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DAISIES AND BUTTERCUPS.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF 'GEORGE GEITH,' 'THE SENIOR PARTNER,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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MR. JOHN NUGENT.

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BOOK III.
MR. JOHN NUGENT.



DAISIES AND BUTTERCUPS.

Book the Third.

MR. JOHN NUGENT.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE CALAIS SANDS.

AFTER the lapse of months, which seem to me as so many years, I once more take up my pen and resume my narrative.

With both diffidence and difficulty, it must at once be said. How shall I interweave together and combine once more the materials and colours of my present and former life? how is it likely I shall be able so to bind the broken strands of a simple story, at best but poor, that the reader may find his former kindly interest in it still possible—may feel himself competent to forget the fact I remember too clearly, of a wide gulf yawning between Reuben Cheverley

of the long-ago days, and quite another man, who, standing on a foreign shore, regards with idle musing eyes the silver streak of restless water which separates him from his native land ?

I am dreaming amongst the sand-hills that lie to the west of the old town of Calais. In one respect I am not changed. In the narrow town lodgings which befitted my once modest means—beside the devious Thames, under the pensive skies of Surrey, wandering along the banks of slowly-rippling streams, bordered with wild flowers, fringed with alders, decked with lilies—I was at once a dreamer and a book-worm.

Since that period I have been out in the world. I have mixed somewhat with my fellow-men. I have occupied my mind with events rather than thoughts. I have studied the works of the great painters, and become learned in the styles of those composers most esteemed by persons who love music, truly, earnestly, in the deepest depths of their hearts ; but I am a dreamer still.

I had thought the old habit was broken, the usage of best part of a lifetime laid aside ; but here, with the sands stretching below me, and the waters

of the Channel rippling slowly and softly in upon the beach, I find myself once more relapsing into useless retrospect and more useless speculation.

To this silent, lonely, forsaken spot of the great earth I have wandered out from Calais; to Calais I came from Paris. When I have heard what Smith wants with me here, I shall return to Paris.

It is Saturday, and high market is being held in the Place. No prettier sight, to my thinking, than a French market!—so bright, so gay, so different from any similar spectacle to be seen on our side of the Channel, that, as I strolled idly away from the heart of the town, and beyond the ramparts and the fortifications, I marvelled English people do not take holiday for a few hours, and run over here to refresh their eyes with the different colour life presents from that they behold each morning of their existences in Great Britain, and accustom their ears to the pleasant gabble of a French crowd, which, to a stranger, sounds at first like a hundred children talking at their play.

Calais itself I am acquainted with fairly well, but I never before chanced to see it with the market-place full of Frenchwomen in their black dresses

and their snowy-white caps, with every conceivable article displayed for sale on stands in the open air; with a Babel of sounds filling the air; with the old, dull, narrow streets quite animated with the number of persons passing along; with French horses shaking their bells, French cocks crowing defiance, French ducks quacking just like their English relatives; the stalls piled high with vegetables grown on French soil; gendarmes coming and going through the crowd, relieving guard on the ramparts, and brightening the foreground of a picture to which the dark attire of the women, and the ancient architecture of the town, present a contrast at once so graceful and artistic.

But at length (one tires even of pleasant sights), leaving the town behind—its fortifications, its harbour, its sluices, its soldiers—I began to wander out here, along an unpicturesque road, which, however, the bright and kindly greetings of the peasants made cheerful; through a scattered village, past a chapel, past a farmhouse, as unlike an English farmhouse as a French château is unlike a British dwelling of the same, or indeed of any, pretension; on till the road led across that which, for want of some better

word, I could only call a common, not moorland, not heath either—a stretch of land wild and uncultivated, terminated in one direction with a line of low unpromising-looking hills, or, to speak more properly, hillocks; in another, away in the far distance, with a chain of what, in so flat a region, appeared almost mountains, with the sun touching here and there softly on their summits, and a vast expanse—miles and miles and miles of plain—stretching between.

The soft gray tints so noticeable in the works of French artists meet the eye everywhere—the very grass seems to have a hazy veil as of silvered gauze thrown over it; gray mingles with the purple tints of the mountains far away; and even the sunshine of the waning year has a softer, milder light than we are accustomed to see in the country of which, although my own, till after Squire Amriott's death, I knew so little.

As I turned aside from the dreary main-road—straight, treeless, hedgeless—and began to cross the tract of bare land intervening between the highway and the low line of broken hills which had excited my curiosity, I saw the ground was covered with a

mossy lichen such as nowhere—save amongst the woods of Surrey, and there only at rare intervals—had ever met my eyes before. The effect produced by it is impossible to describe—that particular subdued colour characterising the whole landscape, not so much sad as subdued, could have, I began to imagine, no other origin. The vivid greens of England seemed nowhere around me; it was all as though the brightest tints were seen through a veil of transparent gray; the sky took its tone from the earth, and melted in some parts into softest azure, in others into pearly clouds. I had looked at all this before on canvas, but now it struck me with a strange sense of unfamiliarity and surprise.

Everything appeared beautiful, but unreal. I felt myself at the moment more thoroughly in a strange land than I had previously done, even in more distant countries, and amongst natives more strange to me than the French ever seemed.

The landscape, though lonely and unbeautiful, was not melancholy; it did not depress my spirits or weigh down my soul. The clear bracing air, the wind pure and fresh, the long sweep the eye could take across a country still, but not desolate; the

calm silence of the distant mountains, steeped as in translucent purple; the pencilled rays of sunshine just giving what was wanted of relief to the cool grays, and the subdued greens and darker browns, of the ever-varying scene, which seemed to change and shift as the clouds flitted over the heavens, and tender blue or softest white prevailed in the great expanse of sky, affected me as no other experience of travel had done, and left behind it a brooding memory that brings the whole thing before me again as I write, more visibly than I am able to recall snow-clad mountains, or seas steeped in the ultramarines of southern noon.

Marvelling what lay on the other side of the rising ground bounding the horizon towards the north, I slowly pursued my way; now over stones, again treading lightly upon lichens and mosses; now pressing underfoot a stubbly and starveling kind of grass, and again noticing wild plants, such as one rarely or never sees growing save close beside the sea.

‘Ah!’ I thought, as my feet suddenly sank deep into sand and gravel, ‘the sea has been here some time. All those low hillocks have been covered,

and formed, perhaps, a dangerous bar. The whole of this plain has lain under water long before any of us were living—were thought of! And, with quite a new interest, from this fresh light thrown upon it, I stood and gazed upon the far-stretching plain.

A dreamer always, I marvelled how far and how deep the waters had lain upon the earth. I pictured to myself the base of the far-away mountains swept by the sea, their soft declivities sloping gently down till the waters kissed their feet.

It came to me in fancy, with the summer gladness shining on the dancing waves, with the green tints of the earth reflected in pellucid depths below; and then the scene changed, and winter's blasts swept across a waste of angry billows; storm-clouds settled on the hill-tops; I could hear the moaning of the tempest, behold the desolation of that scene, which no man had looked upon for centuries and centuries.

Then, my eyes taking cognisance of actual surroundings, I returned from dreamland, and addressed myself to considering how I could best return to Calais without retracing every step of the straight weary road which lay behind.

Up amongst the sand-hills I spied something resembling a sign-post. That would tell me of some way, more circuitous though it might be than that already traversed; and accordingly, keeping the one object which broke the monotony well in view, I started thither.

Climbing up sand-hills is not an easy matter, and long before my goal was reached I began to weary of the task. Deep, deep to the ankle every step—making scant progress because of the lack of any sufficient foothold, the sky growing grayer, the day older; but at last I gained my object. I was close under that which had looked like a finger-post, and found it a cross!

For a moment I remained still, looking up at it, considering how many a lone heart might have taken comfort just at that point, amid the storms and the trials of life, after long buffeting upon highways which are, to most, sterile and difficult; then, turning to the right, by the breadth of perhaps a hand, I stood spellbound, for below me lay the sea.

Yes, the sea. A calm expanse of gray, lonely beyond description or belief; a wide stretch of sand perfectly smooth, perfectly level; in our sense of the

word no shore—that is, no pebbly beach, no stony margin : sand up the low range of hills, on the side of one of which I stood, and beyond also, for were not they sand too ?

It is a hard thing to tell the impression produced by such a scene as this, for often all man's language is but poor to convey ideas. To some a painter might appeal, and not in vain, for sympathy and comprehension, if he drew on canvas what I can but imperfectly describe in these pages. The want of ability to portray to you the effect caused by coming so suddenly, and, as it seemed to me, so strangely, upon that majestic waste of waters, makes me hesitate to attempt to express now what I have felt most deeply—the mystery thus typified of looking with eyes more startled upon a wider and more awful ocean, where the tides never flow back to earth, where the waves bear man's bark to an unseen and unknown shore, across whose vast expanse no traveller returns, from which no message may be carried to those left behind, from whence no voice can echo its cheerful greeting, wherein all, to us, is mystery and dread.

Some day, before this story is quite ended, I

may tell you how, and when, and why this scene recurred, with such associations, to my memory. Just then, after the first shock of delighted surprise, my strongest feeling was one of wonder as to how I should best guide my steps back to Calais. Would it be wise for me to descend and adventure a return by the sands, or would it be more prudent to retrace my path as I had pursued it? or should I adopt a middle course, and walk up and down those sand-hills till I met with some one able and willing to direct me on my way?

Far below, I saw a man walking rapidly along. Before I could possibly reach the beach he would have passed out of earshot. Against the sky-line three black figures showed for a moment, and then disappeared down one of the sand-hills. They were ecclesiastics—even in the distance I was able to see this much; but almost as soon as I had decided they were proceeding from, and not coming towards, me, they were lost to view.

A wild lonely place that seemed to me at the moment. The cross still stood solitary on the hill-side. I bethought me, as I gazed, of a quiet graveyard I passed on my way, lying back a little from

the road. I spent half an hour wandering about it, looking at touching memorials, tawdry decorations, wonderful monuments, inscriptions sacred to those drowned at sea, killed on land, dead surrounded by their families; and it seemed to me as though a wailing wind arose from the gray sullen waters, bearing strange sounds with it to where I stood.

I had not the faintest idea whether there was any path which might conduct over the sand-hills back to Calais; but the knowledge that those priests had taken the way before me, and that crosses were not often erected where human footsteps never passed, decided me to experiment on the subject.

Resolutely I was beginning the descent of the sand-hill, from which I had surveyed the sea, when a ringing shout broke the silence around.

I paused and listened, looked up and down about everywhere, then I turned to pursue my path.

The moment I did so an unmistakable English 'Hi! hi! hi!' saluted my ear.

'Stop a bit!' rang out to me in the once familiar language, to which of late I had been a stranger. 'I am coming as fast as I can.'

Then I knew who it was, and waited. In another

minute Mr. Smith and I were grasping each the other's hand. He had climbed to the height on which I stood, with long, loose, rapid strides ; but he was as little out of breath, and seemed no more inconvenienced by the difficulties of the sharp ascent, than he might have been after taking a gentle stroll along the highway.

A man who had lived hard, worked hard, thought hard, suffered hard ; who made light both of physical and mental toil ; who seemed to me, though I then knew nothing of his past history, of his weary wrestlings with misfortune, a very hero in the world's strife, a soldier than whom, in life's long march, in its bivouacs around its strange camp-fires, amid its dangers, fatigues, hardships, one need ask no better comrade.

Our acquaintance had not been long or intimate, but from the first hour of our meeting, on the night of Allen's lecture, he exercised a wonderful fascination over my mind, which was by no means diminished on the occasion when he and Mr. Rodewald partook of tea at The Snuggery.

From that time I neither saw nor heard anything of Mr. Smith, till some opportune assistance he ex-

tended to Mrs. Holway, wife of that fellow-clerk of mine in the old 'Home and Foreign,' I had been able to help just after the advent of Mr. Amriott's legacy, brought me into correspondence with him. Then, in Paris, chance or design—the latter on my part, I think, and the former on his—threw us together. We met each other often, and I may say I never bade him good-bye without a feeling of regret, without an increased desire to know more of a man who seemed to me a living walking mystery; who was totally unlike any person I had ever talked with before; who, both in speaking and thinking, followed no stereotyped rules; who was for ever leaving beaten tracks of language and established modes of thought, and striking out strange paths for himself through gorse and thicket, across lonely wildernesses of speculation, and up into mountain fastnesses of daring and desolate inquiry, where others were almost afraid to look.

It was solely at his request I had come to Calais. Why he wanted me there, what he wanted when he got me there, I could not conjecture. We were to have met at the hotel in the evening, and consequently there was not the slightest reason why I

should have expected to encounter him in that lonely spot ; yet no feeling of surprise mingled with the pleasure I experienced in seeing his sad whimsical face, in reflecting his grave kindly smile, and answering his indisputably true remark,

‘ So you *are* in this cheerful range of sand-hills, after all ?’

‘ Yes,’ I said ; ‘ but how in the world did you find me ?’

‘ Where should I find a child with a penny in its hand but in the nearest sweetstuff-shop, and where should I be so sure to meet with you, as in the loneliest, saddest, dreariest spot of country within reach ?’

‘ I do not consider all this lonely, or sad, or dreary.’

‘ Of course not ; I never expected you would. I felt certain I should come upon you contemplating a stretch of barren moorland or a waste of sullen sea, with rapturous delight.’

‘ When did you arrive ?’

‘ Let me see—O, two hours ago. Then, hearing you were out, I looked for you round the town, and strolled down to the fortifications ; good Lord ! if

the sight of them isn't enough to make a man go hang himself! There I received intelligence you had passed along, and I followed you through the delightful scenery you think so enchanting. I went some distance beyond the point where you must have turned aside; but as I could gain no tidings of you, I hastened back, and thought I would try the shore. I had just managed nearly to break my neck by coming down the last part of the descent at a run, when I saw you standing solemnly surveying the landscape. And that is all I have to say.'

'And all I have to say is, I am very glad to see you.'

'Why? Did you think in these wilds you should not be able to find your way back to Calais?'

'I do not mean that,' I said; 'I am only glad to see you for yourself, as I always am.'

'O, that's it, is it?' he exclaimed carelessly. 'Much obliged, I am sure. Let us go down on the sands.'

'There is no danger, I suppose?' I suggested, for manifestly the tide was flowing.

'Pooh, none! and if there were, what would it matter?'

‘ I don’t know how you value your own life—’ I was beginning, when he interrupted me.

‘ And I am quite sure that is a point on which I cannot enlighten you. However, you need be under no apprehension in adopting me as your guide about this charming neighbourhood. Bless you, I know it from Genesis to Revelations, from Adam to the Apocalypse. I have walked the road behind us when life looked to me a trifle more dreary than the road, and I have paced the sands when I should have felt glad if the hungry waves lapping in on the shore had, on their return, taken me a longer journey than themselves. It is past now, like a fever or a battle ; but I shall be always fond of Calais, remembering what horrible sufferings its gray cool tints and calm repose soothed to rest. The touch of the plainest and oldest woman is sometimes more grateful than that of a skittish young maiden. Well, there are lovelier places on earth than Calais, but it has seen me through many a trouble I could not have borne, I think, in a smiling country—in a rich, beautiful, cultivated land !’

We went down to the beach together, and out to the very margin of the sea.

‘It is nice here, is it not?’ he said, after he had paused for a little, looking thoughtfully over the solemn expanse of sullen water. ‘What! are you shivering?’ he asked; then added immediately, almost under his breath, ‘Well, I can understand that, too.’

‘Shall we walk on? The air grows chilly,’ I said, though in truth the coldness that seemed to creep over my spirits was less in the air than in the sorrowful look of that vast expanse of lonely sea.

‘Yes, let us walk on,’ he answered; and we paced together for a short time in silence, whilst his eyes gazed wistfully over the gray waters. At length, with a gesture which had become familiar to me, he seemed to shake his mind out of its abstraction, and began,

‘Now, I’ll be bound you wonder what in the world induced me to ask you to come to Calais?’

‘I have no doubt you had some very good reason for your request,’ I answered.

‘A reason which seemed to me good,’ he replied; ‘and yet, do you know, I am afraid you will not be best pleased with me when you hear it.’

‘If it is anything about money,’ I suggested hesi-

tatingly, for he seemed reluctant himself to enter upon the subject; and even when one knows a man to be poor, it is awkward to hint, without a fear of giving offence, that he may be in want of help.

‘No, it is nothing about money,’ he answered, with a short laugh. ‘You rich folks always think poor devils like myself know no other cause of anxiety save that produced by an empty purse.’

‘What is it, then?’ I asked; ‘you may be quite frank with me, and feel sure if it lies in my power to help you I will do it.’

‘Thank you,’ he replied. ‘I believe what you say. I do not regard such utterances from you as mere words of course. See, I cannot talk to you while we are walking—you will think me a strange fellow, full of fads and fancies; but sit down: there is a good big hard stone close under a covered sand-hill, well sheltered from the wind, let us make for that.’

It was, as he said, a good hard stone; but when we reached it he would not share my seat.

‘You sit down,’ he said, ‘and I will stand;’ which accordingly he did, leaning against the poor grass

and unpromising tufts of foliage that failed to cover the sand cliff which formed one side of the nook.

‘When does the next boat leave for Dover?’ asked Mr. Smith, as he sifted a handful of sand with some apparent carefulness through his fingers.

‘You know as well as I do,’ was my answer. ‘There is nothing till to-morrow morning.’

‘One A.M., or thereabouts?’

‘I believe so.’

‘I wish you would cross in her.’

‘If you give me any good reason why I should, I will go with pleasure.’

‘I don’t think you will,’ he said dubiously; ‘but, however, we shall soon see. Here goes! You thought, when I asked you to meet me at Calais, I wanted you to do something for me; didn’t you?’

‘Most certainly. I should not have come otherwise.’

‘No; I knew you would not. Well, the fact is, you can do nothing for me. You did all that was possible, and far more than I expected, when you paid me the amount I advanced to Holway.’

‘I wish you would not mention that.’

‘I am not going to mention it at present. I

only said anything about it now in connection with my statement of standing in no need of help. But *you stand in need of it,*' he went on, speaking rapidly; 'you can do something for yourself.'

'What, in Heaven's name?' I asked, surprised out of an equanimity of manner years of poverty and enforced submission had rendered natural.

'You can go to England, and stop there,' he said.

'And why should I go to England, and stop there?' I inquired, feeling doubtful, as I spoke, whether my companion had not taken leave of his senses.

'Because you will never repent taking the next boat back to Dover, rather than the next train back to Paris.'

I looked at him in amazement, yet with a sudden sinking of my heart, which should have served as a warning signal for what was coming.

'Have you any cause for supposing I should repent returning to Paris?'

'Yes,' he said shortly.

'What is it?'

'Don't you know?' he replied.

It had come ! In one second I understood what he meant. With a rush and a mighty shock, even while he spoke, it seemed to me the world had come into collision with the even tenor of my life, and when the confusion cleared a little I found myself on a lonely sea-shore, with the white-winged gulls making the scene more solitary still, trying to crawl, maimed and crushed and bleeding, out of the wreck and ruin of hopes and dreams and innocent fantasies, that lay strewn all around.

How long I remained there speechless I have not a notion—what time passed during which I saw nothing but that gray waste of waters, heard nothing save the sobbing of the wind and the low moaning of the waves, I can form no idea. If I had been taken up to the top of a steep precipice and flung suddenly down, I could not have felt more stunned and helpless.

‘ You are not angry ? ’ said my companion at last, more by way of a statement than a question.

‘ No, I am not angry, ’ I half whispered, answering his remark almost against my will.

‘ It would not do, ’ he went on, putting his hands deep in his pockets, and apparently addressing any

object in the whole of the desolate landscape rather than myself. 'It is a sort of thing never does do. So long as men and women are men and women, prudence will recognise the fact—so long as the world possesses a tongue, it is as well to give it no occasion to talk.'

'Has the world been talking, then?' I asked feebly.

'It had begun,' he said; 'but you can close its mouth now, if you like.'

'If I like!' I repeated; '*if I like!* As though I would not do anything, adopt any measures—'

'Then you *will* cross to Dover?' he interrupted eagerly.

'Yes,' I answered; 'I will take the next boat back.'

He drew a long breath of relief, as if he had got through a difficult task more easily than he expected, and, lapsing into silence, looked steadily out seaward, like one who never meant to bring his eyes back to land, or speak again.

I felt the sympathy expressed in this abstinence from words. By slow degrees, also, the influence of the sorrowful landscape, of the loneliness, the soli-

tude, the trouble of the fretting sea, laid soothing, softening hands upon my aching heart, and, but for very shame, I could have bowed my head and wept the bitterness of my grief away.

It would have added inconceivably to the weight of my affliction had it been seen by any other man than the one who stood beside me; but I knew no aggravation of the grief because he beheld it; rather, there seemed in his very presence strength and support.

‘Smith,’ I said at last, ‘sit here beside me, will you?’

He complied instantly.

‘Do you think me very—very foolish?’ I went on.

‘I don’t think I know exactly what you mean,’ he answered.

‘I mean, was it not a crazy thing for a man like me—an old man—’

‘You are not an old man,’ he said; ‘and if you were, it would not make much difference.’

‘I am more than fifty years of age,’ I confessed humbly.

‘And what has that to do with it?’ he asked.

‘I suppose I look old enough to be your father, and yet there is a most fascinating creature who has fixed her affections upon your humble servant. Rodewald says I might do worse.’

I did not answer. His remark seemed to float me out upon an ocean of strange, unwonted thought and conjecture, in comparison to which the material waters stretching before my visible sight were a mere mill-pond.

‘If you think it will do you any good to talk—talk,’ he began, after a brief pause; ‘I shall not deem you foolish.’

Nothing in the words, but much in the manner. It was just as though he had said to some one grievously wounded, ‘Lean on me; you will rest more completely.’

‘You know how I first became acquainted with her?’ I suggested.

‘She told me,’ he answered; ‘but you can tell me also, if you think fit.’

Ah! then the feelings so long restrained found vent. I spoke of that night—never to be forgotten so long as I preserved my memory. My heart talked to his heart. A lonely man, he could sympathise

with my loneliness; he understood what the darkness of my life must have been; he could comprehend why I looked upon the girl who once stood a total stranger within my doorway, as a very angel of light.

The human being does not live who need have desired a better auditor. He did not interrupt, he did not question, he did not scoff; he only listened to all I had to say with that dreamy far-away look in his eyes; with his inscrutable face turned seaward; with his hands clasped idly between his knees, and his heels at intervals digging holes in the yielding sand.

I finished at last. There came, at length, a moment when even I felt the theme exhausted, unless I commenced once more at the beginning and went over it all again.

‘Yes,’ he said, when I ended. ‘Yes—’ and his eyes took a longer journey still over the gray rolling waves, that seemed to possess for him such a subtle and mysterious charm.

Suddenly he turned to me with a half smile.

‘There are advantages in poverty, you see, after all,’ he remarked. ‘You have enough money now,

and unlimited leisure at your disposal; but you never again can go through such an experience as that you have just described. It all occurred in Arcadia, in a land of freedom from every conventionality, in a state of life both men and women have to quit when once they begin to gather golden apples, and eat of that accursed tree of the knowledge of good and evil which is set in the midst of the garden of every human life. You were in Paradise then, and you were not aware of the fact; and now the cherubim with the flaming sword keeps constant watch and ward to make sure you never shall return to that state of blissful ignorance and childlike innocence for which you were not then in the slightest degree thankful.'

'But I never entertained a thought, I give you my word—'

'Pooh!' he said, brusquely stopping in an instant the defence I was about to make—the assurance I meant to give. 'We are not in Arcadia now,' he went on, taking no direct notice of my mortified indignation, 'and had better consider the question from a common-sense point of view. The days are past, and you have been lifted out

of that state of life and condition of mind in which it was possible for you to go about with a girl in the way you describe, and no great trouble come of it. No real trouble did come of it, even to you, because I am sure it is better for a man to have loved hopelessly than never to have loved at all. It is just the difference between life and death—between light and darkness.’

I felt what he said was true ; Lord, even in the midst of the sharp agony, I understood vaguely, but certainly, every emotion intended by his Maker the creature should experience, it is best for him to know. A life without love ! a day without sun ! a night without star ! existence without hope ! No ; better any pain than the pain of a numbed heart—preferable to feel the keenest stab than to lie rigid in the trance of catalepsy.

‘But what I want to convince you,’ he proceeded, ‘is that now, when you no longer wander the heights of Islington and pace the easy descents of Pentonville in the character of a gentle shepherd, you must bid adieu to all such pastoral delights as made then at once your happiness and your misery. You asked me a while since if I thought you foolish.

No; but I think you wrong. No man ought to keep dangling after a married woman. I do not care how old he may be, or how young she; no good can come of it.'

'But all I desired was to stand her friend, to be near if she needed help. You know what her husband is; you are well aware she has no one to turn to in her trouble.'

'Granted,' he answered; 'but she cannot turn to you. Let her be in the greatest trouble, in what capacity would it be possible for her to ask your intervention?'

'As her friend,' I said firmly; 'as her true, faithful friend!'

'But you are not her friend,' he insisted; 'you are her lover.'

'Do not say that!' I entreated, for the word struck upon my ear painfully; 'it hurts me.'

'Because you won't believe you are no longer in Arcadia—because you can't realise that you are in the world, in the midst of men and women. For Heaven's sake, look the position straight in the face. You love this woman; then, as a matter of course, you are her lover. You will answer, perhaps, that

she does not care for you save as a friend, which is most likely the case; but do you suppose Mrs. Grundy's tongue will abate one bit of its venom on that account? All you can do for her now is to leave her—to put the silver streak—the streak does not look very silvery from here—between you and temptation. If you return to Paris you will find fifty good reasons why you must see her at once—see her every day. If you stay here you will discover you cannot leave without just saying “Good-bye.” But when you are back in England you will not retrace your steps. You will think, “If I can best serve her at a distance I will remain at a distance, though it break my heart to look on her sweet fair face no more.”’

I did not answer him, for I could not. I looked out over the sea, which at the moment seemed blurred and indistinct before my eyes. He did not add another word, or disturb my reverie, but only scooped up handfuls of sand, and sifted the grains, sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly, through his fingers. At last he consulted his watch, put it back in his pocket, and observing, ‘Well, I suppose, as we have said all there is to say, we may as well

be moving,' rose, and waited for me to follow his example.

But I did not do so immediately.

'Smith—' I began.

'Yes; what is it?'

'Were *you* ever in love?'

He seemed as if he had not heard me, for he picked up a pebble and flung it far seaward without answering.

'*Were you ever in love?*' I repeated, looking up at him as he stood gaunt and ungainly between me and the tossing billows.

'O, yes!' he answered; 'I have been through the mill.'

'Tell me about it,' I weakly entreated. I was in that maudlin hysterical state of mind in which it seems that to hear of another's sufferings must ease one's own.

'No, I don't think I will,' was the reply. 'It was a long while ago. It happened while I was still in time, and I think I must have passed through several eternities since. However, if you want a story, here is an outline for one, which you can fill in at your leisure. I loved and I lost—not a very

original plot ; but toss the human kaleidoscope, and see what pattern turns up.'

'Was she very young when she died?' I asked, puzzled, for he did not speak with much sentiment about the matter.

'She did not die,' he said ; 'there are a hundred means by which one may lose a woman in this world without her slipping quietly into the next. No, she did not die ; she was beautiful, and I—well, no one except Rodewald's fair friend ever thought me anything save very much the contrary. Women like handsome lovers—I am sure I do not know why we should blame them—and, as you may have observed, I am not handsome, so she did not care for me ; flung me over. Not much of a story, but enough for me.'

I do not know if I have said before, my companion was a man who repelled sympathy.

He did not ask for it ; if one offered it he declined the contribution with thanks. I had noticed this before, but it struck me now with a fresh and painful surprise and misgiving. Would the man who made so light of all wounds, who was so uncommunicative about most of the subjects upon which

his fellows were given to enlarge, think contemptuously of a poor creature like myself, who in the time of trial bore himself with such scant courage, and lacked even the dignity that might have impelled him to creep away quietly, and bear his pain in silence and alone ?

I should have done this—most certainly yes—only that the blow he struck was dealt so swiftly and unexpectedly as to break down all old barriers of pride and self-restraint. Taken unawares, the cry so long repressed burst from me almost without my own consent or knowledge ; and now, when the first bitterness of anguish so long pent up, so suddenly expressed, was subsiding, and leaving only the old dull sense of loss never to be replaced behind in its stead, I began to repent me of my confidence, and to wish this uncommunicative man's interest in affairs which really did not concern him had been stated at almost any other time, and in almost any other place, than the hour and the lonely stretch of desolate sea-shore he selected for his purpose.

If he had read my thoughts, as I believe he did, he could not have answered them much more explicitly than was the case.

As we strode along homewards—for his most leisurely pace required me to step out briskly to keep up with him—he brought his eyes back from a long fixed gaze seaward, and remarked :

‘We need not speak any more about this matter, need we? We have said all, I think, there wanted to be said; and we have left unuttered many things which were in both our minds, and of which it is far better mention should not be made. Before we drop the subject, however, I should like to ask you one question. What do you mean to do now?’

‘Do you mean when I return to England?’

‘No, though I was going to talk about that later on. On what terms do you intend to place your—friendship—with her?’

‘There is no alternative,’ I answered. ‘The only thing for me to do now is to write and bid her farewell for ever.’

‘I would not adopt that course,’ he said quietly.

‘Can you suggest any better?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I fancy so. You see, *she* knows nothing of all this—has not an idea of the state of your feelings. Why should you enlighten her? Any talk there may have been about the matter was but

idle chatter. You stop it by leaving. No person besides yourself knows the real state of the case except me, and I am as good as nobody. If you had told your secret to the sea, it would not keep it one bit better than I shall. Make your mind quite easy on that point. There is nor man nor woman in whom I confide. I have my own affairs to attend to, and I shall forget yours by the time I awake tomorrow. In the life of every one there comes a moment when the heart, refusing to bear its load in silence any longer, cries out it can endure the agony no more. I know this is so even in my own experience; but after that one expression of pain, it can go on and bear seven times as much as it endured before. I do not think you quite understand me now; but the day must come when you will realise my meaning.'

'Perhaps so,' I answered vaguely—for, indeed, all I felt was he wanted to soothe my pride and reassure my self-esteem; 'but, meantime, you have only told me what you would not do were you in my place—not the course you should advise me to adopt.'

'Some day,' he said, 'whether soon or late I

cannot say, she will want a friend—one she can appeal to without a fear of giving trouble, or thought of wrong. You would not like to raise a barrier which should at such a crisis prevent her turning to you.'

'God knows I would cut off my right hand first!'

'I am sure of it,' said Mr. Smith. 'Such, then, being the case, take my advice, and when you write—from England—write as if nothing had happened; nothing has, you know, really; keep her informed of your address; correspond regularly, if not frequently; just go on the same as of old, only with the silver streak which looks so remarkably muddy at the moment between you and the only woman you ever loved.'

'Do not laugh at me!' I entreated.

'Laugh!' he said; 'laugh! Would it amuse me, do you think, if I had you laid up on my hands, now, with measles or whooping-cough? And yet it is not more certain if a man does not get over those disorders in childhood he will have them, and badly, in after years, than that, if he does not break his heart in boyhood about a pair of blue eyes or tresses black as the raven's wing, he will eat it out in later

life for the love of some woman. And this woman is one who deserved a better fate than that she found. No, with all your affection, your sorrow for her cannot be greater than my pity. But now we are getting on ground we had better avoid,' he said, suddenly changing his tone. 'So all I will add to what we have already said is this: Do not leave her without a friend. Be as loyal to her in the future as you have been in the past, and if ever you think I can help either you or her, say so without hesitation. The world is not likely to be censorious concerning me; I am so poor a wretch as to be almost beneath its notice. Now let us push on.'

I laid a detaining hand on his arm, for we were walking at the moment so fast I could scarcely get my breath.

'Smith,' I said, breathing quicker than a man who has not left all thoughts of love behind him has a right to do—fact is, of late I had fared better, slept longer, led in every way so much more luxurious an existence than of yore, that, though I looked younger, though the burden of years had dropped in some indefinable way off my outward man, I felt physically actually older than before—'Smith, after a fashion I

am rich now. Mr. Granton has enabled me to lay out some of my money to very great advantage. You know, also, how few are my wants, how very simple a life I lead; and—and—I have several hundreds at this moment lying idle that might be of use to you.'

With a compassionate look, my companion clapped me on the back as he might a boy, and answered :

'What! is that legacy still burning your pocket? No, no; don't offer any part of it to me, for I won't have lot or share. Bless you, I am naturally such a lazy beggar that, if once I began to live on charity and relapse into idleness, I should die in the work-house—and, frankly, I have no taste for the union. If when I am a few years older you have acquired sufficient City influence to get me some quarters in a comfortable almshouse, I shall probably not refuse to avail myself of so desirable a refuge.'

CHAPTER II.

OLD SCENES.

BACK once more in London ; back in the old lodging where, on that never-to-be-forgotten morning in the long-ago past, we breakfasted—she and I together—and afterwards spent the sorrowfully happy day which marked an era in my life.

The house is the same, only shabbier than of yore—some houses in London have a way of growing inexplicably shabbier, dingier, and dirtier on very short notice ; my landlady is the same, and I imagine has not had a new cap during the period of my absence—at all events, though black, it has a look of extreme age and griminess one would have thought incompatible with its colour. She has had a hard time of it, she says (and, indeed, her appearance is such as to suggest the idea the time has been so hard as to prevent her going to bed, and preclude the possibility of washing herself), during the period that has elapsed since I saw her last.

The garden is the same, but the grass is soaked and sodden with rain; the walks are mere pools of water, the haulms of the scarlet-runners are littering the ground, and the creepers trailing their uncomfortable length over the borders, now bare of flower or leaf. There is a good drizzling rain beating against the glass, and the morsel of sky visible from where I sit is as gray and dull and hopeless as London sky can be.

Yet I am glad to feel myself in the old quarters again. Here, at least, I have her memory all to myself. The sweetest, tenderest, saddest recollection of my life is connected with this dull room. It was fine weather then—it is gray November now—and I, though poor, was happy, and never knew it till I awakened from my dream.

We never do know when we are happy, till afterwards. I am satisfied of that. We are only, paradoxical as it may sound, contented when we are wishing for something, when we are stretching our hands out eagerly for that which is just beyond our grasp. I am not happy now—most miserable indeed; and yet how much better off I must be considered in every worldly respect than when I was a

drudging clerk at the beck and call of a dozen masters!

I look in the glass over the mantelpiece, which so often in the days departed held the reflection of a grave worn face of a spare elderly figure, and a different presentment is returned to me. A younger man seems to glance back—and better-looking, too, spite of the frightful distortion which that old wave in the poor cheap mirror always casts over one side of all human countenances—even making *her* sweet cheek appear to be drawn with tooth-ache. A younger man, with the old lines written by thought and poverty almost erased, and other writing traced across his features—travelled, well dressed, less odd in gait and manner—with something which once was part and parcel of himself gone, and something he never before possessed added.

More assured—less satisfied—not so diffident. ‘How improved you are!’ *she* said to me one day; ‘but I liked the old friend best, I think.’

I know now what she meant, though I failed to understand then. Looking in this crazy glass, the change wrought by time and circumstances becomes

suddenly patent even to me. I have lost the simplicity and the guilelessness that kept me happy and contented when I was so lonely and so poor; riches have wrought out their inevitable work, and robbed me of the peace of mind that was mine before Mr. Amriott's legacy came to make Reuben Cheverley, like his neighbours, somewhat suspicious, and a good deal dissatisfied.

The worst of return or meeting after any lengthened period is that it is never the same person that returns; never the same friends which greet; we do not bring the same eyes to look upon the familiar landscape; the thoughts in our hearts are different as we clasp hands. In the pleasant monotony of daily intercourse the inevitable change in mind as well as in body is so gradual as to be almost imperceptible; but when we remain absent for any long time from familiar haunts and people, we are startled and disappointed on our return to find we cannot quite regard them as the haunts and people of old.

I found this the case, at any rate. Places did not seem the same to me. Men and women, too, appeared totally different. When I left my easy-

chair in the accustomed lodgings, commenced the study of human nature instead of books, took to a life of leisure instead of a changeless existence of routine, I found I had lifted my anchor from safe, if unexciting, waters, and permitted myself to drift out upon a very ocean of doubt and regret and perplexity.

The simple faith which had served me so well in a humbler walk failed now to satisfy my restless heart. Constantly I found myself questioning instead of listening; asking impatiently why such things were permitted, instead of obeying the injunction to go steadily on, hoping and believing. My own trials I could bear, but not the trials of others. With jaundiced eyes, I looked out upon the world, and as a doctor sees naturally in the healthiest subject disease, so I, foolish and prejudiced, beheld little save evil and wrong.

Whilst I stood in the valley I was safe enough; but now, mounted on a tiny hillock—a mere worm-cast, as Smith once said contemptuously, when speaking of the height of experience I thought I had gained—I fancied I could see the universe, and was lofty enough to cavil at the ordination of Him who

made the whole of it—valleys and mountains and worm-casts and human beings, and the dumb brutes human beings so shamefully misuse.

My first annoyance in London was not of a sentimental nature ; quite the contrary. It came through Mr. Holway, and I ought to have felt grateful for his communication, which served to distract my mind from the one subject that usually engrossed my thoughts. I did not, however, feel at all grateful. Time, and, perhaps, my niece's ingratitude, had changed my views somewhat about this matter of helping one's neighbour.

'What,' I said to Smith once, when we were discussing Holway and his affairs, 'if one's neighbour won't be helped, can't be helped? if his impecuniosity has become chronic? if, after you have pushed him forward to-day, you find him again to-morrow in the old quagmire of debt and difficulty?'

'I see nothing for it,' answered Smith grimly, 'but to go on helping him. Having once begun, you will find it extremely hard to leave off.'

'But don't you think—' I was beginning, when he interrupted me.

'No, I don't; whatever you think on the old

theme of debt, I am pretty sure to differ from. Yes, I know what you were going to ask. Don't I think Holway ought to live within his income? The man can't. When you go home, Cheverley, do a little rule-of-three sum, and take special notice of the result. How in the name of common sense is a fellow, burdened as he is, to make the two ends meet? The string must give somewhere.'

'But I do not think—I speak, of course, subject to correction,' I added uneasily, for I saw his quizzical glance wandering over my face—'a person ought to incur liabilities he has no means of meeting.'

Smith clapped me on the back.

'When a baby comes into the world it immediately incurs a number of liabilities it has not the faintest means of meeting, and yet few people find fault with the new-born infant for that. It, at any rate, feels quite content on the subject. It lies flat on its back and screams for something it has not got, or it crows with delight because somebody else has taken all trouble off its hands; but it never dreams of jotting down its liabilities on one side, and its assets on another. Now, in his way, Hol-

way is a baby, the only difference being that he does not scream or crow. He is perfectly helpless; after he has tried all he can he finds himself slipping, slipping back.'

'But really—though it is unpleasant to speak of the little I have been able to do—I have tried to help him.'

'I know you have, and you had better have followed his advice and let him alone. If you are not prepared to assist a man who works, and is willing to work, thoroughly, it is no true kindness to lengthen out the pecuniary torture.'

I will say this much for Mr. Smith: he never dealt in compliments, at least to me.

When I returned to England, after that walk along the Calais sands, almost the first thing I heard was that Mr. Holway had been to my solicitors, wanting to give me a bill of sale over his effects.

Those worthy gentlemen considered the matter, and decided the proposed security would be of little use. In the first place, if he were made bankrupt it would not avail me, as at that time such deeds had to grow to a certain age before they became valid;

and in the second, if he were not bankrupt, they knew the bill of sale would involve to me a certain amount both of trouble and expense.

‘You see, Mr. Holway,’ they said, ‘unless a person is prepared to act upon a bill of sale, it is no security to him; it is only a security to the debtor against another creditor.’

‘That is just why I am here,’ he said. ‘There is one of my acceptances coming due, and, unless it is paid, Rodewald, or Rodewald’s principal, will sweep the ground clear.’

‘Even under those circumstances we do not see we could advise Mr. Cheverley to take a bill of sale. Why not let *him* sweep the ground?’

‘I only wish he would,’ answered Holway.

Now, this conversation, when repeated, vexed me greatly. I had hoped, with the help I had afforded, he would be able to ‘pull through;’ and I knew perfectly well even the simple dialogue just narrated would appear, eventually, in a sort of three-volume edition, in my bill, and be charged out, at a length and cost incredible to the uninitiated.

Never having lost the economical instincts of my struggling clerkship, I, therefore, immediately I was

settled again in Islington, wrote to Leytonstone, and begged Mr. Holway to communicate direct with me for the future.

No long time elapsed before a direct communication reached me. It is almost needless to state there was a mortgage over his land; the interest had fallen behind, and the mortgagees meant to foreclose.

Swift on the heels of this letter—whilst, indeed, I was considering what could be done for the unfortunate man—followed another epistle, which ran thus:

‘I have received notice from the office, and shall have to leave this day month. Truly misfortunes never come singly.’

‘Come,’ I thought, ‘here, at least, I may be able to help you to some purpose. I will ask Mr. Fairboy to use his influence in your favour;’ and, forthwith, I wrote a note to Mr. Holway, entreating him not to be disheartened, and stating I should make a point of seeing Mr. Fairboy on the subject at once.

Before, almost, I could have imagined this letter reaching Leytonstone, there came an answer back

from Mr. Holway, stating it would be time and trouble thrown away to try and get his dismissal reconsidered.

‘It was decided upon long ago, I have reason to believe,’ he said, ‘and the board was only waiting a decent pretext to get rid of me. Palmett and Hard-nail are on the direction, and the office, of course, is swarming with *protégés* of their own. If the law business of the “Home and Foreign” is not already transferred from Messrs. Greatchild & Co. it is going to be.’

Certainly, as matters stood, it did not seem as though any interference of mine was likely to produce much fruit; still, as it so happened the premium on the small insurance I had long previously effected for Bessie’s benefit fell due just then, I thought I would call at the office, and put in a good word for Holway, if the chance presented itself.

As I entered the familiar portals, the manager came hurrying in after me, almost catching himself between the swinging doors in his eagerness to welcome my return.

‘And how is Mr. Cheverley?’ he exclaimed,

seizing my hand, and shaking it till every bone tingled with the warmth of his greeting. 'I thought I could not be mistaken. I said to myself, "Surely that is our old friend turning the corner;"' and, having delivered himself of this speech, he held me at arm's length, and contemplated me with admiring attention.

'Not a day older,' he said, in audible soliloquy; 'younger, younger—much younger. But come into my room,' he added, 'and tell me the latest news from the Continent;' which last word he pronounced, in a light and airy way, 'continong.'

I looked round the office, and, though all the clerks' faces wore an almost painful expression of preoccupation and earnestness, I knew the ways of the fraternity too well to doubt what would happen the moment our backs were turned.

However, their gibes and jeers did not matter much to me; so, speaking a few words to those with whom I had been previously acquainted, I preceded the manager into his room, whither he indicated the way by a gracious wave of his hand.

'Have a glass of sherry,' he said; 'you know I always keep a bottle here, so as to take a little when

the directors have been a trifle trying. Don't say no, Mr. Cheverley.'

I did not say no, because I remembered Holway's dilemma; otherwise assuredly that glass of sherry had never been tasted by me.

'And so,' went on the manager quite in a casual sort of way, producing a tumbler and, in order doubtless to put me quite at my ease, half-filling it for himself with the liquor he affected, 'so we are going to lose your friends and our highly-esteemed solicitors. I am very sorry for it—candidly, now, I am truly grieved. The most honourable, the most high-minded, the most gentlemanlike of men: "Take them for all in all, we ne'er," et cetera. Between ourselves—strictly *entre nous*, as you say in France—the changes which have taken place since your accession to fortune are not all to my mind—the office is not what it used to be; and, candidly, if a proposition were made to me to retire on a sufficient pension, I do not think I would stand in the way of a younger man.'

'The office would miss you,' I murmured; for he looked at me so hard, I felt comment of some kind to be necessary.

‘Well, so it would,’ he argued; ‘I flatter myself I have been a good servant.’

‘None could have been better,’ I said, feeling thankful to be able to speak the literal truth. He had proved faithful to the ‘Home and Foreign.’

‘I have nothing to say against the new directors, of course,’ he continued. ‘Men of wealth and position, possessed of business habits, regular, upright, and so forth; but we have our prejudices—you have yours, and I have mine, and they have theirs; you understand me, of course.’

I said I thought I did; adding, with a candour foreign to my general habits, Messrs. Hardnail & Palmett were not persons I should care to be under.

‘Hush, hush!’ he entreated; ‘it is as well never to mention names. Caution, sir, caution has been the rule of my life; but,’ he added, after this general statement, ‘but I am under neither of the persons you mention. I lead them by the nose, sir.’

Here seemed my opportunity.

‘I hope, then, you will exert your influence in favour of poor Holway. I have been very sorry to hear he is under notice to leave.’

‘Yes, it is a bad business,’ said the manager, his brow contracting as he spoke.

‘How did it happen?’ I asked. ‘What has he done or left undone?’

‘He cut his own throat,’ was the figurative reply. ‘I never did care much for Holway. I never had the same feeling towards him as I felt for—for some others in the office,’ with a bland smile and bow in my direction, emphasising the not very obscure meaning he desired to convey; ‘he was always a “hands off” sort of individual; to my mind he lacked tact and manners. But still, his was an old face and a long service; and I have tried—I give you my word of honour, Mr. Cheverley, I could not have tried more for that man if he had been my brother.’

From my knowledge of the manager’s ideas on the subject of relationship, this did not seem a difficult statement to swallow, and I therefore inclined my head in ready acceptance of its truthfulness.

‘I have stood between him and the consequence of his folly times out of number,’ went on the manager, warming with his subject; ‘I have said to him, “Why *will* you try to throw yourself out of a berth? Why *cannot* you be decently civil to your

superiors? Why *do* you let duns and people of that sort lie in wait for you at the door of the office? Why *don't* you endeavour to dress a little better, and to wear a hat a *little* less the worse for wear than that hanging up on the peg? Sir Ahab was saying to-day your hat was a perfect disgrace to the establishment."'

'And Holway?' I suggested interrogatively, as his would-be benefactor paused for breath.

'Holway answered rudely that it did not much matter what he did or what he wore, so long as a set was being made to get him out of the office. "Old Palmett," he said, "wants my stool for a nephew of his wife's, and it won't be long before I get marching orders."'

'The result seemed to imply a considerable amount of prescience on the part of Holway,' I observed.

'Well, I don't know; it is often competent for a man to work out the fulfilment of his own prophecy; at all events, that is what he has done.'

'How did he manage it?'

'Simply enough. The other day, it seems, Palmett had occasion to call close by the Dragon and

Grasshopper in the next street; you know the house, perhaps ?

‘ Yes, ’ I said, ‘ I know the house. ’

‘ Well, as ill-luck would have it, just as Palmett was stepping from his brougham Holway came out of the bar, wiping his mouth, and was hurrying away when Palmett called after him,

“ Hulloa, you sir ! ”

‘ Holway turned, and came slowly back.

“ You’ve been drinking, ” said Palmett.

“ No, I haven’t, ” answered Holway.

“ Don’t dare tell falsehoods to me ! ” cried Palmett, all out in the open street.

“ It is not a falsehood, ” said Holway. “ I have been having some gin-and-bitters ; but that is not drinking. ”

‘ There was a good deal more, but the upshot of the whole thing proved Holway got his orders to right-about-face. I said to him, “ Now, *why* couldn’t you keep yourself cool ? Why *did* you answer Mr. Palmett so disrespectfully ? You *ought* to have considered your wife and family. I am sure if *I* indulged in the same license as you do, it would be impossible to say what would become of *me*. ” ’

‘So I suppose it is quite a settled thing,’ I suggested, as the manager paused, ‘and that your directors would not be disposed to reconsider the case?’

‘No, that they would not,’ was the decisive answer. ‘As I told you at the first, Holway has cut his own throat.’

‘It seems hard lines, too, considering the length of time he has worked for very little money,’ I said. ‘What on earth will he do now? You see, the man must live.’

‘Hum, I suppose so,’ assented the manager doubtfully—perhaps, like his famous prototype, he did not perceive the necessity—‘but, at all events, he need not live on gin-and-bitters.’

I did not make any answer. It seemed, indeed, vain to discuss the question further; so, saying good-morning, I left the office, followed to the door by my friend, who was so delighted with the hit he considered he had made that he repeated, in a whisper, on the threshold,

‘Not on gin-and-bitters—ha! ha!’

As I left the office a feeling of total down-heartedness came over me. Holway’s desk was vacant;

and Cathcart, who had got stout and—if one might use such an expression with regard to any connection of the Palmett clique—bloated, glanced significantly towards the empty place, and, with a sufficiently intelligible gesture, conveyed to me the absent clerk's occupation, and where he might at that moment most probably be found.

I wanted to talk to some sensible person concerning Holway's affairs. I desired to get the taste of that dry sherry out of my mouth, and the memory of the manager's conversation out of my head. As Baxter said, when he saw a poor wretch on his way to the gallows, 'But for the grace of God, there goes Richard Baxter;' so I felt, with a nervous shudder, but for my fortunate legacy, I might, when old and feeble, have been hounded down as Holway had been; the cut of my clothes found fault with, my methodical habits derided, my modest half-pint of beer accounted an extravagance, and the frequenting of secondhand bookstalls—a sin! It all came very bitterly before me, as I wended my way slowly back towards Islington. Every feeling in my nature seemed to rise in antagonism against Messrs. Hardnail & Palmett, and the 'Home and Foreign' generally.

Never previously had I so thoroughly desired to help the one clerk who I knew certainly tried faithfully to do his duty—to make matters smoother for him, and try if he could not be weaned of a habit it was scarcely for me to condemn, still conscious, as I could not but be, of the exceeding dryness of the manager's sherry; and yet I totally failed to see how I could tender any assistance likely to be of permanent service.

'If Smith were but in London, I would take his advice,' I considered. 'I do not know any man whose advice I would sooner take than Smith's.'

But then he was in Paris, and I in dear, dreary, smoky London, which, spite of its dreariness and smokiness, I was growing again to love as much as ever.

'Yes, the Channel parts us,' I thought, with a sigh, as I opened the door of my lodgings, and walked into the parlour.

Could I believe my senses? There, in my own room, in my chair, reading a book I had picked up a few days previously, sat, or rather lay, Smith—his long legs stretched out in luxurious repose, his head resting against the back of the chair, his solemn

face wearing an expression of the deepest melancholy, and my landlady's cat fast asleep on his knee.

'Why, Smith,' I exclaimed in astonishment, 'what in the world brings you here?'

It might not seem a cordial greeting, but it served. When I spoke he gathered his somewhat ungainly figure together, and, rising, grasped my hand with more than his usual cordiality.

'I had business in London,' he said, 'and a message to thee, O king. Nay, do not draw back; I am not going to serve you the same scurvy trick Ehud did Eglon. Sit down, and I will tell you all about her.'

What he told me was of little import to this story, but it refreshed and gladdened me. He said that which he had to say on the subject lying nearest my heart, tenderly and sympathetically. When he had finished, we drifted imperceptibly into other subjects, and at last I spoke about Holway, and the difficulty in which I was placed.

'What am I to do with him?' I asked despairingly. 'You know how earnestly I desire to extricate him from all his troubles, and yet it seems an almost hopeless task.'

Mr. Smith rose, and, plunging his hands deep in his pockets, began pacing the carpet. It was but a small room, and, it seemed to me, the space from door to fireplace, from window to wall, served him but for a single stride.

Perhaps he felt this himself; for, after a turn or two, he stood for a minute silent, looking out into the garden, where the twilight was already stealing down, and then, returning slowly to his chair, threw himself into it once more.

‘There is only one thing you can do for Holway,’ he said, as though no pause had ensued between my question and his answer, ‘and that is to get him to emigrate. If you took him out of Rodewald’s hands this week he would get into them again next. There is no hope for such a man while he stops in England. Talk the matter over with Mrs. Holway, and get some sort of notion of how they are really situated, if you can. It will give you pleasing and sufficient employment for a good while to come, or I am greatly mistaken. The hank of tangled silk in the old fairy tale was nothing, I expect, to the muddle in which you will find his affairs. That is a

nice little crib he owns out at Leytonstone. Have you ever been there?’

‘Yes, once. Poor fellow, he would not like to leave it.’

‘Can’t help himself.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Sure so. Once a man gets amongst the usurers he can only escape by slipping his skin, and very often not even then. Further, mortgaging, like pledging, is apt to become chronic. Rely upon it, were Holway’s place free to-day, he would endeavour to raise five hundred pounds on the title-deeds to-morrow.’

‘What, then, do you think would be my best course?’

‘Do not commit yourself to any. Go and see how the land lies, and then let us talk matters quietly over together.’

It was good advice. I often wondered how a man, capable of giving such sound counsel to others, should have contrived to plunge into such a bog of difficulties as that from which he seemed quite unable to extricate himself, and unwilling to let any one else give him a helping hand. The more

we know of our fellow-creatures the more they seem to perplex us. At all events, Mr. Smith perplexed me. When I began to speculate concerning his antecedents and his story—for that his life held one I felt satisfied—I soon lost myself in a perfect sea of conjecture.

When I went to Leytonstone, which I did the very next day, everything turned out precisely as Smith had prophesied it would do—complication upon complication; interest on the top of interest; loan heaped high on loan; all credit in the neighbourhood stopped; cattle about to be sold for lack of the wherewithal to feed them; ground lying fallow for want of money to buy seed; the children within doors, because their clothes were too shabby to go out; and yet Mrs. Holway quite ready to listen to an exceedingly flattering tale, whispered to her at sight of me, by Hope, that arch-deceiver, the burden of which I soon found to be, a very few hundred pounds would set them all to rights again, *because*, once her husband left the 'Home and Foreign,' his time would be at his own disposal, and the master's eye would cause the steed to fatten and the corn to spring.

From the very depths of despair she ascended almost immediately, and, taking me round the farm, pointed out what could be done with a little money here, and a few pounds there. It hurt me to check her expectations, yet I could not forbear asking how she supposed the two ends could be made to meet without the help of her husband's salary when they had never met with it.

'Well, you see, things are different now,' she answered. 'The children are growing up.'

I had not the courage to add, 'and doing nothing,' but I felt sadly there was little to be done with Mrs. Holway.

'A plucky woman,' thus Smith summed her up; 'but she never sees beyond next week. I don't think she sees beyond to-day. Will face any present trouble with spirit, but has not an idea how to avert the coming of future disasters.'

Finding this the case, I concluded to wait the return of Mr. Holway, who greeted me with,

'You here! I hope you have come to arrange about clearing everything off the place.' It was not a cheerful remark, and possibly he did not exactly intend what he said, or expect me to act up to its

literal meaning ; but it gave me an opportunity for saying what was in my mind, and so I told him plainly that, with all the will in the world to assist him, I did not feel inclined to throw good money after bad ; that I had looked at his land and his stock, and heard a great deal from Mrs. Holway about his embarrassments, and that it did not seem to me—I put the matter as delicately as I could—any good purpose was to be served by struggling on against such overwhelming odds. ‘It is really only lengthening out the torture to defer the evil day,’ I added, quoting Smith quite unconsciously ; ‘for I fear it must come, do what you will to try to avert it.’

‘That is what I told you at first,’ he said. ‘I knew it was bound to come.’

‘But you can soon get another situation,’ put in Mrs. Holway, looking hard at me, though her words were addressed to her husband.

I did not answer, but looked hard at him.

‘No,’ he replied slowly. ‘No, Milly, you are wrong ; I shall not get another situation worth having in a hurry. People want references, and I know pretty well what would be said about me ; besides,’

he added bitterly, 'a berth of that sort unfits a man to undertake other work. If I was turned loose in a merchant's office, I declare to you I should not know what to be at. I am getting an old dog, and it is hard, not merely to learn new tricks, but to unlearn those of years. How long have I been in that office, Mr. Cheverley? a matter of twenty years, I suppose?'

I said yes, I supposed so, though I winced a little—I had felt quite an old stager when first he entered the 'Home and Foreign.'

'And what I am to do I am sure I cannot tell,' he added despondently. 'But I must not be troubling you;' he went on next moment, 'though you are rich now and above the world, I'll be bound you have troubles to bear like the rest of us.'

I could not deny it. I could have told him I had one sorrow, at all events, I found very hard to bear. I wonder whether, if he had known what it was, he would have laughed aloud at the recital of my folly?—he, the man I had tried to help; or rather, I do not wonder, for I know. Those who, like Smith, are able to understand the heartache a man no longer young can suffer are few indeed!

‘The worst of it is,’ said Mr. Holway, instantly reverting to his own trouble, as we are all so apt to do, ‘that that fellow Rodewald will somehow manage to secure this place. He has long had his eye upon it. I saw him one day in the summer skulking along the lane, and taking in every detail. I ran round the back way, and, cutting off a piece of the road, met him. “He was just going to Snaresbrook,” he said; “which was his best way? And so I lived here—really! What a snug little box, and handy besides to the City!” Damn him!’ finished Mr. Holway, with fervour. Indeed, there was a whole Commination Service contained in that single remark.

Now was my time. I had been considering the matter ever since I walked round the farm with Mrs. Holway, and I felt pretty sure, when Smith advised me to come out to Leytonstone, he did so with an ulterior object in his head. If I ever meant to speak out, I felt I must speak at once.

‘Holway,’ I said, ‘why don’t you sell the whole place, stock, lock, and barrel, and emigrate? Your children would be a help to you in a new country, and they must be an expense for many a year to come in England.’

He did not answer me for a minute, but, starting up, walked to the fireplace, which was guiltless of a fire, and leaned his head against the mantelshelf, whilst a dead silence prevailed in the little room.

Then,

‘Who would buy it?’ he asked, in a tone of almost fierce inquiry, lifting his haggard face, across which I fancied I could see the first beams of a new hope dawning. ‘Who would give anything for it, cumbered with the mortgage you know has been eating the heart out of everything it produced?’

‘I would,’ I answered. ‘I don’t want to drive a bargain with you, Holway. I don’t desire your place if you believe you can keep it, and pull through; but if you feel the fight is too much for you, and the battle of life in England too hard, let me buy the freehold, and help you to begin existence again on better lines in some country where living is easier than you have found it here.’

He went straight to the door and opened it. ‘Milly,’ he cried to his wife, who had, poor soul, left us some time previously on hospitable cares intent, as I found a little later on, when bidden to partake of tea; ‘Milly, come here.’

She came all in a flurry, good true wife, not knowing what could have happened.

‘Stand there,’ he said, placing her on one side of a narrow table, ‘and tell me how should you like to go abroad, and cut all this tangle of debt, difficulty, wakeful nights, wretched days, and begin again quite afresh?’

‘I do not know what you mean,’ she said, trembling a little.

‘Tell her what *you* mean,’ he answered, turning to me, and speaking a little rudely, perhaps; but that was ever Holway’s worst fault. ‘Heavens!’ he added, *sotto voce*, ‘it is just as if an angel had come to lead us out of the darkness into light.’

CHAPTER III.

BESSIE'S LOVER.

It was during the time occupied by Mr. Holway in winding up his affairs, transferring his small farm to me, and preparing to leave a country where he certainly had never, within my knowledge, prospered, that I happened to receive a visit from Mr. Dodman.

He came into my sitting-room, announced by the maid-of-all-work simply as 'A gentleman, sir,' and before I could utter a word, had grasped me by the hand, and stated how delighted he felt to make my acquaintance.

'Though I never saw Mr. Cheverley before,' he said, 'I have long known him—known him as a friend;' and he shook my hand again.

Modestly I murmured something in acknowledgment of this too flattering address, no part of which did it lie within my power to return.

I had seen Mr. Dodman often. The moment he

entered the room I recognised him as a person who was always about the City, generally in company with some one who looked more or less disreputable, generally more, rather than less; who greeted his acquaintances in a hail-fellow-well-met sort of style, usually announcing his proximity by a thump on the back, or a hand laid facetiously on the lapel of a coat. O yes, I had seen him in the London streets for twenty years, at any rate; a red-faced, loud-talking, loud-laughing individual, fond of turning into taverns and proposing 'glasses of sherry;' given to consort with men who, whatever else they lacked, generally seemed to have money enough to 'stand treats,' and bet bottles of champagne, and jump into cabs and tear about town, and drive off to the different railway stations, as if their whole time was spent in going to and fro upon the earth, seeking whom they might devour, like a certain scriptural character I need not more particularly mention.

Owing to some peculiarity in my temperament, I find, even in the better ranks of life, the genial man who salutes one with a laugh, and utters some *bon mot* at the very moment of asking after one's health, almost as abhorrent to my feelings as the jovial indi-

vidual who from afar shouts out his noisy greeting, and asks, within the first instant, 'What will you take?'

When I was at the Home and Foreign we had always upon our direction, as a rule, some gentleman considered by the world at large a perfect acquisition, who made puns, who poked irrational jokes at the messenger and porter—irrational, because those functionaries did not dare to return the pleasantry in kind—who waxed facetious if a clerk made a mistake, and threw our manager into convulsions over witticisms so poor a child would have been ashamed to laugh at them.

From causes the reader will wot of, I never could find any fun in these proceedings, and, in like manner, it had been always impossible for me to enter into cordial relations with men who laughed horse-laughs, and stood amicably drinking at the bars of public-houses, and chaffed barmaids, and called the drivers of omnibuses by their Christian names, and went up and down Cornhill and Threadneedle-street arm-in-arm with members of their own fraternity, very much out at elbows, and concocting fresh means of raising the wind.

For these reasons, and others more personal, though perhaps less easy of explanation, I felt by no means rejoiced to make the acquaintance of Mr. Dodman. Unless he spoke very falsely, however—which probably he did, since I found subsequently truth was not one of Mr. Dodman's strongest points—the delight he experienced was more than sufficient to make up for any deficiency on my part.

Had I spent all Mr. Amriott's legacy in feeding the poor—had I denuded myself of every sixpence, and gone about the world as hungry and naked as any old-time saint—had I been a Howard or a Mrs. Fry, Mr. Dodman could not have said or hinted more in praise of my philanthropy.

If a man of his type can ever exhaust himself, which I doubt, my visitor must have achieved that feat within a few minutes of his entrance; and it was impossible to stop the flow of his eloquence, not only because he had a way of talking which bore down all opposition, but because he did not address me direct, delivering his discourse to an entirely imaginary auditor, and cutting from under my feet the vantage-ground of reply.

At length, however, in a lull of his eloquence, I did contrive to edge in a question.

‘How was Mrs. Dodman?’

‘Mrs. Dodman,’ he answered, ‘is as usual, I thank you. She is never well.’

As I looked at him, the thought crossed my mind, he must have absorbed the health of twenty people. My strength would soon have turned to weakness had I been compelled to breathe the same atmosphere as Mr. Dodman for twenty-four hours. It seemed to take the whole air of a room to fill his capacious lungs.

‘And how is my niece?’ I asked, feeling no desire to hear all about Mrs. Dodman’s ailments. From fatal experience, I knew men of this sort have no reticence on medical subjects, or, indeed, on any other.

‘Our dear little “Rosy-posy,” as we call her!’ exclaimed Mr. Dodman effusively, ‘the greatest blessing ever crossed our poor threshold, all life and animation. You have not seen her for some time? No? Well, you won’t recognise her now. She is a lovely girl, positively lovely; as happy as a grig,

lively as a cricket ; being with young people has been the making of her.'

'What transformation has occurred?' I thought ; but I only said I was, indeed, glad to hear Mr. Dodman's report.

'I knew you would,' he answered, in a tone which implied he had been discussing the subject with at least a hundred persons, each one of whom held an antagonistic opinion. 'I knew you would, and—thank you, thank you.' At this moment I managed to interpolate a request for him to be seated. 'And as I was saying,' he went on, with a keen glance round the room in search of any stray decanter or bottle of spirits, 'you will be more glad to hear what I have come to tell you. What do you think of the young lady having made a conquest?'

'Young ladies generally do make conquests,' I answered, awkwardly enough ; for, indeed, the way Mr. Dodman looked at me with one eye cocked knowingly under the brim of his hat, which he had not removed—being, as I supposed, so accustomed to live in taverns, he had forgotten the customs usually observed in private houses—was enough to

have discomposed a bolder man than myself. 'Don't they?'

'Well, in a fashion, perhaps,' he agreed; 'but not such a conquest as this, and quite by accident. There's no position she may not look forward to confidently. You'll see your niece riding in her carriage some day, Mr. Cheverley.' And once again Mr. Dodman, feeling, no doubt, the tap of his eloquence was running dry, looked around him in search of some accustomed stimulant.

To his manifest discomposure I ventured to hint that riding in a carriage did not seem to me to be the be-all and end-all of existence—that it was possible for Care to sit behind even a pair of horses; and, in fine, if the man of Bessie's choice were an honest young fellow, and likely to make her happy, I thought they might very well content themselves with the mode of locomotion Nature has so generously provided for us all.

'He's everything you could desire, and more,' said Mr. Dodman, emerging from the gloom into which the first expression of my 'old-fashioned' ideas had plunged him. 'A handsome, straightforward, honourable, likely young fellow as ever—' Mr.

Dodman paused, evidently at a loss for a comparison, and then finished somewhat lamely—‘asked an uncle to give him his niece. He has a good salary, good prospects. There is not a drawback, so far as I can see.’

On the face of it the matter did undoubtedly bear a fair aspect, but I had my doubts whether under all this smiling exterior there might not be lurking something Mr. Dodman desired to conceal from my notice.

So far he had not said who or what this paragon of a suitor might be, and, in order to get some firm sort of ground under my feet, I ventured to ask his name.

‘When I mention it you will be amazed,’ answered Mr. Dodman, posing himself to watch me while under the influence of astonishment, ‘though you know him very well.’

‘Know him?’ I repeated. ‘I think you must be mistaken; it is not at all likely.’

‘O, but it is,’ he declared, waggishly nodding his head with an air of mysterious superiority, which, at the moment, seemed extremely exasperating. ‘What should you say, now, to a young

gentleman of your acquaintance connected with the Mansion House, and hand and glove with all the City nob, whose surname commences with a C ?

‘Do you mean Cathcart?’ I asked quietly, though I was, indeed, as much astonished as if a shell had exploded at my feet.

‘—I mean—Cathcart—and—no—other,’ he answered, carefully dividing each word from its preceding fellow. ‘I knew you would be thunderstruck. *Now* what do you say?’

‘I do not know that it is necessary for me to say anything,’ I replied; ‘the matter seems to have been settled without the slightest reference to me, and I need not, therefore, express any opinion concerning it.’

‘I thought you would be a bit offended about not being consulted,’ said Mr. Dodman jauntily. ‘That was one reason why I offered to break the news to you myself. Of course, it is natural you should be put out at first; but, Lord love you, it would not have been in reason for the girl to keep her lover waiting for an answer while you were wandering about the Continent.’

There is a way of ‘putting things’ which most

persons find extremely difficult to answer ; and the way Mr. Dodman placed this delicate matter might have taxed the powers of an even more argumentative individual than myself. Nevertheless, in an access of sheer desperation, born unquestionably of the certainty that if I gave my visitor an inch he would at once take many ells, I managed to remark,

‘I had never wandered beyond the reach of the post, and that Bessie had always known where a letter would find me.’

Mr. Dodman leaned forward, stretched out his hand, and tapped me soothingly on the arm.

‘Look back a bit,’ he suggested, ‘we won’t say how many years—there’s no need to be over-particular on the point—to the last time you were in love yourself.’

I felt myself change colour ; the words were so unexpected that they struck me with the force of a blow, and brought the blood, which, at my age, should have flowed more sluggishly, in a crimson torrent to cheeks and brow.

‘Ah, I see I’ve touched you!’ exclaimed Mr. Dodman triumphantly. ‘I flatter myself I know something of the ins and outs of human nature.’

Lord bless you, whether we're young or old, soft as pap or hard as steel with being hammered by experience on the world's anvil, we all remember the little girl we kissed under the mistletoe, or, better still, as we walked home after evening service. Well, to be sure, it makes one feel for the time young again. But, as I was saying, before you kissed the little girl, whoever she may have been, would you have stopped to write to the Continent for leave? or gone home first to ask your mother if you might? No, no, my dear sir,' finished Mr. Dodman, with a twist of the mouth, which was quite characteristic, being at once jovial, persuasive, and superior, 'you wouldn't—you didn't;' and he nodded and winked, and dug two fingers into my ribs.

'But, Mr. Dodman,' I observed, withdrawing myself as civilly as I could beyond reach of his too ready hand, 'the question before us is not—if I rightly grasp your meaning—one of kissing, but of marriage.'

'Now, you've hit it exactly,' answered my father-in-law who would have been, had things gone smoothly; 'that's the point to which we must now devote our attention. So far as billing and cooing

is concerned, we may safely leave the young people to themselves; but when it comes to marrying—by Jove!’ and Mr. Dodman was so appalled by the magnitude of this part of the business that, with the exclamation just recorded, he stopped dead short, and left me to take up the running, if I felt so inclined.

But, in good truth, I did not feel so inclined: knowing perfectly well the end to which all these preliminaries were tending, I thought it best to play a waiting game, and let the lovers’ emissary throw out his best court-card before I trumped his trick.

He looked at me, as if expecting I should speak. I did not speak, however. So, forced to say something, he went on as if in continuation of his last sentence:

‘And yet, upon my soul, I don’t see why they shouldn’t marry at once. They’re young, and they’re fond, and they’ve both got their wits about them. He has tip-top friends, willing to give him a helping hand up any ladder he sets himself to mount. She has an uncle who has made her happiness the aim and object of his unselfish life.’

Even this eulogy of my humble self failed to 'draw me,' as Mr. Dodman would have expressed the matter. What I wanted was to force him to say, in plain words, what he and Cathcart and Bessie expected at my hands. That they had settled the amount of dowry I ought to give, I knew as well as if I had heard the whole matter discussed; but it was not for me to forestall the statement of their wishes. I felt I could wait, and I did.

Mr. Dodman looked at me curiously. Then his bloodshot eyes wandered with watery anxiety round the room in quest of liquor. He was just arriving at a state of mind in which, had any decanter been visible, he would have helped himself without waiting for formal invitation; but his longing gaze met with nothing to satisfy him, so he was forced to fall back upon his own unassisted impudence.

'You don't seem over-gratified, Mr. Cheverley,' he said, in a tone which would have been bullying had prudence not held the speaker in check. 'I am sure I thought, when I told you my news, you would be ready to jump out of your skin with delight. Perhaps you have been looking higher for your niece than a man connected with the best people

in the City—a man, by George, sir, lords might associate with, and feel they were not demeaning themselves; a young fellow of parts, who is certain to get on—certain as that the sun will rise to-morrow morning; handsome, ready, the sort of chap a duke needn't be ashamed to introduce as his son-in-law. There's only one thing against him, and that, I am sure, ought not to weigh with you. He is a clerk; but he is a clerk in an office you sat in yourself, and where you might be still if it had not been for that legacy you deserved so well. Lord knows, though, we can't all expect legacies. I only wish we could. It would not be difficult for me to indicate one house where the master could do with a few thousands, and feel very grateful even for hundreds.'

'I scarcely understand, Mr. Dodman,' I said, 'where all this tends. You have come here to-day very kindly, and possibly at some inconvenience, to tell me Bessie and Cathcart are engaged, and you seem to feel amazed I do not express the amount of pleasure you anticipated. Frankly, the news has not filled me with delight; but, as the matter is settled, it is not necessary for me to damp the hap-

piness of the young people with objections I should, under any circumstances, have, perhaps, no right to raise.'

'Hang me if I know what to make of you!' observed Mr. Dodman, with a smile and laugh, neither of which was as genuine as his irritated tone. 'Come now, be reasonable, do; look at the matter from a sensible point of view. What are you waiting for? What do you expect? I have not a word to say about your niece that is not in her praise; still, I know—and you know—she is not everybody's money. There, I have been frank with you. Do you be frank with me. Nobody can say I don't speak out my mind. I think it was only the second time I ever met Mary Jubb, my wife as is now, she remarked—I had ventured to make some observation she considered rather too personal—"Lor,' you are plain, Mr. Dodman!" "But I'm very pleasant, my dear," I answered, just like that, off-hand; and, faith, she thought me so pleasant when I asked her would she take me altogether, she blushed, and whispered, "Yes," in a minute. Goodness gracious, how these foolish young people do take us back to the time we were

young and foolish ourselves! How is it to be, Mr. Cheverley?’

‘That, I gather, the foolish young people have already decided,’ I answered, ignoring Mr. Dodman’s estimate of himself, his opinion of Bessie, and the pleasing anecdote of his own courtship.

I had brought him to book at last. He could stand what he called this beating about the bush and shilly-shallying between two men ‘who knew the world’ no longer.

‘See now, Mr. Cheverley,’ he finished, ‘it would have been gratifying to me to hear you say, “Well, if they make a match of it, I’ll do so and so;” but still, when a girl’s happiness is at stake, no one shall say I considered my private feelings in preference to her welfare. So, in a word, I’ll tell you what I want to be at. What help do you see your way to giving them, now? Of course, I know she’s your only relation; and being so, I don’t inquire the amount she may expect to inherit some day—some long day, I hope—hence. They are willing to begin in a humble way; but still, you will like, I feel sure, to enable them to start comfortably.’

'So far as that is concerned'—I was beginning, when Mr. Dodman stopped me.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, 'for interrupting you; but have you a drop of spirits anywhere handy? I really have gone through so much lately, that I cannot talk long on any subject on which my mind is concentrated without requiring some tonic. My doctor tells me it is Nature craving for nerve-food, and that I never ought to neglect her appeal. "Just a nip," he says, "when you feel the sinking you describe. The body is precisely like a watch," he explained: "it wants winding up, or it won't go." A very neat illustration, I thought at the time,' finished my visitor, who, as I knew, was in the habit of winding himself up very often indeed.

I rang the bell and ordered what he required; and then, while he proceeded to take not merely one 'nip,' but many, I told him all I felt disposed to do in the way of helping Bessie to 'start comfortably.'

My words evidently affected him like a cold douche, and he was obliged to put a good deal of brandy in his water to counteract the effect of the chill. Quite hospitably he pressed me to follow his example. 'You need it, I know,' he said dogmati-

cally. 'Don't tell me! all men need it;' and then, to show that he was not afraid of carrying his theory into practice, he helped himself to some more—wisely, without waiting to be asked.

'Come, come,' he remonstrated, 'you needn't stand on ceremony with me. We are quite old friends, after a fashion, though we have not spoken till to-day; and you needn't be shy with me. We understand each other. Just wash your throat—do; you'll feel all the better for it;' and he pushed the decanter towards me in what he would have styled, I suppose, his 'rough and ready' manner.

'I have no taste for stimulants, Mr. Dodman,' I said apologetically. 'My head won't stand them.'

'Ah, I am thankful mine will,' he answered. 'I do not know what would become of me if it wouldn't.'

Totally unable to solve this fresh enigma, I held my peace; but he soon brought me to bay again.

'You were not quite serious, I conclude, in what you said a minute ago about your niece,' he began. 'I am sure it is not in your nature to treat anybody shabbily; and I think you'll admit the girl has a right to expect something from you; and, really,

after the hopes I've thrown out to Cathcart, I should feel mighty small if I could report no better success than I have scored so far.'

'I am not answerable, surely, for the hopes you have held out to Cathcart?' I remarked.

'Well, yes, I think you are,' said Mr. Dodman. 'There's an only niece, with a rich uncle; here's a rich uncle with an only niece. How the deuce was it to enter into the heart of man to conceive the rich uncle, who has done so much for fellows who are neither kith nor kin to him, would not hail with satisfaction the opportunity of endowing his only niece with some of his worldly goods?'

'It is a pity you didn't communicate with me before settling my affairs with Cathcart,' I answered. 'However, that there may be no mistake about the matter for the future, it will be better for me to recapitulate what I have already stated. I will furnish a small house for them, plainly but substantially.'

'If they take my advice, they'll go into lodgings.'

'I will allow Bessie after her marriage the same amount I am paying you at present.'

'Keep her in pins and needles, anyhow,' again interpolated Mr. Dodman.

‘And in the event of my death she will have, for her own life, with remainder to her children, the insurance I effected for her benefit many years since, as well as the income I propose to give her now.’

‘You’ll think better of it, Mr. Cheverley.’

‘I shall not think better of the marriage, I know, Mr. Dodman,’ I answered; ‘and my mind is quite made up as regards the money part of the question.’

Mr. Dodman looked at me, and opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he closed it again, having decided, probably, he would be wise to remain silent.

I said no more, and neither did he for a few moments, during the course of which he meditatively sipped strong brandy very little diluted. At last he took up his parable.

‘Now, I’ll make you an offer,’ were the opening words of his sentence; ‘I’ll make you an offer. Lump the whole thing—present income, insurance reversion—all together, and say what you will give down, and be done with it. I won’t fix a value; that is a matter more in your line than mine. If we took the concern to the “Home and Foreign,” what would they estimate the worth—stock, lock, and barrel? You must have the figures at your finger-

ends; you can't have forgotten your average values in so short a time.'

I had thought nothing Mr. Dodman might say could amaze me; but I confess this proposition took me aback. From the first I conjectured a sum down was what he and Cathcart wanted; but such extremely plain speaking, more particularly following so closely, as it did, on the delicate manœuvring of the earlier part of the interview, well-nigh took away my breath.

Had the 'Rosy-posy' of the introductory chapter, 'the greatest blessing' that ever crossed Mr. Dodman's poor threshold—the 'lovely girl, happy as a grig, lively as a cricket, all life and animation,' who was represented as having made a conquest of a gentleman 'hand and glove with all the City nobs'—suddenly been transformed into a nuisance, to be got rid of, even at a considerable price, Mr. Dodman's manner and expression and speech could not have undergone a more complete change.

'Here's such a chance,' he seemed to imply, 'as may never cross your way again. Don't let it slip! What will you give this honourable, handsome, straightforward, likely young fellow to take this Old

Man of the Sea off your hands? Look sharp, now! We won't fall out over a hundred or two; but you must make me a decent offer.'

It would be idle to say my long experience of the City had not brought me, over and over again, into close and unpleasant contact with individuals as like Mr. Dodman as, to quote one of his favourite similes, 'peas in a pod;' but I had been divorced from old times and old ways now for a considerable period, and I felt my visitor's utterances rasp me as utterances had not done previously.

I knew perfectly well the whole thing was a 'put-up' affair; that the two worthies, being so much in want of money, had bethought them that they might as well relieve me of the care of some of mine. I understood, if I held to my resolution, 'Rosy-posy' would have to lose her lover, and forego all hopes of 'driving in her carriage,' unless that conveyance was provided by some other than Cathcart.

It was a gain, however, to have the matter put into a concrete form at last; not merely to guess what Mr. Dodman was aiming at, but to know his own desires from his own lips. I could answer him now with a candour exceeding his own.

'Thank you,' I said, 'for at last coming to the point. If Cathcart wants a sum down with Bessie, he will certainly not have it from me. I do not like the match. I feel satisfied Cathcart is not suited to Bessie, or Bessie to Cathcart; still, if they decide to marry, I will allow her the income I have mentioned, which should help them on their way materially. More I will not do. Nothing shall induce me to pay what you call a lump-sum down.'

'Well, I'm ——!' exclaimed Mr. Dodman.

It was not necessary for me to comment on this declaration; of course he might naturally be supposed to know whether the statement could be relied on as accurate or the reverse. Under any circumstances it was no business of mine; and so I remained silent, while he commenced firing off the following sentences, which he delivered with pauses between, in order to enable me to raise objections or proffer comfort, if I felt so disposed.

'If anybody had sworn it to me I would not have believed it!'

'And a man who has known what it is to be under the thumb of a parcel of purse-proud snobs!'

'It just shows the bad effect coming into a fine

fortune has on people accustomed to consider six-pences and farthings.'

'I'll never be able to look that noble, generous young fellow in the face again.'

'I came on a fool's errand, it seems, and I'll have to go back like a fool.'

'—— it, Mr. Cheverley!' he broke out suddenly, finding I took no notice of his remarks, 'if you have not any consideration for yourself, you might have some for me. How should you like to be in my shoes, and forced to tell Cathcart, instead of being flattered by his offer—an offer an alderman, egad! might feel proud of for his daughter—you hum and haw and chaffer about the matter as if we were a couple of Jews trying to cheat each other over the price of an old saucepan?'

'I am not to blame,' I answered, 'for any disappointment you experience at not finding me as great a simpleton as you imagined. The proposal of which you speak in such high terms recommends itself to my mind in no solitary particular. I have known Cathcart for years, and the more I have known of your friend the less I have liked him.'

'We are all aware, of course, that there was only

one person in the office able to win golden opinions, literally golden, from Mr. Cheverley. If Mr. Cheverley was acquainted with many facts I could communicate concerning his *protégé*, he might not feel so much disposed to waste his substance on strangers, and leave his own flesh and blood out in the weather. A certain plausible sneak, called Holway, can get his cheques and his twenty-pound notes, and his outfit and his passage-money, and—'

'May I ask what all this has to do with my niece?' I interrupted.

'This, sir, that although you choose to desert her, I will not; that I will take care to proclaim her wrongs to the world; that when I hear you spoken of as a liberal and kindly creature, whom anybody can get round and soft-sawder, I will laugh and tell the tale of how he treated his only living relative, leaving her to the care of total strangers—less than kin, but more than kind;' and Mr. Dodman would have pledged his own statement in another glass of brandy, but that I interposed, and, removing the bottle, said firmly,

'If you want any more to drink, Mr. Dodman, you must get it under some other roof than mine.'

He looked at me fiercely for a moment; then, clapping his hat on the crown with a force I expected would crush it in, strode unsteadily out of the room, turning at the door to remark,

‘ You have not done with me yet, sir; you shall hear from me again.’

Greatly exercised in my mind as to the course I ought to adopt with reference to Bessie, I was, over tea, the next evening, explaining how matters stood to Smith, when the door opened and my niece herself rushed in, and, throwing her arms round my neck, kissed me over and over again, exclaiming, ‘ O, my dear, dear uncle! O, my cruel, hard-hearted uncle! No, you’re not—I do not know what you are—but I am the most wretched, miserable girl in all the world;’ and she laid her head on my shoulder, as if with the intention of crying out her sorrows there.

‘ Bessie,’ I said, ‘ do you see I have a visitor?’

It was astonishing the speed with which she recovered herself, and turned towards Mr. Smith, who would have retired from the scene, had I not entreated him to stop. An interview with Bessie alone, in her then frame of mind, would, I felt, be more than I could endure.

‘Now, let me pour out tea, uncle,’ cried Bessie, wiping her eyes, in which there had been no tears, and turning, with that fatal alacrity I remembered so well, to the table. ‘It will be just like old times at the dear Snuggery;’ and, taking off her bonnet and jacket, she seated herself in the chair I had vacated.

‘I suppose we are all friends here,’ she began, after a minute’s general conversation, ‘and that I may say what I came for. I stole out by myself, without telling any one where I was off to. I did not let even Maggie know. Uncle, you’ll give in, won’t you? It will break my heart if Richard does not marry me.’

‘I have not put any obstacle in the way, Bessie,’ I answered. ‘He can marry you if he likes.’

‘But he can’t marry me without some money,’ she replied.

‘I offered to allow you what I consider a good help towards housekeeping,’ I explained.

‘Yes, but that is of no use. It is very kind of you, I am sure, and I feel very grateful, and all that; only what is required is not less than a thousand pounds down. If they have that, he and Mr. Dodman can make at least fifteen hundred a year.’

As my niece spoke I could not resist glancing at Smith, but he returned no answering look; he sat, with his eyes fastened on his teacup, deaf, dumb, and blind, apparently, to the play which was being performed at our end of the table.

‘My dear Bessie,’ I said, ‘if Cathcart and Mr. Dodman told me they could make four times fifteen hundred a year I would not advance any money for the purpose.’

‘But why won’t you?’ she asked.

I declined to enter into the question of why and wherefore with her. I simply stated I had made up my mind upon the question, and told her it was useless to ask me to reconsider my decision.

Bessie then talked as I expected she would talk. Quite unrestrained by the presence of a stranger, she spoke rapturously of Cathcart—glorified his social position; alluded to the balls and parties they were to frequent together; alluded to the riches of his relations; winding up by remarking ‘she was sure as sure I never would be such an obstinate old darling as to refuse to make her the happiest girl in the whole of London.’

In very plain English I told her I did not mean

to pay a thousand pounds in cash down even for that purpose, when she began to whimper, and delicately hinted 'I might as well give her the money now as afterwards, because, you know,' she added, 'I am the only near relation you have in the world.'

I cannot exactly tell what reply I might have made to this speech, which showed the probable contents of my will had been fully discussed in conclave by the Dodman family, but for the fortunate intervention of Smith, who, rousing himself as if from a dream, said lazily,

'May I ask you one question, Miss Richards?'

'Yes; what is it?'

'Has it never occurred to you that your uncle may marry?'

Evidently it never had (anybody, that is to say, except Miss Dodman) for she at once answered, her eyes wide open with amazement,

'Uncle marry! Why, he must be older even than—'

'I am,' finished Mr. Smith composedly. 'I do not think he is much older, but that is a matter of no consequence. I daresay, now, you would not

consider me the sort of man likely to attract a lady's fancy ?

‘No, indeed I should not!’ answered Bessie.

‘We have got into the Palace of Truth at last,’ laughed Smith, turning to me. ‘I also should say not, Miss Bessie,’ he went on, turning to my niece; ‘and yet there is a lady possessed of some money, who has conceived for me as strong an affection as Titania did for Bottom. I am mentioning the fact less from any desire to boast,’ finished my whimsical friend, ‘than to prove there is no age or condition of man in which he need despair of finding some fair creature willing to take compassion on his loneliness.’

Bessie sat turning her teaspoon over and over.

‘She has got a nut to crack now,’ thought Smith, looking at her.

‘But if uncle marries,’ asked Bessie suddenly, ‘what is to become of me? You surely don’t mean to desert me altogether!’ she added, clasping her hands and turning a face, now really bedewed with tears, to where I sat, considering marriage was not for me, but wisely refraining from saying so.

‘No, Bessie,’ I assured her, ‘I shall never

desert you ;' and then followed a silence, which was broken by Mr. Smith, who, saying he must go, rose, and would have shaken hands with me in the room but that I insisted on accompanying him to the door.

' You stick to that,' he advised in the hall. ' I have put a court-card in your hand ;' after which remark he went.

Bessie did not stay long after him. She was very tearful and very miserable, and apparently very little inclined to stir ; but she said she must go, or the Dodmans would wonder what in the world had become of her. Ere she took her departure I presented Cathcart's *fiancée* with a couple of sovereigns, but even this golden ointment failed to mollify the wound Smith's words had inflicted.

There was very little of it, to be sure, and the wound was both deep and long—so deep and so long, she left me quite down-hearted.

Her expectations of fortune had crashed in as suddenly and completely as a good many of Mr. Dodman's speculations.

Bessie had not left me half an hour, and I was just about to put on my coat and hat and turn out

for a stroll under the gas-lamps, when another visitor arrived in the person of Cathcart.

‘How do you do, Mr. Cheverley?’ he began. ‘I thought I had better just come up and talk matters over with you myself.’

I asked him to be seated, and then the whole affair was gone through again. He said he was afraid ‘that ass Dodman’ had offended me. ‘He took it upon himself to call upon you,’ explained Cathcart. ‘I should never have suggested his doing so.’

The additions which that interview made to my former stock of knowledge were—first, that Cathcart was likely to leave the ‘Home and Foreign,’ ‘which is not now a place fit for a dog, to say nothing of a gentleman,’ he explained; and second, that the idea had been for Bessie and himself to reside with me.

It was quite wonderful to consider the manner in which these good people had planned and contrived my future for me. I feel no doubt in anticipation they had already discussed the disease most likely to carry me off, settled the details of my will, and decided on a funeral as plain as possible, because

he 'was always of a retiring disposition, poor fellow.'

Smith drafted out this last idea for me; and really as he spoke I could, in imagination, see Cathcart and Dodman whirling merrily back in the mourning-coach after leaving me, poor cumberer of the ground, safely packed away for ever.

Cathcart, in his interview with me, however, was quiet and sensible enough. He said he was very fond of Bessie, and that he wished to marry soon. He could not do this, though, he added, without help from some one.

'If I leave the old shop,' he said—'and, candidly, I don't think I can stand the life much longer—I want to go into business on my own account, and to do so I shall require capital.'

'But your own friends—' I suggested.

'Will help me when once they think I have no need of them,' he answered. 'It is wonderful to consider the amount of assistance a man can get when he does not want it;' a truism so obvious I felt it unnecessary to make any comment.

He did not say a word about Mr. Dodman going into the business with him, and neither did I.

Concerning Bessie's visit, I also refrained my lips. She had earnestly asked me to keep it secret 'from them all.' I quote her own expression, and even if she had not asked me I should have said nothing about it.

Thus I was master of the position. Each of the three had presented me with a strand of the rope, unknowing that I held the other two. From the first I guessed how matters stood; when Catheart had finished his statement, I knew.

He and Dodman were at their wits' ends. Somehow or other they had got into a deeper rut than usual, and I was the Jupiter they hoped could be induced to come and extricate them from their difficulties.

'*Pas si bête*, however,' said Smith subsequently; which expression I really do not consider in the slightest degree more elegant than its English equivalent.

'No,' I told Catheart when he had finished his plausible statement, 'I do not feel disposed to give my niece anything except an annual income.'

He thought this over for a minute, and then said,

‘You would put the allowance on some tangible footing, I suppose?’

‘O, certainly,’ I agreed; ‘I would place the matter beyond the power of my own caprice’—he smiled in deprecation of the word—‘and so arrange that Bessie should have no power to forestall her income, to assign it in any way,’ I added.

Cathcart tried hard to prevent his face telling tales as he listened to my last words, but it would not do; and, though he left me with the understanding that I might expect him to bring Bessie to see me shortly, I knew the whole affair was virtually at an end, and that already the ‘noble young fellow,’ the ‘pet of the Mansion House,’ was considering what he had better do next.

About a week later, one day, when I returned to my lodgings after a most disagreeable walk through the City, where I had to repair on business, I found a cab at the door laden with boxes, and Bessie in the parlour, which room looked already as if the brokers had been in possession there, instead of their being, as it appeared now, at Mr. Dodman’s.

‘We had to get my things out the back way,’ she explained. ‘Mr. Dodman said it was better for me to

leave at once, as they had nothing to eat themselves, and soon would not have even a roof over their heads. He had been drinking, and swore dreadfully,' added Bessie, who was very fond of entering into details. 'So I am back on your hands, uncle,' she finished. 'I shall be quite happy here.'

'It is impossible you can stay with me, Bessie,' I said firmly. 'I must go at once and see what arrangements I can make for the time being.'

'Send her to Holway's,' advised Smith, to whom I repaired in this dilemma; 'she'll be in her element there.'

I knew what he meant. As one may trace the course of a storm by the damage it has wrought, so every path trodden by Bessie and Mrs. Holway was strewn with the wrecks of confusion and disorder. There chanced to be this difference between the pair, however: Mrs. Holway thought of herself last, if she ever thought of herself at all; my niece's first and last and only thought was of Bessie Richards.

CHAPTER IV.

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

MID-WINTER in the Thames Valley—the middle of a winter when the snow had fallen heavily, and the water was ‘coming down from Oxford;’ when the floods were out, and no one unacquainted with the ‘lie of the country’ could have told which was dry land in summer and which the river. That was the season to see the favoured valley in perfection. Water, water, nothing but water, everywhere—the meadows covered by it; the trees growing in it; the hedges struggling to keep their heads above it. A great sea of sullen, waveless, rushing, moaning, gurgling water; an ever-increasing tide, unable to find the outlet it was seeking, and compelled to spread itself out over the haunts and habitations of men. It creeps under the doors of barns, and sobs its mysterious way across the fields and garden-paths, and up the steps to the highest terrace, where it washes and gurgles against the French casements,

and so at last persistently laps an entrance into the very house. A terrible visitor in its strength, its silence, its swiftness, and its subtlety!

When the Thames is four miles wide at Chertsey it is something to look out on that waste of waters, and listen to the lonely sougling of the spreading flood, which is like unto no other sound that ever falls on the ear of man.

A steady flow, without an ebb; innumerable currents setting in the direction of gardens and orchards, of level mead and by-lane and broad high-road; a lake of muddy water, the monotony of which is broken at intervals by a dash of white froth marking where the flood has chafed itself into fury over the obstruction of a stone or the stump of a tree. Choose a gloomy winter's afternoon, with a pallid sun going down amid stormy clouds behind the Egham hills, the blackness of night travelling fast from the east, casting darksome shadows before it—no man or woman, no dog, or horse, or animal of any description, to bestow one touch of life on the desolate landscape—and the spectator sees before him a scene he will remember when he has forgotten many a fair outlook, many a bright laughing view.

As is usually the case, the 'oldest inhabitant'—a term, to quote Mr. Smith, which is in general synonymous with the 'greatest liar in the parish'—said the Thames had not been so high for twenty years; nay, he went on still further, and asserted the water was nigh on a foot deeper on Runnymede than since the time of King John. Those who resided in the Thames Valley, and were able to go away, left that favoured region in possession of the waters; while those who had houses in London piously thanked Heaven they were not as those sinners down the South-Western rail, who never knew, when they went to bed at night, whether they might not have to take, in a sketchy toilet, to the nearest punt before morning.

All this excitement and notoriety was, it is perhaps scarcely necessary to say, delightful to Mr. Rodewald. Had his cottage been perched on the top of Primrose Hill, he would have declared a palace rent-free should not induce him to take up permanent quarters in Surrey; but, having rented The Snuggery, he was never weary of expatiating to those with whom he came in contact of the delights of living in a well-watered country.

‘There is nothing like it,’ he said enthusiastically. ‘I wouldn’t have missed seeing those volumes of water pouring over the meads for any money that could be offered to me.’

‘Each one to his taste,’ commented Mr. Smith, when this observation was made to him; and then nothing would content Mr. Rodewald but that his friend should repair into the Valley, to be converted.

‘You’ll never see anything like it again,’ he remarked, labouring evidently under the delusion that the whole thing had been a scenic effect got up by Providence out of personal regard for himself. ‘It’s a chance you ought not to miss. Please yourself, of course; but, as a writer, it seems to me this is an opportunity you would be very foolish to let slip. I can’t offer you society, because everybody has fled except De Field, and, as you know, he’s a fellow I find it impossible to fraternise with. Frankford is away, and Posinby—all of them; but though it is impossible for me to take you visiting, I can show you millions of tons of water. From my cottage to Thamesford Ferry is one wide lake, and Milter’s meadows are all submerged, while the Reed is out a mile, I should say, on the other side; it

meets the Thames, at any rate, in Hampsfield Meads. Do come, like a reasonable being, if it is only from Saturday till Monday.'

Thus exhorted, Mr. Smith said he would run down some afternoon and have a look at the Thames Valley under water.

'You were not so enthusiastic about the matter last winter, if I recollect rightly,' he added.

'O, it was nothing last winter there. The rivers only rose sufficiently to make everything sloppy and dirty. We were not living in the midst of a flood, only of a swamp. It is quite exciting, I assure you. Why, from my window, I can see a lake of, I suppose, twenty square miles in size. The inhabitants are going about the streets of Hampsfield on planks laid on the top of casks. I went over there last Monday, and found a regular torrent pouring across the market-place.'

'Well, I'll come down,' repeated Mr. Smith; 'but remember, Rodewald, you are not, upon any pretext whatsoever, to ask me to go visiting. If you do, I shall refuse; and then we are likely to quarrel, and I do not want to quarrel with you if I can help it.'

'Make your mind easy on that point,' said Mr. Rodewald. 'In the first place, there is no one to visit; and in the next, if there were, I should certainly not urge you to do anything likely to prove disagreeable. I have not forgotten the fright you gave me that night at View-Water. No, never again, I decided, will I try to get Smith out of his shell. Each man understands his own idiosyncrasies best. I could not have believed it possible for a quiet dinner to so completely upset a person. The fact is, I suppose, that if you ever went into society at all, you have for so long a time held aloof from it, the excitement, slight though it may seem to others, proves too much for you.'

There was a something in Mr. Rodewald's manner as he delivered himself of this utterance which, airy and intangible as it was, arrested Mr. Smith's attention; but he only said,

'If one's lot in life is to go round and round in a mill, do you not think it is true wisdom to believe such a lot the best and most acceptable that could be offered?'

'Well, perhaps for you,' agreed Mr. Rodewald, with lordly condescension.

‘O, I did not mean for you, believe me,’ answered Mr. Smith, laughing. ‘We are two very different people.’

‘Yes, that is true,’ said Mr. Rodewald, in the tone of one who felt Nature never had cut out such a perfect pattern as himself, and never could repeat the feat. ‘For years, I admit candidly, I have, from various causes, been compelled to live out of the world. So far our cases are parallel; but never believing that the necessity for such seclusion would always continue, I have refrained from finally slamming the door between myself and society. Now, that is what you have done—that is where we differ. You have shut yourself up in your little den and turned the key against your fellows.’

‘And—’ suggested Mr. Smith.

‘I do not know I have anything else to add, except that I shall not attempt to drag you out of your tub. If society is disagreeable to you, why, it is, and we can’t alter the fact.’

‘It is a comfort to find you so tolerant.’

‘Tolerant! There never existed so tolerant a man as myself. Had I not been, our friendship could not have lasted as it has.’

‘Anyhow, it is quite understood I am not to be inveigled out to any entertainment.’

‘No. You shall do precisely as it seemeth best to thee. Now, when and where are we to meet on Saturday?’

‘Nowhere in town,’ answered Mr. Smith decidedly. ‘I shall turn up at The Snuggery some time during the course of the evening; but I won’t bind myself to an hour. I cannot tell how I may be situated.’

‘To hear you talk, any one might conclude you had the affairs of the nation on your shoulders.’

‘I have my own, and I find them quite sufficient.’ After which retort, Mr. Smith lounged out of Mr. Rodewald’s office, where he had called to pay some money.

He did not put in an appearance at The Snuggery till nine o’clock on the Saturday arranged for his visit. With what Mr. Rodewald called ‘his usual indifference to the wishes and feelings of other persons,’ he had taken train for Thamesford, and made his way back to Reedbourne as best he could.

He found it necessary, as he stated, to ‘dodge the floods,’ and was therefore obliged to work a cir-

cuitous route, so as to avoid places where the water covered the high-road for a few hundred yards, and to find by-lanes likely not to lead him too far from the point he desired to touch.

By great good fortune, he said, he had accidentally been able to see the aspect presented by the river from Thamesford Bridge, under the light of a young but bright moon.

‘It was a wonderful scene,’ he remarked; ‘weird and desolate and impressive beyond anything I could have conceived.’

‘You may consider yourself fortunate to have escaped drowning,’ observed Mr. Rodewald. ‘I do not think there is another human being, except yourself, who would have started on such a mad expedition as to walk after nightfall from Thamesford to Reedbourne with the water out.’

‘But I am not drowned, as you see. Where are the children, and how is Miss Lydney?’

Somewhat shortly, Mr. Rodewald said the children had gone to bed, and his sister-in-law was well. Having proposed to act the part of showman to the Thames Valley, with the water higher than it had been since the time of King John, and not a square

inch of Runnymede dry land, he felt naturally incensed at Mr. Smith's coolness in taking the matter into his own hands. He did not think it nice or friendly of Smith to go and see such a spectacle by himself, and he was a little sulky for a time in consequence.

But during supper he unbent. After all, it was pleasant to sit opposite the old familiar face, and hear the remembered tones that had given strength and support to his soul so often—to have an intelligent being to talk to, as a relief from the prattle of his girls, or the household gossip, above which poor Miss Lydney seemed unable to rise.

Yes, with all his faults—and in Mr. Rodewald's opinion he had many—Mr. Smith was good company. He possessed a bitter tongue, and he never looked at anything from a usual and common-sense point of view; but still he is 'something' thought Mr. Rodewald, 'for a man like myself to whet my intellect on.'

When supper was over, and Miss Lydney, remarking it was Saturday and she felt tired, bade Mr. Smith good-night, the last shade of dissatisfaction vanished from Mr. Rodewald's face as he said, after he put a fresh billet on the fire, and begged his friend to fill his pipe,

‘It is quite like old times to have you here again. What an age it seems since you were down before!’

‘Yes,’ agreed Mr. Smith, pressing the tobacco into his pipe as he spoke.

‘You seem to have found some profitable employment.’

‘I have worked very hard.’

‘Yes. You are not looking well.’

‘I am not well.’

‘Why do you overdo it? You know I would assist you, as regards money matters, in any possible way. I have always tried to stand your friend. It vexes me to see you, after a fashion, killing yourself in order to meet your engagements.’

For a minute Mr. Smith did not reply; his whole attention seemed to be devoted to getting his pipe to light; then he said,

‘There comes a night when no man can work. Even in a worldly and pecuniary sense, those words are true; and if I were to rest on my oars now, there might come a time when I should be unable to pull to land.’

‘Why don’t you insure your life, and then you might take things a little more easily?’

‘ My life is insured.’

‘ Why did you never say so before?’

‘ Why should I say so now? I did not insure it for your benefit.’

‘ Surely there was nothing in my question to induce so sharp an answer?’

‘ I did not mean to be sharp. Overwork, and perhaps other matters, have made me irritable lately. Let us change the topic. John Smith is one of those subjects of which I find it possible to hear too much. Tell me something concerning Reedbourne; there is a good soothing sleepy sound about the very name of the place, which seems grateful to my nerves.’

Mr. Rodewald, filling his own pipe, nodded his head gravely. He was thinking,

‘ This is the pass to which laudanum brings a man. How thankful I am I never, in any trouble of my life, took to stimulants or sedatives!’ but he said aloud: ‘ There is not much to tell; we go on much as formerly. Field is rather more bumptious than he used to be; but I rather fancy there’ll be a smash-up at Reed House ere long. He was bitten deeply, I know, over the company Sonnington floated. Fifty thousand, I fancy, won’t see him out of it. He

has three lawsuits pending now, and he only defends them to gain time. Well, I sha'n't lament when his nose is brought to the grindstone ; and I sha'n't be sorry for the Reedbourne tradespeople he lets in. I gave some of them fair warning what they might expect, and if they like to risk their goods after what I said, the fault is not mine.'

'Did you think the Reedbournians incapable, then, of taking care of themselves?' asked Mr. Smith, in mild astonishment.

'They live out of the world,' explained Mr. Rodewald, blandly tolerant of the ignorance to which he felt himself superior. 'I might lose a million of money, and, unless I failed to pay them for the last half-pound of sugar, they would never know anything about the matter. They hear nothing, they read nothing, they know nothing. Except the local news reported in the *Hampsfeld Gazette*, they have not an idea of what is going on beyond the Reed. London might be in Africa, and our places of business in New Zealand, for all they care or can tell about us.'

'Go on,' entreated Mr. Smith lazily. 'Your mental activity is quite refreshing. I always thought nothing was too small or too great for you. So you

really have taken the interests of the country green-grocer and milkman under your fatherly care ?’

‘I could not look on and see men running the chance of losing their little all without speaking a word of caution,’ answered Mr. Rodewald, ‘more especially as they seemed to look up to me, and inclined to place implicit faith in my guidance. So when the grocer mentioned Field owed him a couple of hundred pounds, and added he did not like to ask for the money lest he should lose the custom, but that the want of it was really inconveniencing him, I advised him to press for the whole at once.

“You’ll do as you like, of course,” I said ; “but if you find afterwards you get nothing, remember I warned you in time ; it is better to cry over your goods than after them.”’

‘Well, and did he take your advice ?’

‘Yes ; and is now, I am sorry to say, going up and down the parish cursing me for having given, and himself for having followed, it ; but I don’t mind. I only did my duty. I acted by him as I should have felt obliged had any one acted by me ; and if he chooses to be ungrateful, that is only what one might expect.’

Mr. Smith laughed.

‘This is all delightfully interesting, Rodewald,’ he remarked. ‘Pray proceed.’

‘It would seem,’ explained Mr. Rodewald, ‘that, after waiting and hesitating for several days whether he would or would not ask for his account, he heard Field had sold his pair of carriage-horses, and was going to drive only one in the brougham during the winter. Now, there were reasons for this, quite independent of any motives of economy, as the idiot must have seen, had he only stopped for a moment to consider. He had thought little of what I told him; but selling one horse seemed to his wisdom bankruptcy made visible. Without more to do he started off for Reed House, stopping at the Reedbourne Arms to fortify himself for the visit; and was so insolent, Field wrote out an open cheque for the amount of his account, and told him never to set foot inside the gate again. Next day he went up to town, secured his money, and the reaction began. When he saw the cart of his Hampsfield rival delivering goods at Reed House, he took to his bed; and since he got up has been, figuratively speaking, on his knees before Field.’

‘How fond Field must be of you!’ observed Mr. Smith.

‘There’s no love lost between us,’ agreed Mr. Rodewald. ‘Some day, perhaps, he may wish he had been ordinarily civil to me.’

‘If he had, I suppose you would have left the Reedbourne tradesmen to look after their own interests?’ said Mr. Smith.

But Mr. Rodewald discreetly ignored this suggestion.

‘And Posinby, how is he getting on?’ asked Mr. Smith, after having paused in vain for a reply. ‘And the fair Wickenden? O, tell me about her!’

‘When I saw her last,’ said Mr. Rodewald, ‘she was much as usual. She inquired particularly after you, as she always does—for that matter, indeed, so did they all.’

‘How many persons are included in that “all”?’ inquired Mr. Smith. ‘Excuse me if I seem inquisitive; but it would be agreeable to know the names of those kind enough to remember the fact of my existence.’

‘Well, there are only three of them in that household you know—excluding servants, of course—I meant Mr. and Mrs. Posinby and Miss Wickenden.’

‘Most thoughtful, I am sure. And is Mr. Posinby still going the same pace?’

‘The same pace, only faster.’

‘It must be break-neck by this time, then.’

‘Yes; he has got himself into a nice mess.’

‘And can’t you, with your business knowledge, and fondness for putting your fingers into other folks’ pies, help him out of it?’

‘Really, Smith, if I didn’t know you as well as I do—’

‘Never mind that now. Can’t you help him?’ and Mr. Smith looked curiously at Mr. Rodewald through the smoke they both were making.

‘No. I *may* be able to help her, though I almost doubt it.’

‘I thought her money was tied up, so that she couldn’t muddle it away if she tried.’

‘H—m! I don’t know so much about that.’

‘Have they taken you into council?’

‘I think it has proved a comfort both to husband and wife to talk to me. I see plenty of trouble ahead for both of them; but I really do not exactly know how it is possible for me to interfere in their affairs with advantage.’

‘To you or to them?’ asked Mr. Smith.

‘I don’t want to reap any advantage, I assure you. They have been kind and nice to me; and if *she* was not his wife, and he was not her husband, it might be possible to make some suggestions; but she is so entirely under his dominion, and he is such a wild harum-scarum sort of fellow, that sometimes I feel driven to my wit’s end. The mad wasteful folly of that house is almost incredible. What do you say to the servants drinking up the champagne because there was no beer?’

‘They showed an amount of practical sense worthy of all praise,’ criticised Mr. Smith. ‘But how on earth, Rodewald, did you get to know of this proceeding?’

‘Mrs. Posinby sent for me.’

‘The deuce she did!’

There was such a world of meaning in Mr. Smith’s words, and such an amazed expression in his face, that Mr. Rodewald tried hard to look at him straight, but failed, and went on hurriedly,

‘The brewers had struck over their account, and refused to supply another barrel till they received some money. Mrs. Posinby had no money; and

as beer was therefore not forthcoming, the butler coolly fell back on the champagne.'

'Yes. And Mrs. Posinby?'

'Poor soul! she sent for me in the greatest distress.'

'What did she want you to do?'

'Clear the house.'

'And when you had swept and garnished it?'

'I advised her to go away for a short time. Her health seemed seriously affected.'

'How did Posinby take that?'

'He professed himself very grateful; said View-Water was a tremendous expense, and that he shouldn't care if the floods rose a little more and carried it off bodily into the Thames.'

'From the appearance of the country, more unlikely things have happened.'

'That won't happen. No miracle will intervene to save friend Posinby from the consequences of his own acts.'

'What do you mean—what wickedness has the man been up to?'

'He has done that which will transport him some day,' said Mr. Rodewald, in a calm even voice, as

though he had been merely remarking that Mr. Posinby might, twenty years after, expect to gather walnuts from a tree just planted.

‘Did he tell you this?’ asked Mr. Smith, taking the pipe out of his mouth, stretching his legs till his feet touched the fender, and looking at Mr. Rodewald with a sort of fascinated astonishment.

‘Not in so many words; but I found it out.’

‘O, you found it out? What did you find?’

‘I don’t mind telling you, for I know the matter will go no further; but he has been dealing with the property.’

‘How could he do that?’

‘I have not cared to go deeply into the affair; but somehow he has got money on View-Water.’

‘Is that why he wishes the Thames would carry the place down to Sheerness?’

‘I suppose so; though that would not help him much, unless Somerset House went after it.’

‘Poor devil!’ exclaimed Mr. Smith, whose moral sense was, as Mr. Rodewald often told him, ‘singularly defective.’

CHAPTER V.

‘HEAR, HEAR!’

It was a miserable morning—it might, to judge from appearances, have been Black Monday, with all the impending cares of the week hanging heavy on its mind, instead of Sunday, with banks closed, and duns keeping quiet within their own houses, and debtors trying to catch their breath, and a great silence pervading Reedbourne, where there was nothing in the world to do except go to hear Mr. Rivers discoursing on the Prophets, or walk over to Hampsfield and listen to the clergyman there trying to prove that two and two made five, and enlivening his discourse at intervals with the remark, which he really put almost in the form of a conundrum,

‘What says St. Paul?’

A dull, damp, depressing, heavy morning—warm, oppressive, relaxing, and unhealthy.

When Mr. Smith opened his window, and stood, with arms resting on the sash, surveying the land-

scape as it looked under a leaden sky, with a drizzling rain falling on the damp earth, he perceived a steam rising in the favoured valley, which immediately suggested to his mind the idea of fever and ague made visible. Beyond this mist lay water—miles of it—trees and hedges growing in its midst; altogether a dull and sombre scene, that struck the same sad key the man's own thoughts were pitched in.

The tints of the landscape were no grayer than those which had pervaded the dreary story of his life.

‘Not cheerful, certainly,’ he decided. ‘Now, I wonder if this might be considered a tempting morning for a man to commit suicide?’

He could not settle this matter to his mind, and, turning from the window, determined to refer it to Mr. Rodewald.

But Mr. Rodewald was not, he found, in a mood to receive any suggestion of the sort in a proper spirit. During breakfast that gentleman was very captious indeed. Evidently something had gone wrong domestically; and Mr. Smith swallowed his coffee and buttered his toast and tapped

his egg in a wise silence, wondering what in the world could have happened, for during the whole of his long acquaintance with the household he had never before seen Miss Lydney 'short' with her brother-in-law, or heard Mr. Rodewald snappish in his remarks to the lady who presided over his establishment. The girls, too, were singularly quiet and undemonstrative. When the uncomfortable meal was over, Mr. Rodewald left the room in order to put on thick boots, advising Mr. Smith to follow his example, as the roads were in such a 'vile state.' Miss Lydney, with Annie close at her heels, departed to the kitchen; while Susan only paused for a moment to whisper to her staunch friend,

'Isn't papa cross?' ere limping after her aunt and sister.

Mr. Smith, left thus alone, stood for a moment in the middle of the room amazed. 'What's up?' he thought; and then, turning to the window, he once again commenced contemplating the aspect of external Nature, as Nature can look almost at her worst.

'Aren't you ready?' asked his host, breaking across his reverie.

Mr. Rodewald spoke in an aggrieved tone. His state of mind was that popularly known as being ready to quarrel with his own five fingers.

'Yes, quite ready,' answered Mr. Smith, with a calm gloom, which served its purpose as well as any other mood might have done.

'Won't you put on a top-coat?'

'Too warm,' was the laconic reply.

'Well, then, come along;'

 and thus exhorted, Mr. Smith preceded his host across the hall.

Mr. Rodewald shut the door behind them with a hearty bang, and they walked down the short drive, their feet sinking into the wet gravel, and leaving deep impressions as they passed along.

Once out in the road, Mr. Rodewald found a great deal to say, and he said it. He began with a general statement to the effect that it was a pity people would not be reasonable; he affirmed that the want of common sense—ordinary sense—was the cause of pretty nearly all the trouble and misunderstanding in the world. He proceeded further to observe that, as a rule, he thought women were much more deficient in this desirable quality than men. He said their education was so imperfect

—that their reasoning powers were so poorly developed—that they were so prejudiced and so hard to get out of a certain groove—the result could not perhaps be wondered at, though it was impossible to lament it sufficiently.

So far he had the talk to himself; Mr. Smith remained silent. He suspected what this all meant, but he was waiting to hear.

One of Mr. Rodewald's greatest needs in existence was a confidant. He would rather have told his grievances to an idiot than remained silent; but as even to idiots it is not always safe to expose the secrets of one's soul, he found he had usually either to content himself with generalities, or hold his tongue.

Perhaps this was one reason why Mr. Rodewald's generalities, being mostly barbed with some strong personal feeling, were so extremely disagreeable; when he condescended to particulars, the sting of his utterances lost half its venom.

To Mr. Smith he felt he could unbosom himself; and before they reached the church he explained that Miss Lydney was giving him a vast amount of annoyance.

‘She is acting from the very best intentions, I am sure,’ he said, though indeed he felt sure of nothing of the sort; ‘but I cannot make her understand that she is placing me in the falsest position possible. As I ask her, because I may be unable to buy a new hat at one period of my life, is it absolutely necessary I should go on wearing an old hat for ever? You see, Smith, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ answered Mr. Smith; and he looked mournfully to right and left over the sodden fields and the swollen streamlets.

‘It is really very hard upon *me*,’ continued Mr. Rodewald eagerly. ‘I want to do the best I can for all connected with me. I am sure I try all in my power to make every one in the world as happy as possible. Even in business I know I often go out of my way to do a good turn to those who are not perhaps overgrateful for my kindness. I do not mean you, of course, Smith.’

‘O no, of course not; I quite understand that,’ agreed Mr. Smith grimly.

‘And I feel it too bad, therefore, to have my motives misunderstood in the home circle, and wrong constructions put upon my simplest actions. After

a great deal of trouble—an amount of trouble I should not have taken about any question, except a religious one—I managed to secure a pew in church. I got it as the greatest favour; in fact, Frankford got it for me. I see you look surprised; but the fact is I don't know my information about him was quite reliable; and in any case I suppose a man, no matter how far he has gone wrong, may repent, eh? What do you think?'

'I should be very sorry to think he might not, though I believe he very seldom does,' was the answer.

'Well, we may let that pass, at any rate. He knew I wanted a pew in Reedbourne church, and, being hand and glove with Rivers, got me a nice snug little nook—holds four; rather a tight fit, but still—'

'Yes?' Mr. Smith uttered the word interrogatively.

'Of course, having the seat, I want my family to attend; and do you think I can get Miss Lydney out in the forenoon? No; wild horses won't drag her.'

'But Miss Lydney always preferred going to evening service.'

‘Precisely so; and that is what I now desire to alter. Fact is, Smith—for I really do not think I ought to have any reserves with you—I find that our domestic arrangements are an anomaly in a place like Reedbourne. Of course in town it did not matter; there people knew nothing about our business.’

‘I daresay plenty of people did,’ amended Mr. Smith; ‘only you did not care then whether they did or not, and you *do* care now.’

‘You see, the position has altered,’ said Mr. Rodewald, in semi-apologetic explanation.

‘It has,’ agreed Mr. Smith, ‘as I prophesied it would. You are getting on, my friend; very shortly you will find yourself at the top of the tree.’

‘And don’t you think it is very hard,’ asked Mr. Rodewald, in a tone in which gratification and annoyance were about evenly balanced, ‘that, knowing all the difficulties I have had to overcome, and the way I have slaved to provide for my family and place them in a good station, any one should, now I am, as you so truly observe, getting up a little, try with might and main to pull me back?’

Mr. Smith opened his mouth to speak, but he thought better of it, and remained silent; while Mr.

Rodewald, taking this silence for acquiescence, proceeded solemnly,

‘And I can assure you, Smith, that the fact of my sister-in-law insisting on performing so many household duties with her own hands is, with some persons, a complete bar to social intercourse.’

‘I daresay it is,’ answered Mr. Smith, at the same moment taking off his hat, with a feeling of devout thankfulness, as they entered the church-porch.

Gloom is a totally inadequate word with which to endeavour to describe the interior of the sacred edifice, as it appeared to Mr. Smith on that special Sunday. It seemed to him as if all the mists and fogs and vapours in the whole Valley of the Thames had crept up the rising ground, and taken possession of the building. The painted windows loomed through a steam which would not have disgraced a washing-day. The figures of the clergyman and the choristers—for the state of the domestic atmosphere had caused Mr. Rodewald to be somewhat late in starting from The Snuggery, and service had already commenced—looked an immense way off and as if seen through a transparency. There were not

many persons seated on the narrow and uncomfortable benches, called by courtesy pews. Most of the parishioners seemed to have preferred the comfort of their own firesides to the doubtful warmth of the heating apparatus in Reedbourne Church—an apparatus that could never really be relied on. Those who were present, however, gave cheerful assurance, by a running fire of stifled coughs, of what might be expected later on when the sermon began.

Altogether Reedbourne was at its worst that morning; and Mr. Rodewald seemed to feel this, for the whisper in which he said, 'Do move on, Smith!' was not remarkable for geniality.

Mr. Smith, as usual, had been looking at the windows—those terrible windows—which for him possessed such a weird attraction; but, thus exhorted, he proceeded up the side aisle till he was close beside the pulpit, where, with a just though chastened pride, Mr. Rodewald motioned him into a little pew at right angles with the high-art erection whence Messrs. Rivers and Grey were alternately in the habit of exhorting the Reedbourne sheep not to stray from the beaten track, but continue to pin their faith on perfectly unimportant points of detail,

and prove their sincerity by subscribing, with their wonted liberality, to, &c.

In this pew, which Mr. Rodewald had moved heaven and earth to obtain, his friend felt more truly uncomfortable than he had ever before done in any church. He had not room for his legs; he could not sit sideways, because the seat was so narrow, and the floor encumbered with hassocks; he could not find any place to put his hat; and when he accidentally knocked over his companion's umbrella, Mr. Rodewald looked as much put out as though he had brought down the whole of 'our lovely peal of bells.'

'A coffin made to measure,' said the unhappy man subsequently, 'would be easy and pleasant, Rodewald, in comparison to that egg-chest of yours in church. It may be all very well,' he added, seeing his host was in no temper to hear reflections disparaging to anything he possessed, 'for so admirably proportioned a fellow as you are to be packed into it; but to me, I can simply say it proved a cunningly-devised system of torture.'

Time had been when such a tribute to his stiff sturdy figure, every line of which Mr. Rodewald

thought perfection, would have restored his equanimity, and brought a glow of honest pleasure to his manly cheek: but on that especially gloomy Sunday it was so difficult to please him as to render the feat practically impossible.

‘If things begin to go wrong in the morning they continue to go wrong,’ he threw out as a piece of general information, which Mr. Smith and Miss Lydney might find applicable personally, if they chose to take the hint implied. Mr. Rodewald’s morning had begun badly, and during the course of divine service he felt, to quote his own words, ‘put out consumedly.’

For in church a thing happened which he would not, so he said, have chosen to occur—no, not for five hundred pounds.

‘I do not see how it can possibly affect you in the least,’ said Mr. Smith, on their way home.

‘Well, of course, no one who knows *me*,’ answered Mr. Rodewald, ‘could for a moment entertain the idea that I— But still—’ and he shook his head gravely and sadly, and looked around on the submerged meadows, as if to suggest that, matters having now gone so far wrong with Frantz

Rodewald, it would not much signify if a second Deluge did come upon the earth.

Up to a certain point public worship had that morning droned along in Reedbourne church without any event happening to vary its monotony or startle its decorum. The curate had a cold, it is true; and the choristers, one and all, seemed to have got mist on the chest; while the organ appeared actually to wheeze, and the clack of the bellows at times became terribly distinct; while the congregation could boast a collection of lung and bronchial affections which distanced all competitors. Cough, cough, cough—hack, hack, hack; varied at intervals with paroxysms, brought on, no doubt, by attempts to stifle sounds which would have their way.

In the middle of the Thanksgiving, Mr. Grey paused dead, to let a perfect storm of coughs sweep by; then, before he gave out the hymn, he was good enough to tell his flock that their efforts to control the uncomfortable tickling in their throats, from which many of them seemed to suffer, were really productive of more alarming results than if they let Nature have her own way.

‘It is trying, no doubt,’ he confessed; ‘but we must all strive to be as patient as we can;’ having finished which kindly sentence, for some reason, known best to himself, the curate fixed Mr. Smith—who had not coughed, or thought of coughing, and who wore the expression an early Christian saint might have done on his way to torture and death—with a glance that seemed to say,

‘I have my eye upon you.’

Meeting this glance, Mr. Smith, without a change of countenance, shifted his position, uncrossed his long right leg from his left, and crossed his long left leg over his right.

He had no thought of defiance in the movement, but some who were able to follow Mr. Grey’s gaze construed the action into a sort of insolent defiance.

The service proceeded. The Commandments, as read by Mr. Rivers, were almost inaudible; but that was a usual thing, and did not excite any feeling of surprise. In the Decalogue there was so much of the choir and so little of the Rector that it did not seem greatly to signify how many or how few of the words uttered by the clergyman found their way

out of the chancel into the body of the church. Another hymn precluded the sermon; and when it was finished, and the congregation again settled in their seats, a dead and unnatural silence succeeded to the previous tempest of unpleasant rasping sounds.

The church-going portion of Reedbourne was waiting for the text ere beginning again. If it remained quiet much longer it would get red in the face, and thick in the neck, and—

‘It must be obvious to all present,’ thus Mr. Rivers, in a thin husky voice, which had the effect of being uttered in a forced whisper somewhere in the region of his boots, ‘that it is as painful for me to speak as for you to listen. I am suffering from so severe a cold, and the effort for me to utter even these few words is so great, that I feel my best course is to postpone the address I had meant to give you to-day on the subject of the ten talents, and ask you to come when I am better, and let me tell you my views concerning the responsibilities of those to whom so much has been given.’

Just for a second there ensued an amazed silence—a silence of such utter astonishment that it was not broken by the sound of a solitary throat being

cleared ; then a dreadful, a most terrible thing happened. Through the stillness came a perfectly audible, though softly murmured,

‘Hear, hear!’ an approving, an unctuous, an ironical, a practical ‘Hear, hear!’ and it seemed to proceed from Mr. Rodewald’s pew, which was under the Rector’s very nose.

Each man in the church looked at his neighbour—each man, that is to say, except Mr. Smith. If he had been stone deaf he could not have remained more serenely unconscious ; if he had been blind from his birth he could not have seemed less conscious of the glare with which Mr. Rodewald regarded him.

Mr. Rivers was the first to regain self-possession, for it could not be said that Mr. Smith ever lost his.

With a grand courage, though somewhat tremulously, he pronounced the Blessing ; then the congregation sank on its knees, the coughing recommenced, the ladies tittered, their faces covered with cobwebby handkerchiefs ; the organ pealed forth ; the choristers defiled out of the chancel ; the pews were speedily cleared, the aisles left empty ; and Reedbourne, greatly scandalised, found itself walking

back home at least twenty minutes before it was expected there, while on every lip and every tongue there was but one inquiry:

‘Who could have done it?’

Who *had* done it? For about five minutes there was wild work between Mr. Rodewald and his friend.

‘What on earth possessed you?’ was Mr. Rodewald’s first question.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ said Mr. Smith.

‘Why, of course, it was you called out “Hear, hear!” I’ll venture to say there is not another man in the parish so utterly lost to all sense of decency—I won’t use so mild a word as decorum—as to have committed such a sacrilege; and what I am to say or to do about the matter I am sure I don’t know.’

‘Unless you made the remark—which I confess struck me as wonderfully appropriate—I can’t see why you should do anything. In any case, indeed, I think a masterly inactivity would be the wisest course you could adopt.’

The preliminaries thus over, the fight began. Mr. Rodewald drew his sword and threw away the scabbard. Mr. Smith, who, though he did not care

for battle, could hold his own, not merely stood upon the defensive, but drew blood from his adversary.

While it lasted, the engagement was heavy; but a sort of peace was finally patched up.

Even Mr. Rodewald found that, when his friend meant business, discretion was by far the better part of valour. The whip of Mr. Smith's tongue might be light apparently, but he knew how to lay it on; he did not spare the weak spots or omit to touch the raw. He did not say very much; but what he said was to the purpose, and he might, for he felt just in the humour to speak out the worst half of his mind, have proceeded to give the gentleman who was aspiring to become a power in Reedbourne, some not very palatable hints on the subject, when Mr. Rodewald brought the controversy to a point by saying,

‘Well, if you assure me, upon your word of honour, Smith, that it was not you, of course I must believe myself mistaken, and there's an end of it.’

Mr. Smith laughed scornfully.

‘I wonder what you take me for? Why should I give you an assurance of the sort? Have you ever seen anything about me which should induce you to imagine it possible for me so far to forget

myself as to take to "brawling in church"? If I have no very high opinion of Mr. Rivers, I at least reverence the Master he professes to serve, and should no more think of misconducting myself in His house than of dancing a jig in the throne-room at Buckingham Palace.'

'That's quite enough—more than enough!' exclaimed Mr. Rodewald.

'I am glad you are satisfied at last,' remarked Mr. Smith, 'though what could ever have induced you to impute such an act to me, *I* cannot imagine.'

'But the sound certainly seemed to proceed from my pew.'

'Yes, and there were two of us in it.'

'No one could suspect me!' cried Mr. Rodewald, bristling up again.

'Why shouldn't you be suspected?' retorted Mr. Smith. 'Do you suppose you carry *all* your virtues graven on your face, or that utter strangers can have knowledge of the demon of conventionality which rules you with a rod of iron? But we needn't go over all that ground once more. I don't believe you opened your lips except to sing—which, by the way, you did, for a wonder, very much out of tune—

and, as far as I am concerned, you may believe just what you please about me. I shall not discuss the question further ; and if you don't let it drop, I will go straight back to town. I have no intention of spending a whole Sunday sparring with you.'

'There has been a great change in you lately, Smith,' observed Mr. Rodewald, with glowing cheeks.

'Has there? I am not singular ; other people have changed too, and not for the better ; but I don't mean to go on with this sort of thing. Make my apologies to Miss Lydney, and send my bag on to-morrow to New Inn ;' and actually Mr. Smith was turning off in the direction of the station, when Mr. Rodewald seized him by the arm, and, with many protestations of friendship, respect, and even affection, declared they should not part after that fashion, and, insisting he had quite misunderstood the whole previous tendency of the conversation, gave him to understand nothing was further from his, Frantz Rodewald's, intention than even to suggest the idea he had meant to startle the proprieties of Reedbourne.

It was a very lame, though a full and almost abject, apology that Mr. Rodewald offered. Mr.

Smith accepted it, however, in dumb silence ; and they returned to The Snuggery, conversing as they went on such topics as the aspect of the country under water, the poorness of the pew accommodation in Reedbourne church, the unsatisfactory results achieved by the heating apparatus, the effect such long-continued rains were likely to produce on farming interests, with other subjects of a like dispassionate and interesting nature.

Upon each and all of them both gentlemen could have said a good deal that was excessively unpleasant ; but they were upon their best behaviour ; their courtesy was astonishing ; and the tone of civil forbearance which characterised their conversation over dinner so marked that Miss Lydney, unaccustomed to such amenities as were observed between them, looked occasionally from one to the other in mute astonishment.

In the afternoon no one went out except Mr Rodewald, who marched off through a drizzling rain to admire the effect of the floods as seen from Thamesford Bridge.

He invited Mr. Smith to accompany him ; but that wise man answering he would go as far as the hall-door and no farther, Mr. Rodewald departed to

soothe his perturbed spirit with a pipe and a walk all alone.

Mr. Smith talked to the children and told them stories till it grew quite dusk, and they were sitting in the firelight with no candles when the master of the house returned, saying he would not have missed the sight of the water going over the weir for any money which could have been offered him.

He was in such excellent spirits, Mr. Smith almost imagined he must have met with a pleasant adventure by the way; the contemplation of a hundred tons more or less of water coming down from Oxford and flooding the Thames Valley could scarcely have produced such a beneficial change in his temper as had evidently been brought about by some cause.

During tea he wanted to know who was going to church, and received his friend's decided, 'I am not, for one!' quite amiably, and without any of those allusions to Mr. Smith's inattention to both his worldly and spiritual affairs, with which he was usually wont to point the moral and adorn the tale of his own very different mode of procedure. Annie wished to accompany her father, but Miss Lydney

declared somewhat sharply she was not going to have any tramping through muddy roads, and trouble of nursing sore throats for days afterwards. To Mr. Smith's surprise, Mr. Rodewald expressed his opinion that his sister-in-law was right. 'You know you were complaining of a pain in your chest yesterday, Annie. Better do as your aunt tells you;' which remark, so far apparently from giving satisfaction to Miss Lydney, sent her flouncing out of the room in a manner Mr. Smith had never previously seen her make her exit.

When Mr. Cheverley's tenant had gone off to listen to all the good things that were to be heard at Reedbourne church, Miss Lydney sent the children to amuse themselves in another room, and, taking possession of an easy-chair in front of the drawing-room fire, opened her mind to Mr. Smith. According to her statement, everything was going wrong 'since he,' referring to Mr. Rodewald, 'became acquainted with those horrible people at View-Water. He has not been like the same person,' she said; 'nothing I do or can do, pleases him. He is always finding fault. He is vexed because I can't care for his grand ladies and they don't care for me. I would be ashamed to

keep such a wasteful house and set of idle useless servants as Mrs. Posinby does. Besides, we are not rich as they are. If I had not saved and worked, and never thought of sparing myself, I should like to know how he and the girls would have been off. And he is dissatisfied with the girls, too. He wants them, he says, to be brought up more like young ladies. Annie he talks of sending to school. Why, as I told him, he may as well say he means to break Susan's heart at once !'

Mr. Smith listened in silence ; he did not interrupt the flow of Miss Lydney's eloquence by a word ; and it was not till at length she stopped short in the middle almost of a sentence, and asked pitifully, ' What should you advise me to do ?' that he opened his mouth, and answered ' Nothing !'

She looked at him reproachfully, and he went on, ' You can do nothing, except what it is perhaps too much to expect from any woman—refrain from speech, and wait the progress of events. Ever since Rodewald came to view this place I have anticipated some such change as you describe ; his new acquaintances have only accelerated its coming. The best advice I think I can offer you is to try to accom-

moderate yourself to going up in the world. After all, you know, it is a natural feeling for a man to wish to rise. There was a time in my own life when I hoped to climb—and climb high. Besides, Rodewald is only in the prime of life, as one may say; he is in many respects young—physically I mean; he has worked tremendously hard, and I don't see that any one ought to grudge him social success.'

'I thought you might comfort, or, if you could not do that, I believed you would sympathise with me,' said Miss Lydney reproachfully.

'In my best days I never was much of a hand at putting a false gloss on unpleasant matters, and indeed I don't think it is good policy to do so. Better face an ill than run away from it. You can't put Rodewald back where he was before he took this house, and I am sure what you ought to do is make up your mind to go along with him; because, if you don't, I am afraid he will leave you behind.'

'I can't go with him, and that's the end of it!' exclaimed Miss Lydney.

'A pity,' observed Mr. Smith; and there ensued a short silence.

'He is talking,' began Miss Lydney, 'if he

gives up The Snuggery at Michaelmas, of going into lodgings for the winter at Hampsfield.'

'O!'

'Yes, and the next thing I am sure I expect to hear is that he is going to be married.'

Mr. Smith smiled quite involuntarily.

'I don't see what there is to laugh at,' said Miss Lydney.

'I am not laughing. I was only wondering if Miss Wickenden had stalked him down.'

'No; he does not like her.'

'Then who else is there in or near Hampsfield?'

'Goodness only knows!'

'I don't think he is contemplating matrimony, at all events, at present,' remarked Mr. Smith. 'I fancy he would have thrown out some hint to me of his intentions. Now, if I were you, Miss Lydney, I should try to meet his wishes so far as you can. Get a servant, or servants, as he has a fancy in that direction. Advise him to send Annie to school in Reedbourne or Hampsfield, supposing there is a school in either of those places. Go to church with him if he wishes you to do so, in order to convince society you are not stopping at home to cook the

dinner. After all, it is not much the man wants you to do or leave undone.'

'That may be your idea, Mr. Smith,' said Miss Lydney tartly; and she rose and went away to 'look after supper,' almost as angry with her brother-in-law's friend as she had been with her brother-in-law himself. Over supper, to which meal Mr. Rodewald brought a hearty appetite and the same good temper he had extracted from the sight of the water pouring over Thamesford weir, he was quite particular in his inquiries as to the time Mr. Smith wanted to return to London next morning.

'As early as possible,' said Mr. Smith.

'I sha'n't be going up till the middle of the day,' explained Mr. Rodewald.

'Going to see the floods again?'

'No; though I might do worse.'

'I shall take a last look at them,' remarked Mr. Smith, 'for I mean to walk over to Thamesford and catch a train there.'

If he expected Mr. Rodewald to offer to accompany him in this expedition he was agreeably disappointed. He was next morning allowed to leave alone; and, though pressed to remain longer, and

asked to repeat his visit very soon, it struck him that Mr. Rodewald was well pleased to see his guest depart, and that there was a certain sham heartiness about that gentleman's invitation he had never before noticed.

'If he means to take lodgings in Hampsfield he must be intending to make a pot of money out of Posinby,' thought Mr. Smith as he strode along. 'Well, I don't see why he shouldn't. When a man begins throwing his money to the dogs, one dog may as well have it as another.'

Meanwhile, Mr. Rodewald was walking briskly through the village. It was still early, but he went straight to the Rectory, and, asking the butler if he could speak, for a moment, to Mr. Rivers, was shown into a little waiting-room, generally reserved for the use of those parishioners who were not considered rich enough or grand enough to be made free of the library.

Mr. Rodewald was unacquainted with the ways of the house, never having been inside it before; but still he felt vexed at not being shown into the Rector's presence at once.

The butler said his master was at breakfast, and,

indeed, the smell of coffee and fried ham, and a tray standing on the hall-table, proclaimed the fact.

‘Would you mind walking this way, please, sir?’ asked the butler, again opening the door. ‘Mr. Rivers’s cough is so very bad this morning that he is afraid of venturing into a room where there is no fire.’

‘Humph! it is as cold for me as it is for him,’ thought Mr. Rodewald; but he did not speak; he only followed the butler in silence.

Mr. Rivers was breakfasting in his library, an apartment which combined the advantages of an agreeable seclusion from the rest of the house and a cheerful look-out over the graveyard. No want of heat in that room, where a splendid fire went blazing up the chimney; no lack of company either. Mr. Grey stood on the hearth, Mr. De Field beside the window, and several other gentlemen, whom the new-comer knew only by sight, were also present.

‘How do you do, Mr. Rodewald,’ said Mr. Rivers, rising from table and greeting his visitor with a sort of tempered cordiality, which implied that, though he extended his hand to him as one of

the dearly beloved brethren he addressed on Sundays, he could not forget, while there are many mansions in the next world, there are wide social distinctions in this. ‘*Won’t you be seated? Have you breakfasted? Yes? Ah! Of course you are early! I, myself, am generally early too; but—*’ and here Mr. Rivers coughed plaintively, and all the persons assembled looked at each other, as much as to say, ‘This is a bad business;’ and Mr. Rodewald murmured how truly sorry he felt to find his spiritual adviser’s cold was no better; and then there ensued an awkward pause, during which every person present seemed waiting to be told what had brought Mr. Rodewald to the Rectory.

‘I experience a great awkwardness in opening my business,’ began the gentleman, who certainly at that moment would have given a great deal to find himself back again at The Snuggery, but who, being, as he reflected, ‘in for it,’ assumed a courage he was far from feeling. ‘Fact is, in order that there might be no misapprehension on the subject, I thought I had better call this morning respecting the unpleasant little incident which occurred yesterday morning in church.’

‘I don’t *think* it is necessary, I *really* do not,’ said Mr. Rivers, in his suavest tone.

‘Pardon me,’ observed Mr. Rodewald, ‘but explanation seems to me imperative; you don’t know my friend, or understand how utterly incapable he is of treating any—any one in your position with disrespect. He is the last man in the world to have so far forgotten himself; and I have come here to say, on his behalf, he was not guilty of that astounding and well-nigh inconceivable piece of impertinence.’

There came from the direction where Mr. De Field stood a sound which might have been variously interpreted as a sigh of relief, a scoff of incredulity, or a warning note of battle; but Mr. Rivers never looked towards the window, as he answered deprecatingly,

‘I *think* we had better let the matter drop, Mr. Rodewald; I do *indeed*!’

‘More particularly as we are now all agreed the unseemly interruption did not proceed from your friend,’ said Mr. De Field, addressing the company generally rather than Mr. Rodewald in particular.

‘I am very glad—extremely glad—to hear that

statement,' observed Mr. Rodewald, looking defiantly at his enemy.

With a sneer and a jeering laugh, Mr. De Field turned to a gentleman close beside him and made some remark, which, though evidently uttered in disparagement of Mr. Smith or himself, Mr. Rodewald failed to catch.

'Yes; if you will kindly convey the sense of the meeting to your friend, I shall be so much obliged,' interposed Mr. Rivers, who was clearly getting nervous.

'I am sure,' added Mr. Grey, 'I ought to call and beg his pardon, for I really did think it was he.'

'And so did several of the congregation,' persisted Mr. De Field, 'till I put them right.'

'And now please,' entreated Mr. Rivers, 'we will not say another word on the subject. I feel infinitely obliged to you, Mr. Rodewald, for calling this morning—thank you, thank you;' and, holding out his hand, he would thus, in a masterly manner, have dismissed his visitor, but that Mr. Rodewald, finding he was somehow checkmated, though it baffled him to understand in what way, said,

'But I scarcely comprehend—'

‘As a personal favour, I must *beg* of you, Mr. Rodewald, to say no more about this matter,’ interrupted the Rector. ‘I *assure* you I require no explanation or apology, or anything, except that you will banish the whole affair from your memory, as I mean to banish it from mine.’

‘Explanation! apology!’ gasped Mr. Rodewald, for once fairly thrown off his mental balance. ‘Good Heavens! do you take me for the culprit? I, who would as soon have thought of cutting my throat as so misconducting myself! I, who—’

‘Pray excuse me, Mr. Rodewald’—it was Mr. Grey who spoke—‘but don’t you see how you are agitating our beloved Rector? he is in such a delicate state of health he cannot bear any excitement. You know how dear he is to us all—how kind and considerate; and I am sure you will forgive me asking you to be considerate also. You want the discussion ended, don’t you, sir?’ he went on, addressing Mr. Rivers, who had sunk into an easy-chair, and, from its depths, murmured plaintively, ‘Yes.’

Then arose in the room a buzzing chorus to the same effect, which somehow carried Mr. Rodewald to

the door, whither he was accompanied by Mr. Grey and three other gentlemen.

He wanted to tell them in the hall how utterly innocent he was, but the executive would talk of nothing but their 'dear Rector's' state of health.

There was no one to argue with, no one to brow-beat, no one to threaten. Most courteously, and as if the whole four felt very sorry for him, Mr. Rodewald found himself, by the dint merely of gentle moral force, turned out on the wet gravel, to consider what he had made by his motion, and to swear to himself that, if ever the chance offered of balancing accounts, he would not let it slip by unimproved.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS WICKENDEN'S SURMISES.

MR. SMITH'S chambers, on a second floor in New Inn, consisted of two rooms placed side by side, and a wide hall which was in its way really another apartment. In this hall, on a certain dull damp day in the early spring of the same year when Mr. Rodewald expressed himself in such enthusiastic terms about the water in the Thames Valley, a printer's devil sat waiting till the author, who was writing within, should see fit to bring him out that bundle of copy for which the 'compositors were standing still.'

This was the usual form memoranda to Mr. Smith assumed; from which it will be concluded either that he did not hurry over his work, or that he had more work to do than he could get through.

The boy had been waiting a long time in a silence unbroken save by the noise made by the progress of a rapid pen over the paper, when on the

outer door there commenced a modest but continuous rapping. It was a very timid and irritating sort of tapping, such as a woodpecker might have made if it had expected a lion to jump out of the trunk of the tree on which it was operating.

‘Come in!’ shouted Mr. Smith through the door of his sitting-room, that stood half open. ‘Come in!’ he repeated, finding the tapping went on and that no notice whatever was taken of his permission to enter.

‘See who that is, will you?’ he called to the young gentleman with an exceedingly dirty face and torn jacket, waiting for copy; and then, before the boy could do his bidding, fairly losing his temper at the feeble and exasperating knocking, he took three long steps to the door, flung it wide, and beheld—Miss Wickenden, in a state of shyness, nervousness, confusion, maiden bashfulness, feminine tremor, which altogether transcended any former experience of that fair charmer; Miss Wickenden, with her head a good deal on one side, her ringlets out of curl, an unusual colour in her elderly cheeks and a deeper colour still at the end of her aquiline nose, her knuckles upraised as if in the act of tapping

at the door which had been so suddenly thrown wide; Miss Wickenden, palpitating, fluttering, 'ready to sink through the ground' with shame, and yet striving to greet the unexpected apparition of the man she sought with a sickly deprecating smile; Miss Wickenden, the last person in the world Mr. Smith expected to behold on his landing, and a person he certainly did not wish to behold there or anywhere else.

'Miss Wickenden!' he said, too much astonished to say more.

'Yes, indeed,' she gasped out. 'I *hope* I have not done something very dreadful. I *thought* you would forgive me. I wanted to speak to you so much, and I—'

'Won't you walk in?' suggested Mr. Smith, whose wits were now restored to him; and he gallantly ushered her across the antechamber—where the boy, who had resumed his seat, sat dangling his legs and holding a ragged cap in both his hands, as though too rare and precious a possession to be rashly trusted out of his own keeping—and into the inner room—the holy of holies, as Miss Wickenden, judging from her manner, seemed to consider it.

‘Pray excuse me for one moment,’ he said when his visitor was seated—not ‘too near the fire’ and with ‘her back to the light.’ ‘The lad from the printer’s is waiting for this; I will just make up the parcel and get rid of him, and then I shall be quite at your service.’

To state that the expression with which Miss Wickenden regarded Mr. Smith, as he hurriedly sorted over the written sheets and placed them in order, was rapturous, utterly fails to convey an idea of the reverential, almost worshipping, devotion depicted in her face. For her to see him thus—at home at work, in a loose morning-coat, with his slippers down at heel, with his papers strewn carelessly about, and the ink still wet in his pen—was too much happiness. She sat with clasped hands and adoring eyes, while Mr. Smith, busily engaged in putting his manuscript into ship-shape, was wondering ‘what the deuce had brought the woman there.’

‘Now, Miss Wickenden,’ he said, when, having despatched the boy and made fast the outer door, he reëntered the sitting-room, and took up his former position by the table, ‘to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for the honour of this visit?’

Miss Wickenden raised her eyes to the ceiling, and her lips moved, though no sound escaped from them. Judging from her expression, she might have been engaged in silent prayer, but Mr. Smith knew better. Mentally she was apostrophising his numerous good qualities—in a transport of gushing rapture she was invoking Heaven's choicest blessings on his head.

Mr. Smith sat balancing a penholder on his left forefinger, and waited patiently till it should seem good to the lady to speak. He knew very well she had not come there to contemplate him, delightful though she undoubtedly found that exercise. More serious matter, he felt convinced, lay behind, but he did not intend to drag it out of her by any cross-examination.

'She is more anxious to talk than I am to hear,' he thought. 'She'll begin shortly;' which in effect Miss Wickenden did, heralding the approach of words by sundry little coughs, indicative at once of shyness, modesty, and reluctance.

'I am sure I don't know how to apologise sufficiently,' she said, with a graceful hesitation and a touching confidence.

‘Pray do not try,’ suggested Mr. Smith. ‘I hope it is unnecessary for me to say that it will give me great pleasure if I can be of the slightest service to you or Mrs. Posinby.’

Ah, if he had only stopped at the ‘you,’ and left Mrs. Posinby’s name out altogether, how happy Miss Wickenden would have felt! But, then, she considered he might deem such a statement, under the circumstances, as lacking in delicacy.

‘Thank you—thank you so very, very much!’ cried the lady; ‘it is almost entirely on that poor child’s behalf I have ventured to take a step which my devotion to her interests alone could excuse; for I am sure I need not tell you, Mr. Smith, I would never, never have committed the indiscretion of coming to your chambers on my own account.’

Mr. Smith looked at his visitor, and inclined his head gravely. His manner was that of one who should say, prudence was an excellent quality in a woman.

‘It was only,’ went on Miss Wickenden, doubtless reassured by the grave respect of her true love’s manner, ‘after long deliberation I determined to consult you. I felt’—with a pensive and inquiring

smile—‘ I ought not to allow any foolish fears or scruples with respect to placing myself in a false position in the eyes of one whose opinion I value so highly, so *immensely* as I do yours, to deter me from doing my duty where Ethel was concerned. Though I say it, Mr. Smith, I always have considered her before myself.’

Still balancing the penholder, and apparently vitally interested in his occupation, Mr. Smith managed to murmur, ‘ Only what I should have expected ;’ ‘ Such affection is creditable to both ;’ ‘ Your devotion must touch Mrs. Posinby sensibly.’

‘ That is precisely the point I am coming to,’ answered Miss Wickenden, putting her handkerchief to her eyes. ‘ There *was* a time when Ethel understood I had sacrificed my life to her ; but things are changed now. I believe at this present minute she regards me as—as—her enemy.’

‘ Why should she do that ?’ asked Mr. Smith, laying the penholder down on the table, and loosely folding his hands together, as he bent a little forward to regard Miss Wickenden with more attention than he had yet exhibited.

‘ Because some one has come between us—’

‘ O !’ said Mr. Smith.

‘ And his name is—but no, I won’t mention names just at present. I want you first to tell me your candid opinion of Mr. Rodewald.’

‘ Good Heavens, Miss Wickenden, you might as well ask me to tell you of my own knowledge the source of the Nile!’

‘ But that is ridiculous,’ exclaimed Miss Wickenden pettishly. ‘ You must understand the nature of a man with whom you have been, and are, so intimate.’

‘ I don’t think that follows, Miss Wickenden. The fact is, women are fond of the sort of analysis you indicate, but men are not. For one reason, we are too busy; for another, the wisdom of trying to understand our friends seems to me, at any rate, very questionable. If they are pleasant and congenial, if they enable us to pass a sunshiny day happily, and are fairly staunch in a wet one, what more do we want?’

‘ A good deal, I should say,’ amended Miss Wickenden.

‘ Well, it is entirely a matter of taste, which we need not discuss now. As for Rodewald, he has been to me an agreeable acquaintance, and, on occasion, a kind friend. I never thought of writing a treatise on him, or I might have found myself in a position to answer your singular question with a greater degree of exactness.’

‘ It is no laughing matter to me, Mr. Smith,’ said Miss Wickenden reproachfully.

‘ My dear lady, if you would only be kind enough to explain your meaning, I think we should get on a great deal better.’

‘ My meaning is this,’ answered Miss Wickenden, goaded to a confession she desired to have indefinitely delayed. ‘ Since *your* friend Mr. Rodewald has become so intimate with *my* friend, everything seems to be going wrong between Ethel and myself. She is capricious, fretful, unjust.’

‘ Am I to understand you attribute these changes—if, indeed, they are changes—in Mrs. Posinby’s nature to the influence of Mr. Rodewald?’

‘ Yes, distinctly. Till he essayed the post of vizier, prime minister, head adviser, what you will,

Ethel was content with *my* advice, *my* sympathy, *my* assistance ; but now—O, dear me !

Mr. Smith meditatively regarded Miss Wickenden, as she concluded her speech in this inconsequent manner, emphasising her last words with a toss of her head, and a pursing up of her thin lips.

‘And supposing,’ he suggested—‘which, however, I do not admit—that these painful results have been caused by Mr. Rodewald’s interference, how do you imagine I can set matters right? You have not even told me what Mr. Rodewald does to prejudice Mrs. Posinby against you.’

‘He has constituted himself captain of the ship,’ explained Miss Wickenden ; ‘he is all-powerful ; his word is law ; he has established an influence over both husband and wife which to me is, I confess, inexplicable.’

‘He is an exceedingly able man, you must bear in mind.’

‘Mr. Smith, is he an honest one?’

Mr. Smith smiled.

‘Well, certainly, Miss Wickenden, your speech is not flattering,’ he said. ‘Why do you imagine he

should be otherwise? Surely you do not believe he would pick a pocket or rob a church?’

‘No, I do not,’ she answered; ‘but there are other and worse ways of being dishonest than that. If he has no interest to serve, why should he meddle in affairs that are no concern of his? If he is really anxious to benefit Mr. and Mrs. Posinby, why does he not induce the former to amend his ways, instead of doing all he possibly can to separate Ethel and myself?’

‘It is difficult for me to reply to your last question; but, as regards the former, I have been given to understand the man does not exist who could prevail on Mr. Posinby to reform.’

‘No one could ever accuse me of undue partiality for Louis Posinby; but he is a prince, a king, in comparison to Mr. Rodewald!’

‘Poor Mr. Rodewald! What has he done to incur your displeasure?’

‘I’ll tell you what he is doing, Mr. Smith: he is playing his cards, playing a deep, deep game—a game so designing, if I were Mr. Posinby I should order him out of the house, and never suffer him to reënter it!’

In undisguised amazement Mr. Smith stared at his visitor.

‘I am not an inquisitive man,’ he said at last, ‘but I confess you have piqued my curiosity. What design do you suppose Mr. Rodewald has conceived?’

‘Are you unable to guess?’

‘Totally. I am utterly at sea as to your meaning.’

‘Yet it is plain enough. He intends to marry Mrs. Posinby!’

‘But he can’t. In the present imperfect state of the English law, a lady is not permitted to have two husbands.’

‘Well, you will see. I cannot tell you how I feel even hinting at such a thing; but, remember, Ethel would be a great catch, a *very* great catch, for a person in his position.’

‘But, my dear Miss Wickenden, the thing is impossible. A man can’t marry a lady who has already a husband, unless—’

He suddenly stopped, and looked hard at Miss Wickenden, who, coyly averting her eyes and drooping her eyelids, and skilfully manipulating her handkerchief, murmured *pianissimo*,

‘Yes, that is my trouble, Mr. Smith; that is what is literally breaking my heart!’

‘You are quite mistaken,’ said Mr. Smith decidedly. ‘You wrong Rodewald. Whatever faults he may have, I can say positively I know he would not commit a sin such as you indicate. You may make your mind quite easy on that score. Rodewald will never cause a scandal between husband and wife.’

‘If I could only possess your faith!’

‘You may, then. I don’t say that, in serving Mr. Posinby, Rodewald may not be serving himself as well; but he means no treachery as regards the wife. It is a pity you were not plain with me at first, Miss Wickenden, and I could have relieved your mind sooner. You may put that notion on one side utterly; it has not the slightest foundation, in fact.’

Miss Wickenden sighed heavily; then she said, with a pathetic smile,

‘There is one other thing I want to say before I go, if I may. I wish to say it now, as I may never enter these dear quiet rooms again.’

If she expected Mr. Smith to ask her to repeat

her visit she was disappointed. If he had spoken out his mind he would perhaps have said that, while discretion was a beautiful thing in all women, it was more peculiarly beautiful in those who had attained to the sere and yellow leaf period of existence; but he made no answer to her hint, except to remark he should be sorry if she left without mentioning any other matter she might have in her mind.

‘You will not be offended?’ she entreated.

‘It is impossible for me to answer that question till I know what you are going to say,’ he answered; ‘but I am not easily offended, and I feel sure you would not hurt me willingly.’

‘Willingly!’ she repeated; and her tone was so gushing, Mr. Smith instantly repented him of his utterance. ‘No, *indeed, indeed* I wouldn’t—you know I wouldn’t!’

‘And what is this great matter?’ he asked, with an affectation of liveliness which was far from real. ‘Nothing so dreadful as the last, I hope?’

‘No; it is only this: in the course of conversation, Mr. Rodewald has indicated—nay, why do I not speak plainly?—Mr. Rodewald has said, quite

straightforwardly, that— O, how am I to express myself!

‘That I haven’t two sixpences to jingle together, perhaps,’ supplied Mr. Smith.

‘Well, something of that dreadful sort—you know his brusque, bluff, rude way; and what I wanted to ask you was this. Dear old Mr. Harridge left me a certain sum of money.’

‘Yes?’ said Mr. Smith, as Miss Wickenden paused, overwhelmed with shame at her own audacity. ‘Why, I might be proposing to the darling fellow,’ she reflected; and, indeed, she was making a very long step in that direction.

‘And, of course’—she hesitated for a moment, and then proceeded—‘I have spent little or nothing since the kind creature’s death, and the interest has been added to the principal; and I have never lent any of it, though Ethel—it may seem incredible, but it is true—has more than once suggested I should intrust it to the keeping of her wild spendthrift husband; and really, now, the sum is not so very insignificant, and—and—O Mr. Smith, do, pray, help me! I cannot go on!’ and, in an access of modesty, Miss Wickenden covered her face with her

hands, and left Mr. Smith to take up the burden of what was to follow.

Just for an instant he paused. If he did not feel very much obliged to, he felt sorry for, her. She was, at all events, offering him all she had in the world; and, though the 'all' did not seem much worth in his eyes, the remembrance ran through his mind of the old proverb, which advises us not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

'If I read your kind words aright,' he said, 'you want, generously, to offer to lend me—'

She made a gesture of dissent, and gasped out, 'No—give—give—'

'Lend me,' he repeated, resolutely refusing to hear this amendment, 'a legacy, which I am sure Mr. Harridge could not have bequeathed more judiciously. I will not try to express my gratitude, because I cannot, but I feel your goodness sensibly. At the same time, I should be an even poorer creature than Mr. Rodewald's friendship represents me if I were to take advantage of your trust and inexperience. Follow my advice, Miss Wickenden,' he added, smiling, 'and lend your money to no one;

and when you marry, have it strictly settled on yourself.'

'I shall never marry,' answered Miss Wickenden mournfully. 'In all my life I have only met one person—' and she put out her hand hesitatingly.

Mr. Smith took it without any hesitation at all, and shook it heartily, but with an air of dreadful unconsciousness,

'Whoever that person may be, he ought to feel grateful for your good opinion.'

'I don't think he is,' almost sobbed Miss Wickenden, as her 'affinity' released the hand he had taken; and then somehow it was all over, and she was going down-stairs with her veil drawn close over her face, and Mr. Smith, standing in the middle of his room, was exclaiming,

'Thank Heaven, that matter's settled!'

Then he took a turn or two from window to door and from door to window.

'Daisies and buttercups with a vengeance,' he thought; 'innocence and dewy meads, and all the rest of it into the bargain. Why, I've lived in this wicked world, within ten years, as long as that fair

enchantress, and such a notion as she propounded concerning Rodewald would never have crossed my mind. Rodewald a Don Juan! Bless and save us! I think I must go and call on Cheverley after that, in order to restore my faith in my fellow-creatures.'

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE FERRY.

IF the 'great work,' on which, according to Mr. Rodewald, his friend had been engaged for so long a period, and which, as far as Mr. Cheverley's tenant could discover, never advanced a page nearer to completion, chanced to be a novel, it might have been supposed that the constant amount of study Mr. Smith devoted to the German's character was given with the artistic view of rendering one at least of the personages portrayed as lifelike as possible.

Mr. Rodewald was, in fact, a mental puzzle Mr. Smith never wearied trying to solve—a moral kaleidoscope he never tired of shaking. Though the bits of glass in his nature might be the same, the combinations they presented were ever fresh and new; and, though rarely, indeed never, beautiful, proved far more interesting to Miss Wickenden's latest affinity than the contemplation of virtue,

goodness, and sweet simplicity could, by any possibility, have done.

For it is a fact—lamentable, perhaps, yet true—that, constituted as we are, if there were no sin in the world men would find it somewhat stupid. If we did not know evil we could not appreciate good. All the powers of the human mind are scarcely called into action merely to outwit guileless innocence; but even a shrewd intellect is strained to guard against the wiles of a clever and unscrupulous adversary. Beggar my neighbour can scarcely be considered a mentally exciting game to follow; but put a couple of good men down with a chessboard between them, and—what then?

Mr. Smith regarded Mr. Rodewald as a player of extraordinary merit, and watched his game with unflagging ardour and admiring appreciation. Of course he knew he would win, but he delighted to follow the movements of his pieces; to observe his discomfiture whenever a pawn was captured; to see him steal cautiously up for checkmate, and then, when his plan was discovered and frustrated, take his knight off in some quite opposite direction, as though his previous attempt had been the last in

the world with which he meant to produce the effect imagined.

Now that he was getting almost out of his dear friend's clutches—now, when, by dint of well-nigh inconceivable toil, and bare living and stinting, not merely of every possible luxury, but what most persons would have deemed actual necessaries as well, he had reduced the once formidable mountain of debt to a comparative molehill, and dared to think what he had paid in the way of gigantic interest; the valuable time he had lost in loitering about the City to see Mr. Rodewald, who, at one time, like other great men, was often not to be met with, inclining rather to keep waiting than to wait; the price for which he had sold his labour in order to avoid having to ask for favours, from one who always exacted a price for them in meal or in malt—Mr. Smith began to regret he had not, in days departed, been able to bring a calm and judicial mind to bear on the Rodewald enigma, that he had permitted many chances of studying his character to slip by him, that he had taken so many things for granted, and failed really to trace streams of rare interest to their fountain-head.

For all these reasons, and, perhaps, because he was a man who could not bear to part lightly with any old possession, even if that possession were not so good as might be desired, Mr. Smith once again began to what Mr. Rodewald called 'drift'—that is, he often deferred the 'simple' matter of 'arranging' his impending bills till the eleventh, or, indeed, half-past eleventh, hour, and then asked for help, with an assurance which, as his friend once told him, 'bordered on impudence.'

He was not, as formerly, often asked down to The Snuggery, Mr. Rodewald evidently considering his powers of self-denial might prove unequal to the task of saying no; and he was not now wanted there, either to go out to dinner, or to talk to, concerning the iniquities of Reedbourne.

Mr. Cheverley's tenant had changed all that. He was as much *au fait* with the manners and customs of Thames Valley society as though he had been weaned on palms, begonias, and *entrées*, and sucked in small-talk with his mother's milk. In a dress-coat and a white tie he felt quite as easy as when clothed in a suit of hoden gray. He had taken a first instead of a second class season-ticket,

and felt more at home in the View-Water landau than he had ever done behind that intractable St. George, who was now ignominiously earning his daily bread between the shafts of a butcher's cart, driven at express speed by a bareheaded youth without a whip, who yet produced effects in the way of clearing the Reedbourne roads that scared old ladies, and scandalised mothers who did not desire the untimely death of their unpromising, pasty-faced brood.

Nevertheless, as there are persons who cannot understand even their prayers unless they utter their petitions aloud, so Mr. Rodewald, feeling occasionally his thoughts and aspirations too vast to be pent within the limits of his own mind—great as that mind was—could not help feeling glad when the occasional visits of Mr. Smith to his office in the City afforded opportunity for that sharpening of iron which, upon the best authority, we are informed, man is to man.

Hearing Mr. Rodewald talk, declaim, like Saul, breathe forth threatenings, and prophesy after the fashion of a previous Saul, Mr. Smith satisfied himself the fair Wickenden was indeed utterly mis-

taken, and that no plot for the destruction of Mr. Posinby's domestic peace, so far, at least, as his wife chanced to be concerned, was afoot.

The strongest trait in Mr. Rodewald's nature, to which even the love of money, save as a means of ministering to his master passion, was secondary—the desire for power, and determination to obtain it—had led him to seize the View-Water connection as the best rope he had ever before been given the chance of handling.

Circumstances alter cases. The surroundings of a man's life influence him more than the cleverest and most capable person in existence would, perhaps, care to confess. Had Mr. Cheverley never advertised The Snuggery to be let furnished, and Mr. Rodewald, going down to view, never met with a 'flat' for landlord, he would most likely have sent his children down to Southend or some Hertfordshire farm for change of air; and, retaining his unfurnished part of a house at Islington, as times mended, centred his ambitions on becoming rector's churchwarden or guardian for the poor, and upraising his voice at vestry and committee meetings. The great possibilities presented by the Valley of the Thames had,

however, demoralised him, as it has an unfortunate habit of demoralising many more worthy persons. From the moment he took tickets for self and friend at the Waterloo Station the deteriorating process began ; and it was enough for him to look at The Snuggery in order to regard it as the fortress whence he would sally forth to ravage the fair county of Surrey for position, society, and consideration.

‘ There are very few men who could have done what I have,’ he said once to Mr. Smith.

‘ There are very few men who would,’ amended Mr. Smith ; but this was in the after days, when there was war to the knife between the two men, when even the semblance of peace had ceased, and Mr. Smith flung back the proffered hand, and Mr. Rodewald said,

‘ Just what I might have expected !’

At the period when Mr. Smith went searching after the View-Water secret, if there were one, the pair were friends, so far at least as outward seeming. To say that Mr. Rodewald did not want his old acquaintance down at The Snuggery as formerly is merely to observe that other times obtained amongst

the daisies and the buttereups, and other manners with them.

The man who is more than welcome at one period proves *de trop* at another. Mr. Rodewald had gone a long way ahead since that memorable Easter Sunday when he silenced Mr. De Field's 'bawling' with a wink, and Mr. Smith had, if anything, gone back.

He was 'queerer, more crotchety, less reliable than ever,' decided Mr. Rodewald; 'more likely to get a person into serapes;' which was an extremely ungrateful and inconsistent idea on the part of that gentleman, inasmuch as he did not in the least believe Mr. Smith took act or part in that little 'hear, hear' matter; while, moreover, he (Mr. Rodewald) pledged his word, as a gentleman, a German, a Christian, and a Reedbournian, that his friend was totally incapable of so insulting one whom all the world must respect, namely, their excellent Rector, Mr. Rivers.

He said this and a great deal more to Mr. Grey, betwixt whom and himself a species of unholy alliance had latterly been struck up. Mr. Grey listened in silence. He had his doubts about that grim-

faced long-limbed man some one told him was 'on *Punch*;' and though the verdict of the whole clerical party in the parish eventually went in favour of Smith and against Rodewald himself, Mr. Grey, who perhaps knew more of the De Field faction which led the van than his soft-spoken chief, secretly inclined to the opinion that, let people think what they pleased, the 'comic' man was the culprit.

With the concurrence of his excellent Rector, who, next to tithes, loved peace, Mr. Grey had, after that unfortunate interview at the Rectory, 'edged up' to Mr. Rodewald, walking with that enterprising gentleman to the station on the occasion of his rare visits to London; looking out at the Reedbourne and Waterloo Stations for his new friend, who, though a first-class 'season,' was wont, on such occasions, to so far descend from his pecuniary eminence as, with a touching humility, to travel third in the company of the Reedbourne curate, who ordinarily took a book with him, so that he might not have to enter into familiar converse with any of the poorer order of sheep he was, by a complete fiction, supposed to tend.

On these occasions Mr. Rodewald was asked

many curious questions, which at first he put down to a laudable interest in matters which really could not at all directly concern the Reverend Lionel; but it very soon dawned upon him that Mr. Grey's spirit of inquiry regarding writs, legal processes, the powers conferred by her Most Gracious Majesty upon solicitors, judges, commissioners, sheriffs, sheriffs' officers, and suchlike, had been roused to action by some much more personal feeling than abstract sympathy, or even a great compassion for that 'poor Mr. Gresham, whose home, I am given to understand, is in the hands of brokers.'

It was while all these changes, and many more too numerous to mention, were in progress that Mr. Smith sought Mr. Rodewald's office more frequently than of yore, and heard several facts and conjectures about various matters which it did not then seem to him were calculated materially to influence the life-story of either of them.

Mr. Rodewald was specially irate concerning the way 'that thief Holway had jockeyed Cheverley out of the Lord alone knew how much money.'

'I don't profess,' he said, 'to feel extreme sorrow about the affair, because my good landlord is so un-

mitigated a prig one really cannot weep bitter tears at a little of the starch being taken out of his shirt-front ; still, he ought to have known better. Holway is a fellow I should like to see up at the Mansion House for obtaining money by false pretences. "Wife and children, children and wife !" that was always his cry. Used to come to me, smelling of gin, bemoaning his ill-fortune, and so forth. "Why, man," I told him once, "you've bartered those daisy-meads of yours over and over again to the distillers for half-quarters of your favourite liquor."

'It was a nice calculation,' observed Mr. Smith.

'Well, and, you see, the ground isn't worth twenty pounds an acre as ground, and it's not ripe for building—won't be this many a year, so many houses are being run up on the Leytonstone-road—no use attempting anything of that sort. If my people had got the land, there's just one way they might have recouped themselves. I had the notion all chalked out, even the plans drawn.'

'Had you, now?'

'Yes ; and I do think it might have enabled them to pull themselves home, and leave a margin of

profit; but *he'll* find the concern a dead loss, and serve him right.'

'You can't put him up to your dodge, then?'

'No; why on earth should I? As he has sown, let him reap. He won't even sell me those barren fields of his down at Reedbourne, and I'm sure I made him a fair enough offer.'

That day Mr. Smith left the City exercised in his mind. 'What could Mr. Rodewald's Leytonstone project have been which Mr. Cheverley's money had knocked on the head? He puzzled himself over this question sorely till one day, in the columns of the *Times*, his eyes chanced to light on the prospectus of 'The Stratford and East Middlesex Cemetery Company (Limited),' and amongst the directors the name of F. Rodewald, Esq.

'H—m!' thought Mr. Smith. 'I will sit down at once, and leave directions I am not to be buried there. Living or dead, Rodewald would take one in if he got the shadow of a chance.'

But for ever the Posinby enigma remained unsolved. With all his endeavours—and Mr. Smith really did, after a fashion, exert himself to fathom the mystery—he never succeeded in finding out what

the unfortunate sinner who, in an evil hour, married that 'gentle trusting Ethel,' had really done or left undone.

Mr. Rodewald hinted at forgery, theft, misrepresentation, misappropriation; but he totally refused to descend to particulars. And Mr. Smith could only gather, from the statements of all parties, that Mr. Posinby was awfully afraid of something, that he felt he held his liberty by the slightest thread, and that therefore he was making the money spin, and betting and drinking more than ever; and that Mr. Rodewald was his truest friend, and had been installed as manager of affairs in general, and comforter of that poor dear creature Ethel in particular.

With both of which arrangements every one, from the lawyers down, seemed satisfied, except Miss Wickenden.

'That woman lays herself out to oppose me,' said Mr. Rodewald wrathfully. 'You were wise, Smith, to have nothing to do with her—a foolish, jealous old hag, who can't, or won't, see I am trying to keep the husband out of gaol and the wife from the disgrace he would bring upon her. She does not

like new ways, she says, and the old times were best, and so forth. Old times, indeed !' And with a contemptuous gesture Mr. Rodewald took up a pencil and threw it indignantly upon his desk.

'You must remember,' urged Mr. Smith, in defence of his absent love, 'all ladies are Conservatives.'

'If you said all ladies were fools, you would be nearer the mark !' retorted Mr. Rodewald, with much more decision than gallantry.

Of course he knew there were reasons why the Wickenden alliance was never likely to come to anything, and felt, therefore, he need not strive further to 'arrange' that match.

Mr. Smith laughed, and went back to New Inn, pondering as he paced the stony-hearted streets.

Singularly enough, he was seeing a good deal in those days of that hopeless, wretched, irreclaimable sinner Louis Posinby.

The vagabond course of his own uncomfortable life took him into byways which are not usually all traversed even by such a Bohemian as himself, and thus, quite in the way of his business, it chanced that, at a certain club whither he was then obliged

to repair—not in the least of his own good-will—he ran across Mr. Posinby, who accosted him with effusion. He could not be blind to Mr. Posinby's mode of life; he could not shut his ears when that unfortunate wretch told him what he had lost, spoke about the odds, betted wildly, madly. He grew very intimate, through some subtle sympathy, with this man, who was so poor a creature; but he never learnt what he had done to bring him within the grip of the law, if the law liked to stretch out its arm and seize him.

Once, indeed, Mr. Posinby propounded the vague query whether he, Mr. Smith, believed Mr. Rode-wald was the sort of chap a fellow might depend upon for getting him out of a devil of a mess? But as Mr. Posinby was exceedingly drunk at the time, Mr. Smith did not care to pursue the question further, and simply acted the part of good Samaritan by accompanying him to his hotel.

Nevertheless, he pondered over the mystery, till one afternoon he felt so exercised in spirit about the whole matter he exclaimed,

‘D—— the Thames Valley, and everybody it contains!’ a sort of Commination Service Mr. Smith

would have felt a good deal surprised had it produced the smallest result.

Just at that moment a tap came to his outer door, and, without waiting even for the usual 'Come in!' it opened, and Mr. Rodewald entered.

He was almost breathless; he had his hat off, and was mopping the perspiration from his forehead.

'Thank Heaven,' he said, 'I have found you! Go down instantly to the "Universal," and tell Posinby he must not attempt to sleep at View-Water to-night. Let him get off to France without a moment's delay. Tell him I am working for him heart and soul. *He will understand!*'

The cabman, who tore along the Strand in the direction of the 'Universal,' seemed to imagine life and death hung on the wheels of his hansom.

'Gone, sir, just gone to Waterloo,' said the club porter, in answer to Mr. Smith.

'Waterloo Loop!' cried Mr. Smith, running down the club steps; adding, as he jumped into the vehicle, 'drive like the ——!'

Certainly, on the score of speed no fault could be found. The way that cab went down Parliament-

street, and across Westminster Bridge, and along York-road, and up the incline to the Loop, where it stopped with a bang enough to loosen every screw in its frame, Mr. Smith never forgot.

Flinging the man a royal fare, he rushed on to the platform.

‘Thamesford—I haven’t a ticket,’ he said breathlessly to the policeman at the gate; and then, almost before he could think, he had sprung into the first compartment of a third-class smoking-carriage, the door was banged, and the train off.

On they rushed, through Vauxhall and Clapham Junction, with no stop till they came to Barnes; then on, and still on, across that lovely bit of the Thames at Richmond; past fair English homes, through orchards mellowing with summer fruit, through park and demesne, through wood and mead; and then sleepy Thamesford, with one porter and a lame station-master to greet passengers; and outside the station the View-Water carriage, with the servants, in Posinby livery, to touch their hats to their master, and Mr. Smith standing very pale and erect on the platform, looking for Louis Posinby, whose end had come.

He was a handsome fellow still; and as he walked along with his pleasant face, his sunny smile, his merry brown eyes, his easy confident walk, his extended hand, Mr. Smith's heart yearned over him.

'Well met!' exclaimed Mr. Posinby, with that winning cordial manner Mr. Smith had never yet found different; 'come and dine at View-Water. Wherever you are going, come first to me; you must dine somewhere.'

Twice Mr. Smith tried to answer, and twice the words he had rehearsed to himself so constantly on the way down stuck in his throat.

Even at last, it is doubtful whether he could have spoken them, had not Mr. Posinby himself assisted at their birth.

'What is the matter, man?' he said; 'you look as if you had seen a ghost!' Then suddenly, 'Did you come down here—for me?'

'Yes—Mr. Rodewald—'

'My God!' And they stood for a moment still and silent.

'You are not to go on to View-Water,' said Mr. Smith. 'If you wait here I will get rid of the

servants ; then we can settle what had best be done.'

All the passengers were already gone. The one porter had retired among his lamps to read the *Police News* ; the lame station-master was limping along his garden-paths, looking at his scarlet-runners, and a bed of feathery asparagus adorned with bright red berries and almost ripe for the destroying knife ; engine-driver and stoker were shunting the train, which went no further, on to the up line of rails ; and the guard was leisurely shaking a green flag, a demonstration of which it was exceedingly difficult to see the benefit in so desolate a spot ; in the neighbouring stubble a pheasant was scolding his wife for keeping such late hours ; over the whole landscape peace seemed to brood. The old church tower at Thamesford looked gray and worn against the soft evening sky. Nature was in one of her tenderest, loveliest moods, smiling with pensive sadness on her erring child, who should see her fair face, he had so often flouted, as it was at that moment never again for ever.

The whole scene cut Mr. Smith to his very soul. A great pity, a divine compassion troubled the wells

of his heart, and stirred up everything that was best in his nature.

Side by side he and Mr. Posinby walked slowly along a country lane leading inland from the station; then, after a short time, returning alone to the platform, he studied the bills of the South-Western main line, jotting down in pencil some memorandum concerning the trains from Reedbourne, as he mastered the contents of the time-table.

‘Yes, that is your plan,’ he said, when he rejoined Mr. Posinby; ‘you have plenty of time and to spare to get the next train from Reedbourne to the Junction, and you can wait there till the Southampton express picks you up; then, of course, it is all plain sailing—*if you must go!*’

‘If I must go!’ repeated Mr. Posinby, surprised by the tone no less than the words; ‘there is no choice in the matter.’

It was a trying position, yet Mr. Smith could but confess this wretched sinner quit him like a man. Though about to flee from the justice he had outraged, the laws he had broken, there was no craven faltering in the steady gaze of those brown eyes, the mirth in which was quenched for ever; no quiver

about his lips, though had he been dead they could not have been whiter; no cowardly skulking in his gait, or unseemly haste in his movements. No; he was one of those who, when the worst comes, can face it with a quiet dignity; who, though they have erred, and gone God, their Maker, only knows how far astray, are able, when the evil day of reckoning dawns, to accept their punishment with such grand composure, their guilt is almost forgotten in admiration of the manner in which they accept its penalty.

Swifter than any lightning-flash all this swept through Mr. Smith's mind, and then he answered,

'Remember, I know nothing of what all this means. I can only feel sure you are in trouble of some sort. Yet, ignorant as I am, I advise you to pause before you refuse to face it. If guilty, better endure the stripes than elect to go a wanderer over the earth like Cain, but without Cain's protecting mark on your forehead; if innocent, put your trust in God and the right, and God and His right will not deceive your trust.'

'Why do you say this to me?' asked Mr. Posinby.

'Because I—I who speak to you—did not trust

to God and His right, and have consequently paid a price I should not wish my worst enemy to have to count down coin by coin. I never wronged a man of sixpence, and yet the grain has been eaten out of all the best years of my life ; because for the sake of those most dear to me I elected to bear the burden of a sin that was none of mine, to maintain silence about a shame I had not caused, the folds of which, nevertheless, have stifled all that could make existence worth possessing.'

No description can give an adequate idea of the repressed passion with which these words were uttered. The agony of the years, the tale of the days which had come and gone, been got through somehow, been faced and vanquished, spoke in the voice so low and troubled ; in the eyes, deep in the depths of which lay a terrible sorrow ; in the rigid muscles, and the stern compulsion the man put upon himself as he uttered a warning, drawn from an experience so bitter, none, save The Almighty, knew how His creature had passed through the wild waves of its well-nigh overwhelming waters. For one brief second Mr. Posinby, looking at him, forgot the extremity of his own need, forgot everything, save a

vague wonder at the trouble humanity can bear ; then, in a full tide, his own difficulties flowed again over his heart, and he answered, ‘ But I—it is different with me.’

‘ Well, and if it be, face the worst. I don’t care what that worst may be. See here, Mr. Posinby,’ and he touched the fashionably-cut coat, in one buttonhole of which a dainty flower had been, by some terrible irony, an hour previously jauntily placed, ‘ if it’s money—and I do not suppose it can be anything else—the matter, I feel quite sure, is not incapable of arrangement. What should it profit any one to lock you up, unless he thinks by so doing he would get what you owe him? Even as I speak, I feel a certainty coming over me that all you want is a business man to take the matter in hand. I don’t care what you have done ; short of murdering somebody, a person in your position, with a wealthy wife who adores him, ought to be able to make terms, and I am sure you could do it too.’

Straight and steadily those handsome brown eyes, out of which all the merriment had faded, looked at Mr. Smith as if to read him through ; then said Mr. Posinby, with slow distinctness,

‘Spite of all Rodewald says, I believe you are a right good fellow, and I’ll think over your advice. Just now I am sure the best thing for me to do is to put the silver streak between harm and myself; then, if you will come to me across the Channel, we can talk matters over, and see whether anything is to be done. If not, I had better go over the herring-pond. Anyhow, I promise you I will make a clean breast of it. I will begin at the beginning, and tell the wretched story through to the end. One word more, and then we will start. I know your time is your money, and—’

‘I am not so poor,’ interrupted Mr. Smith, ‘but that I can afford to give my time, as you would give your money. Now we had better be moving.’

Retracing the steps they had taken, they walked from the station to the Thames adown a road lined and shaded with trees—past old Queen Anne houses, with trim lawns and a wealth of flowers; past gardens, where the apples and pears hung golden on the boughs; across a foot-bridge, underneath which a stream, that in the winter inundated the parish, trickled slowly; past the old church tower and the graveyard, where lay those whose little day was over;

past big pretentious mansions, where both men knew pretty young girls lived, who braided their hair and attired themselves for conquest; past cottages, where the poorest rooms fetched fabulous prices at that time of the year; past inns, which had no good quality save being close upon the river; past the sunny suburban residences of town-men, who, having bought a bit of land, had brought a City residence down from London and placed it in the midst of most incongruous surroundings; past a backwater of the Thames, along a lane which, till quite recently, had been a mere cart-track, bordered with common-land, where tethered goats still browsed like lambs; past a red-brick dwelling covered with creepers; and then—the silvery Thames, with two swans sailing down stream to their ait near the bridge below; the sun glistening on the water, the bulrushes standing tall against the opposite bank, willows dipping their branches in the river, a canoe and an outrigger going merrily down with the tide, and, from the Surrey side, the ferry-boat crossing slowly. A fair scene,—one to strike the fancy and live in the memory. It will be many a long day before Mr. Smith forgets that summer's

evening, with the sun going down behind the Egham hills.

‘ Good-bye.’ It was Mr. Posinby who spoke.

‘ God bless you!’ answered Mr. Smith; and they wrung hands in a lingering grasp more eloquent than words.

He was gone. They had said all they had to say, the boat was already two lengths from shore, but still Mr. Smith stood motionless. The river lay in the sun’s bright beams calm as a golden lake. On tree and bush and grass and reed and floating lily-leaf there were the thousand tints of green which make the chief charm of that exquisite land. There was a solemn hush in the air. Behind the tower of Thamesford Church a dark cloud was coming up, which threw a weird shadow, rather to be felt than seen, across the further distance; a solemn peace, like unto God’s very own, seemed to brood over the landscape. And yet there, in mid-stream, sat one man, carrying his load of sin to a foreign land; while the other, with his burden of care, remained on the strand to wave him a last adieu!

And now the boat’s keel grated on the gravel, and the wanderer sprang to shore. Before he did

so he turned, and, with head uncovered, as it had been since he took his place in the bows, waved his hand in farewell.

A gaunt arm was raised and returned the signal, and then, but not till then, Mr. Smith set his face towards View-Water, with part of a sentence, spoken almost unconsciously by the man who was gone, ringing in his ears—

‘Let Mr. Rodewald say what he will—’

‘Ay, ay, my friend,’ he thought, ‘and what has been your little game here, I wonder?’

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RODEWALD'S OPPORTUNITY.

No one would have been more surprised than the Rev. Lionel Grey, curate of Reedbourne, who had arrived in that parish only a short time before the great Mr. De Field, to hear himself described as the son of poor but honest parents; and yet such was the precise worldly condition of his father and mother.

That they thought themselves something very far different, and that, in their way, they held their heads high, does not prove much to the contrary; only the constant struggle which they maintained between fact and fancy made life somewhat harder for them than perhaps it need have been.

It was impossible for them to do this, that, and the other, 'on account of their position;' they had to 'consider their friends,' who certainly failed to consider them; and they did without a great many necessaries in order to 'keep up appearances.' Yet it was all only the old battle of gentility fought with

utterly inadequate means. Neither son, nor father, nor grandfather had ever known what it was to be even fairly well off; but the shorter of money they all were, the more necessary it seemed to them to retain the traditions of somebody who had a great estate and a great name.

The father of the Rev. Lionel was the younger son of a younger son, whose parents had not much to leave even to their first-born. It is quite useless for any good purpose connected with this story to travel back further in the family annals. From a long way in the dim distance they traced their descent; but there was little left to prove they had ever been of much account in the land. Still, it may be taken for granted they did come of a good family; they said so themselves; and, as they were people who spoke the truth, no one thought of denying the fact. Mr. Grey senior was agent to some gentleman in the North, from whom he did not receive any magnificent salary. His employer failed to treat him exactly as an equal, and in no single way could it be considered his sons and daughters found the fight of existence a peculiarly pleasant warfare.

There was always somebody who was going to do wonders for Gerard, or Ralph, or Lal, and the rest of them, and who ultimately did nothing. Mr. Grey, the agent, was not a pushing person, and he resembled his sons in that he had not too many brains.

He was a weak, inoffensive, useless sort of person, and all his children took after him. The girls either went out as governesses, or married struggling men who continued to struggle. The sons emigrated, became Civil servants at low salaries, or entered some profession in which they never seemed to get on. Lionel took orders, because a friend of his father's promised to give the young fellow a living when the then incumbent departed this world. There was not much perhaps to be said against his becoming a clergyman, but there was nothing to be said in favour of his choice, if it were a choice. He was not a bad man. He would have done his duty had he been ever able to see exactly what his duty happened to be. He married a girl, as poor as himself, for love; and the same struggle waged under the paternal roof began in the house of the Reverend Lionel.

But he came, as has been said, of an honest

stock, and he and his wife kept clear of debt, till in an evil hour, when sickness was in the house and nothing in their purse, news came to the village where they were then living that the incumbent, to whose clerical estate Mr. Grey felt sure he should succeed, had fallen down in a fit and could not recover.

The man's pecuniary need was very great, and his hopes seemed to him like certainties. *Now* there could be no harm in borrowing some money, and, through the intervention of a person who called himself a lawyer, the money was obtained. There chanced, however, to be one mistake in the curate's calculation—the incumbent did not die; he recovered, and, for the first time in his life, Mr. Grey found himself in debt to an amount he saw no present means of paying. His creditor, however, did not press him then; nay, rather, when he found he was removing to Reedbourne and a better salary, advanced him a further sum to pay the expenses of travelling and carriage of his goods. If Mr. Grey would let him have the interest regularly, he said, the principal might then remain till better times arrived. It was all very friendly and very nice, and gave the curate an idea the money-lending fraternity

were a maligned and injured race of men. 'He himself thought there was something very grand about the Jews.' 'He believed, even exiles and fugitives as they were, if only properly treated, they would be found quite the equals of many professing Christians.' 'He and Mr. Gideon had indulged in many long and profitable conversations on the subject of religion; and he could only say, speaking from his own experience, no man could have treated another better than he had been treated by a person who, he understood, had been given a very bad name by those who really could know nothing about him.'

Which was all very true, and made the first two years in Reedbourne pass as agreeably as was possible under the circumstances. He gave Mr. Gideon as much money as he could spare, and was not, perhaps, over-cautious about the nature of the documents to which he put his name. He knew nothing on earth of business; he knew even less of the nature of the most ordinary commercial transactions than of theology. And so things went on smoothly till one day, when the patron—not the incumbent—of the living Mr. Grey was to have had died suddenly.

Then Mr. Gideon began to 'want to know,' and Mr. Grey did not know. He was not a man to tell any falsehoods about the matter; but Mr. Gideon so tormented and confused him that his statements became, as that worthy gentleman insinuated, 'not the same two days together.'

Mr. Grey could not tell whether the new patron would ratify his predecessor's promise. He believed he had paid a considerable sum off the loan. Under any circumstances, Mr. Gideon would not have to wait long for the balance. He was very much obliged for his kindness; and if he could only wait a little longer, he should have it all.

Mr. Gideon waited, accepting almost as a favour such small sums as Mr. Grey found he could pay. Then suddenly the incumbent died, and the curate found he was not to succeed to the vacant tithes, to the anise and cummin, or even a blade of grass.

It was at this period Mr. Grey began to sound Mr. Cheverley's tenant about the powers of the law in certain hypothetical cases which he placed cautiously before that astute gentleman. In truth, he could not at first grasp the full horror of his own position. He had been going on paying and paying

for four years ; and now he found he owed about three times as much as he originally borrowed ! When he remonstrated, his own signatures were produced. There were charges of all sorts—law-costs enough to make any man's hair stand on end ; while Mr. Rodewald, in answer to his vague questions, instead of giving him even a ghost of comfort, threw out dark hints of the depths of wickedness which money-lenders could and would sound.

At length the inevitable hour struck. Mr. Gideon instructed his solicitor—a gentleman who owned a Jewish name, but who, as far as religious belief was concerned, probably, to quote Sheridan's famous comparison, was 'neither Jew nor Christian, like the blank leaf between the Old and New Testaments'—to write and request payment of the amount so long overdue.

The usual course of procedure ensued, during which period, amongst the daisies and the buttercups, then in their fullest bloom and beauty, Mr. Grey had a very bad time of it indeed.

He went to see Mr. Gideon and Mr. Gideon's solicitor. Mr. Gideon said he had put the affair in the hands of his solicitor, and could not now pos-

sibly interfere ; the solicitor said he could do nothing without consulting his client ; and so the unfortunate curate was bandied about from one to the other, till, with great difficulty, the lawyer was persuaded to accept seven pounds ten down, which had been carefully laid aside for the landlord, and wait a little longer.

Just about this time it occurred to Mr. Rivers, who was going away for his holiday, that he would try to do something for his subordinate.

Mr. Rivers himself had hopes of very great preferment, in consequence of an old college friend of his having been installed as bishop of the diocese. If his expectations were realised, he thought he knew who would be appointed to Reedbourne ; and he mentally worked back the whole matter, till he came to a very poor, retired, and most select parish he thought might suit poor Grey, who was *so very good*, but unfortunately *not* clever.

Wishing to make all things pleasant for everybody before he departed, the Rector mentioned his excellent intentions to Mr. Grey.

‘Sorry though I should be to lose you,’ he said, ‘I feel, with those dear sweet children growing up,

it is time you had a more settled home than I can insure you.'

Then, after having, with many apologies, pressed a five-pound note into his curate's hand, for which he 'thought Mrs. Grey, who was so *truly* a helpmeet, might find a use,' Mr. Rivers, one fine Monday morning—when the larks were singing and the Marshal Niel roses scenting the air; when Reedbourne looked, as Horace Walpole writes concerning Strawberry Hill, as if set in enamelled meadows—set out thoroughly to enjoy his 'parson's month,' which, as all the world ought to know, means forty days.

A good many things were destined to happen within forty days; but, in blissful ignorance of the fact, Mr. Rivers took his seat in a first-class compartment, in company with a 'chosen few' especially zealous in Church matters—De Field amongst the number—and enjoyed some very profitable and pleasant conversation with these saints on earth, till they reached Waterloo, when it became necessary—'so unfortunately,' said the Rector—to part company.

By a later train Mr. Grey also proceeded to the

great metropolis. He went to tell Mr. Gideon's solicitor he trusted, ere long, to be able to make some satisfactory arrangement concerning the payment of the claim which had already mounted to such gigantic proportions. With the fatuity which dogs the steps of men of his temperament, he explained the nature of the friendship which subsisted between his Rector and the new bishop. He said he felt no doubt he would 'get something' shortly; all he trusted was no disagreeable proceedings on the part of Mr. Gideon might mar his chances of prosperity. The lawyer listened to all he had to say, remarked he would place the whole thing before Mr. Gideon, received two guineas 'on account of costs,' and parted with the clergyman in the most friendly manner.

As he took his seat in the train for Reedbourne, Mr. Grey felt quite relieved and happy.

'I am so glad I went into the City to-day, Mary,' he said.

'I wish you had never to go there again,' returned Mary, who was a lady, if not of experience, at least of great decision. 'Set of unprincipled wretches—taking even that two guineas from you!'

A week slipped by. The first Sunday of Mr. Rivers's absence came, and the morning duty was taken by the Hampsfield vicar, who informed the Reedbournians concerning many of St. Paul's sayings, and added several of his own the Apostle would have felt greatly amazed to hear propounded.

Mr. Grey, who had gone over to help the Hampsfield curate in the morning, preached at Reedbourne in the evening an even worse sermon than usual, full of platitudes and 'once mores' and 'agains,' and silly anecdotes and far-fetched ideas—the fact being, a letter from the Rector had quite upset him, and muddled the few brains Nature found she could spare for the Reverend Lionel.

The Rector's epistle informed his curate that for the next Sunday he had been so fortunate as to secure the bishop's son-in-law to preach the usual annual sermon on behalf of the West Surrey Orphanage, which had its head-quarters in a great building some three miles from Reedbourne. Ever since the charity had been established, once a year—or rather on one Sunday a year—the faithful at Reedbourne were from the pulpit reminded of its claims to their support; and the local paper never failed to

give a long and impressive account of the religious services, and a list of the gentlemen who 'kindly consented' to carry round the boxes (which were indeed extremely artistic, and so constructed that when once a coin was dropped in no one except those 'duly qualified' could get it out again). Upon that occasion, also, a detachment of the girls was sent over in omnibuses; the centre aisle was given up to them; they heard all that was said in the way of endeavouring to wring money out of reluctant pockets for their benefit; some mammas wept as they looked at the stolid faces of the well-clad children; and many women, as they filed out, murmured 'Poor things!'

It was not found always easy to secure a clerical luminary to preach the sermon, so Mr. Rivers's elation could only be considered natural.

'Mr. Bashby will read the service in the evening,' he wrote; 'and, though the bishop and he are quite of my opinion that the Dissenters give to the sermon an undue importance, still I should advise you to well consider your discourse. Mr. Bashby's report *may prove to you a matter of considerable consequence.*'

Mr. Grey felt quite eager for Monday morning to come, so that he might commence his preparation for the great field-day. Before he could shut himself in his study, however, he had a great deal to do: he had to call on the churchwardens; to speak to the organist; to mention the matter to several other persons; then to go to the village schools; then to take train to Hampsfield, and give orders for the printing of posters and circulars. He only got home in time for early dinner; and then he had to pay several visits in order to make sure flowers in sufficient quantity would be forthcoming. He had no horse, and, in walking about the parish, time seemed to fly, so that it was quite six before he could ask his wife for the cup of tea he always found so refreshing. Poor Mr. Grey! the rich people at Reedbourne thought as little of him as he did of the little people. They were civil, courteous, and so forth; but they did not offer to send him home in their carriages, and insist on his staying for dinner, and press refreshments upon him, as they did on Mr. Rivers, who was not merely rector and tithe-taker, but had also received a very fine fortune with his wife.

Still, Mr. Grey was in excellent spirits.

'I shall have a nice quiet evening, Mary,' he said, as he retired to his study to put on paper some of the great thoughts he had been labouring with as he paced the dusty Reedbourne roads and cut across field-paths, where what he saw reminded him that Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of the commonest flowers springing amongst the grass. Resting for a short time under the welcome shade of a great Spanish chestnut-tree, he had taken out his pocket-Bible and found an appropriate text. His heart was 'burning within him,' and, had his powers been only equal to his will, he might have produced a really good discourse, supposing he were left to finish it in peace.

'I am going to commence my sermon, dear, for next Sunday,' he said to his wife, repeating a fact with which she was before well acquainted. 'I mentioned to you, I think, the text I meant to take.'

'Yes, Lal; and, now there seems a probability of your being left in quiet for a little while, do as much of it as you can,' urged Mrs. Grey, who was an energetic person, not much liked by servants or

tradespeople or the poor, and, for that matter, indeed, not over-popular amongst her equals and superiors.

Probably they were as truly uninteresting a couple as could have been found in the *Clergy List*, where it was an idea of Mrs. Grey's that the names of the wives and the number of children in the domestic quiver should be added to the information already vouchsafed.

Acting upon the brisk hint conveyed by his better half, the Rev. Lionel withdrew to his study, arranged his writing materials, and commenced the great sermon, which he hoped would 'attract attention.'

It was getting late. In the study—an exceedingly small and dark room at the rear of the cottage—Mr. Grey was thinking he must soon light his lamp, when his wife entered, and said,

'Lal, a Mr. Haffit has called, and wants particularly to see you. I told him you were very busy, and asked if he could not come round in the morning; but he said that would be very inconvenient, and that if you could give him a moment he would not detain you longer.'

'Haffit!' repeated Mr. Grey, pushing back his chair. 'I don't know the name at all.'

'No, dear; he has never been here before; he is not at all a nice-looking person, but, poor man, I suppose he can't help his appearance. Shall I tell Eve to send him in here? I was just hushing baby off in the parlour.'

In that small house it was but a step from any one part to the other, and, accordingly, next moment Eve had shown 'the gentleman in to master.'

He was as good as his word, and did not stay long; indeed, the hall-door shut behind him as Mrs. Grey got her refractory baby up-stairs. But he left plenty of food for reflection behind him, in the shape of a slip of paper, at which the curate stood staring in an access of misery too great for speech. He had never had a summons or a writ before in all his honest life, and he felt as if he had got a blow from which he could not recover.

There are pleasanter prospects to contemplate than utter ruin; but Mr. Grey had now to look at the most salient points in that dismal country. He sat down in the chair, from which he had risen to receive his visitor, holding in his hand the fatal

piece of paper, thinking, with a sense of sickening faintness, over his position.

Before him lay the unfinished sermon he had intended should prove a masterpiece. With loathing he turned his eyes from it, and let them wander over the furniture of his room, every article in which seemed, from the knowledge it must soon cease to be his, to acquire a fictitious value. Poor enough, Heaven knows, his belongings would have appeared even to a man much less wealthy than De Field; and yet there was not a chair or table, not a faded curtain or threadbare carpet, but was dear to his heart. He knew the value of these things, if no one else was aware of it. So many dinnerless days were represented by that old-fashioned secrétaire, purchased whilst he was still a bachelor and in lodgings. A new top-coat he had deferred buying in order to secure the carpet, off which the pattern was now almost worn. The sofa and chairs had been secured out of money gained by taking six weeks' hard duty in the closest and lowest part of the East End, while the thermometer stood steadily at ninety degrees in the shade. His wife's present to him of a pair of secondhand curtains,

doubly dear because she had made her last year's bonnet 'look as good as new' in order to make up the required amount. And so it was all through the cottage. Not an article in it but had been hardly paid for, and precious for that very reason. And now they would have to leave the house, and part with everything it contained.

Had he been a different man he would have thought, before yielding himself to such utter despair, if there were no possible means whereby deliverance might be compassed; but then he was not a different man, only himself, the Rev. Lionel Grey, of whom nobody, except his wife and children, and his Maker who knew how hard he feebly tried to do his duty, thought very much. Even the old men and women in the parish despised him for his poverty, and, as Mr. De Field truly observed, he was a 'poor muff;' whilst Sir Burke Robinson tersely characterised his best discourses as 'awful rot.'

He owed, so said the writ—and he had no means of proving otherwise—a hundred and fifty-three pounds, and he had not a hundred and fifty-three shillings to pay it with; so he knew the worst

had come, and sat and contemplated ruin at his leisure.

‘Lal dear,’ said his wife, putting her head inside the door, ‘who was that disreputable-looking person, and what did he want?’

For answer her husband gave her the writ, and there ensued a dead silence.

‘What can be done?’ she asked at last, and as she spoke her voice sounded hoarse and strained.

‘Nothing,’ he replied.

‘Nonsense, Lal! no, I didn’t mean that;’ and she kissed him pityingly. ‘What I meant was, we must not sit down with our hands folded, and lose everything without a struggle. There must be help somewhere, if we only knew where to look for it.’

‘It must come from God, then,’ he said; ‘for I know no man who would give it.’

‘But think of all the charitable people there are in the world,’ she urged. ‘Think of all there are living close by us.’

‘Do you imagine one of them would help?’ he inquired. ‘They would give to the bells, or the organ, or the church, or the heathen, or the schools,

but not to me,' said Mr. Grey, with a bitterness foreign to his nature.

'Then their charity is hypocrisy!' cried Mrs. Grey vehemently; 'but I do not believe it, Lal. I cannot. You ought to try some of them, at any rate. There is Mr. Frankford at Hampsfield, for instance. What would this sum be to him?—nothing. Why, he gave five hundred pounds to the new church at Lolford; and we could pay him back every penny, if we only had time to do it. O, how I would pinch and save if he would only, only help us now! Do go to him, Lal; it is too late to-night; but promise me that, first thing in the morning, before he leaves for town, you will see him.'

'He is in Germany,' answered Mr. Grey; 'and besides—'

'Besides what, dear?'

'I have heard something lately which makes me fear he did not earn his money in a very honourable manner.'

'At any rate, he spends it liberally,' said Mrs. Grey, with a woman's curious logic.

Mr. Grey shook his head, but only objected, 'He is not at home.'

On the whole, perhaps, he did not feel sorry one possible benefactor was out of the running.

Glibly poor Mrs. Grey ran over the names of almost every likely and unlikely person, mentioning amongst others all the rich men at whose houses he had called that day, and finally referring to the Rector and the Hampsfield vicar.

‘No,’ said Mr. Grey at last; ‘no, there is only one person in the parish whose advice even I should like to ask at such a juncture.’

‘And that is—’

‘Mr. Rodewald; and I can’t go to him. I have never called, and you have never called. No, there is nothing to be done; the worst has come, and we must face it with such courage as the consciousness of having committed no real wrong can give us.’

He had fought so long, he had struggled, for one of his nature, so gallantly, that it might be the conviction he could do no more proved for the moment almost a relief. Those weary journeys to London; the pleading to men he looked down upon from the eminence of his clerical position; the scraping together of shillings and pounds, which when paid seemed to affect the debt no more than if he had dropped

the money over Waterloo Bridge; the sleepless nights, the anxious days—all, all were ended now. Let them take the furniture; take the baby's cot, and the sofa in the drawing-room Mrs. Rivers had given his wife; and as for afterwards—well, at that moment Mr. Grey was too worn and weary to think about what might come afterwards. Beggary, the work-house, starvation, death—all loomed dimly through the mists of his imagination; but now he did not seem to realise or care what further misfortunes Fate might have in store.

Not so Mrs. Grey, who had the usual wifely trust in herself and distrust of her husband. (It is a strange thing, when one comes to consider it, that before marriage a woman always thinks the man of her choice can do anything, while after marriage she believes he can do nothing.) The masterly inactivity which might have floated Mr. Grey's feeble bark safely over this bar—since it is quite certain the last things Mr. Gideon wished to possess were those few poor assets by which the curate set such store—was repellent to a lady fond of bustling about the house and parish, scolding successive maids, accusing the tradespeople of short weight, and teaching the 'lower orders'

—who really, in their way, do manage to make both ends meet in an extraordinary manner—the ‘first principles’ of domestic economy.

In utter despair she listened to her husband’s objections to this scheme and the other; then, making up her mind that ‘the beds should not be sold from under them without at least some effort on the part of somebody to avert such a catastrophe,’ she at last left Mr. Grey to his own sad company, and the contemplation of that pressing invitation from ‘Victoria, by the grace of God’—‘whom we pray for every Sunday,’ thought the poor lady inconsequently; ‘I wonder how *she* would like such things to happen to *her*!’—went out of the room, ran quietly up-stairs, tied on her bonnet, and, slipping out of the back-door while nobody chanced to be about, made good speed to The Snuggery.

When Miss Lydney, with a little scoffing sneer, told Mr. Rodewald Mrs. Grey was in the drawing-room, and wished to see him, that gentleman knew the nature of her errand.

Chancing to be detained later than usual in town, he was accosted just outside Reedbourne Station by a shabby-looking man, who, in addition

to being slightly lame, had lost one eye—an unattractive person, certainly, so far as externals were concerned—who asked if he could tell him where the Rev. Mr. Grey lived?

‘Writ, for a ducat!’ thought Mr. Rodewald, as he answered,

‘You had better inquire from some one else.’

‘We’re in such dreadful trouble!’ began the lady, who, at sight of him, jumped up from the chair she had taken, ‘and my husband said there was no other person in the parish whose advice he valued but yours; and that he could not and would not intrude himself upon you, as we had never been properly acquainted; but I felt sure you would not think of such things at such a time; and so, without saying a word to him, I came here by myself. And, O dear, it was so dark! and I met a drunken man, and he shouted something to me; and then there was a cow loose on the road, and—’

‘Won’t you sit down?’ interrupted Mr. Rodewald, at once taking the lady’s feeble fluttering intellect in the grasp of his master-mind. ‘Now, tell me, please,’ he added, as she meekly obeyed him, ‘what has happened.’

What had happened did not take long to tell; but how the trouble had come about, she could no more explain than she might have done why her Lionel never, by any chance, wrote a decent sermon.

‘I had better go back with you,’ at last suggested Mr. Rodewald, ‘and talk the matter over with your husband. Now the writ has been served, there is no time to be lost.’

‘O, you *are* kind, you *are* good!’ gushed unhappy Mrs. Grey. ‘I knew you would be sorry for us.’

Mr. Rodewald, with great gravity of demeanour, but in the highest possible spirits, took his hat, opened the hall-door, felt Mrs. Grey instinctively slip her hand through his strong arm for protection against possible drunken men and straying cattle and any other dangers which might crop up, and shortened his manly stride in order to accommodate his pace to her little, short, pottering, feminine steps.

Two such pieces of good fortune as had happened to him that day seldom fall to the lot of any man. It was listening to a most delightful piece of information concerning De Field which, indeed, detained

him in town till long past his usual hour ; and now, out of the whole of Reedbourne, *he* was the person whom the curate's wife flew to for succour in their hour of need !

All things come to him who waits. He had waited two years, and now !

Heavens ! in that time what had he *not* achieved ?

Sorry for Mr. Grey's misfortunes ? If Mrs. Grey had only known how that misfortune gladdened Mr. Rodewald's heart, she might have thought that, by some horrible mistake, she was walking through the night arm-in-arm with the Enemy of mankind !

CHAPTER IX.

HOW SHE CAME BACK TO ME.

‘I must say, Mr. Cheverley, you are a greater simpleton even than I thought you!’

These words were addressed to me, Reuben Cheverley, by my tenant, Mr. Rodewald; and how was it possible for a man meek as Moses and unassuming as myself to answer them in kind? I could not, so simply bowed in acknowledgement.

‘If you had agreed to my proposal,’ he went on, ‘I would have made that place the talk of the county.’

‘For your own benefit, Mr. Rodewald,’ I ventured to hint; after which we exchanged a few sentences unnecessary to chronicle here, and parted *not* on good terms.

After all, I suspect the Rodewalds and the Cheverleys of this world never do part on good terms.

There is as much antagonism between them—I

say this, meaning no disparagement to the Rodewalds or praise to the Cheverleys—as between light and darkness, oil and water, mirth and sorrow.

Our rupture did not seem to me a matter for regret—quite the contrary; there was that in my life at the time with which it would have been undesirable for Mr. Rodewald to become acquainted. He was a dangerous man, I felt—more dangerous even as friend than enemy; and I had long determined that when his second year's tenancy of The Snuggery expired I would not renew his term.

He did not, however, express any desire to rent the place beyond the period referred to; what he wished was to buy, and made me such a ridiculous offer for the house and land I felt glad to be able to refuse his proposal as absurd. He would have advanced the price a little, but I declined to enter into negotiations with him at all. I said I did not mean to sell the place, and that no money he could offer would tempt me to do so.

Then he made a bid for Holway's old home, where, indeed, the conversation took place. 'You can't live in both houses, you know,' he remarked. 'Come, now, what will you take for this?'

Once again his offer was declined, and he said,

‘ Well, what you, without chick or child, or wife or soul belonging to you, except that niece you shipped off with Holway to Australia, can want with a house at all baffles me. That any man should live alone in a spot like this, with only a housekeeper for company! and, excuse me, Cheverley, but you certainly do manage to pick out the very ugliest old women for housekeepers any one ever beheld.’

‘ Surely, Mr. Rodewald, the personal appearance of my servants is no affair of yours!’ I said a little irritably.

‘ Of course not—only you might as well have something not absolutely unpleasant to look at, might not you? But that is not the question now on the carpet. Tell me the price you want for The Snuggery, and I’ll see if it be possible for me, with common justice to myself, to meet you in the matter.’

It was then that I repeated, with a decision of manner and diction foreign to my nature, that I did not mean to sell The Snuggery at all.

After the sharp passage of arms which ensued when Mr. Rodewald found I was not to be moved

from my purpose, he went away in high dudgeon. At that moment, had I been Holway and in his power, it would have fared ill with me and mine ; but I was not Holway, only Reuben Cheverley, a greater simpleton, said my visitor, even than he had previously supposed.

Well, in the beginning of this story I gave the courteous reader fair warning there was very little in me, and why, therefore, should there be anything amazing in the fact that Mr. Rodewald's opinion tallied with my own ? Let that pass for the present, while I tell all the strange events which have been crowded into my life since last I laid down my pen.

The point at which I did so was the precise moment when Mr. Smith advised me to put my too affectionate niece under the care of Mrs. Holway. Quite as a temporary measure his suggestion was adopted ; but no long time passed ere Bessie came to me begging and praying to be allowed to go to Australia with her new friends.

She called me her dear, darling uncle ; she said she knew she had been a trouble to me ; but books such as I liked—‘ dry, heavy, ugly volumes, dreadfully clever and stupid ’—were things she never could

take to. She was persuaded life in Australia would exactly suit her. She felt she could be happy as the day was long with those sweet children. Already she had got so fond of Mrs. Holway, I 'couldn't think.' She needed a complete change after the cruel, cruel way Richard had treated her. Everybody said how thin and bad she looked. A sea-voyage was the best thing in the world, she had always heard, for any one with a tendency to consumption. She wanted to go away to some place where she should never by any chance meet one of those unkind, wretched, deceitful Dodmans again. O! I couldn't ever imagine what a bad unprincipled set they were. She wished she had never known one of them.' And so on, almost *ad infinitum*.

'That is the turn I hoped she might take when I recommended you to send her to the Holways,' said Mr. Smith calmly, when I told him what had occurred. 'There are some persons who ought to emigrate, and your niece is one of them.'

Holway was, as I thought, needlessly explicit about the matter.

'She thinks she'll get married the minute she steps ashore,' he said, 'and it is very likely she may

find a husband —— out there.' In answer to which remark I answered that was precisely what I feared.

'Supposing some scamp out there got hold of the girl and ill-treated her,' I said; 'I can't help her with thousands of miles of water stretching between us.'

'Make your mind quite easy on that point,' Holway replied; 'I'll see to her. There shall be no false pretences about money. I'll let it be clearly understood she has not a halfpenny of her own. Best allow her to chance it with us. You'll never have a day's peace with her as long as she stays in England.'

Thus it was that, one miserable day in January, I found myself at Gravesend, going out to the vessel selected to bear Holway and his fortunes to a brighter shore, in order to bid Bessie good-bye and God-speed.

To my amazement, I found Mr. Dodman and Maggie on board. They also, Mr. Dodman informed me, had come down to say 'ta-ta to the poor lonely little soul.'

'It is a forlorn, desolate sort of undertaking,' he proceeded; 'candidly, now, isn't it?'

‘The choice is her own,’ I answered coldly, for indeed the very sight of the Dodmans excited my anger against Bessie’s persistent and unnecessary dissimulation.

‘Ah, Hobson’s!’ observed Mr. Dodman, with a nasty laugh, turning on his heel.

But he was good enough ere long to hold out the right hand of friendship. While his daughter was saying to Bessie, ‘I could not let you vanish out of my sight, perhaps for ever, without one more fond kiss;’ and, ‘I only wish I was going with you;’ and, ‘Remember never to send for me unless you want me to take you at your word, for I should start by the very next vessel’—till Mr. Dodman, after wiping his watery eyes with a torn handkerchief, and muttering in a loud aside, ‘It was affecting, devilish—— if it wasn’t!’ took me to one side, and conjectured, in a husky whisper, I hadn’t half-a-sovereign about me.

‘Because,’ he added, ‘though, if I was differently situated, nothing could induce me to speak of such a matter, still, coming down here and going back again, and a trifle Maggie bought, so that our dear little Rosy might not feel she was forsaken and for-

gotten by everybody, will make a long hole in a sovereign—ay, in two. Not that I should grudge that, or twenty pounds, if I had it. The sight of those two young creatures would touch a heart of stone! We were young ourselves once, Mr. Cheverley, we were, little as anybody might think it to look at us now—young and tender—and—soft—’ and Mr. Dodman began to weep again.

Putting two sovereigns—the sum at which Maggie’s papa modestly estimated travelling expenses, and a silver thimble, which, with a perhaps unconscious irony, Miss Dodman had selected as an appropriate parting gift to my niece—in Mr. Dodman’s ready hand, I turned to Holway and talked to him, till, just before the time came for leaving the vessel, my niece bethought her she ought to spare a moment to her ‘kind precious uncle.’

I was trying to speak some few words of hope, encouragement, affection, and earnest warning, when Mr. Dodman seized me by the arm, and crying,

‘We must not let you be carried off too!’ mercifully cut short the farewell between Bessie and myself. The last I saw of her she was straining Miss Dodman in a rapturous embrace, so close and so

long, darling Maggie had scarcely time to follow us ere the ship was under weigh.

Much waving of handkerchiefs and kissing of hands ensued ; but, after all, at a short distance one handkerchief is very much like another ; and when hundreds of kisses are being wafted, it is difficult to tell which is which.

At the Gravesend Station I happily managed to escape from Mr. and Miss Dodman, and, hailing a hansom when the train arrived at London Bridge, eluded all chance of further collision with them.

As I walked from Leytonstone Station home—for, although workmen were in the house, I had gone to live at Holway's farm—my thoughts were none of the pleasantest. Again and again I ungratefully recurred to the old question, 'What had Mr. Amiott's legacy done for me?'

I felt more lonely and less satisfied than in the former time of hard work and small salary. My money had enabled me to do something for other people ; but I wanted something for myself.

'It can't buy love,' I sadly reflected ; 'in my own case, not even the semblance of love.'

Truth is, my heart felt sore at thought of Bessie.

I had done much for the girl, and yet, even in the moment of parting, her tears, her looks, her caresses were for 'that deceitful Maggie,' and not for me.

No, it was quite true what Mr. Granton said, money could do very little. Ingrate that I was, I thought it had done *nothing* for me.

I passed through the gate, against the top bar of which Holway had leaned that March night when first I bent my steps to his house—that night now nearly three years ago—walked through the darkness up to the rustic porch, and was about to put my key in the lock, when the door opened slowly from within.

A light was burning in the small square hall; but I could see no person, though I looked about me in astonishment.

'Guess who it is!' said a voice which thrilled every nerve in my body. Behind the door there was a gentle rustling, and a remembered figure glided swiftly into the light.

'Adelaide!' I cried, '*Adelaide!*' But already her arms were round my neck, and she was sobbing on my breast.

I do not know how the next few minutes passed.

When I recovered my scattered senses she was taking my hat, helping me off with my coat, putting my umbrella in its place, leading me by the hand into the parlour, where near the fire lay something which appeared at first sight like a few pillows piled one above another on the carpet.

‘Look!’ she murmured, in the dear remembered tones of old, of the blissfully happy days of poverty and companionship and struggle and confidence—‘look!’ and, turning down the corner of a soft fleecy shawl, she showed me her sleeping child. ‘Poor little man!’ she said, ‘he is so tired;’ and as she lifted her dear face up to look in mine, I saw it was wet with tears.

Gently, with a touch of down, she replaced the shawl, and then stood for a minute still and silent, weeping quietly, but as if her heart were breaking.

‘I came to *you*,’ she whispered at last, putting out her hand, which I clasped in both of mine.

Yes, this was her home-coming! Man proposes. I had bought The Snuggery and decked it out for her; I had set it round with all the flowers she loved, and forgotten no single thing in which her heart delighted; I had waited there for one who

never came ; listened for footsteps that never sounded in my ears ; pictured her rapture at sight of the daisy-spangled meads, the meadows a sheet of golden buttercups—deep yellow contrasting with richest green. I had dreamed that she walked with me beside winding rivers and rustling reeds ; that we stopped to hearken to the aspens' ceaseless murmur ; that her fingers strayed over the keys of the piano ; that, in the twilight, her voice floated in waves of melody through the open windows, and, like some angel visitant, wandered mysteriously through the silence of the tranquil summer night. In my fancy, no adjunct of simple grace, beauty, refinement, was lacking to greet her return ; and behold the reality—Holway's house, almost as he had left it ; Holway's poor worn furniture, and the ' poverty look ' not yet painted out !

Yet, if it had been Paradise, she could not have glanced round the room with eyes full of a quieter content, with a low-breathed sigh of deeper thankfulness,

' I bless the good God ! ' she said softly. ' Ah, He has been with me through deep, deep, waters ! '

I knew it. Smith had told me what would hap-

pen some day; and that which he predicted was come to pass. Bit by bit, not in any regular sequence, not in the way of narration or complaint, I learned that her husband had married only for what she could make, and that pecuniarily he was disappointed.

‘I never did get as much as others,’ she explained. ‘I had a want, they said. A great actress may manage with a not so extraordinary voice; but a voice needs more than its own oneself, so they tell me. Then, as you know, even my voice began to fail—poor useless voice, that could not bear the trouble its owner had brought upon herself. Do you know,’ she asked, after a longer term of silence than usual, ‘why I came to *you*?’

I raised my head and looked at her as I said,

‘I hope because you felt earth held for you no truer friend.’

‘Partly; but that was not quite all. I did once have thought of returning to mine old home; but I said no, there is but one in all this wide desolate world who will speak to me no hard word against the father of my child.’

‘You did me but simple justice, Adelaide,’ I answered.

‘And I loved him so once; and though that is all gone and past, like the now dead roses of the last year’s June—like the foolish hopes I hoped, and the bright dreams I dreamt in those happy, happy days when we were so poor, you and I together—still, we cannot forget—*ach!* no, we cannot forget!’

I made no reply. None was needed. If there had been I could not have spoken it.

‘I never meant to marry,’ she went on, in tones so soft and low that, but for the utter stillness in which we sat, I must have failed to catch many of her words—‘at least, not for long, long years. I had work to do, which I did intend to complete; but *he* came, and my silly heart went fluttering to him. Ah, me! It was hard, too,’ she added, after a moment’s pause; ‘for I did not marry him because he was rich or noble. I knew he had little money. I did not care for his title; but he was my fate—my love; so gay, so handsome. Did you ever—you—see a man handsomer?’

I was sitting, shading my eyes from the light

with my hand, and answered, without moving my position,

‘ I never did.’

‘ And he agreed to let me go on singing till the future of my dear ones was assured ; “ and then,” said he, “ I shall want you all to myself, and we will go and live in some quiet place where my small income will suffice for our few wants.” I knew a villa set high above a lake, in which I thought we should be happy as the day was long. Ah, with what sad tired eyes we come to look at the brightest pictures hung in the gallery of memory ! Courtship is one thing, and marriage another ! And thus, dear friend, after all the so great things I was to do, the fortune I was to make, I am come back to you, like—what is it you funnily say in England ?—one bad shilling, with no voice, no money, no anything, except a whole peck of trouble.’

She slipped from her chair, and sank on her knees by my side as she finished her sentence, at the same time drawing my sheltering hand from its position, and bowing her head upon it. I felt her warm lips touch my fingers, her hot tears dropping slowly one by one ; and, for an instant, though I

tried to speak and move, I could do neither. Then compelling her to rise, I forced myself to say,

‘Where, in trouble, should a child so naturally seek shelter as under its father’s roof. To whom should you, my daughter, come, save home to me?’

CHAPTER X.

MR. SMITH DECLINES.

THAT was the secret my life held when Mr. Rodewald came wanting to buy The Snuggery; and I felt glad to see him depart, and to know he had not caught even a passing glimpse of mother and child.

It was a long, cold, dreary winter we had to pass through, ere we emerged into a late ungenial spring. Down in the heart of the Thames Valley, as in the Midlands, the water had swept in all directions over the low-lying country bordering the rivers. Smith told me the spectacle of the submerged Surrey and Middlesex shores was one worth seeing.

‘If it could only be brought into the Strand and exhibited at a guinea a-head, all London would flock to view it,’ he said. So one day I ran down to Reedbourne, and, walking over to Thamesford, stood on the bridge spanning the river, from whence I

obtained a view of an expanse of water which struck me as at once grand, terrible, and desolate. How I longed to take Adelaide to behold a sight so marvellous and so uncommon ! But the risk was greater than it seemed prudent to run.

At Leytonstone she immediately settled down into the quiet humdrum life of the farm, as though the years of her fame and her success had never been.

‘Ah,’ she said, once pointing to her child; ‘if it were not for him we might think it all a bad dream.’

What was there now my poor home lacked? What was there which could add to my comfort, please my eye, soothe my heart, that most womanly woman ever forgot?

And yet I was utterly miserable—wretched in the house, more wretched out of it—feeling, when I was with her, the position false and anomalous, and dreading, during the time I spent away, to hear, on my return, her husband had discovered her retreat, and that the publicity and the revelations her tender nature dreaded would have to be faced, unless she consented to return to the cruel servi-

tude, the hard bondage, from which, broken in health, and cowed in mind, and humiliated in spirit, she had fled.

Without asking his advice on the subject which lay so near my heart, I one day ventured to indicate to Smith something of the trouble now perplexing me.

He had changed a little since we paced the Calais sands together; grown irritable, and at times seemed almost morose. He was working very hard, far too hard for mind or body long to bear the strain uninjured; but, with that manner which was new to him—new, at least, to my experience—he resented the remonstrances I ventured to make, and, generally, when I expostulated, answered with some scoffing jest or bitter retort. He turned his worst side out to me during the whole of the early part of that year; and now, though the primroses were dotting copse and bank and glade in Epping Forest, though the elms were clothing themselves in divinest green, though high over the Lea marshes the larks were singing at the very gates of heaven, he gave no answering smile to Nature, looking her fairest and freshest and best—nay, rather, he gazed on the

feast she had prepared so royally, to which she bade all sorts and conditions of men welcome, with sad eyes, and a haggard face, and the abstracted mien of one who could not care for beauty or sweetness, because all beauty and all sweetness had departed from out his life.

Nevertheless, I knew the man was not altered at heart; that, underneath an exterior at times harsh and rugged, he hid a great soul; and so I finally opened my mind to him, and said it was a difficult position, and I did not well know exactly what I ought to do.

‘Do?’ he repeated. ‘Why, nothing, to be sure, except drift, and see where the course of events lands you. There are times in life when we cannot in the least tell how we should act, or where we should go; and it is then the wisest plan to commit ourselves to the stream of circumstances, and go with the current. For the rest,’ he added, with a short laugh, ‘Leytonstone is not Paris, or Mrs. Arounheim the baroness of that name, or a weary voiceless woman the beautiful singer Adelaide Lemberg. You are back in Bohemia, my friend; you are outside the pale of Madame and the Misses

Grundy. Make the most of the position while it lasts; for, sooner or later, he will find where she is, and then—' He did not finish his sentence in words, but ended it with an expressive gesture.

And that was his advice—catch happiness on the wing, or, rather, fly through the ether with it. But I could not wholly adopt the suggestion. If we were in Bohemia, I had lived out of that easy pleasant land of liberty, and felt there would be extreme difficulty in dropping once again into its primitive usages. As for Adelaide, I did not know what she was thinking about; till, on one splendid July morning, she asked me to walk with her somewhere—anywhere, 'a long, good way from home.'

I put on my hat, and we went out together, through Leytonstone, past the Green Man, across to the gates then giving on Wanstead Park, round the lake with which the story of a hushed-up tragedy is associated, beyond the church so oddly placed, skirting the cottage set about with such rhododendron-trees as I have seen growing in no other place out on the great terraces which were a grand beauty of that house, described by a historian of the

eighteenth century as 'one of the noblest, not only near London, but in the kingdom.'

It was two hundred and sixty feet in length and seventy in depth, and when we walked over its site not one stone was left upon another!

I told Adelaide as much of the whispered story as will ever now be known, while we made our way to a point from which we could look down on the Thames, and see the blue hills in Kent rising on the opposite shore. We might have been the only man and woman in the world, so great was the solitude around. No 'vast wilderness' ever seemed more destitute of inhabitants. Had thousands of miles stretched between us and London, the loneliness of the scene and the time had not been greater.

'Is this what you want, Adelaide?' I asked at last; and she answered,

'Yes.'

I looked at her in wonder. What could she have brought me here to say? There was a light in her eyes and a colour in her cheeks which had been a stranger to both for many a day. With a

pretty air of command she took me by the shoulder, and said,

‘You must stand with your back to me for a moment, and then—’

She did not finish her sentence; but then—Heavens! Shall I ever forget it? There came through the silence of the still summer morning the wild bird-notes which first melted the ice of my long lonely life’s winter, which woke my numbed heart to love and sorrow, which thrilled through me in the dingy Islington lodging-house, and taught me what my sleeping soul had lost!

Soft and low at first; then with a fuller, richer burst of melody; then a trickling rill of dropping notes, as if to try that each one was in perfect accord, not a false tone in a single flat or natural; then a rush of song, ending in a roulade, which I cannot describe otherwise than as a triumphant flourish, an absolute pæan of joy!

‘Aren’t you glad?’ she said; ‘O, aren’t you glad?’ and, with every pulse in her body quivering and vibrating, she caught both my hands in hers, and held them fast.

And the green of the terraces and of the woods

stretching away in the distance, the blue of the hills and the silver thread of the river, had not changed nor altered since she began!

‘O my dear,’ I answered, ‘I do not know!’ for, as in a glass darkly, I beheld much trouble ahead. I saw Adelaide wanting to sing in public; I saw an irate husband claiming his wife; I saw a weak woman tossed on the wide world’s billows; I saw the cottage where she had been, empty; and I knew now what had ailed me through the months gone by was too much happiness, an intensity of bliss no man born of woman had a right to believe would last. ‘Are you glad?’ I asked. ‘Knowing what you know, remembering what you must remember, are you?’

‘Yes,’ she replied firmly, ‘yes; thankful. I did not think God would be so gracious to me. Since I found it was so, my life seems to have been one long psalm of gratitude to Him. O my friend, never, never, never once has the bread of dependence, eaten under your roof, tasted bitter. To me it has been *most* sweet! But, *ach!* you would not that I should eat it for ever. And then there is the *most* of all, the child. It must be that for him I make—for

mine own small son it shall be that now I can lay aside a *dot*. My little one! O, my little one! God has given back to your mother His great gift of song, and that talent shall not be buried; it must make many, many more.'

'But, Adelaide,' I urged, 'you seem to forget—'

'Do I?' she interrupted. 'O, do I, dear friend? Never, never once! But now I feel strong and well, and able to face what there may come to contend against. I shall give him half—what do you say?—of all that I make only;' and she stretched out her right hand. 'He must come near me no more, never any more for ever!'

I did not answer her. I did not in the least know what to say.

'There must be,' she went on, 'lawyers, advocates—what you call them?—that can manage all of this. You will see the matter put right, will not you?' And then, in her ecstacy at having got back her voice, she thrilled out one long loud note, which seemed to pierce the heavens.

I cannot tell—I cannot even dimly conjecture—where her thoughts were travelling as we retraced our homeward way; but I know mine seemed launched

on a troubled and shoreless sea of difficulty, danger, and doubt.

It seemed the most natural thing in all the world to inform Smith of this new complication ; so, after our early dinner, which was, indeed, on that day a mere mockery of a meal, I took train for the City, and walked thence to New Inn. Arrived there, I found all the windows and doors of Mr. Smith's chambers set wide, and himself clad in an old dressing-gown, unshorn, half-dressed, lying back in a ragged armchair, ill and irritable, a sight for men and gods.

'Down in that cursed 'Thames Valley'—truth obliges me to accurately report his words—he said, 'I was caught in a thunder-shower, and got wet to the skin ; and, as a consequence, here am I, who can't afford to be out of harness for a day, laid up for a whole fortnight, and all because I must needs meddle in the affairs of a man whose affairs were nothing to me.'

'He had been very ill,' he said, 'but was pulling through. Wouldn't I stay and talk to him for a while? No,' in answer to a question, 'talking did not hurt him ; did him good. Mr. Moggan'—at this point I and a curious-looking person I found in

the chambers exchanged bows—‘had kindly looked him up. Mr. Moggan was helping him to do his copy for the *Glowworm*. Perhaps I did not know he was on the *Glowworm*? Well, he was. He sent in something now and then, when he felt he detested the world sufficiently to be funny about it.’

‘Which happens fortunately to be very often,’ put in Mr. Moggan.

‘We have just knocked off some decent things between us,’ went on Mr. Smith. ‘I can think, but I can’t write. Queer, isn’t it? No, Moggan, don’t go. Some other superlatively good joke may occur to me, and Mr. Cheverley and I have no State affairs to talk over.’

He was in one of his most curious, restless tempers, received the mildest suggestion with a rabid spirit of contradiction, told me flatly it was the best treatment in the world for a feverish cold to sit in a thorough draught, with his shirt-collar unbuttoned and chest exposed; and though at times actual physical weakness compelled him to stop in the middle of a sentence, he rattled on again after a moment’s pause, saying all manner of ridiculous things, rapidly weaving garlands of strange thoughts and

wild fancies, and then pulling them to pieces, blowing up mental soap bubbles, and laughing to see them burst, talking merely *pour parler*, making me feel sick, and sad, and sorry.

These, I found subsequently, were the wild reckless moods which induced Rodewald to believe he was given to periodical fits of drunkenness; and indeed, as I sat and listened, I could not myself help wondering whether the poor fellow was perfectly sober. Something in my face perhaps told him the thoughts which were passing through my mind, for he said suddenly,

‘You look as though you thought I had got the bit between my teeth, and bolted for the nearest mal-house. You don’t like it? Well, let us change the play: what shall we talk about? Politics or parsons, love or law, choose your subject, and I’ll discourse you sweetly. Moggan shall take down the conversation in shorthand; perhaps I might be able to get something a column for it. But hark! Here comes one with no uncertain or hesitating tread. Is it a person for me? Yes; and I know who that person is, too. Now, don’t leave me, either of you, *remember.*’

And next instant, after one sounding knock, and

waiting for no answer to his summons, Mr. Rodewald, walking straight across the anteroom, appeared in the open doorway.

‘Good-day,’ he said, nodding to Smith. ‘Ah, Mr. Cheverley, this is an unexpected pleasure. I hope,’ he went on, turning again to Smith, ‘judging from the sound of laughter as I came up the stairs, I may conclude you are better.’

‘I am better, thank you,’ answered Mr. Smith, with a great and, when contrasted with his late demeanour, almost appalling gravity.

‘Well enough to do that little piece of work I wrote to you about?’

Mr. Smith shook his head. ‘I can’t undertake it,’ he said.

‘Can’t, or won’t, which, eh?’

‘Both. I can’t and won’t.’

‘I’d make it well worth your while. I have obliged you over and over again, and I think you might, by way of a change, oblige me. Why, the whole thing wouldn’t take you a couple of hours.’

‘I am not going to try; once for all, it is of no use pressing me. I wouldn’t write what you want if you offered a hundred pounds a line.’

‘Can you give me the name of any other gentleman of your profession more amenable to reason?’

‘I cannot.’

But for the urgent manner in which Mr. Smith had asked us to remain, I should certainly have taken my departure ere the conversation reached this point; but the tone in which the request had been made, as well as a repressed anger in Mr. Rodewald’s face, prevented my moving. Mr. Moggan, however, did not seem comfortable or disposed to remain, for, rising, he slipped quietly away, just saying as he went,

‘I’ll look round again this evening, Smith.’

But neither Mr. Smith nor Mr. Rodewald seemed to take much notice of his exit.

‘I thought I had better come round and speak to you about the matter,’ proceeded Mr. Rodewald. ‘You altogether misapprehend what I want; I feel sure of that. I need scarcely say I do not wish a word written to which the whole bench of bishops could take exception. You know, or at all events you ought to know, I am far more particular than you where such subjects are concerned. The way

you often speak on sacred topics pains me—I can use no other word—and you may therefore feel very certain I should be the last man on earth to ask you to write anything even bordering on irreverence or profanity.’

‘As I do not mean to write at all we need not pursue the question further.’

‘You really, then, refuse to do me a great favour, which would cost you very little toil, and for which I am willing to pay handsomely?’

‘I refuse to sell my pen to serve the purpose you have in your mind, whatever it may be,’ answered Mr. Smith, looking straight at the other man. ‘Very sure am I it is neither to honour God nor serve one of His creatures you invoked the aid of what you are good enough to call “my literary talent and marvellous knowledge of the Scriptures.” Do not let us pursue the subject further, Rodewald; I might chance to say that which had better be left unsaid, and you to hear things you would feel vexed afterwards to remember.’

Mr. Rodewald drew a long breath; then he said, ‘Am I to understand you distinctly decline to repay

a very small part of the large debt of gratitude you owe me?’

‘ I distinctly decline to do the thing you ask.’

‘ Though I assure you, on my word of honour, I wish you to write nothing, the tendency of which is not most true and excellent?’

‘ Let a single word serve for all—*No!*’

Mr. Rodewald walked to the door; then he turned, and, standing as if framed in the opening, said slowly,

‘ You might have found it to your advantage to comply with my request. If you find cause for repentance hereafter don’t blame me;’ then, without taking formal leave of either of us, he walked across the anteroom, out on to the broad landing, and went slowly and deliberately down-stairs.

It was not till the sound of his footsteps died quite away that either of us spoke; then Smith said,

‘ Shut the outer door, will you?’

‘ What did he want you to do?’ I asked, after obeying this direction.

‘ Write two sermons for him.’

‘ Sermons!’ I repeated, in astonishment.

‘Yes, the devil quoting Scripture, and Rodewald willing to pay for a sound discourse, seem to me about on a par.’

‘What can he want two sermons for?’

‘No good, you may be sure of that. I am glad Moggan went when he did, or Rodewald might have pressed him into the service.’

‘May I ask who Mr. Moggan is?’

‘He is a very honest, respectable, good-natured, industrious little fellow, but, for all that, utterly destitute of literary morality. He is a mercenary willing to fight on any side—perfectly indifferent for whom he holds a brief. He attends some place of worship regularly, I believe, but yet would have no objection to turn out an article proving everything came by chance, and that there is no God but matter. I have not the slightest reason to doubt his being a faithful and devoted husband to a lady who exactly answers to Byron’s celebrated lines on Queen Charlotte; yet he would not hesitate to write a paper advocating free-love, or leasehold marriages, or a plurality of wives, or anything, any one might be disposed to pay for.’

‘O Smith,’ I exclaimed involuntarily, ‘how glad

I should be to see you dissociated from all these people, and giving fair play to the genius you possess !'

I struck him suddenly, I suppose, in some sensitive part, for he paused a moment before replying, 'A lost life, my friend. Spilt milk there is no use crying over—and so, as I was saying,' he went on hurriedly, evidently not wishing to give me the chance of pursuing the subject, 'I am glad Moggan went when he did.'

Having just seen from the window that estimable literary character and Mr. Rodewald saunter across the open space in New Inn, talking earnestly as they went, I made no comment on this last remark. In Smith's restless and excited state no good could come of increasing his mental irritation. But before I left there was one question I did put to him :

'Can Rodewald injure you in any way? The expression of his face was not pleasant as he stood in the doorway.'

'He may give a little trouble about money,' was the reply, 'but he has no other pull over me.'

As I knew proffering Mr. John Smith pecuniary assistance to be a mere waste of time and words, I

left that gentleman some half hour later a great deal calmer in mind, and more composed in manner, feeling myself much comforted by the assurance he gave me that Rodewald's visit had been as good as a tonic to him, and that he thought he would have a sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

REEDBOURNE IS ASTONISHED.

MORE than a fortnight later I was surprised, one Saturday morning while still at breakfast, by a very early visit from Mr. Smith.

‘I thought I should catch you,’ he said, as he took the cup of tea I poured out for him. ‘Where’s our refugee, though?’ he asked, looking round the room where Adelaide was not.

‘I have induced her to go to a little out-of-the-way seaside place in Essex, and take the child. He has been something ailing lately. I want to speak to you about her; but, first, tell me what has procured me the pleasure of seeing you at this unwonted hour?’

I thought at last he might have come about money, and that I would break the ice for him without needless delay.

‘O, I wanted to tell you that, after all, my congratulations about Moggan being kept out of the way of

temptation were premature. Rodewald got hold of him, or rather he got hold of Rodewald; they arranged terms. Moggan has written the sermons, and they are to be preached at Reedbourne tomorrow. The little beggar is as proud of them as he might be if he had completed a finer play than *Othello*. Actually he brought them round to my place last night, and wanted to read them aloud; but, I need scarcely add, I could not stand that.

“Sound doctrine!” he said. (I only wish you could have heard the fellow.) “Good moral religious stuff. I did not think I should be able to do what I have done. Mr. Rodewald is delighted—handed over the money instantly. All I am afraid of is they’ll be spoiled in the delivery. I only wish with all my heart and soul I could preach them myself.”

‘And who is going to preach them?’ I asked Smith, as he paused in his account of Mr. Moggan’s self-laudation.

‘That is exactly what I wish to know, but what he could not tell me. He is to go down to take a verbatim report; and I want you, Cheverley, if you do not object, to go to Reedbourne and find out

what is going on. I have reasons for not wishing to go myself, but I really do feel an amount of curiosity on the subject quite foreign to my nature.'

My first impulse was to refuse.

'Wouldn't it look,' I urged, 'as though I, too, were joined in the conspiracy?'

'Whosoever may be going to preach the sermons knows pretty well why he is going to preach them, and at what instance. I have been wondering all night if Rodewald has managed to get some acquaintance of his own to take the duty; but conjecture is vain. Moggan says there is not a vice, or weakness, or folly of the rich laity and popular clergy he has failed to take notice of; so I conclude, Rodewald, having at length got a chance of paying off a long list of outstanding scores in the neighbourhood, intends to make as much of it as he can. From what I can glean, he instructed Moggan to imply there was only one righteous rich man left in or about Reedbourne, and that if next year the floods rose and swept away the whole of the inhabitants, except Rodewald and the few humbler folk he might feel inclined to bid to The Snuggery, no great loss would ensue to the community at large.'

‘What a strange notion altogether!’

‘Isn't it? For once Lazarus is going to have a good word said for him in Reedbourne Church; his sores are going to be artistically displayed; the crumbs from Dives' table are to be held up to scorn and ridicule; the very dogs—Dives' dogs—are to come in for share of the condemnation. And the great beauty of it is that, I suppose, there never lived a man who felt a greater hatred and contempt for Lazarus than our friend Rodewald.’

‘Well,’ I said at last, ‘I do not much care for going; but still, like you, I do feel a curiosity about the matter, and so I will run down to-morrow to Reedbourne in time for morning service.’

A Sabbath peace was all around as I strolled out of the little station, surrounded by pine woods, and made my way across the common.

When first I saw Reedbourne my eyes had not looked on anything especially grand or great or celebrated in the way of terrestrial beauty; but now, though the case chanced to be far different, as I paused and looked adown the sweep of country softly sloping to the still unseen Thames, I could but acknowledge my later judgment confirmed the truth

of my earlier fancy, and that man need never desire to behold anything softer, fairer, lovelier than Reedbourne as it lay in the calm stillness of that summer's morning, with its dark woods, its emerald meadows, its gently meandering streams, its wealth of flowers, its gray church tower, its distant line of blue hills—all glinting and changing and melting and blending into one exquisitely beautiful and tenderly home-like landscape.

Yes, again I was in the very heart of the daisy and buttercup country, and, though I saw no daisies, and the buttercups had long been stacked with the meadow hay, still the charm of the fields where they grew stole over me once more. There were roses, too, in quantity, for that is a land where roses seem to bud and bloom well-nigh the whole year round. An exquisite spot, truly. Why had I ever suffered myself to be disenchanted with it? why could I not even then entertain the idea of returning to live there? why had I long previously decided Holway's Farm was the 'most suitable' for a person like myself? Pooh! Did I not perfectly comprehend the reason why I preferred to remain near London?

It still wanted ten minutes to eleven as I passed through the gate and entered the churchyard. Looking around, and recalling, as I did so, my first impressions of the place, impressions so utterly erroneous as to border on the ludicrous, I beheld Moggan, like another Hervey, meditating among the tombs.

When he spied me he came forward and shook hands, as though we had known each other for years.

‘Pretty place—pretty neighbourhood,’ he said, in true Cockney patronage of Nature. Modern man seems, indeed, to entertain the belief that God Almighty, having well-nigh exhausted His powers in making London and other large cities, invented Nature as a sort of after-thought for the benefit of the dwellers in great towns. Moggan looked on Redbourne exactly as a sort of poorer Hampton Court or Rosherville Gardens; as he expressed it, ‘a good sort of place for a man to come out for a blow.’

‘Well, Mr. Cheverley,’ he went on, ‘and if I may inquire, what has brought you down into these wilds?’

There was no use trying to beat about the bush, so I told the gentleman I would much rather not have met, I had come down to hear the sermon, of which, I understood, he felt so justly proud.

‘Have you really, now!’ he said. ‘Well, I am glad, for I don’t mind confessing to you that I feel I have turned out a very decent bit of copy. I never did do anything of the sort before; but if I could get hold of any dignitary of the Church willing to pay up as handsomely as Mr. Rodewald, I’d go in for divinity altogether. It is a queer start, though, isn’t it?’

It was so queer that, aware no form of words could express my opinion of its exceeding strangeness, I maintained silence on the subject.

‘What are you going to do with yourself after service?’ asked Mr. Moggan, as I was turning to enter the church, where I certainly did not intend to occupy the same pew with him.

‘I mean to take the first train to Waterloo.’

‘Don’t do that,’ he entreated. ‘To begin with, there is no train till after three; and I have ordered a bit of dinner to be ready at the Reedbourne Arms

at two. Come and take share of what may be going, and wait and hear the second sermon. It is even better than the first.'

'In for a penny, in for a pound,' I thought. 'Why should I not go to the Reedbourne Arms and dine with this individual, the like of whom I had never met before?' Having come so far, I felt it would be agreeable to see the whole affair out.

'Are you not going to Mr. Rodewald's, then?' I asked.

'No, wasn't asked. Say you'll come, and then you can tell Smith how things went off.'

'Well, I will come, thank you,' I said.

Truly the downward descent is painfully easy! Fancy me—me, Reuben Cheverley, interesting myself in the doings of Mr. Rodewald, and consenting to take 'pot-luck' with the venal Mr. Moggau!

With a quite fresh feeling of sin and guilt upon me, I walked into the sacred edifice, and, signifying to the verger, who would have put me into a prominent position, my modest desire for a more retired corner, he was graciously pleased to permit me to select a seat amongst the few poor persons who ever went to Reedbourne Church. They only did so, I had been

given to understand, to please the Rector, and get whatever might be going in the way of charity!

De Field, in my time, used to sing in the choir; but he had apparently abandoned his musical efforts, for he now sat, not in the chancel, but in a conspicuous place near the reading-desk with Mrs. De Field and some of his family. He was much stouter than in the days when I used to know something of him at the 'Home and Foreign,' and looked more bloated, braggart, and offensive than ever. Smith told me he had given largely to the church; and, in good truth, the sums Reedbourne Church managed to secure and swallow up could not be considered as other than remarkable. A cathedral well-nigh might have been built for the money spent in beautifying Mr. Rivers's hobby.

The church soon filled; the rank and wealth and youth and beauty of Reedbourne surged in waves of silk and lace and broadcloth and fine linen up the aisles. The latest fashions prevailed. Scent-bottles and prayer-books lay side by side on the narrow ledges inside the pews; fans were brought immediately into requisition—all was just as I remembered it of old. Save that the ladies' bonnets were of a

different shape, and their dresses cut from a more recent pattern, I saw nothing different.

The service proceeded as of yore. An old clergyman, with gray hair and a weak voice, read the prayers, and, a good deal to my surprise, Mr. De Field read the lessons; then, while the customary hymn before the sermon was being sung, Mr. Grey—Mr. Grey and none other—ascended the low pulpit and sank down on his knees.

Could this have been anticipated by Mr. Rode-wald? From my corner I could just catch a glimpse of his face. I saw him smile—yes, certainly he smiled.

There was a dead silence in the congregation while Mr. Grey uttered the little formula in vogue at Reedbourne Church; then ensued a strange sort of rustle, as if every person in the building was craning forward to look at the curate.

What could it mean? I also craned forward myself to get a more uninterrupted view of the preacher, and saw he opened his sermon with trembling hands, and that the man was white to his lips.

Really the element of tragedy seemed to have walked up into the pulpit.

‘For John had said unto Herod, “It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife.”’

This was the text, and, having given it out, Mr. Grey’s nervousness seemed, to some extent, to vanish; for he read the sermon straight on in a dull sort of monotone, something like a schoolboy repeating a lesson, or that in which a lad drones out the exalted sentiments and the pathetic passages in a printer’s office.

Rarely indeed had it fallen to my lot to listen to a much more telling discourse—never, I can truly say, to hear one worse delivered. On and on Mr. Grey went in an even passionless voice, uttering the most scathing denunciations against sin in high places with a calm indifference which certainly struck me as extraordinary. Yet twice after the cannonade of hard words and scathing irony had been more than usually heavy he paused, and passed his handkerchief over his forehead. As the sermon proceeded a dim notion of the state of the case began to dawn on me. Rodewald had brought pressure to bear on the man to induce him to preach words which were none of his own choosing, and the text had a particular reference to some person in the congregation. Who

could it be? With quite a freshly-awakened interest I glanced over the sea of upturned faces; but faces in society tell no tales, and at Reedbourne Church a very select society indeed congregated each Sunday to idly repeat some very solemn truths concerning sin and sinners, to look askance with Christian scorn or envy at its neighbour's clothes, and survey its own with Christian complacency.

Some of the allusions I found no difficulty in following; they had been common talk and property even in my knowledge; but a scandal lives long in a small community, more especially when there chance to be a few kindly disposed people ready to keep it alive.

'If you look into the world,' said Mr. Grey, 'you will see men as much distinguished by their vices as by the features of their face. Few men have many reigning vices at once: covetousness, well planted in the mind, will starve out all other passions; it will hardly suffer any other vice to live by it. The same may be observed of luxury and intemperance, and of lewdness and ambition. Where any of them flourish they take up the whole man. Other vices are admitted only accidentally, and at spare hours, or as they may be subservient to the main inclination.'

The covetous man condemns all other vices, and perversely defends his own; the voluptuous man abhors covetousness, deceit, and fraud, whilst he looks on his own pleasures as innocent and harmless, and yet thinks himself under no great condemnation for seducing the widow's daughter, which is her richest treasure; the ambitious man equally unjustly condemns both, and yet sees no reason to be displeased with himself for all the wild havoc which his ambition makes in the world;' and so on through the whole catalogue of sin, emphasised at intervals with circumstances and events of local occurrence which could not be mistaken, as well as references to what Mr. Moggan, in the course of subsequent conversation, airily referred to as that *faux pas* of David and Bathsheba, the annexation of Naboth's vineyard, the greed of Gehazi, the punishment Samson brought on himself, the worldliness of Balaam, and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

But though the flames of the discourse played around all these various subjects, it was in that matter of the brother's wife that the heat of the fire evidently lay. Never before, surely, was such a character depicted as that of the modern Herod. Men

possessed of some special sin were, as Mr. Grey assured us, usually free of those other vices he condemned in his fellows; but the person who had married unlawfully was the exception, if we were to believe the preacher, to this rule. There was no wickedness of which he might not be regarded as capable. He had made long prayers, he had robbed the widow, he had cheated the orphan, he had made religion a cloak for sin. Finally, as though the poor wretch had not been sufficiently scourged, St. Paul was pressed into the service.

‘What will ye? Shall I come unto you with a rod? . . . For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed. . . . Know you not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven.’

And so, after a few recommendations as to the proper treatment of such a criminal, that reminded me, in their terse comprehensiveness, of the ban pronounced against the unfortunate jackdaw of Rheims, the sermon ended; the blessing, which indeed seemed a good deal out of place, was pro-

nounced; and the amazed congregation were free to depart.

For myself, I took the earliest opportunity possible of leaving the church by a convenient side-door, and, choosing a field-path which led away from the village, strolled in quite an opposite direction from The Snuggery, till the hour came to join Mr. Moggan at the Reedbourne Arms.

When he appeared, which was not for a long time after that appointed, that gentleman proved not to be in the best of tempers. Mr. Rodewald, seizing upon him on the way to the lych-gate, had characterised the sermon as wanting in point, and stated that it fell 'flat—quite flat;' whereupon Mr. Moggan said many things disparaging to Mr. Grey's powers of oratory, and remarked that Mr. Rodewald ought to have bargained for his own man to deliver the discourse as well as to write it.

'After this,' finished Mr. Moggan, 'he went down to the curate's, where, I believe, he held forth to that unfortunate individual in anything but a complimentary style.'

'Held forth to Mr. Grey!' I repeated in surprise.

‘So I hear. Grey’s servant is cousin to the landlord’s wife here; and when she came for the dinner beer, she said “the furriner” had been “going on shameful.” It seems there is an execution in the house, and Rodewald promised to pay the man out if Grey would preach two sermons. Grey refused for a long time; but his wife overpersuaded him, and now he does not want to deliver the second discourse.

“Just as you please,” answered Rodewald; “but you might as well get rid of the bailiff, for you have already made the place too hot to hold you and De Field.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Grey.

“You had better ask him how his brother’s wife is, that’s all,” said Rodewald.’

‘Good Heavens!’ I exclaimed. ‘*Good Heavens!*’

‘When he went there after the man was left in possession, and shown the warrant, Mr. Grey began lamenting that it was signed by Sir Burke Robinson.

“Never mind,” said Rodewald cheerfully; “perhaps Sir Burke Robinson may have an execution in his own house one of these days.”

‘ I almost wish I had not said I would take the sermon down in shorthand again this evening. I begin to feel as if I should like to be out of the matter.’

But after partaking of a much better dinner than, I candidly own, the appearance of the Reedbourne Arms and my own knowledge of the locality led me to expect, Mr. Moggan’s views of the position became less gloomy. ‘ At any rate,’ he said, ‘ no one can blame *me!* I know nothing of De Field or De Anybody.’ And then he waxed facetious, and told me several of his experiences, many of which were, no doubt, instructive, and most of which were amusing.

Time passed in his company quickly enough, till at last, when, despite a faint remonstrance on his part, I had settled the bill, I remarked I would bid him good-evening, and take a stroll before proceeding to church.

As he wanted, I knew, to have a little more whisky ‘ cold without,’ which, he assured me, was the beverage he found he could work upon best and longest, I was permitted to depart alone; but just as I ended my pleasant *détour*, and reëntered the main road through the village, from a field-path

winding among meadows that sloped gently to the Reed, I beheld him coming along at full speed, swinging his hat in one hand and mopping his forehead with the other.

It was of no use trying further to elude his companionship ; and so, after he joined me, we walked soberly on together towards the church, preceded by a party of some half-dozen persons, in the midst of whom I recognised De Field.

He was, as usual, talking loudly and arrogantly ; and we were so near I could hear every word he spoke.

The sermon had evidently been under discussion.

‘ A fine discourse ! ’ declared Mr. De Field. ‘ Tell you what, now—candidly, I did not think Grey had it in him ; did you, Beverton ? ’

What answer Beverton might have made, on this earth will never now be known ; for just as he turned to reply, a voice, as if from heaven, inquired, ‘ *How’s your brother’s wife, Deffield ?* ’

At this question, put with the extremest solicitude, De Field started and looked round—so did we all, indeed, for that matter ; but there was not a human being within speaking distance, save his own party,

myself, and Mr. Moggan, and, quite out in the middle of the road, a namby-pamby youth, who wore spectacles and sang in, the choir, and wore no whiskers or hair of any sort on his face—indeed, owned none to wear—and had walked about Reedbourne for years past with his mouth open, looking as if he were a perfect simpleton.

If Mr. De Field said anything after this, we did not hear it. Even Mr. Moggan was stricken into momentary silence, nudging me, however, with his elbow, and raising his eyebrows in a manner expressive of the greatest dismay. As we neared the church, he whispered in my ear, ‘I’ll lose no time in getting to the station once the sermon is over; there’s a train I can catch.’

I only nodded in reply. It had occurred to me also that I would get out of the daisy and buttercup country as soon after the service as possible.

Somewhat to my surprise, and I may add admiration, Mr. De Field again read the lessons. If there was a word of truth in the accusation launched against him, he must indeed have been possessed of a scarcely human courage to stand up among that congregation and read those useful moral lessons out

of Holy Writ. Like one dazed, I listened to Mr. Grey, who, having apparently settled matters with his own conscience, delivered Mr. Moggan's second sermon, maundering through a discourse which, to those who could read between the lines, was simply a denunciation of the ways and doings of the Reedbourne clergy. The text was, 'But ye have despised the poor.' And it is scarcely necessary to tell any one who has followed the course of this story so far, and is acquainted with the epistle in which these words are to be found, what Mr. Moggan and Mr. Rodewald between them had made of the subject.

The sermon proved to be precisely what Smith had indicated. Dives and Mrs. Dives and the little Diveses, and the stranger without Dives' gate, his ox, his ass, his men-servants and his maid-servants, his dogs, his horses, his carriages, his money, his purple and fine linen, were severally and collectively held up to condemnation; the clergy who lauded him for his subscriptions, who drank his wines, who ate his dinners, who were proud to cross his threshold, and say, when he came into their assembly, 'Sit thou here in a good place,' were denounced for

respecting rich men and despising those of low estate.

That evening, if never before nor ever after, Lazarus had his innings in Reedbourne Church—all his sins were laid at the door of Dives (most unfairly, in my opinion, as I have always held, with Charles Lamb, that ‘the genius of Poverty, hampered and straitened as it is, is not so barren of invention but it can trade upon the staple of its own vice’). How could he be provident when he saw the reckless extravagance of his so-called betters? Why should any one blame him for reeling home from his favourite tavern, when he saw the empty champagne and claret bottles which were cleared periodically out of Dives’s back yard?

This is a sort of declamation of which a very little goes a long way; and I was beginning to feel dreadfully tired of the whole thing, when Mr. Grey suddenly came to an end, stopping short in a moment, after the fashion of one of those walking dolls wound up to go by clockwork, which, while stepping out quite briskly, is brought to an ignominious standstill by reason of the running down of its machinery.

Five minutes later I was on the common, stepping briskly out too for the station, with the peace of the quiet night closing down upon me, the hush of the dark pines around, a thousand sweet scents wandering across my path as if anxious to bid me tenderly farewell, the lights of Reedbourne Station a little way ahead, and the rushing sound of the train distinctly audible as it swept round the curve from Hampsfield.

Every mile of our homeward journey seemed to take some portion of the weight off Mr. Moggan's spirits. He said nobody could blame him; that nobody knew who he was or where he lived; that the business had proved a profitable one; that he would be able, at any rate, to boast hereafter, two of his sermons had been preached to crowded congregations. Did I not think they were a couple of excellent discourses—now, candidly?

‘Did you ever hear the story about Whately?’ I asked, in reply. ‘He went one day into a London suburban church, and after service walked into the vestry, and congratulated the preacher on the “capital sermon.” (A bow of flattered acknowledgment.) “Rather flowery, though, in parts.” (The pleased

smile froze, and the graceful attitude stiffened.) “Spite of that, though, a capital sermon—I don’t know that I ever wrote a better.” “What do you mean, sir?” “I mean that the good parts were mine, and the flowery portions yours.” “And,” scornfully, “may I ask, who are you?” “O, I’m Richard Dublin!”

As I repeated this pleasing anecdote, the varying expressions on Moggan’s face were a study. When I finished, he said,

‘I suppose I am dull, but I really fail to see the appropriateness of your story.’

‘I think you do,’ I answered. ‘I know whence you drew your inspiration—the volume from which you copied out, I won’t say passages, but whole pages. Luckily for you, my friend Mr. Rodewald has been engaged rather in the study of modern men than in the works of the old divines.’

For a second Mr. Moggan’s face fell, and he seemed to hesitate how to take my remark. Then, being a good-tempered as well as an audacious little fellow, he burst out laughing.

‘Come,’ he cried, ‘I’ll cap your story with another. A certain divine—I won’t tell you his

name, because he is still living, and has a large following of silly women and weak-kneed men—achieved a great reputation merely by threading the great thoughts of great thinkers on a string of his own, and presenting the result as original. One Sunday a man who, like yourself, was well read in old theological books, took up his position just under the pulpit, and, as the reverend proceeded with his discourse, commented at intervals: “That’s Jeremy Taylor—that’s Bishop Hooker—that’s Bunyan—that’s Knox—that’s Dean Swift,” and so on, not offensively, but with just sufficient distinctness to be audible in his immediate neighbourhood. The parson stood fire for a long time; but at last, leaning over the pulpit-cushion, he observed, in a voice tremulous with anger, “If you persist, sir, in this unseemly course of interruption, I shall be compelled reluctantly to ask you to leave the church.” “*That’s your own!*” said his tormentor, calmly looking up at him. What’s this? why, it’s Vauxhall! I get out here,’ added Mr. Moggan, speaking now on his own account. ‘Well, there’s one thing I think you’ll admit, Mr. Cheverley, namely, that there are

few who could have got as much out of our old friend the bishop as I did.'

'Upon my word, I don't think there are,' I answered; after which we shook hands, and parted in the most amiable manner.

Next day, when I went to give Smith particulars of the proceedings at Reedbourne, I found him recklessly thrusting a few necessaries into an old portmanteau.

'Read that,' he said, before I could speak, and he thrust a telegram into my hand.

It was dated from a town in a remote part of France, and in the French language informed Mr. Smith that his friend Mr. Posinby, then extremely ill, begged him to come with all speed.

'So I'm off at once,' explained Mr. Smith, with one foot planted on the seat of his chair, looking at me over the back.

'But you can't go this minute,' I remonstrated. 'There will be nothing across the Channel for a few hours yet. What's the good of your going down to Dover, and waiting about there for hours? Stop for the mail, and, if you like, I'll go with you.'

'Will you? Thank you, a thousand times.'

We travelled as fast as we could, delaying nowhere, but rushing on through the night and greater part of the next day. With all, we were too late, however—for aught, that is to say, save just seeing the poor fellow before he breathed his last. He knew Smith, and smiled faintly; but the only intelligible word he spoke was,

‘*Sold!*’

‘Ay,’ said Smith, talking about this afterwards; ‘and I quite innocently helped to sell him. I don’t believe there was the slightest reason why he ever should have left England at all.’

He had not told me before about that hurried journey he made into the Thames Valley, at Rode-wald’s bidding, in order to send the man who lay so still and quiet, in a room near at hand, away to meet his death. The same thunder-storm which caught Smith soaked the fugitive through, and he never changed his saturated clothing till he reached the village where we found him, and of which, as we gathered, he retained some pleasant memory connected with his younger life. All these, at any rate, seemed to know and love him there. He had not sickened amongst strangers. Plenty of tears were

shed for the fate of the handsome generous 'Milord,' as they called him; 'More, by far, I warrant,' said Smith bitterly, 'than if he had died at View-Water, with his silly wife and the fair Wickenden watching beside him.'

He asked me what I thought Posinby had done, or whether I thought he had done anything, repeating Mr. Rodewald's remark about View-Water and Somerset House.

'I do not imagine it was what Rodewald implied,' I answered. 'If it had been, he wouldn't have told you even as much as he did. Possibly he signed some man's name "in mistake," and that Rodewald knew it.'

'And made him believe he was his greatest friend, whereas he was indeed selling him every day of his life.'

We talked about Rodewald and the Thames Valley a great deal during that time, when we walked together, as in an unreal sort of dream, through the French vineyards. I had never, even on the Calais sands, come so near Smith before—I had never liked him so well. After all, these stern hard workers are the people to know. In

one year of their lives they store up enough of the honey of observation and experience to gladden the hearts of their fellows during the whole of their earthly pilgrimage. There was nothing my own life held I kept back from him; but vaguely, and with a sort of sad unrest, I felt there was much Smith was holding back from me.

After thinking the matter over for several hours, he telegraphed what had occurred to Rodewald. 'And if I were you,' he said, 'I should leave before he could possibly reach here. *You* had better not be mixed up in any of his business.'

So I slowly retraced my steps to England, pausing here and pausing there, not hurrying myself in the least, as I supposed Adelaide to be still at that dull watering-place on the eastern coast.

Judge, therefore, how astonished and shocked I felt when, on reaching Leytonstone, I saw her coming down to the gate to meet me, and heard her say,

'How good it is that you have come home! You will tell me what I ought to do. My little child will now soon be quite well again. Ah, he has been so bad, mine own very darling one!'

CHAPTER XII.

MR. FRANKFORD MEETS HIS MATCH.

IT was with a heavy heart that next morning I wended my way to Smith's chambers, to ask if he could give me the address of the best physician in London, when children's ailments were concerned. From a couple of letters awaiting my return, I knew he must have been back more than a fortnight. The first epistle told me how Mr. Rodewald had come to the distant French village, accompanied by Mrs. Posinby and Miss Wickenden; how there had been dreadful scenes, tears, hysterics, self-reproaches, lamentations, and 'all the rest of it,' as Smith irreverently and inartistically finished his sentence; how the 'manager of affairs' had advised Mrs. Posinby to retire for the winter to 'an old-world German town,' in comparison to which, finished Smith, a convent might be considered the very acme of liveliness—'a German town out of the beat of travellers, yet still accessible for Rodewald, who

would find it necessary often to run over and advise with Mrs. Posinby concerning the entangled state of her affairs. He tells me Posinby, one way or another, has so managed matters she is left with a bare maintenance. It seems Posinby got her to sign papers recklessly, and that, strong in the security of old Mr. Harridge's will, she believed she could do her income no permanent injury. Rodewald says she will have to pay for her misplaced confidence to the tune of about nine thousand five hundred a year for her life, all of which you can disbelieve if you like, or believe, should it please you better.'

Number two stated 'all that was mortal of Louis Posinby had been laid to rest (in the last place on earth, I am sure, Mr. Posinby, could he have spoken, would have said rest was likely to be found), in the Harridge vault, at Thamesford. Rodewald beat up the neighbourhood and the whole Harridge and Posinby connection for "mourning volunteers," so upon the whole we really did not muster badly. The day was lovely: from that most silent and romantic churchyard we could see the swans sailing down the river, and hear the lap-lap of the Thames as it sobbed in upon the landing-place hard by the rec-

tory. If even a few present felt as I did, Posinby had some real mourners.'

Though not naturally given to superstition, I felt there was what the lower orders call a 'spell' growing on me, as regards my visits to Smith's chambers. Rarely, of late, had I bent my steps thither without some curious circumstance resulting from, or attending upon, my doing so.

Certainly, however, as I argued with myself, I had seldom gone to New Inn save on errands of importance, or at a time when grave events were happening; and accordingly, a dreamer still, while I wended my westward way, I fell to musing whether facts induced instincts, or instincts facts.

'And you really are back at last!' It was Smith who spoke these words with no element of tragedy in them; Smith, very hard at work, seated at a table drawn close up under the window, who rose from among his papers and gave me most cordial greeting.

'And you are back also,' I said stupidly, as though I did not see the man standing in the small amount of flesh his spare frame carried, before my eyes.

'Ages ago—a fortnight at least; have knocked off

a world of copy in the time ; and I can now look Rodewald, or Rodewald's lawyer, when he crosses my humble threshold, undauntedly in the face.'

I sat down, and told him what I came about ; and he, with a deep sorrow and sympathy in his face, which suited its grave lines well, had just answered my question, and was telling me a pleasant anecdote of the man he felt sure would treat Adelaide's child with the greatest skill and tenderest consideration, when we heard some one ascending the stairs, and pausing at his door.

'Go into my bedroom,' said Smith ; 'if it should be Rodewald, I don't want him to find you here. I have reasons,' he added hurriedly. And, thus instructed, I passed through the inner door, which, without a bang I dared not adventure, refused to latch.

It was not Rodewald, though. I grasped that fact as I immediately did another, namely, the impossibility, owing to the arrangement of the furniture in Smith's mite of a bedroom, of removing myself to any appreciable distance from the door of communication between the two rooms.

'Good-morning!' said Smith to the new-comer,

as if he were one with whom no possible secret would ever need to be discussed ; and ‘ Good - morning ! ’ answered the visitor, in a clear well-bred voice that had not a trace of the Rodewald rank about it.

Mr. Smith marshalled this fresh arrival across his room. ‘ Pray be seated,’ he said ; and the words sounded as if spoken in my ear, so close was the chair on which I sat to the door, which stood just ajar.

‘ I have called,’ began the gentleman possessed of the clear, cold, well-bred voice, ‘ to ask you to be kind enough to give me a little information—’

‘ Any information I possess is quite at your service,’ answered Mr. Smith fluently enough ; and yet it seemed to me as he spoke his voice was not the voice of the man I had been talking to a minute previously.

‘ Thank you very much, I am sure ; but, not to take an undue advantage, I may as well tell you it is quite possible some of the questions I wish to put you may not desire to answer.’

At this juncture I stole on feet of velvet to the other door, hoping to find it open. It was locked ; and there was no spot in all that room where I could

avoid hearing the whole of the dialogue which followed.

‘It is optional, I suppose, in that case,’ said Smith, with a short nervous laugh, ‘whether I answer them or not?’

‘Of course; but, in case you decline to answer them, I shall draw my own conclusions.’

‘Let us get to business, then, at once,’ said Smith, for the moment, I thought, gruffly. ‘What is the nature of the information you seek from me?’

‘I want to know first,’ said the other, ‘whether, some eighteen years ago, you, John Smith Nugent, were married to Amy Wadford?’

‘Before I answer that question,’ replied Mr. Smith, ‘I should like to know who advised you to ask it.’

‘You have answered my question by that inquiry,’ said the clear, cold, passionless voice. ‘Nevertheless, I can entertain no possible objection to tell you. I should probably never have asked it but for Mr. Rodewald.’

I do not know why—for I really knew nothing of the circumstances of the case—but I waited for some deep-wrung curse, some terrible blasphemy to

follow the utterance of that name. Nothing of the sort came, however ; there only ensued a dead silence. Then said Mr. Smith,

‘ And the next question, Mr. Frankford ? ’

‘ Really, I do not know that there is any other. Fact is, till I came here this morning, I did not believe what I had heard was true.’

‘ It is quite true,’ said Mr. Smith. ‘ What are you going to do ? ’

‘ There is only one thing to do, of course.’

‘ And that is—’

‘ Get a warrant out for bigamy.’

Another dead silence, a silence even deeper than the first, broken at last by Smith.

‘ You won’t do that,’ he said.

‘ I most decidedly shall.’

‘ No, you won’t. Why should you ? ’

‘ Why should I ? Do you really suppose *I*,’ with an emphasis on the word which meant scorn to some one else, ‘ should continue to occupy so false a position for an hour longer than was inevitable ? Candidly, as I tell you, I did not believe Rodewald ; but now—’

‘ Mr. Frankford, I will be quite plain with you ;

but, in return, I expect you to be plain with me. Eighteen years ago I married Amy Wadford. Twelve months since, the thirty-first of this month, I met her again as your wife, and—'

'And between—and why did she leave you?' asked Mr. Frankford.

'Were you ever in love with her?' asked Mr. Smith.

'I suppose so, or I should not have married a woman of whose antecedents I knew literally nothing. All the more fool I, for marrying her, you may say.'

'Have you any love left for her now?'

'Certainly not. The person who takes me in does so at his or her own peril; and she took me in completely.'

'Well, yes, poor wretch!' said Mr. Smith, with an infinite pity; then he suddenly asked,

'How did Rodewald know?'

'I haven't the faintest idea; but he knows everything, I believe, about her you would try to conceal even now.'

'Proceed with your questions, and then I will say what I have got to say.'

'I want to learn from your lips why and when

she quitted your home, and what she was doing between that date and the time I met her.'

'She left me, that is enough for you to know; as for your second question, I am unable to answer it. I lost sight of her completely for over two years; then I met her accidentally, under circumstances which induced me to believe she must be badly off. I proposed to provide for her maintenance in some remote part of the country, but she refused to take any help from me. I never saw her again till that night at View-Water.'

'You are fencing with me,' said Mr. Frankford. 'You know perfectly well that when you met her again, at the expiration of those two years, she had sunk to the lowest depths a woman can.'

'If you consider your information as exhaustively accurate, why do you come to me for more?'

'Because, as I tell you, I did not believe it. The whole statement seemed to me incredible. Now, of course, there is only one thing to do, and I shall do it.'

'And I say you shall not,' declared the man I had known as John Smith.

'Who or what is there to prevent me?'

‘I shall prevent you.’

‘I do not think you will.’

‘There is no need,’ began Smith, putting, as I could tell from his voice, a powerful restraint upon himself, ‘for us to discuss this business in bad blood. It is an awful matter for you, and for me—well, it has not been pleasant; but you have not injured me and I have not injured you: let us therefore talk the position over, like men of the world, and think what is best to be done.’

‘I know perfectly what I am going to do,’ answered Mr. Frankfort; ‘and as to your not having injured me, I consider, the moment you knew who and what the person was calling herself my wife, you ought to have told me.’

‘Ought I?’ repeated Smith dreamily. ‘I have often wondered which way duty pointed, and I never could make up my mind. At any rate, if I did keep silence, it was not with the idea of benefitting myself or hurting you, so I hope I may speak to you freely, without any lurking suspicion that you regard me as your enemy.’

‘What have you got to say?’ asked Mr. Frankfort; his tone was not encouraging.

‘I have got to say this: that when a great scandal can be avoided, it is never worth while to cause one. Why should you hound and persecute this unhappy sinner, who, I solemnly declare before God, I do not believe can discern right from wrong—who never understood or acknowledged any law, human or divine, save that of her own gratification—who morally I believe to have been born blind?’

‘Are you mad?’ said Mr. Frankford. ‘Do you suppose for one moment I should ever allow the same roof again to cover us—that I should not instantly free myself from such a woman?’

‘No; I did not suppose anything of the sort. But what I did and do think is, you would rather the world remained in ignorance—that your wife was in fact no wife, and that her antecedents would not bear investigation. Stop! don’t answer me, please, for a moment, till I have quite finished. You are a rich man, Mr. Frankford. Life, I doubt not, still holds many prizes you would desire to win; at all events, life is not over for you. Well, you know what society is as well as I; that, though it gloats over the details of a tragedy, it despises every one of the actors in it; and if you are as sensible and worldly-

wise a man as I take you to be, instead of making yourself and the unhappy woman, who has been known as Mrs. Frankford, the talk of the town, you will quietly separate from her, and leave the rest to time. You won't have to wait long for your release.'

'What do you mean?'

'That she is dying; that before another spring comes, you will be as free as the law could make you, now that there is no need for exposure, or gossip, or publicity. She has, I understand, gone away for the benefit of her health. There is one thing quite certain: she will never come back again unless you decide to bring her under the escort of a policeman.'

'How do you know this?' asked Mr. Frankford.

'How do I know?' repeated Mr. Smith; 'because she came to me here. She sat where you are sitting, and prayed to me for life as she will never, I fear, pray to God for forgiveness. Merton, it seems, told her the truth plainly; the great doctors pocketed their fees; gave her some harmless prescriptions, and told her pleasant fables; but she

knew she was in danger, and so turned to me to save her.'

'And you?' suggested Mr. Frankford.

'When she complained that I would not touch her hand or feel her pulse, I said, "If you offered me for guerdon the years you have cursed; if you returned to me, with its highest hopes fulfilled, the broken career you marred; if you gave me perfected the 'might have been' that can never, never be for me now, I could no more add a day to your existence than I could a cubit to my own stature. They are lying prophets who professed to be able to cure you! I have but to look in your face to know the fiat has been pronounced, the doom gone forth. Make your peace, if it be possible, with God, to whom all things are possible; for I swear to you, in your case, there is no hope of help for mind or body from man!"'

If Rodewald himself, sitting where I sat, had heard those words spoken as they were, I think even he must have been touched; but apparently they produced not the slightest effect on Mr. Frankford.

'Did it not strike you,' he asked, 'as an un-

heard-of thing, for her to come on such an errand to you ?’

‘No ; for I knew her ; and she—well, in her extremity she remembered what men said of me in the days when I had still a future. She thought the wisdom of the College of Physicians folly in comparison to the knowledge of the man whose love she despised, whose heart she broke ; in a word, she wanted something, and, believing I could give it to her, turned to me. She came for life, and I had to substitute death ; and she went out of that door and down the stairs, and back to her home, knowing full surely her days were numbered, that the long dark story of sin, deceit, and selfishness was drawing swiftly to a close.’

There was a moment’s pause. ‘What will he say now ?’ I wondered ; and memory, like a lightning flash, showed me a veiled figure I had once met, as I made my way up to Smith’s chambers ; yes, and that same morning he had said he was busy, and asked me to call again when next I chanced to be passing. Lord, what trouble, known alone to Thee, Thy creatures are often wrestling with, when we, their friends, are totally unaware of the struggle !

‘To divest the whole matter of sentiment and verbiage’—it was Mr. Frankford who spoke—‘what you want me to do is—let this matter remain in abeyance until Mrs. Nugent—shall we call her?—is good enough to solve the difficulty by dying.’

I wish I could have seen Smith’s face as he answered, ‘Yes.’

‘Then I distinctly decline to do anything of the sort. I have not yet been to my solicitors, but I shall go now and instruct them to do *at once* everything which may be necessary in such a case.’

‘You will?’

‘Yes, this morning. In what position, may I ask you, do you suppose I should find myself at the end of a twelvemonth, supposing Mrs. Nugent did *not* die? The whole suggestion is ridiculous!’

‘That is a fear which need not trouble you. She is dying as fast as a woman of her temperament can die.’

‘I mean no imputation on your medical skill—which, however, I should imagine must have got somewhat rusted—or your truthfulness, which I have no sufficient reason to doubt, when I say I intend to put my own position on a sound

footing, quite independent of the opinion of any man.'

'O!' said Mr. Smith, and for a moment he said no more; then, as Mr. Frankford rose to go, he went on,

'There is a case mentioned in a book little read nowadays which seems to me peculiarly applicable to this matter. It commences with the words,

"There was a certain rich man which had a steward." Need I proceed, Mr. Frankford?'

'No, sir, you need not. If you adduced fifty parables to prove I ought to forgive the shameful and shameless deception which has been practised upon me, it would not shake my determination in the least. To end this maudlin, whether you are sincere or whether you are not, whether you are in league with this woman, as I begin to suspect, or whether you are not, she shall pay the penalty of her crime. Remember, I shall not punish her to revenge, but only to free myself.'

'That is your last word, Mr. Frankford, is it?'

I knew Smith must have risen as he spoke. In fancy I could see him towering tall, erect, severe, above the man he addressed.

‘ Yes; I hoped you would have coöperated with me in a reasonable spirit; but as, for some reason best known to yourself, you incline to take the part of the woman who has injured you as well as me, I feel I had better obtain all the technical information I require elsewhere;’ and, with this, he would have gone had Smith not stopped him by saying,

‘ A minute, Mr. Frankford; I won’t detain you longer. You have stated your determination; now hear mine. If you persist in your resolution of sending a dying woman to gaol, the same paragraph which tells the world her sentence shall tell the antecedents of the man who condemns her to pass the few remaining days of her life in prison. Make no mistake about what *I* mean. I knew how you got your money before I ever saw your face. Rodewald, who told you my secret, unearthed yours, and took me into his confidence. Since then I have pursued the matter on my own account, and I swear to you the moment you proceed against the woman who is my wife, I will gibbet you in every paper published in England. You may think me a poor man, but no man is poor who has the press of Great Britain at his back. I have the press at my back. I am rich

enough to retain counsel, and I will retain the best man at the Bar—the man with no scruples, and possessed of the bitterest wittiest tongue. How about the George Jones, Mr. Frankford, which foundered off Newfoundland; about the Albatross, which went down in the Bay of Biscay; about—’

‘I have the honour to wish you good-morning,’ interrupted Mr. Frankford, with the calmest politeness; and I heard him cross the room and lobby, and close both doors behind him.

I waited a minute—in effect I waited many minutes—then I walked into Smith’s sitting-room. His arms were thrown out across the table, his hands were linked loosely together, and his face lay buried on the support thus formed.

‘Smith,’ I said, as he took no notice of my presence, ‘of course you know I have heard every word. Before I go I wish to tell you this sad, sad story shall remain locked in my soul as though it had never been spoken.’

He looked up. ‘Don’t go yet,’ he entreated; ‘I want to speak to you.’

So I waited—I don’t know how long; and, if I did, it would not much matter. I sat in the chair

Mr. Frankford had vacated, and thought about a thousand things; he sat in the chair he had occupied during the interview just ended, and took a cheerful survey, I doubt not, of what that eighteen years referred to had brought to him.

At length, however, when the passion or paroxysm was over, he spoke.

‘I am glad you heard,’ he said. ‘I have often wished to tell you, but I could not. Let me tell you now, or I shall never be able to do so hereafter—never. Don’t answer me, please; don’t talk if you can help it. I am an Irishman; I was born, reared, and bred in the black North; I come of a good family; but what remained of my father’s property was swept away through the Encumbered Estates’ Court, and I always knew I should have to work for my living.’

‘Smith,’ I entreated, ‘tell me all this at some future time, or never, if you think well; but do not speak about your sorrow now—you are in no fit state of mind—’

He stopped me with an impatient gesture.

‘It will do me good, I tell you. The floodgates are open; let the stream have its way. Where was

I?—O, I was never much to look at. Not even the mother that bore me could say a word in favour of my looks; but I had something in me, and I meant to make a mark. Were not my parents proud of me! At home, I have no doubt, the prizes of my boyhood are all still kept in an old ebony cabinet that stands in the right-hand recess, beside the fireplace, in the little drawing-room. Ah, me! ah, me!’

He paused for a moment; but I did not speak. I felt I could not break the thread of his narrative again.

‘I chose the medical profession, and made rapid progress. While still quite a young man, the chance offered of coming to England, and I eagerly availed myself of it. The following summer I spent a month in Ireland; but I have never been there since. That is more than twenty years ago. My mother is dead. In all that time my poor father and I have not once seen each other—’

He rose, and, pouring some water into a tumbler, took a long deep draught ere he went on again.

‘I drifted down from Lancashire into Somerset, and soon dropped into a splendid practice there. It

was not good when I first got it, but the people took to, and circumstances favoured, me. No man of my worldly degree ever probably began life with fairer prospects. I liked the place, my work, my patients, my friends—for the gentry were very kind to me. After a short time I wrote home to say I could begin to show my gratitude for the unselfish love and devotion lavished so ungrudgingly upon my education and the preliminary expenses of my profession, and that I should, therefore, for the future remit quarterly a sum which added no doubt greatly to the comfort of my parents' lives. The sum was just half my then income. I mention this to help to explain my conduct later on.

‘At the distance of some miles from my house there lived a poor curate, with two motherless daughters. He was ill, and I attended him without charge. I don't think he was in the least degree thankful; but for a smile from one of the girls I would have ridden twice as far any day. I knew she was not a wife for me, and I had no more thought or intention of marrying her than of buying some rare Old Master or delicate morsel of china. I always believed she would make some great match. Hers

was the sort of beauty one feels entitled a woman to form a grand alliance. Look ;' and, unlocking a drawer, he took from out its wrappings a miniature painted on ivory, and placed it in my hand.

I could not repress an exclamation of surprise.

'Most beautiful!' I said. 'And is this—'

'There is a "she" in every man's life,' answered Smith, 'and that is the woman of mine—let me cover her fair false face from sight! To make a long story short, the father died, and the sisters were left penniless. The elder took a situation; but Amy was clearly too handsome for anything of the sort. Meantime, the prince, or earl, or millionaire had not come; and there seemed no sign of his coming. I was the only ship in sight; and so—she made believe she was fond of me, and the story of Delilah and Samson was repeated. The whole thing was sudden—the proposal, the marriage, the home-coming. I did not tell my parents what I had done. From the first, I suppose, I knew it was a mad foolish thing; and, besides, they might have felt reluctant to take money from me when I was no longer single.

'Eighteen months went by. Amongst my pa-

tients was a rich bachelor called Ashley. He had always shown me marked favour, which increased after my marriage. I don't know what the trouble may have been his life held ; but at any rate he was fond of bright faces, and Amy kept ever a plentiful stock of smiles for out of doors. If she had been his daughter, he could not have been kinder to her. We were both free of his house ; and at last, when I advised him to winter abroad, he proposed we should accompany him, and offered, if I would consent, to "make it worth my while."

'I would never have consented to such a thing, but Amy gave me no peace about the matter ; and so at last it was arranged I should take a doctor I knew into partnership, and, leaving the practice in his charge, go to France or elsewhere with Mr. Ashley. On the whole, I did not feel sorry at the chance of leaving home for a while, for I was greatly annoyed by the constant presence of a cousin of Amy's—a young lieutenant, who happened to be stationed at the nearest town. He was a poor empty-headed creature, with no single thing to commend him except good looks ; but Amy said he was "very amusing," and of course, as he was her

relation, I could scarcely expect her to share my sentiments concerning him.

‘ People blamed me afterwards, declared I ought to have known ; but upon my word, Cheverley, it seems to me the virtue which needs watching is scarcely worth keeping.

‘ Very often Mr. Ashley had large amounts of money in his house—occasionally as much as three or four thousand pounds—of which fact both Amy and I were well aware. I often remonstrated with him on the subject, frequently offering to bank the amount ; but he still persisted in the practice, and, as I said before, we generally knew when he had such sums. Sometimes, indeed, he would ask Amy to lock a bundle of notes away for him in a small safe fixed into the wall of his library. All the partnership business was settled, and we were to leave in a fortnight, when one evening, on my return home after a hard day’s work, I was met with the information, “ Missus would not be back for dinner.” She never came back at all ; she was gone with her cousin. She had been more than usually sweet and affectionate when we parted ; she had kissed me fondly. The last thing I saw, as I turned to take

one last glance at the house, was a white, white hand waving in tender farewell.'

As he spoke he stopped, as if he had been shot; the rush and hurry of old memories seemed to choke him, and it was a minute before he said,

'While I was battling with this trouble, I heard a large sum of money was missing out of Mr. Ashley's safe. At first I did not connect the two things; I was even dull enough to fail to understand the hints which people dropped on the subject. When he discovered his loss, he at once tried to stop payment of the notes, but found the whole of them, with the exception of one, value ten pounds, had been changed at the Bank of England. Then that one note was advertised for, information received on the subject, the clue taken up and followed *till it was traced back to me*. I knew I had paid away a ten-pound note, and I remembered wondering at the time how it came into my desk, where I felt confident I had left a five-pound note and five pounds in gold.'

Once again he stopped, and I was on the point of entreating him to proceed no further, when he hurriedly resumed,

· I don't think Mr. Ashley would have been so hard upon me as he was, but for his solicitor and the nephew, who was to succeed to his property. It was just a toss-up whether they should give me in charge. I ought to have let them do so; I ought to have stood my trial, allowed them search for the woman who had left me and robbed him; but I could not do it. I had loved Amy with my whole soul. There were my parents, whose hearts I knew such a disgrace would break; there was my worse than motherless child in her cradle; and so I turned from the direct path, and sought safety where it offered.

‘ It was my partner who stood by me then. He found the money, the matter was hushed up; I let my father think I had gone abroad; I gave up my profession, and I went forth into the world, saddled with debt, nameless, penniless, hopeless.

‘ The tale of the years since then can be told in one word—**WORK**—ceaseless work. It took me some time before I could earn enough by my pen to do more than pay the interest on the loan, keep body and soul together, and remit the annual stipend to my parents. I passed through every stage, I think,

of bitterness and despair the human heart can travel. But before the evil day when, my friend dying suddenly, the balance of the debt passed into other hands, I had exorcised some of the demons which held possession of me.'

He paused in his rapid, almost breathless, narrative, and, with lips sternly compressed and eyes fixed on the opposite wall, looked back upon that awful past he had lived through without help from man or love from woman—lived through, solitary in the midst of a mighty city, lonely, though surrounded by thousands of his struggling fellow-creatures. Think of the ordeal he had endured, of the fire he had passed through and come out purified! Yes, knowing him as I knew him afterwards, I can safely say, whatever there may originally have been in his nature of dross was purified in the flame of that fierce fiery furnace. In the struggle a lesser soul might have been lost; as it was, a great soul grew greater, a strong heart stronger.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I think I have told you pretty nearly all—except this, that, after my friend's death, I had to pay unfair interest instead of fair, and that, in the course of the transactions which

ensued, I drifted across Rodewald. He is as bad and dangerous a man, I now believe, as ever drew breath ; yet, for one thing, I shall always owe him a debt of gratitude. He took me to his home—the children were little then, and they laid their tiny hands upon my stricken heart, which could have borne no heavier touch, and seemed to bring something of vitality back to it. 'There, Cheverley,' he added, 'I have done. I was an idiot. I always longed for love and friendship, and the prattle of children, and the songs of gladness, and the soft winning ways of women ; and God, in His infinite wisdom, decreed I should have none of them. Yet shall I murmur ? No : " Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus ?" '

I rose. I knew, then, he wanted me to go ; and yet I felt I could not leave without one word of sympathy.

'O Smith,' I said, 'what a life ! From the first moment I saw you I felt some strange attraction towards you ; and that attraction has gone on ever increasing, till—'

'Here's a ray of hope for you, Cheverley,' he interrupted. 'After a time, do you know, I really

think I may get to be a little like other people. If you remember, in the Bible (you are one of the few left now who read your Bible—for me, reared in the North of Ireland, it is almost unnecessary to say I was “well grounded” in Holy Writ), when the deaf and dumb spirit was finally cast out of the child, whom it had torn and oftentimes cast into the fire and into the waters to destroy him, with the words, “*I charge thee come out of him, and enter no more into him,*” “it rent him sore, and he was as one dead.” “I have been rent sore, and was as one dead,” but now, I think, I hope, I feel that I have passed through the worst of my trouble, and, with God’s good help, I shall be lifted up, and face the rest of my life with a courage I feel I have hitherto lacked.’

I could not answer him. Like Stephen’s, his face seemed transfigured as he spoke. I could not even say, ‘The Lord bless you and keep you!’ I was only able to wring his hand in mute farewell ere starting to seek the doctor, whose name he had given me, and with whom I drove back to Leytonstone.

He proved utterly inscrutable. He was most polite to Adelaide, courteous to me, tender to the

child, and, as we walked to the gate together, said,

‘ We will do all that is possible for the dear little fellow !’

I really did not know what to make of him ; but when Smith came down next day he explained the parable.

‘ Let her find out for herself, poor soul, what is coming. It will be a tedious case ; and she will know the worst before the worst comes.’

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

Two years have passed like a watch in the night, and it is summer once again. I am standing beside the window, looking out, with sad dissatisfied eyes, upon the wealth of flowers with which the Leytonstone garden is filled. In the orchard behind the house early fruit is, I know, hanging, red and golden, ripening in the sun. Where shall I be by the time it is fit to gather? What will have happened before, if ever I again see the roses and the lavender hedge, the pinks and the myrtles, and the dappled maples with splashes of curious green upon their white leaves, and the graceful acacias scattering their airy blossoms on the ground?

For I mean to leave England for a time; and when I return, to take a house, or part of one, in London, and, gathering my books around me, try to resume the dreamy abstracted life of contemplation and study Mr. Amriott's legacy interrupted. No, I

cannot go on as I have been doing. In a man's life there comes a time when he feels he must have a settled home of some sort; and, as it seems the home I desire, is never to be for me, I intend to make the best of my position, and take what I can get.

As I stand thus alone, looking through a perfect bower of greenery which shades the open window, at the garden rich in beauty, bathed in sunlight lying calm in the glory of the summer noon, I feel very mournful and most unhappy. No longer do I see, in imagination, the fair fields of life full of the daisies and buttercups I once thought to wander through. Gone is the golden glitter of the buttercups, closed are the daisy eyes of the stretching meads. Life unrolls its dreary scroll before my eyes—as it is to be, not as it might have been; and for a moment my courage fails me to look on through the years, unbrightened by a single hope, uncheered by the presence of any human being to whom I am all in all.

Yet through the gloom of my own despair a sentence keeps recurring, which Mr. Smith spoke in the September following his interview with Mr. Frankford.

‘I do not believe that, so long as we are in this world, the words “too late” have any real meaning. It is *never* too late to make a fresh beginning, to try to make amends for what we have done wrong, to turn our foolishness into wisdom; even at the eleventh hour, if we set ourselves valiantly to the task, we may make a bad day’s work a good one.’

The first step he took along the fresh road he said he was steadily purposed to travel, surprised me greatly. He proposed himself as a tenant for The Snuggery. ‘I mean to bring my father over to end his days in his son’s home,’ he explained, ‘and I know he would delight in the garden and the river, and the beauty and the peace of Reedbourne. Will you humour my fancy?’

No need for me to answer ‘Yes,’ for he knew I should be only too glad to see him out of those dreary chambers, where he had toiled and suffered and fainted by the way, and recovered and gone on again, and fought a good fight, which at length wrought his deliverance from debt, and doubt, and secrecy.

‘Say you will let me have The Snuggery,’ he said, repeating the name with the pleasure of a

child talking about some new toy, 'and I will finish my big book there, and put my own name to it.'

'Have The Snuggery, by all means,' I answered. 'Here is a letter which has just arrived from Rodewald, asking if he might keep it on for a month or two ; so I can say in answer it is let.'

'I had better go and see him,' decided Smith ; and after a long talk together he left, and repaired to the City office where he had so often gone before on such weary, trying errands.

Mr. Rodewald was not there ; he was at View-Water, the boy said ; and accordingly to View-Water Mr. Smith repaired.

That place had been advertised to let, and the visitor did not therefore feel surprised to see it in the hands of workmen, who were painting, papering, plastering, decorating. Mr. Rodewald, as chief foreman of the repairs, happened to be on the lawn talking to a carpenter as Mr. Smith appeared, and he instantly came forward, and, with the heartiest cordiality and a word of genial greeting, extended his hand.

'We need not shake hands,' said Smith ; 'I came

to speak to you on business, if you can spare a moment.'

'I have always stood your friend,' declared Mr. Rodewald, 'and this is the return I meet with!'

Into which question Mr. Smith firmly declined to enter. 'I have come to tell you I have taken The Snuggery, and Miss Lydney and the children are welcome to remain there for a time if you wish; but I shall require possession at Michaelmas. I believe you are going to send Annie to school abroad, and mean to cut your fortunes adrift from those of your sister-in-law. If it be so, I should greatly like to come to some arrangement by which she and Susan could continue to reside permanently at The Snuggery. Take a few days to consider the matter, and let me know your decision. I am sure she would like to stop.'

Spite of the rebuff he had received, Mr. Rodewald accompanied his visitor to the outer gate, indeed he walked with him part of the way back to Thamesford.

'I suppose,' conjectured Mr. Smith, 'Mrs. Posinby has got a long rent for View-Water?'

‘Mrs. Posinby is no more,’ calmly replied Mr. Rodewald.

‘Why, when did she die? I never heard a word of her death.’

‘She is not dead, she has only changed her name. She is now Mrs. Rodewald.’

Mr. Smith stopped short in the middle of the road. ‘Why, Posinby has not been in his grave more than two months!’ he exclaimed.

‘I know that; but affairs were in such a state it was necessary for some one to take the helm, and I certainly did not mean to do so without having an interest in the vessel.’

‘Mrs. Posinby’s sprained ankle was a fortunate accident for you, Rodewald,’ said Mr. Smith.

‘That remains to be seen,’ answered the conquering hero.

No need to say there is no visiting between View-Water and The Snuggery. Twice a year Miss Lydney is solemnly invited to dinner, twice a year she as formally declines; but she is very, very happy at the little cottage amongst the green fields. And Smith has published his great book; and I know no sight which ever pleased me more than to see him and his

father wandering along the bank of the Reed together, or sitting beside a blazing fire of logs in a silence and content too great to be broken by speech.

And for me ?

During the time which has come and gone since we laid Adelaide's child to rest in the graveyard at Leytonstone, across which the evening sun sheds its last lingering rays, I have been almost a wanderer on the face of the earth.

Feeling as I do towards her, it is a simple impossibility I can resume the relations of our charming earlier intimacy.

For long after the child's death she was very ill; and when at last she crept down, a shadow of her former self, and took her accustomed seat, and laid her dear head back in the easy-chair, she said,

'I have thought it all out, kindest and truest of friends, and it was best for the little one to go. He is safe with One who will never forsake or desert him; and he would not have been safe if his father had claimed him—as he would of a certainty have done some day.'

‘No,’ I answered, ‘he could never have claimed him.’

‘What is it you mean?’ she asked; and then something in my face told her what we had kept back for months. And, with a great sob of anguish and relief, she cried, ‘He is dead!’

‘He fell in a duel, Adelaide,’ I explained.

This is the reason why I have been a wanderer; and now, as I said at first, I mean, though I feel happiness is not for me, to try and make a home for myself somewhere. Before I settle down I am going to America. I shall leave London to-night for Liverpool; and, on my return, think of getting one of Adelaide’s brothers over to live with her at the farm. She will never be able to sing again, and is coming gradually to realise the truth.

‘Why don’t you ask her to marry you?’ Smith said to me plainly this morning; and then I told him it was not fitting—May and December, youth and age; that I felt it impossible to let her know what had always been in my heart. ‘I could not,’ I went on, ‘disturb her simple faith in my fatherly affection—make it hard for her to continue under my roof.’ It was not possible for me exactly to under-

stand Mr. Smith's muttered commentary as he flung himself out of the room; but I gathered it was scarcely complimentary to my common sense.

And so I stand beside the window, thinking of the daisies and buttercups that can bloom for me no more—of the exquisite dreams shattered—of the tender visions dispelled. I am summoning up all my manhood to end this portion of my life, and, resolutely turning my back to the past, set a brave face towards a more satisfactory future, when I am roused from my reverie by a hand lightly laid on my shoulder, and, turning, see Adelaide standing by my side.

‘Well, dear?’ I say.

How fair she is still, spite of all the sorrow she has passed through—nay, because of it she is lovelier, sweeter, tenderer than of yore! She looks at me wistfully, and there is something lying in the depths of her eyes I do not quite understand.

‘I want you to tell me *why* you are going away?’ she begins, with soft decision.

‘Because I want to see America before I die.’

‘That is not all, is it? Why are you going—really?’

‘ I cannot stay, because—’

‘ Yes, dear friend ?’

‘ It is impossible for me to stop here—’

‘ Why ?’

She held my hand in hers, and stroked it slowly, slowly.

‘ Adelaide, you know—’

Some power stronger than myself wrung the words from me.

‘ Yes, I know,’ she whispers.

‘ I could not remain here without asking you to be my wife, and that I must not do—’

‘ Why not ?’

And then I can tell no more, save that next moment I hold her to my heart. The sadness, the pain, the loneliness is over !

O, how the flowers in the garden bloom now ! How exquisite seems the delicate tracery of green leaves before the window ! Did acacias ever before scatter such feathery blossoms ? What man so blest as I ?

The door opens, and Smith comes in. He understands what has happened at a glance. He

ought, since but for him I might still have been drifting on a sea of doubt and indecision.

‘ She has promised to marry me—’ I begin ; and then I stop, for I can say no more.

He looks at Adelaide with a whimsical smile, as he remarks,

‘ I really do not know whether I ought to congratulate you, Cheverley. *Remember, it is extremely difficult to foretell how any wife may turn out !*’

THE END.



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