"Perhaps it is not so bad—only I am told—"

"Why? even in a first-class hotel?"

"*This* hotel? You flatter it."

Mr. Creeper was now merely playing on his lordship's fears, and his ultimate victory was assured. Had it been necessary he would have taken a candle and proceeded to prove —but there was no necessity. A little further leading up and down the stream and the hooked fish was landed panting on the beach; in other words, Mr. Creeper arrived with his lordship leaning on his arm at the landing of the * * * Hotel, unsteady and out of breath, perhaps, but still helpless and quite securely held.

"What is earthly happiness?" asks Hans Breitmann. "You find a bank note in the street; next day the bank is burst!" If ever happiness—pure, undefiled happiness, that tinged somewhat with the hue of triumph after an arduous contest—ever swelled within the bosom of any son of Adam it was that

which Mr. Creeper knew when he brought Lord Strand to his hotel and to the suite of rooms on which his thoughts, and that of his worthy wife, had been centred. But in whose possession these rooms were now the reader has already been informed. He had often schemed—to live was to scheme—and he had known the bitterness of failure, the sweetness of success. Yet never, perhaps, had so much ingenuity, patience and courage been shown than on the present occasion—and———! The cup had been obtained; the wine had been brought from a far distant shore; the cup had been filled, had been lifted to the mouth, when, lo, a blow had dashed it down and its contents had been spilled. Over such bitter disappointment a veil must be drawn.

The manager of the hotel was not at home, and his representative, whose duty it was to break the unwelcome intelligence, never spent a more disagreeable quarter-of-an-hour than when subjected to the angry recriminations of Mr. Creeper and the lordly rebukes of his patron.

It turned out that Merlin Prester had gone to the yacht. It was certain that he would not return that night—and this was a certainty, for the small hours of the morning

were coming on apace—and what was more appropriate than that Lord Strand should enjoy the concession of a single room for the night from Merlin Prester, when Merlin Prester was enjoying the hospitality of Lord Strand. The man who represented the manager was almost persuaded to yield, so eloquent was Mr. Creeper. And it must be confessed that he was very much confused. His ideas of propriety were entangled. Merlin Prester had gone away with a married lady at a late hour of the night, and neither had returned, and here stood the lady's husband, unblushing, *insouciant*, indifferent to the loss of a hundred wives, pleading for the commission of a wrong against the man who had so obviously wronged him. Even one accustomed to the complications of Turkish diplomacy might be pardoned his indecision under the stress of so complicated a situation.

Reluctantly, hoping to put the responsibility of his consent upon his superior's head and upon the head of Mr. Creeper, who offered to bear not only his just half, but the whole, the man, protesting, yielded. At last, then, with a trembling joy Mr. Creeper put his hand upon the goal, the handle of the door of the envied suite of rooms. The handle turned, but the door opened not! Once more was he doomed

to disappointment. Had Merlin Prester locked the door and taken the key to the yacht? Was success a Will-o'-the-wisp? Was he a nineteenth-century Tantalus?

They looked through the keyhole, one after the other; they saw Something, but they knew not what. It was Something mysterious. There was a light in the room. A candle, burning faint and dreary in the large expanse of darkness reaching up to the gilded ceiling. There was Somebody, or at least Something, upon which the light fell. Who was it? What was it? Speculation was busy roaming over a large field.

In the meantime Mrs. Creeper on board the yacht had not been idle. She saw that a new rival had arisen in the person of Merlin Prester, and she bravely entered the lists. To fall was to rise again with her. Like a cork upon the waters she danced higher as each wave went over her: no submersion could drown her, it could only show her buoyancy. If Merlin Prester had gained "the first blood," to use the expressive parlance of the lordly pastime of the slowly dying prize ring, Mrs. Creeper gained "the first fall." The time came for retiring, and, as it was late (for an hour or two had elapsed in pleasant conversation since supper had been taken),

what more natural, even under the dread of fever contagion, than that Lady Strand should invite her lady guest to remain all night on board? To receive such an invitation was to accept it. Thus Mrs. Creeper saw Merlin Prester depart, and she was delivered from his rivalry.

It was a beautiful night, calm and clear. Hardly a sound save the barking of the pariah dogs of the town came floating over the glassy surface of the Bosphorus. Merlin Prester was in a reflective mood, but such a reflective mood when one loves to rest amidst motion, to lie back in a boat and enjoy the night air breathing on the face while the boat glides rapidly through the waters. To watch the silent shipping floating on the deep with the mast-head lights glimmering high up among the stars, to look upon the sky-line of the shore cut by rounded dome and square gable and pierced by the tall minaret—this was delightful. Musing on the events of the past day, his introduction to Western life, his instruction in the knowledge of the West, his experience of its manners, his newly found revelation of its sentiments, his newborn appreciation of its passions, its aspirations, and its yearnings, he was in no humour to seek repose. He was excited, and he required

the exhilaration of motion. Before, then, the boat had reached the shore he had requested the sailors to extend their journey—he wished to be rowed out into the darkness and the mystery of the night. The men could not comply with his wishes, for the boat might be required during the night—his lordship or his friends might wish to go on board—but a *caique* could be easily obtained. And to prevent any danger arising from the rowers of the *caique* (who, being Turks, would not have hesitated at robbing and killing a Giaour if it could be done safely), one of the men, armed with a revolver, volunteered to accompany him. In a little while he was darting along towards Scutari on the opposite shore of the Bosphorus.

An hour or two later, his head cooled, his excitement laid, and with the weariness of the body following the recent exaltation of mind prompting him to seek repose, Merlin Prester again passed the yacht. It was now silent, the inmates being plunged in deep sleep, and only the watch remaining wakeful and observant; he went on towards the landing stage. He paid the boatmen, and being still accompanied by the yachtsman, who, being off duty, was at complete liberty to accept his invitation to sleep at the hotel,

he passed through the streets of Galata and climbed the ascent to Pera, the dogs every now and then starting up and giving tongue. He was thoroughly wearied by the time the hotel was reached, and he only thought of repose.

Great was his surprise, then, when he found Mr. Creeper in conversation with the under-manager of the hotel and a gentleman, to whom he was immediately introduced, and whom he discovered to be Lord Strand. His arrival was timely, for it ended a dispute which was tending towards an angry deadlock. His lordship was indignant with the man for baffling him, with Mr. Creeper for befooling him, and with Merlin Prester for being beforehand with him. Mr. Creeper was angry with everything; things were turning against him, his patience was exhausted. His lordship was unjust and too severe, the man was a blockhead, hopelessly thick, Merlin Prester was disappointing, a nut without a kernel, a bottle of claret turned sour. And the under-manager of the hotel was torn by his anxiety and his responsibility. He was liable to be called to an account for allowing the rooms of a guest to be attempted by another guest, and further, he was dreading punishment for the loud discussion which

was disturbing the quietness of the hotel at that hour of the early morning, and damaging its reputation. They had reached the point where the passions of each were roused, where there was a necessity to advance to some solution, and that speedily, and where there was at the same time an impossibility either to advance or retreat. And the letter which might have relieved them of much anxiety and ill-feeling was lying in the office of the hotel, addressed to the manager by name, and therefore sacred to a subordinate.

Merlin Prester's arrival changed the position of affairs like the waving of an enchanter's wand. In the twinkling of an eye the door was opened, and Lord Strand was invited to seek that rest which he so much needed.

Merlin Prester had merely called out something in a strange language, and the sleeping Sidonia, for it was he who loomed so mysterious in the darkness, rose at the word. The visitors examined, with some interest, the position of the Something which had so impressed them and mystified them when gazing through the keyhole. Sidonia reclining on a low ottoman had been covered by a *boorka*, the hairy cape of the mountaineers, and the strange texture and colour of which made it no wonder that he had

assumed in their excited fancy many shapes, and some of them other than human. Sidonia, it was likely, had been prompted by his master to enter into possession of the suite of rooms which had become so suddenly engaged. And he had fulfilled his duty as if he were still in the Caucasus. He had, according to custom, laid out his master's arms and his own in a convenient position, and a formidable array did these pistols and daggers present. The pistols were loaded, the daggers were sharp, Sidonia was hasty, and even in his haste his aim was true. Perhaps it was well that Mr. Creeper did not force the door, else he, or Lord Strand, or the under-manager of the hotel, might have rued the day they came in contact with Sidonia on watch, though he slept.

CHAPTER X.

WHO WAS JINGO?

"Who was Jingo?

"He came from the East. Those who had seen him said that he was a monster, mighty and terrible, with wings as the winds, a form like a Sphinx, and a mould that was Caucasian....And he stood upon his hind legs."

—EDWARD JENKINS.

A FRIENDSHIP, warm and sudden, such as is possible only between ladies, sprung up between Lady Strand and Mrs. Creeper. For hours before the other members of the company met together at breakfast, the voices of these two ladies might have been heard, like the cooing of doves in a distant wood, issuing from the sacred precincts of Lady Strand's cabin. She had not risen yet, but lay enjoying the privilege of pouring into sympathetic ears all the doings and saying of the last few days. Sometimes she dropped her voice to a whisper, and with nods in certain directions (indicative of the lovely reposing forms similarly reclining in their berths in their respective cabins) she narrated much which brought sympathetic exclamations and head-shakings

from her audience. Lady Strand it must be remembered, was in the presence of a new face: and Mrs. Creeper, it must not be forgotten, was in the presence of a nightcap, which could be exchanged for a coronet.

"How I wish Mrs. Creeper that you could accompany us to England," said Lady Strand, and her audience was overcome by the benevolence of the wish and could not reply—"How I wish we could find place for you and that you could honour us." The heart of the audience palpitated between doubt and expectation.

"But we have been *so* crowded, so inconveniently crowded, that if we had had anyone else than our dear companion we must have sent them on in the yacht while we found some steamer to take us, or else travelled overland."

The audience expressed profound pity for the sufferings of Lady Strand placed in such unfortunate circumstances.

"But, my dear Mrs. Creeper, I have a proposal to make which I yet blush to make. Knowing your affection and devotion for your dear husband——"

The audience presented an unassailable front of wifely chastity andmatr only faithfulness.

"Knowing your affection for and your devotion to your dear husband," continued Lady Strand slowly and watching the effect of her words on her audience, "I much fear that you would not so delight us as to join our party. The separation from your dear husband would be brief. He could reach England before us, and be waiting there to welcome us. How joyful would be the meeting!"

The audience was silent. What was passing in that pure bosom no man dare inquire —save he alone whose privilege it was to recline there—and Lady Strand might well be excused if, mistaking the course of these hidden emotions, she assumed that her offer was being favourably considered, and proceeded in a humble tone to say that she was very simple and plain in her tastes, and that the accommodation offered was but lowly, but such as it was, it was offered sincerely, and much more to the like effect.

Her words fell on the air. The audience sat unmoved like a cold marble statue of the purest of the Greek goddesses—her name shall be revealed when a jury of matrons have sat upon her—sat unmoved and still. Then with a rush came a tide of feeling and of tears. Mrs. Creeper wept copiously. Could Lady

Strand imagine that she, Mrs. Creeper would separate herself from her lord? Thirteen years ago she had delivered herself into her husband's arms; thirteen years had she been faithful to him; not a day, not a night had she been separated from him; she was an Englishwoman, he was an Englishman, could they allow, for a moment, any thought of separation to come before them? Lady Strand acknowledged her error, she did not refer again to the subject, but she strove to soothe her friend whose wifely devotion was so touching.

At the same hour (or rather, a little later) a somewhat similar interview was being held in the hotel at Pera, between Lord Strand and Mr. Creeper. His lordship had awoke with a headache, and his client was administering consolation, mixed with brandy and soda, and washed down with hot coffee.

"You did quite right to refuse them. If they call again say that I am not dressed, that I am busy, or out—or anything."

"Yes, my lord, you may trust me for that."

"It was all the fault of the Colonel. Why did he not tell me that Thames was here? Thames is a very devil to drink. No one can resist him."

"Your lordship is too severe upon him."

"Too severe? I think not. It is he who has been the cause of my getting into scrape after scrape. But enough of that. *I don't want to see him again.*"

"I shall keep him away and the rest of them."

"And especially the Colonel."

"You need not fear him, my lord," said Mr. Creeper knowingly. "He'll take himself off."

"Why? What's the matter, Creeper?"

"After what you said to him last night!"

"I? What did I say?"

"Well, it was no more than he deserved."

"But, d—n me, Creeper. What was it?"

"You referred to the little affair with L——"

"I did, did I? I don't remember. And what happened then?"

Lord Strand laughed dubiously at the forgotten reminiscence.

"Oh, the whole table roared, and they did nothing ever afterwards but remind him of it. He is mad over it now. I am told that he has sent to the yacht for his traps——"

"Really, Creeper, I am very sorry——"

"There is no occasion, my lord. If ever there was a black-leg, he is one. Begging your lordship's pardon for speaking so plainly about a friend."

"Don't mention it, Creeper. But you will oblige me by calling upon him when you have time and apologising for me. Tell him that I would have come myself but was prevented. Why d—n him, if I go near him, Thames is sure to be there."

"I shall not fail to put it right."

"That's a good fellow. I am much obliged to you. I have a lot of visits to pay. Will you kindly come with me? You will confer a world of obligation upon me."

Mr. Creeper desired nothing better, and together, after they had breakfasted, they went to make their calls upon the various officials connected with the proper representing of England at the Turkish court, the representatives of the Church, the Press, and the other institutions which require the presence of Englishmen in distant lands to uphold the honour and safeguard the interests of their own. Wherever he went, Lord Strand, as he deserved, was received with distinction. Even the young man from the Embassy was turned into a sedate thing in gold lace which could not have referred to the usual orgy of the previous evening, still less could it have asked explanation of his lordship's mysterious disappearance. It was sufficient that Lord Strand was alive and well, all the world hastened to

pay him attention and express to him their profound esteem. For him to live was to receive honour from his countrymen.

It was late in the afternoon when Lord Strand, having paid all his visits, returned to his yacht to join his lady and his guests at dinner. The faithful Mr. Creeper still accompanied him, and was proud of the privilege, as well he might be. Even if the battle were lost and the yacht had departed without him, he would be able to look back on the contest with satisfaction. Had he not gained distinction among his fellows? was he not become the object of envy? But his wife, who had not enjoyed the public triumph of accompanying a lord through the streets of Pera and Galata and across to picturesque Stamboul, had not experienced the pleasurable feelings of her lord, and was still unsatisfied. Nothing short of complete triumph would satisfy her: she *must* become one of the party in the *Victoria*. It was therefore with suppressed eagerness that she took her husband aside and discussed with him the probabilities of the issue. At the same time, though they knew it not, Lord and Lady Strand were pronouncing the very words which should determine their fate.

"How very much improved Mrs. Creeper

has become," remarked Lady Strand. "She has lost all that flavour of—what shall I call it?—the shop?—which was so *very* marked before."

"And her husband also. I was very much struck with it. He has been of the utmost service to me to-day."

"Mrs. Creeper has become quite charming."

"And her husband is a brick."

"I wish she could accompany us. She is *so* entertaining. She can talk well; she has wit. She is so *very* different from——" And Lady Strand laughed and thus supplied the continuation of the sentence—"I wish she could come with us."

"And why not?"

"Why not? Do you think she would leave her husband? They are so very attached. I never saw a pair so perfectly matched as Mr. and Mrs. Creeper. They seem to live for each other. No, she could never leave her husband."

"But why should she? Can he not come, too? He would make himself useful."

"But think how crowded we are already. Where could we find room for him?"

"That's very true," returned Lord Strand dubiously. He seemed desirous of adding something, yet he hesitated.

"I regret it very much, indeed,". added Lady Strand musingly,

"Is it true what I have heard—that the Colonel has left us—has been suddenly called away?" stammered Lord Strand, as if ashamed to suggest such an idea, in the event of its being unfounded.

A delighted expression stole over the countenance of Lady Strand, but it was for a moment, and then it was suppressed.

"I have not been informed of this."

Lord Strand seemed disappointed, but whether at the ignorance of his lady, or at the movements of the Colonel, did not appear. They rang for an attendant, who likewise professed ignorance, but who would make inquiries. Having made inquiries, he returned with the intelligence that the Colonel had been suddenly called away. His aunt, it was said, had died, and left him money. So it was decided by the owner of the yacht and his consort that the Creepers should be invited to join the other guests on their voyage to England. Then Lord and Lady Strand took counsel on some other subject of mutual interest.

The dinner that day was a success, both from a material and moral point of view. Being within reach of a large city, fresh pro-

visions had been procured; having new guests, a fresh spirit could be infused into old conversation. Mr. and Mrs. Creeper were happy because the invitation of their patrons had been made known to them and had been accepted. The other guests were happy over what they were about to receive, because it was their duty as guests. Merlin Prester, who was also one of them, was happy, because his Caucasian costume, which he had donned by the special request of Lady Strand, had been admired by all, and many graceful and pleasing compliments had passed to and from all; and what can do more to please and elevate a company of friends, and even enemies, than an elegant compliment frankly uttered? The patrons were happy in the happiness of their guests.

Only once did the shade of regret fall upon them. Someone referred to the separation to be endured by Mrs. Creeper on parting from her son.

"But Mrs. Creeper goes with a good conscience," observed Merlin Prester; and the observation was agreed to by all. Mrs. Creeper was silent; besides the moral propriety of adding nothing to the compliment which touched the deepest feelings, she had learned the political propriety of not crossing

swords, or tongues, with Merlin Prester, for she never knew what strange meaning he could draw from simple words. "Mrs. Creeper goes with a good conscience, for it is the carrying out of a carefully devised scheme of education—that her boy should be left among strangers."

"When I was a boy I used to be sent off to school with a big cake from my mother, and a good licking from my father," remarked Mr. Creeper, to whom the reminiscence seemed to give great pleasure.

"We had not too much sentiment in those days, eh?" added the clergyman, with one cheek swelled out with the food he was masticating.

"I have no doubt the boy liked the cake better than sentiment; as for the licking——"

The company was so happy that Merlin Prester's remarks was drowned in laughter, and no one knew what light he had shed upon the subject. Mrs. Creeper smiled sadly; then she looked grave. A silence, due no doubt to the reaction, settled down after this sally.

"Ah, me!" sighed the wife of the professor. "Ah, me! How frequently we have to experience partings!"

"I feel resigned," remarked Mrs. Creeper,

drawn out by the sympathy of the lady. "I feel resigned. I know it is my Father's will."

"You will meet him again. I am sure he is a good boy. You will meet him again," sighed the lady, as if the meeting was a far-off contingency, full of sadness.

"If it is my Father's will!" replied Mrs. Creeper mournfully.

"Is the scheme of education then due to the boy's grandfather?" asked Merlin Prester, endeavouring to draw the conversation out of the depths of sadness into which it had fallen.

Had the steward suddenly entered bearing a smoking roast, while dressed in his night-shirt, the apparition would not have been more appalling. Each of the ladies seemed confused, shocked, ashamed. A look of astonishment hung over the countenance of Lord Strand, and over that of the clergyman —in the one case it changed into a smile, in the other into a loud explosion of laughter.

"That's the best I've heard for a long time!" shouted the clergyman rapturously.

"I am afraid I misunderstood you," said Merlin Prester coldly, and apparently utterly ignorant of the cause of the clergyman's hilarity.

The clergyman continued to smile to himself, time after time, and now and then seemed on

the point of breaking out into laughter, but by the exertions of Lord and Lady Strand, assisted by others, the remark of Merlin Prester became forgotten in the flow of less sentimental conversation.

It was after dinner; the ladies were writing letters to their friends in England, for the yacht would set sail on the morrow. Merlin Prester, in his Caucasian dress, walked the deck, smoking a Turkish cigarette, and with a newspaper in his hand. From time to time he stopped to watch the *caiques* gliding by, with their precious cargoes of veiled beauties —it was Friday evening, the Sabbath of the Mahommedans, and the beauties were journeying to seek pleasure in the various gardens on the shores of the Bosphorus.

Amidst his varied thoughts his mind wandered again and again to the beautiful features of Lady Strand. There was a charm, a fascination, a mystery about her which he could not fathom. He thought it was that of sadness. She seemed languid and weary in the midst of everything calculated to make her rejoice. He fancied that her smiles were mere masks to hide pain; that her words of joy were like wreaths upon a tomb. Then he brushed away the fancy and his mind opened itself to other thoughts.

Again he found himself meditating on the same subject, and the lady who had been introduced to him under the name of Victoria Tregurtha became connected with Lady Strand, connected by a strange tie which he could not understand. They were so different in appearance, they seemed so different in rank, they differed so largely in thought and sentiment as he judged by various casual remarks he had heard; and yet there was a close union and a complete and harmonious understanding between them.

At that moment Victoria Tregurtha herself appeared on the deck, she seemed to have less correspondence to go through than the other ladies. She entered into conversation with Merlin Prester.

After a while the talk turned upon Constantinople, its society, and its amusements. Victoria Tregurtha seemed to take much interest in the British residents, and especially those who frequented the hotels. At last she came to the question, in whose society did Lord Strand pass the previous evening? Merlin Prester explained that he had spent so much time sailing by midnight on the Bosphorus that he only returned at a very late hour when he found Lord Strand already at the hotel. In a little while the lady broke

off the conversation and went below, leaving him to speculate on the meaning, if any, that could be attached to her questions.

While thus meditating he was conscious that some one was near him and regarding him. He turned round suddenly and beheld a boy staring at him, with eyes and mouth open and expressive of the utmost interest and astonishment.

"By Jingo!" exclaimed the boy when Merlin Prester returned his inquiring gaze.

"Jingo? What's Jingo?

"You."

Then Merlin Prester and the boy continued to regard each other.

"What a dagger! What a belt! What are those things on your breast? Are they silver?"

Mrs. Creeper was at that moment busy writing. She had folded up and directed several letters—one of which lay in a prominent position where it could not fail to catch the eye of Lady Strand. It bore the superscription "To the Editor of ———" with the name of a Fashionable Journal in which the Movements of Titled Personages and Others belonging to Society were recorded. Mrs. Creeper was enjoying the blissful experience of announcing her triumph to her

friends. Suddenly her face paled, her heart throbbed, her pen dropped from her hand. Was that the voice of her son? What calamity had happened? Could it be he?

Her doubt did not last long. A loud footfall sounded on the brass edges of the steps of the companion ladder—it was the heavy footfall of a British boy. In another moment the boy himself was in the arms of his mother.

"Mamma, mamma," he cried, "I waited at the hotel ever so long and you did not come."

"But what brought you to the hotel?"

"Mrs. Brown sent me there with Ahmed."

"But why did she send you there?"

"Tom and Harry have got fever, and Mrs. Brown said that I——"

At the mention of the word fever Lady Strand started up from the table where she had been writing——

"Mrs. Creeper, how could you be so very indiscreet?"

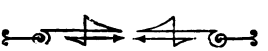
How much was in those words! They pronounced her doom. They contained the death-knell of all her hopes. Not even her splendid daring, not even her husband's aptness in mastering details, could devise a plan to extricate them out of the new and

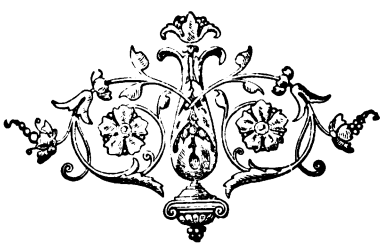
overwhelming difficulty. It was not a fall, it was not a defeat; it was a disaster, it was annihilation. The word fever was final.

A few minutes later a boat was seen cutting the waters of the Bosphorus, pulled by stalwart British rowers towards the landing stage at Galata. It contained a family group, composed of Mr. and Mrs. Creeper and their son. Three days later, when the yacht *Victoria* was already out at sea (and Merlin Prester was on board, leaning on the bulwarks, looking over the blue waves towards the Isles of Greece and meditating on the Mystery of the West), the same family were gathered in a room at Constantinople; the boy was lying on a bed, tossing in the heat of a fever; by his bedside were his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Creeper. Day by day the struggle against disease was continued, the parents' faces became thin and wan, and the boy seemed to linger between life and death. The boy did not die; he recovered full strength and vigour, and it was maternal solicitude and paternal watchfulness that had, humanly speaking, saved him.

In the conflict of life, amidst the terrors of disease, before the horrors of dissolution, a Voice seems to sound, coming clear and sweet from out of Eternity, from the Throne of God,

which makes men noble, devoted, grand. Humanity is of marvellous capacity. How sad it is that the ear is dull of hearing, the eye blind, the heart irresponsive, and that there requires the fall of that blow which cannot be mistaken, that touch of nature which makes the whole world kin. Humanity is great; its greatness is that it can be filled with the Spirit of God.





BOOK THIRD.

"Then fell on Merlin a great melancholy;
He walk'd with dreams and darkness, and he found
A doom that ever poised itself to fall,
An ever-moaning battle in the mist,
World-war of dying flesh against the life,
Death in all life and lying in all love,
The meanest having power upon the highest,
And the high purpose broken by the worm."

—Lord Tennyson.

BOOK THIRD.

CHAPTER XI.

SIR JOHN PRESTER.

"The king of the province is of the lineage of Prester John, and he holds the land under the Great Khan; not that he holds anything like the whole of what Prester John possessed. It is a custom, I may tell you, that these kings of the lineage of Prester John always obtain to wife either daughters of the Great Khan or other princesses of his family."

—MARCO POLO.

WHILE the yacht *Victoria* is bearing the hero of this tale from the East to the West, the opportunity may be taken to relate the history of his family and to explain the reason of his making the journey at this particular time.

The father of Merlin was Sir John Prester, as has already been said. Sir John was only known to his neighbours as an eccentric squire who lived in close retirement; but to those who applied to The Book of Families

he was known as one of the knights created about the time of the great Reform Bill, who had lost his seat for a corrupt burgh and was consoled in consequence with a title. Being a man of some substance, and now possessing a rank which assured him of the honourable regard of his fellow citizens, he withdrew from political life and settled upon the property he had recently purchased in Devonshire. He was the more inclined to this course from the feeling that he was out of harmony with the Reformed House of Commons, and therefore sought no more after the suffrages of his countrymen. At each periodic purging of the House through the influence of Reform a new generation of men become the representatives of the nation. As they have just come from the people a new spirit breathes throughout the august assembly. No change is more apparent than in the high sense of honour which now prevails; so that those who have been sent as nominees of some Lord who thought of nothing beyond preserving his privileges and his patronage, and who called his instincts of self-preservation by the grand name of Conservatism, and those who entered by bribery that they might live by plunder, alike feel themselves outside their proper element. The

House of Commons always tends if left alone, it would seem, to subordinate itself to the House of Lords through its members becoming Lordly delegates rather than popular representatives; and thus there has arisen a constant necessity for bringing it closer and closer to the people by repeated acts of Reform. Sir John Prester accepted without much regret his dismissal from the House, and found in his title some consolation for the loss of his seat. Retiring to his property he spent his days in the cultivation of his land, in his library, and in certain pursuits which occasionally required his presence in the capital. These latter were connected with speculations on the Stock Exchange, and with the operations of various companies united for the execution of large undertakings of a public nature; and among the names on the Board of Directors of the latter might often be seen that of Sir John Prester.

To his neighbours in the country Sir John was a mystery. His intercourse with them was of the most formal nature; he never visited them of his own initiative, and he was pronounced by them to be very unsociable; and further, judging by his want of public spirit and the little sympathy he showed for local objects, they asserted that he was no true Briton,

but a foreigner in disguise—an assertion, it must be admitted, which is most damaging.

Much has been written about the chance said to be offered once in his life to each man, and the acceptance or rejection of which determines the success or failure of his career. Whatever may be thought of the truth of this assertion, there can be no question that the chance of gaining popularity in his district comes at least once to every rich squire when he selects a wife. If he chooses wisely and joins himself to one of the sterling families in the neighbourhood, it goes well with him. His conduct meets with general approval; and criticism concerning him is confined to such subjects as the probability of his having a house in town, discussions on the figures of his income, speculations on the birth of an heir among the fairer portions of his neighbours, expressed by the thousand nods and smiles which herald such an event, and arguments about the probability of his supporting local movements, and about the amount of his donations to charities and so on. But Sir John Prester neglected the chance thus offered him. He married none of the aunts, sisters or daughters of his neighbours, but his own housekeeper. An extenuating circumstance was to be found in the fact

that she was a stranger; for everyone knows that a foreign menial is not half so worthy of contempt as a native; and this is a truth which has often found illustration even in the occupants of thrones. It would have been unjust, however, to have classed this housekeeper who became a lady as altogether menial, as was subsequently found by the ladies who were constrained to receive her occasionally at their own homes. She belonged to an old family which had become reduced in circumstances. Her brother was still a gentleman; he had been educated at one of the universities, and was in Holy Orders. He had been tutor to an heir to an earldom and as a reward for his services received, when that heir became a nobleman under the title of Lord Thames and his post-obits came for payment, a living that was worth ninety-five pounds some odd shillings and pence, and a glebe that could be turned into a cabbage garden. Sir John Prester, who was evidently of a somewhat sardonic nature, on hearing of the preferment offered a living of a higher value in his patronage to this clergyman, who was personally unknown to him. On his offer being accepted, the earl was furious. Stories had been current concerning the earl and the sister of the parson, but scandal is ever busy

upon exalted reputations, and what was whispered was probably untrue.

It was said, in low tones of course, and with head-shakings and impressive gestures, that the earl had reasons of his own for keeping the parson within his power, for if the latter could speak, he might utter many strange stories. And the parson's sister was such a woman as might provoke the unfriendly remarks of country people. She was a handsome woman, and therefore deserved the jealousy of her sisters; she had a foreign air, which naturally brought upon her their ill-will; she was a silent woman who did not join in their gossip, and thus she became the object of their resentment; and she was a haughty woman, and so received their hate. Spiteful constructions were put on all her actions, and her marked devoutness was explained to be the penance performed for early misdeeds. Even the most charitable screwed up their faces and said that where there was smoke there was sure to be fire.

The parson now enjoying a living fat beyond his warmest fancy—for it was worth nearly three hundred pounds a year, and had a parsonage attached to it—turned his thoughts to matrimony. But the lady of his choice was the daughter of a man in the employment of

the earl, and she received a hint that her father's position might be endangered by any want of circumspection on her part. She married the village undertaker; and not long afterwards her husband was engaged in the mournful task of making her coffin, and making it as comfortable as possible. The parson grieved over his disappointment, moralised over her sad fate, and then sought consolation by marrying one of his parishioners. His household now contained two women, each of whom might claim to direct him. He was one of such a nature that he required the directing influence of a strong feminine mind, and the wife proved stronger than the sister, who thus found herself deprived of her chief occupation. The agent of the earl, still watchful of their condition, offered her the post of schoolmistress in the village they had just left. She had accepted the situation when Sir John Prester heard of the circumstances, and offered her the more lucrative appointment of housekeeper in Prester Hall. The earl was again baffled when she withdrew from the agreement into which she had just entered. Sir John Prester made her his housekeeper to annoy the earl; and he afterwards made her his wife to please himself.

A marriage arranged in such a fashion could hardly result in unalloyed bliss—for bliss did not enter into the contract. It was not, however, attended with misery, and for this mercy, no doubt, the temperament of the contracting parties was concerned as well as providence. Sir John found his time fully taken up with the supervision of his acres, with his *Times*, his lists of shares and their prices issued by stockbrokers, and with incidental occupations, as magisterial duties, and occasional journeys to London. Lady Prester found ample employment in the discharge of her household duties, the oversight of her servants, and the rearing of her only son. The birth of this son was naturally of great consequence in the household. Sir John Prester, who, among various sciences, boasted a knowledge of astrology, studied the planetary motions for many weeks before the interesting episode was expected, to the neglect of the motions of foreign bonds, and he was full of eager anticipation. Many conjunctures of mystic import were possible, and he was on the tip-toe of expectation. At last the event took place, and the physician who was summoned from London, brought with him an accurate chronometer to register the exact time of occurrence. Sir John was

in the midst of his charts of the heavens and his astrological schemes, when, by some inexplicable mistake, a daughter's birth was announced instead of that of a son. The pen dropped from his hand, and an oath slipped out of his lips—for his calculations were valueless. A minute or two afterwards the error was corrected, and Sir John, his mind in a whirl, returned to his horoscope. But for the accident of the dropping of the pen, the servant's error (and the origin of which error was never discovered) would have made of no avail the most careful preparations and calculations, and thus, even from his birth, was the boy favoured by the chapter of accidents. The pen had been filled with ink, and, in falling, an indelible mark had been left on the paper—thus the important moment had been registered. Sir John plunged into further calculations, and into the study of prophecies as well as of astrological lore, and forgot to visit the mother and the child. The result of his studies was both astonishing and confusing; and the future of the boy seemed bound up with great persons, and great events, and connected with the East. Columbus, Napoleon, and Mother Shipton, were among those whose stars seemed to be related with

the boy's. At another moment, when studying Eastern lore, Sir John was convinced that the Great Mogul, the Grand Lama, and the prophesied Mahdi were even more closely connected with the fortunes of his son than the Westerns already named. Confident of the great destiny of his boy—but a destiny to be realised only after many years—Sir John sought for a name which might carry with it some hint of this destiny, and he selected MERLIN. In what name does the historical unite more closely with the mythical, or the real with the mysterious, than in that borne by the Sage who advised Kings, and the Prophet who related future history, gathered out of the storehouses of his teeming and brilliant imagination?

Merlin Prester's childhood, like that of many men who have afterwards become famous, was uneventful, and unmarked by any signs of unusual parts, or even of striking precocity. He had his share of the usual ailments, of the usual battles, of the usual scrapes, and he indulged in the usual mischief, and played his share of pranks, and he received a fair average of lickings. When boyhood is reckoned up, mischief and punishment are the significant figures of the sum.

Lady Prester died when her boy was only

nine years old. She had spent the last few years in such complete retirement, that her departure was hardly missed in the neighbourhood, save by the poor people to whom she had proved a true and unostentatious benefactress. She had few striking qualities, and no bad ones. The only defect in her character was her too great fondness for her son—a defect which will be pardoned in a woman condemned to an isolated fate—and she did much towards spoiling him. She was, however, only too soon removed from him, and he received more than his share of salutary discipline in after years to correct the effects of this maternal fondness.

Sir John felt the task of rearing his son was one for which he was little fitted by nature and still less by inclination. He proposed sending him to a fashionable public school, where he might obtain the best instruction given to the most favoured in the realm. But the advice he received from those acquainted with public school life to whom he applied was against such a course, for Merlin seemed unfitted by temperament, as well as physical development, for the rivalry and the muscular contests of such a training. In the midst of his anxious deliberations, a letter came from his married sister, which

suggested a new and advantageous scheme. This sister was the wife of a merchant trading in the Levant; and having no children of her own, she proposed to undertake the tuition and training of young Merlin. At first, Sir John was dead against the proposal, and was inclined to return a very decided negative; but on further consideration, argument after argument cropped up, and he was soon astonished at the strong array of reasons why he should consent to the proposal. Still he was undecided. His sister proceeded with feminine ingenuity to show how all the advantages of Eton and Harrow were to be obtained from imported tutors in Smyrna, Jerusalem or Alexandria. Even upon such proof Sir John hesitated, and it was not till after receiving some bad news from the Stock Exchange, which brought on a mild paralytic stroke, and thus hinted at his own vulnerability to disease, that he entrusted Merlin to his sister's care, and sent him out to the East. And it was with secret complacence that he meditated on the gathering circumstances pointing to the fulfilment of the horoscope of his son. It was plain that in some way he would be connected with the East.

Merlin grew up in the care of his uncle and aunt, who discharged faithfully the trust

they had undertaken. During the course of these years, he was under the instruction of a tutor from one of the English Universities, who taught him to revere the sound learning to be gained there. But the eager search after knowledge of his pupil extended far beyond the tutor's powers to satisfy it, even into regions of Oriental learning, which until very recent times were untalked of in the class-rooms and cloisters of Cam and Isis. The Talmudic writings, the Egyptian records, and those of Babylon and Assyria, Arabic history and poetry, and the flowers of Persian rhetoric, to say nothing of the vast stores of intellectual wealth treasured up in the languages of India, were subjects of study so great and so interesting, that a few years spent in travel, searching after what they could teach, passed away rapidly, and left the student hardly beyond the threshold of his quest.

It happened in the course of nature that the merchant died; and Merlin's aunt talked of returning to her native country, from which she had been separated for many years, and to which otherwise she would have had no desire to return, so accustomed had she become to the ways of the East. Merlin, however, begged a further respite, for he was

engaged in the study of some subject of absorbing interest, and his aunt consented. This delay was of much consequence to his future, for it was through circumstances arising out of it that he was introduced to the Caucasus. Suddenly, a Georgian prince, no other than Zenghis Zeraba Beg, appeared on the scene. In his distant Causasian home he had learned that the merchant, a former rival (for the husband of a lady whom he admired was regarded as such by the Caucasian) was dead, and he descended from the mountains to follow up his suit. It is needless to repeat his arguments, for they were intended solely for the ear of his mistress, or to relate the course of his wooing, for that lies outside the scope of the present tale, but it is only necessary to say that when Zenghis Zeraba Beg returned to his mountain home he bore with him a bride—not blushing, it is true, for age and the sun had performed their worst upon her once fair countenance—who had now given up all thoughts of revisiting her native land. And in his train rode Merlin Prester, who thus took up his abode in the Caucasus and made his home there.

So enchanting is the scenery of the Caucasus, where noble thoughts flow down from every crag, and are wafted on every breeze,

and so absorbing is the study of Oriental wisdom prosecuted within the luxurious halls of a princely home, that Merlin Prester found the years pass away as his talked-of return to his native land was adjourned from season to season. Another cause, perhaps, which had something to do with the delay, was the neglect of his father to send the means. Money is rare in the Caucasus, though corn and wine are overflowing; and the lavish hospitality for which many of the Caucasian princes are distinguished is not less grateful to the guests because it has cost little, and thus they can feel themselves at ease, knowing that their presence entails but a trifling extra expense on their host. And Merlin Prester was young and very simple; he had not yet learned the value of money, for he was surrounded by those who were hardly less simple in their tastes than himself. He valued knowledge more than gold. It was very foolish of him, as he soon learned when he put his foot on his native strand—but this is to anticipate—and he might plead that he was encouraged in this belief by his father, who from his experience of life knew better. The way in which his father encouraged this idea was by his supplying newspapers, magazines, and books, rather than

money, as he knew that his son had a preference for the former. Sir John was not dissatisfied with this strange taste of his son's (which he attributed to the influence of the Caucasus), and he showed his shrewdness in his method of supplying it, by entering into a contract with an eminent stationer to send the various periodicals and books at a diminished rate a little after date—for a few days sooner or later would make slight difference to a reader in the Caucasus. Thus it happened that Merlin Prester used to receive his newspapers not daily, or weekly, but in large packets; and thus he could study contemporary history not in the slovenly method of a daily fraction at a time, but by taking in the whole scheme of an event at once from its commencement to its completion. And Merlin Prester on his part showed his budding diplomatic skill by contriving a method of receiving these packets without their being subjected to the obnoxious examination of the censor.

But it must not be assumed that Sir John was a bad father, wishing to rid himself of his duties to his son. He had only become avaricious in his old age (and this was due to some extent to his living in retirement with no one to care for but himself), and such a

one readily finds out arguments to prove that what is best for himself is also best for others. Had his son returned home, no doubt Sir John would have found his heart expand, and he would have taken an interest in his son's welfare as much as his own. But this return was put off again and again until it was too late—for father and son never saw each other more.

One day a letter came from a firm of solicitors who acted for Sir John Prester, saying that their client was dead, and that they regretted to inform his son of the fact, and then they proceeded to relate that the affairs of the deceased were in some confusion, and finally they told of their being engaged in the task of resolving these affairs. A little while afterwards, in reply to Merlin Prester, they invited him to come home, and forwarded funds for that purpose. And so Merlin Prester at last set out on his journey, as has already been related. The land which had given him birth, and which had always seemed to him in his exile to be very mysterious, was now to welcome his return.

The death of such an important person as was Sir John Prester in his own neighbourhood could not pass without some public recognition of the fact. A paragraph about

him was therefore prepared by the solicitors of the deceased (and charged for against the estate), and was inserted in the local newspapers. His virtues were described in glowing colours, and his public spirit in early life was recalled to the present generation, which is only too forgetful of those who have been its benefactors. Nor was the firm of solicitors, his legal advisers, deprived of their due panegyric as having been the agents to whom much of his success was due. These solicitors, it was added, would continue to advise the son of the late knight, who was now living in the Caucasus, and had become very distinguished for his learning, in so much that he had been made a Prince of Georgia. In consequence of this paragraph Merlin Prester had received letters from his future neighbours condoling with him on the loss of his parent, and complimenting him on the accession to such a fine estate.

These letters had filled him with much satisfaction; he began to appreciate what it was to hold an exalted position; the wisdom of the East began to pale before the power of the West, new hopes and aspirations rose within him, and his joy almost became tumultous when he first realised what it was to possess money. Thus it was that while his

lofty fancy lingered upon the mysterious aspect of the West, his more sordid nature appreciated the joy of possessing wealth and the *prestige* which property brings. And so also, while his imagination brooded over the Mystery of the West, he thought not a little upon his substantial possessions, which had assumed a greater importance in his eyes from the letters of his future neighbours. With this explanation of the circumstance which had mainly been the cause of his journey to the West, and whereby, therefore, he had gained the long-desired opportunity to search out its Mystery, the course of the story must be resumed. Yet before doing so an explanation ought also to be offered of what may seem a strange circumstance, namely, the fact of Merlin Prester becoming the guest of Lord Strand on board the yacht *Victoria* instead of Mr. and Mrs. Creeper. Lord Strand, who was a landowner having estates in many counties in England, and even in Scotland and Ireland, found a neighbour in Merlin Prester, whose father he had once met at a meeting of a county board. His respectability being thus vouched for, the other qualifications of a guest of a lord were not wanting in the ready wit, wide learning, and brilliant imagination which he evinced in his conversation. Lord and

Lady Strand were charmed with him, and would take no refusal when they invited him to accompany them. A steamer was found by which Sidonia was sent direct to London, and Merlin Prester took possession of the vacant cabin in the yacht *Victoria*.

CHAPTER XII.

NOT THE LAND OF INSPIRATION.

"'It is no longer difficult to reach Jerusalem; the real difficulty is the one experienced by the Crusaders, to know what to do when you have arrived there.'

"'It is the land of inspiration,' said Tancred, slightly blushing; 'and when I am there, I would humbly pray that my course may be indicated to me.'

"'And you think that no prayers, however humble, would obtain for you that indication before your departure?'

"'This is not the land of inspiration,' replied Tancred, timidly."

—Lord Beaconsfield.

Fair weather smiled on the company in the yacht from the day of their departure from the Bosphorus. The Ægean vied with Marmora in speeding them on their way, for their sails were kept full and they did not require the aid of steam: and even the most scholarly of navigators sailing over these classic seas is mindful of saving coals. The Mediterranean was calm with the dignity of a great sea. The Bay of Biscay ceased its

surliness for a brief interval and rocked them gently on a long ground swell. And when they reached the Chops of the Channel they found no chops there. They found however a change of climate, and were only too conscious that they had exchanged the sunny south for the hard and misty north. As they approached the shores where England stretches towards the setting sun, they were enveloped in fog. The wind was fair, blowing gently from the south-west, and bearing with it a cold damp mist which made the sails hang heavily, the deck slippery, and the captain anxious concerning his course. Thus the yacht approached Old England, cautiously feeling the way, dreading the sound of breakers or the form of some vessel looming across their course, and heralding their coming by the din of a fog-horn.

The skipper had been taking soundings which gave him secret cause to fear that he had drifted somewhat out of his course, and the hours were passing away and no abatement of the thickness of the haze was visible. He might reach the shore anywhere between the Lizard and the Land's End, or he might run his vessel against the rocks at the Scilly Isles. Unless the weather cleared it was plain that he would have to lie to or come to

anchor. When he was in this frame of mind one or two forms loomed through the mist, and the voices of men were heard and the barking of dogs. Had he reached land? It turned out, however, that the forms were fishing boats from St. Mary's in the Scilly Isles, and that their owners were as much engaged in looking for employment as pilots as in catching fish. So civilisation has spread; a century before these people would have been wreckers alluring ships to their doom, now they were engaged in seeking to save. After a brief colloquy between Lord Strand and the skipper it was decided to accept the offer of these fishermen to take the yacht into the harbour of St. Mary's, for it was impossible to predict how long the haze might last. Barely an hour from the time the pilot came on board they were conscious of passing through a channel, though the shores were enveloped in mist. Thus they caught first sight of Old England—without seeing it.

"We are giving you a cold welcome," said Lord Strand as he shivered in the clammy atmosphere. The yacht was now at anchor; and already had a boat been sent ashore for fresh vegetables and other provisions. "I fear that you will form but a poor idea of our country and will long to be back again in the

Caucasus. But I assure you this is quite exceptional—in the month of June we ought to have nothing but bright sunshine and the perfume of roses."

"Considerations of weather have little influence upon me," replied Merlin Prester, "I only think of the fact that I have reached England—that I have reached the country which is the manifestation of Power—of Empire. And I am proud that this country is my fatherland."

"But you would have a higher opinion of it if you could see it," observed Lord Strand as he waved his hand towards a darkening in the mist which showed where the island of St. Agnes lay.

"That is so—probably," returned Merlin Prester slowly and thoughtfully. Yet there would be less room for the play of the imagination—"

"You have begun to despise our English scenery before you have seen it. Because it is not majestic like the Caucasus you think it has no beauty!" These words were uttered in a clear melodious voice in which there was a playful accent of scorn. Merlin Prester turned round to encounter Victoria Tregurtha, who, dressed in a neat costume of blue serge, could defy even the dampness of the mist

blowing over these Western isles. Her dark eyes sparkled and her cheeks shone with a heightened colour. She, at least, loved her native land, and could defend its beauty.

"You mistake me, Miss Tregurtha. My reference was metaphorical. I was thinking of the moral beauty rather than the physical. When the imagination is fired, it is a cold descent to condescend to facts."

Lord Strand smiled; during the weeks they had journeyed together he had learned to appreciate the peculiar fancy of his guest; and he felt that the present remark was an instance of this peculiar fancy. Victoria Tregurtha, however, regarded his teeming fancy with less respect; she deemed flippant what others, overcome by his impressive manner and appropriate gestures, thought profound. She seemed about to answer impatiently, but she checked herself, and remarked with a smile:

"Then you belong to the philosophic school, which regards everything as subjective. The beauty of English scenery is imaginary, and so is Caucasian, I presume. Everything is subjective and imaginary—nothing is real——"

"Yet I know a beauty which is real—

impossible to be more so," ejaculated Merlin Prester in a barely audible tone.

"Then you had better shut your eyes—and keep them shut—till you get to London." Victoria Tregurtha spoke in a harder tone, which showed that she recognised the compliment, but would take no notice of it. "There you will be surrounded with enough of fog, and have a wide field for your imagination——"

"There is no occasion now to shut one's eyes," interrupted Lord Strand. "That is done for us by Nature. Besides, the London fog is so very noxious and so painful, that one's imagination lies dormant till the spring comes round."

"I accept the rebuke—but I think it is hardly just," said Merlin Prester, humbly addressing Miss Tregurtha. "I am so overwhelmed with the endeavour to realise the fact that I have reached England, and stand on the threshold of the great country to which belong the attributes of Greatness, Renown, Justice, Freedom, Majesty, and Empire, that I hardly think of the dress it wears. Why do these belong to England? What is their origin? How do they act? Reveal to me this secret. This is the Mystery of the West."

At this moment the splash of oars was heard, and a boat appeared out of the mist. This was a manifestation of England's Power; it was the boat with the Custom-house officers sent to examine the yacht's papers, and to see that no smuggling was indulged in by the sailors. Lord Strand was called away to answer the inquiries of the officers, and Victoria Tregurtha descended to the cabin to join the ladies, who were complaining of the weather. So Merlin Prester was left to his own thoughts.

The hours passed slowly, for the expectation of all on board had been roused by their near approach to their journey's end; and their being forced to be inactive, surrounded by mist and shrouded by the clinging cold and damp, was a trial of patience. They were, however, consoled with the supplies of fresh provisions and old newspapers which the village was able to supply them. And in the hope that on the morrow the weather would be clear, and their journey resumed, they set about the task of packing up their luggage, and making the necessary preparations for their departure from the yacht which had been their home for so many weeks. Nor was a tinge of sadness wanting in their conversation, for the morrow would

probably witness the breaking-up of their party and their separation after so long and so pleasant an intercourse.

Night came on; but there was no break in the garment of mist which clothed them with impenetrable gloom. It was an intense darkness which hung over the yacht, and over the islands, and the sea, and the whole of nature—a darkness which was solemn and appalling in its gloom. Save the beacons which faintly glimmered and served to make the thickness of the mist more visible, nothing could be seen from the deck of the yacht, where Merlin Prester paced with an agitated frame. His face, as the light from the cabin skylight fell upon it, was expressive of deep thought, perhaps of anxiety; his unequal steps, now quick, now slow, also showed that he was deeply moved, and that his body merely obeyed the workings of his mind. He had an instrument of music in his hand, the same which had been his companion during the journey, and which he had often carried amidst the deep silence and eloquent utterings of the Caucasus, and upon which he was wont to discourse music and relieve the passionate feelings of the heart. On the present occasion the instrument was voiceless, it failed to find words for his burning

thoughts, it failed to respond to his deep emotions, it was no longer obedient to his tuneful aspirations. Again and again he raised his voice to sing of the glorious images of his fancy, but the words were harsh, the sounds were discords.

After repeated endeavours he at last succeeded in giving expression to the thoughts which burned within him; and the words, which struggled for utterance, yet grated upon him while they came forth, were as follows:

BRITANNIA.

Famous thou in ancient pages!
Famous thou, Oh great Britannia!
Famous thou to distant ages!
Famous thou, and harmless rages
Thy foes' hate 'gainst thee, Britannia!

Vanished kingdoms' ancient story
Lives once more in thee, Britannia!
Old renown and warlike glory,
Purpose high and wisdom hoary,
These are thine, Oh great Britannia!

Live! for great thy lot is cast;
Live for ever, great Britannia!
Live! as aye in ages past;
Live! to Truth and Right hold fast;
Nor ever yield, Britannia!

Actions formed in virtue's mould
Are thine, Oh, great Britannia!
Wise as just, and free as bold,
Moral worth is more than gold,
And such thou hast, Britannia!

Firm to withstand the rudest shock,
Firm for ever, great Britannia!
Firm as thy shores which the waves mock,
Firm as thy surf-beaten rock,
Firm for ever, great Britannia!

As he ended his song Merlin Prester remained in an attitude of silent attention. He started and listened! He seemed to hear his own voice reflected from the hidden cliffs, the granite crags which line the Western shores of Old England! Nay, it was but the cadence of the waves, the distant voice of the surf-beaten rock, which seemed to repeat his words in endless response as the restless sea fretted against it eternally—"Firm for ever, great Britannia! Firm for ever, great Britannia!"

Presently he turned round and commenced to pace the deck once more, but in the darkness he almost stumbled against someone, who, unknown to him, was quite close and must have overheard his song. He stammered out an apology, and could his face have been seen, possibly a blush might have been

detected on that almost blushless face. The form to which his apology was addressed resolved itself into two persons standing together with their arms linked—into Lady Strand and Victoria Tregurtha.

"Your poetic feelings must be true and sincere if your Muse is faithful to you on such a night," said Lady Strand, as she accepted his apologies and assured him that she had suffered no inconvenience from his abrupt approach. "Who would have thought that you could find inspiration with such surroundings?"

"Ah, that is what I have to complain of," returned Merlin Prester in a tone of sadness, "the inspiration does not come!"

"How indeed could you expect it? It is dark, it is cold, it is wet, it is misty, it is miserable—it is—well, all sorts of disagreeablenesses meet together to-night, and yet you complain of want of inspiration! Where could you find anything to suggest high thoughts or noble feelings in such a mist? Bah, it is truly horrible!" And Lady Strand shivered, and drew her companion closer to herself for warmth.

"You have just arrived from a genial climate and from clear skies," rejoined Merlin Prester, "and your ladyship has

forgotten the cold and mist which dwell in the north."

"Oh, no, I shall never forget bad weather, only I shall never learn to like it. But what I wish to know is what you can find of poetry in this——?" And Lady Strand waved her hand over the misty face of nature.

"I think not of the mist but of the shore," returned Merlin Prester. "I feel that I have reached my native land, and I am overwhelmed with a sense of its greatness. Or rather I should say, I ought to be overwhelmed with a sense of its greatness—but am not. Why does inspiration not come? Where but here ought one's lips to find fluent and harmonious utterance? And yet it is not so. I fear this is not the land of inspiration!"

"Not the land of inspiration? Why should it not be the land of inspiration? How absurd of you to talk thus!"

Lady Strand drew her companion towards the skylight, from whence issued a gleam from the warm and brilliant cabin below, which was bright enough to define the outline of the ladies without shining on their faces, so that it was by the tone of their voices alone that Merlin Prester could judge of the emotions with which they uttered any remark.

"How else can I explain the dulness which afflicts me? Or the coldness which I feel?"

"It may be due to the state of the weather," suggested Victoria Tregurtha sympathetically, but her remark passed unnoticed.

"On such an occasion my temples ought to throb, my heart beat, and my lips find words to the harmony of this instrument, but voice and instrument are alike silent!"

"I am sorry to see you so affected," said Lady Strand soothingly.

"The sympathy your ladyship shows towards me is very touching. I feel it deeply," returned Merlin Prester.

"Under more favourable auspices, when the sun is shining, and the sea reflects its brightness, and when the birds are making melody in the trees, you will rejoice in the return of your absent Muse."

"No never! I am deeply and bitterly disappointed. This instrument has sounded its last chord, it shall remain silent for evermore! I will destroy it in my bitterness! I will sink it to the bottom of the sea!"

"Be not so hasty. Think of what you are doing. The instrument is not the cause."

"Stop, I pray you!" exclaimed Victoria Tregurtha, as Merlin Prester stepped towards

the bulwarks, which were hidden in the darkness. "Stop! Music still remains in the instrument—we were charmed with your song!"

"It is too late! I shall play on it no more!" So saying Merlin Prester whirled the instrument round at arm's length, and launched it into the darkness. As it flew a low sound burst forth, as if it were endued with life, and thus it wailed its untimely fate. The cry became more shrill, and sounded like a death shriek. Then there was a splash and a gurgle, and all was over! The music of the Caucasus was quenched for ever!"

As he returned from performing this violent deed Merlin Prester felt conscious that he laboured under the displeasure of both the ladies, for the stern silence which greeted him, even more than the tone of rebuke in their words when they broke the silence, conveyed this to him plainly.

"It was heartless," remarked Lady Strand presently.

"It was cruel," added Victoria Tregurtha.

"Pardon me," said Merlin Prester humbly, "but when the harmony has departed the instrument becomes obnoxious; when life has fled the corpse must be buried."

"You make me lose patience with you!" exclaimed Lady Strand.

"I deeply regret it, your ladyship."

"Can you not see that if the source of inspiration has failed it is because it has become exhausted. You require a new one, a source from which deeper emotions can flow. A subject which can touch deeper springs of your being."

"How so, your ladyship? What subject can be greater, more exalted, more profound than one's native land? Than that country to the reflection of whose influence all others owe what greatness they possess?"

"You make me smile—excuse my saying so. How can you find adequate inspiration in a country—and in a country you have not seen? Inspiration must come from a person—for it is of the nature of love."

"And do I not love my country?"

"By hearsay?"

"If you will have it so; but I have thought deeply and felt warmly."

"The more you say shows more clearly that you know nothing—literally nothing—of love. I thank you for the song which I overheard—unintentionally—and I regret that you have thrown away your instrument. You might have given it to me as a curiosity, if you were determined to play no more upon it."

"I could not have borne to see it put to such a use."

"And so you destroyed it," interrupted Lady Strand. "If that was not love it was the shadow of love. When you learn to love you will not mourn your loss of inspiration. But let us go below. It is getting colder. I believe the wind has changed and before long it will become clear, and we shall sail."

It was even as Lady Strand had said; for with true observation born of long experience she had remarked the change of direction of the wind, which now blew away the overhanging mist, and it was not long after midnight that the *Victoria* resumed her journey. But her words had made an impression on Merlin Prester which he could not explain. He argued against them, and he laid them down defeated before his arguments, yet they continually sprang to life again and laughed him to scorn. All night long he muttered to himself in his dreams; and the subject which so agitated him was that mysterious subject—love.

CHAPTER XIII.

RETURN TO OLD ENGLAND.

"A boy
I left her shores, and now my foot I set
On this loved strand with somewhat of regret."
—LORD JOHN MANNERS.

THE fog had vanished completely next morning, the sky was bright and clear, and the heat of the sun was tempered by a gentle breeze blowing from the north, and scented with the sweet odours of the flowers which made beautiful the green meadows and pastures. The genial fresh breeze stole into each cabin of the yacht and wooed the company forth to gaze on the rare beauty of the scene.

The grey cliffs of the Cornish coast rose high and massive from the slightly rippled sea. Sheer and abrupt in some places, they lifted up their crests in bold outline, out of which the hoarse cry of the sea-birds sounded from the ledges where they had built their nests. Jagged peaks and fantastic buttresses, dizzy precipices and deep ravines, mighty headlands

and grassy slopes alternated with a pleasing variety. Now the eye gazed with wonder and admiration upon some scene of the most magnificent arrangement of colour, and now with awe upon some sublime aspect of Nature, and again with delight upon some charming rural prospect. The deep blue water laved the rocks and fringed their base with a margin of foam which shone like silver in the beams of the sun. Black masses of serpentine or basalt were skirted with flat beaches of white glistening sand. Grey slate formations and red sandstone were blended with gentle green slopes where cattle browsed. Villages nestled in hidden valleys, and were betrayed to the voyager by the curling wreath of smoke or the belfry of the grey old parish church. Sheltered coves with fishing boats drawn up on the beach and with long black lines of drying nets lay ensconced behind protecting headlands. Nor were signs of life and business wanting, for fleets of trawlers hovered about the fishing grounds, and other boats were being propelled by oars in the absence of wind, as they shot their seins to gather in the harvest of the sea of that fish which next to the pilchard is the delight of the Cornishman —the mackerel.

And beyond the cliffs stretched a diversified

expanse of hill and valley. Bare hills, dotted with the white cottages of the miners, and valleys rejoicing in plenteousness and bringing forth fruit and corn. Here might be seen the scaffolding placed above the shaft of a mine, with its great wheel at the top and its huge mass of spent ore at the base. Yonder a farmhouse retired within its protecting clump of trees. And the stalwart farm labourers and handsome maidens were already abroad in the fields performing their daily tasks. It was a smiling land inhabited by an industrious people. From the sea, from the fields, even from within the interior of the earth, did men gather riches. This was their toil. Was it a curse to gain bread by the sweat of the brow and by the hardening of the hand and the bending of the back? Grand was the aspect of rock and sea; fair was the beauty of field and valley; bright and cheerful was the sky and exhilarating the breeze; but was not the toil, the industry, the endurance of man, greater and more noble than all?

So beautiful and bright was the morning that the gloom and darkness of the previous evening were quite forgotten. A cheerful air pervaded the company as they sat down to a substantial breakfast with appetites that were

more than British—that were Cornish, as the Professor remarked with general approval. And the breakfast was substantial, too, and worthy of the appetites, for it was Cornish, and had been supplied out of the produce of the Scilly Isles. No one would have thought who might listen to the gay conversation that this was the last day which they would spend together, and that they would be separated before night closed in. Jokes sprang out of eggs, and happiness seemed to be poured out of tea-pots and coffee-pots. Laughter, clear and unfeigned, greeted each sally, and the sallies were frequent and irrepressible. Nor did their spirits fall when they ascended the companion and went on deck. And the mirth seemed infectious, for the sailors hummed their ditties about their Sals and Sues and Megs and Pollys. And so the merry time flitted by, and they looked upon well-known land-marks which recorded their progress along the coast. There were the Lizard and the Gull, the Ram and the Mew, the Bolt Head and the Bolt Tail, and many other names suggestive of objects animate and inanimate, which through fantastic imagination had been affixed by sailors or others to the prominent points which guided their course in rough weather and fine. Telescopes were brought out,

and the shore was scanned with as much care as if the owners were reconnoitring an enemy, and their safety depended upon the results. Each in his own way showed his exhilaration. Lord Strand expounded the land question, and traced the prosperity of Cornwall to the labours of the Duke and the other nobility holding property there. The elderly gentleman talked of the fishing villages, and, always bringing round the conversation to the government mismanagement of naval affairs, showed that these villages ought to become flourishing seaports if it were not for, &c. The Professor discussed geological formations, and ever and anon interrupted his discourse with stories of Cornish saints, and of the doings of giants, and monsters, and of the Druids. Merlin Prester was thoughtful; but he, too, could suggest strange fancies and interpose jocular remarks. Nor were the ladies so forgetful of good breeding as to refrain from catching the enthusiasm in the air. Lady Strand quoted lines which she asserted to be poetry, and rallied her lord upon his becoming a commoner and talking politics. The elderly ladies went forward among the sailors and joked with them. But the most enthusiastic of all was Victoria Tregurtha, who was brimful of high spirits,

to the verge even of excitement. Her eye flashed and twinkled by turns, the colour of her cheek was heightened, and her hair became loose and floated in the wind. Her sprightliness could not be repressed, and her ringing laugh was the sweetest music imaginable. She had promised to point out the place, as they passed it, where her childhood had been spent, for she was Cornish as her name implied.

> "By Tre, Pol, and Pen
> You may know the Cornishmen."

And in due time they reached the bay, and she showed the little hill which sheltered the farmhouse where, at that moment, her parents were living. Then the telescopes and binoculars were brought to bear upon the spot indicated, and each person and horse just visible in the far distance was examined and discussed with the purpose of establishing their identity. Then she entered into details concerning the fields, and trees, and rocks, and gave a name to each, and attached some story or souvenir of girlhood. And during the course of her reminiscences, her audience became reduced, for one by one they descended to beg something from the pantry

to satisfy the hunger caused by the Cornish breezes. And so she was left alone with Merlin Prester, who thought not of food while he could gaze upon her beauty. Her dark eyes and perfect eyebrows, her finely arched nose, her long eyelashes, her beautiful mouth with its red lips and pearly teeth, and her cheek which was dimpled with her bewitching smile, such were the charms she used to keep him, and the food upon which he feasted were the sweet words of her lips.

He had learned something of her family from various remarks and hints which had been dropped during the voyage, but the facts were isolated, and not gathered into a consecutive history. Now that she was in sight of her birthplace, and knowing that her parents, and her sisters, were living on the shore upon which she was gazing, and inspired by the pleasing recollections of her childhood suggested by each well-known spot, she spoke fluently and minutely of the history of her family. She told that her father's family was an old Cornish one, but that by her mother she had Highland blood in her veins, and then she related the romantic courtship of her parents. Her father, as a young man, had gone in one of the fishing boats on their yearly cruise to the north, and one day had

found himself weather-bound in a small harbour in the Western Highlands. He had gone ashore, and in the course of his walks had come upon a house, which had a garden in front of it, where was a maiden engaged in hoeing the young potatoes. She had bare arms and feet, and the fairness and the delicate texture of her skin had filled him with wonder why such a one of evidently superior position should be so engaged. Violence was done to his sense of propriety, and unable to resist the impulse he jumped over the wall to offer to do the work that was evidently unsuitable for one so delicate. But still greater violence was done to him presently, for before he could explain his intentions a heavy blow of the hoe had almost brought him to his knees, and with myriads of stars shining in his eyes (though the sun was far up in the firmament), he was forced to retreat.

"Dar ye come insulting a leddy in her ain garden?" was the withering question which the infuriated maiden cast after him.

He did not give the proper explanation of the bruise to his comrades as he rejoined them; but there was evidently a more serious wound on his heart, for he returned to the scene of his chastisement, yet cautiously

placed himself a little distance off—and he lingered there each day that he remained in the neighbourhood, so that his strange behaviour became noticed. Yet he had his reward. One day as he was loitering on the beach he was accosted by a damsel, the fairest his eyes had gazed upon, as fair almost as the heroine of the hoe, who blushed as she apologised for her rudeness to him, for, she said, she was surprised, and did not know that his intentions were honest. He blushed and stammered in turn as the truth dawned upon him that this was the shoeless maiden, now dressed in her "braws," and bearing herself as the best lady in the land. He sailed far away, but the vision remained ever present. Years passed away, but the vision endured. Now and then in his solitary hours he would put up his hand to his brow and would recall the stroke of the hoe, then he would immediately lower his hand, place it upon his heart, and sigh. The barefooted maiden had hoed a heart among the potatoes.

After three years of sighing he determined to go to that bourne where sighing should cease; but he went in a different guise. He was the tenant of a well-to-do farm, which would do still better if it had a mistress to look after the household and the servants;

and so great was his faith in the effect which he must have produced upon the maiden (no doubt he judged of this by the effect she had produced upon him), that he went provided with several suits which he had got made by the most fashionable clothier in the town of Millbay (where he had gone specially for the purpose). These he sent before him by steamer to Glasgow, but he went himself in a fishing boat as before, and incurred the ridicule of his friends by doing so, but little they understood the game he was playing. After a fair voyage, which seemed all too long, he reached his desired bourne, but, alas, the sighing did not cease. The house was let to others, the maiden was gone to Glasgow, or Edinburgh, or elsewhere; and how could he pursue her over the country? and how could he know her dressed in shoes and without her hoe? Now that he was despairing he let the secret out of the recesses of his heart; and instead of incurring the ridicule of his friends he received their sympathy. Then his story became current in the village, as in every village every interesting whisper seems to pass through doors and windows and keyholes and chimneys, so that nothing can be hid. Then someone pitied him and put him on the right track.

"If Flora had remained here it would have been different," they said. "No one would have helped a Southern to woo her, but she had gone. And the Saxons of Cornwall were quite as good as those of Glasgow or Edinburgh—if they loved her." Young Tregurtha thought their reasoning sound, packed up his suits of clothes, and went in pursuit. His journey cannot be traced in detail, though it would read like a romance. Suffice it to say, that after wandering, he came upon the lady in the house of an uncle, a lawyer in Edinburgh, and that she professed to have forgotten him, which surprised him very much. Yet there was a merry twinkle in her eye when her lover (for he now aspired to that position) produced from his pocket the iron head of a hoe! Like the bow of the wandering Ulysses this was sufficient to identify him. In after years, when they were surrounded by their children, as she was pressed for an answer upon the subject, she became mysterious and evaded replying—but it was possible the fame of the lover had gone before the hoe, for the maiden often received letters from the country-side, where she had been the pride and darling of the people, and where it used to be considered no unpardonable sin even for a lady to lay aside her shoes.

Merlin Prester found this story so interesting that he wanted more, nor did he recognise any gnawing pangs of hunger—or any desire to slip away to the pantry. But he still sat at her feet (she was sitting on the companion, with her feet on the bench, and her audience occupied the bench), as she told him how she had left her parents and had gone to dwell with her relative Lady Strand. She told how Lady Strand, who was of Highland blood also, had been brought by her mother to London for the season, and had gained many offers of marriage, for her beauty was the talk of the town, and had been referred to often in the Society Journals. She had refused all offers; and it was reported that several coronets were rolling uselessly in the dust before her. But suddenly the rumour was repeated that she was engaged to Lord Strand, of whose losses on the turf many mysterious hints had been current in the genteel prints, and assertions not at all mysterious in the prints not genteel. In a week or two afterwards the daily papers, under the heading of Fashionable Marriages, reported that the event had really been solemnised at the church in Eaton Square, which is peculiarly sacred in the thoughts of ladies of *ton*, both young and old. Then she told how her mother had sent her congratu-

lations to her kinswoman, and how when the noble pair had come to their estates near Millbay, she had presumed to pay her respects to them in person, accompanied by her daughters; and how finally a friendship had sprung up between Lady Strand and herself, which ended in her going to live with her, and thus the story was continued down to the latest date. Then she was led on to speak of Lord Strand, and she became eloquent concerning his many virtues and his undoubted amiability of character; and so she was induced to become even more frank, and so confiding as to admit that he had weaknesses of which his enemies took advantage, and that only a short time before he had been betrayed by some friend, or some conspiracy had been formed to damage him, and the result was that, though innocent, his name had been traduced, and he had gone on a long sea voyage, from which he was now returning. So she was led to speak of their brief visit to Constantinople, and to say that she suspected this enemy had followed them there, and she asked of Merlin Prester if he had not met Lord Thames there?

"Lord Thames?" repeated Merlin Prester thoughtfully, as if trying to recall some forgotten incident. Then he confessed that he

thought the name was familiar to him. He did not remember, however, having heard it at Constantinople, which was not surprising, seeing that the meeting between Lord Strand and Lord Thames, which had been followed with unpleasant recollections, though attended with those which were joyous, had taken place in the absence of Merlin Prester, who was on board the yacht at the time.

Then the bell rang to call them to luncheon, which meal was eaten without any diminution of high spirits, and during its course the engineer was heaping on coals and keeping up steam almost at the bursting point of his boilers, and the yacht was speeding along at a rate which so surprised her that she could not stop to wonder. And then with a hasty turn round a headland, and a splashing in its "race," the *Victoria* came in sight of Millbay, and ran up some extra bunting in honour of the glorious return home, as she sped through the broad expanse of deep water which was fit haven for the numerous fleets which have gathered there during centuries of English history. And most opportune was the arrival, for a regatta was in progress, and the graceful cutters and schooners bending low under the weight of filled sails, rushed through the rippling water.

Then the *Victoria* was steered through the crowd of all descriptions of craft, from the ocean-going steamer to the tiniest dingy, manned by the smallest of amphibious boys, and so came to anchor under the historic promenade, which was made gay with music and the presence of brightly-attired and beautiful ladies.

Merlin Prester, whose graceful attention to the confidential chat of the morning, had gained more for him of the friendship of Victoria Tregurtha than the intercourse of previous weeks, found himself once more by her side. Now that he was in the very presence of one of the most typical scenes of national character—that of power—for at the word of command the bristling cannon of giant forts might belch forth fire and destruction, and in a few minutes sink the proudest fleet that ever floated on the sea; and of another—that of friendly contest—in the races before him, he did indeed feel strangely wanting in appreciation. He seemed to gaze upon the scene only as it was reflected in *her* bright eyes, and to pass remarks upon it only as the echo of *her* words. He joyed in the scene only as it pleased *her*, and he felt the influence of the hour and the occasion only as it came through *her*. It was surely with

prophetic instinct that he had mourned the previous evening that inspiration no longer came to him from the soil—not even the soil of his native land, to which he was returning after long absence—this was truly a mystery of the West. They talked of various matters; but he only seemed to think of their approaching separation, and repeated her remarks in an absent manner, which she resented, and she turned on him her clear glance as if for explanation and apology, but he only observed:

"I hope I shall meet you very soon in London."

She smiled, and tried to put asperity into her voice as she rejoined:

"And I hope that, if we should meet, you will pay me the compliment of trying to understand what I say."

Merlin Prester was profuse in his apologies, which she accepted, and, to show her grace, she turned the conversation on London and his prospects there.

"I suppose I shall devote myself to close study," he explained; "but my future will be largely determined by the advice of my legal agents, who understand my affairs better than I do."

"Devote yourself to study! And what

will become of your fine estates? Do you not think that a landlord should devote some of his time and a proportion of his wealth to the improvement of his property and the amelioration of the condition of the labourers who look up to him?"

"That is one of the subjects which I must study."

"It does not require much study, it only demands some common sense. I call study selfishness. It is often little more than the search after means to evade one's responsibilities."

"I hope I have no desire to evade my responsibilities," replied Merlin Prester gravely; "but I must first learn what they are."

"As a rich squire you will support the 'Church and State—the pillars of the realm.'"

"I must study the subject and so form my conduct——"

"There is no necessity—you *must* do so, as that is the duty of your exalted position."

"I hope I shall not shrink from my duty when I have learned it."

"Of course not. And after doing your utmost for your property and the peasantry

upon it, you will enter political life and seek a seat in Parliament."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Tregurtha, now you go beyond the sphere of my duties, I trust."

It was her turn to look astonished. She had been led on by his respectful attention to continue in a more serious vein what she had commenced in the spirit of raillery; but the gravity and decision with which he uttered these words showed that he was following her closely.

"Not enter Parliament? Then have you no ambition? A man can scarcely be good if he has no ambition."

"I have ambition, I trust, but it does not lead me towards politics."

"Politics is the employment of country gentlemen—of those who have a stake in the country."

"I differ from you materially, Miss Tregurtha, if you will forgive me. I regard politics as a contest between parties, or rather factions. This is the surface view. If you go deeper you will find that it is a game in which chance and skill are both concerned It is a rubber between peers and people, in which prejudice and a pretence of policy, passion and principle, are respectively op-

posed to each other in the Upper and Lower Houses, and the prize is—nothing. No, I have no ambition to waste my time in this game."

"But think of the honour to be won."

"The Sovereign is the fountain of honour," returned Merlin Prester with animation, and his fair auditor thought that he looked more handsome, and even noble, in his enthusiasm. "To lead peers and people in the path made honourable by the Sovereign, this were indeed a reward; but a reward beyond the highest ambition of one who must be regarded as an alien."

The thought flitted past her as he commenced, Had the lost inspiration returned? But the tone of sadness with which he ended dispelled it. Yet there was ambition hidden in the depths of his nature, overweening ambition, she said to herself, as she meditated on it afterwards.

But their conversation was interrupted by Lord Strand, who, with the truly English love of sport, had been deeply interested in the course of a race, now joined them and cried:

"Fifty to one on the Blue Pennon!"

"Fifty to one," repeated Victoria Tregurtha confusedly.

"The Blue Pennon?" murmured Merlin Prester.

"Fifty to one?" said Victoria Tregurtha again. "Done!"

"Done!" echoed Merlin Prester.

"In gloves!" cried Victoria Tregurtha.

"This is the last round," cried Lord Strand. "Well done! It is superb! That spinnaker is too small. There goes another!"

Three cutters of about twenty tons were coming flying through the water almost alongside each other, and reeling with the tremendous press of canvas.

"Dammy!" shouted Lord Strand, who was highly excited over the race. "I thought so. It is no use. She is out of the race."

It was even so. The spinnaker of the foremost yacht, the blue, was too large. With a crash the top-mast gave way. In a moment the other yachts forged ahead, and the blue and white was the winner by about a second.

While discussing the race and endeavouring to decide the difficult question as to the liability of Merlin Prester in gloves—for his bet had been ambiguously expressed, and he could give no explanation beyond that he had wished to bet on the same side as Victoria Tregurtha, while she declared that his "Done" was in reply to her "Done"—

while thus engaged the winning yacht passed them, and Lord Strand, unmindful of the loss of his bet, or rather perhaps on this account, generously saluted the winning yacht, and cried out energetically:

"Bravo!"

"Thanks, my lord," replied the owner of the yacht, who was at the helm.

"It is Haydon, by Jove!" exclaimed Lord Strand. "Well done, Haydon!" he cried, as the yacht shot past them, and the gentleman waved his recognition of his lordship's kind sentiments.

"What a curious coincidence," said Lady Strand, "that he should be the first we have met on our return."

"Was that Mr. Haydon?" repeated Victoria Tregurtha. "He is a very handsome man."

"You have no yachts in the Caucasus?" remarked Lord Strand, with benevolent patronage, and Merlin Prester was forced to admit the truth of the remark.

"That fellow Haydon is a veritable Admirable Crichton," continued Lord Strand. "He does everything, and succeeds in everything. They have made him Mayor of Millbay since I left, though he is little more than a boy. Now climbing Mont Blanc and now

riding with the hounds, now making successful contracts and now winning races—there is nothing that he would not attempt."

"He is, I presume, the son of some local magnate?" inquired Merlin Prester.

"He is a magnate himself," laughed Lord Strand.

"Everybody praises him," said Victoria Tregurtha. "He must have been an infant prodigy."

"You must make his acquaintance," remarked Lord Strand. "He will tell you more about England than anyone I know."

"I shall be delighted to make the acquaintance of this Solon," replied Merlin Prester, who could not repress a secret sense of vexation in hearing the young man's praises celebrated by the generous lips of Victoria Tregurtha. "It would have been a pleasure to me to remain the night in the town of Millbay if I could have hoped to make his acquaintance; but I regret that I must hasten on to London."

And to London he went with the train that night.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THESE ENGLISH, AND THEIR DISCIPLINE."

"And happily may your sweet self put on
The lineal state and glory of the land!
To whom, with all submission, on my knee,
I do bequeath my faithful services
And true subjection everlastingly."

—SHAKSPERE.

NEARLY everyone at some period or other arrives in London for the first time and forms first impressions. Those unfortunate beings who have had the hard fate to be born there, have been so confused by their sudden plunge into the great turmoil that no first impressions have been formed, and consequently no clear idea of relation, London is bewildering at the best; but to such it is also demoralizing. Its vastness can with difficulty be truly appreciated, for the tendency is to form an exaggerated estimate of its importance, and to forget that there is somewhere else which is not London. From its imposing extent it imposes on one; but the creed of the true Cockney is that beyond London there is nowhere else.

Merlin Prester arriving, if not exactly for the first time, yet after many years' absence,

during which interval he had passed from childhood to manhood, was duly impressed by all he saw. And there was so much to see, and his curiosity was so eager, that the weeks passed rapidly away without his noticing their flight. He had been preceded by Sidonia, whom he found ensconced in the suite of rooms which the forethought of his agents had provided for him in a fashionable street. These rooms were on the top storey of a large house styled a "mansion," or rather "mansions," and the windows gave upon Kensington Gardens. Here he found Sidonia on the morning of his arrival in London.

From his extensive experience of the world and its inhabitants, Sidonia possessed the art of accommodating himself to the circumstances in which he found himself—an art which is very much rarer than is supposed. An Englishman insists on having beef and beer where cloven feet and malt are alike unknown, a Frenchman demands his *ragout* and claret in countries whose language contains no equivalents for the words, and a German becomes choleric if he finds no sausage in lands where the unclean beast is an utter abomination; but Sidonia had a ready appetite, and nothing tasty came amiss.

Merlin Prester found that Oriental customs had been combined with Western in the den of that worthy, who knew how to extract from both East and West what was worth extracting. He found for example that Sidonia was in the habit of sitting cross-legged on his bed which he had drawn to the window, and there smoking a *narghileh* and dozing, while the sound of the carriages below, driving to and from the Park, blended with the rustle of the trees to make sweet lullaby. A companion had been provided for Sidonia by the agents to whom Merlin Prester had committed his servant. This man, Ponsonby Walker by name, came every morning to converse with Sidonia, and teach him the English language, and to instruct him in the English customs and to guide him through the streets of the great city. But after the first day thus spent, Sidonia found that his feet were sore, so that he feared he was to be attacked by the English malady—gout, and further, that the street boys were inclined to be jocular towards him in too practical a manner, so that he proposed to watch the panorama of London life move past him from his window. The young man acquiesced in this course, and to while away the time brought in surreptitiously—for he

seemed to have great respect for the eye of those in charge of the house and of the people in the street—some bottles of stout and of beer. More openly he supplied himself with literature consisting of copies of the various journals devoted to sport, of the cheaper of those devoted to society, and of song-books and theatrical publications. Now reading long extracts supplemented by fit explanations, and by such pleasant interruptions as are described in newspaper reports as "hear, hear," "cheers," "laughter," and so on, now singing or humming a few bars from some of the songs, and now discoursing from a text aptly chosen upon the pedigree and training of some horse, or upon the moral aspects of the intercourse between some noble and gallant officer and some beautiful and talented actress, and now executing a few steps of some popular dance, the hours might be expected to pass rapidly and profitably. The young man Ponsonby Walker was pleased with the sound of his own voice, and stimulated by repeated draughts from the eloquent bottles, he went on without remark or interruption from his pupil except an occasional nod of assent or a snore. In this way was Sidonia instructed in the language and habits of the British nation. But these happy days

became a mere sweet recollection on the arrival of the master. Merlin Prester found no satisfaction in the services of which Ponsonby Walker was high priest, and accordingly put an end to them. He employed his servant in the more active occupation of guide, and kept him running about over London as if he wished to find the royal road to the comprehension of the vast city and its inhabitants or to swallow the limitless at a gulp. So arduous was his search, and so active his efforts, that Ponsonby Walker was often forced to announce that he was dead-beat, or that he was run to a standstill.

On arriving in London Merlin Prester had been welcomed by his agents with gladness and cordiality, and no little ceremony. These attentions were none the less effusive for being paid for, nor were they the less ostentatious for being offered in the guise of friendship. In arranging his affairs the agents had, as it were, sought to arrange his friends. And their labours were so far successful that all at once he found himself in a circle of friends who were ready to entertain him and to show him every mark of attention and respect if he would only accept their offices. He was, however, less inclined to this than seemed reasonable to his agents. His conduct was

strange in their eyes. They declared him an enigma. But this was strictly in confidence and in his absence, for, in his presence, none could offer him more signs of respect, none could be more attentive, none could be more humble. From the first interview they had given him his Caucasian title, and they had impressed on all to whom they commended him that he was a prince. They were surprised, therefore, that he did not take advantage of the privileges possessed by him in virtue of his distinguished rank.

And it must be confessed that they were right, for his conduct was very odd. A reasonable desire to see the chief sights, the museums, picture-galleries, public buildings, and such-like, they would have pronounced laudable; but when this desire took the form of rushing into strange places at strange hours to the neglect of most complimentary invitations from distinguished people, this was more than they could support or even comprehend. Chuckle, the jocular partner of the firm of Chuck and Chuckle, declared in a whisper that if he had heard of his client having been seen issuing from a house of assignation he would not have been very greatly surprised, by which ambiguous remark he had no intention to reflect upon the

morality of his client, but only to illustrate his insatiable curiosity concerning the national institutions.

Chief among British institutions is that of Parliament, and Merlin Prester was a frequent listener in the gallery, and was becoming known in the lobby. He endured the dull talk in the confidence that he was studying the country. He listened to the replies to the questions which formed the lively interlude to the business of the evening, and he became confused, bewildered, exasperated, and it was not till the suspicion rose within him that the forms of reply were intended to have this effect, and that the business of government largely consisted in the skilful concealment of what was going on by the opaque cover of the most transparent in semblance of declarations, that he understood the art of Parliamentary reply, and then he ceased to listen. And he was attentive to the debates in the confidence that he was learning something. He was gratified by the oratory of the few foremost men at whose rising the House filled, and he regarded with respect the members who spoke for the landed interest, the farmers, the shipping interest, the city, and various other interests, and he warmed under the earnest statistics of the

fiery Scotch members, and he slept and started by turns as the wrongs of Ireland were brought forward in stentorian harshness or in mild incoherence and endless repetition. Then he wondered at the meaning of all this, which reached the extent of a great Western Mystery.

And he went to the House of Lords, where, without having previously slipped something shining into the hand of the door-keeper, he asked the question, which he managed to put in proper form, if a debate was "on." He was gruffly told that "there never was none on," and he pondered if the words meant what they expressed or the opposite. And through the serene atmosphere he saw some elegant attitudes, and he heard some sweet murmurs, and he knew that he was looking on pure blood and listening to the perfection of English rhetoric, and he was informed that two attitudes joined to the grand personage nodding on the shapeless red box or bag which served as a seat without a back, were sufficient to transact the business of the august assembly, and bring to nought the doings of the representatives of the people. So he looked on admiringly, and his heart burned within him, for surely heavenly messengers were hovering near whispering

wisdom, and, for aught he knew, they might be gracious, and reveal to him what he would know—the Mystery of the West. But no, the glorious visitants, if such they were, were silent; and then he confessed with anguish that it was just, for his heart was visited by no drops of blue blood.

Then he rushed forth with the mighty cry, "to the people, to the people"—it was among the people that he must seek. And he visited public assemblies and institutions where the various classes of the people gathered. He went to the law courts, the police courts, to public markets, to Smithfield, Covent Garden, Billingsgate, to the docks, to railway stations. He frequented theatres and music-halls, he hovered on the edge of crowds gathered to witness fires, brawls and accidents, and he listened to the piteous tales of the abandoned creatures who haunted the midnight streets. "To the people, closer to the people," was the formula he used to mutter to himself as in the morning he went abroad and in the evening he returned. Nor were his labours ended on the Sabbath; but he followed the people to the churches, and chapels, and parks, and suburban haunts of recreation.

Among British institutions five seemed to him to be representatives of the Spirit of the

nation, and he heard rumour of a sixth. His constant attendance in Parliament made it plain that he deemed this the first and the most important of all. His frequent meditations in Fleet Street indicated that he had found out the local habitation of that mysterious invisible Form, whose spiritual presence and shadowy outline reaches to remote corners of the earth—the Press, and the Able Editor. Unable to pierce the editorial sanctum, he speculated on its contents, and when he discovered the dome of the British Museum in his walks round about Jericho, his heart leaped, for he knew that now the walls thereof would fall, and the Form would be revealed.

He could with difficulty command his feelings as he entered under that solemn dome. This was the brain of humanity. Those silent people bending over book and paper, jewelled some of them, threadbare many of them, sedate all of them, were the motory nerves conveying the creative thought to the most out-lying members. The poet with rolling eyes, the philosopher with long hair, the retiring novelist, the melancholy wit, the jovial writer of melodrama, and the stern yet flourishing politician, were all to be discerned there by one who could read his fellows.

Strange, to one from the East, yet significant also, was the presence of ladies, who seemed to bear a brave part in the intricate and delicate and powerful nervous system of humanity. As he cast his eyes along the shelves in that noble library, he called up the writers who had suffered and toiled for their fellows, and he could not refrain from bowing to their memory, for their immortal spirits seemed to be present though invisible, and were urging men to be wise and good, thus still influencing posterity and raising humanity.

Not less, but perhaps greater even, seemed the power of the third institution, the Church; but to estimate its power was difficult. Temples for its worship were scattered lavishly throughout the length and breadth of the land, and numerous priests served its offices. Millions crowded to perform its ritual on the one day of the week when its power was manifested to the overthrow of the power of all other institutions, and then on the morrow everything seemed forgotten. Men blushed on Monday to repeat the words they had uttered on Sunday. Six days of the week they seemed to be proving false what they declared true on the seventh. He was much impressed with the sight he witnessed one Sunday afternoon in the great national

temple, where thousands were assembled beneath the great dome, which presently was filled with the most ravishing strains of music, and where the great multitude hung upon the preacher's words, which reached even to the furthest-off listener. Then as he went out his guide whispered to him what sums were spent upon keeping up the imposing spectacle, and how some of the white-robed priests received high salaries for being in many places at the same time, and Merlin Prester wondered at the great worth of their presence, which cost the nation so much money. Then he went into some bye streets within sight of this magnificent temple, and he saw poverty and misery which drew tears from his eyes, and made him wonder still more why the costly canons urged charity upon their hearers, yet seemed to do nothing to relieve the distress with which they adorned their eloquent sermons and accentuated their figures.

The same evening he crossed the Thames, and mingled with those who thronged another tabernacle almost to suffocation, and he looked with astonishment on the rows of people rising tier above tier, till they reached almost to the ceiling. And he was startled to find that one man, not decked out in the

trickery of striking costume but dressed as other men, and with a grave and earnest mien, ventured to stand forth between the people and their God. Overwhelmed with the weight of his mysterious charge, he made the people, too, feel that they were in an awful presence, and engaged in solemn exercises, for the Divine Spirit was with them and leading them. His words were like fire, and burned into the hearts of the people. Now they bowed down in an agony of sorrow, now they rose up reconciled, and now they joyed with the determination to lead purer lives in the days to come. As Merlin Prester retired he felt overawed by the seriousness of life, for its significance was more than apparent, and its issues might reach into Eternity. This tabernacle was raised, he was informed, by the free-will offerings of the people who found no satisfaction in the attitudes and gestures of the white-robed priests, who found little earnestness in their forms of prayer interminably repeated, and little value in the customs and traditions which did duty for heavenly-revealed doctrine. "And they spent their money to raise this and the thousand other similar tabernacles?" murmured Merlin Prester, as he walked home.

"Their *money?* Then they were in earnest," and so he discovered the fourth institution and the power of Dissent.

Another institution of the land, which, if he believed the words of Ponsonby Walker, overshadowed all others, was that of Sport. And it was one of the most honourable, for none who supported it ever blushed to confess the fact. Nor was its operation confined to any day of the week, but spread over all. Six days were hotly given up to its service, and the seventh was spent in making preparation for the six.

The other important institution of the country was one whose operation he had but partially witnessed, but which was said to be a very great power in the northern part of the country, and it was called Industry. Rumours said that millions of people were employed by Industry from one end of the week to the other, and that many of these people became gaunt and grim in its service, and many died. This was the only institution he had yet heard of which required martyrdom, and as such he thought much about it. Perhaps it was here that he would discover the Mystery of the West.

Merlin Prester was often alone when wandering thus with an enquiring mind;

but was sometimes accompanied by friends; at other times he was attended by Ponsonby Walker, and even by Sidonia. Mutual interests had joined the two latter in a close friendship, tempered by some jealousy, and by a slight dash of fear. The extraordinary readiness exhibited by Ponsonby Walker, his wide knowledge of London and its people, and his wonderful fluency in conversation, impressed Sidonia deeply. And on the other hand Sidonia's somnolence, his knowledge of foreign countries, and his blood-thirsty tendencies exhibited in his fondness for pistols and daggers, implements almost useless in civilised countries, produced an effect on the young Cockney. From the mingled quaintness and shrewdness of his attendants, Merlin Prester often derived some amusement if not information.

"After whom are you called, Walker?" he asked one day, as he heard Sidonia addressing his brother in service by his full Christian name, as he had been privately instructed by that person so to do.

"After whom? Well, sir, that's more than I know."

"Does the name Ponsonby run in your family, that your parents should select it?"

"Bless you, sir, my parents hadn't nothing

to do with it. I selected it—Ponsonby Walker. Don't you think it becoming, sir?"

"It has a high sound. But how was it that you christened yourself?"

"Well, you see, sir, they called me 'Arry, but when I came to serve fashionable gentlemen like you, sir, they laughed when I said my name was 'Arry, and I could not stand it any longer. 'Do they think that I am called hafter hold 'Arry?' I says to myself, sir. 'By the Lord 'Arry, sir, I won't stand it.' So I 'eard of a chap, sir, has took the name of Ponsonby, 'is real name was Smith, and he put on black clothes and became a gentleman's gentleman. Now he keeps a restaurang, where hall the young nobs goes for supper, and they tell me he's bought a 'andsome mansion down Clapham way. That was hall a 'cause of Ponsonby," added the young man impressively.

"And so you called yourself Ponsonby?"

"Yes, Sir. That's about the long and short of it."

"And has it caused an improvement in your fortunes?"

"Well, Sir, I can't say has it 'as, Sir."

"How so?"

"Well, Sir, do ye see, they would not call me Ponsonby. They called me Walker. And

so I might has well 'ave been 'Arry hafter hall—or 'Ooky for that matter."

"And can you explain why they acted so differently to you? Was it not strange?"

"Strange, you call it, Sir? That's about the word. Strange, Sir? Yes, it *his* strange. But I think I know why."

"Indeed?" said Merlin Prester inquiringly.

"'Cos he 'ad a black coat, and a white face —a mealy sort of face, just like the 'orrors in the wax-works, and he was always serious as a judge, and he had a way of lifting hup his heyes, Sir, like a parson or the Hancient Mariner, and the haristocracy likes their people to look serious as death, Sir. And so his fortune was made, Sir."

Merlin Prester hoped that Ponsonby Walker would in time get a black coat and a serious white face, and make his fortune too.

"Thank you, kindly, Sir," replied the young man who, after a pause, continued in a humble manner as if he feared to take liberties with his master. "Now if *he*, Sir," pointing to Sidonia, "was a little less sleepy, and could stir his stumps a bit and speak English, he would make his fortune in the foreign-butler line. It looks travelled-like to 'ave one that 'as come from habroad—especially if he is not a Christian, if he is a Mahommedan or some-

thing or other, and keeps hidols in his bedroom."

"And have you ever seen any of these idols?"

"No, Sir, that would spoil it hall. You must not let anybody see them. You must make a mystery of it. Mystery is everything Sir, *as you know*. And there is mystery when they speak to the foreign butler. It is not English, they speak. Oh, no, Sir, not if I know it. Its parley voo, or it is Italiano, that's what they call it in 'igh life—*as you know*."

Merlin Prester did not contradict Ponsonby Walker, who looked aside to see if Sidonia was listening, and then resumed in a lower tone:—

"And he *is* a mysterious chap—a regular rum one."

"What makes you think so?" said Merlin Prester, and smiled.

"Why he talks so as if he had something on his mind—I hope he has done nothing with those daggers of his—Yes he is always a talking of it."

"It? I thought you told me that he hardly ever speaks?"

"That's just it. When he does speak it is always the same thing, he says. It is always about them hold store'ouses of his."

"Storehouses? What about storehouses?"

asked Merlin Prester. He recalled to his mind that Sidonia had often talked about storehouses.

"Every day he used to ask me the same question, 'Are there many storehouses in London?' 'To be sure,' I says, 'or how could the people live? The teeming millions that they talk about in story books must live, and they must have storehouses.' So he looked pleased like, and then he muttered to himself, and always I heard him talking of storehouses. So one day, Sir—it was just before you arrived, Sir—I got him down to the river, and we took a boat down to Greenwich. And I showed 'im hall the wharfs and the bonded stores, and the granaries and the docks. He looked long at those things, Sir, without saying hanything, and I thought he 'ad gone to sleep looking at them with 'is heyes hopen. At last he says, 'But is there hanything inside of them?' At that I burst out a laughing, and he 'as said no more about store-'ouses to me. If he wants to go into them to steal—there is more than he or a million like 'im can carry away."

Merlin Prester, having laughed at the reminiscence, thought he would search out the mystery, and woke Sidonia, who had fallen asleep. He drew him on to the subject and

finally asked him point blank why he thought so much about storehouses.

After some attempts at evasion, which failed, Merlin Prester forced the confession from him that he had divined on the Koran, and his future was bound up with storehouses.

"Let us hear the divination sentence?"

In obedience to the command Sidonia repeated a sentence which he knew by heart. "Joseph said, 'Set me over the storehouses of the land, for I will be a skilful keeper thereof.'"

"You divined very favourably for yourself, Sidonia."

"I picked as good a one as I could get," returned Sidonia humbly.

"That is the best way to divine, Sidonia," laughed his master, "but you misunderstand the West when you talk of keepers of storehouses. If your divination becomes true you will be Chancellor of the Exchequer."

"Chancellor of the Exchequer," muttered Sidonia to himself several times, but he failed to understand the words, and fell asleep muttering them.

END OF VOLUME I.