



THE WEDDING

RING

Robert Buchanan





THE WEDDING RING

A TALE OF TO-DAY

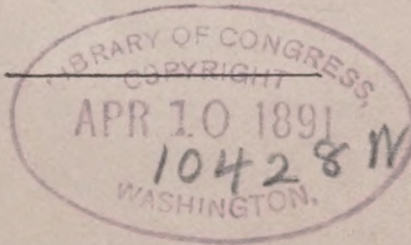
BY

ROBERT BUCHANAN

AUTHOR OF "THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD," "GOD AND
THE MAN," "STORMY WATERS," ETC.

And what's to me a ring o' gold,
That proves the written law ?
A ring of airn's around my heart
That sadly breaks in twa !

Old Ballad.



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THE WEDDING RING.

CHAPTER I.

IN PETER'S STREET, WESTMINSTER.

ON a chilly spring morning a young woman sat at an uncovered deal table near the third floor window of a house in Peter's Street, Westminster, with a little pile of gilt-edged cards and a water-color box before her. A child was lying in her lap, a wee thing of a year old, with a white face and large eyes of more than Oriental gravity, and small fists curled tight upon her breast. She did not distract her mother's attention from the work on which she was occupied by any of the kickings and the cooings usual to healthy infancy, but lay as still as if she understood the necessity of quiet to the artistic laborer, and with precocious self-denial subdued the high spirits proper to her age.

The young woman was tall and finely

built, and her face, which was very sad and gentle, needed only a touch of color and a little more fullness of outline to be beautiful. There was about her an aspect of sorrow grown patient, which was pitiful to see in the face of one so young, for she had hardly passed girlhood in years.

As she worked, her foot beat on the floor in a gently rhythmic measure, and her voice crooned a tuneless song to the child upon her knee.

It was a large low-ceilinged room, occupying the whole width of the house, and sparsely and shabbily furnished. A bed stood in one corner with a cradle at its foot. A chest of drawers, with half its knobs missing; a couple of old-fashioned rush-bottomed chairs, a square table of deal, with red legs; a wash-stand bearing a cracked jug and basin, a battered sofa, covered in torn and faded chintz, and a strip of dogs-eared carpet, whose originally gaudy pattern had faded to a uniform dirty gray, completed its articles of necessary furniture.

A few scraps of clothing, male and female, hung from pegs behind the door.

Near the window an old field easel, with an invalid leg, repaired with a bamboo walk-

ing cane, supported an almost finished landscape, and a broken *porte couleur*, with a score of half empty tubes of color and a handful of ragged brushes, lay on the floor beside it.

On the mantle-piece above the fireless grate was a tobacco jar, a brandy bottle, a tumbler, and a couple of wooden pipes, flanked at either end by a photograph.

One of these photographs no observer would have had any difficulty in identifying as the portrait of the young woman painting near the window, though the expression of the photograph had nothing in common with that of the original at the moment we make her acquaintance. It represented a blooming, laughing lass of nineteen, clad in a light summer frock, with wildflowers in her hair and at the bosom of her dress. Beneath it was written, in a frank female hand, "To Philip," a date being added. The other was that of a young man with a straw hat perched on the back of his head, a cigarette in his mouth, a flaming tie loosely knotted under the collar of a silk shirt, and a velvet jacket. A handsome face, quite alive to its own charm. Under it was written, "To Gillian," and a repetition of the date borne by the companion photograph.

The room was scrupulously neat.

The girl worked on briskly with swift fingers, and crooned to the child. It was yet early, though the sounds of traffic in the streets below were louder than they would be for two hours to come in more fashionable thoroughfares. Presently she paused for a moment, with the suspended brush in her uplifted fingers, and after a moment's listening, resumed her work.

A step sounded on the stairs. The door opened and a man entered the room.

He too would have been easily recognizable by any one who had seen the second photograph upon the mantle-piece. He had the look of one who is just beginning to repent of too jolly an overnight. His face was flushed, his eyes were bleared. The girl did not even look at him, and received his entrance in silence, a silence as eloquent as any reproach could have been. For when a husband comes home imperfectly sober in the early morning, and his wife finds nothing to say, it shows that the circumstance must have been so often repeated that she has got past tears and entreaties, and takes it as a thing of course.

As has been suggested, Philip O'Mara was by no means a bad-looking fellow; yet

he had a certain undefinable air of being handsomer than he was. The photograph, taken some five years ago, flattered his actual appearance, because no man can pass five years in selfish indulgence without grave detriment to any beauty he may originally have started with.

As with the man, so with the clothes he wore. Contrasted with the almost squalid shabbiness of the room and of his wife's dress, they looked for a moment as if they would have passed muster in any society. Then one saw that his coat was not of velvet, but of coarse velveteen, which led to a doubt as to the genuineness of the jeweled ring on his finger, and a wonder as to whether anything more valuable than a latch key was attached to the chain which glittered across his waistcoat. Mr. O'Mara's sartorial splendors, like their wearer, were rather of the shabby swell order, and did not come off well from close examination.

"Dear Gillian!" he began, "industrious girl! 'Pon my soul, you make me blush for myself!"

The blush was purely internal, for no signs of it were visible without. He took up one of the cards she had finished.

"Delightful, my dear Gillian; delightful.

Your powers of imagination are really extraordinary, and your technique improves every day."

Nobody could have told for certain whether he was speaking in mockery or exaggerated compliment.

"You are doing those on commission?"

"No," replied Gillian.

"A pity. But still, work so delightful is certain of a sale."

He returned the card to the table.

"Ah, *apropos* of sale—how inexpressibly revolting it is, by the way, my dear Gillian, that even the creation of beauty, which should be the delightful satisfaction of a divine instinct, should be degraded to the sordid level of the manufacturer of articles of vulgar necessity. Talking of sale, have you any money?"

"I have no money," she replied.

It was noticeable that while the husband interlarded his address to her with endearing epithets, and expressed in the longest polysyllables the most beautiful sentiments, Gillian avoided speaking one unnecessary word.

"My own finances," he said, after a search in his pockets, "amount to—yes—one and sixpence halfpenny. Not a large

amount, but still, judiciously expended, it may do something to mitigate the discomforts I already experience, and which threaten to become even more pronounced. There is some brandy left."

He examined the bottle on the mantelpiece.

"Would you, my dear Gillian, get me a couple of bottles of soda water and a packet of Peachblossom cigarettes!"

She took the money from the table where he laid it, and for the first time since his entrance raised her eyes to his face.

"Mr. Bream was here last night," she said. "He tells me that Dora is really ill, and must have attention, better food, and change of air. He wrote a prescription for her, but I had not the money to get it made up."

"My dear Gillian!" said O'Mara, "you really distress yourself about the child to a quite unnecessary degree. You are always raising false alarms about her. Six months ago she was going to die, I remember. Mr. Bream is, no doubt, a very estimable person, as a clergyman, but he is not omniscient. What can he possibly know about Dora's health?"

“He studied as a doctor before he took orders,” answered Gillian.

“Quite a Crichton,” said O’Mara, “I have no doubt. Still, I would prefer the verdict of a medical man in practice.”

“I shall spend this money,” said Gillian, “or, at least, as much of it as will be required, in getting the medicine Mr. Bream prescribed for Dora. With the rest I will buy soda water or cigarettes, just as you please.”

“I am sure,” said O’Mara, “that you will do nothing of the kind, my dear Gillian. You, who are a model of all the virtues, know that it is a wife’s first duty to obey her husband.”

“I shall get the medicine for Dora,” repeated Gillian.

“Then,” said O’Mara, seizing her wrist with a sudden sharp wrench, which made her wince and drop the money on the table, “I shall have to do my marketing myself, or find another messenger.”

Quite unruffled by this little incident, O’Mara left the room. She heard his voice upon the stair, calling to the girl in the basement, and a minute after he re-entered.

“A mistake in your tactics, my dear,” he remarked, as he kicked off his shoes and lay

down upon the bed. "It would have been wiser to have bought the medicine and said nothing of your intentions—wiser, though less honest and not more dutiful. You will know better next time."

She heard him in silence, finding no reply. With the despairing patience which years of such brutalities had taught her, she again took up her brush, and bent over her work. O'Mara turned upon the bed, seeking an easy posture, and had fallen asleep before the girl came in with her purchases.

It was past noon when he awoke, and, finding the soda water on the mantle-piece beside the brandy, mixed himself a copious draught, which he drank to his great apparent refreshment. He sluiced his face and head liberally with cold water, and, having replaced his coat and waistcoat, arranged the easel beside the window, and seated himself before it.

"There were once, my dear Gillian," he began, lighting a cigarette, and regarding the picture through the smoke with an eye at once critical and approving, "there were once—you will see the application of the story directly—two travelers who had, through infinite difficulties and dangers, traveled across a desert, and arrived within

an hour's walk of the confines of civilization. One of them at that point succumbed to his fatigue. He could go no farther. They had between them one dose of brandy. 'If,' said the sick man to his companion, 'you will give me that brandy, I think I could manage the rest of the distance.' His companion, instead of giving it to him, drank it himself. 'What detestable selfishness!' you will remark, precisely as I did myself when I first read this instructive legend. But I was mistaken, for his object in drinking the brandy was to recuperate his force sufficiently to enable him to carry his friend the rest of the distance. Thus we may learn, my dear Gillian, not to judge our neighbors on insufficient evidence. You see the application of the fable? I am the robust traveler, you—or rather our darling Dora—is the feeble one. Without that brandy and soda I could not possibly have finished this picture, and unless I finished the picture there would be no dinner for us to-day."

Gillian listened in her accustomed silence, and O'Mara, having set his palate, attacked his work. He painted rapidly and dexterously, and after a couple of hours of work, punctuated by the drinking of more brandy

and soda and the lighting of fresh cigarettes, pushed his chair back and rose.

“That should do, I think. I must invent a title for it—something touching and poetical. There is much virtue in a name. Our good British public have not yet risen so high in artistic appreciation as to separate art and literature. To me, its creator, that picture needs no title. To any soul in kinship with my own it would need none. The average Philistine will ask, ‘What is it?’ It is not enough that it is beautiful, a touch of celestial harmony in adorable contrast with the hideousness of daily life.” He sighed, as if the stupidity of the world was hard to bear. “I should be glad of your opinion, Gillian.”

“What do you think you will get for it, Philip?” she asked gravely.

“My darling!” he remonstrated, with a quick indrawing of the breath between his teeth, as if the question hurt him, “you should really discourage this—this extreme practicality of mind. It is growing on you.”

“I must have money, Philip; you must bring me some to-day.”

“My dear, you shall have money. But surely, after so many years’ knowledge of my temperament, you might have more feel-

ing for my peculiarities than to ask me, happy as I am in the contemplation of a thing of beauty fresh from my hands, what—what shall I get for it. Get for it! Is it not enough to know that I must part with it, the last sweet child of my fancy; the Benjamin, so to speak, of what poor artistic faculty I possess? Still, you are right. The vulgar necessities of life are paramount. Facts must be faced.”

“You will let me have some money to-night?” she pleaded. “There is rent due, Philip, and there is nothing in the house to eat. And, oh Philip, I shouldn’t mind for myself, but Dora! She is really ill. See how pale she is, and all day long she has never made a movement. She lies for hours, and she used to be so bright and lively.”

“Well, well!” he answered fretfully, perhaps a little touched through his hide-bound selfishness for the moment. “I will bring what I get for the picture.”

CHAPTER II.

THE ROAD TO RUIN.

IT was manifestly impossible for a gentleman of O'Mara's high breeding and fastidious tastes to be seen trudging on foot with a picture under his arm, like any work-a-day canvas spoiler who habitually painted, not for the divine instinct which prompts to the creation of beauty, but with the sordid aim of money making. Accordingly he took a hansom, and drove comfortably to the shop of a picture dealer in Wardour Street, with whom he had done business aforetime.

"Hum!" said the dealer, looking at the picture with his mouth critically screwed on one side, "really, I don't know as I want it. Pictures are a fearful drug in the market. Trade's so bad, everything flat. 'Taint so good as that last one of yours, you know."

"Naturally," said O'Mara. "The first I ever offered you was no good, and I have

been steadily deteriorating ever since. But you bought them !”

O'Mara had the knack of suiting his conversation to his company and, did not waste flowers of speech on this artistic middleman.

“Where is it?” asked the dealer.

“A little corner of my uncle's place—Sir Charles Vandaleur—in Surrey. I've been staying down there for the last month.”

“Ah!” The title, carelessly dropped, had its effect upon the worthy tradesman. “What are you going to call it?”

“Really, I don't know. ‘Crépuscule,’ would that do?”

“Don't believe in foreign titles; people don't understand 'em. What's it mean?”

“It means Twilight.”

“That'd do,” said the dealer, “if it hadn't been used so much. Tell you what, call it ‘In the Gloaming.’ There's a tune called that, very popular on the organ.”

O'Mara's eyes were raised to the ceiling in a speechless pang of æsthetic agony.

“That'd do,” said the dealer, and repeated the title with the relish of a man who feels that he has satisfactorily solved a problem. “‘In the Gloaming.’ Could you get a couple of figgers in just here, say a

boy and girl spooning? 'Uman interest, that's what the public likes in a picture.'

"My dear sir," said O'Mara, with the air of one who unbends to make his meaning plain to an inferior intelligence which must needs be conciliated, "it is the *absence* of human interest which makes the preciousness of art. The intrusion of a boy and girl 'spooning' (he seemed to speak the word under protest, and proceeded to clear his palate of its slangy offensiveness by a mouthful of polysyllables) would annihilate the æsthetic value of the composition. The interview of anything so vulgar on that majestic solitude of nature would be an outrage, my dear sir—a positive outrage."

"Don't see it," said the dealer shortly.

O'Mara had spoken with less than his ordinary tact. Nobody likes to be told that a suggestion which he thinks clever is an outrage. Sincerity was not O'Mara's strong point, but if he had any touch of it in his nature, it was on questions in which art was concerned. He had his own conception of what pictures should be, and had painted this one in accordance with it. It was hard to receive lessons from a vulgarian who talked about "'uman interest," and in his artistic heat O'Mara temporarily forgot

that the vulgarian, though artistically contemptible, was financially worthy of respect.

“You work in them two figgers,” said the dealer, with the air of a man who speaks his last word, “and I’ll call it ‘In the Gloaming,’ and give you a tenner for it.”

Had this been put a little more in the form of a request and a little less directly as an order, O’Mara might have yielded. As it was, he felt compelled to resent the outrage on art and on his own superior social status. He was an aristocratic amateur who condescended to sell, not a beggarly dauber who kept the pot boiling with the labor of his hands.

“I am afraid that even when improved by the figures ‘spooning’—that, I think, was your expression—my humble effort would hardly be worth your offer for it. I wish you good-morning.”

“Morning,” said the man of business, rattling his money in his pockets, and permitting the nephew of Sir Charles Vandaleur to open the door for himself.

He drove to two or three other places, with no better luck. He had to avoid most of the dealers he knew, being in their debt. The rebuffs dashed his courage, and he was sensible that after each his manner was less

easy and engaging, and he did not drop in the name of his titled relatives in Surrey quite so naturally as he could have wished.

The lack of human interest was so strongly insisted on, that at last he suggested to a dealer, who seemed inclined to buy, that he should work in the "spooning" couple. He also suggested, as a happy thought which had just struck him, that the picture should be christened, "In the Gloaming," and dwelt on the popularity of the air of that name. The dealer assented, and promised to give him ten pounds for the picture, so altered.

O'Mara bade his cabman drive him to the Temple, where he had an acquaintance named Seyton, who dabbled in the arts, and who placed his tools at his disposal, and posed for the masculine member of the interpolated group, pressing the laundress into his service to represent his inamorata.

Seyton was a light-hearted youth, and did not greatly sympathize with O'Mara in his mournings over this degradation of art, seeming to see the humorous side of the situation more clearly. His impromptu fellow model, it may be observed, was younger and comelier than most of her kind.

The early spring evening was beginning to

fall when O'Mara had completed his task. He had eaten nothing all day, and, when Seyton proposed that they should dine together, readily assented. He took the picture to the dealer, received his ten pounds, and discharged his cabman, whose fare had been accumulating all this time.

At the restaurant to which they repaired for dinner, Seyton found two of his acquaintances, and an hour passed rapidly enough at table. O'Mara dined with what he felt to be a commendable modesty for a man with over nine pounds in his pocket; a little clear soup, a bit of fish, a bottle of Beaune, a cup of coffee, and a liqueur are not unjustifiable extravagances for a man so famished.

Dinner over, Seyton proposed an adjournment to his rooms for a quiet round at nap. If that patient figure of his wife, sitting at home with their sick child upon her knee, had troubled O'Mara much during the day, the genial influences of the dinner and the society of his confrères had quite expelled the vision from his mind.

They went to the Temple together, and Seyton hospitably produced liquors and cigars, of which he and his two acquaintances liberally partook, with a proportion-

ate access of geniality. They were all three younger in the ways of the world than they would liked to have been thought, or they would have noticed that though O'Mara was as free in talk and laughter as they, he was by far the soberest member of the party, and though his glass went as often to his lips as the best of good fellowship required, it required filling much more seldom than theirs.

He won steadily for half an hour, and as they were playing a ready-money game had pretty nearly doubled his capital in that time. Then one of his companions began to get restive.

"I say, Mr. O'Mara," he asked, "isn't it a bit odd that when you deal you're the only man who ever gets an ace?"

A question of that kind would disconcert most people, but O'Mara showed no sign of understanding its obvious meaning.

"Is that so?" he asked, "I had not noticed it."

"Jimmy always gets rusty if the luck goes against him," remarked Seyton.

"Very natural," said O'Mara, with good-natured forbearance. "Nobody likes losing, I don't, I know."

As Jimmy happened to get a fairly good

hand next time O'Mara dealt, he made no remark for a time. But his next was even more startling than his first.

"You low cad!" he exclaimed, "you've got the ace of hearts and the ace of clubs between your knees and the table!"

He dragged the table away, and the cards fell to the ground.

O'Mara raised his hand to dash the pack in his face, but Seyton caught his arm.

"None of that!" he said, sternly but quietly. "I think you'd better go, O'Mara. I beg your pardon, you fellows."

O'Mara, white as death, took up his hat and stick and left the room, the others making way for him. The flush of rage which had followed Jimmy's denunciation of him had passed, and he felt sick and shaken. Seyton's tone of quiet scorn rang in his ears, the apology he had made for intruding upon his friends the society of a detected card-sharper was bitter to remember.

He had reached the Strand before he remembered that, in the shame and confusion of his detection, he had left Seyton's rooms not only without the money he had won, which he certainly would not have been allowed to take, but without the bulk of his own money.

For a moment the discovery had stripped him of the icy veneer of affectation which long use had made second nature to him, and he stood still in the street, shaking his fist and sputtering curses until the passers-by paused and stared at him.

He walked on, drunk and blind with rage.

The idea crossed his mind that he might go back to the Temple and claim his money, but even his cynicism quailed at the thought of facing those who had so recently expelled him from their society as a convicted swindler. The figure of Jimmy, who was muscular and obviously had a nasty temper, finally appeared in his mind's eye to put the idea to flight.

He paused under a gas lamp and counted the coins remaining to him. They amounted in all to a few shillings.

“Was ever such damnable luck!” he groaned. “To be detected by a pack of boobies like that. I can never show my face again. I must get out of this. London is played out for me. I’ll go home and work for a day or two, make a little money, and go. Gillian and the child must shift for themselves.”

He steadied his shaking nerves with a glass of brandy at a bar near Charing Cross,

and doggedly started for home. It was raining, and before he arrived in Peter Street he was wet to the skin.

He let himself in with his latch-key, and mounted the stairs.

The door of his room was ajar, and he heard voices within—his wife, and the deeper tones of a man. He crept softly up the final flight and listened.

CHAPTER III.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

GILLIAN, meanwhile, had completed her work, and followed her husband's example of going out to find a patron for it, with less success than he had met.

None of the tradesmen to whom she offered the little package of cards, painted with pretty, feeble designs, wanted them, or had need of any service she was fitted to perform. She was only one of many hundreds of women, gently born and nurtured, who were tramping the streets of London that day on similar errands, trying to turn to some profit the conventional accomplishments which is part of what is termed their education.

Of all sad spectacles in the world, the penniless lady is the most hopeless. One meets her on every hand, bravely and silently fighting her hopeless battle, content if she can secure wages a bricklayer would scorn. And every day her numbers increase.

A neighbor, as poor as herself, a little seampstress who worked sixteen hours a day for five farthings an hour in the garret overhead, had taken charge of Dora for her during her absence. She had nothing but thanks to give her for her services, nor would the brave little woman have accepted any recompense more solid.

Only those who have lived among the poor can know what they are to each other, how by continual little shiftings of their common burden they make it endurable to their bruised and weary shoulders.

Gillian sat with her child in her lap beside the window in the fading light of the chill spring evening. There was a threat of rain in the low-lying clouds and in the moist, dark air. At no time of the year is Peter Street a particularly pleasant neighborhood, but it knows its dreariest period in the dreary evenings which precede the coming of summer, at least to the minds of such of its inhabitants as have any memory or imagination of the brooding peace of the lands beyond the city.

The cracked and dirty pavements, the roadway littered with vegetable offal, the sordid houses, from whose windows dangle wretched scraps of household linen, the

heavy air, gritty with dust or foul with the mists of the neighboring river and the fumes of the forest of chimneys, all weigh upon the spirit with a leaden gloom. Swarms of children, ragged, dirty, and unkempt, fill the streets with tumult in a haggard semblance of play. Rusty cats and dilapidated poultry swear and spit and cluck and scratch about the kennels.

She fell into a dreamy reverie, from which she was awakened by the striking of a clock on the floor below.

“Nine!” she counted. “It is time he was here. Surely, oh, surely he will not disappoint me to-day, when he knows how much depends on it.”

The child stirred in her lap with a feverish wail, and she raised it to her breast and rocked it there, singing to quiet it.

“If we could only get away from London,” she thought, “away from the people who take Philip from his work and his home! Oh, darling, hush! You must be patient, dear. Papa will come directly, and bring the medicine to make my darling well again, and perhaps the money to take us into the country, all among the grass and flowers and the fresh air.”

She ran on, as mothers will, talking to the

child as if her words were as comprehensible to its little intelligence as the happy tone in which she forced herself to speak them.

“That’s all we want, isn’t it, to make us well and strong again? Hush, what’s that?”

She paused in her talk to the child with a sudden catch of the breath.

“Philip? Yes, thank God.”

Her face flushed at the sound of a foot upon the stair. It mounted as she listened eagerly, but she fell back in her seat with a sigh of patient disappointment as a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in!” she answered, and the visitor obeyed.

“Mr. Bream?” she asked, peering at him through the shadows.

“Yes,” answered a cheery voice. “I was passing on my way home and thought I would run up and see how you were, and the little one.”

Gillian rose and lit a candle.

Her visitor was a man of thirty-five or so, broad shouldered and strongly built, deep in the chest, long in the arms, with a clean-shaven face of healthy pallor and crisply curling hair. He was rather negligently dressed in the uniform of a Church of England curate, but his general style and man-

ner were by no means of the conventional clerical kind, and but for his clothes he might have been anything in the world but a parson.

“Mr. O’Mara’s out, I see,” he remarked, after shaking hands.

“Yes; he finished the picture this morning, and has gone to take it home. I am expecting him back every minute. Pray take a seat, Mr. Bream.”

Mr. Bream’s quick eyes, traveling round the room in a perfectly candid examination, rested on the brandy and the empty soda water bottle.

“Hum!” he said, in a tone too low to reach his companion’s ear, and, obeying her invitation, drew the remaining chair to her side and sat down.

“And how is Dora?” he asked, bending above the child as she lay in her mother’s lap. “Allow me.”

He took the child delicately in his strong hands, and examined it by the light of the candle, with his finger on the little wrist.

“Hum!” he said again. “The medicine does not seem to have answered as well as I had expected. You are sure you obeyed the directions?”

Gillian's fluttering breath was the only answer to his query.

"The pulse is weaker," said Bream, as if to himself, but with his eyes fixed on the mother's averted face. "Dry skin, distinctly feverish—Mrs. O'Mara, answer me, please. Has the child had the medicine?"

"No," she answered faintly.

"That," said the curate, "can mean only one thing—that you have not the money to buy it. Come, come, are we not old friends enough yet to speak to each other plainly? Do you put your pride in the balance with your child's life?"

"With her life?" she said. "Oh, Mr. Bream!"

"The child is seriously ill," he answered. "She was ill yesterday, and is worse to-day."

Mrs. O'Mara stared at him with a face as white as paper.

"I warn you that Dora's life is in danger. She must have proper treatment, proper food, change of air. Think! Is there no way of procuring these for her?"

Gillian shook her head, with her hands opening and shutting with a nervous, mechanical gesture. The blow had been so sudden she could not realize it yet.

“The medicine,” said Mr. Bream, “is easily arranged for.”

He turned to the table, and wrote on a leaf torn from his note-book.

“Excuse me,” he said, “while I give this to the landlady.”

Gillian, left alone with the child, strained it in her arms, but without looking at it, staring straight before her, with a wide-eyed look of terror.

“Listen to me, Mrs. O’Mara,” said Bream, re-entering the room. “I knew, when first you came to live in this place, that both you and your husband were different in birth and breeding from the people about you. It was impossible to see either of you and not to know it. It was not my business then—it would have been an impertinence—to ask questions, to pry into your past, to seek in any way to know more of your history than you chose to tell. It is different now, and I am resolved to allow no scruple of false delicacy to restrain me from prompting you to plain duty. Have you any relations, any friends, who could help you? I do not ask to know who they are, for the moment at least. But, are there any such?”

“No,” she answered. “There are none. I wore out their patience months ago.”

“If you have friends and relatives,” said Bream, “think if there is not one among them who would help you once more. Your child’s life depends upon it !”

“I have tried them,” she answered. “They have not even answered my letters.”

“Your parents ?”

“They are dead !”

“Your husband’s friends ?”

“He has none. None at least who would help.”

“Who are his friends ? You knew his family when you married him ?”

“No.”

She tried to bound her answer to that one syllable, but her longing for sympathy, the need which lies in all of us to lighten the burden of our suffering by speech, impelled her on, though she kept watch over herself, and spoke only in guarded words.

“He was a stranger when he came to—to where I lived. I was only a child. He said he loved me. My father was dying, my mother was dead ; I had neither brother nor sister ; I saw the time coming when I should be alone in the world. He won my father’s confidence, who was glad to leave me with a protector who could take care of me, and urged me to the marriage.”

“And you know nothing of his people—of his family?”

“Nothing. I do not even know if he had any right to the name he gave me.”

Mr. Bream was silent for a moment before asking—

“Does he know the state of the child?”

“I told him what you said last night. When he went out this morning with the picture he promised, if he sold it, to return and give me some money for the child. Oh, my poor little innocent darling!”

The floodgates of her tears, closed too long, opened, and she wept without restraint.

“I have some money,” said Bream, “in-trusted to me for charitable purposes by friends of mine. A month of country air and proper attention, and wholesome food, would save the child’s life. You must let me be your banker, Mrs. O’Mara. No, no! I won’t hear a word. You must take it. When fortune is kinder to you, as must happen, for no man of Mr. O’Mara’s talents can remain poor for long, you may repay me, and if you like to add a little interest I shall not refuse it. Now, my dear Mrs. O’Mara, I won’t hear another word on the subject. It’s settled and done with. Here is the money—ten pounds. With economy that

should be enough to give you and Dora a month in the country, or at the seaside. Mr. O'Mara, I am sure, will not object to your receiving it as a loan."

"I can't refuse it," said Gillian. "I have not the right. And yet—Mr. Bream, I shall *never* be able to repay you."

"You will repay me, and over pay me, by bringing back Dora strong and well. In the mean time, while you are away, I must try and see if I cannot find you some employment in the neighborhood. Do you think you could teach in the school? One of the ladies there is about to leave us. The salary is not large, but every little helps, and we might be able to find something better later on. And now I must get away, for I have other visits to make. No, don't move, I beg. I can find my way out perfectly well. Good-by, little one; I hope you will come back with the roses in your cheeks which used to be there. Good-night, Mrs. O'Mara."

He gently extricated his hand from Gillian's gratefully clinging grasp, and bustled out to cut short the flood of incoherent thanks she poured out on him. The landing outside was too dark to permit him to see the figure of O'Mara, against whom he almost brushed as he descended the stairs.

Left alone with Dora, Gillian's joy overflowed in a thousand hysterical caresses, which so frightened the child that she began to cry. The mother quieted her by dancing before her eyes the glittering coins which Bream had left behind him; a thousand times the sum in minted gold had never sounded half so sweet in the miser's ears as did the chink of those few precious coins in Gillian's.

"Isn't he a good man, my darling? You shall learn to bless him, and thank him, and pray for him. He has saved your life, my sweet, and your poor mother's too, for how could I live if my precious one were taken away from me? I knew help would come. I knew it. God could not be so cruel as to rob me of you, my treasure."

She stopped suddenly at sight of O'Mara, who had entered the room unnoticed, and was standing almost beside her, his clothes glistening with rain.

"You seem excited," he said. "May I ask if anything in particular has occurred?"

His sudden appearance, his monotonous, mocking voice, froze her with terror and foreboding.

In that sudden bright dream of hope for her child she had forgotten her husband's

mere existence. At the first sight of him she had instinctively closed her hand upon the money. She stood panting and staring at him, as if he surprised her in the commission of a theft. He looked back at her with a face like a mask, and his eye glittering evilly in the candle light.

“What have you got in your hand?” he asked.

“Mr. Bream has been here,” she began, and paused.

“Mr. Bream has been here,” he repeated. “Well?”

“He has given me money to take Dora into the country.”

“How much?” he asked.

“Ten pounds,” she answered. He had expected her to say less, and had merely asked the question to help her in the lie, which showed how little real knowledge he had of her nature after their years of marriage.

“Mr. Bream is generous,” he said with a hardly perceptible sneer.

His manner was unusual, and puzzled Gilian almost as much as it frightened her. There was something of a struggle going on in his mind, which he disguised by his expressionless face and voice. He meant to

take the money Bream had left, but his sense of shame was not wholly dead, and he hesitated as to the means he should employ to wrest it from her.

Suddenly his brutality, always ill-concealed beneath the varnish of his affectations, triumphed.

“*I want that money,*” he said. “Give it to me!”

For the first time for many a day, the courage which underlay Gillian’s acquiescence flamed out into open revolt.

“Not one penny if you kill me!” she answered, with her teeth set, and outraged wife and mother written in her face and the inspired poise of her figure as she faced him. “Stand off!” she cried as he advanced. “Don’t dare to touch me. It is my child’s life I hold in my hands, and I will die rather than yield it up.”

He made a sudden clutch at the hand which held the money, and missing it, seized her by the throat in a sudden access of rage. For the moment her passion lent her strength, and she struggled hard, but the cruel grip choked her breath. She tried to cry for help, but only a stifled moan escaped her, and she fell, striking her head heavily against the leg of the table, with a

crash which seemed to shake the house, and lay still upon the floor.

With a noiseless step O'Mara ran to the door and listened.

The house was still; no one had heard Gillian's fall.

He crept back to her, and saw from among the tumbled tresses of her hair a dark red line, momentarily growing in width, staining the boards. Even in falling she had kept the hand which held the money close shut.

In a thievish tremor, with his heart beating like a muffled drum in his ears, he knelt beside her, and forced open the reluctant fingers. With pale face and shaking limbs he moved backward to the door, closing it to shut out the haunting vision of Gillian's white face—whiter in contrast with that widening stain.

A minute later he had reached the street.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CLOUD BREAKS.

WHEN, slowly, like a swimmer rising through deep, dark waters to the growing light above, Gillian came back to consciousness, phantom memories of the troubled visions which had haunted her through her long sleep so mingled with realities that it took some time to settle her impressions of the things around her.

She was in bed, in a large and lofty room, which was certainly not the room in which the last few moments of her life had been passed, though whose it might be, or how she had come there, were mysteries at which she could make no guess.

There were hushed voices speaking at a little distance, but she was so weak that when she tried to turn her face in that direction she found the effort beyond her strength. She lay and wondered, with a languid curiosity, till a step approached her bed, and she saw, bending above her,

the face of a young woman, with a cloud of fair hair arranged beneath a white cap.

A soft hand touched her forehead, and a voice asked :

“ You are better, now ? ”

“ Where am I ? ” Gillian would have asked in return, but her voice, like her strength, had gone, and the low and broken murmur which escaped her lips was scarcely audible to her own ears.

“ You have been very ill, ” the girl said, in answer to the movement of her lips. “ Do not try to talk, you are too weak. You are in St. Thomas’s Hospital. You have been here over a week. ”

Memory flowed back on Gillian like a flood.

“ Dora ! ” she panted feebly.

No emotion less strong than that all-conquering one of maternity could have given her the strength to shape an intelligible word.

“ Your little girl ? She is well. She is in the country. Mr. Bream is taking care of her. You shall see her when you are well enough—to-morrow, perhaps, if the doctor will allow you. And now you must be quiet, and try not to talk any more. You have been very ill indeed, and in great danger ; but that is over now. ”

Gillian was so weak that, before the happy tears the woman's reassuring words had called to her eyes were dry upon her lashes, she had fallen asleep. When next she woke the room was growing dark with shadows. The great bulk of the Palace of Parliament was dull purple against the rosy light of the western sky, and softened murmurs of voices and the clank of oars came up from the river below.

Presently a voice was heard praying, and muffled responses came from the rows of beds which lined the ward. Then a hymn was sung :

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide!

and the guests of the great hostelry of the good Saint Thomas addressed themselves peacefully for sleep.

She woke in the early morning, to find the gilded vane of St. Stephen's burning like a beacon in the bright dawn, and lazily watched the last thin wreaths of vapor from the river melt in the warm air. Her mind seemed as feeble as her body; her one definite idea was that Dora was well, and that she should see her.

She thought of her husband, and though her memory of every detail of their life to-

gether was clear and perfect, she remembered him with neither hate nor horror, but with the same languid indifference, which nothing but the idea of her child could stir. She murmured the name to herself, finding that after her night's sleep she had strength enough to speak it.

“Dora, Dora, Dora.”

And so she fell asleep, like a tired child.

There was the echo of a well-known voice in her ears when she woke again, and it was with no shock of surprise that she recognized it as Mr. Bream's.

“It would not be advisable, you think,” he was saying, “to give her any hint of that matter yet?”

“I think not,” another voice replied. “She is very weak. There is no necessity for telling her yet. Good news can always wait; it loses nothing. Look! She is awake. Don't stay too long with her.”

Bream came and sat beside her, with the grave and friendly smile his face constantly wore. He took her hand—the sight of it surprised him, it was so wan and thin—in his, and patted it gently.

“Hush!” he said. “You must let me do all the talking. You want to know first about Dora? Dora is doing grandly. She

has been in the country exactly a week, and has put on exactly two pounds in weight. I made the people who have her weigh her every day, and send me a bulletin. Tell me the age of a child, and how much the child weighs, and I'll tell you whether it's healthy or not. When will you see her, is the next question, isn't it? That, my dear Mrs. O'Mara, depends entirely on yourself. It depends on how soon you get strong enough to bear the meeting. Let us make a bargain. If you are very good, and get better very fast—let me see, to-day is Friday—yes, you shall see Dora on Sunday. Is that understood?"

There was an almost magic influence in Bream's strength and tenderness, in his kindly face and helpful voice, which had often done a patient more good than all the drugs in the pharmacopœa could have worked. Gillian smiled at him through the moisture with which her weakness and his friendliness had filled her eyes, and he felt her feeble fingers press his, ever so lightly.

"That's well," he said, as he rose. "I must go now. This is not the regular visiting hour at all, and I have been admitted only by special favor. I walked this hospital before I took my degree and was house

surgeon in this very ward for two years. Good-by, and remember your promise. No improvement means no Dora !”

With such a hope for her sick heart to feed on, it was not wonderful that Gillian should make rapid progress. The doctor who saw her morning and evening marveled at the speed of her return to convalescence.

“I am to see Dora on Sunday, if I am better,” she told him, and the explanation sufficed, as she had thought it would.

“Dora deserves to be patented and registered as a new healing agent,” said the surgeon.

Sunday afternoon came, and with it came Dora, carried in the arms of a strapping, ruddy-cheeked peasant woman, who, dropping a courtesy, introduced herself as the little lady’s nurse, and hadn’t she come along beautiful? So pale and wizened as she had been, and now just look at her.

From the moment the child was laid upon her breast Gillian’s recovery went on at an even quicker rate. With reviving strength came new interest in the things of life. She asked Bream when next he came where her husband was.

“He has vanished,” was the answer. “We have no news of him.”

“Was any effort made to find him?” she asked.

“Yes,” answered Bream. “Every effort, but without result.”

“Dora and I must face the world alone,” said Gillian after a pause.

“I hope—I think,” said Bream, “that the struggle will not be so severe as you anticipate. You are strong enough to bear good news now. I have some brave news. Your trials are over, Mrs. O’Mara.”

She looked at him with questioning eyes and heightened color.

“I have spoken, perhaps, before I ought,” said Mr. Bream; “indeed, there is an accredited messenger of the good news, a lawyer with whom I have been in communication for the past week, who can tell you all the details. I can tell you nothing more than that you are, by the death of your uncle, Robert Scott, of Sydney, put beyond the need of want.”

“I am very glad,” she said, “for Dora’s sake.”

It was a relief to Bream to find her take the news so quietly.

“I have seen you bear so much trouble bravely,” he said, “that I could not help

telling you so much. May I bring the lawyer here to-morrow afternoon?"

"I am glad I heard it first from you," she answered. "Dear friend, you are my good angel."

Bream came again the following day, accompanied by a gray-haired, fatherly old gentleman of precise and methodical manner, whom he introduced as Mr. Probyn.

"Of the firm of Grice, Probyn, & Davies, Old Jewry," added the solicitor. "I have the honor of addressing Mrs. Philip O'Mara?"

"That is my name," said Gillian.

"Otherwise Gillian Scott, only child of the late John Scott, doctor of medicine, of Merton Barnett, Shropshire?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember your father having referred, in your presence, to a brother, Robert Scott?"

"Yes, he was my father's younger brother. He went out to Australia before I was born."

"Quite so," said Mr. Probyn, referring to some memoranda. "In the year 1849. There were money transactions between them after Robert Scott left England."

"I believe so. My uncle was not suc-

cessful in his business, and on more than one occasion he applied to my father for assistance."

"Quite so," said Mr. Probyn again. "I am happy to state, however, that his bad luck did not last. He died on the 3d of February of the present year, a widower and childless. I have here an attested copy of his will."

He unfolded the document, and, perching a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on the extreme tip of his nose, scanned it at arm's length.

"'I, Robert Scott'—h'm (need scarcely trouble you with mere formalities)—'do hereby give, bequeath and devise all property whatsoever of which I die possessed, after the payment of my just debts, to Gillian, only daughter of my late beloved brother, John Scott, of Merton Barnett, in the county of Shropshire, England.' The personalty has been sworn under £20,000, and will be transferred to your account in London on the completion of the legal forms necessary in such cases. There is also some land in the neighborhood of Sydney, of which you would have no difficulty of disposing, if so minded, though we are advised by our correspondents, the solici-

tors of the late Mr. Scott, that it is steadily rising in value, and is, therefore, probably worth retaining. Those and other details can be arranged at your convenience. Meanwhile, madam," the old gentleman rose and made a cordially stately bow, "I have the pleasure to wish you joy of your good fortune."

*Jake takes his
bride to America*

CHAPTER V.

SUMMER DAYS.

TWO gentlemen attired in clerical costumes were walking together along a pleasant lane, bordered on one hand by a long line of lofty elms, swathed to mid-height in trailing ivy, and on the other by a low hedge, odorous with wild roses, over which was visible a wide reach of the rich pasture lands of Essex, shining in a checkered pattern of deep emerald and dull gold. It was verging on a midsummer evening, and both time and place were beautiful in deep serenity.

One of the wayfarers was considerably his companion's superior in years. He was a hale, ruddy-faced gentleman of sixty or so, portly and comfortable of presence, and very lightly touched by time, save that his hair, which he wore rather longer than is the fashion of the present day, was snow white.

He had a mild, clear eye, and his habitual expression was one of rather absent-minded

benevolence. Some peculiarities of his dress, which was dusty with long walking in the summer lanes, and which, though of the last cut and the finest material, had a lack of complete neatness which proclaimed its wearer a bachelor, gave the learner in such matters the idea that the Reverend Marmaduke Herbert was a High Churchman.

His companion, something over twenty years his junior, we have met before. Time had dealt not unkindly with Mr. Bream, as it does with all men of simple lives who regard existence as a sacred gift in trust from a great Master, and are zealous to give a good account of its utmost minute. His cheerfully resolute face and manly figure were as of old, and only the thinnest possible lines of gray in his thick brown hair proclaimed the passage of seven years since we last met him.

“We will close our round of visits, Bream,” the elderly clergyman was saying in a full and genial voice, “at Mrs. Dartmouth’s, who will, I daresay, give us a cup of tea. I expect you to be—ah! charmed with Mrs. Dartmouth, Bream. A most amiable and admirable lady.”

“I shall be happy to make her acquaintance, sir.”

“A most superior woman,” said Mr. Herbert, “and a true—ah! daughter of the church. She is a widow, with one child. A daughter. When she first came among us, some six or seven years ago this summer, there was—ah! she excited considerable interest.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, she had, if I may so express myself, the—ah! the charm of mystery. Nobody knew who she was, or whence she came. In a small community like ours in Crouchford a stranger is likely to excite—ah! comment. That, however, passed away—and Mrs. Dartmouth was accepted as what she is, my dear Bream, a most amiable and accomplished lady.”

Mr. Bream again expressed his pleasure at the prospect of making Mrs. Dartmouth's acquaintance.

“That,” said Mr. Herbert, pointing with the polished stick of ebony he carried in his hand to a cluster of red brick chimneys visible above the trees, “is her home. We are now passing the outskirts of her freehold. She farms her own acres—an excellent woman of business.”

The line of elms had given place to a twisted hedge, separated from the high road

by a deep ditch. As the two friends walked on, a little shower of wild field blossoms fell at their feet and a light childish laugh drew their eyes to a spot where, the hedge being thinner, the figure of a little girl in a white summer dress, touched here and there with fluttering pink ribbons, was standing above them.

“Ah, little mischief!” cried the elder cleric. “You are there. We are going to call upon mamma. Is she at home?”

“Yes,” answered the child, looking shyly at Mr. Bream, “mamma is at home.”

“That is well. This, Dora,” continued Mr. Herbert, “is Mr. Bream, who has come to Crouchford to be my curate. As I am introducing you to your parishioners, Bream, let me seize th—ah! opportunity, and present you Miss Dora Dartmouth, the Reverend Mr. John Bream.”

The little girl bowed with a wonderfully demure aspect, and then, fearful of her own gravity, said “I’ll go and tell mamma,” and was off at the word, like a flash of varicolored light among the bushes.

“A pretty child,” said Bream.

“A delightful little thing, my dear Bream. A real child, a rarity nowadays. The precocious infant is—ah! unendurable, and its

commonness is one of the saddest features of the degeneracy of our times.”

Mr. Bream had an almost imperceptible dry smile at moments, and it crossed his face now.

A wooden gate, set in a red brick wall, and leading to a short, graveled carriage drive, led to the house, a pretty and pleasant two story building, swathed about to its chimney cowls in rose vine and creepers. A glass-roofed veranda ran the entire length of the house, supported on square wooden pillars, and covered also with the same sweet smelling growths. The still summer air was heavy with their breath.

A fire of roses, roses white and red and pink and yellow, burned on the lawn before the house, and sun-smitten roses glowed like lamps all over its front. The door stood open, and Mr. Herbert entered, like a frequent guest certain of his welcome.

Bream, following him, found himself in a wide, old-fashioned entrance hall, occupying the whole depth of the house back to the open French windows leading to a second and wider lawn. A mighty chestnut tree, in full leaf, stood in its center, and on either hand it was bounded by the sweeping curve of the shrubbery, through a wide gap of

which the corner of a hayrack and fields of tall green wheat were visible.

The hall was solidly and comfortably furnished as a reception room, and on the left a door led to another apartment ; on the right was a huge open chimney, with a wide tiled hearth and wooden settles. The place was a curious and pleasant mixture of old architecture and modern conveniences, and of old and modern decorations. Strange monsters, born of the fancies of Chinese and Japanese artists, encumbered the high mantle shelf, and delicately colored fans and exotic plaques of earthenware shone against the fully polished black oak of the walls.

“What a delightful room !” said Bream.

Mr. Herbert, with a sigh of content, sank his portly frame into an arm-chair.

“I shall really be very glad of a cup of tea,” he remarked.

“Dora !” called a clear feminine voice, on the lawn outside. “Dora, my darling !”

Dora’s voice was heard in answer from a distance, and a quick patter of light feet on a gravel path showed that she and her unseen summoner were close to the open French window. Bream, who had taken a seat behind his vicar, started and stared with a sudden wonder and doubt in his face.

Mr. Herbert, flicking the dust from his shoes and gaiters with his pocket handkerchief, took no notice of these signs of perturbation.

“Go and tell Johnson,” the voice proceeded, “to pick some strawberries for tea.”

“Oh, mamma, can I help?”

“I think you had much better not,” said the voice. “You had better go to Barbara, and get her to dress you. Look at your shoes, and oh, what hands! There, run away and tell Johnson.”

The little feet were heard fading in the distance.

“Am I mad?” Bream asked of himself, “or dreaming? I would know that voice among a thousand.”

A lady, clad, like the child to whom she had been overheard speaking, in a white summer dress, entered at the open window and glided toward the two visitors. Bream's face, as he rose, was against the light, and only dimly visible. Mr. Herbert had stepped forward to their hostess.

“I have taken the liberty——” he began.

“Which is not at all a liberty, to begin with,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, with a pleasant smile.

“Thank you — I have done myself the honor, let me say, to make known to you the Reverend Mr. Bream, my future assistant in the duties of my parish. You will remember that I mentioned his name to you a day or two ago.”

“I remember very well,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, extending her hand frankly to Bream. He took it with a curious clumsiness. “Welcome to Crouchford, Mr. Bream. You are here,” she said to Mr. Herbert, “just in time for tea.”

“Then I am here, Mrs. Dartmouth,” said the reverend gentleman, “just at the time I wanted to arrive at. We have had a long walk and the roads are—ah! dusty.”

“It is laid on the lawn. Will you come out?”

She led the way to where, under the spreading shade of the great chestnut tree, a table gleamed, set with the whitest of cloths and the prettiest of glass and china, to which a stout, homely, brown-faced woman of thirty, dressed in a neat cotton print in contrast with the ruddy brown of her face and her bare arms, was just putting the finishing touches.

“That’ll do, Barbara, thank you,” said her mistress. “Will you see that Miss Dora changes her shoes?”

Barbara, with a courtesy to the reverend gentlemen, which Mr. Herbert repaid with a fatherly nod and smile, and Bream passed unheeded, went into the house.

“Mr. Herbert tells me, Mr. Bream,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, when the little party were seated in the rustic chairs set about the table, “that your last curacy was in London—in Westminster, I think?”

“Yes,” Bream answered.

“You will find this a pleasant change, I hope; the country is really delightful in this neighborhood.”

Bream, a little more collected, replied, “Beautiful, indeed.”

“Bream,” said Mr. Herbert, “is hardly altogether a stranger here. He is, to a certain extent—ah! *en pays de connaissance*. He is an old friend of Sir George Venables.”

“Indeed!” said Mrs. Dartmouth. “You know Sir George, Mr. Bream?”

“We are old friends. We were at Rugby together, and at one time were inseparable. We have seen little of each other of late, from many causes. I believe he has spent most of the last five years almost entirely abroad. I have to thank him for my appointment as curate here, for it was he who

introduced me to Mr. Herbert and induced him to engage me.”

“Sir George and I are old friends. I was his tenant, here, before he consented to allow me to buy the freehold,” said Mrs. Dartmouth.

Dora arriving at this instant with an enormous glass dish of strawberries, and Barbara following her with the teapot, Mrs. Dartmouth busied herself in distributing the materials of the pleasant meal, additionally pleasant amid such surroundings. Had Mr. Herbert been a man of quick observation, which he decidedly was not, his curate's strangeness of manner since their hostess's appearance could hardly have escaped him. They had made many visits together that day, and Mr. Bream had come through them all with flying colors, and was at that moment being lauded in a dozen Crouchford households as a delightful companion. Here, he was decidedly stiff and embarrassed, and though he had recovered from the first shock of the condition with which he had met Mrs. Dartmouth, he was still constrained in voice and manner, looked harder and longer at the lady than was altogether polite or necessary.

Mrs. Dartmouth seemed quite at ease

under his scrutiny, unless a livelier flush of color on her face, which might have been equally accounted for by the heat or by the shade of the large pink Japanese umbrella attached to the back of the chair she sat in, was called there by his protracted reading of her features. She addressed her conversation, after the beginning of the meal, mainly to Mr. Herbert, who answered with a rather high-flown clerical gallantry in the intervals of absorbing a vast amount of tea, now and then bringing Bream into the talk, until after awhile he found his tongue and his forgotten manners simultaneously, and came into it himself, naturally and easily.

The shadows lengthened on the green as they sat and talked, when Barbara came to her mistress's side with a card. She bent her head for a moment to her visitors, and after glancing at it said to Barbara :

“Certainly, ask him to join us here, and bring another cup and saucer. Sir George Venebles,” she announced to her visitors. “You have not met him since you arrived, Mr. Bream?”

“No,” said Bream, “though I have a standing invitation to the Lodge. I expect I shall get a blowing up for not having

availed myself of it on my first coming here."

Barbara appeared, followed by the newcomer. Sir George Venebles was a man in the early thirties; one of those happy people who seem to radiate health as a lantern does light. He had the fair skin, bronzed by constant exercise in the fresh air, and the light brown hair common among Englishmen of pure strain. He was, as he looked, as hard as nails all over, and had not an ounce of superfluous flesh anywhere about him, though his breadth was rather more than proportionate to his height, which was five feet eleven in his stocking feet. He wore a short clipped mustache and a crisp brown beard of a golden bronze tinge, which admirably finished a face more remarkable for its evidences of health, pluck, and kindness than for accurate beauty of line, though he was a handsome fellow too, judged even by that standard. He was dressed in cords and spurred boots, literally powdered by the dust of the road, and carried a riding crop.

"You're a pretty fellow, don't you think," he asked Bream, after greeting Mrs. Dartmouth, "to have been more than twenty-four hours in the place and never to have given me a call. I called at your diggings

just now—just fancy, Mrs. Dartmouth, he's gone and taken Mrs. Jones's first floor, over the Supply Stores in the High Street, when he might have had the free run of the Lodge as long as he liked."

"I shall come over there presently," answered Bream. "It's a maxim of mine to work upward, not downward. When I know all the *oi polloi* of the district I shall claim acquaintance with the lord of the manor."

"Do I belong to the *oi polloi*?" asked Mrs. Dartmouth, a question which created a diversion by sending Mr. Herbert's tea the wrong way.

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. DARTMOUTH.

THE meal finished, Mrs. Dartmouth rose and invited her guests to a stroll about the grounds.

In the dead quiet of the evening air the trees stood silent, no breath of wind waked their leaves to the faintest rustle. The sun was sinking in a placid splendor of rose and gold, and in the opposing heavens the crescent moon was faintly glimmering in an ocean of tender sapphire. A riot of birds came from the winding borkage,—black-cap and thrush, and linnet and blackbird merrily piping their adieu to the departing sun. The little party passed through the gap in the semicircle of trees on to a broad garry terrace, separating the house domain from the farm.

They had split into two groups, Sir George and Mr. Herbert, and Mrs. Dartmouth and Bream, while little Dora flitted from one to the other, and from bush to bush, like a butterfly.

“Mr. Bream,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, when they had got beyond earshot of the others, “I have to beg your forgiveness. Believe me, I do most sincerely.”

“For what?” asked Bream.

“For taking no farewell of the only friend I had, seven years ago.”

“Surely, Mrs. O’M——, I beg pardon, Mrs. Dartmouth, you have no need to ask my forgiveness for that. You have, I suppose, in common with other people, the right to choose your own acquaintances.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, “let there be no conventional phrases between us! I acted wrongly, and I have repented of it many a time. When I heard from Mr. Herbert and Sir George that you were coming here I was glad, not merely at the prospect of renewing an old acquaintance, but of apologizing and explaining, if you think my explanation worth listening to.”

“I cannot see that you have anything to apologize for,” said Bream, “but I shall be glad to hear anything you have to say.”

“You cannot know,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, “even your sympathy cannot guess, what I suffered before and during the time you knew me in London. I look back on that time now as a soul escaped from purga-

tory might be supposed to look back on its experience there. I wonder that I came out of it with life and reason. It was only last night—perhaps the mention of your name and the knowledge that you were coming here may account for it—I dreamed that I was back in Westminster, and I woke, crying and sobbing like a child. I woke in that way often for months after I had left London. All that time comes back upon me as a hideous nightmare. I have set myself resolutely to forget it—striven hard to banish any thought of it from my mind, but every detail is as clear in my memory to-day as if it had all happened only a week or two ago. I cannot even look at my child, healthy and strong as she is, thank God, without remembering——” She passed her hand across her eyes, as if to clear away some shadow that offended them.

“Why distress yourself by recalling it?” said Bream.

“Because the only way for you to forgive me my ingratitude is by your knowing, as much as any one, other than myself, can know, what a mad desire I had to cancel, to root out, destroy, cast aside, all that reminded me of that time. My one desire was to get free of it, to get beyond it all, to

persuade myself, if possible, that it had never been. I passed the first year of my freedom abroad, moving from place to place, trying, in the bustle and movement of travel, to forget. Forget! How could I, when the one thing in the world that was left me to love, my little Dora, brought back memories of that time at every minute of the day? The very pleasure I felt in seeing her grow back to health recalled the agony I had known in seeing her dying—dying of hunger, Mr. Bream, as you saw her.”

No hardness of voice or passion of gesture gave any force to her speech. They were not needed. Her voice throbbed as an even note of pain, her face was white, her eyes looked straight before her with something of the wild look Bream remembered in them seven years ago in the garret in Westminster, when he had warned her that Dora's life was in danger.

“I returned to England—not to London. I have never entered London since that day I left the hospital, and with God's help I never will. I resolved to try some kind of occupation, some steady daily task, some work that must be done at its appointed hour, and see if that would not banish the

memories which had clung to me all over the continent. This house and farm were advertised to let. I am country bred, and had passed most of my early years on a farm, and a longing for the dear old innocent life, for the fields and woods where I had been so happy as a child, came back to me. I took the farm, at first on a lease, and threw my whole heart into its management. The experiment succeeded; well enough, at least, to give me hope that it might succeed altogether if I gave it time. Sir George consented to sell me the place,—it is an outlying piece of property, bought by his father only a few years ago,—and since then I have remained here, working, and educating Dora. You are the only person in the world, Mr. Bream, who knows my secret. I know that I have no need to ask you to keep it, but I do ask you to pardon my ingratitude in being silent all these years.”

“Are you quite sure,” asked Bream, “that you have been silent?”

She looked at him questioningly.

“Do you remember the date on which you left the hospital? It was the 8th of April. On the 8th of April of every year I have received a £50 note, with a slip of paper,

bearing the words, 'For the poor of your parish, from a friend grateful for past kindness.' It was not your hand, but I have always thought it came from you."

"Yes," she said quietly. "It came from me. Conscience money, Mr. Bream."

"More than enough," said Bream, "to buy you all the absolution you ever needed. I hardly required your explanation; I understood from the first. I am sorry that circumstance has brought me here, since my presence awakens such unwelcome memories."

"Do not think that," she answered. "Since I have never forgotten, you cannot charge it to yourself that you have made me remember. You are as welcome to me now, as you will be, before long, to every one of your parishioners."

It was some little time before silence was broken between them again. Then Bream asked:

"You have never had any news of—*him*?"

He shrank from mentioning O'Mara's name, remembering that she had avoided it.

"None whatever."

"You have made no inquiries, caused none to be made?"

"God forbid!"

“But is that wise? You may be a free woman now; not free merely in the sense of his absence, but for altogether,—by his death.”

“It is best,” she said, “to let sleeping dogs lie. Besides, in what direction could I look for news? He disappeared utterly, leaving not the smallest trace. And it is seven years ago.”

“It is some comfort,” said Bream, “that the scoundrel committed his greatest villainy just at that moment; and when he thought he was shifting a burden from his shoulders was, in reality, robbing himself of a fortune.”

She made no answer to his remark. They had reached the end of a long shaded alley. They turned, and she held out her hand.

“Then—we are friends again, Mr. Bream?”

“We were never anything else,” he answered, as he took the proffered hand. “I have never thought of you all the time but with respect and pity. I am glad, gladder than I can tell you, that the need for pity is past, and that you are happy at last.”

“Yes,” she said, looking wistfully down at the summer snow of acacia leaves with which the path was strewn, “I suppose I am as happy as one has a right to expect to

be in this world. But that is enough of me and my affairs. Tell me of yourself. What have you been doing all this long time?"

"Really," he said, "I have nothing to tell. Coming here has been the only event in my life since we last met."

"Well," she said, "I suppose men are like nations—and those are happiest that have no history."

"We all have histories," he said, "of one sort or another. Mine is finished for the present at least."

She remembered the words later, though they had little enough meaning for her at the moment. Her other guests came in sight, Mr. Herbert and Sir George Venebles strolling side by side, the latter with Dora perched upon his shoulder, like a tropical bird, busy in weaving wildflowers about his hat.

"There," said Sir George, depositing her on the ground, "you've had a long ride, and I want to talk to Bream. He and I are old friends, you know."

"But I haven't finished the hat," said Dora, pouting, "and I was making it so pretty."

"Very well. There's the hat. Work your sweet will upon it," he continued,

taking the curate's arm, and drawing him apart from Mrs. Dartmouth and Mr. Herbert.

“Have you any engagement to-night?”

“Nothing that I know of, unless Mr. Herbert should want me.”

“Then come over to the Lodge and dine with me, there's a good fellow, and stay till morning. Why on earth you wanted to go and stick yourself into that hole in the village, when you might have come and put up with me, is more than I can understand.”

“It is nearer my work, for one thing,” said Bream. “I want to get to know my parishioners, and to be within easy call of the vicar, until I have learned the routine of the place. But I'll come over to-night and dine with you.”

“Good!” said Sir George, clapping him on the shoulder, “I'll get Mrs. Dartmouth to lend you a horse, and send it back in the morning by a groom. It will be like old times having you about me again, old fellow. I'm devilish solitary, all alone in that great rambling place since the old man died.”

“Solitude,” said the curate, “is not an incurable disorder, I should think, for a man with ten thousand a year, and one of the best estates and oldest names in the country.”

Sir George made no answer, but flicked at his boot with his riding-whip in an absent-minded fashion.

“You seem to have been getting on very well with Mrs. Dartmouth,” he said abruptly. “What do you think of her?”

“She seems a very pleasant, amiable woman,” answered Bream, rather constrainedly. “She bought this place from you, she tells me”; he continued, merely for the sake of saying something to continue the conversation.

“Yes,” said Sir George. “I sold her the place. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Very pretty.”

Their talk languished after this, though they were old and close friends, who had not met for seven years. Bream’s mind was busy with the matter of his recent talk with Mrs. Dartmouth, and Sir George walked beside him in a moody silence, slapping his boot at intervals.

“It is time we were going,” he said at last, referring to his watch. They turned and rejoined Mrs. Dartmouth.

“Bream is going over to the Lodge to dine with me, sir, if you have no objection,” said Sir George to the vicar.

“By no means,” said Mr. Herbert. “Our

work for the day is over. You will meet me at the school to-morrow morning at eleven, Bream."

"I am mounted," said Sir George, "and Bream is not. I wonder, Mrs. Dartmouth, if you would lend him a horse until the morning? You could ride him back yourself, Bream."

"I will lend him Jerrica," said Mrs. Dartmouth. "Barbara!" she called across the lawn to the servant, who was clearing away the table under the chestnut tree, "get Jerrica saddled for Mr. Bream."

They strolled back across the lawn, Dora chatting to Sir George as she added the finishing touches to the decorations of his hat, and getting absent-minded monosyllables in reply.

"There," she said, "now it's lovely. Stoop down and I'll put it on for you."

He stooped, obedient to the small tyrant, and, when she had put on the hat, took her up in his arms and kissed her. His somber face contrasted oddly with the festive appearance of his headgear.

"What makes you look so solemn?" she asked him.

"Do I look solemn?" he asked in return.

"Oh, dreadful!" said Dora. "I can

guess," she added, "shall I? It's because mamma was talking such a long time to the new gentleman, Mr. Bream, instead of to you. I saw you watching them."

Sir George blushed a fiery red, and shot a quick glance at the others to see if they showed signs of having noticed the wisdom of this precocious infant.

"Little girls shouldn't talk nonsense," he said severely.

"I'm not little," said Dora; "I'm almost grown up. I'm eight. If you call me little again I'll take the flowers out of your hat."

This dread threat brought them to the house. Sir George was glad of the obscurity in the wide hall, which hid his still blushing face, and he lingered there, talking a little at random, till Jerrica and his own horse were announced as waiting. Then he gave Dora a final kiss, and shook hands with Mrs. Dartmouth and the vicar.

"You surely are not going to ride home with those flowers in your hat," said the hostess.

"Till I get out of sight of the house," he answered. "It pleases Dora."

She laughed and turned to the curate.

"Dora and I always take tea at five

o'clock," she said, "and we shall always be glad to see you."

He thanked her, and rode away with the baronet. The road was solitary, and they had gone a mile or more before Sir George untwined Dora's garland. Even then he rode on with it in his hand for some distance, and it was with an audible sigh that he let it fall from his fingers to the dust.

CHAPTER VII.

SIR GEORGE.

THE two friends rode side by side, in silence for the most part, until they came to Crouchford Lodge, a venerable pile of building, of which the central and oldest portion was Elizabethan, and the two wings of the date of the first Charles and the second George respectively.

It stood on a little eminence (quite a hill it seemed amid the flat Essex meadows) and commanded a goodly view of the broad acres which owned Sir George as master.

Dinner that evening was as dull a business as if the two companions, instead of being bosom friends who had not met for years, had been long since bored to death by each other's society, and could find nothing to say. Bream, who had by this time got over his amazement at recognizing his old Westminster parishioner in Mrs. Dartmouth, made several attempts to lead his companion into conversation, but with little avail. Sir George woke up for a minute, only to fall

back into his uneasy reserve. At last, when coffee had been served, and they were left alone with their cigars, the curate roundly challenged his friend as to the reason of his melancholy.

“I may as well tell you,” said Venebles. “One gets a sort of relief sometimes by talking freely. But not here. Let us get out of doors into the fresh air.”

They passed out together in the growing moonlight, and the baronet, at first with an obvious effort, but increasing ease as he continued, unloosened himself to his old friend.

“You asked me just now,” he said, “why I went abroad the year before last, and stayed away until two months ago. I’ll tell you. It was because I had asked Mrs. Dartmouth to be my wife, and she had refused, and I thought that change of scene and occupation might help me to forget her.”

“She refused you,” repeated Bream.

“Yes.”

“Did she give any reason for the refusal?”

“I asked her for a reason. She begged me to let the question go unanswered, but assured me that the reason was sufficient.”

“Who *is* Mrs. Dartmouth?” asked Bream.

It went against the honest openness of his nature to be guilty of even such innocent feigning as this, but he held the woman's secret in trust, and had bound himself in silence. Sir George was his oldest friend, and he must needs show sympathy for him in his trouble.

"She is Mrs. Dartmouth," answered the baronet. "That is all I know, and all I want to know, except for the last five years she has been the only woman in the world to me."

"You know nothing of her antecedents?"

"Nothing whatever. She came here with her child five years ago, and took the farm through an agent. A year later she made personal overtures to buy it. My father was very unwilling to let it go, but I persuaded him, and he gave way. That was the beginning of a misunderstanding between us, which lasted to his death—the only one we ever had together. I was so infatuated with Gillian after my first meeting with her, that I couldn't keep away from her, and my constant presence at the farm got to be the talk of the country. There was some scandal about it, I heard—the fools about here would talk scandal of an angel, I think."

He paused, angrily striking his boots with his riding-whip.

“Well, it came to my father’s ears, and he spoke of it to me, and warned me that I was damaging Mrs. Dartmouth’s reputation and hurting my own prospects. He had plans for me. Our neighbor, Sir James Dayne, had an only daughter, and the two estates run side by side. It was the old man’s dream to put a ring fence round them. He told me all this. I don’t know what I said, but I remember what I did. I jumped on horseback, and went over to Mrs. Dartmouth, and asked her to marry me. She refused, as I have already told you.”

Bream listened, but expressed no surprise. Sir George continued:

“I was like a man dazed for weeks after, and then I had a severe illness—a brain fever. It was thought that I should die; but I recovered. My father was very good about it; he did not reproach me, or press me to obey his wishes in any direct way, for some time. I suppose he saw the case was desperate, and understood that his only chance was to give me time. After a while, he returned to the subject very delicately. He brought Miss Dayne and me together, and encouraged people, in a quiet way, to

look on our union as certain. I suppose I gave him some right to do so, for I never mentioned Mrs. Dartmouth's name for months, or went near her."

"Wise, perhaps," interrupted Bream.

"Once I met her by accident, at a yeomanry ball, and I am sure that no stranger who had seen our meeting would have discovered that there was anything between us but the most commonplace acquaintance. I seemed numbed, somehow,—as I felt once when I was pitched on my head out hunting, and got up and rode home. My father thought I was cured. I should have thought so, too, if I could have cared for anything, or felt any interest in life. Something like a tacit engagement was entered into with the Daynes. I was to go abroad and travel a little, and when I came back the engagement was to be made public, and we were to be married."

Sir George paused, with a gloomy frown, then proceeded:

"She—the girl—was a good, feeble, insignificant little creature, who would have married a laborer off her father's fields if she had been ordered to do it. It was arranged that I should go away for a year. I started, and got as far as Paris, and then—God

knows what idea I had in my poor head—I knew it was hopeless, and whether I was at home or at the North Pole it would make no difference; but I came back, I could not bear to be away from her. My father saw that it was no further use to struggle with me, and gave in about Miss Dayne. He died a year later, and I succeeded to the title and the estates, and some months later I made a second proposal to Mrs. Dartmouth.”

“And then?”

“I learnt then, what I had never known before, that she loved me. She told me so. I begged her to tell me what was the obstacle that kept us apart, but she would not. She extracted a promise from me that I would go away from England for a short time, and that, come what might, she would marry no other man. I went and traveled all over the continent, and through America and Australia. I was away nearly two years, till I could stay away no longer. The absence did me a little good. I shall never cease to love her, but I have learned patience. I can meet her now as a friend, without making her unhappy by asking her for what she cannot give me. I am not very unhappy, except at moments, and I manage to keep

my unhappiness to myself, as a general thing. I potter about the estate, and attend Quarter Sessions, and all the rest of it, and I daresay some day I shall go into the House, and be a tolerable success as a country gentleman."

"Have you no idea of her reason for refusing to marry you?"

"She gave me none. I can only guess. The likeliest guess I can make is that her husband is still alive. A nice brute he must have been to quarrel with an angel like that. By God, Bream, when you know her as I do! She's an angel. She's been the sunlight of this place since she's been here. You'll hear what the poor say about her. They worship her, and no wonder. She's the best friend they ever had."

"Do you see her often?"

"No oftener than I can help," he replied simply. "I hadn't been there for six weeks when I called to-day."

"You could hardly have liked my monopolizing her as I did," said Bream.

"I did not mind it," answered Sir George. "I am glad to be near her, but it is as well, perhaps, that I should not be alone with her. I am not certain if I could trust myself to speak of—of things better left unspoken of."

The anodyne which soothes the heart of one who has spoken of his secret trouble to a sympathetic listener had come to him, and he was more cheerful, more like his strong and hopeful self, whom Bream had known years ago, when they had been boys together. They walked late under the moonlight, talked of many things,—old memories and future plans. Sir George was cheerful at breakfast, and saw his friend mount and start back to the village with jovial invitations to him to come again soon, and to stay a longer time.

As Bream drew near Mrs. Dartmouth's house, he saw approaching him the figure of a tall and strongly built man, clad in what seemed a peculiar compromise between the ordinary dress of a peasant and that of a sailor. He had on a pair of dilapidated longshore boots, reaching to mid-thigh, and splashed with mud of various hues, as were the corduroy trousers which surmounted them; a blue flannel shirt, with a carelessly knotted flaming red tie; a ragged tweed jacket, and a broad felt sombrero. He seemed to be under the influence of liquor, for he was reeling and tacking from side to side of the road, and every now and then pausing to hold on to a tree branch. Think

ing that it was an early hour for the most faithful subject of La Dive Bouteille to be so nearly prostrate at her shrine, and wondering if one so strangely garbed was merely a passing tramp or one of his parishioners, Bream turned in at Mrs. Dartmouth's gate.

The lady was on the lawn in front of the house, equipped with gardening gauntlets and a pair of shears, and engaged in trimming a rose bush, with Dora hovering about her. She gave him a pleasant greeting, and called to a gardener, at work at a little distance, to take the mare round to the stable. They were chatting together as she continued her work among the flowers, when a sudden cry of alarm from Dora made them both turn. There, in the gateway, stood the figure which Bream had seen a few minutes before in the road. In the very moment in which Bream again caught sight of him, he set both hands to his head and with a long groan fell forward on the path, sending the gravel flying in a little shower about his prostrate figure.

Bream ran to him. He was lying, face downward, in an attitude of complete unconsciousness and self-abandonment.

Turning him over as he raised his head,

the curate saw that he had altogether misread the man's condition. He was not drunk, but clearly very ill. His face was blanched to the hue of chalk, his lips a dull violet, the half-opened lids showed the glaring and discolored whites of his eyes. The beating of his heart was scarcely sensible to the touch of Bream's hand, and only his slow and stertorous breath betrayed that life was in him.

"The man is seriously ill," he answered to Mrs. Dartmouth's rapid questions. "He has fainted from hunger."

"Poor wretch," said Mrs. Dartmouth pityingly. "Can you not carry him into the hall? Tom will help you."

The gardener had returned, and lent a pair of strong and willing hands. The broken wayfarer was carried into the house, and set upon a chair, where he sat, lax as an unstrung marionette, supported by Bream's arm.

"A bad business, I fear," said the latter. "Could you let me have a little brandy, please?"

A ring at the bell produced Barbara, who went in search of the spirit, and stood by while Bream gently insinuated a teaspoonful into the man's throat. He sighed, and

a faint tinge of color flickered into his ashen cheeks.

“That’s better,” said Bream. “Come, my lad, try another dose.”

The second teaspoonful of liquor worked a marked change for the better in the man’s aspect and condition. The color in his face deepened, his eyes opened, and after letting them wander for a moment he fixed them on Mrs. Dartmouth. His lips stirred with a broken murmur, and he made a wandering movement with his arm, meant, perhaps, for a phrase of thanks and a salute, though no word was distinguishable, and his arm fell heavily by his side again.

“Is there any workhouse or asylum that would take the poor fellow in?” asked Bream.

“None nearer than Stortford,” answered Mrs. Dartmouth, “and that is twelve miles away. Is he very ill?”

“Too ill to stand such a journey,” said Bream. “He is almost exhausted. What is to be done?”

“We must give him shelter here, I suppose. It would be inhuman to turn him out upon the road again.”

“Eh, misses,” said Barbara, “but he is such a rough lookin’ chap.”

“It may be a long business,” said Bream, “he has evidently only partially recovered from a severe illness, possibly an infectious disorder.”

“There is a loft over the stable,” said Mrs. Dartmouth, “where the groom used to live before his cottage was finished. He would be quite safe there.”

“Lord save us, misses,” again interposed Barbara, “we shall all be murdered in our beds !”

“Not by this fellow,” said Bream, “for a time at any rate. He hasn’t the strength to murder a fly. Whatever is to be done, should be done quickly.”

“We cannot turn him out,” said Mrs. Dartmouth again, “that would be too shameful. Will you help Tom to carry him to the loft, Mr. Bream ; and please tell we what food he should have.”

“Soup—not too strong. A spoonful every half-hour. Now, Tom, my man, take his legs. So ! You had better come with us, Miss Barbara, to see that the room is in order.”

Barbara followed, a mute protest expressed in her face, and Bream and the gardener bore their patient to the loft. It was not until they had got him there that Bream

noticed a ragged and dirty scrap of paper clenched in the man's hand. It seemed as if, even in his mental prostration and physical exhaustion, he blindly attached some value to it, for he feebly resented the curate's effort to take it from his fingers.

On it was written, in thin, rusty ink, in straggling, formless characters, these words :

Barbara Leigh,
Crouchford Court, Crouchford, Essex.

He read the words aloud, and was electrified by a sudden scream from the woman at his side.

“ Lord sakes, it's Jake ! ”

“ Jake ! ” said Bream, “ you know him ? ”

“ Know him ? He's my own very brother-in-law—Jake Owen, as married my sister ten years ago and took her to Ameriky ! ”

CHAPTER VIII.

JAKE OWEN.

“JAKE!” said Barbara, kneeling beside the bed. “Eh, Jake, lad, to think as I’d ha’ turned thee out on to the road again, like a starvin’ dog! Lord forgive me for my wicked sin. Jake, don’t ee know me? I be Jess’s sister—Jess, as you married, Jake.”

The repetition of the name stirred the traveler. His eyes, which had been fixed upon the ceiling with a meaningless and glassy stare, grew brighter, the rigid lines of his face softened.

“Jake!” said Barbara again, “won’t ee speak to me, lad?”

The fingers which had held the paper fumbled feebly on the counterpane, as if seeking for it. Jake turned his head and saw Barbara kneeling beside him.

“Who be you,” he asked; “where am I?”

“I’m Barbara Leigh,” she said, letting his second question pass unanswered.

“Barbara Leigh,” he repeated ; “let’s see thy face. Aye, Barbara Leigh. Jess’s sister.”

“Yes, yes, Jess’s sister. What brings ee here ?”

“I’ve come,” said Jake, slowly and with difficulty, “to see ye, and bring ye a message. How did I come here ? Where did ye find me ? Ah, I remember ! I was at the gate when my head went round, and I seemed death-struck, and then—what place is this ?”

“Crouchford Court,” answered Barbara ; “I’m servant here. Ye had the name wrote on this paper.”

“Ah !” said Jake, recognizing it. “I wrote it myself, two days agone, when I left London, after I’d first felt the deadness coming over me, so as folks might know as I had friends, and belonged somewhere. Who’s this ?” he asked, with a gesture of the head toward Mr. Bream, who stood quietly attentive at the bedside.

“It’s Mr. Bream, Jake, the curate of the parish, as found ye at the gate and brought you here.”

“Sarvice t’ye, sir,” said Jake, “though I’d rather see ye in a coat of another color.”

“Aye?” said Bream, “and why so, my good fellow?”

“Why,” answered the wayfarer, “they say where black coats gather they be like ravens, and scent death. But I won’t die yet, no—by God—not till I’ve done my work!”

“You’ll live to do plenty of work yet, my friend, if you’ll take care and not excite yourself.”

“Bless you, sir, for them words!” said Barbara.

“You’ve had a long tramp?” said Bream.

“Aye, all the way from London. Three nights and days on the road. I’m sore spent, but there’s life in me yet.”

“There is, indeed,” said Bream, looking at him with interest.

There was a galvanic vitality in the man. Five minutes ago he had seemed almost on the point of death; now his voice, though weak, was firm, and his pale face was full of a restless energy. “You’ll come through all right, but you must be quiet, and not excite yourself. You’ve had brain fever.”

“Ay!” said Jake. “That’s what they called it aboard ship. But I want to talk to Barbey, and, begging your pardon——”

“You want me to go? Well, so I will in

a minute. Let me feel your pulse. Are you hungry?"

"I was a while ago!"

"Some soup will be here in a little while. See that he eats moderately, Barbara. He is not so ill as I supposed, but he must be careful. I'll look in again toward evening. Keep your heart up, my fine fellow, and you'll soon be on your legs again."

"Thankee, sir," said Jake, "for what you've done, and my sarvice to Barbey's missis."

"Tell me," said Barbara, when the door had closed behind Mr. Bream, "tell me about Jess. Where is she? Is she come back to England wi' you?"

"Nay," said Jake, "she'll come back to England no more, my lass."

"Jake!" said Barbara, "can't ee speak plain? What is it as ye're trying to hide from me?"

"She's dead," said Jake.

"Dead!" said Barbara.

"Ay," said Jake, staring at the ceiling. "She's dead and buried. She died in my arms."

"I can't believe it," said Barbara; "eh, Jake, ye're lying, I doubt for sport. Say as ye are."

“It’s the God’s truth,” said the man. “She died i’ my arms, out yonder. Look me i’ the face, Barbey,—did you have no word from her—no news o’ what happened ere she died?”

“Not a word,” said Barbara. “Not a word have I had from her for twelve months and more. The last letter I got said as she was well and happy, and that you was good to her!”

“Better to her, may be, than she deserved,” said Jake.

“What d’ye mean?” said Barbara. “I’d claw the face of any other man as said a word agen my sister. Speak out, straight and open, like a man!”

“She left me,” said Jake.

“Left ye, how left ye?”

“She went off with another man.”

“No, no!” cried Barbara, covering her face with her hands, as if to shut out some horrible vision.

“Ay,” said Jake, “that was the end of it. That was what came of nine years of happy married life. Good to her! She might well say that, Barbey, and more to the back of it. Good to her! I loved the ground she trod on—the thing she touched. I’d ha’ put my hand in the fire to save her

from the finger-ache. And she loved me, too—till *he* came.”

“He?” repeated Barbara.

“Ay, the man she bolted with.” He lay looking at the ceiling with the same unwinking stare, and then said softly, but with an indescribable intonation of hate and loathing, “Damn him!”

Barbara sat silent for a time, rocking her body quietly to and fro, till suddenly she broke into loud weeping.

“Ay, lass,” said Jake, with the same evil-sounding quiet in his voice, “I’ve done that, too, but it didn’t fetch her back.”

Barbara wept unrestrainedly for some minutes. “Tell me,” she said, at last, “how it came about.”

“It was in California, at a place called Jackson’s Gulch. I was mining there, and doing well, for the place was rich. I’d been doing well pretty much all along, after I married Jess, for when a man loves a gail as I loved her, it puts the starch into his back. I’d done a lot of things, and tried a lot of trades and places, for there might ha’ been gipsy blood in her veins, she was that fond of change. We had no children, thank God! Though, perhaps,” he added, after a pause,

“if we had had, it might ha’ kept her straight.”

“ Well, we got to Jackson’s Gulch, and it was there we met Mordaunt. That was the name he gave himself, though most likely it wasn’t his own. He was a gentleman, born and bred, and a scholar, and I took it as a good deal of honor as he should have took to me directly a’most as he saw me. Jess liked him, I could see, and I was glad to see her make a friend, for the place was full of rough people as she didn’t care to mix with. I was away at work all day long, and I thought no harm, even when I knew as he was always with her. I’d have trusted her across the world, after the nine years we’d lived together, and him with her, for I believed he was my friend, and was proud to be in his company. He never did any work, and always seemed to have plenty of money, somehow. Everybody liked him, and gave way to him, as he was a sort of king among them rough chaps, and every woman in the camp was after him. There was nothing as he couldn’t do. He could talk to the Frenchmen and the Germans in their own lingo, and he could play the fiddle better than any other chap in the place, and he could draw people’s pictures so as they seemed to speak

to you out of the paper a'most. He did a picture of Jess, as used to hang in the cabin at the Gulch. I burned it after—after *that* happened, for I couldn't stand seeing the eyes follow me about. I found out afterward as there'd been a lot of talk in the camp about her and Mordaunt being so much together, but nobody said anything to me at the time. P'raps that was lucky for 'em, for I was so mad about the wench, and so took up with Mordaunt, that as likely as not I should have stuck a knife into 'em for their pains. Well, the end came at last. I went home one night, and the cabin was empty. I waited till one o'clock in the morning, and then I went to the bar, beginning to be afeared as something might have happened, and I thought I might get news of her there. Nobody had seen her. Then I asked where Mordaunt was, and the man as kept the bar said he'd borrowed a horse from him and rode out that morning, and hadn't come back yet. I went back to the cabin and waited all night. No news came, and no news all next day. I was well nigh mad with fright, and I went to the chief of the Vigilance Committee, and I asked him to give me a search party to look for her. 'It's no use, my lad,' he said, 'they've got six-and-thirty

hours start of us, and God knows where they are by now.' ' *They!*' I said. ' What d'ye mean?' And he told me, she'd been seen with Mordaunt, thirty miles away, at six o'clock the day before.

He paused in his story, panting a little with the exertion of so much speech. Barbara sat waiting, with clasped hands and tear-stained cheeks, for him to continue. Outside, the pleasant homely sounds of farm life came floating up to the window of the room on the still June air, the clamping of the horses in the stalls below, the cluck of poultry, the rattle of the big mastiff's chain, as he snapped at the flies, the call of a wagoner to his horses fifty yards away on the high road, the distant clatter of a sheep bell, the drowsy music of the trees. Presently Jake's voice rose again, monotonous and hollow, like a ghost's.

"I was that mazed I couldn't think for an hour or two. Then I went to the claim where my partner was working. I didn't need to tell him what had happened. He knew already, and he saw it in my face as I knew, too. I asked him to buy my share and he took it, and paid for it more than it was worth, I remembered afterward, though I didn't notice at the time. He offered to

come along with me, but I said I didn't want him. It was *my* work, and I meant to go through with it alone. I meant to find 'em, and to kill 'em both—and what was to happen afterward I didn't know and I didn't care. I hunted 'em for a long time, nearly all across America, getting word of 'em here and there, but never coming up with them, till at last I got to New York. They had been there together, and Mordaunt had sailed to England a day or two before, alone. I went all over the city looking for Jess, and at last I found her. She was in the hospital, for she'd been fever struck, and he'd took advantage of it to run away and leave her to die, or to starve, or to go upon the streets. I'd meant to kill her, even when I heard she was in the hospital; I went there with murder in my heart, and my knife was open in my pocket when the doctor took me to her bed. But, oh! lass, when I saw her poor white face, with the mark of death on it, plain for a child to read, my heart broke, and I fell crying by the bedside. For I loved her in spite of all."

Barbara took his hand, and kissed it, and wept upon it, in a helpless passion of pity.

"She died," Jake continued. "Thank God, she died in my arms, and knew as I'd forgiven her. I was raving mad for days

after, and knew nothing as happened. When my brain cleared, I was standing by her grave, and there, with the rain beating down on me like my own heart's blood, I swore to find the man as had done it all—as had killed her and ruined my life."

"And did you find him?" asked Barbara, involuntarily shrinking from the bed, though she still clung to Jake's hand.

"No," said Jake, "or I wouldn't be raving here like an old hen-wife as has lost half a dozen chickens. If I'd found him, I'd be quiet, lying in the grave with Jess. That's what's brought me here. That's what's kept me alive through the fever, and the trouble, and the hunger. It's fed my mouth like bread, the thought of meeting *him* face to face. It's all I asked of God Almighty, just to let me stand before that man for one minute."

The simple peasant woman had never seen passion like to this. It frightened her to silence. Then she began to stammer religious commonplaces about the wickedness of revenge. Jake lay staring at the ceiling, and made no answer; it was doubtful if he heard her.

"I'm tired, lass," he said, quietly, a minute after her voice had ceased; "leave me to myself—I'll sleep awhile."

CHAPTER IX.

MR. EZRA STOKES.

MR. EZRA STOKES, the landlord of the Pig and Whistle, one of the two houses of public entertainment in the village of Crouchford, was a newcomer in these parts. Crouchford was slow to accept new people, and Stokes had been a member of its community only for the last two years.

He was a dry and withered man of late middle age, whose skin had been burned to an equal blackish brown by stronger suns than that which shone on Essex. He was gnarled and warped and knotted all over like a wind-blown tree—with a halting leg, a wry neck, a humped shoulder, a peculiarly ghastly squint, a crooked mouth, furnished with huge discolored teeth, no two of which stood at the same angle, and a twisted nose with three distinct bridges.

His antecedents were dark ; except that he had been a traveler, and had as, despite the time-honored proverb to the contrary,

rolling stones sometimes do, gathered some financial moss in his wanderings, nothing was known of him by his neighbors. He had dropped down into the little place from—Heaven knows where, and had taken the lease of the Pig and Whistle, paying solid cash for the privilege, and lived respectably in the village, owing no man anything.

There was a certain likeness between his home and himself: both had been newer and smarter once upon a time, but the battering which makes a man ugly makes a house picturesque, and such stray connoisseurs of the beautiful as came to Crouchford found the Pig and Whistle a prettier spectacle than its landlord. It was a tumble-down, weather-stained roadside house of two stories, with bulging walls shored up by heavy baulks of timber. Its low browed door was covered with a heavy lintel of oak beams, and furnished with two settles, where, on fine nights, Mr. Stokes might be seen reading the newspaper or drinking affably with his rustic customers. The latter voted him 'mazin' good company, for he could, when he chose, talk of moving adventures by flood and field, in places whose names sounded strange and barbaric in

rustic ears, and had besides a sly, hard humor, which sometimes took a practical form.

Mr. Bream, rapidly covering all the ground — social and geographical — of Crouchford with his usual energy, knew every soul in the parish in a week, and among them the landlord of the Pig and Whistle. Their acquaintance made quick progress. There were not many people of sufficient native shrewdness or acquired experience in Crouchford greatly to interest a man of culture, except with the interest, grown commonplace to Mr. Bream, of individual traits of character, or of such special worries and troubles, bodily and spiritual, as it was his duty to attend to.

A man who had traveled, and would talk more or less intelligently of what he had seen, was an acquaintance to be cultivated in a village of whose inhabitants not one per cent. had ever wandered twenty miles from the church spire. Then, the Pig and Whistle was the sitting place of the local parliament, where the ancients and young men of the place came together to unbend in social dissipation after the labors of the day, and he who would know men should meet them at such moments.

Crouchford came to think well of its new curate.

In the first week of his sojourn among them, the annual cricket match with the neighboring village of Hilton had been played, and for the first time in five years had resulted in a victory for Crouchford, mainly through his batting and bowling. That alone would have conquered the affections of the villagers, but when, after the match, Mr. Bream stood the two elevens a supper at the Pig and Whistle, and after due justice had been done to beef and ale, sang "Tom Bowling" from his place at the head of the table, Crouchford old and young, male and female, swore by him.

This access of popularity rather disturbed the mind of Mr. Herbert, who belonged to an altogether different type of clergymen, and whose aristocratic instincts were not so tempered by his Christianity as to permit him so large a familiarity with the humbler members of his flock.

A week or two after Bream's arrival his vicar was shocked to see his curate at the door of Stoke's hostelry, holding forth to the assembled yokels, with a glass of beer in his hand, and obviously, to judge by the broad grins of his audience, not on a doc-

trinal subject. When the two clerics next came together, the senior took the curate to task about this undue familiarity.

“Understand me, Bream,” he said, “I would not willingly be taken for one of those—ah—false shepherds, who think that the delivery of a weekly sermon and the discharge of bare parochial work, completes a pastor’s work. By no means. I have endeavored during my whole time here, to—ah—to institute a friendly feeling between myself and every member of the church congregation. But there are—ah—limits, Bream.”

“So you think I have overstepped the limits, sir?”

“Distinctly!” said Mr. Herbert, with emphasis. “To preserve authority among the—ah—vulgar, a gentleman, and above all, a priest, should keep a certain aloofness—a certain dignity. How can that dignity be preserved by a clergyman who drinks—ah—beer?” Mr. Herbert got out the vulgar monosyllable with something of an effort—“with a crowd of rustics before a common ale-house?”

“Stokes’s beer is really very good, sir,” said Bream, gravely.

It never entered into Mr. Herbert’s head

that anybody, especially his curate, could dare to chaff him, and he put aside the irrelevant remark with a wave of his hand.

“Let me ask you, Mr. Herbert,” said Bream, “if you ever happened to overhear those fellows talking when they were unaware of your presence!”

“Very possibly. I—ah—don’t exactly remember any particular occasion, but it has probably occurred.”

“It has occurred once or twice to me since I have been here,” said Bream, “and I have noticed that on such occasions their whole conversation is one tissue of dirt and profanity. Well, sir, when I am with them, I have seldom heard a word which might not be used from the pulpit. Last night, just after you had passed, one man, Ned Roberts, from the Pear Tree Farm, began to swear. I told him he had no right to use that language in my presence, but—he was drunk—he went on swearing, and Stokes turned him out and sent him home. Now surely, sir, if my presence among them obliges them to talk and think decently for an hour or so a day, that is so much gained, and the fact that it does so is surely proof enough that my familiarity with them has not bred contempt either of me or of my office.”

“There is something in what you say, Bream,” said Mr. Herbert. “Still,” he continued, returning to his original position, “there are limits. Don’t overstep them. As for that fellow Stokes, I don’t like him. During the four years he has lived here he has not once entered the church door. He has given me more trouble about—ah—tithes than any three people in the place. I don’t think he led a reputable life before he came here.”

“He is a fairly intelligent man, sir, and he has a good deal of influence among the laborers. As to what his life has been it is hard to say. He has traveled a good deal, though in what capacity I don’t know. He is willing enough to talk of what he has seen, but he never talks about himself.”

“I should say,” said Mr. Herbert, “that he probably has good reason for his reticence,” an uncharitable remark, which Bream attributed to the tithes dispute.

It fell out, however, that this same Stokes was to be intimately associated with the development of the one romance which was going forward in that sleepy and world-forgotten village, and it so fell out in this wise. Mr. Bream, calling at the Pig and Whistle one evening, found Stokes holding

forth to his ring of customers regarding a tremendous landslip in the State of Arizona, which had happened a few years back, in a district with which he had been familiar both before and after the catastrophe. His hearers listened open-mouthed, save one sour-faced veteran, who, at the conclusion of the tale, snorted with disdainful laughter, before burying his visage in a wide-mouthed earthen mug.

“What be laughin’ at, George?” asked a crony.

“Why at all you fools swallerin’ the like of that,” said the ancient.

“Don’t you believe it?” asked Stokes.

“Do you believe it, as has been a telling of it?” asked the ancient, sourly. “You comes here, and asks Chris’en men i’ their sense to b’lieve a rigmarole like that.”

“Well, but George, what is it as ee don’t b’lieve,?” asked the crony.

“I don’t believe one word of it,” said George, sturdily.

“You’re wrong there, then,” said Mr. Bream. “Things of that sort do occur, and as for the details of this story, I remember reading some of them in the English papers at the time.”

“There,” said Stokes, triumphantly.

“That’s what comes o’ telling a story to a gentleman as knows something. And if ye want any more proof than Mr. Bream’s word, why ye shall have it.”

So saying, he left the meeting for a moment, and presently returned with a big volume in his arms, which turned out to be a collection of literary and pictorial scraps from English, Colonial, and American newspapers.

“There,” he said, bumping the volume down before the dissenting George, open at a large picture—“that’s the place as it was after the landslip—as it is now for all I know. I’ve eat my meals and slep’ in that hut in the corner scores o’ times, when it was a quarter-of-a-mile higher up the mountain.

“Well,” said the combative George, unable to stand against the phalanx of testimony, but retreating like a valiant general, with his face to the foe, “I don’t know as it’s much use to talk o’ places when that kind o’ thing’s like to happen. I’m glad as I can go to my bed i’ Crouchford without bein’ afraid of finding Hilton atop o’ me when I wakes i’ the mornin’. I should look on a visitation o’ that sort i’ th’ light of a judgment.”

“Ah, surely!” chorused the others, with the exception of Stokes, who was surveying

the ancient with a visage of humorous disdain, and Mr. Bream, who was turning the leaves of the book.

“Have you been in all these places, Stokes?” asked Mr. Bream, glancing from page to page, filled with scraps of journalism from most of the English-speaking countries and settlements on the face of the globe.

“Why, no sir!” said Stokes, “not all, but I’ve been in a good many of ’em. I was always fond of reading, and I cut them things out, here and there, and kept ’em, and when I came here I pasted ’em into that book. They comes in useful, sometimes, when a set o’ moldy old yokels, as has never been a mile from the town pump, calls me a liar.”

George wisely declined to accept this challenge to a renewal of hostilities. Suddenly the assembly was startled by a stifled exclamation from Mr. Bream, and saw him staring like one amazed at a page of the book.

“Stokes!” he said, rising with the volume in his hand, and speaking in a quick, uneven voice, “give me a word in private, will you? There is something here which interests me.”

Stokes limped his way into the deserted parlor, and Mr. Bream followed, bearing the

book, which he laid open on the table. The inn-keeper offered him a chair; he took no notice of the act, but after looking round to see that they were really alone and the door closed, laid his finger on a cutting.

“Read that,” he said, “and tell me if it’s true.”

Stokes, after staring at him, read the paragraph. It was to this effect:

“News comes from Yuam, New Mexico, that Bluffer Hawkins, the well-known desperado of that district, has at last handed in his checks. Our readers will remember that it is little over a month since Hawkins, accompanied by a solitary confederate, stopped the mail-coach just outside Yuam, and executed a daring and successful robbery on the passengers. On Tuesday night, one of the victims of the raid gave information to Police Lieutenant McCormick that Hawkins and his companion had entered the town, and were drinking in the Magnolia Saloon. That officer, with his usual energetic promptness, betook himself to the place, accompanied by three of his subordinates. Immediately on his entrance, Hawkins and his companion drew their revolvers. In the first exchange of shots McCormick and one of his followers fell, fatally wounded, and there is

little doubt but that Hawkins and his companion would have escaped but for the public-spirited conduct of Mr. Uriah Cleary, the proprietor of the saloon, who materially aided the officers of law by firing at Hawkins from behind. His bullet passed through the desperado's neck, and a lucky shot from one of McCormick's party settled his companion. The identity of the latter was established at the police-station, where, life being discovered to be extinct, an examination of his body resulted in the discovery of several old letters, addressed to Philip O'Mara, at an address in London. McCormick's gallant conduct has excited universal admiration, and a subscription has been liberally started on behalf of his widow and children."

It seemed to Mr. Bream's excited fancy that Stokes took an unconscionably long time to read this short paragraph. When at last he raised his head, his twisted face was as impassive as a stone wall. As for his eyes, there was never anything to be learned from them, not even the direction in which they were looking. He said nothing, but waited for the clergyman to speak again.

"Is that true?" asked Mr. Bream again.

“It’s given here as a piece of news,” Stokes answered. “I don’t see why it shouldn’t be.”

“Were you ever in that place? Did you know either of those men?”

Stokes’s crooked eyes came together, as if taking council of each other.

“I knew them both,” he answered, after a moment’s pause.

“Were you at this place, Yuam, when the affray happened?”

“No, I was in New York; that’s where I saw the report. It’s cut out of the *New York Sentinel*, June 5, 18—.” He pointed to the date, written in his own rude characters, below the paragraph.

“You knew O’Mara?”

“Not by that name; Mordaunt was what he called himself!”

“How do you know then that this was the man?”

“Because I was with him in a bar in St. Louis; a man came up to him and called him O’Mara. Mordaunt stuck the man out as he’d made a mistake. He was an Englishman, so was Mordaunt.”

“Could you describe him?”

“Tallish chap; good-looking; very swell way of speaking. Used a lot of crack jaw

words. Played the fiddle and the pianner beautiful.”

“Will you lend me this book for an hour or two, Stokes? Say till to-morrow morning?”

“Certainly, sir,” said Stokes, closing the volume and handing it to him, “keep it as long as you like, sir.”

“I knew the unfortunate man,” said Mr. Bream, “he has relatives in England who know nothing of his death. I will ask you, Stokes, to be so good as to say nothing of our conversation. It is a painful story and I don’t want it talked about.”

“I’m mum, sir,” said Stokes, “there’s nobody here, at all events, as I’m likely to talk to about it.”

“True,” said Mr. Bream.

He left the house with the book under his arm.

“He said he was going home when he came in,” said Stokes to himself, as he watched the curate’s rapidly lessening figure along the village street. “*That ain’t his way home. He seemed knocked all acock by it. He asks me not to talk about it. What’s in the wind now, I wonder?*”

CHAPTER X.

AFTER SEVEN YEARS.

BREAM, with Stokes's book of scraps hugged under his arm and seeming to communicate an electric tingle under his whole frame, strode along the village street into the lane beyond, walking at his rapidest rate, until he came in sight of the red brick chimneys of Crouchford Court. He slackened his pace there to recover his breath and wipe away the thick perspiration which his rapid walking had brought to his face. He was in such a condition of nervous tremor as few men of his splendid physical condition seldom know, and it required a strong effort to quiet the trembling of his hands, and to compose his features to their usual calm.

Barbara answered his ring, and replied to his inquiry that Mrs. Dartmouth was at home. She led him to the breakfast-room, and left him to announce his arrival, returning with the message that her mistress would see him directly.

“How is your brother-in-law progressing?” he asked her.

“He’s mending, sir, slowly. Doctor says as he ought to be all right again in a week or two. My lady is going to find him work on the farm when he is well enough to take it.”

“He seems to have something on his mind,” said Bream. “His illness is much more mental than physical. Whatever it is, he refuses to talk of it.”

“He’s told me, sir,” said Barbara. With a reticence natural under the circumstances, she said no more than that he was grieving for her sister—his wife—who had died a year ago. Mrs. Dartmouth entering at that moment released her from further question, and she left the room.

Bream found himself in a situation which most of us have known at some time or other; the possessor of a piece of news he knew must be welcome, yet requiring considerable delicacy in the fashion of its conveyance. To gain time, he opened with some stereotyped commonplace, and Mrs. Dartmouth answering on the same lines, found himself floundering dismally, and feeling it more and more difficult with every passing moment to disclose the real object of his visit. His uneasiness was too pro-

nounced to miss Mrs. Dartmouth's observation.

"You seem agitated, Mr. Bream. No bad news, I hope, of your parishioners?"

"Oh, none! Things are going splendidly." He stopped short, and then, taking his courage *à deux mains*, plunged at the communication he had to make.

"I have learned a thing this afternoon, which closely concerns you," he said. "It concerns you so closely, it is of such vital importance, that I scarcely know how to approach it. I am afraid that it will be something of a shock to you."

She went a shade paler than usual, but it was with perfect quiet that she bade him proceed.

"You will remember that on my first meeting with you how we spoke of—of your husband." She went paler still, and her breathing quickened. "I have news of him." There was so unmistakable a look of fear and horror in her face that he hurried on, blurting out his communication crudely, almost brutally. "You are free. He will never trouble you again."

Mrs. Dartmouth gave a gasp, and her bosom labored under the hand with which she tried to still it.

He laid the book open at the paragraph he had read half an hour before.

“Read for yourself,” he said.

She took the book, and remained staring at it blankly for a minute or two. When at last she bent her eyes upon the lines, they so danced and gyrated before them that she could not read. Even when she had found the passage, she sat staring at the page as if the words meant nothing to her. Presently the tears began to run down her blanched cheeks, and she gave a gasping sob or two. Bream feared an attack of hysterics.

“I will leave you,” he said, “and send Barbara.”

“No, no!” she said. “Stay!”

She tried hard to fight down the attack, and succeeded, but the tears were still running when the door opened, and a head of golden curls peeped round it. Dora sped to her mother, and climbing upon her knee, began to cry in affectionate and ignorant sympathy. Mrs. Dartmouth strained her in her arms, hushing and soothing her with broken ejaculations of comfort. The tears still ran, but the emotion which called them forth was changed. She kissed and caressed the child with a passionate affection, which frightened her almost as much as her

mother's white face and choking sobs had done before.

“Oh, mamma, what *is* it?” cried Dora, bewildered and frightened by the rapid changes of emotion readable in her mother's face and manner. “What is the matter?”

“I will tell you darling, some day, perhaps; not now—you would not understand. See, I am quite happy now; I am not going to cry any more.” She wiped the tears from her own face and from that of the child. “Run away, dear; Mr. Bream and I have things to talk of.”

“And you are sure—*sure*—that you won't cry any more?” asked Dora.

“No, darling, my crying is over now,” answered Gillian. She kissed the child again, whispering, “Go!” in her ear, and Dora went obediently, with a lingering backward glance. Bream had retired to a window looking on the garden, and had left child and mother together. He remained there, giving Gillian the time to conquer herself before resuming her talk with him.

“Let us get into the open air,” she said, “I am stifling here.”

They passed into the garden together, and for a space there was silence between them. They crossed the lawn, and a hay field where

the grass was almost ready for the scythe, and entered a long stretch of spinney, bounded by the public road. Still no word was spoken, as they walked slowly through alternate spaces of green gloom and golden sunlight.

“Mr. Bream,” said Gillian at last, “I feel like a criminal. The man was my husband, I almost loved him once, when our married life was new. He was the father of my child, I swore before the altar to love and honor him, swore as a Christian woman, knowing the meaning of that solemn vow. And now that I know that he is dead—I cannot help it—my only feeling is joy.”

“Very naturally,” said Bream. ‘He made his tone purposely dry, almost careless, for there was such a deep emotion in her voice that he dreaded to increase it. “There is a point at which nature must assert itself, at which no vow, however sacred, no duty, however great, can beat it down.”’

“I was his wife,” she said.

“A true one, I know,” he answered, “and a loving one, had he ever cared to have your love. Am I right?”

“God knows you are,” she said.

“I am a clergyman,” he said, “an unworthy one, I know, but one who at least

tries to do his duty. I am speaking now guardedly and with a full sense of the spiritual import of what I say. Justice and common sense absolve you. You gave this man duty and obedience. He trampled them underfoot. You offered him affection and respect. He flung them aside. You owe to his memory no more than the sorrow every Christian should feel for a wasted life, and hope that God may have pardoned his cruelty."

The steady beat of a horse's hoofs, which had been clearly audible since they entered the strip of woodland, had come nearer and nearer unmarked, and now in the sudden dead stillness, which had followed Bream's solemn words, rang on their ears with a startling suddenness. They reached the further outskirts of the spinney, and saw Sir George Venebles riding by. He was looking in their direction, but passed without seeing them. Bream stole a look at his companion, and saw the pallor of her face drowned in a sudden wave of crimson. She turned, and struck into a narrow path through the undergrowth, so narrow that he could no longer walk abreast with her. To his mind, the blush and succeeding action were a confession. When a widening of the

path permitted him to regain her side, he saw that though the first brilliancy of the blush had faded, her face was aflame with healthy color, and there was a soft, dreamy look in her eyes. Becoming aware of his scrutiny, she blushed anew, and covered her confusion by holding out to him her hand with a bright, grateful smile.

“You seem to have been appointed by Providence as my special guardian angel,” she said. “Now, how can I ever thank you?”

“Thank me? Why, what have you to thank me for?”

“For everything that makes life worth living,” she answered. “For new hope, for countless kindnesses.”

“You owe me literally nothing,” said Bream. “It is I who should thank Providence for putting into my hands the opportunity of serving you. I did not make the opportunity. It came to me. I used it, that is all.”

“You were always generous,” she said, “but that only adds to the burden of my obligation.”

Venebles was in his mind, and as they walked side by side to the house, he strove to find some form of words in which he might hint, not too broadly, of his friend's

hopes. The flush in her face, the tender dewiness of her eyes as the baronet had ridden by, at once opened his desire to speak, and seemed to intimate how little need of speech there was. He had parted with her before he found his opening.

“That will be arranged without any interference of mine,” he said to himself, as he swung gaily back to the village. “She loves him, that is evident enough. I suppose Herbert will want to marry them. I should have liked to do that, but I suppose I must be content with the position of best man. Poor old Venebles, he has waited a long time. How sad he looked as he passed. Well, his troubles are over now, and hers too, thank God! They ought to be happy together. He’s a splendid fellow, and she—she’s an angel. They are worthy of each other, and the whole world doesn’t hold a finer couple. By Jove! there he is. Hi! Sir George! I want to speak to you.”

The baronet, who had suddenly hove into sight, cantering down a cross-road, pulled up at the summons, and waited until his friend came panting up to him. At his request he dismounted, and they walked side by side together down a deserted lane as Bream told his story. Venebles went red

and pale by turns, but his broad, handsome face glowed like a sun with sudden joy as he turned it on his friend. He wrung his hand hard, pouring out incoherent words of thanks.

“I was right, then; I knew she cared for me.”

“Her face showed that as you rode by,” said Bream. “You never made a more opportune appearance. Where are you going?” he asked, as the baronet swung himself into the saddle.

“I’m going to make another,” he answered; “to strike while the iron is hot.”

“You’re a brisk lover,” said the curate, with a laugh. “Had you not better give her a bit of time, and wait a little?”

“Wait?” said Venebles, fiercely. “You talk easily of waiting. I’ve waited six years already.” He leaned over and pressed his friend’s hand again. “God bless you, old fellow! I shall have news for you to-morrow.”

He struck his spurs in his great roadster, and was gone like a flash, Bream looking after him till he had disappeared from sight. Five minutes at that pace carried him to Crouchford Court. He tied his foaming horse to the gate, and entered the garden.

Gillian was there among her flowers. He strode toward her. She tried to keep back the great wave of crimson, which flooded her from brow to throat, and to repress the trembling of her limbs, but he gave her no time to play the tricks of her sex. He had hold of both her hands in his strong grasp before she knew, and bent above her radiantly.

“Gillian,” he said, “I know your secret now. I know the barrier that parted us is down. Bream has told me all.”

“Mr. Bream tells other people’s secrets very easily,” she said, with an attempt at frigid dignity, made quite abortive by her beaming face and humid eyes, and by the electric tremor of her fingers.

“I have waited for my happiness a long time, Gillian,” he said, with a sudden tremor in his voice. “Have I not found it at last?”

“If I can make you happy, yes,” she answered, with a sweet gravity, and yielded to the strong and steady persuasion of the hands which drew her to his breast.

CHAPTER XI.

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT IT.

THE evening after the blissful interview which had ended six years of fear and doubt, Sir George Venebles, mounted on his big roadster, was journeying through the pleasant green lanes which lay between the Lodge and Crouchford Court.

It was still early in the morning, and the heat of the young sun was tempered by a cool breeze and an occasional fleecy cloud. The whole earth seemed, in the happy lover's imagination, to rejoice with his rejoicing; and the tranquil, friendly prospect of the meadows, among which his whole life had been passed, had never touched him with a charm of such serene happiness.

The long ribbon of road, inch deep in white dust between the flowering hedges, was empty of passengers, and in the pleasant solitude he gave vent to the gladness of his heart with an almost boyish simplicity, answering the incessant chatter of the birds with a fluent whistle, as jolly as the jolliest

note of thrush or blackbird. His handsome face, ruddy with free exercise in sun and air, beamed with satisfaction. He was dressed with unusual care, and from the corner of his hat to the tips of his polished boots looked the very model of an English squire.

As he approached within sight of the chimney cowl of Crouchford Court visible above the winding hedges, he became aware of a figure approaching him on foot, and on a second glance recognized the pedestrian as Mr. Herbert. He waved his riding whip in salutation and quickened his horse's leisurely pace.

The reverend gentleman was strolling along with a serenity of visage begotten of a good breakfast, a conscience at rest, a mind at peace with all the world, and the softening influence of the odorous morning air.

"Good-morning, Sir George," he said, as the baronet reined in his horse. "Magnificent weather."

"Yes," said Venebles. "It's the finest day I ever saw, I think."

There was an unconstrained ring of jollity in his voice, he spoke the words upon a laugh, as though they had been some masterpiece of merry humor. The clergyman

looked at him, with knitted brows of good humored inquiry drawn over his mild, short-sighted eyes.

“You look particularly happy this morning,” he exclaimed.

“I *am* particularly happy,” Venebles answered.

“I rejoice to—ah—hear it,” said Mr. Herbert. “May I ask the cause?”

“Well,” said Venebles, “you would certainly soon hear it from some other source, so I will tell you the more willingly since, to some extent, it concerns you.”

“Concerns me?” repeated Herbert.

Venebles descended from his horse, and taking the clergyman’s arm, led on his horse by the bridle.

“Yes, I hope in a week or two to ask for a cast of your office.”

“Indeed?”

Mr. Herbert spoke the word with a sudden gravity, and shot a side-long glance at the radiant face of his companion.

“Yes,” said Venebles. “I’m going to say good-by to bachelorhood, and settle down as a married man.”

“Ye-es,” said Mr. Herbert.

“Is that all you have to say?” asked Venebles.

“By no means. I may have much to say, my dear Sir George; but tell me, first, who is the lady?”

“I should have thought you would have guessed that,” said the baronet. His tone was a little discomfited and brusque, as though his old friend’s lack of warmth hurt him.

“Perhaps I do,” said the clergyman. “Mrs. Dartmouth?”

“Yes, I proposed to her last night, and she accepted me. By Jove! I believe I’m the happiest man in England at this moment. You know, sir, what a woman she is, how good, how——”

He checked himself. To his devoted tenderness his very praise seemed almost a profanation of the priceless woman he loved, so little could he express of the devotion with which she filled his heart.

“A most admirable lady,” said Mr. Herbert. “A lady for whom I have the most profound respect—I had almost said—ah—affection. Beautiful both in person and character.”

“Isn’t she?” cried Venebles, turning a happy face on him. “Thank you, sir, for saying that. Though who could think otherwise who’d ever seen her for five minutes. I

knew you would congratulate me when you knew."

"Ahem!" went Mr. Herbert.

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Venables, releasing his arm. His face, which was simply wondering, would have expressed indignation had his companion been other than he was.

"My dear Sir George," said Mr. Herbert, "be calm. I respect and admire the lady as much, I think, as you can do. I admit that as far as the graces of her mind and person, the excellence of her character and principles are concerned, it would be difficult to discover a lady more admirably suited to do credit to the station you will raise her to. But there are other considerations."

"Other considerations?" echoed Venables. "What other considerations, in Heaven's name?"

"Let us approach them—ah—*seriatum!*" said Mr. Herbert. "You must know, my dear sir, that a friend so intimate, not merely with yourself but with your dear father, must have been aware of the conditions of your feelings with respect to Mrs. Dartmouth for some time past. I know, for instance, that some five or six years ago you asked her to become your wife."

“I did.”

“Did she—ah—confide to you any reason for her refusal at that date?”

“No, I guessed it, and have since learned that my guess was correct. Her husband was still alive.”

“I gather, from her acceptance of you, that he is since dead.”

“Precisely,” said Venebles, dryly.

“Precisely,” echoed Mr. Herbert. “Has she confided in you the reasons for her separation from her husband for so long a period?”

“I never asked her,” answered Venebles; “I did not want to know them. The matter has not been mentioned between us.”

“Don’t you think,” pursued the clergyman, “don’t you think, my dear Sir George, putting aside for the moment other considerations to which we will—ah—presently return—that it would be well to invite such a confidence.”

“I am so perfectly certain,” said Sir George, “that Gill—that Mrs. Dartmouth—can have nothing to blame herself for, so sure that, whatever the reason for her separation may have been, she was blameless in the matter, that I have never thought it necessary to approach the subject. Let me

ask you, sir, if ever, in all your knowledge of women—and in your clerical capacity you must have known many very intimately—have you ever known one her superior? I have heard you speak of her goodness a hundred times. She is your favorite parish-woman. It was by your countenance and friendship that she conquered the prejudice with which, as a stranger, she found herself surrounded when first she came to live here.”

“True,” said Mr. Herbert. “I believe her to be an excellent woman. But, mark me, I can only *believe* it. I do not *know* it. I know nothing but her career among us in Crouchford.”

“Is not that enough?”

“To extend to her my personal consideration as a gentleman, my office as a spiritual guide—yes. To receive her as a fit wife for you, the son of my oldest friend, the representative of the best family in this county, as the future mother of your children—no. No, my dear George. You have a right to know more, to know—ah—all. I pay the lady a sincere compliment when I express my belief that she would welcome your invitation to such a confidence.”

“I have no fear of it,” said Venebles,

with a laugh. "If she likes to tell me—I'll listen. But I won't hint a doubt of her by asking it."

"Then," said Mr. Herbert, "let us waive that point for a little time, and come to the other consideration at which I hinted a minute ago. Mrs. Dartmouth is—ah—a widow."

"Well!" said Venebles. He spoke the word dryly, with a twinkle in his eyes which his companion did not see.

"My views upon certain topics," said Mr. Herbert, "are, I know, what the present generation, even the present generation of clergymen, are in the habit of calling—ah—old-fashioned. That judgment has, however, never frightened me into holding back when I deemed it necessary to express them. Some old fashions are worth preserving. Your 'well,' my dear Sir George, is a little disingenuous, for I think you are aware of my views upon the re-marriage of widows."

"I know that you disapprove of it," said Venebles. "Mrs. Dartmouth knows it, too, for you have expressed it, she tells me, in her presence. She told me so last night, when I said that I hoped that you would marry us."

"Understand me," said Mr. Herbert,

“that I have never taken the ground that *no* widow should marry. There may be—ah—dispensations. There are many rules of conduct which admit of no exception whatever. There are others in which—ah—distinction may fittingly be made. I trust that this may be such a case, admitting, of course, that, as I am strongly inclined to believe, your blind belief in Mrs. Dartmouth’s purity of character is justified. Come!” he said, pressing the young man’s arm, and speaking with a winning friendliness of manner made additionally pleasant by his general stiffness and preciseness, “come, my dear sir, let us see if there is no way of reconciling our views upon this matter.”

“Willingly,” said Venebles. “I know, sir, that I have no more sincere well-wisher than yourself.”

“Good!” said Mr. Herbert. “Then, will you let me approach Mrs. Dartmouth on the two themes of which we have spoken? Let me in my double character of your friend and well-wisher—representing in that capacity, the world and—ah—the general feeling of society—and as a clergyman, representing the views of the true church, let me ask Mrs. Dartmouth for some particulars of her

first marriage and the reason of her—ah—unfortunate separation from her husband.”

Venebles paced on slowly for a moment.

“I tell you candidly,” said the old cleric, with an obvious affection, which gave a certain dignity to his speech and preserved the young man from taking any offense at his rather fussy officiousness, “that I feel toward you—ah—in *loco parentis*—Ah! you laugh. You think you are old enough to be out of leading strings, old enough to do without anybody’s advice.”

“Advice!” repeated Venebles. “Pray, understand me, Mr. Herbert.” He checked his horse, and stood still to make the declamation, letting go the old clergyman’s arm. “There is no power on earth could prevent me from marrying Mrs. Dartmouth. I believe, now that she is free, there is no force on earth that could prevent her from marrying me,” he went on, with a heightened color and a broken voice, which testified to the violence he did to his inner self in speaking thus plainly of his dearest and most inmost thoughts. “I love her, sir. . She loves me. We are pledged to each other, and nothing, *nothing* can part us.”

“I trust,” returned Mr. Herbert, “that there may be no need to speak of your part-

ing. My knowledge of Mrs. Dartmouth during her residence among us prompts me to believe that the fullest possible inquiry into her antecedents will conduct only to an additional respect for her character. That inquiry, my dear George, is the merest precaution, the merest matter of form. As to the dispensation, that is a matter on which, until I know the facts of her former union, I cannot venture to speak. It is a matter for grave deliberation, not for—ah—haphazard guess-work.”

“You have heard my ultimatum, sir,” answered Venebles. “No power on earth can keep me from fulfilling my engagement with Mrs. Dartmouth. I do not think—I cannot believe—that anything will force or persuade her to break her promise to me.”

“You expressed a desire,” said the cleric, after a moment’s silence, “that I should perform the marriage service.”

“Certainly,” said Venebles. “It would add to my happiness, even in marrying Mrs. Dartmouth, that you should unite us.”

“Nothing would give me sincerer pleasure,” said Mr. Herbert, “than to do so, if I can only satisfy my conscience that I am guilty of no breach of the laws of the church. But I feel so strongly upon this point that I make

no apology for plain speech. If I find that I cannot so satisfy myself, it will be a painful necessity imposed upon me by—ah—the necessities of the case to request you to apply to another clergyman.”

Venebles gave a little shrug, half of vexation and half of humor.

“Well, sir,” he said, “I can’t and shan’t try to prevent you speaking to Mrs. Dartmouth on any topic you think fit. She may tell you what she will about her past life. As to your crotch—your views about this other matter—I warn you that I would marry Mrs. Dartmouth if she were fifty thousand widows rolled into one.”

With this wholesale announcement of unconquerable affection, Venebles turned his horse’s head again in the direction of Crouchford Court.

•“You are going to call upon Mrs. Dartmouth?” asked Mr. Herbert.

“Yes.”

“Will you permit me to accompany you?”

“Certainly,” said Venebles, and he and the clergyman walked on together.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER WAY.

A SMALL rustic, in an ancestral smock frock, covered with a rimless felt hat, and wearing a pair of enormous boots of abnormal thickness of sole, was coming whistling along the road toward them at an easy pace, which quickened at sight of them to a shambling half run. On encountering the two gentlemen outside Mrs. Dartmouth's gate, he touched a shaggy forehead and extended a letter to Mr. Herbert.

"I missed 'ee at the vicarage, sir," he said.

Mr. Herbert opened the letter, dismissing the messenger with a fatherly nod. He perused the communication with lifted eyebrows, and handed it over to his companion with a gravely twinkling smile.

"Mrs. Dartmouth wishes to see you, sir," said Venebles.

"As you see," said Mr. Herbert.

They passed into the house together, and had been seated in the wide reception room

some five minutes when Mrs. Dartmouth entered. She was dressed in a riding habit, and carried a whip in her hand. She flushed a little at sight of Venebles, and cordially greeted Mr. Herbert.

“It is very good of you,” she said, “to answer my appeal so soon, when you must have so many calls upon your time.”

“I am always at your disposal, Mrs. Dartmouth,” the reverend gentleman answered. “Your messenger missed me at the vicarage. I met him at the gate, where I had just encountered Sir George.”

“If,” said Venebles, looking at his watch, “if you can let me know, Gillian, at what time you think your conference with Mr. Herbert will be over, I will get back then, and we can go for our ride.”

“But I want you to stay,” she answered. “I asked Mr. Herbert to come at this hour because we had already made an appointment.”

Venebles sat and plunged into contemplation of his boots.

“I am all attention,” said Mr. Herbert.

“You are aware,” she began, the color playing on her face and her breathing a little quickened, though her manner was as simple and unembarrassed as her words,

“you are aware, Mr. Herbert, of the relationship newly established between Sir George Venebles and myself?”

Mr. Herbert bowed.

“I have heard it from Sir George himself, within the last half hour.”

“I took the liberty of asking you to call.”

“You did me the honor, Mrs. Dartmouth.”

She acknowledged the stately mixture of correction and compliment by a slight bend of the head.

“To make a communication to you. The circumstances of my engagement to Sir George, and of my position in this place, seem to me to be such as make it advisable.”

“My dear Gillian,” Venebles broke in at this point, “pray allow me a word. You are free to make any communication to Mr. Herbert you please. But I have asked for none, and I desire none.”

“It is best,” she said. “I should be unworthy the honor you do me—of your love,” she added, with a little deepening of color, “if I permitted you to marry me except with the clearest possible understanding between us.”

“Admirably said, Mrs. Dartmouth,” said Mr. Herbert. “You see, my dear Venebles, you stand for love, who has always been

painted blind, I represent the church and the world."

"Which have always had their eyes particularly wide open," interjected Venebles.

Mr. Herbert let out a resounding cough of one syllable, deprecating levity, to call it by no harsher name.

"I have been told," continued Gillian, addressing him again, "that you have leanings to auricular confessions."

"In a sense, yes. Without its perversions, its intrusions into domestic privacy. There are many things in the old formulas which might still be adopted, with—ah—modifications."

"Adapted," murmured Sir George, "like plays from the French."

"On another point," said Gillian, "I hear you hold rather old-fashioned views—you doubt the right of a woman who has once been married to marry again?"

"Hum! Not—not entirely. There may be exceptions—spiritual dispensations. Divorce—of course, I hold with the Fathers to be abominable and un-Christian. Even when death intervenes, causing a temporary separation, it seems to me that the union of souls is still a living certainty."

"Ah!" said Gillian, softly, but with a

note of deep emotion in her voice, which made her auditors look at her—Mr. Herbert with a quickened interest, and Venebles with a pitying affection. “The union of souls! It is of that I wish to speak before you both—of that, and other things. It is right that my future husband should know the whole truth concerning my former marriage and my past life.”

“I listen under protest, Gillian,” said Sir George. “I ask for nothing that it can pain you to tell.”

“It would pain me all the more to be silent, George,” she answered.

She paused for a moment before beginning her recital.

“I was a mere child when my mother died, so young that I can scarcely remember her at all. My father had till that time practiced as a doctor in London, but at my mother’s death he gave up his practice, and retired to a little town in the midlands. He had been very successful in his profession, and besides the money he had earned in that way, had a small private fortune, so that we were in more than easy circumstances. He was passionately devoted to science, and after his retirement from practice devoted his whole time to his studies and experi-

ments, leaving me to the care of an old nurse, who had been my mother's favorite servant, and who idolized me. I was the only child. I grew up under her guardianship, not the best in the world, perhaps, for a self-willed child, seeing little of my father, who passed nearly all his waking hours in his laboratory. I would not have you think that I blame my father, or think of him with anything but the warmest love and respect. He was the kindest and best of men, generosity and gentleness in person, and he loved me dearly. But he was absorbed in his scientific studies, and so long as I looked happy and contented when we met, he never dreamed that there was more to wish for. I learned what and how I liked, and studied or idled as the fit took me. It was a happy life," said Gillian, with a sigh, "a long dream of happiness, but not the best preparation for the duties and struggles of the world.

"The place in which we lived was a very small one—little more than a village—and from two years of age to seventeen I had never been five miles away from home, so that between the unceasing affection of my father and my nurse, and my ignorance of everything in the world which I had not

learned from books, I was little more than a child in knowledge when already almost a woman in years. I can look back on myself as I was then, quite dispassionately. I had many faults. I was willful and petulant, as spoiled children who have never had their whims crossed are sure to be. I was very ignorant of life, and my brain was filled with nonsensical dreams and ideas, some drawn from the novels and poetry which were all I cared to read, some the birth of my own ignorance and girlish folly. But I was as innocent and honest a girl—I can truly say—as I have ever known. Looking back to that time through the miserable years which separate the poor girl from the woman I now am, the contrast is all to her advantage.

“I was just seventeen when I first saw my husband. He came to the village on a sketching tour. He managed to scrape acquaintance with my father by pretending to have a great interest in some scientific problem on which my father had just published a book. He was an extremely clever man, with a ready address and a certain ease of manner which imposed on most people very readily, and he had, more than any other person I have ever known, the art of

pleasing and interesting the people he desired to stand well with. A less clever man might easily have made a conquest either of my father or myself. He, poor old man, fell a complete victim. In a week he could talk of nothing else but this new acquaintance. He had made himself my father's pupil and secretary, and it was my father's constant cry that he was a man of scientific genius, who, if he had had the necessary training, would have been one of the greatest lights of the age. I can remember and understand now by what means he gained my father's affection, how he played on his simple vanity and flattered his foibles. I learned more afterward, and from him. It was one of his favorite amusements to tell me, after our marriage, how he had cheated and deceived the good old man, who grew to love him in a month or two almost as a son.

“ My father fell ill, and after only a week's confinement knew that his case was hopeless. In his last days all his thoughts were for me. He reproached himself bitterly for his neglect of me; the only terror death had for him was that he must leave the child he loved, alone and unprotected in a world of which he knew as little as I myself. Philip—that was my husband's name—played on

this terror with such success that the day before his death my father begged me to marry him there and in his presence. His belief in this man amounted to a mania, though he had known him scarcely three months. He implored me with tears to make his last hours happy, 'happier,' he said, 'than he deserved to be after his neglect of me'—to let him know that he did not leave me unprotected. I consented. What else could I do? Put yourself in my place, Mr. Herbert; imagine the circumstances."

"Did you love this man?" asked Mr. Herbert.

"No," said Gillian.

"A bad beginning," said the clergyman.

"Bad, indeed," said Gillian. "No, I did not love him. I admired him, I thought him clever, handsome, like the heroes of novels I had read, but he had not touched my heart at all. But my father begged me to marry him, and in his anxiety for my welfare painted the future of an unprotected girl so black and full of danger, that I consented. To be quite honest with you, there was a dash of romance in this marriage to a semi-stranger, by the bedside of a dying father, which appealed to my silly fancy. Don't think worse of me than I deserve. I

loved my father truly, devotedly, and was desolate at the thought of losing him ; but I felt that it was like an event in a novel or a play, and felt a sort of pleasure in making a poetic figure.

“For the few days in which my father lingered, and for the few other days after his burial, during which we remained in the village, my husband’s conduct not merely gave no cause for alarm, but was most affectionate and considerate. Then, without any warning, he suddenly told me that the house and grounds were sold, and that we were going to London. Arrived there, he took rooms in a street in the West End. I was a perfect stranger in the town, without a friend or even an acquaintance, and perfectly at his mercy. We had hardly been in London a week before he began a systematic course of insult and neglect, which lasted till our separation. He would leave me completely alone for days at a time. My remonstrances were treated with cool contempt, and, on more than one occasion, were answered by violence.”

“For God’s sake !” broke out Venebles, “why should you torment yourself in this fashion ?”

“Let me finish, George,” she answered.

“Half-confidence is no confidence. I will be as brief as I can. I found I had married a libertine and a drunkard. He had a truly diabolical cunning, which he loved to exercise. When guests were present, he acted affection and respect in a fashion which would have deceived any witness. Always, in the presence of a third person, his conduct was the very perfection of consideration; when we were alone—I cannot speak of it. His hypocrisy was the most horrible of all his vices. I had married a man with neither heart nor conscience—one base beyond conception,—cold, calculating, horribly impure. And, as I fully awoke to the wretchedness to which I had bound myself, I became a mother.”

“Have we not heard enough, sir?” asked Venebles, turning with a groan of pain and impatience to Mr. Herbert.

“Be patient, George,” said Gillian. “If I could bear it, surely you can bear to hear of it, now that it is all over so long ago. When my child was a few months old I learned that we were ruined. My fortune had gone, every penny, in gambling and debauchery. Grade by grade we sank lower and lower, till at last we were actually starving—I and my darling Dora. *He*, mean-

while, made enough money by the exercise of his talents as an artist for his own needs, dressed like a gentleman, and took his pleasures abroad, only returning to the miserable garret in which he lived, when he was penniless, to do a few hours' work whereby to provide money for his pleasures. Dora was ill—she was dying of want of nourishment and fresh air. She would have died, had it not been for a friend—God bless him! a truer friend, a better man never broke bread. He gave me ten pounds with which to take her for a time into the country. My husband heard that I had the money. He seized it, and, when I attempted to prevent him, he struck me to the ground. For weeks after I lay in the hospital. While I was convalescent, news came of the death of a relation in Australia. He had left me a sum of money, with which I came here and bought this farm. The rest you know.”

CHAPTER XIII.

A THUNDERCLAP.

AT the end of Gillian's recital there was silence for a moment. Then Venebles rose, and taking Gillian's hand, kissed it. There was a flash of moisture in his eyes, and his voice trembled as he spoke.

"What you have told us only confirms my faith in you, my deep affection. Henceforward, God willing, you shall lead a new life, indeed."

"Let us hear Mr. Herbert, George," said Gillian.

"I have heard your story, Mrs. Dartmouth," said the clergyman, "with the deepest interest and compassion. I pity you, yet cannot altogether absolve you."

"What!" cried Sir George, almost fiercely. "Has she not suffered enough?"

"More than enough," said Mr. Herbert, gently. "A heavy penalty for a wrong committed in the thoughtlessness of youth."

"What wrong has she committed?" asked Venebles.

“The union she has described, a loveless union, can scarcely be defended. From its nature, perhaps, sprang many of her misfortunes. And let me ask another question. The name you bear is—ah—your husband’s?”

“No.”

“Another error,” said Mr. Herbert.

“Nonsense,” cried Venebles, “it was a perfectly justifiable step.”

“Deception of any kind is never justifiable. It is—ah—a violation of those spiritual veracities on which society is founded.”

“Perhaps,” said Venebles, who relished as little as may be imagined the application of abstract principles of morality to the conduct of the woman he loved; “perhaps she might have done better to advertise in the public prints that she had come into a fortune, and that Mr. — (whatever the black-guard’s name may be) was humbly requested to return to his disconsolate wife, now that she had something more that he might rob her of.”

“George, George!” said Gillian, in a tone of remonstrance. “And the dispensation, sir?”

“On *that* point, if you have acquainted me with the actual facts, I have little or no

doubt. You have never, in the spiritual sense, been a wife at all, and under the circumstances—I say under the circumstances—you may be justified in again marrying.”

“Bravo!” cried Sir George. “The Church comes round to common sense after all!”

“The informality, however,” continued Mr. Herbert, “must be at once set right. Your true name is——”

“My husband’s name,” said Gillian, “was O’Mara!” It was the first time for seven years that it had passed her lips.

“Then, Mrs. O’Mara, I must ask you to correct this sad mistake at once. When it is done, and not until it is done, I shall have pleasure in performing the marriage ceremony.”

“I will ask you to reconsider that point, sir,” said Venebles. “In the mean time, dear, we will go for our ride. The horses are waiting.”

“I hope, Mr. Herbert,” said Gillian, “that you will lunch with me when we return.”

“I have a little correspondence to do,” said Mr. Herbert, referring to his watch, “and it is a long step from here to the vicarage.”

“Then why not do your writing here?” said Gillian. “You will find the materials in my desk there. If you should need anything you have only to ring, and Barbara will attend on you. Shall we find you here when we return?”

“You are extremely good, Mrs.—ah——” He boggled over the unfamiliar name and ended by omitting it altogether. “You will find me here, or in the garden.”

“*Au revoir,*” said Venebles, and led his *fiancée* from the room. Mr. Herbert watched them mount and canter away.

“A painful story,” he said, sitting at Gillian’s desk. “Well, her troubles should be over now. Venebles is a good fellow, and his affection for her is evidently very deep. Hardly such a match as he might have aspired to, or as I could have wished him to make; but—— Well, well, I hope they may be happy.”

He bent himself to his correspondence. The day was hot, and his walk and the long conference with Gillian and Sir George had tired him, and he nodded over the paper until he dozed. How long he had been unconscious of his surroundings he did not know, but he returned to consciousness to find a voice ringing in his ears, and turned in some

confusion to the direction from which it came.

A man was standing just within the door. He was a tall, well built, athletic looking fellow, with a bronzed face, clean shaven, and a mass of dark brown hair, touched with gray about the ears and at the temples. His dress was shabby, though of originally good materials, and in its cut and in his careless fashion of carrying it hinted at the artistic pursuits of its wearer, a hint strengthened by the sketch book he held in his hand.

“Ten thousand pardons,” he began, as Mr. Herbert rose in surprise at his apparition. “Do I address the owner of the house?”

“No,” replied Mr. Herbert. “It belongs to a friend of mine—a lady. She is absent for the moment, but will return presently.”

“Indeed. Thank you. It is a charming old place. I have just made a sketch of it from the outside, and was going to ask permission to see the interior.”

“An artist, sir?” asked Mr. Herbert.

“An amateur,” said the stranger. He spoke with a rather affected accent, and with a self-conscious smile. “You, sir, I perceive, are in holy orders.”

“I am the Vicar of Crouchford, sir.”

The stranger bowed, with a flourish of the

broad brimmed wideawake he held in his hand.

“I salute you, sir. If there is one thing in the world I reverence, it is religion. I look upon it as the mother of art.”

“It has, I should hope, even greater claims upon our reverence than that,” returned Mr. Herbert, obviously pleased however; “though I would not be understood as underestimating your beautiful occupation. Pray come in. The lady of the house is so old a friend of mine that I may take it upon myself to play cicerone. You are a stranger in the neighborhood?”

“Quite. In fact, almost a stranger in England. I am just returned after a long sojourn abroad, and am wandering hither and thither at accident, reviewing old impressions. There is something in the English atmosphere, in English scenes and institutions, indescribably refreshing. Decay is always beautiful.”

“Eh?” said Mr. Herbert, a blank stare of astonishment succeeding to the smile with which he had listened to the first part of this speech.

“Decay is the beauty of our England,” continued the stranger. “Its sleepy conventions, its moldering habitations, its mil-

dewed churches, its mossgrown religion, delight me inexpressibly.”

“I trust, my dear sir,” said Mr. Herbert, whom the stranger’s fluent chatter had rather put at sea, “I trust that you are one of us. I mean, I hope that you belong to the church which is the symbol of our civilization?”

“I am a Churchman, sir—a fervent Churchman. That is a very fine bit of black oak, by the way, and, pardon me—yes. That delightful bit of color. Yes, sir, I am a Churchman. To be frank with you—I hope I may be so fortunate as to find your views correspond with my own—my leaning is toward the higher and most symbolic forms of Episcopacy.”

“I am delighted to hear it.” It did not occur to the worthy clergyman that he was at least as obviously High Church in his dress and appearance as his interlocutor was obviously artistic.

“Dissent is so radically unlovely, its forms are so bare, so harsh; its teachings void of grace.”

This was an utterance which chimed in with Mr. Herbert’s mind.

“The furnishing of this place,” said the stranger, “is worthy of its exterior. It gives

me a keen desire to make the acquaintance of your friend. Such perfect taste."

"Mrs. Dartmouth is a lady of good taste," said Mr Herbert. "A most charming and accomplished person."

"Mrs. Dartmouth!" repeated the stranger. "That is her name? A piano? Excuse me." He ran his fingers deftly along the keys. "An exquisite tone. Ah!" He gave a slight shudder and struck a solitary note, listening with corrugated brows. "That F is a semi-tone flat."

"You play?" said Mr. Herbert.

"A little," replied the artist, with a deprecatory smile.

"I am sorry Mrs. Dartmouth is from home. She would be delighted in this dull place to meet a person so accomplished."

"Oh, pray don't call me accomplished. I am simply an amateur of the beautiful. I am so constituted that what is beautiful alone gives me pleasure—next, of course, to what is religious. The terms are really interchangeable. Religion, true religion, the religion of which you are an exponent, and I the humblest of devotees, is the soul of beauty. Only religion interprets thus the full meaning of the beauties which make up the sum of life. A sower passing with

measured footsteps, posed like a god, from furrow to furrow, with the sunlight sparkling on the seeds as he casts them, making them gleam like golden rain—a star, a flower, a dewdrop — life is full of such felicities, which, justified by their beauty, are divine.”

“You talk, my dear sir, like a poet.”

“I hope I have the poet’s nature.”

“You write?”

“A little.”

“Bless me, you seem to do everything.”

“A little.”

“And you have traveled?”

“A little. You don’t mind me sketching as we talk? That chimney piece is delightfully quaint.”

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the entrance of Dora. She came running in with her hair streaming and her eyes sparkling and her lips parted to communicate some childish confidence to her old friend, when she caught sight of the stranger, and paused.

“Ah!” said the latter. “A child! I love children. And how very beautiful! Come to me, my rosebud. What is your name? It should be a pretty one.”

“Dora,” said the child, looking up at him

shyly through the tangle of her disordered hair.

He took her hands in his and drew her to him, looking at her with a curious scrutiny.

“*C'est bien ça,*” he said, under his breath.

“Oh,” she said, catching sight of the sketch-book on his knee, “you are drawing. Please go on. I am learning to draw. Mamma is teaching me.”

“A charming little pupil. Would you like me to teach you?”

“I like mamma best.”

“Charmingly frank, these little people,” said the artist, with a smile.

“Can you paint houses?” asked Dora.
“Mamma can.”

“Oh yes, I can paint houses—and little girls, when they are pretty.”

“You must be very clever,” said the child, solemnly.

“I am considered fairly intelligent,” said the stranger, with his own smile. “Your mamma is out, this gentleman tells me.”

“Yes, she is riding with Sir George.”

“Oh, with Sir George. And your papa?”

“I've never had a papa,” said Dora.
“But I'm going to have one soon.”

“Really. That will be delightful. How should you like me in that capacity?”

“I should like you pretty well ; but I like Sir George best. Why do you laugh so much ?”

“You amuse me, my innocent child.” He stroked her hair with a lingering touch, and his face saddened. “Will you give me a kiss, little one ?”

“Yes,” said Dora, shyly. “I like you.”

The stranger kissed her, and, rising, walked to the window for a moment, passing a handkerchief across his eyes.

“Excuse me,” he said to Mr. Herbert, in an altered voice, as he returned. “I had a little child once. She would be of about this little darling’s age, if she be still alive. And the same name. I am not ashamed of these tears, sir. My little child, my Dora. Where is she ?”

“My dear sir !” said Mr. Herbert.

“I must not afflict you with my sorrow,” said the artist, putting away the handkerchief after passing it again across his eyes ; “but these memories will return at moments. There !” He bent over the child again. The beat of horses’ hoofs became audible, nearing the house. “Music is the cure for such sorrow as mine. Do you love music, my darling ?”

“Yes,” said Dora. “And I like to dance. Sir George plays waltzes for me.”

“Come then.”

He sat at the piano, and dashed into a lively tune with the manner of one trying to banish unpleasant memories. Dora flitted round the room, and was watched with a pleased smile by Mr. Herbert. The sound of horses' feet came near, and paused on the gravel before the door. The tune changed suddenly from the lively rhythm of the waltz to “Home, sweet home.”

“Mamma, mamma!” cried Dora, pirouetting to the door. “Come and see the funny gentleman.”

Gillian, her face flushed with free air and exercise, entered the hall, followed by Sir George, and stopped for a moment at sight of the stranger. He, with his fingers still playing the melody, turned half round upon the music stool.

“Gillian!” he said softly, smiling.

The poor woman's face changed to a look of stony horror.

“Philip!”

She spoke the name scarcely louder than a whisper, and fell fainting into Sir George's arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BRIDE OF JACOB'S FLAT.

THREE years before the meeting described in our last chapter, a number of men were assembled around the bar of the only drink-house in Jacob's Flat, a rough mining settlement within a two days' ride of San Francisco.

It was Saturday night, and drink of all kinds was flowing like water. Every one seemed in high spirits, from the burly, bearded fellows in red shirts who were lounging against the bar, to the little group of gamblers seated at small tables and engaged busily at cards.

Though oaths were common, and the general conversation scarcely fit for ears polite, everybody present seemed in remarkable good humor, and the merriment had reached its highest when Prairie Bill, a giant of six feet, known to his facetious intimates as "Prairie Oyster" (the name also of an insidious kind of American drink),

dashed his fist upon the counter, lifted up his glass in the air, and exclaimed :

“ H’yar’s Jake’s health and fam’ly ! Long life to Jake and her ! ”

The toast was received with acclamation, and drunk with enthusiasm.

“ What time, now, do you calc’late they’ll be a-coming to Parson’s Ford ? ” asked a little thick-set man with the lingering remains of a strong Cockney accent.

“ Wal, ye see, ” said Bill, reflectively, “ the coach passes the Big Creek at ’arf past three, and it’ll take the wagon two hours or more to reach the Ford in this weather. You bet they won’t be thar afore daylight. I say, boys, ” he added, raising his voice, “ who’s a-going to ride over ? ”

“ Who’s a-going to ride over ? ” echoed the little man, contemptuously. “ Better ask, who’s a-going to stay ? I ain’t seen a blooming female since the school-mistress was drowned last year, poor thing, and I’m curious to see what kind of petticoat Jake’s married. ”

“ Married her up to Frisco, didn’t he ? ” demanded another voice, that of a new-comer.

“ Put your bottom dollar on that, ” said Prairie Bill, proudly ; “ and if you don’t be-

lieve me, thar's Jake's pardner—ask him to show you her pictur.”

The partner alluded to, an old man busily engaged in a game of euchre, looked up and nodded; whereupon he was immediately surrounded by the whole assembled company, clamorously demanding to see the picture in question. Determined, however, not merely to gratify public curiosity, but to do a stroke of business, he expressed his determination not to assent until every man had planked down a five dollar note, explaining at the same time, however, that the amount was not to go into his own pocket, but to constitute part of a home-coming present for Jake's wife.

The money was soon collected, some enthusiasts even doubling and trebling the amount demanded from each individual, and then, with much solemnity and amid a hush of expectation, Jake's partner drew out from his bosom a small packet, wrapped carefully in brown paper, took off the paper with great deliberation, and exposed to view a somewhat dingy colored photograph, which he handed to his next neighbor, enjoining him at the same time to handle it very carefully and to limit his possession of it to the space of half a minute.

Thus the picture was passed round from hand to hand, excited spectators crowding eagerly round each man as he took his turn, and uttering cries of critical admiration.

“ Purty dear ! ”

“ She’s yaller ’air, like my own sister Eliza ! ”

“ ’Taint yaller neither—it’s brown ! ”

“ She’s a-smiling ! ”

“ Jake was allays lucky ! ”

“ There’s gloves on her ’ands, and they’d ’bout fit my thumb ! ”

“ I reckon she aint more’n eighteen ! ”

“ I’d give a million dollars for a wife like that ! ”

And so on, and so on ; till the photograph reached a dirty, blear-eyed man, far gone in intoxication, who, instead of adopting the decorous manner of his companions, uttered a drunken croak and *kissed* the picture. Dire was the tumult evoked by that act of outrage. Shrieks and oaths arose, and before he could realize what had occurred, the offender was kicked from group to group and shot out through the open door into the drift without, where he lay like a log. Meantime, Prairie Bill had snatched the photograph away, and striding back to Jake’s partner, handed it back with these words :

“Jest you put up that pictur agin, Jim Collier! ’Taint fair to Jake Owen ter make his wife a show like that!”

A sentiment which elicited a cheer of approval from the majority of the company.

Jim nodded, and with one respectful glance at the photograph wrapped it up again and concealed it in his bosom. Then striding back to the bar, Prairie Bill demanded a glass of spirits, and drained it off to the health of “Jake’s wife.”

The excitement awakened by the mere sight of a woman’s photograph may be better understood when we explain that every man in Jacob’s Flat was a bachelor, and that, beyond one or two wretched squaws who hung around the place, women, whether fair or plain, were almost utterly unknown.

Men had been known to ride a hundred miles across country to catch a glimpse of a female passing in the stage coach, and when an emigrant wagon containing members of the softer sex was heralded as about to cross the plains anywhere within reach, the rough fellows of Jacob’s Flat would strike work and gallop over to the nearest halting place to await the passers-by.

To those rough fellows a woman or a child

was something far off, mysterious, and consequently almost sacred.

So when the news first went around that Jake Owen, one of their number, was going to 'Frisco to meet a young Englishwoman, who had come out all the way from the old country on purpose to marry him, the excitement was tremendous. Although there was a general opinion in that region that Jacob's Flat was hardly the place to bring a lady to, Jake's "luck" was the universal theme of conversation. And when, some weeks after Jake's departure, his partner received the photograph, with an intimation that "Mr. and Mrs. Owen" were speedily returning home, the local excitement rose to fever heat.

For if every white woman was a paragon to the members of this colony of bachelors, this particular white woman seemed a positive goddess—with soft, child-like face, gentle eyes, little hands, and the dress of a downright little lady. Jacob's Flat was not a moral place, its inhabitants were violent and often murderous in their habits, but honesty of a sort was at a premium, and the ethics of society postulated of necessity a certain standard of purity. Had the original of the picture appeared there alone and un-

friended, she would have found herself as safe and as respected as a lady in her own drawing-room ; for though one or two hopeless desperadoes might have looked upon her with evil eyes, the whole spirit of the community would have been certain to protect her. Offers of marriage, of course, she would have had by the hundred, but beyond that necessary homage to female beauty, no citizen would have had the temerity to presume.

At early daybreak the following morning Jacob's Flat was almost deserted, but on the banks of a narrow river, fifty miles away, Prairie Bill and his companions sat, waiting and expectant.

"This is bloomin' slow," said Simpson, the cockney. "It's light enough now to see the pips by. Let's 'ave a flutter, eh boys?"

"Flutter be——!" said Prairie Bill, to whom the suggestion was more directly addressed ; "let's ride along and meet the wagon."

This suggestion meeting with more favor, the whole cavalcade were soon in motion, riding in loose order along the faint lines left in the deep grass by the last passage of the coach a fortnight before.

Simpson, one of the many accredited hu-

morists of the little community, looking about him at his companions, under the slowly broadening light, remarked on the unwontedly spruce appearance they presented:

“I begin to think as I’m in Pall Mall. There’s Chicago Charley. Look at him! I’m blowed if he hain’t washed hisself.”

“I’ll wash *you*,” said the individual thus rendered remarkable, “in the creek, if I get much more of your chin music.”

“An’ Bill, too,” continued Simpson, ignoring the threat; “he’s combed ’is ’air. Sure you’ve got the partin’ straight, old pal?”

“Shut your head!” growled Bill; and Simpson obeyed, seeing in the stolidly expectant faces of the party that his cheerful impertinences were for once out of place.

The party rode in silence save for the muffled beat of their horses’ hoofs in the grass and the creaking of the saddles, till Simpson began to whistle the Wedding March. The air was perhaps unrecognized, at all events nobody joined in it, and the discomfited humorist stopped midway through it with a forlorn grin, lit his pipe, and rode on as silent as the rest.

“There she comes!” cried the foremost horseman—a long, loose, saturnine Yankee, who had once been a harpooner on an American whaler. He rose in his stirrups, pointing with a forefinger straight ahead. A dim speck was visible on the horizon beyond the undulating billows of grass.

“Come along, boys,” cried Bill, clapping spurs to his horse, and the whole crowd started at a brisk gallop with a ringing cheer.

The dim speck grew every moment in distinctness as they flew toward it, till it grew recognizable, to sight less keen than that of the old whaler, as the St. Louis express.

“That’s Kansas, drivin’,” he said to Bill, who rode abreast of him. “They’ll be aboard of her, I reckon. See his rosette! And the horses have got streamers on.”

These and kindred remarks passed from mouth to mouth as the distance between the galloping crowd of horsemen and the approaching coach grew less.

“Let’s give ’em a salute,” suggested Simpson, and a sudden crackle of revolver shots resounded over the muffled beat of hoofs. Kansas waved his long whip, and rose in his seat, lashing his horses to a faster gallop,

and the last half mile was covered at racing pace.

The band of horsemen formed about the coach like a breaking wave around a boulder, yelling and whooping like a crowd of fiends, and blazing away with their revolvers. A man's head and shoulders emerged from the window, and in the interior a glimpse was visible of a pale and terrified female face.

“Dry up,” roared Bill, “ye pack of howling fools! Ye'll skeer the soul out of her!”

A sudden silence fell upon the party, broken by a tuneful ringing cheer, led by Simpson with a shrill, “Ip, ip, 'ooray!” and a dozen hands were thrust out to seize that of the male traveler.

“I took ye for a gang of prairie ruffians,” said the latter, with a strong provincial English accent. “Ye frightened the little woman. It's all right, lass,” he continued. “It's the boys from the camp, come over to give us a welcome, bless their hearts.”

He sank back in his seat and gently pushed his bride to the window.

She looked out, with the pallor of her recent fear still on her cheeks—a frank, delicate face, which made the photograph the

men had admired on the night before seem a clumsy libel on her living beauty. Every man in the crowd drew a deep breath as she ran her still half-frightened glance along their bronzed and bearded faces. They returned the gaze with ardent eyes, sitting like statues about the arrested vehicle, staring at this wonder of womanhood dropped from the skies to share their rough lives.

“God bless you, my beauty, and welcome to the Flat,” cried an unmistakably English voice, and amid another cheer the coach started again. The girl’s face, which had flushed rosily at the words, paled again at a stray shot of rejoicing from some ardent spirit, who was immediately knocked out of his saddle by a neighbor and sharply anathematized by his companions.

Coach and escort moved forward at a moderate pace, keeping time to a song started by a Spaniard in the van, a gravely joyful measure, sung in a rough but melodious voice, which lasted until the halting place of the coach was reached. Here Jake opened the coach door, and springing to the ground, assisted his wife to descend.

The men dismounted from their horses and formed a circle about the couple. The girl was quite self-possessed now, and when

Jake took her hand and led her a step forward, smiled brightly in answer to the cheer which greeted her.

“These are my friends, Jess, and you must make 'em yours,” said Jake. “Good friends they've been to me, through fair and foul.”

She put out a little gloved hand to Prairie Bill, who blushed redder than she as he took it, and, after wringing it with unnecessary force, dropped it and looked a trifle foolish. There was no man in the crowd who did not envy him, but no other claimed the honor thus bestowed.

“I'm very glad to meet you all,” said Jess, “and I'm very thankful for your kindness to Jake—to my husband.”

The voice was sweet, and only one or two in the crowd could recognize that its accent was almost as strong as Jake's. But she might have been far less pretty than she was in face and speech, her femininity and her youth were as a strangely potent wine to insure the worshiping affection of every man in the party.

“Talk o' that gal at Dutch Gulch as Poker Sam married last year!” said Prairie Bill to Simpson. “Reckon we lay over the Gulch this deal. We've got a lady.”

Not one among them had any touch of mean envy of his companion's luck.

"A reg'lar daisy and no error," said Simpson. "I 'ope the lady can ride, matey," he continued, to Jake; "we've bought a little 'oss for her—our weddin' present. She's a nice little thing and as quiet as a lamb, ma'am." The others looked with awe and respect at Simpson, entering thus easily into converse with the radiant goddess.

"Ride!" cried Jake, proudly, "she can ride nigh on a'most anything. Country bred, she is. *My* county, Essex."

Jess clapped her hands delightedly at sight of the horse, a pretty little beast, of mustang strain, gorgeously caparisoned in scarlet Mexican leather.

"I don't know what to say," she cried, "it's *too* beautiful! Thank you. Thank you all, ever so much."

"Give her a lift, Simpson," said Jake, with the air of Jove distributing favor to mortals, and the blushing Cockney stooped to the little foot and lifted the bride to her saddle amid another cheer. Jess shook hands with Kansas, and thanked him sweetly for the care he had taken of her during the long ride from 'Frisco.

“I wish I had something as pretty to take care of every journey,” said Kansas, with the air of a man who meant it, and, Spartan in his sense of duty, waved his hat and drove away with the empty coach, as the cavalcade, headed by the bride and bridegroom, set out at a gentle gallop for Jacob’s Flat.

CHAPTER XV.

AT JACOB'S FLAT.

FOR a year after his wedding Jake Owen was as happy a man as the most enthusiastic of the crowd of celibate women worshipers among whom he lived could have believed him to be. The district was one of the richest within a few days' ride of San Francisco, and Jacob's Flat was one of the luckiest camps in California, but Jake's good fortune was so singular as to cause him to be known to everybody as "Happy Jake." His luck became legendary; it was averred of him that he had only to stick his spade into the ground to *make* gold, however unlikely the spot might be.

Nobody grudged him his good fortune, thought it was only human nature to envy it, for Jake was emphatically what his comrades called him, "a white man," with a sturdy English honesty of character supplemented by much kindly shrewdness learned in his travels, and by a native happiness of

temperament and generosity of heart. His popularity doubled with the arrival of his wife, and the "Duchess," as she was called with affectionate pride, had every reason to be as happy as her husband.

Whatever rude luxuries were possible in so wild a place were here. Jake's cabin windows were beautified with colored hangings, its earthen floor was concealed by a carpet of the gaudiest procurable pattern, and Jake, in the full flower of his honeymoon happiness, had gone the length of procuring a piano from San Francisco. The circumstance that neither Jess herself nor any other person in the camp knew a note of music, detracted nowise from the satisfaction of Jake and his comrades in the possession of the instrument. The piano was a splendid fact, a fitting background to the beauty and distinction of the "Duchess." There was no piano in Dutch Gulch, which one-horse community persisted in an attempt, which might have seemed almost profane had it not been so hopelessly absurd, to proclaim its equality with the Flat.

It befell, upon a certain hot and dusty summer evening, that Jake Owen, returning from a distant town on the hillside, came, at the outskirts of the camp, upon a man

lying by the wayside under a tuft of azalea blossoms.

Jake's first impression was that the man was intoxicated, his second that he was dead. He lay with his arms broadcast and his open eyes staring at the sky, and the breast of his shirt was caked with stiffened blood.

Closer examination, however, disclosed that he was still alive. Jake poured the remnant of the whisky left in his flask down his throat, and, as the man gave signs of returning consciousness, propped him against the bank at the roadside, ran to the saloon, and pressed into his service a couple of men drinking there, who, provided with a broad plank and a blanket, bore the sufferer to Jake's cabin.

There was no qualified doctor in the place, but several of its inhabitants had some rough notion of surgery, and it was evident to the little knot of men who gathered in Jake's sitting-room that the wounded sufferer was in a very critical condition.

"A darn'd ugly cut," said one critic. "The knife slid off the rib, you see. He's lost a sight of blood. Say, what'r ye goin' to do with him, Jake?"

"Keep him till he's better," said Jake.

“Eh Jess? Why lass,” he exclaimed, seeing her look a little doubtfully at the sufferer, “ye wouldn’t have us throw him out on the road again? Do as ye’d be done by. It might be my turn to-morrow.”

“He must be taken care of, of course,” said Jess.

“He’ll want nussing, too,” continued Jake, “and you’re the only woman in the camp; we’re the best able to afford it too, thank God!”

The girl’s not very strong opposition to her husband’s proposal was easily understood, for the wounded man was a ghastly object. He had smeared his face with his own blood, and the red dust of the road had caked upon the stain. His hair was wild, his cheeks rough with a week’s unshaven beard, his clothes foul with blood and mire.

They got him to bed and dressed the wound with the best rough skill at hand. It was not intrinsically serious; a large flesh wound, rendered dangerous by effusion of blood. When the stains had been washed from the sufferer’s face, an instantaneous change of opinion regarding him took place in Jess’s mind. He was a distinctly handsome fellow, of a species of male beauty not common in the Flat. His features were finely

cut and delicate, his hands soft as a woman's, his hair abundant, and wavy and silky as Jess's own.

"A gentleman, I should think," said Jake; "English, too."

It was a day or two before the wounded man recovered consciousness, and a longer time still before he could give any coherent account of himself.

Then, at long intervals, for he was weak from loss of blood, he told him his story.

He was an Englishman, as Jake had surmised. His name was Philip Mordaunt. He had been traveling in America for some years, painting, hunting on the prairies, and recently, more for love of adventure than for need of money, as he hinted rather than said—had been digging. He had made a little pile at Empire Camp, and had started on horseback for 'Frisco with his partner, also an Englishman. Some twelve hours before Jake had found him, the partner had treacherously stabbed him, rifled his body of all his possessions, and ridden off with the horses. He had crawled with great difficulty to the spot where he had been discovered, and there had finally lost consciousness.

"I should have died but for you," he

said, pressing Jake's hand with his delicate and feeble fingers. "How can I ever repay you. I haven't a penny in the world."

"Pay me!" answered Jake; "who talks of payment, sir? You pull round, that's what you've got to do, and we'll talk about payment later on. We're rough folks, sir, but we're proud to be able to serve a gentleman in misfortune—and from the old country, too. That we are," said Jake, heartily.

It was Jake that Mordaunt thanked with his lips, but he kept his eyes on Jess's face. Fine eyes they were—dark, lustrous, and the more interesting to a woman from the deep humidity with which weakness and suffering had filled them.

When once Mordaunt had definitely turned the corner of his illness, it was not long before he was sufficiently convalescent to leave his bed. The denizens of the Flat were a roughish lot, but they were not without their sympathies, and Jess's patient became a favorite with them, many preferring to come to the cabin in the evening to take a quiet smoke and drink with him and his host, to passing the evening at the bar. Mordaunt was hail-fellow-well-met with all who came, accepting the deference they paid

him as his due, but friendly and familiar with them.

It was reckoned as another specimen of Jake Owen's wonderful luck that he should have had the privilege of finding such a guest. He was a delightful companion, full of stories of travel, jokes, and repartee.

One night, toward the end of his convalescence, Jess told Jake that morning that she had found him playing on her piano. A universal demand for music followed this revelation, and Mordaunt, nothing loth, played a score of airs for them, good old simple home tunes they had not heard for years, and sang, in a rather weak voice, "Tom Bowling" and "Annie Laurie."

Affectionately interested already, the camp acclaimed him that night as its king and hero. The musical evenings became a feature, and drew so splendidly that Pat McClosky, the bar keeper, after declaring that it was no longer any use in keeping a saloon to which nobody came, and seriously entertaining thoughts of going elsewhere to make his livelihood, hit on the magnificent idea of offering Mordaunt two hundred dollars a week and his liquor to play nightly at his establishment. Mordaunt cemented the admiration of the camp by refusing the offer.

“I play to please my friends,” he said, “not to make money.”

The camp swore by him, and swore at McClosky copiously and in many languages. Pete Durgan, the half-witted, half-breed fiddler came to the camp on his round, and when it was found that Mordaunt could play as brilliantly on his instrument as on the piano, there was no reserve stock of enthusiasm left to draw upon.

Mordaunt's recovery became complete, but there was no hint of his leaving Jake Owen's shanty. Indeed, so far from anything of the kind being mooted, Jake had, with his own hands, in the intervals of necessary labor, built out an additional room to his shanty, and furnished it even more gorgeously than his own parlor for the accommodation of his honored guest. Mordaunt repaid his hospitality by teaching Jess to play the piano, in which art she made astonishing progress under his skillful tutelage, and by painting a portrait of her which the simple digger and his chums looked at as the most wonderful effort of white magic in their experience. His only other occupations were to lounge about the camp and the bar, to play poker and euchre, at which games he was a proficient, and to write letters for illiterate

“ pikes ” with friends and relations in other parts of the world.

Now, a camp of diggers is not the kind of community which shines in morals when contrasted with a well-regulated convent or a boarding school, and Jacob's Flat was not on a higher kind in such matters than other places of like nature. But almost every conceivable set of social conditions results in its own peculiar scheme of morality, and in one or two particulars a man who knew the world would have found the crowd among which Jake Owen and his wife passed their lives a curiously simple and Arcadian people.

They were habitual devotees of the whisky bottle, and spasmodically addicted to the use of the knife and pistol. They were always more or less coarse, and often profane in the language, their play at poker and the other games they loved was often more remarkable for skill than for strict probity. There were men among them who would have been shy of entering any civilized city, even San Francisco, which at that date was not an oppressively moral community, and who would have been shot at sight or judicially hanged in the Eastern cities. They were a rude and desperate lot, but, with all allow-

ance for their less amiable side, they had their virtues.

Like desperate men in general, they had a high ideal of personal friendship, and a detestation of anything resembling treachery. A friend, to them, was a man in whose hands a man might trust his possessions and his life, with a sense of absolute security.

As regarded women, they were not perhaps much more logical in their views than the rest of the world. In towns and cities, where women are plenty, they had as little sentimental regard for feminine purity as any Parisian *boulevardier*, and their vices lacked the saving civilizing grace. But in the camp, where the fairer half of humanity was represented by one woman, they clothed her, half unconsciously, with every attribute of sacredness.

She would have been safe from all but blunt and honorable courtship had she been alone among them. But she was a chum's wife, and the lowest blackguard of the crowd would have been ashamed of harboring a thought against his happiness; she was something apart from and above them; she breathed a finer air, seemed of another order.

So that Mordaunt's constant presence in Jake's house, his continual association with

his friend's wife, the intimacy he never tried to conceal, which would in another kind of community have excited suspicion and remark, and would have stamped the simple Jake either as a fool or as a too complaisant husband, seemed the most natural and innocent business to the simple-minded crew of desperadoes. Mordaunt owed his life to Jake, the clothes he wore, the food he ate. Their almost superstitious reverence for the only pure woman many of them had known since childhood, the high value their dangerous lives had taught them to put on comradeship and gratitude, and Mordaunt's open bearing and universal friendliness of manner kept them from such suspicion as people of infinitely more reputable life than theirs would have jumped at without hesitation.

The halcyon dream of happy Jack's life was doomed to be rudely broken. The simple, honest heart had no skill to read the sign of the coming disaster, which grew so plain to him in later days.

It was the old sad story, so often told, which we may allow to pass as an episode in this chronicle without long dwelling on its details—the story of the dull loving husband, whose affection has grown stale and commonplace to the poor silly woman who

has won it, of the smooth polished man of the world, gradually weaning her heart from the accustomed round of daily duties with which it has grown content.

Jess was as innocent a little creature as drew breath, not in the least wicked, only weak and fatally fond of admiration. The handsome, glib, clever stranger had trapped wiser women than she in his time, and at every turn he contrasted with Jake and the rough crowd about him. To the ignorant little woman his manners seemed those of a royal prince, his knowledge and his accomplishments prodigious and superhuman.

She felt the fascination growing, and did her feeble best to fight against it. Jake remembered after, how pathetically she had clung to him ; how, in a thousand ways, her apparent love for him had gone on strengthening almost to the dreadful hour when he learned her sin.

The discovery had come suddenly. Jake returned home one night to find the cabin empty. There was nothing in that to excite his suspicions ; it had happened a score of times before that Jess and Mordaunt had gone out riding or walking together, and had let the meal time slip by.

He cooked his own modest supper, ate it

with a good appetite, and dozed peaceably over his pipe and a week-old copy of a 'Frisco newspaper.

He grew uneasy with the passage of time, and toward midnight strolled out to the saloon to learn what news he might of the missing couple.

Nothing had been seen of either since noon, when they had started for a ride together.

Next morning news came. They had been seen at nightfall forty miles from the camp. The meaning of that was clear even to the simplest mind.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PURSUIT.

THE wretched man on whom this heavy blow had fallen like lightning from a summer sky was, as is usual in such cases, the last to hear the dreadful news.

It came to him in a fashion characteristic of the time and place. He was sitting alone in his cabin, devoured with curiosity regarding his wife and friend, racking his brain to discover some admissible reason for their absence, some method of assuring himself of their safety, without a shadow of suspicion of the terrible truth, when a distant beat of horses' hoofs came to his ears, and a minute later a score of men galloped up to the cabin, drew bridle, and entered.

They ranged themselves in front of him as he stared at them, and for a full minute there was a silence, broken only by the pawing of the horses outside and by the occasional shuffle of a boot upon the floor.

“Well, boys!” said Jake at last, in a tone of question.

There was another interval of silence, and Simpson elbowed Prairie Bill to the front.

“You speak,” he said.

Bill cleared his throat with unnecessary loudness, fidgeted uneasily with the breast of his shirt, stooped and wiped a splash of red mud from his boot with his forefinger, and finally said :

“We’ve bad news, Jake.”

“News,” said Jake. “Of Jess — Mor-daunt?”

Bill nodded with a sudden grimness of face.

“What about ’em? Where are they?”

There was another silence, and then Bill spoke again.

“They were seen last night at eight o’clock, together, just along by Pete’s Pocket.”

Jake’s look was one of pure relief and expectation.

“Thank God, they’re alive, anyhow!” he said.

A man in the background broke into a hoarse, short laugh.

“I’m glad you’ve got something to laugh at,” said Jake. “What’s the joke? Don’t keep it all to yourself.”

The men looked at each other as if in

doubt if this unsuspecting ignorance could be real.

“Has anything happened, anything bad?” he continued. “I’ve often told Jess that she shouldn’t get too far from home. It’s a rough place, and there’s a good many bad characters about, as might hurt even her. But Mordaunt was with her. Is it him? Has anything come to him? He’d stand by her, I know.”

Simpson uttered a sort of groan. Jake’s face turned in his direction with a sudden pallor and wonder on it, and then he looked to Prairie Bill. The burly ruffian’s face was full of an almost womanly pity.

“You’ve got to know,” he said, “though I’d a blame sight rather cut my tongue out than tell ye.”

He manned himself to the disclosure.

“She’s gone, Jake; she’s left ye.”

“Left me!” cried Jake, rising.

“She’s left ye for that white-faced, white-livered, sneakin’ snake—that Mordaunt.”

Jake sprang to his feet, with his eyes blazing.

“——!” he cried, “I’d have the blood of e’er another man alive as said it!”

“We’re old pards, Jake,” said Bill. “It hurts me as much, pooty nigh, to say it, as

it does you to hear it. But it's true. What else can it be—but that? We're out after 'em, and you'd better come along."

Jake came forward, with his arms extended, like a blind man, or like one groping in black night in an unfamiliar place. He looked along the line of faces, grim, resolute, but pitying, and after swaying for a moment like a drunken man, rushed from the cabin to the mud shanty where his horse was stabled.

For three hours the party rode in dead silence, till they sighted a solitary horseman riding across their trail. They shouted to him and rode on at a gallop; he waited for them. A rapid fire of questions resulted in nothing save that, early that morning, just after dawn, on the other side of Pete's Pocket, he had remarked the track of two horses, side by side. It was the faintest of clues, but they followed it, in the same grim silence. Jake seemed the only man in the crowd who rode without thought or purpose. He was dazed, and only occasionally raised his eyes to look with a dumb, pitiful hopelessness about the prospect.

By hard riding they reached Pete's Pocket in the early afternoon. It was a deserted mine, long since worked out and abandoned,

with the doubled solitude of a once populous place, which has fallen back to its pristine savagery. By the clues their informant had given, they found the trail, and followed it till evening was closing in. Jake's dazed mind had seized upon it as something positive and actual, and the sight of the hoof prints had strung him to as intense an interest in the hunt as was shown by his companions. It made for the rising ground in the direction of San Francisco, till suddenly, at the foot of a little eminence, it split, one line of the track going straight on, the other inclining to the coast.

A halt was called, and a hurried consultation held.

"It's a pretty thin dodge," said Simpson. "Both them roads lead to 'Frisco—there ain't any other place ye *can* get to from here in that way."

"That's so," said Bill, "and, see here now. This to the left is a heap heavier than the other. That's his trail—sposin' as it's him at all, and that's her's. Small prints, ye see, just such as the little mare would make. We must split, boys. I'll follow the big track. You'd better take the other lot. Which'll you go with, Jake?"

To the momentary surprise of everybody

present, Jake elected to follow Mordaunt's trail.

"Means business," said Simpson to his lieutenant, as they trotted along the lighter trail. "He'll blow daylight into that covey when he finds him—see if he don't."

Not a word was spoken among the other party, who galloped on along the trail till the lights of the city came in sight, and the track was lost among a hundred others. They made for the office of the police, then a newly organized force, recently succeeded to the functions of the old vigilance committee. Their story was heard, and all possible assistance was at once promised.

"We'll make a house to house visitation, if need be," said the captain.

By this time the other party, headed by Simpson, arrived, and the whole contingent, worn out with their long ride, made for a saloon for meat and drink.

Jake sat stonily among them. He refused food, but drank, and presently went out and roamed among the crowd in the streets, peering in the faces of every couple that passed him. A dozen times his heart thrilled at the distant glimpse of a figure resembling that of Jess or Mordaunt.

When past midnight, he rejoined his com-

panions ; the captain of police was with them. He had vague news of a couple who answered somewhat to the descriptions of the missing parties. They had passed through the town separately, making no stay there, and it was supposed that they had gone in the direction of Los Perros, a mining settlement twenty miles inland.

They had a start of nearly twenty-four hours, and even if they were the people sought, such an advantage made the chase look very hopeless.

“We’ll follow,” said Bill. “Saddle, boys.”

They tramped out of town, and did the distance on their jaded horses in two hours, only to learn that Los Perros knew nothing of the runaways.

“They’ve doubled on us, Jake,” said Bill. “It’s a royal flush to a busted sequence agen us now.”

“We never ought to ha’ left ’Frisco,” said Jake. “It’s a biggish place ; they can lie quiet there for a bit, and then start across for New York, or take ship for somewhere.”

“They’ll watch the boats for us,” said Bill. “Our best holt is to strike in and cover the country.”

He and his mates were stanch to the cause

of friendship, though they had little enough hope of success in their search.

“We must spread ourselves,” he continued, “and cover all the ground we can.”

He rapidly mapped out all possible routes which might be taken by the fugitives, and told off the men to follow them. Some rest was distinctly necessary for the horses, though one or two of the most ardent, among whom were Jake and Bill, managed to effect exchanges of their tired beasts for fresh ones, and to start at once. The final rallying place was the Flat, at which all the party were to put in an appearance in two days or send news of the trail they were pursuing.

The men straggled back to the Flat, on the second day, newsless and hopeless. There was absolutely no trace. The fugitives had vanished as utterly as if they had melted into air. Even conjecture was at a standstill. Police and volunteers had dragged the whole country side as with a net. Every possible course of action had been tried, but Jess and her seducer had melted beyond pursuit.

The betrayed husband took the successive disappointments with a stony calm, sitting in the little room in which he had known so many tranquilly happy hours.

“Thank you, my lad, thank you, kind and hearty, for what you’ve done,” he said to each, as he unfolded his tale of failure. He had not broken bread since the solitary supper he had eaten three days ago, or closed his eyes during the chase, but when the last straggler had come in, he ate heavily, and fell to sleep with his arms on the rude table and his head laid upon them. An hour or two later he came to the claim where his partner was working.

“I want to talk to you,” he said, and led the way to his shanty, his partner following.

He waved him to a seat, and set a bottle before him.

“I want to talk to you,” he said again. “A bit of business.” He sat for a space, and then repeated, “a bit of business.” His eyes, wandering around the room, fell upon Jess’s portrait, painted by Mordaunt, which hung upon the wall. He went and took it from its place, tore it from its frame with a sudden, deliberate strength, rent it to ribbons, and cast the fragments into the grate.

“The claim’s been yielding pretty fair,” he said, after sitting down again. “I want to sell it. Will you buy?”

“Sell!” said his partner. “What d’ye want to sell for?”

“I’m leaving this place,” said Jake, “and I want money.”

He spoke quite calmly, and the other, who necessarily guessed his purpose, was surprised at the quietness of his manner.

“She ain’t worth it, Jake. Nor him. Let ’em rot. Can’t ye wait till luck gives ye a chance, and go for him then?”

“What’s the claim worth?” asked Jake, in reply.

“I’ll stand you five thousand for it,” said the other, falling into his companion’s humor with a scarcely susceptible shrug of the shoulders.

“I’ll take four,” said Jake. “That’s as much as it’s worth. Let me have the brass to-night, mate.”

He nodded a dismissal, which his partner obeyed, promising to bring the money before nightfall, and left alone, began to busy himself with his simple arrangements for his journey. He filled his saddle-bags, loaded his revolver, weighed his dust and nuggets before dropping them into the belt about his waist, and then went out and groomed and fed his horse, doing all those little tasks in a quiet, every-day fashion. No stranger who had witnessed his preparations could have guessed the nature of the journey he

meditated, the faint chance of even the tragic measure of success which was all that was left to him to hope for. His face was as a mask, his movements quite orderly and regular. His arrangements completed, he sat down beside the window in the fading light, quietly smoking and waiting for his partner.

The man came. He placed a bag on the table.

“I reckon ye’ll find that about right,” he said, “if ye’ll heft it. It’s two thousand, and that’s the rest in greenbacks.”

“Thank you,” said Jake, and there was a moment’s silence.

“I said ye’d like to go alone,” continued the partner. “’Taint the kind o’ business ye want other folk foolin’ round. Some of the boys talked about coming, but I stopped ’em.”

“I’d rather be alone,” said Jake. “Thank you, Tom.”

“They’d take it kind if ye’d just turn into the saloon for a drink. They’d like to say good-by to ye.” He saw a spasm cross Jake’s face in the dim light.

“Well,” he said, “perhaps so, if ye’d rather not. Good-by, old pard.”

“Good-by. My love to the boys. God

bless 'em all. I shan't forget 'em, however the luck goes."

They grasped hands and parted.

An hour after, news came to the saloon that Jake had started. As they stood about, discussing the tragedy of the last three days, a red glare shone through the windows of the bar-room. It grew momentarily brighter, and cries and shouts came from its neighborhood.

The men trooped out, and ran toward it. Before they had advanced a hundred yards, Jake's partner cried :

"It's Jake's shanty. He must ha' fired it 'fore he left."

CHAPTER XVII.

A LIFE CHASE.

FOR many a day after that wild parting the mind of Jake Owen seemed a dark blank, lit up only by the fiery thought of revenge.

As a man moves from place to place in sleep, performing every function with strange mechanical certainty and under the influence of some mysterious will, yet knowing and remembering now, the miserable creature followed on the track of Jess and her companion. From city to city, from house to house, he passed like a shadow; sometimes gaining a false clue which drew him hopelessly hither and thither, at others absolutely certain that he was pursuing the right trail. He ate and drank, walked or slept, like any other creature; his manner was gentle and reserved toward all he met, only his fixed jaw and absent eyes expressing the determination on which his soul was set.

He reached Denver City, and there, by cunning inquiry, he learned news which placed him almost beyond doubt that his wife and Mordaunt had rested together for several days at one of the best hotels in the place, and had then, only twenty-four hours before his arrival, taken the night cars for New York.

He followed on at once, and in due course, after a long and dreary journey, arrived in the great city. Here, however, he lost all trace of the fugitives; they were swallowed up in that great sea of human being.

Convinced in his own mind that New York had been their destination, and that they were somewhere there in hiding, he haunted the streets daily, made inquiries at the principal hotels, and was down on the quays, with watchful, bloodshot eyes, whenever there was an outgoing steamer—for it was possible, he thought, that the guilty pair might endeavor to put the seas between them and their pursuer.

All was in vain. Days passed into weeks, and he was still without a clue.

Meantime his hungry passion for revenge was consuming him like fire, wasting the flesh from off his bones, devouring and destroying him, so that he was gray and old

before his time. He had but one thought and prayer, to find the woman and her paramour, and to destroy them without mercy. Sometimes when he feared his life might fail before that dreadful purpose was achieved, he sobbed to himself in agony, and prayed God to give him strength till the hour of retribution.

The wistful, childlike face of the wife he had loved was ever before his eyes, side by side with the mocking smiling, face of Mordaunt. He could not bear to think that the two were somewhere together, laughing perhaps at his misery.

This torture of a nature overstrung by misery could not last forever. One day, as he was standing on the quays, watching one by one the passengers streaming across the gangway on to the deck of a great ocean steamer, his force failed him, his heart seemed to burst in two, and he fell like a stone.

It would have been merciful if death had taken him then, and had spared him the torture which was to come. However, he did not die. A little later, he was tossing fever-struck in one of the wards of a great hospital.

Terrible as his position now was, it was tempered with a certain mercy, for often in

his delirium his mind went back to the past and seemed to forget the present. He talked with his old wild comrades at the mine, he spoke to them of the pretty bride who was coming to him from England, he was in the streets of 'Frisco waiting for her arrival, he was being married to her again as in the past. Then a wave of despair would seem to sweep over him, and he would shriek out and stab at some unknown enemy, until in his agony he would swoon utterly away.

Had the man not been made of iron fiber, he would certainly have died; but full of superhuman strength he fought inch by inch with death.

“If he recovers,” thought the kindly surgeons of the hospital, “he will be a madman all the rest of his life.”

The prognostication proved a false one, unless we are to assume that one murderous master-passion is in itself a proof of madness. He recovered, and he was *not* mad—that is, he was to all outward seeming rational enough. Questioned of the trouble which seemed to possess his soul, he answered quietly and cunningly, declining all explanation. But he was eager to be gone, and after a rapid convalescence left the hos-

pital and, like a blind man grasping for the light, passed out into the street.

He remembered little of the past, but the thought of his wrong was still clear and vivid. His furious excitement seemed to have passed away ; he no longer moaned and raved as during his fierce agony, but there was no failure of his purpose, as he searched hither and thither to ascertain if, during his illness, the fugitives had escaped him.

Nearly two months had now passed since Jess Owen and Mordaunt had fled from Jacob's Flat.

It was quite clear now to Jake Owen that he had been following a fool's trail, and that the persons he sought were not in New York at all—possibly had never come so far. Had they been in the city, some trace of them must have been found, for he had spared neither toil nor money to unearth them. Mordaunt's personal peculiarities, he knew, would mark him out in any company. If in New York, they would certainly have been heard of in the public places, yet every bar, drinking saloon, hotel, or gambling haunt had been searched in vain.

Poor Jake was stupefied ; unable to decide what to do, or whither to turn.

He took lodgings now in a rough place,

half beer-house, half hotel, but regularly every day he made the pilgrimage across the ferry to New York. Then, strangely enough, he thought for the first time of consulting a lawyer, and wandering one day by the Tombs he entered the dingy, dirty offices tenanted by the great firm of criminal practitioners, Messrs. Hawk & Fourmart. He sent in his name and, after waiting for nearly an hour in the company of divers evil-looking clients, was ushered into the presence of Mr. Hawk, the senior partner, a little keen-eyed gentleman of the Hebrew persuasion.

Mr. Hawk knew everybody and everything; he was at once the smartest and most disreputable legal practitioner in the State.

Jake told his story. The lawyer, after listening patiently, looked him from head to foot, observed his haggard, almost hungry looking countenance and his equally woe-begone apparel, and shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s a difficult job,” he said, “and can’t be done without expending a heap of dollars.”

Jake’s eyes gleamed. Thrusting his hand into the breast of his coat, he drew out a

handful of greenbacks, and slapped them down on the table.

“Don't let *that* stop ye!” he said hoarsely. “I can pay for what I want—only just you tell me this: Can I find the man I want?”

Mr. Hawk looked less dubious.

“You are certain they've not left the country?” he asked.

“No,” was the reply; “I'm certain of nowt but this—that I'll find 'em, dead or alive.”

“And then? What course would you propose to take? A divorce, certainly.”

“A divorce!” echoed Jake. “Yes, a divorce, if you like to call it that.” Then putting his face to the lawyer's, he said, “I mean to *kill* 'em—that's the kind 'o divorce I'm after.”

Mr. Hawk pursed his lips, glanced at the bundle of greenbacks, and smiled.

“You'll think better of that my man,” he observed, blandly. “However, your future course of action is no business of mine. What you ask us to do is to find out a certain person or persons. Well, I'll do my best.”

Jake grasped his hand.

“Now, describe the man Mordaunt as accurately as possible.

Jake did so, and the sense of his great wrong made him eloquently pictorial. He imitated Mordaunt's voice and gestures, described his character and general bearing to the life.

Mr. Hawk reflected.

“I believe I have seen the man you describe,” he said, quietly. “He conversed with me, as you are doing, in this very office.”

Jake gasped and almost staggered, while his eyes gleamed with eager anticipation.

“But that,” the lawyer continued, “was over a year ago, before the unhappy episode you have been describing. He was then acting, under another name, at the Bowery Theater. A thorough rascal! We did some business for him—got him out of some gambling trouble—and he rewarded us by declining to pay our costs.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE TRACK.

JAKE OWEN left the web of the legal spider with a certain sense of relief. He had heard wonderful reports of the amazing cleverness of Mr. Hawk (that charmingly disinterested gentleman had only asked a small advance of five hundred dollars in advance for expenses), and he was impressed in his dull, stolid way by the lawyer's promises of ultimate success. He went back to his lodging, ate a good meal, and then slept soundly—for the first time during several days. He would wait patiently till the good news came.

As Jake Owen was on his way homeward, there was being dispatched from New York to Nokota Town, a small settlement some forty miles up the Hudson River, a telegram to the following effect :

You had better see us at once. Serious business.
Hawk & Fourmart.

The telegram was addressed to

Mr. Horace N. Stoddard,
Black's Hotel,
Nokota Town.

Early the next day Mr. Horace N. Stoddard, *alias* Mordaunt, elegantly attired in winter costume and sealskin overcoat, entered Mr. Hawk's office.

"I am eternally grateful," he said, after hearing Mr. Hawk's account of the interview with Jake Owen. "The man is a ruffian, and I shall adopt measures of self-protection."

"I think you had better," returned the lawyer, "or you're a dead man. By the way, what are you doing now?"

"Helping the man Black to run his hotel, and playing cards with his customers. But I'm tired of it, I've thrown it up, and I sail for England in three weeks."

"You are a remarkable man, Mr. Stoddard," said Mr. Hawk, admiringly, yet facetiously. "Your talents will be wasted in the old country."

Mr. Stoddard, *alias* Mordaunt, smiled.

"I can return the compliment," he replied. "*Arcades ambo, eh?*"

"And this woman, is she with you?"

“No, she has left me.”

And he drew out a pocket handkerchief, and sighed.

“Left you? Since when?”

“About a month ago. That is to say, we had differences. She was one of those dreadfully retrospective persons who eternally reproach themselves and everybody—quite what the French call a *pleureuse*. It bored me. I suggested at last that she couldn't do better than return to her husband. She made a scene. A few nights afterward she disappeared. Poor girl, I hope she hasn't done anything foolish. The river is close by, and women of that temperament have a fascination for running water.”

Even Mr. Hawk, though he belonged to the vulture species, was not quite hardened enough to be edified by words so cruelly flippant and pitiless.

“Make certain of one thing,” he said, sharply, “this man, if he ever finds you, will kill you.”

“He will try,” returned the other, coolly, fingering the breast of his overcoat. “But I always carry arms, and am a good shot. Honestly, I am very sorry for poor Jake. Had I thought that he would have taken the affair so much to heart, and that it

would have entailed such an infinity of trouble on myself, I should never have disturbed his domestic hallucinations."

"You sail in three weeks, you say."

"Yes."

"Avoid New York till then. I'll keep the man busy."

"Good. By the way, Hawk, I owe you a small account."

"Which you will settle within a fortnight from to-day," said Mr. Hawk, affably.

"*Must* I? Well, as you please, though I'm not all over well supplied with money. You may rely upon me."

After a few words more the two separated.

As Mordaunt left the office, Mr. Hawk thus soliloquized:

"If the rascal attempts to sail without a settlement, I'll put this madman on him. He deserves it, the infernal scoundrel! But if he pays—well! I never approve of extreme measures."

Mordaunt, on his side, strolling quietly back to the railway station, soliloquized also:

"I don't trust my friend the vulture, and I don't mean to pay him. He little guesses my passage is taken under an *alias* in the *Mesopotamia*, which sails in ten days from now."

Two days passed, and Jake heard nothing from Mr. Hawk. Then, fierce and impatient, he called again at the offices.

“I was just going to write to you,” said the lawyer. “I think we have got a clue. There is a man living in Philadelphia who answers the description, and he is accompanied by a female, whom he calls his wife.”

Jake tottered and staggered, while Mr. Hawk, with well-simulated sympathy, gave him the address of a Philadelphia hotel. Jake clutched it wildly, and made for the door.

“Take care what you do!” cried Mr. Hawk, warningly.

Jake made no answer, but turned a livid face on the lawyer, and vanished. Hastening to the depot, he ascertained that there were no through cars to Philadelphia till the evening, so that he had several hours to spare. So he went to his lodging, strolled into the drinking bar, and carelessly took up an old newspaper. He was looking at it almost vacantly, turning his eyes from column to column, and scarcely knowing what he read, when his face went deathly pale, and he reeled on his seat like a drunken man. For staring him in the face,

as if written in letters of blood, were these words :

Personal. If this should meet the eyes of Jake Owen, of Jacob's Flat, let him come to New York, and inquire of the Janitor of the — Hospital, New York City. He will hear news of one for whom he is seeking, and who prays for his forgiveness.

The next minute Jake was in the street, hurrying up town in the direction of the hospital, one devoted entirely to patients of the female sex. He reached the place at midnight, rang the bell, and told his errand. The janitor at the door informed him that his wife was a patient there, but that it was impossible to see her at that hour—he must return next morning between visiting hours.

“See her?” he shrieked, losing all self-control. “I will see her, by — !”

A terrible scene ensued—the officers were summoned, and Jake was about to be ejected, when one of the physicians came upon the scene.

“Don't send the man away,” he said, “if he is, as he says, the woman's husband. I don't think she'll last out the night. My man,” he added to Jake ; “I must ask you, if we grant your request, to be very quiet. Nothing can save your wife—she is dying !”

“Dying !” It seemed at that moment as

if a thunderbolt had fallen on Jake Owen's head. He was dumb with horror and despair.

The rest the reader already knows from Jake's own confession to Barbara. The last meeting of husband and wife, the scene in the dim light of the hospital ward, the last forgiveness and farewell, the quiet burial in the heart of the great city, are pictures already dimly guessed at, and not to be lingered over without pain. A few days later the broken man stood over his wife's grave, and lifting up his haggard face to Heaven swore to continue his search for the man who had destroyed them both.

Further interviews with the firm of Hawk & Fourmart proved of no avail. Mr. Hawk could not, or would not help him, and strongly advised him to return in peace to Jacob's Flat. What was his astonishment one morning, therefore, to receive a message from Mr. Hawk, asking him to call at once.

He hastened down to the office.

"I think your man is found," said Mr. Hawk, "and I will give you his address on one assurance—that you do not contemplate any violence."

"No!" cried Jake. "Gie me the writing—I only want to look at him, that's all."

“If you only want to *look* at him,” said Mr. Hawk, smiling, “go at once to Black’s Hotel, Nokota Town, on the Hudson River, and inquire for Mr. H. N. Stoddard. I should advise you to lose no time, as Mr. Stoddard, *alias* Mordaunt, is about to depart for the old country.”

Jake rushed from the office, while Mr. Hawk, with a very ugly look in his eyes, reflected to himself:

“I think it would have been wiser, my friend, to pay *our* debt and so escape *his*. The firm of Hawk & Fourmart are long-sighted, and it’s not on record that they were ever swindled, even by so clever a man as you.”

The meaning of which was that the astute Mr. Hawk, by means best known to himself, had ascertained that his elegant client had lied to him, and was going, without any ceremonies of settlement or farewell, to sail for Europe on the *Mesopotamia*.

That night, amid a storm of wind and rain, Jake Owen arrived in Nokota Town, a dismal collection of buildings on the banks of the Hudson.

He had no difficulty in finding the house he sought, for there was only one hotel in the place. Striding into the place, and keep-

ing his passion well under control, he inquired for Mr. H. N. Stoddard.

The landlord, a lank, cadaverous person, smoking a long and damp cigar, instantly replied :

“I guess you come too late, for he ain't here, and, what's more, I don't want to know any more of him. He's left, and he's a good riddance.”

Thereupon, rendered voluble by liquor, Mr. Black enlarged upon Mr. Stoddard's manners and peculiarities in such a way as to make it perfectly clear, even to Jake's dazed mind, that this same Stoddard was the very man he sought. He had been Mr. Black's confidential manager and adviser for some months, and had left that very day, leaving behind him a strong odor of what in America is called “smartness” and in England, petty larceny.

“And where's he gone?” cried Jake Owen, in despair.

“I calkilate,” said Mr. Black, “that he's taking ship for Europe, and you bet I hope he'll stay there !”

Jake stood close to the inner door of the hotel, the upper part of which door was paned with plate glass. No sooner did he hear the landlord's last words than he uttered

a fierce shriek, and dashed his clenched fist through the glass in a rush to leave the place.

Cries and curses followed him, but he did not turn. Wild and bareheaded, he rushed out again into the night.

Could he only take the villain by the throat, and cast him into the gutter, and stamp his heel upon his face, and crush that pretty barber's block into pulp—could he only make him a thing that men would shun and women loathe.

“Hark! what is that!”

The whistle of a steam engine in the distance.

Beside him, within a stone's throw, stands a desolate railway station, not the one at which he alighted an hour or two ago. How many miles he has walked he does not know, nor does he care to inquire. With a bound he springs into the booking office, obtains a ticket for New York, and is just in time to catch the passing cars.

The railway people take note of his wild appearance, his bloodstained hand and arm, his matted hair, his haggard eyes, his clothes saturated with the rain, his torn coat, and soiled linen. They evidently take him for a madman or a murderer, and they telegraph to New York accordingly.

The chief constable and a couple of police officers await his arrival ; when he steps out, he is arrested.

In vain he struggles, in vain he demands to know the offense with which he is charged. The only answer he can get is :

“Time enough, you will know by and by.”

Fortunately for him, and still more fortunately for the man of whom he is in pursuit, some civic ceremony takes place that day at the docks, the police court is not open, and he is relegated to the lockup until to-morrow.

It is well that he is mad only on one point. Were it otherwise, the humiliation and disgrace to which he is now subjected would surely upset the balance of his reason. The all-engrossing object for which he lives, however, endows him with more than a madman's cunning. He hides his rage, and affects a settled calm he does not feel.

Besides, if his enemy could learn, if he should escape him now when he is so near him—so near his revenge ! The previous night and its attendant horrors have begun to tell upon him. He is faint from loss of blood. He asks for a doctor and obtains one.

Evidently this gentleman is under the impression that his patient is mad. While his wounds are being dressed, the police-inspector cautions him that anything he says may hereafter be used as evidence against him, so he remains discreetly silent.

The doctor takes his leave, promising to send a composing draught.

Nature begins to assert herself, he is absolutely hungry.

His purse, of which the inspector has taken charge, contains a large amount of greenbacks, and he is graciously permitted to order his dinner and to smoke a pipe. While he smokes, he is feasting his eyes with the prospect of his enemy beneath his feet, his heel, his iron heel always on the scoundrel's sneering face.

How strange it is with this fever, this ravenous thirst for blood on him, he can eat, drink, and even sleep—sleep without dreaming.

He had always led a temperate and abstemious life—so that it is not to be wondered at that he awoke refreshed, strong, and vigorous. At first he knows not where he is, or how he came there, but at the sight of his wounded hand all came back upon

him. Again his blood boils, again the devil takes possession of him.

And now a happy idea occurred to him. He sent a message to Mr. Hawk, explaining his position. The result justified his confidence, for no sooner was he brought before the "judge," or sitting magistrate, than he was discharged with a caution.

Mr. Hawk knew how to manage these things wonderfully.

He was free! And perhaps there was yet time! As he walked out into the street he found the lawyer by his side.

"Your man is now in New York," said Mr. Hawk. "I could take out papers to prevent him leaving, but I have private reasons for not doing so; he sails this forenoon on the *Mesopotamia*. You have only half an hour to spare if you want to see him," and with an ugly look and a nod Mr. Hawk disappeared.

Jake hesitated a moment, then hailed a yellow cab which was passing.

"Drive like —— to the Cunard wharf."

Away they go as hard as they can drive. As they come down to the wharf they can see the steamer still alongside the wharf, a crowd of people looking on.

There would be just time—nearer, yet

nearer still. Once aboard, that is all he asks.

“Quicker, quicker!” he cries. “Five dollars if you’re in time.”

Thus urged, the man makes a *détour* through a narrow lane to the left, which he calculates will enable him to cut off a few hundred yards. As he rattles down they encounter, full butt, a government van, laden with stores, leisurely rolling along from the opposite direction.

This is an obstacle impossible to pass.

“— you, drive on,” roars Jake, “drive over it, over the pavement, over anything.”

The driver catches the fever of excitement and rushes horse and cab upon the pavement. Even then there is not room. The cab and van collide; with the shock Jake is thrown out head foremost. He is not killed; the poor maimed hand saved his head—perchance his life. He takes no heed of that, but runs as fast as his feet can carry toward the pier.

As he reaches the mouth of the lane, the great liner is moving from the quay side.

If he can only be in time to take a flying leap on deck!

Fast as he speeds, the preparations aboard speed faster still. A forest of waving hats

and handkerchiefs shut out the vessel. He buffets his way through the crowd. He reaches the edge of the pier to find that he is too late.

Not too late, however, to catch a passing glimpse of his dead wife's paramour, who stands aloft upon the hurricane deck, dressed as though he had just turned out of a band-box. He nods pleasantly and kisses his hand to some quondam friend. Jake's curses are drowned by the mighty roar of "God's speed—good-by!" amid which the great ship passes out to sea.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GREAT WATERS.

FOR a brief space Jake Owen was paralyzed with disappointment. He stood haggard and wild upon the quay, watching the mighty ship till it disappeared, and to the eyes of those who observed him he seemed rather like a man mourning some loved one who had departed from him, than one intent on terrible revenge.

But his was a nature of strange tenacity. Had he laid hands upon his enemy, as he had hoped, he might have spared him; but his purpose, from being defeated, grew in strength and violence—so that he was more than ever bent on bringing the foe to bay. Recovering at last from his stupor, he rushed to a hotel and consulted a time table, from which he discovered to his joy that a vessel sailed that day for Liverpool from Hoboken, on the other side of the city.

Without losing a moment he proceeded by car and ferry to Hoboken, and arrived

there in time to get on board the vessel, which was under weigh.

The *John Macadam* was a screw steam-vessel of about 3000 tons burden, belonging to the famous Macadam line of packets, trading between Liverpool and New York. She carried both cabin and intermediate passengers, as well as a large steerage complement forward. Her captain was Andrew Macpherson, a sturdy weather-beaten Scotchman, and all the officers, as well as the surgeon and a large portion of the crew, belonged to the same nation. On week days the vessel was spick, span, and business-like from stern to stem, and on Sunday it was solemn as a church. When the captain read prayers in his broad Annandale accent, it was like a Covenant meeting on a Scotch hillside.

Jake Owen, not being wasteful of money, had taken a berth in the intermediate, or second, cabin. His companions were small traders, Jews on the pilgrimage to the shrines of Mammon, farmers returning from a trip to the new country, and one or two rough miners returning home to bring out their families.

Lost in gloom, and deeply determined on revenge, Jake kept almost entirely to him-

self, while the great vessel steamed out through the dark waters, leaving the white elephant of Coney Island behind her and steering due east into the ocean. The dull mechanical thunder of the engines, ceasing neither night nor day, kept tune to the miserable throbbing of his brain, to the deeper beating of his sad, overburdened heart.

Surely, he thought, no man breathing on this planet could be more miserable; no man, however unfortunate, could have had a heavier load to bear. His passion for Jess had been the master-purpose of his simple life. What tore his soul to frenzy, what he could not endure or reason calmly upon, was the bitter sense of shame at having been so cruelly befooled. For the poor fellow was proud as Lucifer, and he felt himself, in the present situation, an object for all the world's contempt.

Well, it was all over. Jake had drunk his cup of humiliation to the dregs; and all he thirsted for now was a meeting with the man who had mixed the poison for his drinking. Would he find him? Yes, if he hunted the earth from pole to pole. And then?

Revenge, more than almost any other evil passion, leaves its signs upon the outer man. Few men would have recognized in the gaunt,

moody, gray-haired creature, with that cruel, far-off look in his eyes, the tall and powerful Jake Owen of a year before. He wore a rough seaman's jacket and a wide-awake, he had given up shaving, and altogether looked more like a low-class adventurer than an honest son of toil.

The nights and days passed on. Jake had made no male friends, and was generally voted a sullen, disagreeable fellow. Yet the purifying breath of the sea had not altogether failed to do its work. He was calmer now and not so restless ; as determined as ever to have it out with his enemy, but not so cruel. We are creatures of the elements we breathe, and oxygen, if absorbed in full measure, will disintegrate even revenge, as well as solidier secretions.

Only one person in the intermediate cabin had awakened his interest in the slightest measure. This was a young woman of about his wife's age, and not unlike her in features, dressed in widow's weeds, and accompanied by a little girl about five years old. Her look of abstraction and deep unhappiness had first attracted him. Here, he thought, is some one almost as miserable as myself.

During the rough weather out, the woman

was very ill, and as she was quite helpless and alone, Jake paid her some little friendly attentions, for which she seemed very grateful. One evening, when the vessel was laboring in a calm but heavy sea, they got into conversation, and after some hesitation she told him something of her story.

Her maiden name, she said, was Ellen Windover, and she was going home to join a married sister at Plymouth. Six years before she had married, or so she thought, a gentleman who said he was an officer in the army, and who had met her when she was a governess in a wealthy Quaker family, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. For about a year, and up to the birth of her child, she lived a life of comparative happiness, despite the fact that her husband was of idle and dissipated habits. At last, however, he left her almost without a word, and almost simultaneously she was informed that he had another wife living—a discovery which, she said, almost broke her heart.

“The villain!” cried Jake, indignantly. He added, with flashing eyes, “Aye, the parsons are right—there *must* be a hell!”

“I have forgiven him long ago,” said the woman, sadly. “My only grief now is for my little girl.”

“And you have never seen him since?”

“Never, sir!”

“Well, maybe it’s better so. The Lord will punish him somehow, make no mistake about that!”

The woman lifted her eyes timidly to his face, and, with genuine intuition, almost guessed his secret.

“I think,” she said, “that *you* too have been unfortunate. I only hope your misery has not been as great as mine.”

Flushing to the temples, he forced a laugh.

“No, my lass,” he returned. “I ha’ had my troubles like other men, but a man wi’ health can defy the blue devils. It’s strange, though, that in so bonny a world there should be so many wicked devils unfit to live. Aye, aye, there must be a hell! There are some men—and maybe some women, too—that need purging in fire. Your mate was one o’ them, and I know another! It’s him I’m follering across the sea.”

And with a forced laugh and a nod he walked away, and looked sullenly across the lonely waste of waters.

Days and nights passed away, till the vessel was within a few days’ sail of the North of Ireland, when suddenly there swept upon

her a furious southeasterly gale, laden with the spume of Antarctic frost and fog. It was an anxious and awful time. The passengers were kept prisoners below for forty-eight hours; but Jake Owen, who knew something of sea-craft, offered to make himself useful, and was allowed to keep his place on deck and assist the men. It was a strange scene, a curious mingling of the picturesque and the diabolic, and he watched it with a sort of savage delight.

The great iron ship lay helpless as a straw in the trough of the sea, and as the mighty waves came rolling up with crash of thunder and flash of foam, they washed her stern to stem, staved in her boats to starboard, cleared her decks of every loose fragment, and on one occasion, upleaping high as the funnel, nearly put out her fires. For twelve hours together it was necessary to keep her head to the gale, but, despite the power of full steam, she swung this way and that way at the mercy of the billows, and had she not been built of malleable stuff would have split to pieces.

The old captain kept the bridge, trumpet in hand, and had the Caledonian hymn-book in his pocket. For days together, his sole sustenance was whisky in moderate doses, quali-

fied with natural piety. The hubbub below, the thunder above and all around, were deafening, but the grim old Scot never lost his head. He gave his orders as calmly as if he were giving the psalm from the precentor's desk, and regarded the vast ocean as just so much contemptible matter in disturbance, which a word from the Almighty could stop at once.

At last the gale ceased, and there came a great, peaceful lull. The captain dived down into his cabin to snatch a little sleep, the seamen crept hither and thither repairing damages, and the chief officer guided the good ship on her way to port. The next morning, however, she found herself in a fog so dense that it was impossible to see the end of her own nose—that is to say, of her bowsprit; and as it was some days since the sun had been visible, or it had been possible to take any reckoning, the engines were slowed to half speed, and she stole through the fog leadenly, like a blind woman groping her way.

The fog increased, till all was black as Erebus on every side. The air was so bitter cold that the masts and shrouds were frozen, and the decks crackled like ice underfoot. There was not a breath of wind. The sea,

still rolling with the force of the tempest which had subsided, was sinister looking and black as ink.

Jake watched the old captain and his officers in frequent consultation, and saw by their looks that they were very anxious. At last, the engines stopped altogether and the ship rolled in the seas like a log, while they waited for the fog to clear. Every now and then soundings were taken, and entered in the ship's log.

Thoroughly tired out by the exertions of the last few days, Jake went down to his berth and slept like a log for many hours. He was awakened at last by a hard roaring and crashing, and simultaneously he found himself nearly swinging out of his berth by a lurch of the vessel to leeward. Hurrying on his clothes, he ran on deck, and found that the fog had partially cleared, and that another tempest, from the southeast this time, was blowing great guns.

It was just about daybreak, or so it seemed by the dim, wan, doubtful light which flickered now and again in the eye of the howling wind. Clinging on the bridge, the captain was trying to get a reckoning, and after infinite struggles he partially succeeded. The result did not seem reassuring, for the ship,

instead of being allowed to continue on her way, was put round to face the gale, and the engines increased to full speed.

Such was the fury of the tempest, however, that she seemed to make no way whatever, and again and again she fell off and drifted sidelong in the trough of the sea. The clouds and vapors, trailing low upon the water, swept over her and mingled with the upleaping waves.

All day long, if day it could be called where all was a doubtful and sinister twilight, this state of things continued. When night came, the blast had somewhat slackened its fury, but the violence of the enormous seas was greater than ever.

Meantime, the passengers were tossed about with mingled feelings of discomfort and terror. Again and again, as some more than unusually violent sea struck the ship, making it quiver through and through till destruction seemed imminent, the cries of women and children rose from the cabin. Many fell upon their knees, clinging to the quivering woodwork, and prayed.

Among those who seemed least panic-stricken was the poor woman named Ellen Windover. Pale, but calm, she watched by the side of her little girl, who was too pros-

trate with seasickness to comprehend the danger. On the night of which we now speak, Jake found her kneeling by the child's side, and wetting its lips with a little milk and brandy.

"Things be mending, I think," he said, going over to her. "At any rate the wind has fallen. How be the little lass?"

"Very ill, sir. She has eaten nothing for so long, and was never very strong."

"And you? I'm glad you keep up your courage. Many men aboard might take a lesson from you."

She looked sadly up into his face.

"If it were not for my darling, I should not mind much what happened."

"Come, don't say that!"

"Ah, sir, my life is wasted, and I have little left to live for. Perhaps it would be better for both of us if we sunk down this night into the deep sea."

As if in very answer to her words, at that moment there was a crash like thunder, the cabin in which they stood seemed rent and riven, she herself was thrown violently forward on her face, and Jake was shot like a bullet right away to leeward. The after-part of the cabin shot up to an angle of fifty degrees, forming an inclined plane, at the bottom of which struggled a mass of shriek-

ing human beings. Another crash! and another! Then, instead of righting herself, the ship stood firm, raised up aft and dipping down forward, while thunder after thunder of raging seas roared around her.

She had struck!

With a wild cry of horror and surprise, Jake crawled rather than ran up the companion, and came out upon the deck. What a sight met his eyes! The breakers were white as milk around the ship, rising and whirling high up into the air, and on every side was horrible darkness. The wailing of the wind, the loud quivering of the vessel, the crash of the seas as they smote upon her, the shrieking of the officers and the bewildered crew, all stunned the ear and filled the sense with horror!

The truth soon became apparent. Beaten backward before the blast, now fronting the seas and now blowing sidelong, she had at last drifted on some terrible reef or shore. The engines were going at full speed, but she was wedged in between the sharp teeth of the submerged rocks. Nor was this all. The propeller, half broken away and dangling by the steering chains, was beating like a sledge hammer on the ship's sides, threatening momentarily to stave them in; and as Jake stood listening and gazing, an enor-

mous sea, sweeping over the vessel forward, rolled right over the decks, swept into the engine room, and put out the fires.

What next happened he scarcely knew. The crew seemed distracted, and the terror-stricken passengers, shrieking and struggling, many in their night-dresses, swarmed the deck. Up on the bridge still stood the old captain, roaring out his orders and trying to still the tumult.

Suddenly a wild shriek went up that she was going to pieces. Another enormous sea swept her from stem to stern, carrying away with it many human beings. At this moment Jake Owen saw the young woman clinging to the door of the intermediate companion, holding her child in her arms. He rushed to her assistance. As he did so, there was another crash, which stunned him. He seemed to be drawn down, down into some whirling gulf of darkness, and when he recovered consciousness, he was clinging to a spar and struggling like a straw in the trough of the foaming waters.

After many hours, he and two others, seamen of the ship, were picked up by a passing vessel. All the rest, including the brave old captain and Jake's one friend, had been swept, with the *John Macadam*, to the bottom of the sea.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRODIGAL RETURNED.

THE mutual recognition of husband and wife, and Gillian's swoon following upon it, happened so swiftly that the witnesses of the scene did not at first comprehend what had happened. Venebles was the first to recover his presence of mind. He laid Gillian on the sofa, and taking from a table near at hand a glass flower-stand, dipped his fingers in the water, and threw the drops smartly in her face.

“My darling Gillian!” said O'Mara, bending over her. “My *wife!* Look up and speak to me.”

“Your wife!” cried the baronet, pausing in his ministrations. Mr. Herbert echoed the words. Dora meantime was clinging to her mother's insensible hand, and sobbing over her.

“Yes,” cried O'Mara, with a face of agony, “my dear wife! Separated all these years and now to meet like this! Oh, sir, if you are a friend of hers—if you have a

heart to pity us, send a messenger at once for a doctor."

Venebles leaned against the wall with a stifled moan, like a man stunned by a physical blow.

"His wife!" he repeated wonderingly, as if the words bore no significance.

Mr. Herbert, recalling a little of his lost presence of mind, bade Dora run for Barbara. At first the child only clung the faster to her mother's hand, but, after a little persuasion, left the room.

"This is no place for us, Venebles," he said, touching the baronet on the arm. "Come!"

He took the poor fellow by the arm, and led him, dazed and stupefied by this sudden cruel blow, from the room which, scarcely a minute before, he had entered so gayly with his affianced wife. O'Mara looked after him with a grim, soundless laugh, which changed again to an expression of harassed solicitude as Barbara entered the room with Dora.

"Eh, my poor lady!" cried the faithful servant.

She went on her knees beside her, and loosed the collar of her dress and held a bottle of smelling salts to her nostrils.

A faint color tinged Gillian's cheeks and leaden lips. She shivered, sighed, and opened her eyes, looking round vacantly.

"Mamma!" cried Dora, "oh, mamma, don't look so! Speak to me, mamma!"

Memory returned at the sound of the loved voice, and Gillian cast her arms about the child.

"Ah!" said O'Mara, in a tone of devout gratitude, "thank God, she returns to life! Thank you, my good woman. Leave us, if you please, and take the child with you."

"And who be you?" asked Barbara, wonderingly and suspiciously.

"I am this lady's husband," answered O'Mara.

"Leave us, Barbara," said Gillian, in a low voice. "He speaks the truth. Go, my darling."

She kissed Dora with icy lips, and, rising, led her firmly, though with uncertain steps, to the door, and closed it on the beseeching, tear-stained little face. As she turned, O'Mara came toward her with a radiant smile and hands outstretched.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, "don't come near me. The knowledge of your presence is enough!"

Her horror of the man, who after years of

cruelty and desertion had returned to dash the cup of happiness from her lips, banished her weakness.

“My darling!” cried O’Mara, in a wounded voice. “The shock has turned her brain,” he added pityingly, for the behoof of Barbara, or of any other possible listener.

“What do you want here?” asked Gillian. “How did you come?”

“By the purest accident, my dear Gillian. I entered the house and asked permission of your venerable friend the Vicar to sketch the interior of this charming room. You still retain—nay, you have positively improved upon—the exquisite taste you always possessed. While conversing with him, my child, *our* child, Gillian, came into the apartment.”

He produced his handkerchief and made play with it at this moment.

“I learned from her own sweet lips that her name was Dora. My memory flew back to the time when I had possessed a cherub of that name, and even then, yet when I was ignorant that the child was mine, nature seemed to draw me to her. I half thought that I could trace in her little lineaments the features I had loved so well.”

He flourished the handkerchief before his eyes.

“It was too good to be true, I thought ; such bliss was not for me ; and yet, not only in her face, but in her voice, her manner, in her happy frankness, the child recalled the wife I had never ceased to mourn. The little one, perhaps with a divine instinct that I had need of consolation, asked for music. This beautiful dwelling, the odor of the flowers, the sweet Englishness of the scene, the presence of the child, her name, with its remains of that happy time we spent together, too short, alas, and shortened, I must own, by my own intemperate folly, which I have bitterly repented, and which, I see in your dear face, you have long since forgiven,—all these influences flooded a heart which, with all its shortcomings, has ever been opened to the influences of external beauty and poetic feeling. The dear old song you used to sing came back to me, ‘Home, Sweet Home.’ Ah, I thought, as my fingers dwelt upon the keys, if this peaceful and beautiful dwelling were indeed my home, if this angelic child were the Dora I had loved and lost, if you were by my side, as in the dear dead days ! And the dream *is* true, my Gillian, my bride !”

The strained and flimsy rhetoric, the theatrical gesticulations with which he spoke this rigmarole, contrasting with the diabolic half grin upon his face, was an epitome of the man's character. The words and voice were for the possible listeners, his gestures expressed his sense of the dramatic value of the situation, the smile bespoke a pleasant sense of humor. It is not often that a born torturer has a more perfect chance of displaying his instincts than this that fate had just put into the hands of Mr. O'Mara.

He made a second step toward her.

At his first advance she had shrunk from him in terror, but now she stood firm, drawing herself to her full height, and meeting his eyes with a look which changed his mocking regard to one of half-sullen admiration.

“Listen!” she said quietly. “I know the powers you have, the privileges the law gives you. I know that all I have is yours, that it is just as much in your power to-day to strip me of all I possess as it was to rob me seven years ago. You are welcome to do so. Take all I have—I shall speak no word of complaint, make no effort to assert the right—I know God recognizes though the law denies it. But try to do no more. Lay a

hand upon me, advance one step toward me, and you will find that I am not unprotected. I have but to raise my voice to have you thrown out of this house, like the thing and cur you are. You will be wise not to provoke me to such a measure. Go, and leave me to myself for awhile."

Her calm did more than any raving denunciation of him could have done. The quiet contempt of her words and look left him quite untouched, but he recognized the force that lay behind them, and gave way, marking his retreat in his usual flowery glances.

"I comprehend, Gillian. You want quiet to accustom yourself to these changed circumstances. I can understand that my sudden apparition is something of a shock to you. I am not here to rob you, as you call it. You do me injustice in thinking that the prosperity of your circumstances adds one iota to the joy I feel in finding you. It is not your wealth I want, it is only yourself; the affection you once had for me I would revive. Try not to think too harshly of me, Gillian. I was not blameless in that past time. I admit my faults, my errors. I confess them with tears. I leave you for a time; your better nature will conquer—I am sure of it.

You will forget and forgive the errors I deplore, you will hear the call of duty and affection. We shall be reunited. Here, in this delicious spot, I shall taste the felicity which in my foolish youth—I confess it, Gillian—I threw aside. God bless you, darling, and our dear little one. I will return presently to meet, I hope, the reception dear to a husband and a father.”

He left the house, and walked toward the village, his face grown hard with lines of calculation.

“I shall have trouble with her,” he said to himself. “Gad! how infernally handsome she is. These last seven years have improved her prodigiously. She used to be a little thin. I arrive *apropos*. That burly baronet was hard hit when I proclaimed my identity, but I don’t suppose I shall have much trouble with him. I have made one friend already in that thick-witted old parson, and to have the clergy on one’s side is half the battle with women. But that fellow Bream will be the *clou* of the situation, I’m afraid.”

He reached the Pig and Whistle, where Stokes was smoking his pipe in the porch. O’Mara passed him with a slight sideward motion of the head, and went upstairs to a

room overlooking the street. A minute later Stokes knocked and entered.

“Well?” he asked eagerly.

“Your penetration was not at fault,” said O’Mara. “Mrs. Dartmouth is my wife.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Yes, and she has seen me.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing you would be the wiser for knowing, or that I should care to repeat.”

“I can believe that,” said Stokes, “if you treated her as you did the others out yonder,” with a jerk of the head in the supposed direction of America. “I could find it in my heart to wish as I’d never told you anything about Mr. Bream and the scrap-book.”

“Never mind what you could find in your heart, my good Stokes. See if you can find a bottle of drinkable brandy in your bar.”

Stokes went and returned with the brandy. O’Mara motioned him to a seat on the other side of the table.

“Just to get things straight in my mind,” he said, “I will tell you the morning’s adventures.”

He told them, plainly and succinctly, as he could speak when he chose, and Stokes listened.

“What do you make of that?” he asked, when he had finished.

“She’s going to bolt,” said Stokes, “and she’ll most likely take the kid with her.”

“That is my reading of the situation, also,” said O’Mara. “I shall want your help, Stokes.”

“Then I wish you didn’t,” said the publican uneasily, nerving himself with a gulp of spirit; “and I’ve a—good mind as you should do without it.”

O’Mara, with his hand on the table and a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, looked at him with a smile of dry, contemptuous inquiry.

“I’m sick o’ being made a tool and cats-paw of; I had enough o’ being your jackal, out yonder. Nice jobs as you put me on, too! If I’d ha’ held my jor about that pary-graph, as likely as not you’d ha’ gone away from here no wiser than you’d come. And if I’d ha’ known as Sir George was sweet on her, I’d ha’ seen you——[Mr. Stokes’s language was remarkably forcible at this point] afore I’d ha’ said a word.”

“You are really shockingly immoral, Stokes,” said O’Mara.

“Go it, go it!” said Stokes disgustedly. “I mean it, though. Mrs. Dartmouth’s a

lady. When I was down with the rheumatic, a queen couldn't ha' been kinder than she was to me. Jelly and port wine every day, she sent me. The poor man's Providence—that's the name they give her hereabout. A nice providence you'll be to anybody, won't you? And Sir George is a good sort, too; he's going to rebuild this place and give me a new lease on the old terms."

"Bucolic Philistine!" said O'Mara, "why can't he leave the house alone? It's charmingly picturesque. I am afraid, Stokes, that you didn't shed many tears over that paragraph announcing my untimely decease."

"I shouldn't cry over better men nor you, Mr. O'Mara."

"Wonderful are the ways of Providence!" said O'Mara. "When that infernal ruffian left me on that beastly hill, twenty miles from anywhere, I little thought what a good turn he was doing me. I wonder why he kept the letters; though, for the matter of that, I don't quite know why I had kept them myself. I'm glad he did keep them. I wasn't popular in that part of the States, and his death, with those letters on his person, was a godsend to me."

"Yes," said Stokes, "the devil's mindful of his own."

“Thank you,” said O’Mara sweetly, “and now to business. I think with you that my wife will probably try to run away, and, as you euphemistically express it, take the kid with her. That must be stopped. It’s my intention to stay in this delightful spot, for a time at least, and I want no avoidable scandal. You must watch the house, and have the pony and trap in readiness. If she goes, follow her, and wire me the earliest possible information.”

“Why should I?” asked Stokes, who had been drawing pretty freely on the brandy bottle. “You’re a disposin’ of one pretty face, you are. You leave me alone. I came to this place for peace and quietness, and I’ve had it, till you come to make mischief, as you always did. I’m a reformed character, I am. You go and ask about the village if I ain’t a respectable man.”

“There are one or two other communications, my Stokes,” returned O’Mara, “where your record would not bear sifting so well. Do you remember a little affair at Oleoville, in ’68, wasn’t it? You are remembered there with quite a tender interest. Did you ever hear of the Extradition Act?”

“You’re a virtuous character, you are, ain’t you now?” said Stokes. “’Pon my

soul, you're a cool hand to take that sort of tone with me. Split on me, eh? We'd make a pretty pair side by side in the dark, my sweetie. You're as deep in the mud as I am in the mire, if it comes to that."

"Precisely," replied O'Mara, calmly. "Which helps to make our interest identical. My dear Stokes, we are in the same boat, and as usual, I am at the helm, so it will take what course I choose. The work is exhausting, let me speak plainly."

"If you can," grunted Stokes.

"I can and will. Our danger and our interests are the same. You want to settle down as a moral and virtuous character in this delightful village. So do I, and we're going to help each other. That's the situation in a nut-shell."

"But what am I to get for it?" asked Stokes.

"I shall give you one hundred pounds for your original information, and a further sum, to be settled between ourselves, for such further services as you may perform. And now, waste no more time, go to the Court, and keep your eyes open. I'll go meanwhile to that dear old ass of a parson, and get him to muzzle Bream. *He's* the only real danger, because he's the only one of the crowd with a head on his shoulders."

CHAPTER XXI.

COUNSEL.

GILLIAN had borne herself bravely enough in the detested presence of her husband, but after O'Mara had left her she sank back, all lax and helpless, into the chair from which she had risen, and had to summon all her strength to ward off an hysterical attack.

The wreck of her hopes could not have been more appallingly complete; the past hour had seen her fall from the summit of happiness to a depth of misery more profound than she had known even in that dreadful time seven years ago in Westminster,—the deeper for the awful suddenness of the plunge. She could neither think nor rest, but sat staring blankly before her, her sensation a chaos, and her mind a whirl of purposeless trifles.

Suddenly a step sounded in her ear. She sprang up with sudden heart pang, thinking O'Mara had tracked her to this retreat, and stood shrinking with repugnance till a

shadow crossed her field of vision, and she beheld Mr. Bream.

There was such an atmosphere of strength and helpfulness about the man that he came to her troubled mind like sunshine and free air. She grasped his hand with an inarticulate cry of welcome.

“I know,” he said simply; “Sir George has told me what has happened. It was he who sent me here. Your husband has come to light again. He has claimed you.”

“Tell me,” she asked; “what shall I do? Is there any help for me? Any hope?”

“There are both if you will take them,” he answered. “It is a slow business and an unpleasant one; but you, at least, have nothing to fear from the fullest publicity. You must divorce him.” She shuddered as she leaned upon his arm. “I know, I know,” he continued with a quick sympathy. “But think of Dora, think of Sir George! Will you shrink from a little pain when it is necessary for the future of your child, for the happiness of a good fellow who loves you? Let me give you his message, which he gave me scarcely an hour ago. ‘Tell her,’ he said, ‘that whatever happens, if all is over between us, I absolve her from all blame; she is still the only woman in the

world to me, and I am her faithful friend till death.' ”

“God bless him!” said Gillian, with a sudden burst of tears. “God bless him!”

He let her weep in peace for a few minutes, glad that she had found her natural vent for the cruel emotions which tortured her. The crisis passed, and she was wiping away her tears, when a step was heard on the gravel outside, and the portly figure of Mr. Herbert darkened the sunlight pouring through the door.

“Pardon me, my dear madam,” he said, entering hat in hand, “I must really speak to you.”

“I know what you have to say, sir,” said Gillian. “You come from the man who calls himself my husband.”

“From the man who is your husband, yes. Suffer me to say——”

“I would rather hear nothing from you, Mr. Herbert.”

“Perhaps,” said Bream, “you had better leave Mr. Herbert and myself together. If he has any message you ought to hear I will convey it to you.”

“Thank you,” said Gillian; “you are a true friend.”

She pressed his hand, and with a formal

bend of her head to the vicar left the room, in spite of a remonstrant exclamation from him.

“Pray be seated, sir,” said Bream, offering his superior a chair.

“I will *not* be seated, sir,” said Mr. Herbert, with indignant anger. “As your spiritual superior I demand an explanation of your conduct.”

“The explanation is perfectly simple. I feel it my duty, as a clergyman and a gentleman, to protect that lady.”

“Your first duty, Mr. Bream, is to *me*.”

“Pardon me,” said Bream, with a fine mixture of firmness and respect. “I acknowledge your superiority so far as the offices of the parish are concerned; but I have sold you my services, not my conscience.”

“Does your conscience instruct you to side with a woman against her lawful husband?” asked Mr. Herbert hotly. “I have just left that unfortunate gentleman. He has—ah—been perfectly frank with me. He admits, fully, amply, that his married life was not a happy one, and that he chiefly was to blame. He confessed his errors with a candor, a conscientiousness, which did him infinite credit, and which moved me pro-

foundly. He is heartbroken, and, being in a very delicate state of health, is scarcely able to bear the sufferings of his present situation. His heart is yearning for reconciliation; he begs humbly, yet tenderly, for an interview with his wife."

"You see, sir," said Bream, stroking his chin thoughtfully, "Mrs. Dartmouth was taken a little by surprise. The gentleman had been so long dead and buried."

"Dead and buried! The man lives, sir."

"Unfortunately."

"Let us have no more, sir, of this revolting cynicism. For my own part I am astonished to find in a lady for whom I have a sincere respect and sympathy, a tone of such bitterness toward one whom she had sworn to love, honor, and obey. And I am even more surprised to find a man of your good sense and general right feeling so easily influenced by a mere *ex parte* statement."

"Even if that were so, sir, I might retort that all you have to go on is a mere *ex parte* statement of the other side. But it is not so. I was intimately acquainted with Mrs. Dartmouth—Mrs. O'Mara, if you prefer the real name—during the most disastrous part of her married life."

"Do I understand, Mr. Bream," asked the

vicar, with ponderous indignation, "do I understand, sir, that you were privy to this lady's concealment of her name? You knew that circumstance, and did not report it to me?"

"My dear sir," said Bream, "I am not aware that the circumstance of my being a clergyman absolves me from my duty as a gentleman. Did you expect me to break the confidence this unhappy lady reposed in me?"

This was so blank an argumentative "No thoroughfare," that Mr. Herbert could only blink and cough.

"May I ask, sir," continued Bream, "if you have ever been married?"

"I, sir?" roared Mr. Herbert.

"Pardon me, I forgot you stand for the celibacy of the clergy. But if the vicar has not been married, the curate has."

"Indeed!"

"So you see, I approach this subject with a double advantage. I know something about matrimony in the abstract, and about this particular marriage we are discussing in particular. I have an opinion founded, not, as you said just now, on the *ex parte* statement of an interested and prejudiced person, but on actual knowledge—that this new

acquaintance of yours is a whited sepulcher."

"Will you explain?"

"A humbug, if you like it better. His debaucheries at the time I knew him were open and shameless. They broke the heart of this unfortunate lady."

"Judge not," said Mr. Herbert, "that ye be not judged! He has repented, and I would stake all I possess that his repentance is sincere. He is a person of refined tastes, and his whole conversation assures me that he is deeply religious."

"Ah! That looks bad."

"Sir?"

"No offense. Our religion, Mr. Herbert, is often merely a cloak."

"In this case, I am sure that it is not. I think I know a little of human nature, and this unfortunate man, I believe, is of a most affectionate and devoted disposition. When he spoke of his child he cried, actually cried! He did the same this morning when he first heard her name, before he knew that she was his child."

"Yes," said Bream, "crocodiles cry."

"I myself was deeply affected, sir," said Mr. Herbert; "and I presume that you do not call *me* a crocodile. I promised as a

Christian, as a clergyman, to plead his cause. I feel myself—ah, somewhat compromised. I shudder when I think that I was on the point of pronouncing a blessing on a bigamous marriage.”

“And what do you advise this lady to do?”

“To do?” repeated Mr. Herbert. “To do what any self-respecting woman, any Christian, sir, would do under such circumstances—to fall upon her knees and humbly to thank a merciful Providence that she has been spared the commission of an act of abomination; and then to receive with tenderness the gentleman to whom she owes a wife’s duty, a wife’s obedience.”

“I see,” said Bream; “kill the fatted calf, and all that sort of thing. My dear vicar, it can’t be done; and it shan’t, if I can help it.”

“Those whom heaven has joined——”

“The other place often puts asunder.”

“You are blasphemous!”

“Not at all. I am practical and honest in the avowal of my ideas. If Mrs. Dartmouth——”

“Mrs. O’Mara,” said Mr. Herbert.

“As you please. The name does not greatly matter. If that lady ever again

avowed allegiance to a cur like that, I, who am her friend, would give her up forever.”

“For her child’s sake, Bream——”

“Even a child cannot mend the broken chain of love.”

“Put love aside—duty?”

“Is sometimes but another word for immorality.”

“Good heavens, Bream!”

“I repeat the word, immorality. For a woman, under any protest, to live in conjugal bonds with a man she does not love, whom she does not respect, from whom she shrinks in actual loathing, is an infamy in the eyes of God and man.”

“We are not sent into this world, Bream, merely to follow our impulses and wishes, but to be chastened and made obedient. The carnal love which you would make the final rule of conduct——”

“Is the most divine thing in the world.”

“For itself, it is nothing.”

“It is everything, for it is priceless, and cannot be bought or sold; to the blessing from without, it adds the sanction from within; with it, marriage is a pretaste of heaven; without it, veritable hell on earth. I speak from knowledge, sir; from bitter knowledge of what a loveless woman is.”

“We are—ah—losing ourselves in generalities, Bream,” said Mr. Herbert. “Let us return to the case in question. Mr. O’Mara has undoubted and undeniable legal rights, to put it on the lowest ground. These rights it is his intention to assert.”

“Mrs. O’Mara will deny them on her own responsibility until legal powers can put her beyond his power.”

“Legal powers!” repeated Mr. Herbert, with a horror-stricken aspect. “Do I hear you aright, Bream, you as a—ah—a Christian priest, counsel divorce!”

“Most certainly. It is the only common-sense solution of the dilemma.”

“And how,” asked O’Mara’s voice from the door, “does she propose to procure this divorce?”

“By my evidence, Mr. O’Mara,” said Bream calmly, “and by that of one or two other people, who will be easily enough found. Her case is perfect. You have furnished her with everything she needs,—cruelty, unfaithfulness, desertion!”

“Cruelty!” echoed O’Mara, with an abominably acted air of surprise. “What cruelty, in the name of heaven?”

“She spent a month in St. Thomas’s Hos-

pital in consequence of your last assault upon her.”

“And where is your witness to *that*?” asked O’Mara. “It is merely an unsupported statement, to which my denial will be a sufficient answer.”

“That we shall see,” said the curate.

“This is hard,” said O’Mara. “After seven cruel years of separation, I returned with a heart overflowing with affection. I was happy. My nature was full of sunlight and tender anticipations. I know my former infirmities—I have freely confessed them to Mr. Herbert—but, ah! how I loved that woman!”

“You proved it, among other things, by leaving her for seven years, and making no signs all that time.”

“I left her—yes, we were penniless, and I could not bear to see her suffer. I said, ‘I will cross the seas and labor until I become rich.’ I went. I returned to find——” He passed his hand across his eyes.

“You have returned, as you say. Rich, as you hoped?”

“Alas, no! Fortune has frowned upon me, but I still retain my old illusions. I am a little older, but still the same.”

“Yes,” said Bream, with a world of

meaning in his tone. "That seems the difficulty."

"And all you desire," said Mr. Herbert, "is a perfect reconciliation?"

"Precisely," said O'Mara. "I pass my dear wife's unfeeling reception of the news that I survived; I pass over her *tendresse* for another man; I forget that, with my child's innocent eyes fixed upon her, she was about to marry that person, and I say, 'All is forgotten and forgiven. For our little angel's sake, let us be united!'"

Mr. Herbert blew his nose sonorously.

"You hear, Bream?"

"Yes," said Bream, "I hear."

"Then join me as a peacemaker in invoking on these good people a Christian blessing."

"Thank you, thank you," cried O'Mara, pressing his hand. "I shall never forget your sympathy. Sir," he continued to Bream, "this torture is killing me. I have an obscure heart affection, and——"

"Possibly an aneurism?"

"I—I fear so."

"Hardening of the great artery, I diagnosed it long ago; but with care cases like yours last for years. Your *heart* will never kill you, Mr. O'Mara."

“My dear sir,” said O’Mara, with a slight impatience of manner, “all this is apart from the point. I demand an interview with my wife. I shall try gentle persuasion to bring her back to ideas of wifely duty. If those fail I must try other means, though I shall be very reluctant to do so. I ask you, as a gentleman, to leave this house.”

Bream considered for a moment, with his eyes on O’Mara’s face; then, walking to the hall rope, rang. Barbara entered the room.

“Ask your mistress to step this way, if you please.” Barbara went. “I will leave you with your wife, Mr. O’Mara, perfectly confident that since my interview with her an hour ago you can do her no harm.”

Gillian entered, pale but collected.

“This gentleman,” said Bream, “insists on an interview with you. I see no harm in you granting the request. You had better have help at hand in case he should attempt violence, though that is hardly likely.”

“I am not afraid,” said Gillian. “Thank you, and good evening.”

She pressed his hand, acknowledging Mr. Herbert’s embarrassed bow, and turned to her husband.

CHAPTER XXII.

FACE TO FACE.

THEY stood face to face for a minute in silence, with the aspect of two duelists taking their places, sword in hand. In Gillian's intense face, and in the free and strong poise of her figure, O'Mara read a more decided courage than that she had shown in the earlier intercourses. His face wore its habitual expression of tired cynicism, touched by the admiration he felt, despite himself, for her undaunted bearing and by his appreciation of her beauty. He carried in his hand a bunch of field flowers, which he held out to her with a gesture of chivalrous deference.

"You used to like them, Gillian," he said. "It was one of the many ties between us in the dear old days before our dissensions began. Will you not take them?"

"Enough of this," she answered. "Why are you here?"

"Why? what a question! Why, because——"

“Because the report of your death was a falsehood invented to destroy me. Because you know that I have money, not much, but enough to draw you toward me—because all else has failed with you, and, in despair, you come back to me.”

“Permit me,” said O’Mara, “to set you right on one point. The report of my death was none of my doing. The facts are very simple. I was robbed by a desperado and stripped of all I possessed, even my clothes. In my pocket were letters I had received from you during our courtship, the only possessions I had clung to during all the miserable time that I was separated from you. The man was shot with those letters in his possession. He was unknown, and it was supposed, naturally enough,—for people do not, as a rule, trouble to carry old letters addressed to other people,—that he was Philip O’Mara. So much for that. I came back to you, you say, because you have money. An accusation like that is hard to fight; but consider the circumstances. I knew nothing of your whereabouts, nothing of your accession to fortune. It is purely by chance that I am here. Being here, I claim you, Gillian. I am your husband! I claim your obedience!”

“You are not my husband ; you are only the man who betrayed, degraded, and then abandoned me !”

“You put it harshly, Gillian. I had my faults, I admit ; I have deplored them during many a bitter hour of our term of separation with tears. I repent them. For our child’s sake——”

“For our child’s sake ?” asked Gillian. “If every fiber of my body and every inch of my soul did not loathe you, the thought of her would be as fatal to any idea of reconciliation with you. My life is ended—it would matter very little whether I dragged out the remnant of my time in solitude or again became your drudge and slave. But she—I will keep her clear of the pollution of your influence, God helping me, with my life ! When I look into her face, and see in it any likeness to you, I say to myself better that we both were dead.”

“Gillian, you horrify me ; you cannot understand what you are saying.”

“I understand well, and I have resolved to say it once for all. Equivocation is useless between us ; as long as we lived together your life was infamy, mine was misery and shame. You left me ; I thought you were dead and I rejoiced—yes, I rejoiced. You

have returned, and the old horror comes back upon me ten-fold. Take everything that I possess; let me go and live my own life in peace; and promise me that I shall never see your face again."

"I will promise nothing of the kind," answered O'Mara. "The sacred tie of wedlock is not to be broken so easily. Gillian, my darling, cease these reproaches, and be reasonable. I am a changed man. My old ways are repented of and abandoned; I swear it. You are what you were, only, if possible, more beautiful." The admiration that shone in his face was real enough. She felt it; his glance seemed to burn her. "Let me, by devoting my life to you, atone for the past, Gillian—I love you."

"After what I have suffered from you, you dare——"

"To love you? Who could help it?"

"Silence! Not another word. Turn your eyes away. If you look at me like that——"

"Forgive my admiration. You never looked so beautiful! The same soft eyes and thoughtful brow, the same golden hair, the same fair form that I have clasped to mine." He came forward with extended hands. She made a step back, with so evil

a glitter in her unchanging eyes that he paused.

“Don't prompt me to forget my sex,” she said, “as I fear I shall if you attempt to lay a hand upon me. I have been free from you too long to fall under your power again. I remember too well the shame of our life together.”

“I remember only its happy moments. Why torture yourself and me by thinking of these little indiscretions, long since repented, which caused an occasional estrangement. Come, let us be friends. What! will you not even take my hand?”

“Not even that! You knew well what you were and are! You taught me long ago to know you also. You can deceive the world, perhaps, but you can never again deceive me. Do not approach me! Go your way, and let me go mine.”

“May I ask,” said O'Mara, with a sudden coldness of tone—“forgive the question—if you are quite ingenuous. Is not your present conduct the consequence less of my misconduct, which I have amply admitted, than of the fact that another man has supplanted me in your affections?”

“Infamous! Be silent.”

“No, my dear Gillian, I will not be silent.

You ask too much; you would have the charity all on one side. I must remind you of your duty, and command you—yes, *command* you—to admit my authority as your lawful husband. No, you shall not go; I have not yet done. If you insist on a separation *a mensa et thoro*, which I deeply deplore, I shall require at least one *solatium*, the custody of my little daughter.”

Gillian staggered as if the words had stabbed her.

“Take my child from me?” she gasped. “Yield her up to you? I would rather see her dead.”

“You compel me to remind you again of my legal position. Do you think a fellow has no rights? Do you mean that I will suffer my darling child to remain under the care of one who has taught her to hate and despise her father?”

“I have not done so,” said Gillian. “Philip, I swear to you, until to-day I had never breathed your name to her. She had never heard of your existence.”

“That is even more unnatural. Gillian, I repeat it, you shock me exceedingly.”

“Hypocrite!” cried Gillian.

“Ah, you do not know me!”

“To the inmost fiber of your being! To

the very core of your false and cruel heart! My little child! Oh, God! Philip!" she cried, with outstretched hands, and with a sudden intensity of pleading passion, "have pity! Listen to me. I will believe all that you say of your repentance. I will teach her to pray for you night and morning. Have pity! Take all that I possess, but leave me my child."

"You ask too much," he said again. "The bribe you offer is a greater insult than any you have yet put upon me. It is not for the sake of money that I shall desert my child, or give up my rights as a husband. I cannot compel you to believe in the sincerity of my repentance, the ardor of my affection, but I can at least take care that my child is not schooled to detest and abhor her father, or permitted to grow up in ignorance of his mere existence."

"Will nothing move you?" cried Gillian. The threat about the child had frightened her horribly. She had, if such a thing were possible, exaggerated O'Mara's cunning and cruelty, and her thought was that before she could procure the legal protection she needed, he would steal Dora from her side.

"Nothing!" he answered; "I stand here on my rights. You are my wife, Dora is

my child. This house is mine, nothing but process of law can eject me. I see by the unaltered stubbornness of your demeanor that soft measures are of no avail. I might as well have acted decisively this morning as now." He took a seat, crossed his legs easily, and took a case from his pocket. "You don't object to a cigar, if I remember rightly. Oh, by the by, you had better send up to the 'Pig and Whistle' for my portmanteau. You are nearer the bell than I, might I trouble you to ring."

Showing consciousness in every line of his face and curve of his body of Gillian's horrified gaze upon him, he kept his eyes fixed on the flame of the match at which he lit his cigar. His voice was purely commonplace, and having thrown aside the match he stretched out an indolent hand for a book on the table beside him.

A knock came to the door, which Gillian scarcely heard, and left unanswered. Barbara entered the room with a card upon a salver. Her mistress took it mechanically. For a second or two the name it bore meant nothing to her, but at a second reading she cried to Barbara, with a stifled pant in her voice :

"Yes, show him in."

She stood erect again, and quivering as if some galvanic influence flashed from the scrap of pasteboard held between her fingers. Thirty seconds later, Sir George Venebles entered the room. He stopped at sight of O'Mara, who looked up at him from the page of the book with an abominably acted cool stare of non-recognition.

"A friend of yours, my dear Gillian? Pray present me."

"I am Sir George Venebles," said the baronet; "I desire to speak a few words with Mrs. Dartmouth."

"There is no lady of that name here," returned O'Mara. "Do you know her address, Gillian? Perhaps you can direct this gentleman to find the person he requires."

"Gillian!" began Venebles.

"Pardon me," said O'Mara. "That lady is my wife. May I ask what right you have to address her by her Christian name?" he continued, dropping his bantering tone, and speaking angrily. "Don't you think, under the circumstances, that your visit is misplaced and impertinent, and that you had better go? I am not of a jealous temperament, but I decidedly object to the presence here of one who proposed taking my place and usurping my privileges. To put it on the lowest ground, it is hardly becoming."

“I came here——” began Sir George again.

“As cavalier in ordinary. Just so; but the proper guardian of a wife is her husband.”

“You cur!” cried Sir George, making a step toward him. “Utter another word of insult and——”

“Oh, pray, strike me! You are powerfully built, I am physically delicate; no doubt you would be the stronger. But morally and legally, young man, I should be a giant, you a pigmy.”

“My object in coming here to-night,” said Venebles, restraining his passion with a strong effort, “was to offer that lady my protection against a scoundrel.”

“Indeed! Highly chivalric.”

“I know what she has suffered. I know the misery you have brought upon her; and now, if she said the word, I would avenge her wrongs upon your miserable body.”

“George, be silent; let me speak.”

“Wait, my dear Gillian,” said O’Mara, “I shall have the greatest pleasure in listening to any remarks you may have to make when we are quit of the presence of this intruder. Sir, I am master here, as you will find if you intend to deny my authority.

That lady is my wife. This is my house. Your presence here is an outrage. Be good enough to make yourself scarce."

"I shall not stir a step while you remain."

"Reflect a minute," said O'Mara, "and you will see that you are compromising this lady, whom you declare it your object to serve. If I were as hot-headed as yourself, there would be a deuce of a scandal."

Sir George turned to Gillian.

"Is it your wish that I should go?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "It is my wish you should go, and take that man with you."

"Then, after you, sir," said Venebles, with a flash of genuine triumph, pointing to the door.

"Pardon me! Deeply sorry, of course, to interfere with your arrangements, but I shall stay here to-night, *en famille*. Let me remind you, my dear Gillian, that your conduct would suggest to an unprejudiced mind that while I was merely your husband you regarded that gentleman as your lover."

"What?" cried Venebles, "you dare——"

"Do not heed his insults," said Gillian. "He merely wishes to provoke you to an outrage. Go—but before you go, save me from his presence."

“You hear,” said Sir George. “Come, sir!”

“Absurd!” said O’Mara, “I remain.”

With one strong clutch on his collar the baronet pulled him from his seat. For a moment O’Mara made a show of feigning resistance, but a rat in the fangs of a terrier was not more helpless.

“I yield to your *force majeure*,” he said, “but I protest against this violation of my rights.”

“You can protest just as well outside,” said Venebles, and with a gesture of impotent rage O’Mara retreated. Sir George shot a rapid whisper to Gillian as he passed her:

“At the bottom of the spinney, at nine; if you ever loved me, be there.”

Before she could answer yes or no, he had followed O’Mara.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLIGHT.

SCARCELY had Sir George disappeared when Gillian became conscious of a loud contention of voices in the garden. For a moment she fancied that O'Mara and the baronet must have broken into open quarrel, and listened with a sick apprehension of new disaster, but a moment later she recognized the voice of Barbara in the debate, mingled with another which seemed strange to her. She moved to the window, and there saw her faithful servant engaged in a struggle with her brother-in-law, Jake Owen. Gillian had forgotten the man's existence, and recalled it by an effort.

"I tell ee," said Jake, who was white and feeble, but strung to an energy not his own by some fearful excitement, "I tell ee, I *heard* him. Shouldn't *I* know his voice? Theer ain't two like it in the world. Let me go, lass; let me go. He's close about. He can't ha' got far away by this time."

Barbara clung to him and held him back.

“Jake, Jake! take a thought, lad, and remember where ye be. Is it likely as he’d be here? Do act reasonable, now, and don’t ee go there, frightening the soul out o’ my poor lady, as has enough to bear a’ready.”

“I heard him, I tell ee,” repeated Jake, “I heard him.” His eyes grew fixed, and the ghastly pallor of his face deepened. “Sh’,” he said, setting Barbara aside with a strong gesture. “He’s there. I’ve got him. Quiet, my lass.”

Gillian, fixed to her place behind the curtains with horror, saw him start with winding steps and crouching body, a few paces forward, and then, with a sudden spring, strike hurriedly at the empty air with a formidable-looking knife.

“—— him!” he said, “he’s gone again! What are ye doing with him?” he said fiercely to Barbara. “You’re hiding him from me. You, Jess’s sister! ye’re false, my lass.”

“Come back, Jake, come back to your bed,” pleaded Barbara; “ye’re not fit to be about, my poor lad.”

“But I *saw* him,” persisted Jake, though with an accent on the word, which showed that a flash of complete sanity had made him

doubt the countenance of the vision. "I saw him right there."

"But ye saw him this morning," said Barbara; "and Jess, too."

"Ay!" said Jake, "lying dead and white at his feet. That was only a dream, lass, but this time——"

"It's only a dream, too, Jake. Come back to your bed, my poor lad."

Jake looked about him with a pathetically puzzled face, and, Barbara's gentle pressure on his arm, allowed her to lead him away.

Time had slipped by unnoticed on this day of strange events, and it was with a sort of dull surprise that Gillian saw the finger of the clock upon the mantle-shelf pointing to within five minutes of the hour of Sir George's rendezvous at the spinney. She began to wonder whether it would be right or wise to go, and so debating, went. Her mind was a chaos, with no definite sensation save one of vague, hopeless misery.

She passed through the dusk of the open spaces of garden and farm, faintly silvered with strengthening moonlight, to the strip of dense shadow cast by the spinney. There she paused in a sharp wrestle with tears, which would force their way through her eyelids, and became conscious of a measured step, pacing slowly up and down the high-

road beyond the trees. He was there already, waiting for her. The brave heart which had borne its own load of sorrow so well went out to his desolation. She conquered her weakness, and pressed forward. At the first crackle of her step upon the dried leaves with which the spinney was strewn the steady beat on the road stopped, and as her dark figure glided out into the moonlight, she heard her lover's breath escape him in a sob of relief.

“Thank God! I feared you might not come.”

“It would perhaps have been better if I had not,” she answered.

“Don't say that,” he pleaded. “I can't tell you, Gillian, how I have longed to see you since—since this morning. My whole life, for the last six years, has been spent in longing for you, to see your face, to hear your voice, but I never knew how dear you were to me till to-day. Ah, my darling! To have held you in my arms, to have heard from your own lips that you love me, and then to lose you! I could bear that, perhaps; at least I could bear it better than to know that I lose you to that brute-beast who has blackened all your innocent life. Tell me, Gillian, let me hear you say it, you

will never be reconciled to him—never go back to him !”

“Never,” she said, “never ! You may be sure of that, at least. No,” she cried suddenly, “stay as you are.” He had made a sudden motion to swing himself up the bank which divided the road from the spinney. “This is good-by, George, between us. I was wrong to come here at all. Do not make me more sorry than I am that I have been so weak.”

“Good-by !” he echoed, “why good-by ? You have only to fling this wretch out of your path to be free.”

“Will that be so easily done ?” she asked.

“There is no court in the world,” he said, “that would not give you your liberty after what you have condoned at this man’s hands.”

“Think,” she answered, “think what I must endure to procure that liberty. You do not know. I have not told you one tithe of the shame, the horror, of my life with that man. What he was, no one can know but myself. The proof of his infamy would be my shame as well as his before the world. George, it would be horrible. I would rather die than face that ordeal.”

“But what will you do?”

“I do not know. I must have time to think. My brain and heart seem numb—dead.”

“Gillian, you must face it for my sake. There can be no disgrace to you. How can there be? What have you done at which people could point? All the shame would be his. I know how you must shrink from it. You could not be the woman you are if you could welcome such a prospect, or be indifferent to it; but think of your liberty—think of Dora’s future—think of me. A little courage, darling, for my sake.”

“For your sake?” she answered. “Ah, George, it is of you I think more than of myself. Could you—proud as you are, with your name and position—marry a woman whose fame had been dragged through the mud of the public courts?”

“You doubt me, Gillian? You doubt my love?”

“No,” she answered; “I do not doubt your love. It is because I believe in it and in you that I shrink from taking the means which could make it possible for us to come together. I know you would redeem your promise. You might be happy for a time, but it would be happiness dearly bought.”

“I would give my life for you,” he protested.

“Your life, yes. I think you would,” she answered simply, looking sadly at the exaltation on his moonlit face. “But your friends, your position in society?”

“Friends? Position in society?” he repeated, scornfully. “What are friends, what is position in society? Why, what danger is there of my losing them, even if I cared for a second whether I lost them or not? Listen, Gillian.” He sprang up beside her, with one arm embracing the fence, and caught her fingers in his disengaged hand. “We have our happiness in our own power. If we act like a brave man and a brave woman, who truly love each other and have real confidence in each other’s affection, this man cannot keep us apart. Why should we wait for the law to set you free?”

“George!” cried Gillian, starting back and disengaging her hand.

“What?” he said, “look the thing fairly in the face, as if it were another woman’s case. Would you blame another woman in your position for acting so, knowing the circumstances as fully as you do? While you remain here you are constantly open to this man’s attacks and insults, you are complete-

ly defenseless before him. Even when you made your appeal for justice in the court, see what you have to face—the insults of a licensed cad in a wig and gown, the publicity of the press, and, God knows, there are always accidents to be dreaded, and justice is never certain ; perhaps when you have condoned all this, you will still find yourself tied to this villain more hopelessly than now. Why should you stand such a risk ?”

“ And my child, George ?”

“ Your child ? Why, she would come with us, of course, and learn to love me as a father, as she does already, dearest.”

“ And when she learned the story, and grew old enough to understand ?”

“ Why should she ever know the story ?”

“ If she never did, would that alter the fact that I should be unworthy of her affection ? Ah, George, you do not love me as I dreamed, if you would degrade me in my eyes and your own. Ah !” she continued, seeing him about to protest, “ I know what you would say. I know you would be sincere in saying it, but the time would come when you too would despise me. Evil cannot cure evil. Suffering can never be cured by sin.”

“ The sin would not be ours,” said Ven-

ebles, "it would be the world's, which has brought this misery upon you. If you loved me, Gillian, you would not hesitate."

"I *do* love you," said Gillian, "and you know it. It is because I love you that I am jealous of your good fame and my own. Spare me, George. Let me feel that one man at least is pure—that one man lives who is incapable of a thought, a wish, which would reflect dishonor on his own nature, and prove his scorn for mine."

He hung his head, and a great sob forced its way from his throat.

"At least," he said, when he could trust his voice again, "you will try to recover your liberty?"

"I must think," she said. "It has all been so sudden, so terrible. Of one thing you may be certain—all is over between him and me. Even if his hypocritical repentance were real, it could not wipe out the past."

"Remember this," said Venebles, "that, whatever happens, I am your servant, your slave, till death. You have one friend, Gillian, who will see justice done to you. You are tired and ill, my darling. Go home and try to sleep. I shall bring you to reason at last, I know. Good-night."

He caught the hand she offered him, and

kissed it passionately. Then he walked away, but Gillian heard his steps stop before she was beyond the line of shadow cast by the trees.

The house was silent when she returned to it and quite dark, save for a gleam of light through the shutters of the kitchen where Barbara sat. In the cool night air Gillian walked up and down the lawn, considering the event of the past hour. Sir George's parting phrase, "I shall bring you to reason at last," rang in her ears, with a gathering clearness and terror in its meaning.

"God help me!" she cried to herself; "I am walking among fires."

The man she loved grew to seem a more pressing danger than the man she hated. She had schooled herself to speak calmly and wisely during this interview, but she dreaded the renewal of his pleadings, clearly foreshadowed in the phrase which haunted her mind.

"I am not strong enough to bear it. God knows what I might be tempted to do in this strait." She stood for a moment, gazing intently at the ground, her fingers knotted together. "Yes," she said slowly, "it is the only way."

She hurried within doors, to her bedroom, where she rang the bell which summoned Barbara. That good creature found her packing a portmanteau, and stood astonished.

“Wake Miss Dora, please, Barby, and dress her.”

The woman stared, and then, with a sudden understanding of the situation, began to blubber.

“You are a good, faithful creature,” said Gillian, kissing her; “I think you are my friend.”

“God knows I be, my lady.”

“I will trust you,” said Gillian, “I am going away, you can guess why. When I have a shelter, you shall know where I am. I shall be away some time—how long I don’t know yet. You will stay here, and look after the place, and let me have news of what happens. And now be quick, there is no time to lose.”

She finished her packing, putting a few immediate necessities for Dora and herself in a portable handbag, and leaving the heavier packages to be forwarded later. She took a little bundle of bank notes from her *escritoire*, and wrote a short note. “I am going away. I leave you master of this

house, of all that is mine. I admit your right to make me a beggar—you shall never make me do more. I will rather beg my bread than defend myself against you.”

“Give that to Mr. O’Mara when he comes to-morrow,” she said to Barbara, as she appeared with the child. “My darling, you are not afraid to go with me?”

“No, mamma,” answered the child, bravely, though with a quivering lip.

“We must go away to-night. If we stop here, they will take you from me.” The child nestled closer to her, looking up in her face with frightened eyes. “You will be good—you will not cry? My darling, it is for mamma’s sake. God bless you, Barbara, you shall hear from me soon. Send on these things when I send for them; I shall write to you through Mr. Bream.”

Again she kissed the honest, homely cheek, wet with tears; then, with Dora clinging to her skirts, she hurried downstairs and from the house. Scarcely fifty yards from the gate she beheld a dark object barring the road, which on closer inspection resolved itself into a dogcart and a horse. A smaller black object detached itself from it, and became perceptible in the moonlight as Stokes.

“Evening, mum,” said that worthy, with a touch of his rabbit-skin cap. “Evening, little lady.”

“Good evening,” said Gillian, quietly. “You are late on the road, Mr. Stokes.”

“I’ve been over to Radford, mum. The horse had got a stone in his shoe, and I pulled up to pick it out.”

“Could you take me over to Radford?” asked Gillian; “I have important business in London, and must catch an early train. I will pay you well for your trouble.”

“Trouble’s a pleasure mum,” said Stokes, gallantly. “As to payment, I hope you won’t talk o’ that. I’m proud to oblige ye, mum. The little horse is as fresh as paint, he’ll take you there inside of an hour and a half.

He helped Gillian to mount, and lifted in Dora after her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST MEETING.

IT was yet early on the following morning when O'Mara, placidly asleep in his bed at the "Pig and Whistle," was aroused by a loud knocking at his door.

"Who's there?" he asked, sitting up in bed.

"It's me," responded the voice of his landlord, "I've got news for you."

"Wait a minute," responded O'Mara, and hastily donning one or two articles of clothing, admitted him.

"I've got her!" said Stokes, triumphantly. "It ought to be worth another hundred, gov'nor."

"What is all this?" asked his patron.

"I've got the kid," replied Stokes; "your wife bolted last night, as you thought she would, and I drove her into Radford. She went to the George Hotel there, and I heard her tell the waiter to wake her up in time for the first train as left the station. So I

waited on, followed her to the station, and heard her ask for tickets to Cambridge. She was lookin' precious ill and worried, as if she'd been crying all night. She went out on the platform, and, just as the train was signaled, blow me if she didn't faint bang off. She'd ha' fell on to the line if a chap hadn't ha' caught her in his arms. That give me my chance, and I took it sharp, you bet. 'I know the lady,' I says, 'I drove her in here from Crouchford last night. She's a-stopping at the George.' I says, 'Leave her to me, it's all right.' The station-master knows me, and I got charge of her and the kid easy enough. I takes 'em back to the George—at least I takes *her* back, leavin' the little one in the trap outside. The chambermaid took her up-stairs to her room—she was in a dead faint all the while—and I lays into the horse, and comes along here with the little 'un."

"And where is she?" asked O'Mara.

"Locked in the parlor down-stairs," said Stokes. "What are you going to do? The mother'll be back here in no time. She'll guess, if nobody tells her, what's gone with the kid."

"Your penetration does you credit, Mr. Stokes," said O'Mara. "You have man-

aged things very cleverly. Thou art the best o' cut-throats."

"There's another thing, too," continued the publican, "Sir George was with her again last night."

"What, after I got home?"

"Yes. They were together at the bottom of the spinney for a good hour and more."

"Did you hear anything of their conversation?"

"No, I daren't go close enough. But the moonlight was bright and I see him kiss her hand."

"Ah!" said O'Mara, "I think, if it should be necessary, that you might remember a little of their talk later on, my good Stokes."

"No," said Stokes, with a resolute shake of the head, "no, no perjury!"

"Perjury!" echoed O'Mara, "my dear Stokes. Go and freshen up your faculties with a little sleep. Or—stay. Wait till I am dressed, and you shall drive Miss Dora and myself down to Crouchford Court. An invaluable fellow, that," he continued, when Stokes had withdrawn, "his scruples are amusing—or would be if they were less costly to his employer. Conscience—not too much of it, but just enough to put up a

man's prices—is a splendid thing. He seems to have managed this affair rather cleverly. He has some elementary knowledge of women, too. He's right about Gillian, she'll double back to the Court, when she finds the child is gone, like a hare to her form. I shall have trouble with her, and with that rustic booby of a *cavalier serviente*, too. I wonder if the brute would really have proceeded to violence if I had resisted him last night. By to-day I should be free from that kind of annoyance. My lady will alter her tune when she gets a letter from a London solicitor, stating my claim and my intention to prosecute it to the utmost. She's devilish handsome and well preserved," he went on, as he stropped his razor; "she piques me with her confounded airs. It would be something of a triumph to win or force her back, and the discomfiture of her admirer, the baronet, would be a rich treat. It will be a hard fight, and she may go to court with a divorce suit, which would be awkward,—confoundedly awkward,—especially if she won. But could she win? No mortal creature ever saw me lay a hand upon her, save in the way of kindness. She can't *prove* that it was I who took that ten pounds. The desertion

looks ugly, but I don't think desertion alone is good enough for a divorce, and even then I have my defense—her assumed name and change of domicile. I have done well to strike first—it's always the safe rule with women. A threatened suit for restitution of conjugal rights may turn out to be a very ace of trumps, and frighten her into submission. It's a stake worth playing for, and my hand is not a bad one, all things considered. Fancy that ass of a baronet going back last night, and talking to her from the public road! I can fancy what a virtuous British jury would make of that and her flight an hour later. That's a trump card, and must not be forgotten."

Communing thus with himself, he finished his toilet, and descended to the room in which Stokes had hastened little Dora. The child was sitting silent, and trembling with terror. It was not his cue to set her against him, and he opened the conversation with an engaging smile.

"Well, my darling, are you ready to go home with papa?"

"You are not my papa!" said Dora.

"Oh, but I am, indeed! Won't you give me a kiss?"

“No,” said Dora, “I won’t. I don’t like you.”

“You will like me better, my darling, when you know me better,” said O’Mara. “I am a really charming person, I assure you. Come, dry your eyes and don’t cry any more. I am not going to hurt you.”

“I want mamma,” said Dora.

“We shall find her at home,” said O’Mara.

“Come along, the trap is ready.”

The child followed him, submissive but obviously distrustful, and Stokes drove them to within a hundred yards of the gate of Crouchford Court. There he stopped.

“Go on, Mr. Stokes, if you please,” said O’Mara.

“Oh, no!” said Stokes, with a dry air and a lengthened shake of the head, “I’ve had as much of Miss Barbara Leigh as I want. She’s a tartar, that’s what she is; I don’t want *her* to see me along o’ you.”

O’Mara accordingly descended, and holding Dora by the hand, walked to the house and rang. He was admitted by Barbara, who gave an inexpressible snort of anger and contempt at his appearance and handed him Gillian’s letter. Dora made a motion to run to her old nurse, but O’Mara checked it.

“Go and sit in that chair,” he said, point-

ing to one in the corner behind him. There was so strong a hint of possible disagreeable consequences in his manner that the child obeyed. He tore open the envelope, and read the missive it contained.

“You’ve got your will at last,” said Barbara, her hatred of the usurper conquering her prudent feeling that it would be best to hide it. “You’ve driven my mistress away, poor dear. Ah! if she only had *my* sperrit——”

“Yes?” O’Mara smilingly prompted her.

“She’d have stayed and faced ye, ye smooth-tongued, smiling serpent.”

“You are really an extremely disagreeable person,” said O’Mara.

“Aye, so you’ll find me.”

“We had better come to an understanding at once,” said O’Mara. “I am master here; you are doubtless a hard-working and deserving person, but your appearance—to say nothing of your manners, which are deplorably vulgar—dissatisfies me. I like to have well-favored people about me.”

“Ye don’t get me out o’ this house,” said Barbara, folding her arms, “without force, and I wouldn’t be in your shoes if you tried *that* dodge. I don’t go till I’m told to by my lady. If harm comes to her or to .

that sweet lamb there, you'll find me harder to reckon with than many a strong man."

"Oblige me by leaving the house," said O'Mara, advancing toward her.

"If I go," said Barbara; "I take Miss Dora with me. Don't ee be afeared, my darling, no harm'll happen to ee while Barby's here to look after ye. Come to Barby!"

"Stay where you are," said O'Mara to the child. "Do you dare," he continued, "to interfere between me and my child?"

"Aye, do I?" said the honest virago, "and what's more, I don't believe she's any daughter o' yourn—she's o'er good and o'er pretty."

"Take care, woman," cried O'Mara, stung through his armor of cynicism by the servant's outspoken contempt.

"Woman, or no woman, I'm match for you, master. Don't 'ee lay a finger on me! Raise your hand if ye dare, and I'll write my ten commandments on your ugly face! Thank God, there's my lady."

Gillian tottered into the room, overcome with fatigue and fear. Her eyes fell upon Dora, who ran forward with a glad cry and fell into her arms.

“I’m glad you’re here, my lady,” said Barbara.

“Yes,” said Gillian, who had grown quite calm again upon a sudden. “I am here, I have come to take back what this man tried to steal from me, like the coward he is.”

“I am glad to see you,” said O’Mara, “I expected you.”

“You had reason to. You know that I would have risen from my dying bed to save my child from *you!*”

“Pardon me,” said O’Mara, quietly, “also *my* child. Let me trust, Gillian, that you have come to your senses, and that your return to this house implies a new and growing feeling of wifely duty.”

Gillian, with her eyes fixed upon his face, touched Dora lightly on the head.

“Go with Barby, my darling. You are safe with her.”

“Aye, that she is,” said Barbara, “but don’t stay with him alone. Let me be by.”

“There is nothing to fear,” said Gillian. “Go, leave us, but remain at hand. In a little while this gentleman will be gone, and I shall be again mistress in my own house.”

“My dear Gillian,” said O’Mara, with a laugh, when they were alone together,

“you amuse me. You are positively splendid.”

“What I have to say to you,” said Gillian, “can be said in a few words. Weigh them well, they are the last you will ever hear from me.”

“I am all attention. Let me remind you, however, that you talk nonsense. You said just now that I was about to leave this house. Quite a mistake. I shall remain,”—he took a chair and crossed his legs with an easy gesture—“and if you are a sensible woman you will remain with me.”

“Listen,” said Gillian. “Last night you terrified me ; your very presence, the thought of what you might say and do, filled my soul with dread.”

“Naturally. You see, I commanded the situation.”

“In my terror I attempted to escape from you. I was weak and ill, and even as I tried to fly I was struck down. While I lay, feeble and helpless, you had my child stolen from me.”

“Quite so. I had warned you of my determination.”

“The news was brought to me instantly. Thank God ! it did not kill me. No, It cured

me of all my cowardice, and gave me a mother's strength."

"You still look a little pale," said O'Mara, sympathetically. "Let me get you a glass of wine."

"I feared the world! I feared the scandal and the cry; I shrank from the public shame! I thought, 'So long as that man lives there is no shelter for me, and no escape.'"

"Quite right, my dear—except in sweet submission."

"I said to myself, 'There is nothing he will not do. There is no infamy to which he will not subject me, rather than let me keep my child and live in peace.'"

"An exaggeration, I only——"

"Hear me out. Then, while hastening back home, I thought it all out, and before I had reached that door I had made my determination."

"To be reasonable? Come."

"To defy the world; to defy all scandal and shame, and to take my stand upon the law itself as a free and fearless woman."

"A vigorous program," said O'Mara. "And how do you propose to carry it out?"

"Your desertion absolved me from all re-

sponsibility. Your absence for all those years is my justification. I was divorced by your own act, and in proof of that I will invoke the law."

"It won't help you, my love."

"We shall see. Next—you left your child to starve. Day by day, year by year, I have guarded and reared her, without one sign from you. By the duty so done, I had made my child mine only—and in that, too, the law shall justify me."

"You really think so? Anything more?"

"Yes. From first to last I have never had one penny, one crust of bread from your hands. You abandoned me in my poverty. What came to me afterward escaped you. It is mine—this house, with all in it, and all else that I possess is mine, and that also the law shall prove."

"Try. I am here."

"You will not remain another hour. You will go as you came."

"One moment!" said O'Mara, calmly still. "I will not attempt to combat your very primitive notions of English jurisprudence. I will pass over your insane presumption that a husband has no right either in his wife's property or in the person of his child. I will merely remind you, my dear

Gillian, that should you 'invoke the law,' as you poetically describe the simple process of consulting the nearest solicitor, you will cause very unpleasant revelations."

"I have thought of all that, and I am prepared. Shame cannot touch me now."

"I, on my side, will have an unpleasant duty to perform. I shall have to contend that one reason, and one reason only, accounted for my wife's eccentric conduct on my return, that reason being connected with her attachment to a man who certainly wished to become her husband, and was possibly her lover."

"You *coward!*" said Gillian. "Well, I am prepared for that, too."

"I shall have also to testify—very unwillingly—that this gentleman and my wife were alone together last night at the bottom of the spinney an hour after she had called upon him to eject her lawful husband from her house, an hour before she fled—the presumption being that during that interview her flight was arranged, and that he was to follow her, meet her at some convenient spot, and convey her to some secluded haven of bliss."

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Gillian.

“I—I think so.”

“Then leave this house!”

“I shall do nothing of the kind.”

“You had better go quietly. If you do not, I will not call the *law* to assist me, but I will summon one who is prepared to take its place.” She moved to the open door as she spoke.

“Who, pray?” asked O’Mara, with a sudden pallor.

“The man whom you call my lover, and whom I love.”

“Then,” said O’Mara, fiercely “you confess it?”

“Without shame, now, and without fear. Yes, I love him. He knows that we are here together. He is prepared at a sign from me to remove you from this house, which, I tell you again, is mine now. Will you go?”

“No,” answered O’Mara, ragingly.

The handkerchief which Gillian had held in her hand during the interview fluttered for a moment at the door, and a few seconds later Sir George Venebles and Mr. Bream entered the room.

“I see,” said O’Mara, “a conspiracy.”

“Nothing of the kind,” said Bream;

“only a course of treatment which I have suggested.”

“And which we are here to carry out,” added Venebles.

“You see, my friend,” said Bream, “the lady was too precipitate. Had you accepted her generous yielding up of her possessions, and ceased to persecute her, you might have been quite comfortable. Now, the tables are turned.”

“So!” said O’Mara, “are you quite aware, gentlemen, what you are doing? Have you calculated the consequences?”

“We have,” said Venebles, “and at a word from that lady——”

“That lady,” said O’Mara, with a bow in Gillian’s direction, “is again to be congratulated on her champions. I put this rural parson aside—he is simply a pertinacious busybody; but as for you, sir, who are simply my wife’s lover——”

“Be silent,” said Venebles, “or——”

“I will not be silent,” cried O’Mara, with every symptom of outraged virtue in face and voice. “I am not *un mari complaisant*, and I do not intend to be either silenced or suppressed. And if I ever do vacate these premises my daughter, at least, shall accompany me.”

“I claim my child, too,” said Gillian; “everything I possess; and I defy you to do your worst against me.”

“You!” cried O’Mara, “you! heathen and infamous?”

“That’s enough,” said George; “out you go!”

“Very well,” said O’Mara, stepping back out of reach of his arm. “Observe, I yield to force—to force only. Remember, I shall spare none of you now. Personally, I dislike publicity, but since you put me to it, madam, the world shall know everything—yes, everything. If I fail, I shall at least have the pleasure of knowing that my existence—and I think the world will decide with the husband, and against the wife who pretended to be a widow and entrapped an innocent clodhopper into a marital engagement. It will be a *cause célèbre*. I shall conquer, and society will be amused. Sir, I salute you. Monsieur Busybody, Mr. Cantwell, Mr. Facing Both Ways, your servant. *Madame la soi-disante* widow, *au revoir!*”

He swept a semi-circle of bows and lounged easily toward the open French window. But suddenly he stopped, with uplifted hands of helpless panic.

“Keep him back!” he cried, “keep him from me!”

A shadow darkened the sunlight. Jake Owen, with dilated eyes, stood there, glaring at O'Mara. The gleam of steel in his hand warned onlookers of his intent; but before a foot could move Jake sprang, the knife flashed in the air, and O'Mara fell, groveling to the floor. Bream leapt on him and wrenched the knife from his hand.

“Back, you madman! Give me the knife.”

“Aye, take it parson,” said Jake, “I've done what I came to do.”

“Good God!” cried Bream, sinking on one knee beside O'Mara, who had writhed over on his face, “he's dead.”

“Dead!” cried Gillian, “Murdered!”

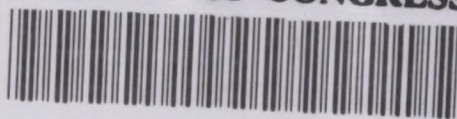
“Murdered,” said Jake, still with his eyes on O'Mara's figure at his feet. “No, for I killed him! He killed my Jess, and it's only life for life.”

THE END.





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