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RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

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RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

A Novel.

BY

EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF "BROKEN TO HARNESS."

FORTITER—FIDELITER—FELICITER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE STREET,

STRAND.

1865.

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TO

NICHOLAS HERBERT HARRINGTON,

OLD COMRADE AND TRIED FRIEND.

6533

Rev. Rev. Ray



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RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.



CHAPTER I.

NEWS.

THROUGHOUT the length and breadth of this London of ours there were few legal firms, no matter of how old standing, doing a better, larger, ready-money business than that of Moss and Mòss of Cursitor Street, Chancery Lane. Looked down upon? Well, one could hardly say that. Old Mr. Trivett, of the firm of Trivett, Coverdale, and Trivett of Bedford Row, who had the secrets of half the first families in England locked up in his dusty japanned boxes; young Mr. Markham, who, besides being nominally a solicitor, was a high-bailiff somewhere, and had chambers in the Al-

bany, and rode a very maney and taily light chestnut cob in the Row; and a few others,—might shrug their shoulders when the names of Moss and Moss were mentioned; but that did no harm to Moss and Moss, who, on the whole, were very well respected throughout the profession. At Mrs. Edward Moss's Sunday-evening parties in the Regent's Park were to be met many people whose names were pleasantly familiar to the public. Mr. Smee, Q.C., known as "Alibi Smee" from his great success in proving that his clients never had been within fifty miles of the spot where the crime with which they were charged was committed; Mr. Sergeant Orson; Mr. Toesin, who bullied a witness admirably, but who gave more trouble to Edward Moss than any other man at the bar, wanting perpetual cramming and suggestions, and having the face of brass and the lungs of steel and the head of wool; Mr. Replevin, the most rising junior at the O.B.; and others, amongst them Gilks, the marine painter, some of whose choicest bits adorned Mrs. Moss's walls; Kreese, the editor of the great sporting,

literary, and theatrical Sunday print, *The Scourge*; O'Meara of the Stock Exchange; and actors, actresses, and singers too numerous to mention. These last were invited through Mr. Marshall Moss, Edward's brother and junior partner, who was a bachelor, and who, though he gave occasional excellent Greenwich and Richmond dinners, yet had no house of his own to entertain in. Marshall Moss attended to the more convivial portion of the clients: the actors who had differed from their managers; the ladies who wanted certain settlements arranged; the sporting publicans who wanted "the screw put upon certain parties;" the fast young gents requiring defence from civil process,—were shown up to Marshall's room on the first-floor, a comfortable room with several arm-chairs, and a cupboard never without sherry and soda-water; a room where some of the best stories in London were from time to time told, and which was fenced off with thick double doors, to prevent the laughter caused by them penetrating to Edward's sanctum downstairs.

For Edward attended to the real clients of the

house—those for whom it was originally established—those by whom its fame had been made. And these were—thieves. Yes, there is no blinking the word. If a burglar were “in trouble,” if a forger had been apprehended, if some very heavy turf-robbery had come to light, Edward Moss’s busy brain was at work, and Edward Moss’s hours of sleep were ruthlessly curtailed. He did not care about the heaviest kind of business, though two or three murderers unquestionably owed their necks to his skill and forethought; and he refused all petty cases of magmen, skittle-sharps, and card-swindlers. They would have longed to have him; but they knew it was impossible. He did not like their style of business, and, above all things fatal to a chance of their engaging him, he never did any thing on spec. When a man was “in trouble” he knew that it was no use sending for Mr. Moss without being able to tell him that at such-and-such a tavern or lodging-house, he would find a landlord willing and ready to advance the fee for the prisoner’s defence. Then Mr. Moss would

step into the first hansom outside the station, and hie away to St. Luke's, Cripplegate, Drury Lane, or any other locality indicated, and returning with the money in his pocket would hear all that the prisoner had to say, and straightway determine on the line of defence. A wonderful little man, Edward Moss! wonderful to look at! without the smallest sign of colour in his shrunken, baggy, parchmenty face, with small gray eyes under overhanging bristly brows, with a short stubbly head of gray hair, a restless twitching mouth, thin wiry figure, and dirty hands with close-bitten dubby nails. In these respects a very different man from his brother Marshall, who was a by-no-means bad-looking Hebrew, with a handsome beard and moustache, full scarlet lips, prominent brown eyes, and in face and figure showing a general liking for the flesh-pots and other good things of this life. Where Edward Moss wore dirt, Marshall Moss sported jewelry, and each brother was sufficiently vain of his display. Each knew his business perfectly, and neither interfered with the other. Marshall's

clients drove up in broughams or rattled in hansoms to the front-door, went up the broad staircase to the first-floor, and either passed straight into the presence, or beguiled the necessary interval in the perusal of the daily papers handed to them by obsequious clerks. Edward's clients sneaked in through a narrow door up a side-court; had their names and business wrung from them by the most precocious and most truculent of Jew boys; were left to rub their greasy shoulders up and down the white-washed walls of a ghastly waiting-room until "Mithter Edward" chose to listen to the recital of their distress and wishes.

Occasionally, however, visitors to Mr. Edward Moss came in at the large front-door, and afterwards made the best of their way to his sanctum. They were generally people who would not have been regarded with much favour by the greasy-shouldered clients in the court. This was one of them who entered Cursitor Street on a warm June afternoon, and made straight for the front-door blazing with the door-plate of "Moss and Moss." A middle-sized fattish man, ill-

dressed in an ill-fitting blue frock-coat and gray trousers, and a very innocent-looking small hat with a black mourning-band; a soddren-faced sleepy-looking man with mild blue eyes and an undecided mouth; a man like a not very prosperous publican; a man who, with a fresher complexion, and at another time of year, might have been taken for a visitor to the Cattle Show; who looked, in fact, any thing but what he was — chief officer of the City detectives and the terror of all the evil-doers of the East-end. He walked through the hall, and, leaving the staircase leading to Mr. Marshall Moss's rooms on his right, passed to the end of the passage and tapped at a door on which was inscribed the word "Private" in large letters. It must have been a peculiar knock which he gave, for the door was immediately opened merely wide enough to admit him, and closed as he passed through.

"Ah, ah!" said a little man in an enormous pair of spectacles; "ah, ah! ith you, intpector! The governor'th been athkin' after you to-day. Let'th have a look," he continued, lifting a corner

of a green-baize curtain; "ah! he'th jutht shakin' off that troublethome perjury. Now I'll give him your name."

This was Mr. Amedroz, Edward Moss's right-hand man, who knew all his master's secrets, and who was so reticent that he never opened his mouth where he could convey as much by writing. So Mr. Amedroz inscribed "Stellfox" in large round-text on a slip of paper, laid it before his principal, and, receiving an affirmative nod, ushered the inspector into the presence.

"Morning, Stellfox," said Mr. Edward, glancing up from a mass of papers in front of him; "report?"

Inspector Stellfox, unbuttoning his blue frock-coat, produced from his breast-pocket a thick note-book, and commenced:

"Sorry to say, nothing new about Captain Congreve, sir. We've tried—"

"Now look here, Stellfox," interrupted Mr. Moss; "you've had that business in hand a fortnight. If you don't report by Wednesday, I'll give that to Scotland Yard. Your men are

getting lazy, and I'll try what Sir Richard Mayne's people can do. What next?"

Crestfallen, Inspector Stellfox continued,—
“Slimy William, sir.”

“Well,” said Mr. Moss keenly, “what of him?”

“I think that's all right, sir. We've found out where his mother lives,—Shad's Row, Wapping, No. 3; bill up in the window, ‘a room to let.’ If you've no objection, one of my men shall take that room, sir, and try and work it that way.”

“No,” said Mr. Moss; “must put a woman in there. Don't you know a woman up to that sort of thing?”

“There's Hodder's wife, sir, as helped us in Charlton's case; she'd do.”

“I recollect; she'll do well. Furnished or unfurnished?”

“Unfurnished room, sir.”

“All right; hire some furniture of the broker. Tell Mrs. Hodder to get in at once. Widow; or husband employed on railway in the country.

Must keep a gin-bottle always open, and be generous with it. Old lady will talk over her drink; and Mrs. Hodder must find out where Slimy William is, what name he's going under, and must notice what letters old lady receives. Tell her to take a child with her. Has she got a child?"

"Not of her own, sir."

"Never mind; must get one of some one else's. Must see you, or one of your men, every morning. Child will want air—excuse for her taking him out. If Slimy William is coming home on the sudden, child must be taken ill in the middle of the night; she can take it to the doctor, and come down to you."

"Right, sir. Now about Copping Crossman."

"Well?"

"Markham will have him to-night, sir. That girl 'Liza Burdon blew his gaff for him last night. He's a comic singer, he is. Goes by the name of Munmorency, and sings at the Cambridge Music-hall."

"Good! What of Mitford?"

“ Well, nothing yet, sir. You’re hard upon me, Mr. Moss; and that you are. We’ve only had that case three days, and you’re expecting information already.”

“ Stellfox,” said Mr. Moss, rising, and taking a sonorous pinch of snuff, “ you detectives are mere shams. You’ve been spoilt by the penny press, and the shilling books, and all that. You think you’re wonderful fellows, and you know nothing—literally nothing. If I didn’t do your work as well as my own, where should we be? Don’t answer; listen! Mitford has been three times within the last week to the Crown coffee-house in Doctors’ Commons. There’s very little doubt that he’ll go there again; for it’s a quiet house, and he seems to like it. You’ve got his description; be off at once.”

Inspector Stellfox had transacted too much business with Mr. Edward Moss to expect any further converse, so he took up the child’s hat and quietly bowed and departed.

To say that of all the intensely-quiet and re-

spectable houses in that strange portion of the City of London known as Doctors' Commons the Crown coffee-house is the most quiet and respectable, is making a strong assertion, but one which could yet be borne out by facts. It is a sleepy, dreamy neighbourhood still, although its original intense dulness has been somewhat enlivened by the pedestrians who make Paul's Chain a passage to the steamboats calling at Paul's Wharf; and the hansom cabs which find a shortcut down Great St. Andrew's Hill to the South-Western Railway. But it is still the resort of abnormal individuals,—ticket-porters, to wit; plethoric individuals in half-dirty white aprons and big badges like gigantic opera-checks, men whose only use seems to be to warn approaching vehicles of the blocking-up of the narrow streets; and sable-clad mottled-faced proctors and their clerks. There are real green trees in Doctors' Commons; and flies and butterflies — by no means bad imitations of the real country insect — are seen there on the wing in the sultry summer days, buzzing round the heads of the ticket-porters,

and of the strong men who load the Bottle Company's heavy carts, and who are always flinging huge fragments of rusty iron into the capacious hold of the *Mary Anne of Goole*, stuck high and dry in the mud off Paul's Wharf before mentioned. Life is rampant in the immediate vicinity,—in enormous Manchester warehouses, perpetually inhaling the contents of enormous Pickford's vans; in huge blocks of offices where the representatives of vast provincial firms take orders and transact business; in corn-stores and iron-companies; in mansions filled from basement to roof with Dresden china and Bohemian glass; in insurance-offices and banks; and in the office of the great journal, where the engines, for six days out of the seven, are unceasingly throbbing. But in the Commons life gives way to mere existence and vegetation. The organ-man plays unmolested on Addle Hill, and the children's shuttlecocks flutter in Wardrobe Place; no Pickfords' vans disturb the calm serenity of Great Knight-riding Street; and instead of warehouses and offices, there are quaint old dumpy congrega-

tionless churches, big rambling old halls of City Companies, the forgotten old Herald's College with its purposeless traditions, a few apparently nothing-doing shops, a number of proctors' offices into which man is never seen to enter, and two or three refreshment-rooms. Of these the Crown is the oldest and the dirtiest. It was established—if you may trust the half-effaced legend over its door—in 1790, and it has ever since been doing the same quiet sleepy trade. It cannot understand what Kammerer's means by it. Kammerer's is the refreshment-house at the corner, which has long since escaped from the chrysalis state of coffee-shop, and now, resplendent with plate-glass and mahogany bar, cooks joints, and draws the celebrated "Crm Grw" Llangollen ale, and is filled with a perpetual stream of clattering junior clerks from the adjacent warehouses. The Crown—according to its proprietor, in whose family its lease has been vested since its establishment—don't do nothin' of this sort, and don't want to. It still regards chops and steaks as the most delicious of human food, and tea and coffee

as the only beverages by which their consumption should be accompanied. Across its window still stretches an illuminated blind representing an Italian gentleman putting off in a boat with apparently nothing more serviceable for navigation purposes than a blue banjo; and it still makes a gorgeous display of two large coffee cups and saucers, with one egg in a blue egg-cup between them. Its interior is still cut up into brown boxes with hard narrow seats, on which you must either sit bolt upright, or fall off at once; its narrow old tables are scarred and notched and worm-eaten; and it holds yet by its sawdusted floor.

About seven o'clock in the evening of the same day on which Inspector Stellfox had consulted Mr. Moss, the green-baize door of the Crown was gently swung open, and a man slinking in dived into the nearest box then vacant. He was a young fellow of not more than three-and-twenty, with well-cut regular features, and who would have been handsome had not his complexion been so sallow and his cheeks so pinched. His gaunt attenuated frame, thin hands, and eyes of unnatural brightness and

restlessness, all told of recent illness; and though it was summer time his threadbare coat was tightly buttoned round his throat, and he shivered as he seated himself, and looked hungrily at the cooking-fire burning in the kitchen at the other end of the shop. After furtively glancing round him he beckoned the proprietor, gave him an order for some small refreshment, and then taking down an old volume of the *Gentleman's Magazine* from a neighbouring shelf, began to turn over its pages in a listless purposeless manner. While he was thus engaged, the green-baize door swung open again, admitting a portly man with a child's hat perched on the top of his round head, who, walking into the middle of the shop, ordered from that post of vantage "a large of coffee and a rasher," then looked round the different boxes, and finally settled himself with his back to the light in that box where the last arrival was seated. The portly man made the other visitor a very polite bow, which was scarcely returned, and the first-comer bent more earnestly over his book and shrouded his face with his hand. But the portly man, who

was no other than Inspector Stellfox, had been too long in his profession not to know his business thoroughly, and so he hung up the child's hat on a peg immediately over his friend's head, and he took hold of a newspaper which lay directly under his friend's elbow; and taking advantage of each opportunity to look his friend over and over, saw that he was on the right track, and thoroughly made up his mind what to do when the chance arrived. The chance arrived simultaneously with the refreshment ordered by the haggard man: he had to put down his hand to reach the tray, and in so doing his eyes met those of the inspector, who at once winked and laid his finger on his lip.

“Mr. Mitford?” said he in a fat voice; “ah! I thought so. No, you don't, sir,” he continued, pushing back the man, who had attempted to start up; “it's all right; that little matter at Canterbury's been squared up long since. I wanted to see you about something else. Look here, sir;” and the inspector took from his pocket-book a

printed slip of paper, and handed it across the table to his companion, who read as follows :

“ FATAL AND APPALLING ACCIDENT.

We (*Bridgewater Mercury*) deeply regret to hear that a telegram has been received from Malta stating that Sir Percy Mitford of Redmoor near this town, and his two sons aged twelve and nine, were drowned by the upsetting of a little boat in which they were proceeding to Sir Percy's well-known yacht *Enchantress*, then anchored off Valetta. By this dreadful accident the title and estates pass into another branch of the family; the heir being Sir Percy's nephew, Mr. Charles Wentworth Mitford, now studying abroad.”

“ There, sir ! there's news for you ! ” said Inspector Stellfox ; “ we know what studying abroad means, don't we ? We knows— ” but Inspector Stellfox stopped suddenly ; for his companion, after glaring at him vacantly for an instant with the paper outstretched in his rigid hand, fell forward in a fit.

CHAPTER II.

MORE NEWS.

TWENTY years ago the Mæcenas Club, which is now so immensely popular, and admission to which is so difficult, was a very quiet unpretending little place, rather looked down upon and despised by the denizens of the marble palaces in Pall Mall and the old fogies in St. James's Street. The great gaunt stuccoed mansion, with the bust of Mæcenas in the big hall, then was not; the Club was held at a modest little house only differing from a private residence in the size of its fanlight, in the fact of its having a double flight of steps (delicious steeple-chase ground for the youth of the neighbourhood), and from its hall-door being always open, typical of the hospitality and good-fellowship which reigned within. Ah, a glorious place in those days, the Mæcenas! which, as

it stated in its prospectus, was established “for the patronage of literature and the drama, and the bringing together of gentlemen eminent in their respective circles;” but which wisely left literature, the drama, and the eminent gentlemen to take care of themselves, and simply brought together the best and most clubbable fellows it could get hold of. There was something in the little M., as the members fondly abbreviated its name, which was indescribably comfortable and unlike any other club. The waiters were small men, which perhaps had something to do with it; there was no billiard-room, with noisy raffish frequenters; no card-room, with solemn one-idea’d fogies; no drawing-room for great hulking men to lounge about, and put up their dirty boots on yellow-satin sofas. There was a capital coffee-room, strangers’-room, writing-room, reading-room, and the best smoking-room in London; a smoking-room whence came three-fourths of the best stories which permeated society, and whither was brought every bit of news and scandal so soon as it was hatched. There

was a capital *chef*, who was too true an artist to confine himself to made-dishes, but who looked after the joints and the toothsome steaks, for which the M. had such a reputation; and there was a capital cellar. Furthermore, the members believed in all this, and believed intensely in one another.

That a dislike to clubs is strongly rooted in the female breast is not a mere aphorism of the comic writer, but is a serious fact. This feeling would be much mitigated, if not entirely eradicated, one would think, if women could only know the real arcana of those much-loathed establishments. Life wants something more than good *entrées* and wine, easy-chairs, big waiters, and a place to smoke in: it wants companionship and geniality—two qualities which are very rare in the club-world. You scowl at the man at the next table, and he scowls at you in return; the man who wants the magazine retained by your elbow growls out something, and you, raising your arm, growl in reply. In the smoking-room there is indeed an attempt at conversation, which is confined to maligning human nature in general,

and the acquaintance of the talkers in particular ; and as each man leaves the room his character is wrested from him at the door, and torn to shreds by those who remain.

It was its very difference from all these that made the Mæcenas so pleasant. Every body liked every body else, and nobody objected to any body. It was not too pleasant to hear little Mr. Toecin, Q.C., shrieking some legal question across the coffee-room to a brother barrister ; to have your mackerel breathed over by Tom O'Blather, as he narrated to you a Foreign-Office scandal, in which you had not the smallest interest ; to have to listen to Dr. M'Gollop's French jokes told in a broad-Scotch accent, or to Tim Dwyer's hunting-exploits with his " slash'n meer ;" but one bore these things at the M., and bore them patiently. How proud they were of their distinguished members in those days ; not swells, but men who had distinguished themselves by something more than length of whisker and shortness of head—the very " gentlemen eminent in their respective circles" of the prospectus !

They were proud, and justly proud, of Mr. Justice Ion, whose kindly beaming face, bright eye, and short-cropped gray hair would often be seen amongst them; of Smielding and Follett, the two great novelists of the day, each of whom had his band of sworn retainers and worshippers; of Tatterer, the great tragedian, who would leave King Lear's robes and be the delight of the Mæccenas smoke-room; of Gilks the marine-painter, of Clobber, who was so great in cathedral interiors, and Markham, afterwards the great social caricaturist, then just commencing his career as a wood-draughtsman. The very reciprocity of regard was charming for the few swells who at that time cared for membership; they were immensely popular; and amongst them none so popular as Colonel Laurence Alsager, late of the Coldstream Guards.

By the time that Laurence Alsager was gazetted as captain and lieutenant-colonel, he had had quite enough of regimental duty, quite enough of transition from Portman Barracks to Wellington Barracks, from Winchester to Windsor; quite

enough of trooping the guard at St. James's, and watching over the treasures hidden away in the Bank-cellars; of leaning out of the little window in the old Guards Club in St. James's Street; quite enough of Derby drags and *ballet* balls, and Ryde pier and Cowes regatta, and Scotch moor and Norway fishery, and Leamington steeplechase and Limmer's, and all those things which make up the life of a properly-regulated guardsman. The younger men in the Household Brigade could not understand this "having had quite enough." They thought him the most enviable fellow in the world. They dressed at him, they walked like him, they grew their whiskers as nearly like his as they could (mutton-chop whiskers were then the fashion, and beards and moustaches were only worn by foreign fiddlers and cavalry regiments), they bragged of him in every possible way, and one of them having heard him spoken of, from the variety of his accomplishments, as the Admirable Crichton, declared that he was infinitely better than Crichton, or any other admiral that had ever been in the

sister service. The *deux-temps* valse had just been imported in those days, and Alsager danced it with a long quick swinging step which no one else could accomplish; he played the cornet almost as well as Koenig; while at Windsor he went into training and beat the Hammersmith Flyer, a professional brought down by the envious on purpose to degrade him, in a half-mile race with twelve flights of hurdles; he was a splendid amateur actor; and had covered the rough walls of the barrack-room at Windsor with capital caricatures of all his brother officers. He knew all the mysteries of "battalion drill" too, and had been adjutant of the regiment. When, therefore, he threw up his commission and sold out, every body was utterly astonished, and all sorts of rumours were at once put into circulation. He had had a quarrel with his governor, old Sir Egremont Alsager, some said, and left the army to spite him. He was bitten with a theatrical mania, and going to turn actor ("Was he, by G—?" said Ledger, the light comedian, hitherto his warmest admirer; "we want none of your imitation mock-

turtle on the boards!"); he had got a religious craze, and was going to become a Trappist monk; he had taken to drinking; he had lost his head, and was with a keeper in a villa in St. John's Wood. All these things were said about him by his kind friends; but it is probable that none of them were so near the mark as honest Jock M'Laren of the Scots Fusiliers, a great gaunt Scotchman, but the very best ferret in the world in certain matters; who said, "Ye may depend upon it there's a wummun in it. Awlsager's a devil among the sax; and there's a wummun in it, I'll bet a croon." This was a heavy stake for Jock, and showed that he was in earnest.

Be this as it may, how that Laurence Alsager sold out from her Majesty's regiment of Coldstream Guards, and that he was succeeded by Peregrine Wilks (whose grandfather, *par parenthèse*, kept a ham-and-beef shop in St. Martin's Court), is it not written in the chronicles of the *London Gazette*? Immediately after the business had been settled, Colonel Alsager left England for the Continent. He was heard of at Munich, at

Berlin, at Vienna (where he remained for some considerable time), and at Trieste, where all absolute trace of him was lost, though it was believed he had gone off in an Austrian Lloyds' steamer to the Piræus, and that he intended travelling through Greece, the Holy Land, and Egypt, before he returned home. These were rumours in which only a very few people interested themselves; society has too much to do to take account of the proceedings of its absent members; and after two years had elapsed Laurence Alsager's name was almost forgotten, when, on a dull January morning, two letters from him arrived in London,—one addressed to the steward of the Mæcnas ordering a good dinner for two for the next Saturday night at six; the other to the Honourable George Bertram of the Foreign Office, requesting that distinguished public servant to meet his old friend L. A. at the Mæcnas, dine with him, and go with him afterwards to the Parthenium Theatre, where a new piece was announced.

Honest Mr. Turquand, the club-steward, by

nature a reticent man, and one immersed in perpetual calculation as to ways and means, gave his orders to the cook, but said never a word to any one else as to the contents of his letter. George Bertram, known among his colleagues at the Foreign Office as "Blab Bertram," from the fact that he never spoke to any body unless spoken to, and even then seldom answered, was equally silent; so that Colonel Alsager's arrival at the Mæcenas was thoroughly unexpected by the members. The trimly-shaved old gentlemen at the various tables stared with wonder, not unmixed with horror, at the long black beard which Alsager had grown during his absence. They thought he was some stranger who had entered the sacred precincts by mistake; some even had a horrible suspicion that it might be a newly-elected man, whose beard had never been mentioned to the committee; and it was not until they heard Laurence's clear ringing voice, and saw his eye light up with the old fire, that they recognised their long-absent friend. Then they crowded round him, and wanted to hear all his two-years' adventures and wanderings told in

a breath ; but he laughingly shook them off, promising full particulars at a later period ; and went over to a small corner-table which he had been accustomed to select before he went away, and which Mr. Turquand had retained for him, where he was shortly joined by George Bertram.

It is probable that no man on earth had a greater love for another than had George Bertram for Laurence Alsager. When he saw his old friend seated at the table, his heart leapt within him, and a great knot rose in his throat ; but he was a thorough Englishman, so he mastered his feelings, and, as he gripped Laurence's outstretched hand, merely said, "How do?"

"My dear old George," said Laurence heartily, "what an age since we met! How splendidly well you seem to be! A little stouter, perhaps, but not aged a day. Well, I've a thousand questions to ask, and a thousand things to tell you. What the deuce are you staring at?"

"Beard!" said Mr. Bertram, who had never taken his eyes off Laurence's chin since he sat down opposite to him.

“Oh, ah, yes!” said Laurence. “That’s a relic of savage life, which I shall get rid of in a few days; but I didn’t like to have him off suddenly, on account of the change of climate. I suppose it shocks the old gentlemen here; but I can’t help it. Well, now you’ve got oceans of news to tell me. It’s full a twelvemonth since I had letters from England; not a line since I left Jerusalem; and—ah, by Jove! I’ve never told you how I happened to come home in such a hurry. It’s horribly absurd and ridiculous, you know; I hadn’t the least idea of returning for at least another year. But one sultry evening, far up the Nile, as I was lying back in my kandjia,—boat, you know,—being towed up by three naked chaps, pulling away like grim death, we met another kandjia coming down. In it were two unmistakable Englishmen; fellows in all-round collars and stiff wide-awakes, with pug-gerees put on all the wrong way. They were chattering to each other; and I thought, under that burning sky and solemn stillness, and surrounded by all the memorials of the past, they

would probably be quoting Herodotus, or Gardner Wilkinson, or, better than all, Eothen; but, just as they passed me, what do you think I heard one of them say to the other? ‘No, no, Jack,’ said he; ‘you’re wrong there: it was Buckstone that played Box!’ He did, by Jove! Under the shadow of the Pyramids, and close by the Sphinx, and the vocal Memnon, and Cheops and Cephrenes, and all the rest of it, to hear of Buckstone and *Box and Cox!* You can’t tell the singular effect it had on me. I began to feel an awful longing for home; what the Germans call *Heimweh* came upon me at once. I longed to get back once more, and see the clubs and the theatres, and all the old life, which I had fled from so willingly; and I ordered the Arabs to turn the boat round, and get me back to Cairo as quickly as possible. When we got to Cairo, I went to Shepherd’s, and found the house full of a lot of cadets and fellows going out; and one of them had a *Times*, and in it I saw the announcement of the new piece at the Parthenium; and, I don’t know why,—I fixed upon that as a sort

of date-mark, and I said, 'I'll be back in England to see that first night;' and the next day I started for Alexandria. And on board the P.-and-O. boat I made the acquaintance of the post-office courier in charge of the Indian mail, a very good fellow, who, when he found my anxiety to get on, took me with him in his *fourgon*; brought me through from Marseilles to Calais without an instant's delay; let me come on board the special boat waiting for him; and landed me at London Bridge last night, having got through my journey wonderfully. And I'm in time for the first night at the Parthenium; and—and now tell me all your news."

"Blab" Bertram had been dreading the command, which he knew involved his talking more in twenty minutes than he was in the habit of doing in a month. He had been delighted to hear Laurence rattling on about his own adventures, and fondly hoped that he should avoid any revelations for that night at least. But the dread edict had been issued, and George knew his friend too well not to obey. So he said with

a sigh, drawing out a small note-book, "Yes, I knew you'd be naturally anxious to hear about people, and what had happened since you've been away; and so, as I'm not much good at telling things, I got Alick Geddes of our office—you know him; Lord M'Mull's brother—to put down some notes, and I'll read them to you."

"That'll do, George," said Laurence laughing; "like the police, 'from information you have received,' eh? Never mind, so long as I hear it.—Mr. Turquand, they've not finished that bin of Thomson and Crofts' '20 during my absence? No. Then bring us a bottle, please.—And now, George, fire away!"

For the purposes of this story it would be needless to recount all the bits of scandal and chit-chat, interesting and amusing to those acquainted with the various actors in the drama, but utterly vapid to every one else, which the combined memories of Messrs. Alexander Geddes and George Bertram, clerks in the Foreign Office, and gentlemen going a great deal into all kinds of society, had furbished up and put together for the

delectation of Colonel Alsager. It was the old, old story of London life, known to every one, and, *mutatis nominibus*, narrated of so many people. Tom's marriage, Dick's divorce, and Harry's going to the bad. Jack Considine left the service, and become sheep-farmer in Australia. Little Tim Stratum of the Treasury, son of old Dr. Stratum the geologist, marrying that big Indian widow-woman, and becoming a heavy swell, with a house in Grosvenor Square. Ned Walters dead,—fit of heart-disease, or some infernal thing,—dead, by Jove! and that pretty wife of his, and all those nice little children, gone—God knows where! Lady Cecilia married? oh, yes; and she and Townshend get on very well, they say; but that Italian chap, Di Varese, with the black beard and the tenor voice, always hanging about the house. Gertrude Netherby rapidly becoming an old woman, thin as a whipping-post, by George! and general notion of nose-and-chinniness. Florence Sackville, as lovely and as jolly as ever, was asking after you only last night. These, and a hundred other little

bits of gossip about men in his old regiment, and women reputable and disreputable, formerly of his acquaintance, of turf-matters and club-scandals, interspersed with such anecdotes, seasoned with *gros sel*, as circulate when the ladies have left the dinner-table, did Laurence Alsager listen to; and when George Bertram stopped speaking and shut up his note-book, he found himself warmly complimented on his capital budget of news by his recently-arrived friend.

“You’ve done admirably, old fellow,” said Laurence. “’Pon my oath I don’t think there’s any body we know that you haven’t had something pleasantly unpleasant to say about. Now,” taking out his watch, “we must be off to the theatre, and we’ve just time to smoke a cigarette as we walk down there. You took the two stalls?”

“Well—no,” replied George Bertram, hesitating rather suspiciously; “I only took one for you; I—I’m going—that is—I’ve got a seat in a box.”

“George, you old vagabond, you don’t mean

to say you're going to desert me the first night I come back?"

"Well, I couldn't help it. You see I was engaged to go with these people before you wrote; and—"

"All right; what people are they?"

"The Mitfords."

"Mitfords? *Connais pas.*"

"Oh, yes; you know them fast enough; oh, I forgot—all since you left; only just happened."

"Look here, George: I've had quite enough of the Sphinx during the last six months, and I don't want any of the enigma business. *What* has only just happened?"

"Mitford—and all that. You'll give me no peace till I tell you. You recollect Mitford? with us at Oxford—Brasenose man, not Christ Church."

"Mitford, Mitford! Oh, I recollect; big, fair man, goodish-looking. His father failed and smashed up; didn't he? and our man went into a line regiment. Oh, by Jove, yes! and came to grief about mistaking somebody else's name for

his own, and backing a bill with it; didn't he? at Canterbury, or somewhere where he was quartered?"

"Same man. Had to leave service, and came to awful grief. Ran away, and nothing heard of him. His uncle, Sir Percy, and two little boys drowned off Malta, and title came to our man. Couldn't find him any where; at last some Jew lawyer was employed, put detectives on, and hunted up Mitford, nearly starved, in some public in Wapping, or somewhere in the East-end. When he heard what a swell he'd become, he had a fit, and they thought he'd die. But he's been all square ever since; acted like a gentleman; went down to the place in Devonshire where his people lived before the smash; married the clergyman's daughter to whom he had been engaged in the old days; and they've just come up to town for the winter."

"Married the clergyman's daughter to whom he had been engaged in the old days, eh? George Bertram, I saw a blush mantle on your ingenuous cheek, sir, when you alluded to the lady. What is she like?"

“Stuff, Laurence! you did nothing of the kind. Lady Mitford is a very delightful woman.”

“*Caramba*, Master George! If I were Sir Mitford, and heard you speak of my lady in that earnest manner, I should keep a sharp eye upon you. So you’ve not improved in that respect.”

George Bertram, whose *amourettes* were of the most innocent description, but to accuse whom of the wildest profligacy was a favourite joke with his friends, blushed deeper than ever, and only uttered an indignant “Too bad, too bad!”

“Come along, sir,” said Laurence; “I’ll sit in the silent solitude of the stalls while you are basking in beauty in a box.”

“But you’ll come up and be introduced, Laurence?”

“Not I, thank you; I’ll leave the field clear for you.”

“But Sir Charles Mitford would be so glad to renew his old acquaintance with you.”

“Would he? Then Sir Charles Mitford must reserve that delight for another occasion. I shall

be here after the play, and we can have a further talk if you can descend to mundane matters after your felicity. Now come along." And they strolled out together.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE PARTHENIUM.

THE Parthenium Theatre at the time I write of was a thing by itself. Since then there have been a score of imitations of it, none of them coming up to the great original, but sufficiently like to have dimmed the halo surrounding the first attempt, and to have left the British public undecided as to whom belonged the laurels due to those who first attempted to transform a wretched, dirty, hot building into an elegant, well-ventilated, comfortable *salon*. It was at the Parthenium that stalls were first introduced. Up to that time they had been only known at the Opera; and it was the triumph of the true British playgoer,—the man who had seen Jack Bannister, sir, and Munden and Downton, and all those true performers who have never had any successors, sir,—that he al-

ways sat in the front row of the pit, the only place in the house whence the performance could be properly seen. When Mr. Frank Likely undertook the lesseeship of the Parthenium, he thought he saw his way to a very excellent improvement founded on this basis. He hated the true British playgoer with all his heart. In the style of entertainment about to be produced at the Parthenium, he had not the smallest intention of pandering to, or even propitiating, that great historic character; but he had perfect readiness to see that the space immediately behind the orchestra was the most valuable in the theatre; and so he set carpenters at once to work, and uprooted the hard black deal pit-benches, and erected in their stead rows of delicious *fauteuils* in crimson velvet, broad soft padded-backed lounges with seats which turned upon hinges, and left a space underneath for your hat and coat; charming nests where you could loll at your ease, and see and hear to perfection. The true British playgoer was thus relegated to a dark and dismal space underneath the dress-circle, where he could see little save the parting of the

back-hair of the swells in the stalls, and the legs, from the knee downward, and feet of the people on the stage; where the ceiling seemed momentarily descending on him, as on the prisoner in the story of the "Iron Shroud;" and where the knees of the orange-sellers dug him in the back, while their baskets banged him in front. It is needless to say that on the Saturday after the opening of the Parthenium under the new régime, the columns of the *Curtain*, the *Thespian Waggoner*, and the *Scourge* were found brimming over with stinging letters from the true British playgoer, all complaining of his treatment, and all commencing, "By what right, sir, I should like to know." But Mr. Frank Likely cared little enough for this, or for any thing else indeed, so long as he could keep up his villa at Roehampton, have his Sunday parties, let his wife dress like a duchess, have two or three carriages, and never be compelled to pay any body any thing. Not to pay was a perfect mania with him. Not that he had not the money. Mr. Humphreys, the treasurer, used to come round about half-past ten with bags

of gold and silver, which were duly deposited in Mr. Likely's dressing-room, and thence transferred to his carriage by his dresser, a man whose pound-a-week wages had been due for a month; but if ever he were to ask for a settlement Mr. Likely would look at him with a comic surprise, give a short laugh, say, "He, he! you don't mean it, Evans; I haven't a fourpenny-piece;" and step into the brougham to be bowled away through the summer night to lamb-cutlets and peas and Sillery Mousseux at the Roehampton villa, with a prime cigar on the lawn or under the conservatory afterwards. He took the money, though he never paid any one, and no one knew what became of it; but when he went through the Court the Commissioner complimented him publicly, as he gave him his certificate, and told him in his private room that he, the Commissioner, had experienced such pleasure from Mr. and Mrs. Likely's charming talent, that he, the Commissioner, was really glad it lay in his power to make him, Mr. Likely, some little return.

It is, however, only in his position as lessee of

the Parthenium Theatre that we have to do with Mr. Frank Likely, and therein he certainly was admirable. A man of common-sense and education, he saw plainly enough that if he wished to amuse the public, he must show them something with which they were perfectly familiar. They yawned over the rage of Lear, and slept through Belvidera's recital of her woes; the mere fact of Captain Absolute's wearing powder and breeches precluded their taking any interest in his love-affairs; but as soon as they were shown people such as they were accustomed to see, doing things which they themselves were accustomed to do, ordinarily dressed, and moving amongst ordinary surroundings, they were delighted, and flocked in crowds to the Parthenium. Mr. Likely gave such an entertainment as suited the taste of his special visitors. The performances commenced at eight with some trifle, during the acting of which the box-doors were perpetually banging, and early visitors to the stalls were carefully stamped upon and ground against by the club-diners steadily pushing their way to their seats. The piece

of the evening commenced about nine and lasted till half-past ten; and then there came forty minutes of a brilliant burlesque, with crowds of pretty coryphées, volleys of rattling puns and parodies, crackling allusions to popular topics, and resplendent scenery by Mr. Coverflats, the great scenic artist of the day. When it is recollected that though only two or three of the actors were really first-rate, yet that all were far above the average, being dressed under Mr. Likely's eye, and taught every atom of their "business;" that the theatre was thoroughly elegant, and unlike any other London house in its light-blue-and-gold decorations and airy muslin curtains, and that its *foyer* and lobbies were happy meeting-grounds for wits and men of fashion,—no wonder that "first-nights" at the Parthenium were looked forward to with special delight.

On the occasion on which Colonel Alsager and Mr. Bertram were about to be present, a more than ordinary amount of curiosity prevailed. For some weeks it had been vaguely rumoured that the new comedy *Tried in the*

Furnace, about to be produced, was written by Spofforth, that marvellous fellow who combined the author with the man of fashion, who was seen every where, at the Premieress's receptions, at the fast clubs, always associating with the best people, and who flavoured his novels and his plays in the most piquante manner with reproductions of characters and stories well known in the London world. It was rumoured that in *Tried in the Furnace* the plot strongly resembled the details of a great scandal in high life, which had formed the *plat de résistance* of the gossips of the previous season; and it was also said that the hero, an officer in the Guards, would be played by Dacre Pontifex, who at that time had turned all women's heads, who went regularly into society, and who, to a handsome face and figure and a thoroughly gentlemanly bearing, seemed to add great natural histrionic genius.

All these reports, duly set afloat in the various theatrical journals, and amongst the particular people who think and talk of nothing else but

the drama and its professors,—a set permeating every class of society,—had whetted the public appetite to an unparalleled amount of keenness; and long before its representation, all the retainable stalls, boxes, and seats generally, for the first night of *Tried in the Furnace* had been secured. The gallery-people were certain to come in, because Mugger, the low comedian, had an exceedingly humorous part, and the gallery worshipped Mugger; and the diminished area of the pit would probably be thronged, as it had been whispered in the columns of the *Scourge* that the new play was reported to contain several hits at the aristocracy, invariably a sure “draw” with the pittites. It was only of the upper boxes that the manager felt doubtful; and for this region he accordingly sent out several sheaves of orders, which were duly presented on the night by wild weird-looking women, with singular head-dresses of scraps of lace and shells, dresses neither high nor low, grimy gloves too long in the fingers, and bonnets to be left with the custodian.

It was a great night; there could be no doubt

of that; Humphreys had said so, and when Humphreys so far committed himself, he was generally right. Humphreys was Mr. Likely's treasurer, confidential man, factotum. He stood at the front of the theatre to receive the important people,—notably the press,—to settle discord, to hint what was the real strength of the forthcoming piece, to beg a little indulgence for Miss Satterthwaite's hoarseness, or for the last scene of the second act, which poor Coverflats, worn off his legs, had scarcely had time to finish. He knew exactly to whom to bow, with whom to shake hands. He knew exactly where to plant the different representatives of the press, keeping up a proper graduation, yet never permitting any critic to think that he was not sufficiently honoured. He knew when to start the applause, when to hush the house into silence. Better than all, he knew where to take Mr. Likely's acceptances to get them discounted; kept an account of the dates, and paid the renewal fees out of the previous night's receipts. An invaluable man Humphreys; a really wonderful fellow!

When Laurence Alsager flung away the end of his cigarette under the Parthenium portico, and strolled leisurely into the house, he found Humphreys standing in exactly the same position in which he had last seen him two years since ; and he almost quailed as, delivering up his ticket, he returned the treasurer's bow, and thanked him for his welcome. "Glad to see you back, Colonel. Something worth showing to you to-night!" and then Laurence laughed outright. He had been away for two years ; he had seen the Sphinx and the Pyramids, and all the wonders of the East, to say nothing of the European continent ; and here was a man congratulating himself that in a three-act tinpot play they had something worthy of his observation. So he nodded and laughed, and passed on into the theatre. Well, if there were no change in Humphreys, there was little enough in any one else. There they were, all the old set : half-a-dozen newspaper critics dotted over the front rows of the stalls ; two or three attached to the more important journals in private boxes ; celebrated author surrounded

by his family in private box; other celebrated author scowling by himself in orchestra-stall; two celebrated artists who always came to first-nights amusing themselves by talking about art before the curtain goes up; fat man with vulgar wife, with wreath of roses in her head,—alderman, wholesale stationer, said to be Mr. Frank Likely's backer, in best stage-box; opposite stage-box being reserved by Jewish old party, landlord of the theatre, and now occupied by the same, asleep and choking. Lady Ospringe of course, with (equally of course) the latest lion of the day by her side—on this occasion a very little man, with long fair hair, who, as Laurence afterwards learned, had written a poem all about blood and slaughter. The Duke and Duchess of Tantallan, who are mad about private theatricals, who have turned the old northern feudal castle into an uncomfortable theatre, and whose most constant guests are little Hyams (the costumier) and Jubber ('heavy old man') of the Cracksideum Theatre, who 'gets up' the duke's plays. Sir Gerald Spoonbill and Lord Otho Faulconbridge, jolly old boys,

flushed with hastily-eaten dinner at Foodle's, but delighting in the drama; the latter especially having inherited taste for it, his mother having been—well, you know all about that. That white waist-coat which glistens in the stalls could belong to no one but Mr. Marshall Moss, next to whom sit on either side Mr. Gompertz, the stock-jobber, and Mr. Sergeant Orson, the last-named having entertained the other gentlemen at a very snug little dinner at the Haresfoot Club. Nor was pipe-clay wanting. The story of the plot, the intended character to be assumed by Mr. Pontifex, had been talked over at Woolwich, at Brompton,—where the sucking Indian heroes, men whose names long afterwards were household words during the Mutiny campaigns, were learning soldiering,—at the Senior and the Junior, and at the Rag, the members of which, awaiting the completion of their present palatial residence, then occupied a modest tenement in St. James's Square. There was a boxful of Plungers, big, solemn, heavy men, with huge curling moustaches, conspicuous among whom were Algy

Forrester and Cis Hetherington of the Blues; Markham Bowers of the Life Guards, who shot the militia-surgeon behind the windmill at Wimbledon; and Dick Edie of the 4th Dragoon Guards—Dick Edie, the solicitor's son, who afterwards ran away with Lady Florence 'Ormolu, third daughter of the house of Porphyry; and on being reconciled and introduced to whom on a future occasion, the Dowager Countess of Porphyry was good enough to make the remark that she "had no idea the lower orders were so clean."

Where are ye now, lustrous counts, envied dandies of that bygone time? Algy Forrester, thirty-four inches round the girth, has a son at Oxford, breeds fat sheep, and is only seen in London at cattle-show time. Cis Hetherington, duly heralded at every outlawry proclamation, lies *perdu* in some one of the barren islands forming the Hebrides cluster. Markham Bowers fell in the Balaklava charge, pierced through and through by Cossack spearmen; and Major-general Richard Edie, M.P., is the chief adviser and the trusted agent of his mother-in-law, the Dowager Countess

of Porphyry. In the next box, hiding behind the muslin curtains, and endeavouring to hide her convulsions of laughter behind her fan, sat little Pauline Désirée, *première danseuse* at the Opera Comique, with Harry Lindon of the Coldstreams, and Prothero of the Foreign Office, and Tom Hodgson the comic writer; none of them one atom changed, all of them wonder-struck at the man in the big beard, all of them delighted at suddenly recognising in him an old friend, not much thought of perhaps during his absence, as is the way of the world, but certainly to be welcomed now that he was once more among them.

Not one atom changed; all of them just the same. What were his two years of absence, his wanderings in burning solitudes, or amongst nomadic tribes? His sudden rushing away had been undertaken with a purpose; and whether that purpose had been fulfilled was known to himself alone. He rather thought it had, as, without an extra heart-beat, he looked into a box on the pit-tier, and his grave face flashed into a sardonic grin as his eyes lit on the bald forehead

and plaited shirt-frill of an elderly gentleman, instead of the light-chestnut bands and brilliant bust which once reigned dominant there on every "first night." But all the others were just the same; even the people he did not know were exactly like those whom he had left, and precisely answered to those whom he should have expected to find there. No, not all. The door of a box on the grand tier next the dress-circle opened with a clang, and a lady whom he had never seen before, coming to the front, settled herself in the corner opposite the stage. The noise of the door attracted the attention of the house; and Ventus, then playing his celebrated cornet-solo in the overture, cursed the interruption; a whisper ran round the stalls; the arrival was telegraphed to the Guards' box: this must be some star that had risen on the horizon since Laurence's absence. Ah, there is Blab Bertram at the back of the box! This, then, must be Lady Mitford!

She was apparently about twenty, and, so far as could be judged from her sitting position, tall and slight. Her complexion was red and white, beauti-

fully clear,—the white transparent, the red scarlet,—and her features regular ; small forehead, straight Grecian nose, very short upper-lip, and mouth small, with lips rather thin than pouting. Her dark-brown hair (fortunately at that time it was not considered necessary for beauty to have a red head), taken off behind the ears in two tight bands, showed the exquisite shape of her head, which was very small, and admirably fitted on the neck, the only fault of which was its excess in length. She was dressed entirely in white, with a green necklace, and a tiny wreath of green ivy-leaves was intertwined among the braids into which her hair was fastened at the back of her head. She took her seat gracefully, but looked round, as Laurence noticed, with a certain air of strangeness, as though unaccustomed to such scenes ; then immediately turned her eyes, not on the other occupants of the theatre, not on the stage, nor on George Bertram, who, after some apparent demur, took the front seat opposite to her, but towards a tall man, who relieved her of her cloak, and handed her a fan, and in whom Alsager recog-

nised the Charles Mitford of his Oxford days. A good realisation of Tennyson's Sir Walter Vivian,—

“No little lily-handed baronet he;
A stout broad-shouldered genial Englishman,”—

was Sir Charles Mitford, with strongly-marked well-cut features, bright blue eyes, curling reddish-brown hair, large light breezy whiskers, and a large mouth gleaming with sound white teeth. The sort of man who, you could tell at a glance, would have a very loud hearty laugh, would grip your hand until your fingers ached, would be rather awkward in a room, but who would never flinch across country, and never grow tired among the turnips or over the stubble. An unmistakable gentleman, but one to whom a shooting-coat and gaiters would be more becoming than the evening-dress he then wore, and who evidently felt the moral and physical restraint of his white choker, from the way in which he occasionally tugged at that evidence of civilisation. Shortly after they had settled themselves, the curtain went up, and all eyes were turned to the stage; but Laurence noticed that Lady Mitford was seated

so as to partly lean against her husband, while his left hand, resting on her chair-back, occasionally touched the braids of her hair. George Bertram seemed to be entirely overlooked by his companions, and was able to enjoy his negative pleasure of holding his tongue to the fullest extent.

They were right who had said that Spofforth had put forth all his power in the new piece, and had been even more than usually personal. The characters represented were, an old peer, wigged, rouged, and snuff-box bearing, one of those wonderful creations which have never been seen on the English stage since Farren left it; his young wife, a dashing countess, more frequently in a riding-habit than any thing else, with a light jewel-handled whip, with which she cut her male friends over the shoulders or poked them in the ribs,—as is, we know, the way of countesses in real life; a dashing young cavalry-officer very much smitten with the countess, excellently played by Dacre Pontifex, who admirably contrived to do two things at the same time—to satisfy the swells by his representation of one of their class,—

“Doosid good thing; not like usual dam cawick-achaw,” they said,—and simultaneously to use certain words, phrases, and tones, to fall into certain attitudes and use certain gestures, all of which were considered by the pittites as a mockery of the aristocracy, and were delighted in accordingly. It being an established fact that no play at the Parthenium could go down without Mugger the low comedian, and there being in the “scandal in high life,” which Spofforth had taken for his plot, no possible character which Mugger could have portrayed, people were wondering what would be done for him. The distribution of the other characters had been apparent to all ever since it was known that Spofforth had the story in hand: of course Farren would be the marquis, and Miss Amabel the marchioness (Spofforth had lowered his characters one step in rank, and removed the captain from the Guards to the cavalry—a great stroke of genius), and Pontifex the military lover. But what could be done for Mugger? The only other character in the real story, the man by whom the intrigue was found out, and all the

mischief accidentally caused, was a simple old clergyman, vicar of the parish close by my lord's country estate, and of course they could not have introduced a clergyman on to the stage, even if Mugger could have played the part. This was a poser. At first Mugger proposed that the clergyman should be turned into a Quaker, when he could appear in broad-brim and drab, call every body "thee," and snuffle through his nose; but this was overruled. At last Spofforth hit upon a happy idea: the simple old clergyman should be turned into a garrulous mischief-making physician; and when Mugger appeared at the back of the stage, wonderfully "made-up" in a fluffy white hat, and a large shirt-frill protruding from his waistcoat, exactly like a celebrated London doctor of the day, whose appearance was familiar to all, the shouts of delight rose from every part of the house. This, with one exception, was the hit of the evening; the exception was when the captain, in a letter to his beloved, writes, "Fly, fly with me! These arms once locked round you, no blacksmith shall break them asunder." Now

this was an expression which had actually been used by the lover in the "scandal in high life," and had been made immense fun of by the counsel in the trial which ensued, and by the Sunday newspapers in commenting on that trial. When, therefore, the phrase was spoken by Pontifex in his most telling manner, it created first a thrill of astonishment at the author's daring, then a titter, then a tremendous roar of laughter and applause. Mr. Frank Likely, who was standing at the wing when he heard this, nodded comfortably at Spofforth, who was in the opposite stage-box anxiously watching the effect of every line; and the latter shut up his glass, like the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo, and felt that the battle was won. "It was touch-and-go, my boy," Likely said to the author afterwards; "one single hitch in that speech, and the whole thing would have been goosed off the stage."

There were, however, a few people in the theatre who were not so intensely delighted with Mr. Spofforth's ingenuity and boldness. Laurence Alsager, whose absence from England had

prevented his hearing the original story, thought the whole play dreary enough, though he appreciated the art of Pontifex and the buffoonery of Mugger; but the great roar of delight caught him in the middle of a yawn, and he looked round with astonishment to see how a very silly phrase could occasion such an amount of laughter. Glancing round the house, his eyes fell upon Lady Mitford, and he saw that her cheeks were flushed, her looks downcast, and her lips compressed. She had been in the greatest wonderment, poor child, during the whole of the piece: the manners of the people represented were to her as strange as those of the Ashantees; she heard her own language and did not understand it; she saw men and women, apparently intended to be of her own nation and station, conducting themselves towards each other in a manner she had never heard of, much less seen; she fancied there had been a laxity of speech and morals pervading the play, but she only knew it when the roar of welcome to Mr. Pontifex's hint about the blacksmith fell upon her ear. She had never heard the origin of the phrase, but her

natural instinct told her it was coarse and gross ; she knew it from the manner in which her husband, unable to restrain a loud guffaw, ended with " Too bad, too bad, by Jove ! " She knew it by the manner in which Mr. Bertram studiously turned his face away from her to the stage ; from the manner in which the ladies all round endeavoured to hide their laughter behind their fans, oblivious of the betrayal afforded by their shaking shoulders ; she knew it from the look of intense disgust in the face of that curious-looking bearded man in the stalls, whose glances her eyes happened to meet as she looked down.

Yes, Laurence Alsager was as thoroughly disgusted as he looked, and that was saying much ; for he had the power of throwing great savageness of expression into his bright eyes and thin lips. Here had a sudden home-sickness, an indescribable longing, come upon him, and he had hurried back after two-years' absence ; and now within half-a-dozen hours of his arrival he had sickened at the change. He hated the theatre, and the grinning fools who laughed at the im-

modest rubbish, and the grinning fools who uttered it; he hated the conventionality of dress and living; he could not stand going in with a regular ruck of people again, and having to conform to all their ways. He would cut it at once; go down to Knockholt to-morrow, and stay a couple of days with Sir Peregrine just to see the old governor, and then be off again to South America, to do prairies and bisons and that sort of thing.

As he made this resolution, the curtain fell amidst a storm of applause, and rose again to show the actors in a row, bowing delightedly with their hands on their waistcoats; Spofforth "bowed his acknowledgments from a private box," and kissed his hand to Alsager, who returned the salute with a very curt nod, then rose and left the theatre. In the lobby he met the Mitford party, and was quietly slipping by when Sir Charles, after whispering to Bertram, touched his shoulder, saying, "Colonel Alsager, let me renew our old acquaintance." There was no escape from this big man's cheery manner and

outstretched hand; so Laurence, after an instant's admirably-feigned forgetfulness, returned the grasp, saying, "Ah, Mitford I think? of Brasenose in the old days?"

"Yes, yes, to be sure! All sorts of things happened since then, you know."

"Oh yes, of course; though I've only been in England six hours I've heard of your luck and the baronetcy. George Bertram here is such a terrific talker, he couldn't rest until he had told me all the news."

This set Sir Charles Mitford off into one of his great roars again, at the finish of which he said, "Let me introduce you to my wife; she's just here with Bertram.—Here, Georgie darling, this is Colonel Alsager, an old acquaintance of mine."

Of any one else Mitford would have said "an old friend;" but as he spoke he glanced at Laurence's stern grave expression, and changed the word. Perhaps the same feeling influenced Lady Mitford, as her bow was constrained; and her spirits, already depressed by the performance,

were by no means raised by the introduction to this sombre stranger.

Sir Charles tried to rally. "Hope we shall see something of you, Alsager, now you're back. You'll find us in Eaton Place, and—"

"You're very good; but I shall leave town to-morrow, and probably England next week."

Probably no man had ever been more astonished than was George Bertram as he stood by and heard this; but, true to his creed, he said never a word.

"Leave England!" said Sir Charles. "Why, you've only just come back. You're only just—All right; we're coming!" This last in answer to roars of "Lady Mitford's carriage!" surging up the stairs. "Thank you if you'll give my wife your arm."

Lady Mitford accepted this courtesy very frigidly, just touching Laurence's arm with the tips of her fingers. After she had entered the brougham, Alsager stood back for Sir Charles to follow; but the latter shut the door, saying, "Good-night, Georgie dear; I sha'n't be late."

“Oh, Charley, are you not coming with me?” she said.

“No, dear, not just yet. Don’t put on such a frightened face, Georgie, or Colonel Alsager will think I’m a perfect Bluebeard. I’m going to sup with Bligh and Winton; to be introduced to that fellow who acted so well,—Pontifex, you know. Sha’n’t be late, dear.—Home, Daniells.”

And as the carriage drove off, Sir Charles Mitford, forgetting to finish his civil speeches to Laurence, shook hands with him and Bertram, and wishing them good-night, walked off with his companions.

“Chaff or earnest,” said Mr. Bertram when they were left alone, “going away again?”

“I don’t know yet; I can’t tell; I’ve half a mind to—How horribly disappointed that little woman looked when that lout said he was going out to supper! He is a lout, your friend, George.”

“Cubbish; don’t know things yet; wants training,” jerked out Mr. Bertram.

“Wants training, does he? He’ll get it soon

enough if he consorts much with Bligh and Winton, and that set. They'll sharpen him."

"Like Lady Mitford?" said Bertram interrogatively.

"I think not; I don't know. She seems a little rustic and missish at present. Let's come to the Club; I want a smoke."

But as they walked along, Laurence wrung some further particulars about Lady Mitford from his friend; and as they ascended the club-steps, he said, "I don't think if I had a pretty wife like that, I should leave her for the sake of passing my evening with Winton and Bligh, or even of being introduced to Mr. Pontifex. Would you, George?"

"Can't say. Never had one," was Mr. Bertram's succinct reply.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE SMOKING-ROOM.

AMONG the advantages upon which I have not sufficiently dilated, the Mæcenas Club had a smoking-room, of which the members were justly proud. Great improvements have been lately made; but in those days the smoking-room was a novel ingredient in club-comfort, and its necessity was not sufficiently recognised. Old gentlemen, generally predominant in clubs, were violently opposed to tobacco, save in the shape of the club-snuff; regarded smoking as a sure sign of dissipation, if not of entirely perverted morality, and combined together in committee and out of committee to worry, harass, and annoy the devotees of the cigar. Consequently these last were in most clubs relegated to a big gaunt room at the top of the house, which had palpably been formed by

the removal of the partition between two servants' attics, a room with bare walls, an oil-cloth-covered floor like a hair-dresser's cutting-room, a few imitation-marble-topped tables, some windsor chairs, and a slippery black-leather ottoman stuck against the wall. Thither, to that tremendous height, the waiter, humorously supposed to be devoted to the room, seldom penetrated; and you sat and smoked your cigar, and sipped your gin-and-seltzer when you were lucky enough to get it, and watched your neighbour looming through a fog of his own manufacture in solemn silence. It required a bold man to penetrate to such howling wildernesses as the smoking-rooms of the Retrenchment, the True Blue, and the No Surrender in those days; nor were they much better off at the Rag, save in the summer, when they rigged up a tent in the back-yard, and held their *tabagie* under canvas. At the Minerva, they had no smoking-room at all; the bishops, and other old women in power there, distinctly refusing to sanction a place for any such orgies. But at the Mæcenas the smoking-room was *the* room in the house. None of

your attics or cocklofts, none of your stair-climbing to get into a bare garret at the end of your toil. At the Mæcenas you went straight through the hall, past all the busts of the eminent gentlemen, through a well-lit stone passage, where, if you were lucky, you might see, in a little room on the right, honest Mr. Turquand the steward brewing a jorum of that gin-punch for which the Club was so renowned; past the housekeeper's-room, where Mrs. Norris always sat breast-high in clean table-linen, and surrounded by garlands of lemons and groves of spices; past the big refrigerator, into which Tom Custance threatened to dip little Captain Rodney one night when that peppery light-weight had had too much of the club-claret; and then, built over what should have been the garden, you found the pride of the little M. A big square room, lit by a skylight in summer, or sun-burner in winter, with so much wall-paper as could be seen of a light-green colour, but with the walls nearly covered with sketches of all kinds in oil, crayon, and water-colour, contributed by members of the Club. From mantel-

shelf to ceiling had been covered by Gilks, in distemper, with "Against Wind and Tide"—a lovely bit of seascape, to look at which kept you cool on the hottest night; opposite, hung Sandy Clobber's hot staring "Sphinx and Pyramids;" Jack Long's crayon caricature of "King Jamie inditing the Counterblast" faced a charming sketch of a charming actress by Acton, R.A.; and there were a score of other gems of art. Such cosy chairs and luxurious lounges; such ventilation, watched over specially by Fairfax, the oldest and perhaps the jolliest member of the Club; such prime cigars and glorious drinks, and pungent anecdote and cheerful conversation, were to be had nowhere else.

The room was full when Laurence and Bertram entered, and the former was immediately received with what dramatic critics call "an ovation;" that is, the men generally shook hands with him, and expressed themselves glad to see him back.

"And I see by your dress that you've no sooner arrived than you've plunged into the vor-

tex of society, Colonel," said old Fairfax from his post of honour in the chimney-corner.

"Not I, Mr. Fairfax," replied Laurence, laughing; "I've only been to the play."

"What! not to Spofforth's,—not to the Parthenium?"

"Why not? is there any harm? is it a riddle? what is it? Let me know at once, because whatever it is, I've been there."

"No, no; only there's been a difference of opinion about the new piece. Billy Gomon thinks it capital, and gave us a flaming account of it; but since then Captain Hetherington has come in and spoken very strongly against it. Now, Colonel, you can act as umpire between these two referees."

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Gomon, a mild bald-headed little gentleman who did Boswell to Spofforth, and was rewarded for perpetually blowing his idol's trumpet by opera-ivories and first-night private-boxes, and occasional dinners with pleasant theatrical people. "I merely said that there was—ah, an originality,—a—cle-

verness,—and—a—above all a gentlemanly tone in the piece such as you never find in any one's writings but Spofforth's."

Most of the men sitting round laughed heartily as Billy Gomon uttered his sentiments in the mildest, most deprecatory manner, and with the pleasantest smile.

"Well, that's not bad to begin with; and now, Cis, what have you got to say?"

A big man, half-sitting, half-lolling on an ottoman the other side of the room, wholly occupied in smoking a very large cigar, staring at the ceiling and pulling his long tawny moustaches, looked up at the mention of his name, and said:

"Well, look here, Alsager: I'm not clever, and all that sort of thing, you know; I'm not particularly sweet on my own opinion; of course, being a Plunger I can't spell or write, or pronounce my *r*'s, 'cordin' to *Punch* and the other funny dogs, and so I've no doubt Billy Gomon's right; and it's doosid clever of Mr. Spofforth, a gentleman whose acquaintance I've not the pleasure of possessing—and don't want, by Jove,

that's more!—doosid clever of Mr. Spofforth to rake up a dunghill story out of the newspapers when it had been forgotten, and to put the unfortunate devils who were concerned in it on to the stage, and bring back all the old scandal. I've no doubt it's doosid clever; and I'm sure it's a very gentlemanly thing of Mr. Spofforth to do; so gentlemanly that, if any of my people had been mixed up in it, I'd have tried the strength of my hunting-loop over Mr. Spofforth's shoulders!" And having concluded, Cis Hetherington leant back lazily, and resumed his contemplation of the ceiling.

There was a pause for a moment, and then Bertram said:

"Quite right, Hetherington; horrible piece, dreary and dirty. D—d unpleasant to think that one can't go to the theatre with a modest woman without having innuendoes and *doubles entendres* thrown at you."

"By Jove, a second edition of the miraculous gift of tongues!" said a man seated on Laurence's right. "I never heard the Blab so charmingly

eloquent. You were with him at the theatre, Alsager ; who was the lady whom he so deliciously described as a ‘modest woman’ that he escorted ?” The speaker was Lord Dollamore, a man of good abilities and position, but a confirmed Sybarite and a renowned *roué*.

“Bertram escorted no one ; he merely had a seat in a box with Lady Mitford and her husband,” said Laurence coldly. He hated Lord Dollamore. As he himself said, he “didn’t go in to be straight-laced ; but Dollamore was a cold-blooded ruffian about women, and, worse still, a boaster.”

“Ah, with Lady Mitford !” said Lord Dollamore, slowly expelling a mouthful of smoke ; “I have the pleasure of her acquaintance. She’s very nice, Alsager !”

There was a succulence in the tone in which these last words were spoken that sounded unpleasantly on Laurence’s ear ; so he said shortly, “I saw Lady Mitford for the first time to-night.”

“Oh, she’s very nice ; a little too classical and statuesque and Clite-like for my taste, which leans

more to the *beauté-du-diable* order; but still Lady Mitford's charming. Poor little woman! she's like the young bears, with all her troubles before her."

"Her troubles won't be many, one would think," said Laurence, who was growing irritated under his companion's half-patronising, half-familiar tone in speaking of Lady Mitford.

"Won't they?" said Lord Dollamore, with another slow expulsion of smoke; this time in the shape of rings which he dextrously shot one through the other.

"I can't see how they should. She has beauty, wealth, and position; a young husband who doats on her,—oh, you needn't grin; I saw him with her in the box."

"Yes, and I saw him without her, but with Bligh and Winton, the two Clarks, who are *coryphées* at Drury Lane, and Middle. Carambola from the cirque at Leicester Square, turning in to supper at Dubourg's. Now, then, what do you say to that?"

"Nothing. Mitford told his wife he was

going to supper with Bligh and Winton. I heard him."

"Very likely; but you didn't hear him mention the female element. No, of course not."

"Sir Charles Mitford being, I presume, a gentleman, that suggestion is simply absurd."

"Pardon me, my dear Colonel Alsager, I never make any suggestion that can be called 'simply absurd.' The fact is, Alsager, that though I'm only, I suppose, five or six years older than you, I've seen a deal more of life."

"Of which side of it?"

"Well, the most interesting,—the worst, of course. While you've been mounting guard and saluting colours, and teaching bullet-headed recruits to form square, and all that kind of thing, I've been studying human nature."

"How delightful for human nature!"

"That may or may not be," said Lord Dollamore calmly, and without the smallest sign of irritation; "but this I know, that all boy-and-girl marriages invariably come to grief. A man must have his fling some time or other; if he does

not have it before his marriage, he will after. And between ourselves, Alsager, this Mitford is a devilish bad egg. I've known of him all his life. He had a fast turn when he was a mere boy, and didn't stick at trifles to raise money, as you may have heard."

"I know all about that; but—"

"And do you think that, now that he has plenty of money and health and position, he won't go in for that style of pleasure which he formerly risked every thing to obtain? Nonsense, my dear Alsager; *cela va sans dire*. Lady Mitford will have to run the gauntlet of society, as do most married women with loose husbands; and will certainly be more successful than most of her competitors."

Laurence put down his cigar, and, looking steadily at his companion, said, "I don't envy the man who could be blackguard enough to attempt to throw a shadow on such a woman's life."

"Don't you?" said Lord Dollamore, as steadily returning the glance; "of course not." Then, in a somewhat lighter tone, he added,

“By the way, have you seen the Hammonds lately?”

A flush, noticeable even through the red bronze, rose on Laurence's cheeks; but before he could speak, a man who was sitting on the other side of Lord Dollamore cut into the conversation by saying, “Oh, by the way, there was a brother of Percy Hammond's dining here last week; Prothero asked me to meet him. He's a sporting parson, and a tremendous character. He told us he always knew when woodcock came in by the lesson for the day.”

“I know him,” said Cis Hetherington, who had lounged up and joined the party; “Tom Hammond, a thundering big fellow. His vicarage or rectory, or whatever it is, is close by Dursley; and at the last election Tom seconded my brother—Westonhanger, you know—for the county. The Rads brought over a lot of roughs, navvies, and fellows working at the railway close by; and whenever Tom spoke, these fellows kept yelling out all sorts of blackguard language. Tom roared to them to stop it; and when they

wouldn't, he quietly let himself drop over the front of the hustings, right into the middle of 'em. He's a splendid bruiser, you know; and he let out—one two, one two—right and left, and sent half-a-dozen of 'em flying like skittles. Then he asked if any more was wanted, carefully settled his clerical white-choker, and went back to the hustings again."

"He owed your brother a good turn after the way in which he astonished your governor a year or two ago, Cis," said Lord Dollamore.

"What was that? Did he pull the Duke up for coming late to church, or for not hunting the county? The last most likely, I should think."

"Not at all. You all know what a tremendous swell Cis's brother the Duke is,—you know it, Cis, as well as any body,—wants all the pavement to himself in St. James's Street, and finds the arch on Constitution Hill not quite high enough for his head. Well, a year or two ago Tom Hammond had a splendid roan horse which he used to drive in a light Whitechapel to cover.

The Duke saw this animal, and thought it would make a splendid match for a roan of his; so he sent his coachman over to Tom's little place to ask if he'd sell. Tom saw the coachman, heard what he had to say, and then told him he never spoke to grooms, except to give them orders; if the Duke wanted the horse, he must come himself. I can't think what message the man can have given to his master; but two days after, the Duke's phaeton pulled up at the parsonage-door, and the Duke himself bowed to Tom, who ran to the window with his mouth full of lunch. Tom's account of the interview was delicious. He imitates the Duke's haw-haw manner to perfection,—you don't mind, Cis? He asked him in, and told him that the stilton was in prime cut; but the Duke declined, and said, 'I understand you wish to sell your roan, Mr. Hammond.' 'Then your grace understands a good deal more than I gave you credit for,' said Tom. 'Then you don't want to sell the horse? I want him particularly for a match-horse.' 'No,' said Tom; 'I won't sell him. I'm a poor parson, and I wouldn't take

three hundred for him ; but I'll tell you what I'll do, your grace. I'm always open to a bit of sporting ; and *I'll toss your grace for the pair* ; or, if that's not exciting enough, I'll get my curate to come in—he's only next door—and we'll go the odd man, the best of three. That's what I'll do.' Tom says he thought the Duke would have had a fit. He never spoke a word, but drove straight away, and has never looked at Tom since."

After the laugh which this story raised had ceased, Lord Dollamore said, " Did Tom say any thing about his brother Percy the day he dined here ?"

" Oh, yes," said the man who had first spoken ; " they're coming back at once. Mrs. Hammond finds Florence disagrees with her."

" Perhaps she'd find Laurence agree with her better," said Dollamore *sotto voce* ; then aloud, " Ah ! and so of course poor Percy is to be trotted back again. By Jove, how that woman rules him ! She has only to whistle, and he comes to her at once. I should like to see a

woman try that on me,—a woman that I was married to, I mean.—By the way, you haven't seen Mrs. Hammond since her marriage, have you, Alsager?"

"No; I left England just previously."

"Ah! she's as pretty as ever, and infinitely more wicked—I beg your pardon, though; I forgot we had turned purist since our Oriental experience."

"At all events we have learned one thing in our Oriental experience, Lord Dollamore."

"And that is —?"

"To keep our temper and—hold our tongue. Good-night."

As he said these words, Laurence Alsager rose from his seat and left the room; Bertram had previously taken his departure; so that Laurence walked off alone to his hotel, pondering on all he had seen and heard.

"So she's coming back," he said to himself as he strolled along; "coming back to bring back to me, whenever I may happen to meet her, all the sickening recollection of the old times, the heart-

burnings, the heart-breaking, to escape from which I rushed away two years ago. She won the day then, and she'll be as insolent as she can be on the strength of her victory now, though she knows well enough that I did not shoot my best bolt then, but keep it in my quiver yet. It's impossible to fight with a woman; they can descend to so many dodges and meannesses where no man worthy of the name could follow them. No; I'll seek safety in flight. I'll be off again as soon as I've seen the governor; and then—And yet what a strange interest I seem to take in that girl I saw to-night! Poor little child! I wonder if Dollamore's right about her husband. Well, I'll wait a few days, and see what turns up."

While these thoughts were passing through Laurence Alsager's mind, Sir Charles Mitford was leaning against the jambs of the door leading from his dressing-room into his wife's bedroom. He had one boot off, and was vainly endeavouring to discover the hole in the bootjack in which to insert the other foot. The noise which he made in

this operation awoke Lady Mitford, who called out, "Oh, Charley, is that you?"

"Course, my dear," said Sir Charles in a thick voice; "who should it be this time o' night? not that it's late, though," he said, correcting himself after a moment's reflection; then looking vacantly at her, added in a high-falsetto key, "quite early."

"You are not ill, Charley?" she asked, looking anxiously at him.

"Not I, my darling; never berrer.—Off at last, are you?" this last observation addressed to the conquered boot. "But you, what's mar-rer with you? Look all flushed and frightened like."

"I've had a horrid confused dream about the theatre, and people we saw there, and snakes, oh! so dreadful; and that grave man, Colonel Somebody, that you introduced me to, was just going to rescue me. Oh, Charley, I feel so low and depressed, and as though something were going to happen. I'm sure we sha'n't be happy in London. Let's go away again."

“Nonsense, Georgie; — nonsense, my love! Very jolly place for — good supper, — Colonel Snakes;” and with these intelligible murmurings Sir Charles Mitford slipped into the land of dreams.

CHAPTER V.

GEORGIE.

IF, twelve months before the production of Mr. Spofforth's play (which necessarily forms a kind of Hegira in this story), you had told Georgie Stanfield that she was destined to be the wife of a baronet, the mistress of a house in one of the best parts of London, the possessor of horses and carriages, and all the happiness which a very large yearly income can command, your assertions would have been met, not with ridicule, for Georgie was too gentle and too well-bred for that, but with utter disbelief. Her whole life had been passed in the little Devonshire village of which her father was vicar, and it seemed to her impossible that she could ever live any where else. To potter about in the garden during the summer in a large flapping straw hat and a cot-

ton gown, to tie up drooping flowers and snip off dead leaves ; to stand on the little terrace dreamily gazing over the outspread sea, watching the red sails of the fishing-smacks skimming away to the horizon, or the trim yachts lying off the little port—the yachts whose fine lady-passengers and gallant swells, all blue broad-cloth and club-button, seen at a distance,—were Georgie's sole links with the fashionable world ; to visit and read to the bed-ridden old women and the snuffling, coughing old men ; to superintend the preparation of charitably-dispensed gruel and soup ; to traverse Mavor's Spelling-book up and down, up and down, over and over again, in the company of the stupid girls of the village-school ; to read the *Cullompton Chronicle* to her father on Thursdays, and to copy out his sermon on the Saturday evenings,—these had been the occupations of Georgie Stanfield's uneventful life.

She had not had even the excitement of flirtations, a few of which fall to the lot of nearly every girl, be she pretty or plain, rich or poor, town- or country-bred. The military dépôts are now

so numerous that it is hard, indeed, if at least a couple of subalterns cannot be found to come over any distance in the rumbling dog-cart hired from the inn in the provincial town where they are quartered; and though in Georgie's days there was no croquet,—that best of excuses for social gathering and mild flirtation,—yet there were archery-meetings, horticultural shows, and picnics. Failing the absence of the military, even the most-out-of-the-way country village can produce a curate; and an intending flirt has merely to tone-down certain notions and expand others, to modify her scarlets and work-up her grays, and she will have, if not a very exciting, at all events a very interesting, time in playing her fish. But there were no barracks within miles of Fishbourne, nor any temptations there to have attracted officers from them, if there had been. There were no resident gentry in the place, and the nearest house of any importance—Weston Tower, the seat of old Lady Majoribanks—was twenty miles off, and old Lady Majoribanks kept no company. As for the curates, there was one,

certainly ; but Mr. Lucas had “ assisted ” Georgie’s father for the last eighteen years, was fifty years old, and had a little wife as slow and as gray as the old pony which he used to ride to outlying parts of the parish.

Besides, if there had been eligible men in scores, what had they to do with Georgie Stanfield, or she with them ? Was she not engaged to Charles Mitford ?—at least, had she not been so affianced until that dreadful business about something wrong that brought poor Charley into disgrace ? and was that sufficient to permit her to break her plighted word ? Mr. Mitford, Charles’s father, had been a banker and brewer at Cullompton, and had had a country cottage at Fishbourne, a charming little place for his family to come to in the summer ; and Mr. Stanfield had been Charley’s tutor ; and when the family were away at Cullompton in the winter, Charley had remained at the vicarage ; and what so likely as that Charley should fall in love with Georgie, then a tall slip of a girl in short petticoats and frilled trousers and very thin legs, with her hair in a net ; or

that Georgie should have reciprocated the attachment? Both the fathers were delighted at the arrangement; and there was no mother on either side to talk of extreme youth, the chance of change, or to interpose other womanly objections. There came a time when Charley, then a tall handsome fellow, was to go up to Oxford; and then Georgie, to whom the outward and visible frill period was long past, and who was a lovely budding girl of sweet seventeen, laid her head on his breast on the night before he went away, and promised never to forget him, but to be his and his alone.

Ah, those promises never to forget, those whispered words of love, breathed by lips trembling under the thick cigar-scented moustache into delicate little ears trellised by braids fresh from the fingers of the lady's-maid! They are not much to the Corydons of St. James's Street, or the Phyllises of Belgravia. By how many different lips, and into how many different ears, are the words whispered and the vows breathed in the course of one London season! I declare I never pass through any of the great squares and

streets, and see the men enclosing the balconies with striped calico, that I do not wonder to myself whether, amongst all the nonsense that has been talked beneath that well-worn awning-stuff, there has been any that has laid the foundation for, or given the crowning touch to, an honest simple love-match, a marriage undertaken by two people out of sheer regard for each other, and permitted by relatives and friends, without a single thought of money or position to be gained on either side. If there be any, they must be very few in number; and this, be it observed, not on account of that supposed favourite pastime of parents—the disposal of their daughters' hands and happiness to the highest bidder, the outcry against which has been so general, and is really, I believe, so undeserved. The circumstance is, I take it, entirely ascribable to the lax morality of the age, under which a girl engages herself to a man without the slightest forethought, often without the least intention of holding to her word, not unfrequently from the increased opportunities such a state of things affords her for flirting with some other man, and

under which she can break her engagement and jilt her lover without compromising herself in the least in the eyes of society. Besides, in the course of a London life these vows and pledges are tendered so often as to be worn almost threadbare from the number of times they have been pledged; and as excess of familiarity always breeds contempt, the repetition of solemn phrases gradually takes from us the due appreciation of their meaning, and we repeat them parrot-wise, without the smallest care for what we are saying.

But that promise of love and truth and remembrance uttered by Georgie Stanfield on the sands at Fishbourne, under the yellow harvest-moon, with her head pillowed on Charles Mitford's breast and her arms clasped round his neck, came from a young heart which had known no guile, and was kept as religiously as was Sir Galahad's vow of chastity. Within a year after Charley's departure for Oxford, his father's affairs, which, as it afterwards appeared, had long been in hopeless confusion, became irretrievably involved. The bank stopped payment, and the old m

unable to face the storm of ignominy by which he imagined he should be assailed, committed suicide. The smash was complete; Charles had to leave the University, and became entirely dependent on his uncle, Sir Percy Mitford, who declined to see him, but offered to purchase for him a commission in a marching regiment, and to allow him fifty pounds a year. The young man accepted the offer; and by the same post wrote to Georgie, telling her all, and giving her the option of freeing herself from the engagement. It was a gentlemanly act; but a cheap bit of generosity, after all. He might have staked the fifty pounds a year his uncle had promised him, on the fidelity of such a girl as Georgie Stanfield, more especially in the time of trouble. Her father too, with his old disregard of the future, entirely approved of his daughter's standing by her lover under the circumstances of his altered fortune; and two letters—one breathing a renewal of love and trust, the other full of encouragement and hope—went away from Fishbourne parsonage, and brought

tears into the eyes of their recipient, as he sat on the edge of a truckle-bed in a whitewashed room in Canterbury Barracks.

The vow of constancy and its renewal were two little epochs in Georgie's quiet life. Then, not very long after the occurrence of the last,—some six months,—there came a third, destined never to be forgotten. There had been no letter from Charley for some days, and Georgie had been in the habit of walking across the lawn to meet the postman and question him over the garden-wall.

One heavy dun August morning, when the clouds were solemnly gathering up together, the air dead and still, the trees hushed and motionless, Georgie had seen the old man with a letter in his hand, and had hastened, even more eagerly than usual, across the lawn, to be proportionately disappointed when the postman shook his head, and pointing to the letter, said, "For the master, miss." The next minute she heard the sharp clang of the gate-bell, and saw her father take the letter from the postman's hand at his little study-window. Some inward prompting—she knew

not what—kept Georgie's eyes on her father. She saw him take out his spectacles, wipe them, and carefully adjust them; then take the letter, and holding it at nearly arm's length, examine its address; then comfortably settling himself in his arm-chair at the window, prepare to read it. Then Georgie saw the old man fall backward in his chair, his hand dropping powerless by his side, and the letter fluttering from it to the ground. Without uttering a cry, Georgie ran quickly to the house; but when she reached the study, Mr. Stanfield was sitting upright in his chair, and had picked the letter from the floor.

“Papa dearest,” said Georgie, “you gave me such a fright. I was watching you from the garden, and I thought I saw you faint. Oh, papa, you *are* ill! How white and scared you look! What is it, papa darling?—tell me.”

But to all this Mr. Stanfield only murmured, gazing up into his daughter's face,—“My poor child! my poor darling child!”

“What is it, papa? Oh, I know—it's about Charley! He's not—” and then she blanched

dead-white, and said in a scarcely audible voice :

“ He’s not dead, papa ?”

“ No, Georgie, no. It might be better if he were,—be better if he were.”

“ He’s very ill, then ?”

“ No, darling,—at least—there ! perhaps you’d better read it for yourself ; here, read it for yourself ;” and the old man, after giving her the letter, covered his face with his hands and sobbed aloud.

Then Georgie read in Sir Percy Mitford’s roundest hand and stiffest style, how his nephew Charles, utterly ungrateful for the kindnesses which he, Sir Percy, had showered upon him, and regardless of the fact that he had no resources of his own, nor expectations of any, had plunged into “ every kind of vice and debauchery, notably gambling ”—(Sir Percy was chairman of Quarter-Sessions, and you might trace the effect of act-of-parliament reading in his style)—how he had lost large sums at cards ; and how, with the double object of paying his debts and retrieving his losses, he had at length forged Sir Percy’s signature to a bill for 200*l.* ; and when the docu-

ment became due, had absconded, no one knew where. Sir Percy need scarcely say that all communication between him and this unworthy member of—he grieved to say—his family was at an end for ever; and he took that opportunity, while informing Mr. Stanfield of the circumstance, of congratulating him on having been lucky enough to escape any matrimonial connection with such a rogue and a vagabond.

Mr. Stanfield watched his daughter's perusal of the letter, and when she finished it and returned it to him calmly, he said:

“Well, my dear! it's a severe blow, is it not?”

“Yes, papa, it is indeed a severe blow. Poor Charley, poor Charley!”

“Poor Charley, my dear! You surely don't feel the least compassion for Charles Mitford; a man who has—who has outraged the laws of his country!”

“Not feel compassion for him, papa? Who could help it? Poor Charley, what a bitter degradation for him!”

“ For him ! degradation for him ! Bless my soul, I can’t understand ; for us, Georgina,—degradation for us, you mean ! However, there’s an end of it. We’ve washed our hands of him from this time forth, and never—”

“ Papa, do you know what you’re saying ? Washed our hands of Charles Mitford ! Do you recollect that I have promised to be his wife ?”

“ Promised to be his wife ! Why, the girl’s going mad ! Promised to be his wife ! Do you know the man has committed forgery ?”

“ Well, papa.”

“ Well, papa ! Good God ! I shall go mad myself ! You know he’s committed forgery, and you still hold to your engagement to him ?”

“ Unquestionably. Is it for me, his betrothed wife, to desert him now that he is in misery and disgrace ? Is it for you, a Christian clergyman, to turn your back on an old friend who has fallen, and who needs your sympathy and counsel now really for the first time in his life ? Would you wish me to give up this engagement, which, pre-

haps, may be the very means of bringing Charles back to the right?"

"Yes, my dear, yes; that's all very well," said the old gentleman,—“all very well from a woman's point of view. But you see, for ourselves—”

“Well, papa, what then?"

“Well, my dear, of course we ought not to think so much for ourselves; but still, as your father, I've a right to say that I should not wish to see you married to a—a felon.”

“And as a clergyman, papa?—what have you a right to say as a clergyman?"

“I—I decline to pursue the subject, Georgina; so I'll only say this—that you're my daughter, and you're not of age yet; and I command you to break off this engagement with this—this criminal! That's all.”

Georgie simply said, “You know my determination, papa.” And there the matter ended.

This was the first quarrel that there had ever been between father and daughter, and both felt it very much indeed. Mr. Stanfield, who had

about as much acquaintance with human nature, and as much power of reading character, as if he had been blind and deaf, thought Georgie would certainly give way, and laid all sorts of palpable traps, and gave all sorts of available opportunities for her to throw herself into his arms, confess how wrong she had been, and promise never to think of Charles Mitford again. But Georgie fell in with none of these ways ; she kissed her father's forehead on coming down in the morning, and repeated the process on retiring at night ; but she never spoke to him at meal-times, and kept away from home as much as possible during the day, roaming over the country on her chestnut mare Polly, a tremendous favourite, which had been bought and broken for her by Charley in the old days.

During the whole of this time Mr. Stanfield was eminently uncomfortable. He had acted upon the ridiculous principle vulgarly rendered by the phrase, cutting off his nose to revenge his face. He had deprived himself of a great many personal comforts without doing one bit of good. For a

fortnight the *Cullompton Chronicle* had remained uncut and unread, though he knew there was an account of a bishop's visitation to the neighbouring diocese which would have interested him highly. For two consecutive Sundays the parishioners of Fishbourne had been regaled with old sermons in consequence of there being no one to transcribe the vicar's notes, which, save to Georgie, were unintelligible to the world in general and to their writer in particular. He missed Georgie's graceful form in the garden as he was accustomed to see it when looking up from his books or his writing; he missed her sweet voice carolling birdlike through the house, and always reminding him of that dead wife whose memory he so tenderly loved; and notwithstanding the constant horse-exercise, he thought, from sly glances which he had stolen across the table at her during dinner, that she was looking pale and careworn. Worst of all, he was not at all sure that the position he had taken up was entirely defensible on moral grounds. He was differently placed from that celebrated character in the *Critic*, who "as a

father softened, but as a governor was fixed." As a father he might object to the continuance of an engagement between his child and a man who had proved himself a sinner, not merely against religious ordinances, but against the laws of his country ; but he was very doubtful whether, as a Christian and a clergyman, he was not bound to stretch out the hand of forgiveness, and endeavour to reclaim the penitent. If Mr. Stanfield had lived in these days, and been sufficiently before the world, he would probably have had "ten thousand college councils" to "thunder anathema" at him for daring to promulgate the doctrine that "God is love ;" but in the little retired parish where he lived, he taught it because he believed it ; and he felt that he had rather fallen away from his standard in endeavouring to coerce his daughter into giving up Charles Mitford.

So one morning, when Georgie came down to breakfast looking flushed and worried, and very little refreshed by her night's sleep, instead of calmly receiving the frontal kiss, as had been his wont during the preceding fortnight, the old

man's arms were wound around her, his lips were pressed to hers, while he murmured, "Oh, Georgie! ah, my darling! ah, my child!" and there was a display of *grandes eaux* on both sides, and the reconciliation was complete. At a later period of that day Mr. Stanfield entered fully upon the subject of Charles Mitford, told Georgie that if the scapegrace could be found, he should be willingly received at the parsonage; and then the old gentleman concocted a mysterious advertisement, to the effect that if C. M., formerly of Fishbourne, Devon, would call on Mr. Stevens of Furnival's Inn, Holborn, London, he would hear something to his advantage, and be received with hearty welcome by friends who had forgiven, but not forgotten, him.

This advertisement, duly inserted through the medium of Mr. Stevens, the lawyer therein named, in the mystic second column of the *Times* Supplement, appeared regularly every other day during the space of a month; and good old Mr. Stanfield wrote twice a week to Mr. Stevens, inquiring whether "nothing had come of it;" and Mr. Ste-

vens duly replied (at three shillings and sixpence a letter) that nothing had. It must have been two months after the concoction of the advertisement, and one after its last appearance in the columns of the *Times*, that there came a letter for Georgie, written in the well-known hand, and signed with the well-known initials. It was very short, merely saying that for the second time the writer felt it due to her to leave her unfettered by any past engagement existing between them; that he knew how he had disgraced and placed himself beyond the pale of society; but that he would always cherish her memory, and think of her as some pure and bright star which he might look up to, but to the possession of which he could never aspire.

Poor little Georgie was dreadfully touched by this epistle, and so was Mr. Stanfield, regarding it as a work of art; but as a practical man he thought he saw a chance for again working the disruption of the engagement-question—this time as suggested by Charles himself; and there was little doubt that he would have enunciated these

sentiments at length, had he not been abruptly stopped by Georgie on his first giving a hint about it. Despairing of this mode of attack, the old gentleman became diplomatic and macchiavellian; and I am inclined to think that it was owing to some secret conspiracy on his part, that young Frank Majoribanks, staying on a desperately-dreary three-weeks' visit with his aunt and patroness Lady Majoribanks, took occasion to drive one of the old lady's old carriage-horses over to Fishbourne in a ramshackle springless cart belonging to the gardener, and to accept the vicar's offer of luncheon. He had not been five minutes in the house before Georgie found he had been at Oxford with Charley Mitford; and as he had nothing but laudatory remarks to make of his old chum (he had heard nothing of him since he left college), Georgie was very polite to him. But when, after his second or third visit, he completely threw aside Charley as his stalking-horse, and began to make running on his own account, Georgie saw through the whole thing in an instant, and treated him with such marked coldness

that, being a man of the world, he took the hint readily, and never came near the place again. And Mr. Stanfield saw with dismay that his diplomacy succeeded no better than his threats, and that his daughter was as much devoted to Charles Mitford as ever.

So the two dwellers in the parsonage fell back into their ordinary course of life, and time went on, and Mr. Stanfield's hair grew gradually more gray, and his shoulders gradually more rounded, and the sweet girl of seventeen became the budding woman of twenty. Then one Thursday evening, in the discharge of her weekly task of reading to her father the *Cullompton Chronicle*, Georgie suddenly stopped, and, although not in the least given to fainting or "nerves," was obliged to put her hand to her side and wait for breath. Then when a little recovered she read out to the wondering old gentleman the paragraph announcing the fatal accident to Sir Percy Mitford and his sons, and the accession of Charles to the title and estates. Like Paolo and Francesca,—though from a very different reason,—“that night they

read no more," the newspaper was laid by, and each sat immersed in thought. The old man's simple faith led him to believe that at length the long-wished-for result had arrived, and that all his daughter's patience, long-suffering, and courage would be rewarded. But Georgie, though she smiled at her father's babble, knew that throughout her acquaintance with Charley he had gone through no such trial as that to which the acquisition of wealth and position would now subject him; and she prayed earnestly with all her soul and strength that in this time of temptation her lover might not fall away.

A fortnight passed, and Mr. Stanfield, finding not merely that he had not heard from the new baronet, but that no intelligence of him had been received at Redmoor, at the town-house, or by the family lawyers, determined upon renewing his advertisement in the *Times*. By its side presently appeared another far less reticent, boldly calling on "Charles Mitford, formerly of Cul-lompton, Devon; then of Brasenose College, Oxford; then of the 26th regiment of the line;" to

communicate with Messrs. Moss and Moss, Solicitors, Cursitor Street, Chancery Lane, and hear something to his advantage. To this advertisement a line was added, which sent a thrill through the little household at the parsonage: "As the said Charles Mitford has not been heard of for some months, any one capable of legally proving his death should communicate with Messrs. M. and M. above named." Capable of legally proving his death! Could that be the end of all poor Georgie's life-dream? Could he have died without ever learning all her love for him, her truth to him? No! it was not so bad as that; though, but for the shrewdness of Edward Moss and the promptitude of Inspector Stellfox, it might have been. A very few hours more would have done it. As it was, little Dr. Prater, who happened to be dining with Marshall Moss at the Hummums when Mitford was brought there by the inspector, and who immediately undertook the case, scarcely thought he should pull his patient through. When the fierce stage of the disorder was past, there remained a horrible weakness and languor, which

the clever little physician attacked in vain. “Nature, my dear sir,—nature and your native air they must do the rest for you; the virtues of the pharmacopœia are exhausted.”

So one autumn evening, as Mr. Stanfield sat poring over his book, and Georgie, her hope day by day dying away within her, was looking out over the darkening landscape, the noise of wheels was heard at the gate; a grave man in black descended from the box of a postchaise, a worn, thin, haggard face peered out of the window; and the next instant, before Mr. Stanfield at all comprehended what had happened, the carriage-door was thrown open, and Georgie was hanging round the neck of the carriage-occupant; and kiss, kiss, and bless, bless! and thank God! and safe once more! was all the explanation audible.

Dr. Prater was quite right; nature and the patient's native air effected a complete cure. By the end of a month—such a happy month for Georgie!—Sir Charles was able to drive to Redmoor to see the men of business from London; by the end of two months he stood at the altar

of the little Fishbourne church, and received his darling from the hands of her father; the ceremony being performed by the old curate, who had learned to love Georgie as his own child, and who wept plentifully as he bestowed on her his blessing.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GRAYS.

WHEN Laurence Alsager awoke the next morning, he did not regard life with such weariness, nor London with such detestation, as when he went to bed. He had slept splendidly, as would naturally fall to the lot of a man who for two years had been deprived of that greatest of earthly comforts — an English bed. Laurence had bounded on French spring-mattresses; had sweltered beneath German feather-lined coverlets; had cramped himself up in berths; had swung restlessly in hammocks; had stifled behind mosquito-curtains; and had passed many nights with his cloak for his bed, and his saddle-bags for his pillow, with the half-naked forms of dirty Arabs dimly visible in the flickering firelight, and the howls of distant jackals ringing in his ears. He

had undergone every description of bed-discomfort; and it is not to be wondered at that he lingered long in that glorious nest of cleanliness and rest provided for him at his hotel. As he lay there at his ease, thoroughly awake, but utterly averse to getting up, he began to think over all that had happened during the previous evening; and first he thought what a charming-looking woman Lady Mitford was.

The Scotch gentleman who had remarked that Colonel Alsager was "a deevil among the sax" had some foundation for his observation; for it was a fact that, from the days when Laurence left Eton and was gazetted to the Coldstreams, until he sold his commission and left England in disgust, his name had always been coupled by the gossips with that of some lady well known either in or out of society. He was a mere boy, slim and whiskerless, when the intense admiration which he excited in the breast of Middle. Valentine, combined with what she afterwards termed the "coldly insular" manner in which he treated her, gave that charming danseuse such

a *migraine* as rendered her unable to appear in public for a week, and very nearly caused Mr. Lumley to be favoured with a row equal to the celebrated Tamburini riot in the days of M. Laporte. He was not more than twenty when "Punter" Blair told him that his goings-on with Lady Mary Blair, the Punter's sister-in-law, were the talk of the town; and that if her husband, the Admiral, was blind, he, the Punter, wasn't, as he'd let Alsager pretty soon know. Laurence replied that the Punter had better mind his own business,—which was "legging" young boys at *écarté* and blind-hookey,—and leave his brother's wife alone; upon which Punter Blair sent O'Dwyer of the 18th with a message; and there must inevitably have been a meeting, had not Blair's Colonel got a hint of it, and caused it to be intimated to Mr. Blair that unless this matter with Mr. Alsager were arranged, he, the colonel, should have to take such notice of "other matters" affecting Mr. Blair as would compel that gentleman to send in his papers.

So in a score of cases differing very slightly

from each other. It was the old story which was lyrically rendered by Dr. Watts, of Satan being always ready to provide congenial occupation for gentlemen with nothing to do. There is not, I believe, very much martial ardour in the Household Brigade just now. That born of the Crimean war has died out and faded away, and the officers have taken to drive off *ennui*, some by becoming district-visitors, and others by enjoying the honest beer and improving conversation of the firemen in Watling Street. But even now there is infinitely more enthusiasm, more belief in the profession as a profession, more study of strategy as a thing which a military man should know something of, than there was before the Crimean expedition. The metropolitan inhabitants had little care for their gallant defenders in those days. Their acquaintance with them was limited to the knowledge that large red men were perpetually discovered in the kitchens, and on discovery were presented as relatives of the servants; or that serious, and in some cases fatal, brawls occurred in the streets, when the pleasant

fellows laid about them with their belts, or ran a-muck amongst a crowd with their bayonets. An occasional review took place in the Park, or a field-day at Woolwich; but no cordial relations existed between the majority of the Londoners and the household troops until the news came of the battle of the Alma. Then the public learned that the Guards officers were to be heard of in other places than ballrooms and divorce-courts, and that guardsmen could fight with as much untiring energy as they had already displayed in feeding on householders and flirting with cooks.

Not much worse, certainly not much better, than his compeers was Laurence Alsager in those days, always having "something on" in the way of feminine worship, until the great "something" happened which, according to Jock M'Laren and one or two others, had occasioned the great change in his life, and caused his prolonged absence from England. But in all his experience he had only known women of a certain kind; women of the world, ready to give and take;

women, in his relations with whom there had been no spice of romance save that spurious romance of the French-novel school, so attractive at first, so hollow, and bad, and disgusting, when proceeded with. It is not too much to say that, varied as his "affaires" had been, he had not known one quiet, pure-minded, virtuous woman; and that during his long foreign sojourn he had thought over this, and often wondered whether he should ever have a wife of his own, or, failing this, whether he should ever have a female friend whom at the same time he could love and respect.

Yes, that was the sort of woman, he thought to himself as he lay calmly reflecting. What a good face she had! so quiet and calm and self-possessed. Naturally self-possessed; not that firm disgusting imperturbability which your hardened London coquette has, he thought; like that horrible Mrs. M'Alister, who puts her double-eyeglass up to her eyes and coolly surveys women and men alike, as though they were slaves in the Constantinople market, and she the buyer for the

Sultan. There certainly was a wonderful charm about Lady Mitford, and, good heavens! think of a man having such a wife as that, and going off to sup with Bligh and Winton, who were simply two empty-headed *roué* jackasses, and Pontifex, who—Well, it was very lucky that people didn't think alike. Yes, that man Mitford was a lout, a great overgrown-schoolboy sort of fellow, who might be led into any sort of scrapes by—By Jove! that's what Dollamore had said, with that horribly-cynical grin. And Lady Mitford would have to run the gauntlet of society, as did most women whose husbands went to the bad.

Laurence Alsager was a very different man from the Laurence Alsager of two years ago. He wanted something to fill up his leisure time, and he thought he saw his way to it. Dollamore never spoke at random. From his quietly succulent manner Alsager knew that his lordship meant mischief, probably in his own person, at all events hinted plainly enough that—Ah! he would stop all that. He would pit himself against Dollamore,

or any of them, and it would be at least a novelty to have a virtuous, instead of a vicious, end in view. Mitford might be a fool, his wife weak and silly; but there should be no disastrous consequences. Dollamore's prophecy should be unfulfilled, and he, Laurence Alsager, should be the active agent in the matter.

Simultaneously with this determination he decided upon deferring his visit to his father, and settling himself in London for a time. He would be on the spot; he would cultivate the acquaintance which Mitford so readily held out to him; he would have the garrison well under surveillance in order carefully to observe the enemy's approach; and— The shower-bath cut short his reflections at this point.

He dressed and breakfasted; despatched his servant to see if his old rooms in Jermyn Street were vacant; lit a cigar, and strolled out. He had at first determined to brave public opinion in every shape and form, to retain his beard, to wear the curious light coats and elaborately puckered trousers which a Vienna Schneider

had a year before turned out as prime specimens of the sartorial art. But even to this determination the night's reflection brought a change; and he found himself turning into Poole's, and suffering himself to be suited to the very latest cut and colour. Then he must get a hack or two from Saunderson in Piccadilly; and as the nearest way from Poole's in Saville Row to Saunderson's in Piccadilly is, as every one knows, down Grosvenor Place and through Eaton Place, that was the way that Laurence Alsager walked.

Eaton Place is not a very cheerful thoroughfare at the best of times. Even in the season, when all the houses are full of the domesticity of parliament-members, furnished at the hebdomad at twenty guineas, there is a stuccoy and leading-to-not-much-thoroughfare depression about it; but on a January morn, as Laurence saw it, it was specially dull. Sir Charles Mitford had mentioned no number, so that Laurence took a critical survey of each house as he passed, considering whether the lady in whom he had suddenly

taken so paternal an interest resided there. He had, however, passed a very few doors when at the other end of the street he saw a low pony-carriage with a pair of iron-gray ponies standing at a door; and just as he noted them, a slight figure, which he recognised in an instant, came down the steps and took up its position in the phaeton. It was Lady Mitford, dressed in velvet edged with sable, with a very little black-velvet bonnet just covering the back of her head (it was before the days of hats), and pretty dog-skin driving-gloves. She cast a timid glance at the ponies before she got in (she had always had horsey tastes down at Fishbourne, though without much opportunity of gratifying them), and was so occupied in gathering up the reins and speaking to the groom at the ponies' heads, as scarcely to notice Laurence's bow. Then with a view to retrieve her rudeness, she put out her hand, and said cordially :

“How do you do, Colonel Alsager? I beg your pardon; I was taking such interest in the ponies that I never saw you coming up. They're

a new toy, a present from my husband ; and that must be my excuse."

"There is no excuse needed, Lady Mitford. The ponies are charming. Are you going to drive them?"

"Oh yes ; why not ? Saunderson's people say they're perfectly quiet ; and, indeed, we are going to take them out to the farm at Acton, just to show Mr. Grieve the stud-groom how nicely they look in our new phaeton."

"You're sure of your own powers ? They look a little fresh."

"Oh, I have not the least fear. Besides, my husband will be with me ; I'm only waiting for him to come down, and he drives splendidly, you know."

"I've a recollection of his prowess as a tandem-whip at Oxford, when the Dean once sent to him with a request that he'd 'take the leader off.' Well, *au plaisir*, Lady Mitford. I wish you and the two ponies all possible enjoyment." And he took off his hat and went on his way. Oh, he was perfectly right ; she was charming. He

wasn't sure whether she hadn't looked better even this morning than last night, so fresh and wholesome. And her manner, without the slightest suspicion of an *arrière pensée*, free, frank, and ingenuous; how nicely she spoke about her husband and his driving! There could be no mistake about a woman like that. No warping or twisting could torture her conduct into any thing assailable. He'd been slightly Quixotic when he thought to give himself work by watching over and defending her; he—"Good-morning, Mr. Spurrier. Recollect me? Mr. Saunderson in?" Revolving all these things in his mind, he had walked so quickly that he found himself in Piccadilly, and in Mr. Saunderson's yard, before he knew where he was.

"Delighted to see you back, Colonel. Thought I caught a glimpse of you at the theatre last night, but was doubtful, because of your beard. No; Mr. Saunderson's gone up to the farm to meet a lady on business; but any thing I can do I shall be delighted." Mr. Spurrier was Mr. Saunderson's partner, a very handsome, fresh-coloured,

cheery man, who had been in a light-cavalry regiment, and coming into money on the death of a relation, had turned his bequest and his horsey talents to account. There were few such judges of horseflesh; no better rider across country than he. "Thought you'd be giving us a call, Colonel, unless you'd imported a few Arabs; and gave you credit for better judgment than that. Your Arab's a weedy beast, and utterly unfit for hacking."

"No, Spurrier, I didn't carry my orientalism to that extent. I might have brought back a clever camel or two, or a dromedary, 'well suited for an elderly or nervous rider,' as they say in the advertisements; but I didn't. I suppose you can suit me with a hack."

Mr. Spurrier duly laughed at the first part of this speech, and replied in the affirmative, of course, to the second. "You haven't lost much flesh in the East, Colonel," said he, running him over with his eye,—“I should say you pull off twelve stone still.” Then Mr. Spurrier, as was his wont, made a great show of throwing

himself into a fit of abstraction, during the occurrence of which he was supposed by customers to be mentally going through the resources of his establishment; and roused himself by calling the head-groom, and bidding him tell them to bring out the Baby.

The Baby was a bright bay with black points, small clean head, short well-cut ears, and a bright eye, arching neck, and, as she showed when trotted up the yard with the groom at her head, splendid action. When she was pulled up and stood in the usual position after the "show" had been given, Laurence stepped up, eyed her critically all over, and passed his hand down her legs. Spurrier laughed.

"All right there, Colonel. Fine as silk; not a sign of a puff, I'll guarantee, and strong as steel. Perfect animal, I call her, for a park-hack." A horse was never a "horse," but always an "animal" with Mr. Spurrier, as with the rest of his fraternity. "Will you get on her, Colonel? Just give her a turn in the Park.—Here, take this mare in, and put a saddle and bridle on her for Colonel Alsager."

It was a bright sunny winter's day, and the few people who were in town were taking their constitutional in the Row. As Alsager rode round by the Achilles statue he heard ringing laughter and saw fluttering habits, which, associated with the place in his mind with his last London experiences, brought up some apparently unpleasant recollection as he touched the mare with his heel, and she, after two or three capricious bounds, settled down into that long swinging gallop which is such perfect luxury. He brought her back as quietly as she would come, though a little excited and restless at the unaccustomed exercise, and growled a good deal to himself as he rode. "Just the same; a little more sun, and some leaves on the trees then, and a few more people about; that's all. Gad! I can see her now, sitting square, as she always used, and as easy on that chestnut brute that pulled so infernally, as though she were in an arm-chair. Ah! enough has happened since I was last in this place." And then he rode the Baby into the yard, asked Mr. Spurrier her price,

agreed to take her, told Spurrier he wanted a groom and a groom's horse, and was sauntering away, when Mr. Spurrier said, "You'll want something to carry you to hounds, Colonel?"

"I think not; at all events not this season."

"Sorry for that, as I've got something up at the farm that would suit you exactly."

"No, thank you;—where did you say?"

"At our farm at Acton. You've been there, you know."

The farm at Acton!—that was where Lady Mitford said she was going to drive. She must be the lady whom Mr. Saunderson had gone to meet. Spurrier saw the irresolution in his customer's face and acted promptly.

"Let me take you out there; we sha'n't be twenty minutes going; and this is really something you ought not to miss. He's so good, that I give you my word I wouldn't sell him to any but a workman. You will? All right!—Put the horses to."

Within three minutes Laurence Alsager was seated by Mr. Spurrier's side in a mail-phae-

ton, spinning along to Mr. Saunderson's farm and his own fate.

There were few whips in London who drove so well or so fast as Mr. Spurrier, and there were none who had better horses, as may be imagined; but Laurence did not find the pace a whit too fast. He had asked Mr. Spurrier on the road, and ascertained from him that it was Lady Mitford who was expected. "And a charming lady too, sir; so gentle and kind with every one. Speaks to the men here as polite as possible, and they're not over-used to that; for, you see, in business one's obliged to speak sharp, or you'd never get attended to. Don't think she knows much of our line, though she's dreadfully anxious to learn all about it; for Sir Charles is partial to horseflesh, and is a good judge of an animal. He's been a good customer to us, and will be better, I expect, though he hasn't hunted this season, being just married, you see. That's the regular thing, I find. 'You'll give up hunting, dear. I should be so terrified when you were out.' 'Very

well, dear; any thing for you;' and away go the animals to Tattersall's; and within six months my gentleman will come to me and say, 'Got any thing that will carry me next season, Spurrier?' and at it he goes again as hard as ever."

"I saw the ponies at the door this morning," said Laurence for the sake of something to say; "they're a handsome pair."

"Ye-es," replied Mr. Spurrier; "I don't know very much of them; they're Mr. Saunderson's buying. I drove 'em once, and thought they wanted making; but Sir Charles is a good whip, and he'll do that.—Ga-a-te!" And at this prolonged shout the lodge-gates flew open, and they drove into the stable-yard.

Mr. Saunderson was there, but no Lady Mitford. Mr. Saunderson had his watch in his hand, and even the look of gratification which he threw into his face when he greeted Colonel Alsager on his return was very fleeting. There was scarcely a man in London whose time was more valuable, and he shook his head as he said, "I'll give her five minutes more, and then I'm

off.—What are you going to show the Colonel, Spurrier?”

“I told them to bring out Launcelot first.”

Mr. Saunderson shook his head: “Too bad, Spurrier, too bad! I told you how the Duke fancied that animal, and how I’d given his Grace the refusal of him.”

“Well, we can’t keep our business at a standstill for dukes, or any one else. Besides, we’ve known the Colonel much longer than the Duke.”

“That’s true,” said Mr. Saunderson with a courteous bow to Laurence; “well, if Colonel Alsager fancies the animal, I must get out of it with his Grace in the best way I can.”

It was a curious thing, but no one ever bought a horse of Mr. Saunderson that had not been immensely admired by, and generally promised to, some anonymous member of the peerage.

“Easy with him, Martin, easy! Bring him over here.—So, Launcelot; so, boy.”

Launcelot was a big chestnut horse, over sixteen hands high, high crest, long lean head, enormous quarters, powerful legs, and large

broad feet. He looked every inch a weight-carrying hunter, and a scar or two here and there about him by no means detracted from his beauty in the eyes of the knowing ones. Martin was the rough rider to the establishment, bullet-headed, high-cheek-boned, sunken-eyed, with limbs of steel, and pluck which would have made him ram a horse at the Victoria Tower if he had had instructions. As Mr. Spurrier patted the horse's neck, Martin leant over and whispered, "I've told one o' them to come out on Black Jack, sir. This is a 'oss that wants a lead, this 'oss does. Give 'im a lead, and he'll face any think."

"All right," said Spurrier, as another man and horse came out; "here they are. Go down to the gate in the tan-gallop, will you? put up the hurdles first.—Now, Colonel, this way, please: the grass is rather wet, even now."

They walked across a large meadow, along one side of which from end to end a tan-gallop had been made. Midway across this some hurdles with furze on the top had been stuck up between

two gate-posts, and at these the boy on Black Jack rode his horse. A steady-goer, Black Jack; up to his work, and knowing exactly what was expected of him; comes easily up to the hurdles, rises, and is over like a bird. Not so Launcelot, who frets at starting; but moves under Martin's knees and Martin's spurs, gives two or three bounds, throws up his head, and is off like a flash of lightning. Martin steadies him a bit as they approach the leap, and Jack's rider brings his horse round, meets Martin half-way, and at it they go together. Jack jumps again, exactly in his old easy way, but Launcelot tears away with a snort and a rush, and jumps, as Mr. Spurrier says, "as though he would jump into the next county."

"Now the gate!" says Mr. Spurrier; and the hurdles were removed, and a massive five-barred gate put up between the posts.

"You go first, boy," said Spurrier; and Black Jack's rider, who was but a boy, looked very white in the gills, and very tight in the mouth, and galloped off. But Jack was not meant for a country which grew such gates as that, and when he

reached it, turned short round, palpably refusing. Knowing he should get slanged by his master, the boy was bringing him up again, when he heard a warning shout, and looking round, cleared out of the way to let Launcelot pass. Launcelot's mettle was up; he wanted no lead this time. Martin, with his face impassibly set, brought his whip down heavily on him as he lifted him; but Launcelot did not need the blow: he sprang three or four inches clear of the leap in splendid style.

“By George, that's a fine creature!” said Laurence, who had all a sportsman's admiration for the feat. “I think I must have him, Spurrier, if his figure's not very awful. But I should first like to take him over that gate myself.”

“All right, Colonel; I thought he'd take your fancy.—Get down, Martin, and let down those stirrups a couple of holes for the Colonel, will you?—And you, boy, tumble off there. I'll see whether that old vagabond will refuse with me.—Ah, you're a sly old scoundrel, Jack; but I think we'll clear the gate, old boy!”

Alsager was already in the saddle, and Spur-

rier was tightening the girths, when the former heard a long low rumbling sound gradually growing more distinct.

“What’s that?” he asked his companion.

“What?” asked Spurrier, with his head still under the saddle-flap; but when he stood upright and listened, he said, “That’s a runaway! I know the sound too well; and—and a pair! By the Lord, the grays!”

They were standing close by the hedge which separated the meadow from the road. It was a high quickset-hedge, with thick post-and-rail fence running through it, and it grew on the top of a high bank with a six-foot drop into the road. Standing in his stirrups and craning over the hedge, Laurence saw a sight which made his blood run cold. Just having breasted the railway-bridge, and tearing down the incline at their maddest pace, came the grays, and in the phaeton, which swung frightfully from side to side, sat Lady Mitford—alone! A dust-stained form gathering itself up out of the road in the distance looked like a groom; but Sir Charles was not

to be seen. Lady Mitford still held the reins, and appeared to be endeavouring to regain command over the ponies; but her efforts were evidently utterly useless.

Mr. Spurrier, who had mounted, comprehended the whole scene in a second, and roared out, "Run, Martin! run, you boy! get out into the lane, and stop these devils! Hoi!" this to the grooms in the distance, to whom he telegraphed with his whip. "They don't understand, the brutes! and she'll be killed. Here, Colonel, to the right-about! Five hundred yards off there's a gate, and we can get through and head them. What are you at? you're never going at the hedge. By G—, you'll break your neck, man!"

All too late to have any effect were his last words; before they were uttered, Laurence had turned Sir Launcelot's head, taken a short sharp circling gallop to get him into pace, and then crammed him straight at the hedge. Spurrier says that to his dying day he shall never forget that jump; and he often talks about it now when he is giving a gentleman a glass of sherry, after a "show"

just previous to the hunting-season. Pale as death, with his hat over his brows, and his hands down on the horse's withers, sat Laurence; and just as Sir Launcelot rose at the leap, he dealt him a cut with the heavy whip which he had snatched out of Spurrier's hand. The gallant animal rose splendidly, cleared posts and rails, crashed through the quickset, and came thundering into the lane below. Neither rider nor horse were prepared for the deep drop; the latter on grounding bungled awkwardly on to his knees; but Laurence had him up in an instant, and left him blown and panting, when at the moment the grays came in sight. Lady Mitford was still in the carriage, but had apparently fainted, for she lay back motionless, while the reins were dragging in the road.

Laurence thought there was yet a chance of stopping the ponies, upon whom the pace was evidently beginning to tell severely, but, as they neared a gate leading to a portion of the outbuildings, where on their first purchase by Mr. Saunderson they had been stabled, the grays, recollecting the landmarks, wheeled suddenly to the left and

made for the gate. The carriage ran up an embankment and instantly overturned; one of the ponies fell and commenced lashing out in all directions; the other, pulled across the pole, was plunging and struggling in wild attempts to free itself. The men who had been signalled to by Spurrier were by this time issuing from the lodges, and making towards the spot; but long before they reached it, a tall man with a flowing black beard had sprung in among the *débris*, regardless of hoofs flying in all directions, and had dragged therefrom the senseless form of Lady Mitford.

“What is the matter? Where am I?”

“You’re at my farm, Lady Mitford,” said Mr. Saunderson, advancing with that old-fashioned courtesy which he always assumed when dealing with ladies; “and there’s nothing the matter, thank God! though you’ve had a bad accident with the ponies, which seem to have run away; and I may say you owe your life to Colonel Alsager, who rescued you at the peril of his own.”

She looked round with a faint smile at Laurence, who was standing at the foot of the sofa on which she lay, and was about to speak, when Laurence lifted his hand deprecatingly :

“Not a word, please, Lady Mitford; not a single word. What I did was simply nothing, and our friend Mr. Saunderson exaggerates horribly. Yes, one word—what of Sir Charles?”

“He has not heard of it? He must not be told.”

“No, of course not. What we want to know is whether he started for the drive with you.”

“Oh no; he could not come,—he was prevented, thank God! And the groom?”

“Oh, he’s all right; a little shaken, that’s all.”

Laurence did not say that the groom had been *not* a little shaken by Mr. Spurrier, who caught the wretched lad by the collar, and holding his whip over him told him mildly that he had a great mind to “cut his life out” for his cowardice in throwing himself out of the trap, and leaving his mistress to her fate.

Then it was arranged that Mr. Saunderson should take Lady Mitford home, and explain all that had happened to Sir Charles. She took Laurence's arm to the carriage, and when she was seated, gave him her hand, saying frankly and earnestly, "I shall never forget that, under Providence, I owe my life to you, Colonel Alsager."

As they drove back to town together, Mr. Spurrier said to his companion: "I shall have to book Sir Launcelot to you, Colonel. I've looked at his knees, and though they're all right, only the slightest skin-wound, still—"

"Don't say another word, Spurrier," interrupted Laurence; "I wouldn't let any one else have him, after to-day's work, for all the money in the world."

Laurence spoke innocently enough; but he noticed that during the rest of the drive back to town, Mr. Spurrier was eyeing him with great curiosity.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT HAD DETAINED SIR CHARLES.

THE arrangement for the trial of the ponies had been one of some standing between Sir Charles and his wife, and one to which he fully intended to adhere. It is true that on waking after the supper with Messrs. Bligh, Winton, Pontifex, and their companions, he did not feel quite so fresh as he might have wished, and would very much have liked a couple of hours' additional sleep; yet so soon as he remembered the appointment, he determined that Georgie should not be disappointed; and by not having the "chill" taken off his shower-bath as usual, he was soon braced up to his ordinary good condition. Nevertheless, with all his good intentions, he was nearly an hour later than usual; and Georgie had gone up to dress for the drive when Sir Charles

descended to the breakfast-room to discuss the second relay of broiled bone and devilled kidney which had been served up to tempt his sluggish appetite. He was making a not very successful attempt to eat, and between each mouthful was reading in the newspaper Mr. Rose's laudatory notice of Mr. Spofforth's play, when his servant, entering, told him that a "person" wanted to speak to him. There is no sharper appreciator of worldly position than your well-trained London servant, and Banks was a treasure.

"What is it, Banks?" asked Sir Charles, looking up.

"A person wishing to see you, Sir Charles," replied Banks.

"A person! Is it a man or a woman?"

"The party," said Banks, varying his word, but not altering the generic appellation,— "the party is a man, sir."

"Do I know him?"

"I should say certainly not, Sir Charles," replied Banks in a tone which intimated that if

his master did know the stranger, he ought to be ashamed of himself.

“ Did he give no name ? ”

“ I ast him for his name, Sir Charles, and he only says, ‘ Tell your master,’ he says, ‘ that a gentleman,’ he says, ‘ wants to see him.’ ”

“ Oh, tell him that he must call some other time and send in his business. I can’t see him now ; I’m just going out for a drive with Lady Mitford. Tell him to call again.”

“ There was a time, and not very long ago either,” said Sir Charles, taking up the paper as Banks retired, “ that if I’d been told that a man who wouldn’t give his name wanted to speak to me, I should have slipped out the back-way and run for my life. But, thank God, that’s all over now.—Well, Banks, what now ? ”

“ The party is very arbitrary, Sir Charles ; he won’t take ‘ no’ for an answer ; and when I told him you must know his business, he bust out larfin’ and told me to say he was an old mess-mate of yours, and had sailed with you on board the Albatross.”

A red spot burned on Sir Charles Mitford's cheek as he laid the newspaper aside and said, "Show this person into the library, and deny me to every one while he remains. Let your mistress be told I am prevented by business from driving with her to-day. Look sharp!"

Mr. Banks was not accustomed to be told to "look sharp!" and during his three-months' experience of his master he had never heard him speak in so petulant a tone. "I'd no idea he'd been a seafarin' gent," he said downstairs, "or I'd a never undertook the place. The tempers of those ship-captains is awful."

When Banks had left the room Sir Charles walked to the sideboard, and leant heavily against it while he poured out and drank a liqueur-glass of brandy.

"The Albatross!" he muttered with white lips; "which of them can it be? I thought I had heard the last of that cursed name. Banks said a man; it's not the worst of them, then. That's lucky."

He went into the library and seated himself

in an arm-chair facing the door. He had scarcely done so when Banks gloomily ushered in the stranger.

He was a middle-sized dark man, dressed in what seemed to be a seedy caricature of the then prevailing fashion. His coat had once been a bright-claret colour, but was now dull, thread-bare, and frayed round the edges of the breast-pocket, out of which peeped the end of a flashy silk handkerchief. He had no shirt-collar apparent; but wore round his neck a dirty blue-satin scarf with two pins, one large and one small, fastened together by a little chain. His trousers were of a staring green shawl-pattern, cut so as to hide nearly all the boot and tightly strapped down, as was the fashion of those days; and the little of his boots visible was broken and shabby. Sir Charles looked at him hard and steadily, then gave a sigh of relief. He had never seen the man before. He pointed to a chair, into which his visitor dropped with an easy swagger; then crossed his legs, and looking at Sir Charles said familiarly, "And how are *you*?"

“You have the advantage of me,” said Sir Charles.

“I think I have,” said the man, grinning; “and what’s more, I mean to keep it too. Lord, what a precious dance you have led me, to be sure!”

“Look here, sir,” said Mitford: “be good enough to tell me your business, and go. I’m engaged.”

“Go! Oh, you’re on the high jeff, are you? And engaged too! Going to drive your missis out in that pretty little trap I saw at the door? Well, I’m sorry to stop you; but you must.”

“Must!”

“Yes, must. ’Tain’t a nice word; but it’s the one I want. Must; and I’ll tell you why. You recollect Tony Butler?”

Sir Charles Mitford’s colour, which had returned when he saw that his visitor was a stranger to him, and which had even increased under the insolence of the man’s manner, fled at the mention of this name. His face and lips were quite white as he said, “I do indeed.”

“Yes, I knew you would. Well, he’s dead, Tony is.”

“Thank God!” said Sir Charles; “he was a horrible villain.”

“Yes,” said the man pleasantly; “I think I’m with you in both those remarks. It’s a good job he’s dead; and he *was* a bad ’un, was Tony, though he was my brother.”

“Your brother!”

“Ah! that’s just it. We never met before, because I was in America when you and Tony were so thick together. You see I’m not such a swell as Tony was; and they—him and father, I mean—were glad to get me out of the country for fear I should spoil any of their little games. When I came back, you had given Tony a licking, so far as I could make out, though he’d never tell exactly, and your friendship was all bust up, and he was dreadfully mad with you. And that’s how we never came to meet before.”

“And why have we met now, pray?” said Sir Charles. “What is your business with me?”

“I’m coming to that in good time. Tony’s

last words to me were, 'If you want to do a good thing for yourself, Dick,' he says, 'find out a fellow named Charles Mitford. He's safe to turn up trumps some day,' says Tony, 'he's so uncommonly sharp; and whenever you get to speak to him, before you say who you are, tell him you sailed in the Albatross.' Lord bless you! I knew the lot of 'em—Crockett, and Dunks, and Lizzie Ponsford; they said you and she used to be very sweet on each other, and—"

The door opened suddenly, and Lady Mitford hurried into the room; but seeing a stranger, she drew back. Sir Charles went to the door.

"What do you want, Georgie?" said he sharply.

"I had no idea you had any one here, Charles, or I wouldn't have disturbèd you. Oh, Charley, send that horrid man away, and come and drive me out."

She looked so pretty and spoke so winningly that he patted her cheek with his hand, and said in a much softer voice, "I can't come now, child. This man is here on special business, and I must

go through it with him. So good-bye, pet, and enjoy yourself."

She made a little *moue* of entreaty, and put her hands before his face in a comic appeal; but he shook his head, kissed her cheek, and shut the door.

"Pretty creechur, that!" said his companion; "looks as well in her bonnet as out of it; and there's few of 'em does, I think."

"When did you ever see Lady Mitford before, sir?" asked Sir Charles haughtily.

"Ah! that's just it," replied Mr. Butler with a sniggering laugh. "I told you you'd led me a precious dance to find you, and so you had. Tony told me that you had regularly come to grief since you parted with him, and I had a regular hunt after you in all sorts of lodging-houses and places. There are lots of my pals on the look-out for you now."

"Upon my soul, you're devilish kind to take all this trouble about me, Mr. — Butler. What your motive was, I can't imagine."

"You'll know all in good time; I'm coming

to that; and not 'Butler,' please: Mr. Effingham is my name just now; I'll tell you why, by and by. Well, I couldn't get hold of you any how, and I thought you'd gone dead or something, when last night, as I was standing waiting to come out of the Parthenium, I heard the linkmen outside hollaring 'Lady Mitford's carriage!' like mad. The name strikes on my ears, and I thought I'd wait and see her ladyship. Presently down came the lady we've just seen, leaning on the arm of a cove in a big black beard like a foreigner. 'No go,' says I; 'that's not my man;' and I says to a flunkey who was standing next to me, 'He's a rum 'un to look at, is her husband.' 'That's not her husband,' he says; 'this is Sir Charles coming now.' The name Charles and the figure being like struck me at once; so I took the flunkey into the public next door, and we had a glass, and he told me all about the old gent and his kids being drowned, and your coming in for the title. 'That's my man,' says I to myself; and I found out where you lived, and came straight on here this morning."

“And now that your prying and sneaking has been successful and you have found me, what do you want?”

“Ah! I thought you’d lose your temper; Tony always said you was hotheaded. What do I want! Well, to be very short and come to the point at once—money.”

“I guessed as much.”

“Yes, there’s no denying it; I’m regularly stumped. I suppose you were surprised now to hear I wasn’t flush, after seeing me so well got-up? But it’s a deal of it dummy. These pins now,—Lowther Arcade! No ticker at the end of this guard; nothing but a key—look!” And he twitched a key out of his waistcoat-pocket. “My boots too are infernally leaky; and my hat has become quite limp from being perpetually damped and ironed. Yes, I want money badly.”

“Look here, Mr.—”

“Effingham.”

“Mr. Effingham, you have taken, as you yourself admit, an immense deal of trouble to hunt me up, and having found me you ask me

for money, on the ground of your being the brother of an infernal scoundrel whom I had once the ill-luck to be associated with—don't interrupt me, please. It wasn't Tony Butler's fault that I didn't die on a dunghill, or that I am not now—”

“In Norfolk Island,” said Mr. Effingham, getting in his words this time.

Sir Charles glared fiercely at him for an instant, and then continued: “Now I expected I should have to encounter this sort of thing from the people who pillaged me when I was poor, and would make that an excuse for further extortion, and I determined not to accede to any application. But as you're the first who has applied, and as you've neither bullied nor whined, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you, on condition I never see or hear of you again, this five-pound note.”

Mr. Effingham laughed, a real hearty laugh, as he shook his head, and said: “Won't do; nothing like enough.”

Sir Charles lost his temper, and said: “Stop this infernal tomfoolery, sir! Not enough! Why,

d—n it, one would think you had a claim upon me!”

“And suppose I have, Sir Charles Mitford, what then?” said Mr. Effingham, leaning forward in his chair and confronting his companion.

“What then? Why—pooh, stuff! this is a poor attempt at extortion. You don’t think to get any money out of me by threatening to tell of my connection with the Albatross crew? You don’t think I should mind the people to whom you could tell it knowing it, do you?”

“I don’t know; perhaps not; and yet I think I shall be able before I’ve done to prove to you I’ve a claim on you.”

“What is it?”

“All tiled here, eh? Nobody within earshot? That sleek cove in black that wouldn’t let me see you, not listening at the door, is he?”

“There is no one to hear,” said Sir Charles, who was getting more and more uncomfortable at all this mystery.

“All right, then. Sorry to rake up disagreeables; but I must. You recollect making a slight

mistake about your Christian name once, fancying it was Percy instead of Charles; writing it as Percy across a stamped bit of paper good for two hundred quid, and putting Redmoor as your address after it?"

"Well, what if I do?" His lips were so parched he could hardly frame the words.

"It would be awkward to have any thing of that sort brought up just now, wouldn't it?"

Sir Charles hesitated for an instant, then gave a great sigh of relief as he said: "You infernal scoundrel! you think to frighten me with that, do you? To make that the ground for your extortion? Why, you miserable wretch, I myself burnt that—that—document in Moss's office!"

"How you do run on, Sir Charles! I just mentioned something about a little bill, and you're down upon me in a moment. I guessed that was destroyed; at all events I knew it was all safe; and Sir Percy's dead, so it don't much matter. But, Lord! with your memory you must surely recollect *another* little dockyment,—quite a little

one, only five-and-twenty pound,—where you mistook both your names that time, and accepted it as Walter Burgess :—recollect?”

The pallor had spread over Mitford's face again, and his lips quivered as he said: “That was destroyed—destroyed by Tony Butler long since—before the other one was done.”

“Yes, yes, I know this was the first,—a little one just to get your hand in. But it ain't destroyed. It's all right, bless you! I can see it now with a big black 'FORGED' stamped across it by the bank-people.”

“Where is it?”

“Oh, it's in very safe keeping with a friend of mine who scarcely knows its value. Because, though he knows it's a forgery, he don't know who done it. Now, you see, through my brother Tony I do know who done it; and I do know that Walter Burgess is alive, and is a large hop-factor down Maidstone way, and owing you a grudge for that thrashing you gave him in the billiard-rooms at Canterbury, which he's never forgotten, would come forward and prosecute at once.”

“You—you might prove the forgery ; but how could you connect me with it?”

“Not bad, that. But I’m ready for you. People at the bank will prove you had the money ; and taken in connection with the other little business, which is well known, and which there are lots of people to prove, a jury would convict at once.”

Sir Charles Mitford shuddered, and buried his face in his hands. Then, looking up, said : “How much do you want for that bill?”

“Well, you see, that’s scarcely the question. It’s in the hands of a man who don’t know its value, and if he did he’d open his mouth pretty wide, and stick it on pretty stiff, I can tell you. So we can let him bide a bit. Meantime *I* know about it, and, as Tony told me, I intend to make it serve me. Now you want to get rid of me, and don’t want to see me for some little time? I thought so. I’m not an extravagant cove ; give me fifty pounds.”

“Until that bill is destroyed, you will wring money from me when you choose.”

“If you refused me money and I cut up rough, the bill should be produced, and you’d be in quod and Queer Street in a jiffy! Better do as I say—give me the fifty, and you sha’n’t see me for a blue moon!”

Whether Sir Charles was stimulated by the period named or not, it is certain he sat down at his desk, and producing his cheque-book began to write. Mr. Effingham looked over his shoulder.

“Make it payable to some number—295, or any thing—not a name, please. And you needn’t cross it. Lord! you didn’t take much trouble to disguise your fist when you put Walter Bur—, beg pardon! quite forgot what I was saying. Thank you, Sir Charles. I’ll keep my word all right, you shall see. I’m not an idle beggar; I’m always at something; so that I sha’n’t depend entirely on this bit of gray paper; but it’ll ease my springs and grease my wheels a bit. Good-day to you, Sir Charles. Never mind ringing for that solemn cove to let me out; I ain’t proud. Good-day.”

Mr. Effingham gave a very elaborate bow, and

departed. As the door shut upon him, Sir Charles Mitford pulled his chair to the fire, and fell into a deep reverie, out of which he did not rouse himself until his wife's return.

CHAPTER VIII.

KISMET.

IT was not because Laurence Alsager had been for a twelvemonth in the East that he believed in the Mohammedan doctrine of fatalism. That had been an unacknowledged part of his creed long before the disappointment which sent him flying from the ordinary routine of life had fallen upon him. Even under that disappointment he allowed the power of the wondrous "to be," and, bowing to its influence, accepted his exile with far greater equanimity than many others would have done under similar circumstances. He had suffered his plans — undecided when he left England — to be entirely guided by chance; had followed suggestions for his route made by hotel-landlords or conveyance-advertisements; had dallied over one part of his journey and hurried

over another, simply in obedience to the promptings of the feeling of the moment; and had finally decided on returning to be present at the first night of Spofforth's play at the Parthenium in the haphazard spirit which had prompted all his movements.

His belief in Kismet had been enormously strengthened since his return. It was "arranged" that Lady Mitford should be present on the occasion in question; that he should be presented to her after trying to avoid her and her party; that Lord Dollamore should be at the Club, and should give utterance to those sentiments which had aroused so deep a disgust in Laurence's breast. As to the events of the next day, — the visit to Saunderson's, the drive to Acton, the trial of Sir Launcelot and its consequences,—therein was the most marvellous illustration of the doctrine of Kismet that ever he had yet seen.

He thought of all this as he woke the next morning; and clearly saw in an instant that it would be running directly contrary to his fate

to go down to see his father just then. He felt impelled to remain in London, and in London he should stay. He felt—Ah, how beautiful she looked as he dragged her out from amidst the *débris* of the carriage and the plunging hoofs of the ponies, though her face was as pale as marble, and the light of her eyes was quenched beneath the drooping lids! It was Kismet that had kept that handsome oaf, her husband, at home, and prevented his interfering with the little romance. Not that Sir Charles Mitford was by any means an oaf; he was a man of less worldly experience, of less polish, of social standing, higher in rank, but decidedly lower in reputation, than Laurence; and so Laurence regarded him as an oaf, and, since the pony-carriage adventure, began to find a little hatred mingling with the contempt with which he had previously regarded the latest addition to the baronetage.

This last feeling may have been in accordance with the rules of Kismet, but it certainly was not in accordance with the practice of the world. There were many men in his old regiment, and

generally throughout the brigade of Guards,—men who, as professedly *coureurs des dames*, held that, for the correct carrying out of a flirtation with a married woman, an intimacy of a certain kind with the lady's husband was almost indispensable. And, though not good at argument, had they been put to it, they could have indorsed their *dicta* with plenty of examples. They could have told of picnics improvised solely for the pleasure of madame's society, when monsieur was of the greatest assistance, the life and soul of the party, opening champagne, finding salt, cracking jokes; the only man who could induce the gathered leaves to burst into a fire for kettle-boiling purposes; the first to volunteer to sit in the rumble with the captain's valet on the journey homewards. They could have told of visits paid in opera-boxes at a time when it was certain that monsieur was just smacking his lips over something peculiar in claret at a dinner at the Junior, specially given by the captain's brother-officer, the major. They could have told of capital fishing and excellent shooting obtained by them for monsieur with a

tendency in that direction; stream or lake, moor or stubble always happening to be at a very remote distance from monsieur's family abode. There were even some of them who for the time being would thoroughly interest themselves in monsieur and his affairs, would bear with his children, would listen to his stories, would, on rare occasions, be seen about with him, and would, when very hard hit, invite him to the Windsor mess, or give him a seat in the Derby drag.

But that sort of thing did not do for Laurence Alsager. Such a line of conduct might have suited him once; but it would have been years ago, and with a very different style of wife and husband from Lady Mitford and Sir Charles. He could not think of her with any feeling that was not deeply tinged with respect, and that in itself was sufficient to remove this new passion from the category of his past loves. His new passion? Yes; he could not deny it to himself; he felt a singular interest in this woman; there was an attraction in her such as he had never experienced in any one else. He smiled as he

recollected how, in the bygone times, he would have called her "cold" and "statuesque;" how he would have despised her slight figure, and thought her manners rustic, if not *gauche*. How he had sneered at love, as distinguished from intrigue, when he was a mere boy; and now, at thirty, after thirteen years of hard life of all kinds—traces of which might be seen in a few lines round the eyes and on the forehead—he was lapsing into the calf-love which boys at school feel for the master's daughter. He laughed; but he knew it was all true, nevertheless.

He must see her that day, of course; at least, he must call—mere politeness required so much after the events of the previous day. Meanwhile he would go down to the club, to read the papers, and get some luncheon, and kill time.

There were several men in the morning-room at the club, some of whom he had seen on the first night of his arrival, others whom he met now for the first time since his return. Lord Dollamore was there, his legs up on a sofa, reading a newspaper, with a very peculiar grin upon his face.

“Here he is!” he said, looking towards the door as Laurence entered the room; “here’s the man himself! Why don’t we have a band to play ‘See the conquering’?”

“So we ought, by Jove!” said Cis Hetherington. “Hallo, Laurence, old boy! no sling or any thing?”

“Looks well after it, don’t he?” said another; while several old gentlemen looked up from their newspapers, partly in admiration, partly in awe.

“Fire away, gentlemen!” said Laurence. “Be as funny as you please; it’s all lost upon me. What the deuce do you mean by ‘sling,’ Cis?”

“He’s been so long away, that he’s forgotten the English language,” sneered Dollamore.

“Oh no, he hasn’t, Lord Dollamore, as he’d quickly show you, were there the least occasion,” said Laurence. “But,” added he more quietly, “what is the joke? I give you my honour I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“A lovely lady and a gallant knight! Bring forth the steed! The accident; the leap; the

rescue! Ha, ha! she's saved! Slow music and curtain! Stunnin' draymer it would make. I can introduce you to several enterprising managers if you'd like to tour in the provinces," said jolly Mr. Wisconsin, who spent nearly all his time and two-thirds of his income amongst theatrical people.

"Why, how on earth did that story get here?" asked Laurence, on whom the truth was beginning slowly to dawn.

"Here! why, it's all over town—all over England by this time. It's in the papers."

"In the papers! Ah, you're selling me."

"Take it, and read for yourself," said Wisconsin. "Open the paper, and knock it back with your hand—that's the legitimate business."

"Doosid well Alsager pretends to be astonished, don't he, considering he put that in the paper himself?"

"No, he didn't do it himself; he got Cis Hetherington to do it."

"Cis couldn't have spelt it," said Lord Dolla-

more. "There are some devilish long words, over which Cis would have come a cropper."

While his friends were thus pleasantly discussing him, Laurence was reading a remarkably full-flavoured and eloquent description of a "Serious Accident and Gallant Conduct," as the paragraph was headed, in which Lady Mitford's name and his own figured amongst the longest adjectives and most difficult adverbs. How the wildly-excited steeds dashed away at a terrific pace; how the grasp of the lovely charioteer gradually relaxed, and how her control over the fiery animals was finally lost; how the attendant groom did every thing that strength and science in equine matters could suggest, until he was flung, stunned and breathless, into the mire; and how, finally, the gallant son of Mars, mounted on a matchless barb, came bounding over the hedge, and extricated the prostrate and palpitating form of the lovely member of the aristocracy from utter demolition at the hoofs of the infuriated animals. All this was to be found in the newspaper paragraph which Laurence was reading.

This paragraph originated in a short story told by the groom in the bar of a public-house close to the mews, whither he had gone to solace himself with beer after the indignities he had suffered at Mr. Spurrier's hands, and where he had the satisfaction of repeating it to a broken-down seedy man, who "stood" a pint, and who took short notes of the groom's conversation in a very greasy pocket-book.

Laurence was horribly disgusted, as could be seen by the expression of his face, and the nervous manner in which he kept twisting the ends of his moustache. The amusement of the other men was rather increased than diminished at his annoyance, and was at its height when Cis Hetherington asked :

"What the doose is a 'matchless barb,' Alsager? I've seen all sorts of hacks in my time, but never met with one of that kind."

"What do you mean by hacks?" said another. "A barb is a fellow that writes plays, ain't it? They call Shakespeare the immortal barb."

"Ah, but they call him a Swan, and all kinds

of things. There's no making out what a thing is by what they call him."

Meanwhile Lord Dollamore had risen from the couch, and strolled over to the rug in front of the fire, where Laurence was standing.

"You've begun your duties quickly, my dear Alsager. There are few fellows who get the chance of falling into their position so rapidly."

"What position?"

"That of champion of beauty in distress."

"Position! I declare I don't follow you, my lord."

"My dear Alsager, surely the East has not had the effect of rendering obtuse one of the keenest of men. Don't you recollect our talk the other night?"

"Perfectly."

"When I then expressed my opinion that Lady Mitford would have to go through the usual amount of danger, of course I meant moral, not actual, peril. However, the actual seems to have come first."

"Ye-es. A smashed carriage and plunging

horses may, I suppose, be looked upon as actual danger."

"Ah, she'll have worse things than those to contend against and encounter. You were lucky enough to save her from a fractured skull; I suppose we shall see you doing the 'sweet-little-cherub' business, and watching over her generally, henceforth."

"You seem to forget that Lady Mitford has a husband, Lord Dollamore."

"Not for an instant, my good fellow. But so has—well, Mrs. Hammond—and so have lots of women; but then the husbands are generally engaged in taking care of somebody else. Well, well, to think that *you* should become a sheep-dog,—you whose whole early life was spent in worrying the lambs!"

"Whose whole *early* life—that's it! *Quand le diable est vieux il se fait ermite!*"

"Ye-es; but if I were the husband of a very pretty young wife, I doubt whether I should particularly like you being her father confessor."

“You need not alarm yourself, my lord; I’m not going in for the position.”

“*Qui a bu, boira*, my dear Alsager. I distrust sudden conversions, and have no great reliance on sheep-dogs whose fangs are scarcely cleared of wool.”

Laurence might have replied somewhat sharply to this, had he heard it; but he was off on his way to the coffee-room to his luncheon, which had been announced by the waiter; that finished, he started off for Eaton Place.

He had sufficient matter for reflection on his walk. This preposterous story which had crept into the papers would of course form a splendid subject of gossip for all those who had nothing better to do than to talk about such things. There was already a certain amount of interest attaching to the Mitfords from the fact of Sir Charles having inherited the baronetcy in a singular and unlooked-for manner, and from his wife’s having had the audacity—although sprung from an unknown family—to have a beautiful face and agreeable manners. For this presumption Alsager felt that

a terrible retribution was in store for her, poor child, when the regular season came on, and the dowagers brought up their saleable daughters to the market. Then the notion that a common country parson's daughter had been beforehand with them, and had carried off an unexceptionable *parti* before he had been regularly advertised as ready for stalking, would drive these old ladies to a pitch of rankling and venomous despair which would find vent in such taunts, hints, insinuations, and open lies as are only learnt in the great finishing-school of London society. Lady Mitford's beauty, style, and position were in themselves quite sufficient to render her an object of dislike to nine-tenths of the other women in society, who would eagerly search for something against her, however slight it might be. Had not that unfortunate accident and its result given them this "something"? Laurence had been too long amongst the ranks of *nous autres* not to recognise the meaning of the grins and winks which went round the assembled circle of clubmen when the newspaper paragraph was read,

not fully to understand every sneering inflexion of Lord Dollamore's voice. Thus was the sin of his youth visited on him in later life, with a vengeance. Hundreds of other men might have done exactly as he had—an act simply of manly impulse—without any thing having been said about it save praise; but with him, that infernal reputation for gallantry, of which he was once so proud, and which he now so intensely loathed, would set shoulders shrugging and eyebrows lifting at once. The old story! Laurence Alsager again! What else could be expected? For an instant, as all these thoughts came rushing through his mind, he stopped short, wondering whether it would not be better to retrace his steps to the hotel, and to fulfil his first-formed resolution of paying a hurried visit to his father, and then quitting England at once. Yes; it would be much better; it would save any chance of scandal or talk, and—And yet he did not like to miss the chance of being thanked by those sweet eyes and that soft voice. He had thought so much of how she would look, not as he had

hitherto seen her in full evening-dress, or in her bonnet, but in that simple morning-costume in which all charming women look most charming. Besides, it was his duty as a gentleman to call, after the events of the previous day, and see whether she was suffering from any result of her accident, or from any fright which might have arisen from it. Yes; he would first call and see her, and then go away;—at least, he was not quite certain whether he would go away or not. He was not sure that it would not be far more advisable that he should stay in England, and be on the spot to put a stop at once to any preposterous talk that might arise; and especially to watch over her in case of any attempts which might be made by men of the Dollamore class. Lord Dollamore was a most dangerous fellow, a man who would stick at nothing to gain his ends; and what those ends were, it was, to a man of Alsager's experience, by no means difficult to imagine. Besides, he was merely the type of a class; and if all he had stated about Sir Charles Mitford were really true,

if the baronet were a man of dissolute tastes and habits, and utterly unable to withstand the temptation which his wealth and position would at once open up to him, it was absolutely necessary that some one should be there to prevent his wife's falling a prey to the numerous libertines who would immediately attempt to take advantage of her husband's *escapades*, and ingratiate themselves into her favour.

When the wish is father not merely to the thought, but to the subsequent argument, it is by no means difficult to beat down and utterly vanquish the subtlest and most logical self-reasoning. Three minutes' reflection and balancing served to show Laurence how wrong he had been in thinking of absenting himself at such a critical time; and though for a moment the "still small voice" ventured to insinuate a doubt of the soundness of his argument, yet he felt that—leaving future events to take such course as they might ultimately fall into—it was at least his bounden duty to go then and inquire after Lady Mitford; and onwards he proceeded.

Lady Mitford was at home. In a charming drawing-room,—every thing in it bearing evidence of exquisite womanly taste,—he found her, dressed, as he expected, in the most lovely of morning-costumes—a high violet-silk dress with a simple linen collar and cuffs; her hair perfectly plain, showing the small classic head in all its beauty: she looked to him the loveliest creature he had ever seen. She rose at the announcement of his name, and came forward with a pleasant smile on her face and with outstretched hand. Laurence noticed—not, perhaps, without a little disappointment—that there was not the smallest sign of a blush on her cheek, not the slightest tremor in her voice.

“I’m so glad to see you, Colonel Alsager,” she said frankly; “I’m sure I’ve thought a hundred times since we parted of my *gaucherie* in not thanking you sufficiently for the real service you did me yesterday.”

“Pray don’t say another word about it, Lady Mitford; it was a simple duty which merits no further mention.”

“Indeed, I don’t think so. It was a very gallant act in itself, and one which, so far as I am concerned, renders me your debtor for life.”

“The acknowledgment cancels the obligation. I only trust you are none the worse for the mishap.”

“Thank you, not in the least. I was a little shaken and unstrung by the fall, and rather stupid yesterday evening, I’m inclined to think; but the night’s rest has set me perfectly right. You know I’m country-bred, and therefore what my husband would call in good condition; and I’ve had so many tumbles off ponies, and been upset so many times in our Devonshire lanes by papa,—who, I’m afraid, is not a very good whip, bless him!—that I’m not entirely unused to such accidents.”

“That accounts for your pluck, then. I never saw any one go through what—now it’s over—I may say was a very ugly runaway with more perfect calmness.”

“Ah, that’s what I wanted to ask you. I lost my head just as we started down that de-

scent, and knew nothing afterwards. I do so hope I didn't scream."

"You may make yourself thoroughly easy on that score. You were perfectly mute."

"I *am* delighted at that!" she laughed out with childish glee. "Charley asked me the very first thing whether I hadn't 'yelled out,' as he called it; and I told him I thought not. It was very weak of me to faint, and I fought against it as long as I could; but I felt it must come, and it did."

"You would have been more than woman if you could have deprived yourself of that treat," said Laurence smiling. "How is Sir Charles?"

"Well, not very well. I fancy that this accident has upset him very much, poor fellow. I think he blames himself for having allowed me to go without him; and yet he couldn't come, as he had some horrid man here on business. But he's been very dull and preoccupied ever since. He'll be annoyed at having missed you, as he went out specially to call and thank you for

your great kindness. We did not know your address, and he went down to Mr. Bertram's office to get it from him."

"Oh, Bertram is a very old friend of mine. It was from him I first heard of you."

"Yes, he knew Charley at Oxford. He is a kind gentle creature, I should think; a man that it must be impossible for any one to dislike. And really his silence is sometimes any thing but disagreeable—at a theatre, you know, and that sort of thing."

"Silence! I can assure you, Lady Mitford, that when you are the theme of his discourse, he is a perfect Demosthenes. 'The common mouth, so gross to express delight, in praise of her grew oratory,' as Tennyson says. He is one of your stanchest admirers."

Lady Mitford looked uncomfortable and a little vexed, as she said, "Indeed!" then smiled again as she added, "You also have the effect of loosening the dumb man's tongue. In Mr. Bertram you have the loudest of trumpeters. In fact, ever since he heard from you of your

intended return, we have grown almost tired of hearing of your good qualities.”

“I hope you won’t banish me, as the Athenians did Aristides for the same reason. Old George is one of the best fellows living. Do you know many people now in town, Lady Mitford?”

“No, indeed. Our Devonshire neighbours have not come up yet, and will not, I suppose, until Parliament meets. And then Sir Charles having been—been away for some time, and I not having lived in society, we scarcely know any body yet; at least, I mean—I—some of Charley’s old friends have found us out. Mr. Bertram, Captain Bligh and Major Winton, and Lord Dollamore.”

“Ah, Lord Dollamore! yes, to be sure. And what, if it’s a fair question, do you think of Lord Dollamore?”

Georgie laughed. “It certainly is *not* a fair question, and if Charley were here, I should not be allowed to answer it; but I don’t mind telling you, Colonel Alsager, that I have a great horror of Lord Dollamore.”

Laurence smiled grimly, but with the greatest inward satisfaction, as he said, "Poor Dollamore! And will you tell me why you have a horror of him, Lady Mitford?"

"I can scarcely say. I'm sure I ought not to have it, as he is always studiously polite to me; but there is something strange to me in his manner and in his conversation, something such as I have never met with before, and which, though I don't comprehend it, rouses my antipathy and makes me shudder. I never know what to say to him either, and he always seems to be watching every word that you speak. Now you're laughing at me, Colonel Alsager; and I can't explain what I mean."

Her cheeks flushed as she said this, and the heightened colour added to her beauty. Laurence found himself staring mutely at her, in sheer wonderment at her loveliness; then roused himself and said, "Indeed, I was not laughing, and I can fully comprehend you. Now tell me; the ponies are none the worse for their race?"

“Not much. One has a cut fetlock, and both have had a good deal of hair rubbed off; but nothing to signify. I was round in the stables the first thing this morning, and came in great glee to tell Charley how little harm had been done to them. But he’s dreadfully angry about it, and declares they shall both be sent away. And all because I was too weak to hold them!”

“Well, I should like to be on your side; but I don’t think your husband is very far wrong in the present instance. They are plainly unfit for any lady’s driving, unless she is what no lady would like to be,—undeniably horsey, and masculine, so far at least as her wrists are concerned.”

“Ah, and your horse! that splendid fellow that took the tremendous leap,—Mr. Saunderson told me this; I knew nothing of it at the time,—what of him?”

“Oh, he’s wonderfully well. He landed splendidly; but just heeled over for a second and touched his knees,—the merest graze, and that

all through my clumsiness ; but I was too much excited at the time to attend to him. But it's a mere hair-scratch, and he'll be as right as ever in a week or two."

"Well, the whole thing seems to me like a dream ; but a dream from which I should never have woke, had it not been for your promptitude and presence of mind. Those I have said I shall never forget ; and—Now here comes Charley to indorse my gratitude."

As she spoke, a heavy tread was heard on the staircase ; the door opened, and Sir Charles Mitford entered, full of life and radiant with happiness. Any preoccupation or anxiety, for which his wife had prepared her visitor, seemed entirely to have disappeared. He advanced with open hand, and in his cheeriest manner said, "My dear Alsager, delighted to see you ! A thousand thanks, my dear fellow,—much more than I can express,—for your conduct yesterday ! I've heard all about it, and know how much I owe to you. Tremendous pluck ! Oh yes, I know ; you needn't pretend to be modest about

it. I've been round to Saunderson's, and seen Spurrier ; and he tells me that it was just one of the pluckiest things ever done. You staked the horse, or did something damaging to him, didn't you ? so of course I told Spurrier to enter him in my account."

"You're very good ; but you're a little late, Sir Charles. I bought him on the spot, and would not part with him for treble his price."

Laurence could not resist stealing a glance at Lady Mitford as he said this. Her eyes were downcast ; but a bright-red spot burned on her cheeks, and her brows were contracted.

"Well, you've the right of refusal ; and you know a good fencer when you see one, Alsager, I know. I only wished to have the horse as a memento of the day."

Laurence muttered something inaudible.

"I went down to call upon you, to thank you for all your kindness to my wife," continued Sir Charles ; "and then finding I didn't know your address, I looked up Bertram at the Foreign Office ; and after being handed about

from one room to another, I found him, and he took me to your hotel. Don't seem to have much to do, those fellows at the Foreign Office. Bertram had only just arrived ; but he left immediately when I told him I wanted him to come with me."

"I'm very sorry I was not at home."

"Well, so was I partly, and partly not. Of course I should have wished to have given you my thanks for your kindness the very first thing ; but then of course you understand that I meant all that. When a man rescues another man's wife from tremendous danger, of course he understands that her husband is tremendously thankful to him, unless it's in a book or play, or that kind of thing, where husbands wish their wives were dead. And then again, if you had been in, I should have missed being introduced to such a charming woman."

"To such a what, Charley?" asked Lady Mitford.

"Oh, don't you be frightened, dear ; it's all square and above-board. She asked me if she

might call upon you ; and she'll be here to-morrow or the next day ; so mind you're at home to receive her."

" Her ? who ?"

" Oh yes, I forgot. I'll tell you all about it. When we found Alsager was not at his hotel, Bertram evidently didn't want to go back to his office, so he proposed a stretch round the Park. I said I was quite agreeable ; and off we started ; right round the Oxford-Street side, back by the Powder-magazine, and so into the Drive. When we got there, there was not a single trap to be seen—not one, I give you my honour ; but as we stumped along, and Bertram—most delightful companion!—never opened his mouth, I saw a pair of bright chestnuts in black harness come whirling a low pony-phaeton along ; and as it passed, Bertram took off his hat to the lady driving. She pulled up, and we went to the trap, and Bertram introduced me. She was a very pretty little woman, and had a sable cloak ;—you must have a sable cloak, Georgie ; I'll find out where she got hers ;—and there was another

woman whom I could not see—kept her veil down, and looked like companion, or something of that sort—sitting by her. She certainly drove splendidly. I couldn't help thinking if she'd had those grays of yours yesterday, Georgie, she'd have mastered them."

"I sincerely wish she had," said Lady Mitford with a little petulance; "I can't say I entirely relished the adventure, even though it called forth Colonel Alsager's assistance." ["That's a thorough woman's blow," thought Laurence, listening.] "But you haven't told us the name of this charming Amazon."

"I don't know any thing about Amazon or not," said Sir Charles, who began to be a little nettled; "the lady's name is Hammond—Mrs. Hammond, wife of a man who was something in the government service. Ah, you know her, Alsager. Yes, by the way, I recollect her asking Bertram whether you had come back."

The mention of Mrs. Hammond's name seemed to throw rather a damp upon the conversation. Lady Mitford did not appear in the least to share

her husband's rhapsodies,—as how should she, being ignorant of their object?—and Colonel Alsager's expression was moody and his voice silent. But when he rose to take his leave the expressions of gratitude were renewed both by husband and wife, each in their peculiar manner—Sir Charles was boisterously hearty; Lady Mitford quietly impressive.

“We shall see a good deal of you now, I hope, Alsager; you won't stand on any ridiculous ceremony, or any thing of that sort, but come in and out just as you like. There's no one who will be more welcome here, and no one who's earned the right so much, for the matter of that. It rests with you now entirely how far you pursue the acquaintance.”

“Good-bye, Colonel Alsager,” said Lady Mitford with a sweet smile; “and I'll promise, when you do come to see us, not to give you so much trouble as I did yesterday.”

Laurence was equally averse to commonplaces and to committing himself, so he bowed and smiled, and went away.

“Kismet,” he muttered to himself as he strode down the street,—“Kismet in full force. Laura Hammond back in England, and an acquaintance formed between her and Mitford already. Taken with her, he seemed too. She’s just the woman that would fetch such a man as he. Well, let Kismet do its worst; I shall stand by and see the play.”

CHAPTER IX.

MR. EFFINGHAM'S PROCEEDINGS.

WHEN Mr. Effingham found himself with fifty pounds in his pocket outside the bank where he had changed Sir Charles Mitford's cheque, he could scarcely contain his exultation. His dealings with bankers had been few, and not always satisfactory. He had had cheques in his possession which he had been too bashful to present in his own proper person, but had employed a little boy to take to the counter while he waited round the corner of an adjacent street; he had had cheques which he had presented himself, but the proceeds of which, when asked "how he would have," he had always taken in gold, as a more convenient and untraceable medium. On the present occasion, however, he had walked boldly in; had rapped on the counter, to the horror and dismay

of the old gentlemen behind it; had handed over his cheque with a swagger, and taken half the change in clean crisp notes of the Bank of England. All right now; all straight and above-board. Old Mr. Coverdale, solicitor to the banking-firm, passing through the public office on his way to the private parlour, peered at Mr. Effingham under his bushy gray eyebrows curiously; but Mr. Effingham did not mind that. The porter sitting on a very hard stool just inside the swing-doors rubbed his nose and winked significantly at the policeman in plain clothes stationed just outside the swing-doors, whose duty was to help rich old-lady customers in and out of their carriages. Both porter and policeman stared very hard at Mr. Effingham, and Mr. Effingham returned the stare with all the eye-power at his command. What did he care? They might call him back and inspect the cheque if they liked, and then they would see what they would get for attempting to molest a gentleman.

In his character of gentleman, Mr. Effingham felt that his costume was scarcely so correct as it

might have been ; in fact, that in the mere quality of being weather-tight it was lamentably deficient. So his first proceeding was to visit an outfitter's, and then and there to procure what he termed "a rig-out" of the peculiar kind most in accordance with his resonant taste. The trousers were of such an enormous-check pattern that, as the Jew tailor humorously remarked, "it would take two men to show it;" the hat shone like a bad looking-glass ; the coat, though somewhat baggy in the back, was glossy, and had a cotton-velvet collar ; and the Lowther-Arcade jewelry glistened in the midst of a bird's-eye scarf of portentous height and stiffness.

His outer man satisfied, Mr. Effingham thought it time to attend to his inner ; and accordingly turned into a City chop-house of renown, where his elegant appearance made an immense impression on the young stockbroking gents and the junior clerks from the banks and Mincing-Lane houses, who commented, in no measured tones, and with a great deal of biting sarcasm, on the various portions of his costume.

Either not hearing or not heeding this banter, Mr. Effingham ordered a point steak and potatoes and a pint of stout ; all of which he devoured with an appearance of intense relish. An old gentleman sitting in the same box opposite to him had a steaming glass of fragrant punch, the aroma of which ascended gratefully into Mr. Effingham's nostrils and almost impelled him to order a similar jorum ; but prudence stepped in, and he paid his bill and departed. Not that he did not intend to indulge in that after-dinner grog, which was customary with him whenever he had the money to pay for it himself, or the luck to get any body to pay for it for him ; but he wished to combine business with pleasure ; and so started off for another tavern nearer the West End, where he knew the combination could be accomplished.

The chosen place of Mr. Effingham's resort, though properly designated the Brown Bear, was known to all its frequenters as "Johnson's," from its proprietor's name. It was a commonplace public-house enough, in a street leading out of

the Strand, and sufficiently near the large theatres and newspaper-offices for its parlour to be the resort of actors and press-men of an inferior grade. The more eminent in both professions "used" the Rougepot in Salad Yard, a famous old place that had been a house of call for actors, wits, and men-of-letters for generations, and where strangers seldom penetrated. The *habitués* of "Johnson's" were mostly young men just affiliated to their professions, and not particularly careful as to their associates; so that you frequently found in Johnson's parlour a sprinkling of questionable characters, men who hung on to the selvage of theatrical life, betting-book keepers, and card-sharpers. The regular frequenters did not actually favour these men, but they tacitly allowed their presence, and occasionally would join in and listen to their conversation, from which they gleaned new notions of life.

When Mr. Effingham pushed open the parlour-door and looked into the room, on the afternoon in which he had conducted his banking-operation with such signal success, the place was almost

deserted. The large corner-boxes by the fire, where the professional gentlemen usually congregated, were empty; but at a table in the far end of the room were seated two men, at sight of whom Mr. Effingham's face brightened. They were flashily-dressed, raffish-looking men, smoking rank cigars, and busily engaged in comparing betting-books.

“Hollo!” said one of them, looking up at the noise made by the opening of the door; “I'm blessed if here ain't D'Ossay Butler! And the regular D'Ossay cut too—sprucer than ever; might pass for the Count himself, blowed if you mightn't, D'Ossay!”

“What's happened to the little cove now, I wonder?” said the other, a thin man with a shaved face and a tall hat, which he had great difficulty in keeping on his head; “what's happened to him now? Has he stood-in on a steeple-chase, or robbed a bank? Look at his togs! What a slap-up swell he is!”

Mr. Effingham received these compliments with great equanimity, sat down by his friends,

and seeing their glasses empty, said: "Any lap? I'm game to stand any thing you like to put a name to;" rang the bell for the waiter, and ordered three nines of brandy hot.

"What an out-and-out little cove it is!" repeated the first man with great admiration. "Well, tell us, D'Ossay, all about it. How did it come off? What was it?"

"Come off!" said Mr. Effingham; "what do you mean? Nothing's come off that I know of; at least nothing particular. You know that gentleman in the City that I told you of, Griffiths?" he asked, with a private wink at the man in the high hat.

"I know him fast enough," replied that worthy with a nod, partly confirmatory, partly to keep the tall hat on his head. "Did he pull through in that matter?"

"Pull through!" said Mr. Effingham; "he won a lot of money; and as I'd given him the office, and put him on a good thing, he said he'd behave handsome; and he didn't do amiss, considerin'."

“What did he part with?” asked the first man.

“A tenner.”

The first man's eyes glistened, and he instantly made up his mind to borrow half-a-sovereign if he could get it—five shillings if he could not—of Effingham before they parted.

“Ah, and so you went and rigged yourself out in these swell togs, D'Ossay, did you, at once? You always had the notions of a gentleman, and the sperrit of a gentleman, that's more. I wish you'd put me on to something of that kind; but, there, it wants the way to carry it out; and I haven't got that, I know well enough.”

While this speech was in progress, Mr. Effingham had caught the eye of the tall man, and winking towards their friend, pointed over his shoulder at the door. The tall man repeated the nod that did the double duty, and after looking up at the clock, said, “You'd better be off, Jim; you'll be just in time to catch that party down at Peter Crawley's, if you look sharp.”

Jim, thus admonished, finished his grog and

took his leave, asking Mr. Effingham if he could have "half a word" with him outside; which half-word resulted in the extraction of a half-sovereign, as Jim had predetermined.

"Now for it," said Griffiths, as soon as Effingham returned, "I'm death to hear all that's happened, only that fool wouldn't go. Wanted something, of course, outside, eh? Ah, thought so. What did you square him for?"

"Half-a-couter."

"You appear to be making the shiners spin, Master D'Ossay; that swell at the West End must have bled pretty handsome. Tell us all about it. What did he stand?"

"Well, I won't try and gammon you. He stood fifty."

"What, on the mere gab? without your showing him the stiff, and only telling him you knew about it? Fifty quid! that's a cow that'll give milk for many a long year, Master D'Ossay, if only properly handled. Come, hand us over what you promised for putting you on. By George!" he added, as Effingham drew a bundle

of notes from his pocket, "how nice and crisp they sound!"

"There's your tenner," said Effingham, selecting a note from the roll and handing it to his friend; "I'm always as good as my word. That squares us up so far."

"No fakement about it, is there?" said Mr. Griffiths, first holding the note up to the light, then spreading it flat on the table, and going carefully over it, back and front. "I've been dropped in the hole too often by flimsies not to be precious careful about 'em. No. Matthew Marshall—all them coily things in the water-mark and that; all right. I think you ought to make it a little more; I do indeed."

"Make it a little more! I like that. Why, what the devil could you have done without me? It's true you first heard of the coppered stiff from Tony; but you didn't trouble a bit about it. Who set all the boys to hunt up this cove? who found him at last? and who walked in as bold as brass this morning, and checked him out of fifty quid without a stitch of evidence? Why, you

daredn't have gone to his crib, to start with ; and if you had, he'd never have seen you ; the flunkey would have kicked you out for an area-sneak or a gonoph. Why, even *I* had some bother to get in ; so what would have become of you ?”

Mr. Effingham was only a little man, but he swelled so with self-importance as, in the eyes of his companion, to look very big indeed. He bounced and swaggered and spoke so loud as to quite quell the unfortunate Griffiths, who began, with due submission, to apologise for his own shortcomings and deprecate his friend's wrath.

“ Well, I know all that fast enough, and I only just hinted ; but you're down upon a cove so. However, it's a fine thing for us both, ain't it ? He'll be as good as a bank to us for years to come, will this swell.”

“ I'm not so sure of that,” said Mr. Effingham thoughtfully.

“ How do you mean, not so sure of that ?” asked Griffiths.

“ Well, you see, he's a long way off being a fool ; he's not half so soft as Tony led us to

believe. He downed on to me once or twice as quick as lightning; and I think it was only my way of putting it, and his being taken sudden on the hop, that made him shell out."

"You think that after he's thought the matter over, he'll fancy he's been a flat?"

"Well, not exactly that. You see the higher a fellow climbs, the worse it is when he falls. This Mitford wouldn't have cared a cuss for this thing in the old days; he'd have stood the racket of it easy. But it's different now; he's a big swell; it's 'Sir Charles' and 'my Lady,' pony-phe-aton and 'orses and grooms, nice wife, and all that. He'd come an awful smasher if any thing was to trip him up just now, and he knows it. That's our hold upon him."

"And that's what will make it easy for us to squeeze him."

"No, not entirely. That very fear of being blown upon, of having to bolt or stand a trial—my eye! how blue he turned when I mentioned Norfolk Island to him!—that very fear will make him most anxious to get rid of every chance of

coming to grief, to prevent any one being able to lay hold of him."

"There's only one way for him to do that, and that's to burn the bill."

"Yes; but he must get it first, and that's what he'll want, you may take your oath. The next time I go to him, it'll be, 'Where is it? let me see it! name your outside price, and let me have it!' That's what he'll say."

"Likely enough; and what'll you say then?"

"Cussed if I know!" said Mr. Effingham ruefully. "If I say I haven't got it, he'll stop the supplies until I bring it; if I say I can't get it, not another mag from him."

"You must fall back on the bounce, like you did to-day, and tell him you know of there bein' such a thing, and that you won't keep your mouth shut unless you're paid for it."

"Oh, you're a leery cove, Griffiths, you are!" said Mr. Effingham with great disgust. "You never heard of attemptin' to extort money, did you? You don't think he'd ring the bell and send for a bobby, do you?"

“No, I don’t. He wouldn’t have the pluck.”

“Oh, but I do though; and as you see it’s me that the bobby would lay hold of, I’m rather partickler about it. Besides, it’s not such a pleasant thing finding yourself at Bow Street; for even if one could square this Mitford and get him not to prosecute, there’d be heaps of bobbies there to prove previous convictions. Clark of the G’s getting up: ‘Known as D’Ossay Butler, your worship. I had him for passing base coin in ’43;’ and all that kind of game. No, no, Griffiths! bounce won’t do, my boy; won’t do a bit.”

“What will do, then? what shall we try? Shall we shy up the sponge and think ourselves lucky to have got this fifty, and never try him any more? That seems hard lines with such a chance.”

“It would be; and we won’t do it. No; there’s only one thing to be done—we must go the whole hog; we must have the bill.”

“Ah! and we must ’ave lamb and green-

peas in Febooary; and a patent shoofle cab to ride in, so as not to tire ourselves; and pockets full of 'alf-bulls to toss with! We *must*; but you see we 'aven't, D'Ossay, my boy! And as for gettin' that bill, we're done at the very first step: we don't know who's got it."

"You fool! if we did know who'd got it, we'd have it, fast enough. There ain't many of 'em that could keep it away from me!"

"You are a plucked 'un!" said Griffiths, regarding him with admiration; "I can't help sayin' so, though you do lose your temper and call your friends ugly names. No; I don't think there is many as could keep you off it, if you knew where it was. But how we're ever to find that, I can't tell."

"Let's go over the business all again," said Effingham. "It was Tony that always had a fancy for that bit of stiff. He stuck to it when it wasn't worth more than the stamp and the paper it was wrote on; but he always thought something would come of this Mitford, and then it would be a first-class screw to put on him, and

CHAPTER X.

SOUVENT FEMME VARIE.

No; Laurence Alsager was certainly not best pleased at all he heard about Mrs. Hammond. Mrs. Hammond, a pretty little woman, coming to call upon you—great Heaven! Is that the way that that oaf Mitford talked of her who two years ago was Laura Molyneux, the mere mention of whose name caused Alsager to thrill to his finger-tips; and whose low *trainante* voice, long steady passionate glances, and rippling shoulders could have led him to destruction? Drove her chestnuts well, eh? Yes, by Jove! there were few women could touch her either in riding or driving, and—Laurence laughed grimly to himself as he strode along. What was it Dollamore had said about Mitford's readiness to go to the bad, to shake a loose leg, to enjoy those ad-

vantages of health, wealth, and position which had before been denied to him? Why, here was the very woman to ensnare him, to act as his evil genius, the very counter-charm of Lady Mitford's quietude and girlish grace; a woman of the world, bright, sharp, active, and alert; with plenty of *savoir faire*, an enormous talent for flirtation, and not the smallest scrap of heart to throw into the balance against any of her whims. No, by George, not a scrap. Laurence be-thought him of a certain December morning in Kensington Gardens, and the whole scene rose vividly before him. The trees all stripped and bare, and stridently clanging in the bitter wind; the thick dun clouds hanging over the horizon; the greatcoated park-keeper stamping vigorously over the gravel, and banging himself with his arms with vague notions of generating caloric; and he himself pacing up and down by Laura Molyneux's side. The arguments he had used, the very phrases which he had employed to induce her to reconsider the determination then announced to him, were ringing in his ears. He

recollected how he had humbled himself, how he had implored her to reconsider her decision, how even he had begged for time, and how he had been met with one stern pitiless refusal; and how he had gone away to weep bitter tears of mortified pride, and rejected love, and savage disappointment; and how she had stepped into the neat little brougham waiting for her at the gate, and been whirled off to accept the hand and heart of Mr. Percy Hammond, a retired civil-servant from India, a widower with one daughter, who had shaken the pagoda-tree to some purpose, and returned to England with a colossal fortune.

That was the then finale of the intimacy between Laura Molyneux and Laurence Alsager. In the course of the next week he started on his tour; in the course of the next month St. George's, Hanover Square, was the scene of her marriage,—a bishop welding the chains. And now two years had elapsed, and he was back in London, pretty much the same as if he had never left it; and she was asking whether he had returned, and he had begun to feel a great interest

in Lady Mitford; and Sir Charles Mitford evidently thought Mrs. Hammond a most delightful person, and every thing was *à tort et à travers*, as it has been, is, and always shall be, in the great world of London.

Nil admirari is the motto on which your precocious youth piques himself; but which is adopted in all due seriousness and sobriety by the calm student of life. Who wonders at any thing?—at the peevishness of your wife; at the ingratitude of the child for whom you have pinched and slaved; at the treachery of the one familiar friend; at the enormous legacy left you by the uncle whose last words to you were that you were a jackanapes, and, so far as he was concerned, should be a beggar? The man of the world is surprised at nothing; he is not *l'homme blasé* of the caricaturist; he is not an atom astonished at finding nothing in any thing; on the contrary, he finds plenty of novelty in every variety of life; but nothing which may happen to him excites the smallest wonderment on his part. So that when Colonel Alsager

walked into the Guards Club to dinner, and received from the hall-porter a small note, with an address in a handwriting perfectly familiar to him, he was not in the least surprised.

But he looked at the note, and twisted it between his fingers, and even put it into his waistcoat-pocket, as he walked up to the table whereon stood the framed *menu*, and left it there while he walked round and spoke to two or three men who were already at dinner; and it was not until he was comfortably seated at his little table, and had eaten a few mouthfuls of soup, that he took it from his pocket, leisurely opened it, and bringing the candle within range, began to read it. Even then he paused for a moment, recollecting with what heart-throbs of anxiety and sensations of acute delight he used to read the previous epistles from the same source; then, as with an effort, he set himself to its perusal.

It was very short.

“I shall be at home to-morrow at three,

and hope to see you. I hear all sorts of rumours, which you alone can solve. *Chi non sa niente non dubita di niente!* It will be for you to read the riddle. L.”

He smiled outright as, after reading it and restoring it to his pocket, he said to himself, “The old story; she always made a mystery when there was no other excitement; but I’ll go, for all that.”

During his wildest times, Laurence had always been a punctual man; and even the irregular manner of his life during the two last years had not altered him in this respect. On the next afternoon, as the clock was striking three, he presented himself at Mrs. Hammond’s door, and was immediately admitted and shown into her presence.

He was apparently a little too punctual; for a tall young woman, looking half lady, half nursery-governess, was standing by her and listening respectfully. Mrs. Hammond rose at the announcement of the Colonel’s name, and

coming forward, pressed his cold motionless hand with a tight grasp.

“Pray excuse me for one instant, Colonel Alsager,” said she; “the doctors have said that we were all wrong in leaving Florence; that it’s impossible Mr. Hammond can remain in London during this awful weather, and that he must go at once to Torquay. So I’m sending Miss Gillespie down there to get a house for us, and arrange matters before we go down. Now, Ruth,” turning to her, “I don’t think there’s any more to say. Not facing the sea, recollect, and a six-stall stable and double coach-house. You know all about the rest,—bedrooms, and those sort of things,—and so good-bye.” Miss Gillespie touched lightly the outstretched tips of Mrs. Hammond’s fingers, bowed gracefully to Laurence, and departed.

Mrs. Hammond watched the door close again, and, obviously ill at ease, turned to Laurence, and said: “Miss Gillespie is the most invaluable person. She came at first as governess to Miss Hammond; but she has really made herself so

useful to me, that I don't know what I should do without her. Housekeepers and all regular servants are so stupid; and I hate trouble so."

She stopped, and there was a dead silence. Mrs. Hammond coloured, and said: "Have you nothing to say, Colonel Alsager?"

"On the subject of Miss Gillespie, nothing. If you sent for me to expatiate to me on Miss Gillespie's virtues, I am sorry; for my time could have been better employed."

"Than in coming to see me? You did not think so once."

"Then we didn't talk about Miss Gillespie. Your note said that you had heard rumours, or riddles, which you wanted me to explain. What have you heard?"

"In a word, nothing. I wrote the first thing that came into my mind because I wanted to see you, Laurence Alsager. Because I have hungered to see you for two years; to hear your voice, to—You were at Vienna? at Ischl? and at Trieste?"

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“ You saw the *Times* occasionally on your travels ? ”

“ While I remained in Europe, frequently. Oh yes, Laura, I received all your letters at the places you mention ; and I saw the advertisement in the *Times*, under the signature and with the ciphers by which we used to correspond in the old days. ”

“ And why did you take no notice ? ”

“ Because my love for you was gone and dead ; because I was tired of being dragged about and shown-off, and made to display the abject state of docility to which you had reduced me. I told you all this that January morning in Kensington Gardens ; I said to you, ‘ Let us finish this scheming and hiding ; let our engagement be announced, and let us be married in the spring. ’ And you apparently assented, and went home and wrote me that letter which I have now, and shall keep to my dying day, declaring that you had been compelled to accept an offer from Mr. Hammond. ”

“ You knew, Laurence, that my mother insisted on it. ”

“I knew you said so, Mrs. Hammond.— When I was acquainted with Mrs. Molyneux she was not much accustomed to having any influence with her daughter. Then I went away; but at first not out of the reach of that London jargon which permeates wherever Englishmen congregate. I heard of your marriage, of your first season, of the Richmond *fête* given for you by the Russian prince, Tchernigow. I heard of you that autumn as being the reigning belle of Baden, where Tchernigow must have been at the same time, as I recollect reading in *Galigiani* of his breaking the bank. Before I went to the East I heard of you in a score of other places; your name always connected with somebody else’s name—always ‘*la belle Hammond, et puis—*’ I never choose to be one in a regiment; besides—”

“Besides what?”

“Well, my time for that sort of thing was past and gone; I was too old for it; I had gone through the phase of existence which Tchernigow and the others were then enjoying. I had offered you a steadfast honest love, and you had rejected

it. When I heard of the Tchernigow alliance, and the various other *passe-temps*, I must say I felt enormously grateful for the unpleasantness you had spared me."

"I cannot say your tour has improved you, Colonel Alsager," said Mrs. Hammond calmly, though with a red spot burning on either cheek. "In the old days you were considered the pink of chivalry, and would have had your tongue cut out before you would have hinted a sneer at a woman. You refuse to believe my story of compulsion in my marriage; but it is true—as true as is the fact that I rebelled then and there, and, having sold myself, determined to have as much enjoyment of life as was compatible with the sale."

"I never denied it, Mrs. Hammond; I simply told you what I had heard."

"Then tell me something more, Laurence Alsager," said Mrs. Hammond, flushing brilliantly, and looking him, for the first time during their interview, straight in the face; "is it to be war between us two, or what?"

She looked splendidly beautiful just at that

moment. She was a bright-looking little woman, with deep-gray eyes and long dark lashes, shining chestnut hair, a *retroussé* nose, a wanton mouth, and a perfect, trim, tight, rounded small figure. As she threw out this verbal challenge, her eyes flashed, she sat erect, and every fibre within her seemed quivering with emotion.

Laurence marked her expression, and for an instant softened, as the recollection of the old days, when he had seen her thus wilfully petulant only to make more marked the subsidence into placidity and devotion, rose before him; but it faded rapidly away, had utterly vanished before, no less in reply to her peering gaze than to her words, he said, "No, not war; neighbours who have been so nearly allied should never quarrel. Let us take another strategic phrase, and say that we will preserve an armed neutrality."

"And that means—?"

"Well, in our case that means that neither shall interfere with the other's plans, of whatever kind, without due warning. That once given and disregarded, there will be war to the knife;

for I think under present circumstances neither will be inclined to spare the other."

"Your anticipations are of a singularly sombre character, Colonel Alsager. I think that—ah!" she exclaimed, suddenly clapping her hands, "I see it all! my eyes are opened, and the whole map lies patent before me."

"What has caused this happy restoration of sight?"

"Remembering a story which was told me a day or two ago by a little bird. The story of a *preux chevalier* and a lady in distress; of a romantic adventure and a terrific leap; of plunging hoofs and fainting-fits, and all the necessary ingredients of such a scene. *Je vous en félicite, Monsieur le Colonel.*"

Laurence's brow grew very dark as he said, "You are too clever a woman to give a leg-up to a manifestly limping story, however much it might temporarily serve your purpose. Of that story as it stands, turned, twisted, perverted as it may be, nothing can be made. The scandal-mongers don't know what they have taken in

hand. They might as well try to shake the Rock of Gibraltar as that lady's good name."

Mrs. Hammond laughed a short bitter laugh and said, "You have even lost that grand virtue which you possessed—the power of concealing your emotions. With the gravity, you have attained the simplicity of the Oriental; and you now—"

She was interrupted by the servant's throwing open the door and announcing, "Sir Charles Mitford."

That gentleman entered immediately on the announcement of his name, with a certain air of *empressement* which vanished so soon as he saw Colonel Alsager's broad back. Laura Hammond prided herself on never having been taken unawares. When speaking to Alsager her face had been curling with sneers, her voice harsh and strident; but before Sir Charles Mitford had crossed the threshold, she had wreathed her mouth in smiles, and as she shook hands with him, though aloud she only uttered the ordinary commonplaces, in a lower tone she said, "I thought you would come to-day."

Alsager heard her say it. That was a singular property of his—that gift of hearing any thing that might be said, no matter in how large a party, or how earnestly he might be supposed to be talking. It had saved his life once; and he had assiduously cultivated it ever since. Mitford heard it too, but thickly. He had not had as much experience in the cadences of the *demi-voix* as Laurence.

“How are you, Alsager? We seem to be always tumbling over each other now, don't we? and the oftener the better, I say.—How d'ye do, Mrs. Hammond? I say, what's all this that you've been saying to my wife?”

Laurence started, and then reverted to the album which lay on his knees. Mrs. Hammond saw the start, and the means adopted for hiding it, and smiled quietly.

“I don't know what I said in particular to Lady Mitford; nothing to frighten her, I hope,” said Mrs. Hammond; “I was congratulating myself that she and I had got on so very well together.”

“ Oh, yes, so you did, of course,” said Sir Charles,—“ sisters, and all that kind of thing. But I mean what you said to her about leaving town.”

“ Oh, that’s perfectly correct. Mr. Hammond has seen Sir Charles Dumfrik and Dr. Wadd, and they both concur in saying that he ought not to have left Florence until the spring; and that he must leave London forthwith.”

“ And they have recommended Torquay as the best place for him; at least so my wife tells me.”

“ Quite right; and in obedience to their commands I have sent Miss Gillespie off this very day to take a house, and make all necessary arrangements.”

“ Who’s Miss Gillespie?”

“ My—well, I don’t know what. I believe *factotum* is the Latin word for it. She’s Miss Hammond’s governess (my step-daughter, you know), and my general adviser and manager. I don’t know what I should do without her, as I told Colonel Alsager, who, by the way, did not pay much attention.”

Laurence grinned a polite grin, but said never a word.

“She was with me in the pony-carriage the first day Mr. Bertram introduced you to me, Sir Charles. Ah, but she had her veil down, I recollect; and she asked all about you afterwards.”

“Very civil of her to take any interest in me,” said Sir Charles. “I recollect a veiled person in the pony-carriage; but not a bit of interest did I take in her. All that concentrated elsewhere, and that sort of thing;” and he smiled at Mrs. Hammond in a manner that made Laurence’s stern face grow sterner than ever.

“Well, but about Torquay,” continued Sir Charles. “I thought at first it was a tremendous nuisance your having to go out of town; but now I’ve got an idea which does not seem so bad. Town’s horribly slow, you know, utterly empty; one does not know what to do with oneself; and so I’ve been suggesting to Georgie why not go down to Redmoor—our

country place in Devon, you know—close to Torquay,—and one could fill the house with pleasant people, and you could come over from Torquay, and it would be very jolly indeed.”

He said it in an off-hand manner, but he nevertheless looked earnestly up into Mrs. Hammond's face, and Laurence Alsager's expression grew sterner than ever.

Mrs. Hammond returned Sir Charles's glance, and said, “That would be thoroughly delightful! I was looking forward with horror, I confess, to a sojourn at Torquay. Those dreadful people in respirators always creeping about, and the stupid dinner-parties, where the talk is always about the doctor, and the quarter in which the wind is. But with you and Lady Mitford in the neighbourhood it would be quite another thing.”

“Oh yes, and we'd get some jolly people down there.—Alsager, you'd come?”

“I don't think I'd come, and I'm any thing but a jolly person. I must go to my father's at once.”

“Gad, Alsager, you seem to keep your

father always ready to bring forward whenever you want to be misanthropical. You were to have gone to him a week ago."

"Circumstances alter cases," said Mrs. Hammond with a short laugh; "and Colonel Alsager finds London more tolerable than he expected. Is it not so, Colonel?"

"'Very tolerable, and not to be endured,' as Dogberry says, since I am about to leave it," said Laurence. ("She would like to draw me into a semi-confidence on that subject; but she sha'n't," thought he.)

"No; but really, Alsager, do try and come, there's a good fellow; you can hold over your father until you want an excuse for not going to some place where you'll be bored. Now we won't bore you; we'll take down a rattling good team: Tom Charteris and his wife—she plays and sings, and all that kind of thing, capitally; and Mrs. Masters, who's quiet to ride or drive—I don't mean that exactly, but she's available in two ways,—as a widow she can chaperon, and she's quite young and pretty

enough to flirt on her own hook ; and the Tyrrells—nice girls those ; and Bligh and Winton,—oh, and Dollamore ! I'll ask Dollamore ; he'd be just the man for such a party."

" Oh yes, you must have Lord Dollamore," said Mrs. Hammond ; " he has such a delightfully dry way of saying unpleasant things about every body ; and as he never shoots or hunts, he is a perfect treasure in a country house, and devotes himself to the ladies." She shot one hasty glance at Laurence as she said this, which he duly perceived.

" Oh yes," said Sir Charles, " Dollamore's sure to come. And you, Alsager,—come, you've changed your mind?"

" Upon my word, the temptation you offer me is so great, that I'm unable to resist it. Yes, I'll come."

" I thought you would," said Sir Charles carelessly.

" I knew you would," said Mrs. Hammond in an undertone ; then aloud, " What going,

Colonel Alsager? Good-bye; I'm so pleased to have seen you; and looking so well too, after the climate, and all the things you've gone through."

Laurence shook hands with Mitford and departed.

Yes, there was not much doubt about it: Sir Charles was tolerably well "on" in that quarter. An old poacher makes the best gamekeeper because he knows the tricks and dodges of his old profession; and there was not one single move of Sir Charles Mitford's during the entire conversation, which Laurence Alsager did not recognise as having been used by himself in bygone days. He knew the value of every look, knew the meaning of each inflexion of the voice; and appreciated to its full the motive-power which had induced the baronet suddenly to long for the country house at Redmoor, and to become disgusted with the dreariness of London. Determined to sit him out too, wasn't he? Lord! how often he, Laurence, had determinedly sat out bores for the sake of getting ten words, one

hand-clasp from Laura after they were gone! Yes, Mitford was getting on, certainly; making the running more quickly even than Dollamore had prophesied. Dollamore! ah, that reminded him: Dollamore was to be asked down to Redmoor. That, and the manner in which Mrs. Hammond had spoken of him and his visit, had decided Laurence in accepting Mitford's invitation. There could not be any thing between them which—no; Dollamore could never have made a *confidante* of Laura and imparted to her—oh, no! Laura had not too much conscience in any case where her own passion or even her own whim was concerned; but she would shrink from meddling in an affair of that kind. And as for Lord Dollamore, he was essentially a man of *petits soins*, the exercise of which always laid those who practised them open to misunderstanding. He had a habit of hinting and insinuating also, which was unpleasant, but not very noxious. As people said, his bark was probably worse than his bite, and—

And at all events Laurence was very glad that he had accepted the invitation, and that he would be there to watch in person over any thing that might happen.

CHAPTER XI.

DOWN AT REDMOOR.

JUST on the highest ridge of the great waste of Redmoor, which is interspersed with dangerous peat-bogs and morasses, and extends about ten miles every way, with scarcely a fence or a tree, stands Redmoor House, from time immemorial—which means from the reign of Edward III.—the home of the Mitford family. Stands high and dry, and looking warm and snug and comfortable, with its red-brick face and its quaint gables and queer little mullioned windows. It is a house the sight of which would put spirit into a man chilled and numbed with looking over the great morass, and would give some vestige of credibility to the fact, that the sluggish little stream born in the middle of the moor, and winding round through the gardens of the house,

from its desolate birthplace flows down—as can be traced from the windows—through a land of plenty, of park and meadow, of orchard and corn-field, by the old cathedral-city, to the southern shore.

A grand old house, with a big dining-hall like St. George's Chapel at Windsor on a small scale, without the stalls, but with the knightly banners, and the old oak, and the stained glass, and the solemn air of antiquity; with a picture-gallery full of ancestors, beginning with Sir Gerard, temp. Henry VIII., painted by Holbein, a jolly red-bearded swashbuckler, not unlike his royal master, and ending with the late lamented Sir Percy, painted by Lawrence, with a curly head of hair, a fur-collar to his coat, a smile of surprising sweetness, and altogether not unlike *his* royal master. There were drawing-rooms in blue and amber; a charming bow-windowed room hung with tapestry, and commanding a splendid view over the cultivated landscape, which, in the housekeeper's tradition, had been a boudoir for Sir Percy's lady, who died within three years of

her marriage; a grand old library, the bookcases in black oak, and nearly all the books in russia leather, save those bought under the auspices of the late baronet,—Hansard's Debates, and a legal and magisterial set of volumes all bound in calf and red-lettered at the back. There is a grand terrace in front of the house, and all kinds of gardens stretch round it: Dutch gardens, formal, quaint, and solemn, with a touch of old-world stiffness like the Mynheers; Italian gardens, bright and sunny and gaudy, very glittering and effective, but not very satisfactory after all, like the Signori; English gardens, with ample space of glorious close-shaved lawn, and such wealth of roses as to keep the whole air heavy with their fragrance. Great prolific kitchen-gardens at the back, and stables and coach-houses which might be better; but the late baronet cared for nothing but his quarter-sessions and his yacht; and so long as he had a pair of horses to jolt with him to join the judge's procession at assize-times, troubled himself not one jot how the internal economy of the stables was ordered.

This is all to be altered now. It was not very bright in Sir Percy's time, and it has been deadly-lively indeed since his death; but the Sleeping Beauty herself was never more astonished by the arrival of the prince than was Mrs. Austin, the old housekeeper at Redmoor, by the advent of a tall hook-nosed gentleman, who announced himself as Captain Bligh, and who brought a letter from Sir Charles Mitford, duly signed and sealed with the family arms, which Mrs. Austin knew so well, ordering implicit obedience to whatever orders the bearer might choose to give. With him came a sleek-looking man with close-cut hair and a white cravat, whom Mrs. Austin at first took for a clergyman, until she discovered he was the stud-groom. This person inspected the stables, and the remnant of the late Sir Percy's stud, and reported to Captain Bligh that the stables was pigsties, and as for the hanimals, he should think they must be the 'osses as Noah put into the hark.

A fresh *régime* and fresh work to be done by every body under it. No more chance for

Tummus coachman and Willum helper to just ride harses to ex'cise and dryaive 'em out in trap whenever wanted to go crass to races or market, or give missus and young 'uns a little change. No more chance for Dawniel Todd the Scotch gardener to make his market of all the fruits, flowers, and vegetables, selling them to Mrs. Dean or Miss Archdeacon, or to the officers up in barracks. Not much chance for the head-keeper and his two under-trappers, who really had all their work to do to keep the game down after Sir Percy's death, so strictly had that terror of poachers preserved; though they thought they saw their way to balancing any loss which they might sustain from being unable any longer to supply the poulterers of the county town, in a house full of ardent sportsmen, with innumerable heavy tips after battue-days, and an occasional dog to break or to sell. The old lodge-gates had begun to grow rusty from disuse; but they are constantly on the stretch now, for carts with ladders and scaffolding-poles, and men in light linen blouses

daubed with paint, were streaming in and out from morning till night. There is a new roof being put on the stables, and the outhouses are being painted and whitewashed throughout; and the mastiff, who has been bred up on the true English principle of "keeping himself to himself," has been driven quite mad at the influx of new faces, and has shown such a convincing set of teeth to the painter's men, that they have declined proceeding with their work until he has been removed. So Tummus coachman and Willum helper have removed his big kennel to the back of the stables; and here Turk lies, with nothing but his black nose visible in the clean straw, until he catches sight of a painter or a tiler pursuing his occupation high up in mid-air, and then with one baleful spring Turk bounds out of his kennel, and unmistakably expresses his fervent wish to have that skilled labourer's life's-blood.

Captain Bligh too sits heavy on the lodge-keeper's soul. For the Captain, after a cursory inspection of the vehicles at Redmoor House, has

sent down to Exeter for a dog-cart, and has duly received thence the nearest approach which the Exeterian coachbuilder had on hand. It is not a bad tax-cart, of the kind known as "White-chapel," has a very big pair of wheels, and behind a long chestnut mare—which the Captain found in a loose box in the corner of the yard, and which it seemed Tummus coachman used to reserve for his special driving—runs remarkably light and well. In this tax-cart Captain Bligh drives to and from the station, where he is occupied watching the disembarkation of furniture coming direct from Gillow's,—ottomans for the smoking-rooms, and looking-glasses for my lady's boudoir; to and from the market-town, where the painters and other workpeople are to be hunted up; to and from the barracks, where he has found that hospitality and good-fellowship which are invariable characteristics of the service. From the barracks the Captain is not unfrequently very late in returning, yelling out, "Ga—a—ate!" in the early hours of the morning, and frightening the lodge-keeper from

peaceful dreams; and as the painter's men arrive at six, and the railway-van did not leave till eleven, the lodge-keeper begins to feel, on the whole, that life is not all beer and skittles, and rather wishes that the late baronet had never been drowned.

Now things begin to look a little straighter, and rumours are rife that it won't be long before the new baronet brings his wife down, and regularly takes possession. The old stables have been re-tiled and touched up, four new loose boxes, "wi' sla-ate mangers and brass foxes' heads a-holdin' the pillar-reins," have been erected, the coach-houses have been cleaned and enlarged. The stud-groom, under whose directions all these alterations have been made, has watched their completion, and has then started for London, returning with a whole string of splendid creatures, all in the most perfect-fitting hoods and cloths embroidered with Sir C. M.'s initials and bloody hand, railed down to the nearest station, and brought over thence in charge of three underlings, also sleek-headed, tight-trousered, and

white-cravatted. Not in income, but in status do Tummus coachman and Willum helper feel the change. They are to be retained on the establishment with the same rate of wages; but they are simply to make themselves generally useful in the stables, and to have no particular duties whatsoever.

Very busy indeed has been Captain Bligh; but his labours are drawing to an end now, and he begins to think that he has been very successful. He has been good in generalisation, he thinks; there's nothing that any one could find particular fault with, looking at the materials he had to work upon, and the time he had to do it in. But there are two things about which he knows in managing for other people you should be particular. Take care that both the men and the women have a stunning good room of their own. You know the library is generally considered the men's room; but Charley ain't much of a bookworm; the *Times* of a day, and *Bell* of a Sunday, and that kind of thing; and the library's an infernal big room, with all sorts

of plaster-casts of philosophic classic parties, grinning at you off the tops of the shelves. Charley won't like that; so Bligh has fitted him up this little crib, next to his dressing-room, cosy and comfortable, good drawing stove, little let-down flap for his grog, whip-rack, pipe-rack, and all snug—don't you think so? Bollindar and Smyth, of the 26th Cameronians, to whom the question is put, think so—rather! and look all round the room and nod their heads sagaciously, and clap Bligh on the back and tell him what a knowing hand he is, and then go off to try the new billiard-table which Thurston has just sent from London. That Lady Mitford's special room should also be something to be proud of, is also a desideratum with the Captain; but there he mistrusts his own taste. The late Mrs. Bligh had been a barrack-master's daughter, and having lived in barracks both before and after her marriage, had been accustomed, as her husband recollected, to think highly of any place where the doors would shut and the windows would not rattle. But the old campaigner re-

collected that Mrs. Barrington the widow, daughter of the Dean and Deaness, and then living at home with her parents in the Close, had, during the two happy years of her marriage to George Barrington, private secretary to Lord Muffington when keeper of the Gold Fish to her Majesty, lived in very decent society in London; and it was after Mrs. Barrington's idea that the bow-windowed boudoir had its bow-window filled with plate-glass, and a light chintz paper and maple furniture. Sipping a glass of '20 port with her lunch-biscuit (the cellars at Redmoor were splendidly stocked, and wanted no renovation), Mrs. Dean declared that the room was perfect; and poor pale peaky little Mrs. Barrington, looking round at the elegance and comfort, was reminded of the days when she was something more than a dependent on her parents' bounty, and when she had a husband whose chiefest delight was the fulfilment of her every wish.

So the Captain wrote up to his principal, and reported all in readiness; and the day for Sir

Charles and Lady Mitford to come down was agreed upon. There was some talk of having a public reception; but the Captain did not think Sir Charles would care particularly about that, and so the scheme was given up. However, when the carriage which fetched them from the station dashed through the lodge-gates, the tenantry, some mounted on their rough little Red-moor ponies, some on foot, but all in their best clothes, were drawn up on either side of the avenue, and greeted their new landlord with reiterated cheers. They are an impressible people, these Devonians; and they were much gratified by the frank, hearty, sporting appearance of Sir Charles, "so different from Sir Percy, as were all dried-up like;" they liked the jolly way in which he stood up and waved his hat to them; while as for Lady Mitford, the impression she created was something extraordinary. The men raved about her, and the women seemed to feel the greatest gratification in repeating that she was "a pure Devon lass, as any one could tell by her skin."

Sir Charles had wished to bring all their friends down to Redmoor at the same time as they themselves came; but Georgie, who, ever since the visit to the ancestral home had been determined upon, had found her mistress-of-the-house position weighing on her mind, begged that they might be there for at least a day or two by themselves, that she might settle with Mrs. Austin the disposal of the various rooms, and the general arrangement of the household. To this Sir Charles agreed, and they came alone.

The "day or two" spent by themselves were very happily passed by Georgie. The whole of the first day was consumed in going from room to room with Mrs. Austin, listening to the family history, and thoroughly examining all the pictures, tapestry, and curios. The old lady was enchanted with her new mistress, who took so much interest in every thing, and who, above all, was such an excellent listener. Then Georgie, whose housekeeping tastes had not had much opportunity for display in the parsonage at Fishbourne, under Mrs. Austin's guidance

went "through the things," absolutely revelling in snowy linen and spotless damask, in glorious old china and quaint antique glass, in great stores of jams and preserves, and all Mrs. Austin's household treasures. She did not take so much interest in the display of plate, though it was really very handsome and very valuable; not the least effective among the trophies being several splendid regatta-prizes won by the late baronet's celebrated yacht. With the boudoir Georgie was delighted; and when she heard from Captain Bligh that, feeling his utter ignorance in the matter, he had consulted Mrs. Barrington, after whose taste the room had been prepared, Georgie declared that Mrs. Barrington must be a very nice woman to have such excellent taste, would probably prove a delightful neighbour, and certainly should be called upon as soon as possible.

You see, if Georgie "gushed" a little at this period of her life, it was not unnatural, and was certainly excusable. She had been brought up very quietly, and had had, as we have seen, her little trouble and had borne it with great pluck

and determination; and now, as she imagined, she was thoroughly happy. Husband's love, kind friends, wealth and position, were all hers; and as she was young and impulsive, and thoroughly appreciative of all these blessings, she could not help showing her appreciation. In those days, even more than in the present, it was considered in the worst taste to be in the smallest degree natural; a dull uncaring acceptance of events as they occurred, without betraying the least astonishment or concern, was considered the acme of good breeding; so that unless Georgie altered a great deal before the London season, she would be voted very bad *ton* by Lady Clanronald and the Marchioness of Tappington, those sovereigns of society. But there is some little time yet before the commencement of the season, and Georgie may then have become as unappreciative and as undemonstrative as the other women in her position. Just now she is thoroughly happy with Mrs. Austin and the contents of the linen- and china-rooms.

Whether, as the woman is the lesser man,

the feminine mind is much more easily amused than the masculine, or whether there was much more absolute novelty to Lady Mitford in her position than to Sir Charles in his (he had seen something of the external life of fashionable people, and, like most military men, had acquired a veneer of swelldom while in the army), it is difficult to determine; but it is certain that the "day or two" to be spent before the arrival of their friends, seemed like a day or twenty-two to Sir Charles Mitford. He had gone over every room of the house, thoroughly examined the new stables and loose boxes, had out all the horses and critically examined them, had tried two new pairs and spent an hour or two in breaking them, had pulled the old mastiff's ears until the dog growled, had then kicked him for growling, had put all his whips and all his pipes into their respective racks, had smoked more than was good for him, had whistled every tune he could remember, and was utterly and horribly bored.

He was like the little boy in the child's story-

book: he wanted somebody to come and play with him. Captain Bligh had been obliged to leave for London directly his friends arrived, and was coming down again with the first batch of visitors. And Sir Charles hated being alone; he wanted somebody to smoke with him, and to play billiards with him. He used to put a cigar in his mouth and go and knock the balls about, trying various new hazards; but it did not amuse him. He could not ask the officers of the neighbouring garrison to come over, as his plea to his friends had been the necessity for preparation in the house. He grew very cross towards the close of the second day; and after dinner, as he was going off to smoke a sulky pipe in his own room, Georgie came up to him, and put her arm through his, and looked at and spoke to him so affectionately, that his conscience gave him a little twinge as he thought how lately he had let his fancy run on eyes and hair of a different colour from his wife's.

“What is it, Charley? You're all wrong, I see; not ill, are you, darling?”

“No, Georgie, not ill; only confoundedly bored.”

“Bored?”

“Yes, bored! Oh, I know it’s all very well for you, who have your house to look after and Mrs. Austin to attend to, and all that kind of thing—that passes the time. But I’ve had nothing to do, and nobody to speak to, and I’m regularly sick of it. If this is the kind of thing one’s to expect in country life, I shall go back to town to-morrow.”

“Oh, you won’t feel it when your friends come down, Charley; they’ll be here the day after to-morrow. It’s only because you’re alone with me,—and I’m not much of a companion for you, I know,—that you’re moped. Now let us see, what can you do to-morrow? Oh, I have it,—why not drive over and see your friends the Hammonds at Torquay?”

He had thought of that several times, but had not mentioned it because—well, he did not know why. But now his wife had started the subject; so of course it was all right. Still he hesitated.

“Well, I don’t know—”

“Now I think it a capital idea. You can drive over there, and they’ll most probably ask you to stop to dinner, and you’ll have a fine moonlight drive back. And then the next day all the rest of the people will come down.”

After this Sir Charles did not attempt, however faintly, to interpose an objection, and was in a very good temper for the remainder of the evening.

CHAPTER XII.

DRAWING COVER.

IT was part of the crafty policy of the tall-hatted Mr. Griffiths to keep his employer Mr. Effingham in good-humour, and to show that he was worth feeling occasionally; and it was with this end in view that Mr. Griffiths had spoken so confidently of Mr. Lyons's undoubted knowledge of the whereabouts of the forged bill and of his (Griffiths's) intention of seeking an immediate interview with Lyons. But, in sober truth, Mr. Griffiths merely had a faint notion that Lyons, from his previous connection with Tony Butler and his general acquaintance with the shady transactions of the deceased, might possibly give a guess as to the hands in which the bill then was, while he had not the remotest idea where to find the redoubt-

able Mr. Lyons himself, with a view to obtain from him the necessary information.

For Mr. Lyons, as is the case with many gentlemen of his persuasion, did not confine his energies to the exercise of one calling, but dabbled in a great many. To some men he was known as a jeweller and diamond-merchant; to others as an importer of French clocks, whistling bullfinches, and German mustard; to some he was known in connection with the discounting of stamped paper; to others as a picture-dealer, a cigar-merchant, a vendor of *objets d'art* of a very peculiar kind. He had no residence—that is to say, he had a great many, but none particularly tangible or satisfactory. He would write to you dating from a number in Clement's Inn; and when you called there, you would find the name of Mr. Glubb over the door, with a painted square of tin by the letter-slit announcing that Mr. Glubb had removed to Great Decorum Street, and that letters for him were to be left with the porter; and lower still you would find a dirty scrap of paper, with "M. Lyons" faintly

traced upon it; and on the door being opened, you would find M. Lyons in a room with one chair, one table, a blotting-pad, pen and ink, and a cheque-book. He was in the habit of making appointments at coffee-houses and taverns; and when he sent the clocks or the bullfinches, the cigars or the *objets d'art*, to their purchasers, they arrived at night, being left at the door by mysterious boys, to whom they had been given, with the address and twopence, by a man whom they had never seen before, but who was just round the corner. There was, it was said, one permanent address which Mr. Lyons had kept up for a great number of years; but this was known only to those with whom in their relation with Mr. Lyons a melting-pot was associated, and these were very few in number.

Mr. Griffiths was getting desperate, for the last half-crown out of the ten pounds lay in his pocket, and his principal Mr. Effingham had already spoken to him rather sharply on the matter. He had been to all Mr. Lyons's known haunts; he had spoken to a dozen people who were known

to be of his intimates; but he could obtain no tidings of him. Some thought he might be at Amsterdam, where the diamond-sale was going on; others had heard him mention his intention of visiting Frankfort about that period; some laughed, and wondered whether old Malachi had heard of the plate-robbery, "thalvers ath big round ath a cart-veel, and thpoonth, all new, not a bit rubbed!" which had lately taken place. But no one could give any precise information. And time was going on, and Mr. Effingham's patience and Mr. Griffiths's stock of ready-money were rapidly becoming exhausted.

One night, going into "Johnson's" as usual, Mr. Griffiths saw his principal seated at one of the tables, and not caring to confront him just then, was about quietly withdrawing as much of his tall hat as he had already protruded through the swing-door, when he was espied and called to by Mr. Effingham.

"Come in there; don't think I didn't see you, because I did. What a slimy cove you are,

Griffiths!—that's what I complain of; nothing fair and aboveboard in you."

"Who's to be fair and aboveboard," growled Mr. Griffiths, "if they're to be everlastingly growled at and badgered? What I come here for is to be quiet and 'ave a little peace, not to be worritted and downed upon. D'rectly I see you sittin' here, I knowed it'd be, 'Well, and wot's up?' and 'Ain't you got no news?' and 'Wot a feller you are, not to 'ave learned somethink!' so, as I didn't seem to care about that, I was goin' away agen."

"Poor feller," said Mr. Effingham with great contempt, "don't like being worried or having to work for your livin', don't you? I wonder you didn't get yourself a government berth, where pokin' the fire and whistlin' tunes is what they do when they're there, which is only the three winter months of the year. So you've brought no news?"

"Not a stiver, not a ha'porth, not a blessed word. There, you may as well take it all at once!" said Griffiths in desperation.

“And you’ve been every where likely?”

“Every where,—in every gaff and crib where there was the least chance of hearin’ of the old boy; but not a word.”

“Now you see what a thing luck is,” said Mr. Effingham sententiously; “I believe that old City cove who said he couldn’t afford to know an unlucky man was right after all; and I’m not at all sure I’m right, Master Griffiths, in not dropping your acquaintance, for certingly you’re an unlucky buffer, if ever there was one.”

“Well, p’raps I am, D’Ossay,” said Griffiths, who began to see how the land lay; “perhaps I am in some things; but it ain’t only luck,—I’m as lucky as most of ’em; but it’s the talent as does it—the talent; and there’s none of us has got that like you, D’Ossay, my boy.”

“Well, luck or talent, or whatever it is,” said Effingham, pulling the bell, “it helps me on.—Bring some brandy and hot water here.—I come in here to have a mouthful o’ bread and cheese and a glass o’ ale about two this afternoon, and

Pollock was in here; Jack Pollock they call him,—the feller that writes the plays, you know.”

Mr. Griffiths, over his first gulp of brandy-and-water, nodded his head in acquiescence.

“Things is going on rather bad at the Garden,” continued Mr. Effingham; “I don’t know whether you’ve heard. Their pantomime’s been a reg’lar failure this year, and Wuff’s paper’s beginning to fly again. I suppose old Lyons is in that swim, for Pollock says to me, ‘Didn’t I hear you askin’ after Mr. Lyons?’ he says. ‘I did,’ I says. ‘I thought so,’ he says; ‘and I told him so when I saw him just now in Wuff’s room at the Garden. And he says, “I’ve just come back from abroad, and I don’t reckleckt Mr. Effingham’s name,” he says; “but if he’s one of the right sort, he’ll find me among the lemons on Sunday morning.”’ So I thanked Pollock, and winked my eye, and nodded my head, and made believe as though I knew all about it; but I don’t.”

“You don’t?”

“Not a bit of it; I’m as far off as ever, save for knowing that the old man’s in England.”

“You ain’t fly to what’s meant by ‘among the lemons,’ eh?”

“Not a bit of it, I tell you. What are you grinning and chuckling away at there, Griffiths? That’s one of your disgustin’ ways, — crowin’ over me because you know something which I don’t.”

“Don’t be riled, D’Ossay; don’t be riled, old feller. It’s so seldom that I get a chance of findin’ any thing that you don’t know, young though you are, that I make the most it, I confess.”

“Well, there, all right. Now do you know what he meant by ‘among the lemons’?”

“Of course I do.”

“And what does it mean?”

“‘Among the lemons’ is magsman’s patter for ‘Houndsditch.’ There’s a reg’lar gatherin’ of sheenies there every Sunday mornin’, where they have a kind of fair, and sellin’ all sorts of things, — clothes, and books, and pictures, and so on.”

“ Well, but old Lyons is a cut above all that sort of thing.”

“ I should think he was.”

“ He wouldn't be found there.”

“ Well, not sellin' any thing ; but he might be on the look-out for some magsmen as work for him, and who may have had the office to be about there. But if he's not there, I'd know where to lay hands on him, I'd take my oath.”

“ Where's that ?”

“ At the Net of Lemons, a public where sheenies of all kinds—diamond-merchants, fences, all sorts—meet on the Sunday.”

“ Do you know the place ?”

“ Know it ! I should think so, and Mr. Eliason as keeps it ; as respectable an old gent as walks.”

“ They'd let you in ?”

“ Ah, and you too, if I squared it for you.”

“ Very well, then ; we'll hunt up old Lyons on Sunday morning.”

Mr. Effingham was so pleased with his chance of success, that Mr. Griffiths thought he might

borrow half-a-sovereign ; and what is more, he got it.

On the following Sunday morning Mr. Effingham found himself by appointment opposite Bishopsgate Church as the clock struck ten, and Mr. Griffiths there waiting for him. As he approached, Mr. Effingham took stock of his friend's personal appearance, and mentally congratulated himself that it was at the East and not at the West end of London that they were to be seen in company together ; for those mysterious means by which Mr. Griffiths went through "the fever called living" had not been very productive of late, and his wardrobe was decidedly seedy. The tall hat shone so as to give one the idea that its owner had forgotten to remove it when he applied the morning macassar to his hair, and the suit of once-black clothes looked as if they had been bees-waxed. Mr. Effingham must have allowed his thoughts to be mirrored in his expressive countenance, for Mr. Griffiths said as he joined him :

“Looking at my togs, D'Ossay? Well, they ain't as nobby as yours; but you see, I don't go in to be a 'eavy swell. They'll do well enough for the caper we're on to-day, though; better perhaps than your gridironed kickseys.”

At another time Mr. Effingham might have shown annoyance at thus having his check trousers sneeringly spoken of; but something which Griffiths had said had rather dashed him, and it was with a little hesitation that he asked:

“They—they ain't a very rough lot that we're going amongst, are they?”

“Well, there's more rough nor smooth hair among 'em; but they won't do you no harm; I'll look after you, D'Ossay. Shovin' you won't mind, nor elbers in every part of your body at once. Oh, and I say, don't leave any think in your 'ind-pockets, and put your fogle in your 'at. Like this, look. I carry most things in my 'at.”

And Mr. Griffiths whipped off the tall hat, and showed in it a handkerchief, a greasy parcel suspiciously like a ham-sandwich, a pocket-comb,

and a paper book with the title "The Olio of Oddities, or the Warbling Wagoner's Wallet of Wit and Wisdom."

Mr. Effingham took his friend's advice, and transferred all his portable property from the tail-pockets of his coat to other less patent recesses, and then the pair started on their excursion.

Crossing Bishopsgate, and turning short round to the right up a street called Sandy's Row, past a huge black block of buildings belonging to the East India Company, and used as a store-house for costly silks, round which seethed and bubbled a dirty, pushing, striving, fighting, higgling, chaffering, vociferating, laughing mob, filling up the narrow street, the small strips of pavement on either side, and what ought to have been the carriage-way between them. It was Sunday, and may have been observed "as such" elsewhere, but certainly not in Sandy's Row or Cutler's Row. There were shops of all kinds, and all at work: tool-shops,—files, saws, adzes, knives, chisels, hammers, and tool-baskets displayed in the open windows, whence the sashes

had been removed for the better furtherance of trade ; hatters', hosiers', tailors', bootmakers' shops, the proprietors of which had left the calm asylum of their counters and stood at the doors, importuning the passers-by with familiar blandishments : for in the carriage-way through which Effingham and Griffiths slowly forced a passage were peripatetic vendors of hats, hosiery, clothes, and boots, —hook-nosed oleaginous gentry with ten pairs of trousers over one arm, and five coats over the other, with enormous boots, a few hats, and a number of cloth caps. Mr. Effingham soon learned the value of his friend's advice, for there were thieves of all kinds in the motley crowd ; big burly roughs with sunken eyes and massive jaws sulkily elbowing their way through the mass, and "gonophs" or pickpockets of fourteen or fifteen, with their collarless tightly-tied neckerchiefs, their greasy caps, and "aggerawater" curls. Delicate attention was paid to Mr. Effingham before he had been five minutes amongst them. The hind-pockets of his coat were turned inside out, and he was "sounded" all over by a

pair of lightly-touching hands. Whether Mr. Griffiths was known, or whether his personal appearance was unattractive and promised no hope of adequate reward, is uncertain ; but no attempt was made on him.

While Mr. Effingham was vaguely gaping about him, staring at every thing and thoroughly impressed with the novelty of his situation, Griffiths had been taking stock of the crowd, and keeping a strict look-out for Mr. Lyons. Jews were there in shoals, and of all kinds : the grand old Jewish type, dignified and bearded, than which, when good, there is nothing better ; handsome sensual-looking men, with bright eyes, and hook-noses, and scarlet lips ; red frizzy-headed Jews, with red eyelids, and shambling gait, and nasal intonation ; big flat-headed, stupid-looking men, with thick lips, and tongues too large for their mouths, and visibly protruding therefrom ; — all kinds of Jews, but Mr. Lyons not among them.

So they pushed on, uncaring for the chaff of the mob, which was very facetious on the subject of Mr. Effingham's attire, saluting him as a

“collared bloke,” in delicate compliment to his wearing a clean shirt; asking whether he was a “Rooshan;” whether he were not “Prince Halbut’s brother,” and other delicate compliments,—pushed on until they arrived at the Clothes-Exchange, a roofed building filled round every side and in the centre with old-clothes stalls. Here, piled up in wondrous confusion, lay hats, coats, boots, hob-nailed shoes, satin ball-shoes, driving-coats, satin dresses, hoops, brocaded gowns, flannel jackets, fans, shirts, stockings with clocks, stockings with torn and darned feet, feathers, parasols, black-silk mantles, blue-kid boots, belcher neckerchiefs, and lace ruffles. More Jews here; salesmen shrieking out laudations of their wares, and frantically imploring passers-by to come in and be fitted. “Here’th a coat! plue Vitney; trai this plue Vitney, ma tear.” “Here’th a vethkit for you, thir!” shouted one man to Effingham; “thuch a vethkit! a thplendid vethkit, covered all over with blue-and-thilver thprighth.” Mr. Effingham cast a longing eye at this gorgeous garment, but passed on.

No Lyons here, either among sharp-eyed vendors or leering buyers. Mr. Griffiths was getting nonplussed, and Mr. Effingham growing anxious. "We must find him, Griffiths," he said; "we must not throw away this chance that he's given us; he may be off to the Continent, Lord knows where, to-morrow. Why the devil don't you find him?"

Mr. Griffiths intimated that so far as eye-straining could be gone through, he had done his best; and suggested that if the man they sought were not there, all the energy in the world would not discover him. "But there's the Net of Lemons yet," he said; "that's, after all, the safest draw, and we're more likely to hit upon him there than any where else."

So they pushed their way through the steaming, seething, struggling crowd, and found themselves in a quiet dull little square. Across this, and merely glancing at several groups of men dotted here and there in its midst, loudly talking and gesticulating with energy which smacked more of the Hambourg Börsenhalle or the Frank-

fort Zeil than the stolid reticence of England, Mr. Griffiths led his companion until they stopped before the closed door of a public-house, aloft from which swung the sign of "The Net of Lemons." At the door Mr. Griffiths gave three mystic raps, at the third of which the door opened for about a couple of inches, and a thick voice said, "Who is it?"

"All right, Mr. Eliason. Griffiths, whom you know. Take a squint, and judge for yourself."

Mr. Eliason probably followed this advice, and finding the inspection satisfactory, opened the door to its extent, and admitted the pair; but raising his bushy brows in doubt as to Mr. Effingham, Griffiths said, "A friend of mine—come on partickler business, and by appointment with Mr. Lyons. Is he here?"

The reference was apparently satisfactory, for Mr. Eliason, a fat good-looking big man in a soft wide-awake hat, said, "You'll find him inside;" and shut the door behind them.

Mr. Effingham walking through, and following his conductor, found himself in a low-roofed

square-built comfortable room, round three sides of which were ranged tables, and on these tables were placed large open trays of jewelry. There they lay in clusters, thick gold chains curled round and round like snakes; long limp silver chains such as are worn by respectable mechanics over black-satin waistcoats on Sundays; great carbuncle pins glowing out of green-velvet cases; diamond rings and pins and brooches and necklaces. The best emeralds in quaint old-fashioned gold settings nestled by the side of lovely pale opals; big finger-rings made up after the antique with cut cornelian centre-pieces; long old-fashioned earrings; little heaps of rubies, emeralds, and turquoises set aside in the corners of the trays; big gold and silver cups and goblets and trays and tazzas; here and there a clumsy old epergne; finger-rings by the bushel, pins by the gross; watches of all kinds, from delicate gold Genevas to the thick turnipy silver "ticker" of the schoolboy; and shoals of watchworks without cases. On this Tom Tiddler's ground were crowds of customers, smoking strong cigars,

walking about without let or hindrance, and examining—ay, and handling—the jewels without creating the least consternation in the breasts of their vendors.

There was a slight movement among the company at the entrance of the new-comers; but Griffiths seemed to be known to a few, with whom he exchanged salutations, and the appearance of Mr. Eliason with them settled any wandering doubts which might have arisen in the minds of the others. As for Mr. Effingham, he began to think he was in the cave into which Aladdin descended to get the lamp at the bidding of the magician; and he went moving round, gazing first on one side, then on the other, lost in wonder. But Mr. Griffiths, to whom the scene was tolerably familiar, went at once to business, scrutinising with keen glance the buyers and sellers, poking his nose into the groups of domino-players in the corners, hunting about with admirable patience and forbearance, but for a long time with no result.

At last he stopped before a group of three.

One of these was an old Jewish gentleman, with strongly-marked features, overhanging bushy eyebrows, hooked nose, and long white beard. He held in his hand a blue paper, such as generally contains seidlitz-powders, but its contents were diamonds. These were being carefully inspected by the other two men, each of whom had a bright steel pair of pincers, with which he selected a specimen from the glittering heap, breathed upon it, watched it carefully, and in most instances finally laid it on one side for purchase. When this transaction had been gone through and was at an end, the old gentleman folded up his paper with such diamonds as remained in it, placed it in his waistcoat-pocket, and was calmly walking away, when Griffiths touched him on the arm, saying interrogatively, "Mr. Lyons?"

The old man turned in an instant, and threw a sharp look of inquiry over his interlocutor, as he said: "Yes, ma tear sir, that's mai name; not ashamed to own it any veres. Vot might you vant vith me?" As he spoke he had covered his

waistcoat-pocket with his hand, and stood prim and spry.

“This gentleman—Mr. Effingham—has been looking for you some little time. You told a friend of his—Mr. Pollock—that you would be here to-day, and we’ve come on purpose to meet you.”

“Effingham! Pollock!” said the old man, musing. “Oh yes, Pollock, who writes those funny burlesques for my friend Wuff; oh yes—Effingham,” he said. “How do you do, ma tear? Now vot is it? A leetle advance, or something you’ve got that you don’t know how to get rid of, and think I might fancy it, eh?”

“Well, it ain’t either, Mr. Lyons,” said Effingham. “It’s a little information you’re in possession of that you might be inclined to give us, and—”

“You’re not traps?” asked Mr. Lyons, turning pale.

“Not a bit of it, Mr. Lyons,” said Griffiths, striking into the conversation. “Quite different from that. You and I have done business before.

I was with—” and here he whispered into Lyons’s ear.

“ Ah, I reckleckt,” said the old gentleman. “ That vos a very good plant, and bothers them all in Scotland Yard to this day. Ha, ha! I reckleckt. Now vot did your friend say? Information? Vell, you know, I never *give* information.”

“ No, no, of course not,” said Griffiths, winking at Effingham.

“ Oh no, sir,” said that worthy. “ I’m prepared to pay, of course, any thing reasonable for what I require.”

“ Vell, vell, ma tear, let’s know vot it is.”

“ You were great pals with my brother, I believe?”

“ No. Effingham? No;—never heard the name.”

“ No, no; not Effingham. That’s merely—you understand?”

“ Oh, ah! Oh yes! I qvite understand; but vot *is* the name?”

“ Butler! You knew Tony Butler well?”

“Knew him vell; I should rather think I did. A good fellow; a clever fellow; oh, a very clever fellow, ma tear.”

“Yes; well, I’m his brother.”

“Not like him,” said Mr. Lyons. “More dressy, and not so business-like. A rare fellow for business, Tony.”

“That may or may not be,” said Effingham, slightly offended. “Now, when he died, you cleared off his traps.”

“Only a few sticks; very poor sticks. Ah, ma tear, vot I lost by that transaction! Vy, there vosn’t enough to clear me in a sixth part of vot I’d advanced to Tony.”

“Well, I’m not here to enter into that—that was your look-out. But amongst what you took away there was a desk.”

“Vos there? ’Pon my soul I can’t reckleckt; not that I’m goin’ to gainsay you. Vos there a desk, now?”

“And in it,” continued Effingham, not seeming to heed him, “there was an overdue bill for twenty-five pounds accepted by Walter Burgess.”

“ Lord now ! Vos there indeed ? ”

“ Look here, Mr. Lyons. If you don't know any thing, all right. We won't waste our time or our money, but we'll go to those who can help us. ”

“ Vot a headstrong boy it is ! Who said I couldn't help you ? Go on now,—a bill accepted by Walter Burgess ? ”

“ Exactly. Now that bill's no use to any one, and we want you to give it to us. ”

“ Ha, ha ! clever boys, clever boys ! Vot large-hearted fellows too, to vant to buy a bill that ain't of any use to any vun ! Oh, vot generous boys ! ”

“ It's no use, Griffiths, ” said Effingham angrily ; “ he either don't know or won't say any thing about it. ”

“ Steady, ” said Griffiths. “ Come, Mr. Lyons, say you've got the stiff, and name your price. ”

“ Accepted by Walter Burgess, eh ? ” said the old gentleman ; “ yes, I reckleckt that bill ; oh yes, I reckleckt him. ”

“ Well now, bring your recklektion into

something practical, and I'll give you this for that bill," said Mr. Effingham, producing a five-pound note.

The old Jew's eyes glistened at the sight of the money; and then his face fell, and he looked horribly disappointed.

"You should have it for that," said he; "you should have it for that, and welcome; only there's vun little reason vy I can't make it over to you."

"What's that?" cried Effingham.

"Vell, it's a strong reason, as you'll allow ven I tell it to you. I can't let you have the bill because—because I haven't got it myself."

Mr. Effingham swore a sharp oath, and even Mr. Griffiths looked disconcerted.

"Come along," said the former,—“we've wasted time enough with the pottering old fool, who's only selling us, and—”

"Vait a minute," said Mr. Lyons, laying his hand on the other's arm,—“vait a minute, ma tear. Though I haven't got the leetle bill myself, perhaps I know who has.”

“That’s likely enough,” said Griffiths; “well, who has?”

“Ah, that’s tellings, ma tear. I shall van’t—just a leetle something to say.”

“I’ll give this,” said Effingham, producing a sovereign.

“Vell, it ain’t enough; but you’re such head-strong fellows. There!” said Mr. Lyons, slipping it into his pocket; “now do either of you know a gal who was under Tony Butler’s thumb at one time, but who hated him mortal, and vos very sveet on vun of Tony’s friends?”

“I do!” cried Griffiths; “Lizzie Ponsford.”

“That’s the same; a fine gal too, a reg’lar fine gal. Vell, I’d no sooner got Tony’s traps over at my place than that girl comes to me, and she says, ‘You’ve got a desk that b’longed to Tony Butler,’ she says. And ven I says ‘yes,’ she offered me a pound for it. It vosn’t vuth five shillings; so I knew there vos something in it she wanted, though I’d hunted it through and found nothin’ but old diaries and memorandums and such-like. ‘I von’t sell it,’ I says. ‘May I look at it?’ she

says. 'You may,' I says; and vith that I fetched it down; and ven she see it, she touched a spring, and out flew a secret drawer vith this bill in it. 'Hands off,' I says, for she vos going to clutch it at vunce. 'Let me have it,' she says; 'I'll pay for it.' So I looked at it, and saw it had been overdue eighteen months, and reckleked hearin' it was all wrong; so I says, 'Vot'll you give?' 'A sovereign,' she says. 'Make it two, and it's yours,' I says. So, after a little, she give me two skivs, and she took the bill and valked away vith it."

Mr. Effingham looked at Griffiths, and the latter returned the glance.

"It would be almost worth another crown to know if these are lies you are telling us, old gentleman," said the former; "but it sounds something like truth. Now one question more. Where is Lizzie Ponsford?"

"Ah, that beats me. A reg'lar clever gal; nice-looking and reg'lar clever. I'd have given something to find out myself; but it vos all of no use. She vent away from all the old haunts, and hasn't been heard of for a long time. I've all

sorts of people about, and they'd tell me, bless you, if she'd ever showed up. But she's gone, and no one can find her."

"Very good," said Effingham; "now you take this commission from me. If you hear of her within the next month, and can let me know where she is, find out Griffiths at Johnson's, and it'll be a fiver in your pocket. You understand?"

Mr. Lyons made no verbal reply, but struck his forefinger against his nose and looked preternaturally sagacious.

"All right! now good-bye;" they shook hands and parted.

When they got into the street again Mr. Effingham said, "So Lizzie Ponsford has the bill. What the deuce made her want it? unless some day to revenge herself on Mitford. But she's not likely to have heard of his having turned up such trumps. Now, Mr. Griffiths, our pursuit begins again. Lizzie Ponsford has that bill. Your business and mine is to find out Lizzie Ponsford, and by some means or other—no matter what—get that bill from her."

CHAPTER XIII.

SIR CHARLES'S VISIT.

SIR CHARLES MITFORD was up betimes the next morning, for he had a twenty-miles' drive before him. The weather was bright, clear, and frosty; Sir Charles's spirits were high; he was radiant and buoyant, and thoroughly in good temper with himself and every body else. He was specially kind and affectionate to Georgie, and after breakfast insisted upon seeing her commence her day of work before he started on his day of pleasure; and he complimented Mrs. Austin on the progress her pupil had made under her directions, and on the care, cleanliness, and order observable throughout the house, and by his few words made a complete conquest of the old lady, who afterwards told Georgie that though Sir Percy had been an upright man and a good

master, it was all in a straitlaced kind of way, and no one had ever heard him say a kind word to herself, let alone any of the servants. And then when the chestnuts had been brought round in the mail-phaeton, and were impatiently pawing at the gravel in front of the hall-door, and champing at their bits, and flecking with foam their plated harness and their sleek sides, Sir Charles gave his wife an affectionate kiss and drove away in great glee.

Mrs. Austin's instruction of her mistress was shortened by full five minutes that morning—five minutes during which Lady Mitford was occupied in leaning out of the window and watching her husband down the drive. How handsome he looked! in his big heavy brown driving-coat with its huge horn buttons, his well-fitting dogskin gloves, and his natty hat—wide-awakes had not then been invented, but driving-men used to wear a hat low in the crown and broad in the brim, which, though a trifle slangy, was in some cases very becoming. The sun shone on his bright complexion, his breezy golden

whiskers, and his brilliant teeth, as he smiled his adieu; and as he brought the chestnuts up to their bearings after their first mad plunges, and standing up got them well in hand and settled them down to their work, Georgie was lost in admiration of his strong muscular figure, his pluck and grace. It was a subject on which she would have been naturally particularly reticent, even had there been any one to "gush" to; but I think the tears of pleasure welled into her eyes, and she had a very happy "cry" before she rejoined Mrs. Austin in the still-room.

And Sir Charles, what were his thoughts during his drive? Among all the wonderful revelations which the publication of the Divorce-Court trials has made public, the sad heart-rending misery, the brutal ruffianism, the heartless villany, the existence of which could scarcely have been dreamed of, there is one phase of life which, so far as I have seen,—and I have looked for it attentively,—has never yet been chronicled. The man who leaves his wife and family to get on as they best can, while he revels

in riot and debauchery; the man who is the blind slave of his own brute passions, and who goes headlong to destruction without any apparent thought save for his own gratification; the man who would seem in the iteration of his share of the marriage-service to have substituted "hate" for "love," and who either detests his wife with savage rancour, or loathes her with deep disgust, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until the Judge-Ordinary does them part; the respectable man, so punctual in the discharge of his domestic duties, so unswerving in the matter of family-prayers, whose conjugal comfort is one day wrecked by the arrival of a clamorous and not too sober lady with heightened colour and blackened eyelids:—with all these types we are familiar enough through the newspaper columns; but there is another character, by no means so numerously represented, nor so likely to be brought publicly under notice, who yet exists, and with specimens of which some of us must be familiar. I mean the man who, with great af-

fection for his wife, and strong desire to do right, is yet so feeble in moral purpose, so impotent to struggle against inclination, such a facile prey to temptation, as to be perpetually doing wrong. He never grows hardened in his vice, he never withdraws his love from its proper object—for in that case it would quickly be supplanted by the opposite feeling; he never even grows indifferent: after every slip he inwardly upbraids himself bitterly and vows repentance; in his hour of remorse he institutes comparisons between his proper and improper attractions, in which the virtues of the former are always very bright and the vices of the latter always very black; and then on the very next occasion his virtuous resolutions melt away like snow, and he goes wrong again as pleasantly as possible.

Sir Charles Mitford was of this class. He would have been horrified if any one had suggested that he had any intention of wronging his wife; would have said that such an idea had never crossed his mind—and truthfully, as whenever it rose he immediately smothered it; would

have declared, as he believed, that Georgie was the prettiest, the best, and the dearest girl in the world. But he was a man of strong passions, and most susceptible to flattery; and ever since Mrs. Hammond had seemed to select him for special notice, more especially since she had assumed the habit of occasionally looking pensively at him, with a kind of dreamy languor in her large eyes, he had thought more of her, in both senses of the phrase, than was right. He was thinking of her even then, as he sat square and erect in his phaeton, before he passed out of Georgie's gaze; thinking of her large eyes and their long glances, her full rounded figure, a peculiar hand-clasp which she gave, a thrill without a grip, a scarcely perceptible unforgettable pressure. Then his horsey instincts rose within him, and he began to take coachman's notice of the chestnuts; saw the merits and demerits of each, and almost unconsciously set about the work of educating the former, and checking the latter; and thus he employed himself until the white houses of Torquay came within sight, and

glancing at his watch he found he should have done his twenty miles in an hour and forty minutes.

Mrs. Hammond had told him that he would be sure of finding their address at the Royal Hotel; so to the Royal Hotel he drove. The chestnuts went bounding through the town, attracting attention from all the valetudinarians then creeping about on their shopping or ante-prandial walks. These poor fellows in respirators and high shawls, bending feebly on sticks or tottering on each other's arms, resented the sight of this great strong Phoebus dashing along with his spinning chariot-wheels. When he pulled up at the door of the Royal, a little crowd of invalids crept out of sunny nooks and sheltered corners, where they had been resting, to look at him. The waiter, a fat greasy man, who used to let the winter-boarders tear many times at the bell before he dreamt of answering it, heard the tramp of the horses, and the violent pull given to the door-bell by Sir Charles's groom, and in a kind of hazy dream thought that it must

be summer again, and that it must be some of the gents from the yachts, as was always so noisy and obstreperous. Before he could rouse himself sufficiently to get to the door, he had been anticipated by the landlord, who had scarcely made his bow, before Dr. Bronk, who had noticed the phaeton dashing round the corner, and fancied it might be a son or nephew on the look-out for quarters—and medical attendance—for some invalid relative, came into the portico, and bestowed the greatest care in rubbing his shoes on the hall-mat.

Mr. Hammond? No, the landlord had never heard the name. Constant change of faces renders landlords preternaturally stupid on this point, they can never fit names to faces or faces to names. Hammond? no, he thought not. John! did John know the name of Hammond? But before John could sufficiently focus his wits to know whether he did or not, Dr. Bronk had heard all, had stepped up to the side of the phaeton, had made a half-friendly, half-deferential bow, and was in full swing.

Mr. Hammond? a middle-aged gentleman,—well, who perhaps might be described as rather elderly, yes. Bald,—yes. With a young daughter and a very charming wife? Yes, oh yes; certainly he knew them; he had the honour of being their medical attendant,—Dr. Bronk of the Paragon. Lately had come down to Torquay, recommended to him by his—he was proud to say—old friend and former fellow-pupil Sir Charles Dumfunk, now President of the College of Physicians. Where were they? well, they had been really unfortunate. Torquay, my dear sir, every year rising in importance, every year more sought after,—for which perhaps some little credit was due to a little medical brochure of his, *Torquay and its Climate*,—Torquay was so full that when Mrs. Hammond sent down that admirable person Miss Gillespie, —whom of course the gentleman knew,—there was only one house vacant. So the family had been forced to content themselves with a mansion—No. 2 Cleveland Gardens,—very nice, sheltered, and yet with a charming sea-view. Where was it? Did the gentleman see the bow-windowed shop at

the corner? Second turning to the right, just beyond that—"Se-cond turn-ing to the right!" This shouted after Sir Charles, who, with a feeling that the chestnuts were too rapidly cooling after their sharp drive, had started them off the minute he had obtained the information.

The second turning to the right was duly taken, and No. 2 Cleveland Gardens was duly reached. It was the usual style of seaside-house, with stuccoed front, and green veranda, and the never-failing creeper which the Devonians always grow to show the mildness of their climate. The groom's thundering knock produced a smart waiting-maid, who acknowledged that Mrs. Hammond lived there; and the sending in of Sir Charles Mitford's card produced a London flunkey, on whom the country air had had a demoralising influence, so far as his outward appearance was concerned. But he acknowledged Sir Charles's arrival with a deferential bow, and begging him to walk in, assured him that his mistress would come down directly. So the groom was sent round to put-up his horses at the stables of the

Royal, and Sir Charles followed the footman into the drawing-room.

It was not an apartment to be left alone in for long. No doubt the family of the owner, a younger brother of an Irish peer, found it pleasant and airy when they were down there in the summer, and the owner himself found the rent of it for the spring, autumn, and winter a very hopeful source of income; but it bore "lodging-house" on every scrap of furniture throughout it. Sir Charles stared round at the bad engravings, at the bad old-fashioned artists on the walls; looked with concentrated interest on a plaster-model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and wondered whether the mortar shrinking had warped it; peeped into two or three books on the table; looked out of the window at the promenading invalids and the green twinkling sea; and was relieved beyond measure when he heard a woman's step on the staircase outside.

The door opened, and a woman entered—but not Mrs. Hammond. A tall woman, with sallow cheeks and great eyes, and a thickish nose and

large full lips, with a low forehead, over which tumbled waves of crisp brown hair, with a marvellous lithe figure and a peculiar swimming walk. Shifty in her glance, stealthy in her walk, cat-like in her motions, her face deadly pale,—a volcano crumbled into ashes, with no trace of its former fire save in her eyes,—a woman at once uncomfortable, uncanny, noticeable, and fearsome,—Miss Gillespie.

The family of the younger brother of the Irish peer owning the house prided themselves immensely on certain pink-silk blinds to the windows, which happened at that moment to be down. There must have been some very peculiar effect in the tint thrown by those blinds to have caused Sir Charles Mitford to stare so hard at the new-comer, or to lose all trace of his ordinary colour as he gazed at her.

She spoke first. Her full lips parted over a brilliant set of teeth as with a slight inclination she said, "I have the pleasure of addressing Sir Charles Mitford? Mrs. Hammond begs me to say that she is at present in attendance upon

Mr. Hammond, who is forbidden to-day to leave his room; but she hopes to be with you in a very few minutes."

A polite but sufficiently ordinary speech; certainly not in itself calculated to call forth Mitford's rejoinder—"In God's name, how did you come here?"

"You still keep up that horrid habit of swearing! *Autre temps, autres mœurs*, as I teach my young lady from the French proverb-book. What was it you asked?"

"How did you come here? what are you doing here?"

"I came here through the medium of the Ladies' Association for Instructors, to whom I paid a registration-fee of five shillings. What am I doing here? Educating youth, and making myself generally useful. I am Miss Gillespie, of whom I know you have heard."

"You have seen me before this, since—since the old days?"

"I don't know what is meant by 'old days.' I was born two years ago, just before Mrs.

Hammond married, and was christened Ruth Gillespie. My mother was the Ladies' Association for Instructors, and she at once placed me where I am. Except this I have no past."

"And your future?"

"Can take care of itself: sufficient for the day, &c.; and the present days are very pleasant. There is no past for you either, is there? so far as I am concerned, I mean. I first saw Sir Charles Mitford when I was sitting in Mrs. Hammond's phaeton in the Park with my Shetland veil down, I recollect; and as I had heard the story of the romantic manner in which he had succeeded to the title and estates, I asked full particulars about him from—well—my mistress. I learned that he had married, and that his wife was reported to be very lovely—oh, very lovely indeed!" she almost purred as she said this, and undulated as though about to spring.

"Be good enough to leave my wife's name alone. You say there is no past for either of us. Let our present be as wide asunder as possible."

“That all rests with you.”

“I wonder,” said Sir Charles, almost below his breath, “what infernal chance has sent you here!”

“If ‘infernal’ were a word to be used by a lady—I doubt whether it should be used in a lady’s presence; but that is a matter of taste—I should reiterate your sentiment; because, if you remark, you are the interloper and intruder. I am going on perfectly quietly, earning my living, giving every satisfaction to my employers,—living, in fact, like the virtuous peasant on the stage or in the penny romances,—when chance brings you into my line of life, and you at once grumble at me for being there.”

“You can understand fast enough, I suppose,” said Sir Charles sulkily, “that my associations with my former life are not such as I take great pleasure in recalling.”

“If a lady *might* say such a word, I should say, upon my soul I can’t understand any such thing. Though I go quietly enough in harness, and take my share of the collar-work too, they

little think how I long sometimes to kick over the traces, to substitute Alfred de Musset for Fénelon in my pupil's reading, or to let my fingers and voice stray off from *Adeste Fideles* into *Eh, ioup, ioup, ioup, tralala, lala!* How it would astonish them! wouldn't it?—the files, I mean; not Mrs. Hammond, who knows every thing, and I've no doubt would follow on with *Mon père est à Paris* as naturally as possible."

Sir Charles was by no means soothed by this rattle, but frowningly asked, "How long do you mean to remain here?"

"How long? Well, my movements are of course controlled by Mrs. Hammond. It is betraying no confidence to say that I know she is expecting an invitation to Redmoor (you see I know the name of your place); and as this house is not particularly comfortable, and your hospitality is boundless, I conclude when once we get there, we shall not leave much before we return to town for the season."

"We!" exclaimed Sir Charles; "why, do

you mean to say that *you* are coming to stay at my house?"

"Of course I am. Mrs. Hammond told me that she gave you distinctly to understand that she must bring Miss Gillespie with her when she came to stop at Redmoor."

"True; but then—"

"Then you did not know Miss Gillespie. Well, you'll find she's not a bad fellow, after all."

"Look here," said Mitford with knitted brows and set teeth: "there's a point to which you may go, but which you sha'n't pass. If you dare to come into my house as my guest, look to yourself; for, by the Lord, it shall be the worse for you!"

"The privileges of the salt, monseigneur!" cried Miss Gillespie, with a crisp laugh; "the salt, 'that sacred pledge, which once partaken blunts the sabre's edge.' You would never abuse the glorious rights of hospitality?"

"You were always fond of d—d stage-jargon; but you ought to have known me long enough

to know that it would have no effect on me. Take the warning I've given you in good part, and stay away."

"And take the warning I give you in good part and in good earnest, Charles Mitford," said Miss Gillespie, with a sudden change of voice and manner; "I've been tolerant to you hitherto for the sake of the old times which I love and you loathe; but don't you presume upon that. I could crush you like a snail: now this is no stage-jargon, but simple honest fact. You'll recollect that though perhaps a little given to rodomontade, in matters of business I was truthful. I can crush you like a snail; and if you cross me in my desires,—which are of the humblest; merely to be allowed to continue my present mode of life in peace,—so help me Heaven, I'll do it!"

All claws out here.

"You mean war, then? I'll—"

"Hush! not a word; here's Mrs. Hammond coming down. I *do* mean war, under circumstances; but you won't drive me to that. Yes,

as you say, Sir Charles, it is the very place for an invalid.”

As she spoke Mrs. Hammond entered the room, looking very fresh and pretty; her dark-blue merino dress with its close-fitting body displaying her round figure, and its sweeping skirts, and its tight sleeves, with natty linen cuffs. She advanced with outstretched hand and with a pleasant smile, showing all her fresh wholesome teeth.

“So you’ve come at last,” she said; “it’s no great compliment to say that we have anxiously expected you—for any thing like the horror of this place you cannot imagine. Everybody you meet looks as if that day were their last, and that they had just crawled out to take farewell of the sun. And there’s not a soul we know here, except the doctor who’s attending Mr. Hammond, and he’s an odious little chatter-box. And how is dear Lady Mitford? and how did you find the house? and did Captain Bligh make the arrangements as nicely as we thought he would? Come, sit down and tell me all about it.”

It was at this period, and before they seated themselves, that Miss Gillespie said she thought she would go and see what Alice was doing. And Mrs. Hammond asked her to tell Newman that Sir Charles Mitford would dine with them; and that as he had a long drive home, they had better say six-o'clock dinner. And charged with these messages, Miss Gillespie retired.

Then Mrs. Hammond sunk down into a pleasant ottoman fitted into a recess close by the glowing fire, and Sir Charles Mitford, looking round for a seat, obeyed the silent invitation conveyed to him in her eyes and in the movement of her dress, and seated himself by her side.

“Well, you must have a great deal to tell me,” she commenced. “I saw in the *Post* that you had left town, and therefore imagined that Captain Bligh's arrangements were concluded. And how do you like Redmoor?”

“It's a glorious place, really a glorious place, though I've been rather bored there for the last two or three days—wanted people there, you know, and that sort of thing. But the place

itself is first-rate. I've chosen your rooms. I did that the first day."

"Did you?" said she, her eyes sparkling with delight; "and where are they?"

"They are in the south wing, looking over the civilised side of the country, and are to my thinking the very best rooms in the house."

"And you chose them for us, and thought of us directly you arrived! How very, very kind of you! But suppose we should be unable to come?"

"What! unable to come! Mrs. Hammond, you're chaffing me, eh?"

"No, indeed. Mr. Hammond's health is in that wretched state, that I doubt whether Dr. Bronk would sanction his being moved, even to the soft air and all the luxuries of Redmoor."

"Oh, do him good, I'm sure; could do him no possible harm. He should have every thing he wanted, you know; and the doctor could come spinning over there every day, for the matter of that. But at any rate *you* won't disappoint us?"

“I don't think my not coming would be keenly felt by many.”

“It would by me,” said Mitford in a low voice.

She looked him full in the face for an instant. “I believe it would,” said she; “frankly I believe it would;” and she stretched out her hand almost involuntarily. Sir Charles took it, pressed it, and would have retained it, but she withdrew it gently. “No, that would never do. Mrs. Grundy would have a great deal to say on the subject; and besides, my place is at his side.” If “his side” were her husband's, Mrs. Hammond was far more frequently out of place than in it. “My place is by his side,” she repeated. “Ah, Sir Charles, you've no idea what a life I lead!”

He was looking at her hand as she spoke, was admiring its plumpness and whiteness, and was idly following with his eye the track of the violet veins. There is a something legible in the back of a hand, something which chiromancy wots not of, and Sir Charles Bell has left unexplained. Mitford was wondering whether he read

this problem aright when the last words fell on his ear ; and feeling it was necessary that he should reply, said, " It must be dull, eh ? "

" Dull ! you've no conception how dull. And I often think I was meant for something different,—something better than a sick-man's nurse, to bear his whims, and be patient under his irritability. I often think—But what nonsense I'm talking !—what are my thoughts to you ? "

" A great deal more than you know of. Go on, please. "

" I often think that if I had been married to a man who could understand me, who could appreciate me, I should have been a very happy and a good woman. Good and happy ! God knows very different from what I am now. "

With her right hand she touched her eyes with a delicate little handkerchief. In her left hand she had held a small feather fan, with which she had screened herself from the fire ; but the fan had fallen to the floor and lay there unnoticed, while the hand hung listlessly by her side close by Sir

Charles. Gradually their hands touched, and this time she made no effort to withdraw hers from his clasp.

There was silence for a few moments, broken by her saying, "There, there is an end of that! It is but seldom that I break down, and show myself in my true colours; but there is something in you which—inexplicably to myself—won my confidence, and now I've bored you with my troubles. There, let me go now, and I'll promise never to be so silly again." She struggled to free her hand, but he held it firmly.

"Leave it there," said he; "you have not misplaced your confidence, as you know very well. Oh, you needn't shake your head; you know that I would do any thing to serve you."

He spoke in a low earnest voice; and as she looked up at him with one of her long deep dreamy looks, she saw a sudden thrill run through him, and felt his hand which held hers tremble.

"I *do* know it," she said; "and we will be

the best, the very best of friends. Now, let us talk of something else.”

He was with her the whole of that day in a state of dreamful happiness, drinking in the music of her voice, watching her graceful motions, delighted with a certain bold recklessness, a contempt for the conventional rules of society, a horror of obedience to prescribed ordinances, which now and then her conversation betrayed. They saw nothing more of Miss Gillespie, save at dinner, when Mitford noticed that Mrs. Hammond made no alteration in her manner towards him, unless indeed it was a little more *prononcé* than when they had been alone. Miss Gillespie did not appear to remark it, but sat and purred from time to time in a very amiable and pleasant manner. She retired after dinner, and then Sir Charles's phaeton was brought round, and it was time to say adieu.

He said it in the little library, where the brother of the Irish peer kept his boots and his driving-whips, as he was lighting a cigar for

which Mrs. Hammond held a cedar-match. As he bent over her, he felt her breath upon his face, and felt his whiskers touch her scented hair. He had not been inattentive to some Burgundy, which the invalid upstairs had specially commended to him in a message, and his blood coursed like fire through his veins. At that moment Miss Gillespie appeared at the open door with a glove which she had found in the hall, and with her dark-green eyes gleaming with rage. So Sir Charles only took Mrs. Hammond's hand, whispering "Friends?" receiving a long pressure and "Always!" for answer; and passing with a bow Miss Gillespie, whose eyes still gleamed ferociously, sprang into his phaeton and drove off.

That last pressure of Mrs. Hammond's hand was on his hand, that last word of hers rung in his ear all the way home. All the way home his fevered fancy brought her image alluringly before him—more frequently, more alluringly than it had been in his morning's drive. But there was another figure which he had not thought of

in the morning, and which now rose up ;—the figure of a woman, green-eyed, pale-faced, cat-like in her motions. And when Sir Charles Mitford thought of her, he stamped his foot savagely and swore.

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