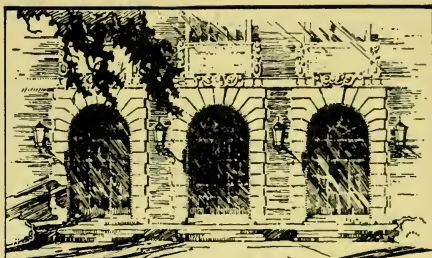


3 vols 1st ed



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

Y27ru

v.3

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

A Novel.

BY

EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF "BROKEN TO HARNESS."

FORTITER—FIDELITER—FELICITER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18 CATHERINE STREET,
STRAND.

1865.

[All rights reserved.]

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.


823

Y27m

v. 3

CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A CRISIS AT REDMOOR	1
II. MR. WUFF'S "NEW STAR"	29
III. LOVE AND DUTY	57
IV. SIR LAURENCE'S LETTER	98
V. A "TERCEL GENTLE"	134
VI. NATURE AND ART	175
VII. AMONG THE SPRINGS	215
VIII. REAPING THE WHIRLWIND	249
IX. LAST WORDS	276



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.



CHAPTER I.

A CRISIS AT REDMOOR.

WHEN Mrs. Hammond left the dinner-table on the evening destined to add a new sorrow to Georgie Mitford's sorely-troubled lot, she really had gone, as she had announced her intention of going, to her husband's room. The old man was lying in his bed, propped up with pillows, his face turned to the large window, through which the rays of the moon were shining, and mingling in a cold and ghastly manner with the light in the room. The invalid had a fancy for seeing the dark clumps of trees on the rising ground, and the cold moon shining over their heads. Gifford, his confidential servant, sat at the bed's head, and had been read-

ing to his master. Mrs. Hammond asked him several questions in a tone of interest which sounded almost genuine as to how Mr. Hammond had been; and then saying she meant to remain with the invalid for a while, she dismissed him, and took her seat by the window, in a position enabling her to see quite distinctly a portion of the broad carriage-drive to the right of the entrance, across which the rays of the moon flung their uninterrupted radiance. Laura did not exert herself much for the amusement of the invalid. The few questions he asked her she answered listlessly, then sunk into silence. After a short time her step-daughter came softly into the room to bid her father good-night.

“You are rather late, Alice; where have you been?” said Laura, without turning her head towards the child, still looking fixedly at the patch of ground in the moonlight.

“With Lady Mitford, mamma,” answered Alice.

“Have the gentlemen left the dining-room?”

“Lord Dollamore came into the drawing-room,

and I saw Sir Charles crossing the hall into the library ; but I don't know about the others," answered Alice.

Mrs. Hammond said no more ; and Alice, having received an affectionate embrace from her father, and the coldest conceivable touch of Mrs. Hammond's lips on the edge of her cheek, went off to bed. The silence continued in the sick man's room, and Laura's gaze never turned from the window. At length a figure passed across the moonlit space, and was instantly lost in the darkness beyond. Then Mrs. Hammond drew down the blind, and changed her seat to a chair close by the bedside. She took up the book which Gifford had laid down, and asked her husband if he would like her to read on.

"If you please, my dear," said Mr. Hammond, "if it won't tire you ; and you won't mind my falling asleep, which I may do, for I feel very drowsy."

Laura was quite sure it would not tire her to read, and she would be delighted if her reading should have so soothing an effect.

“If I do fall asleep, you must not stay with me, Laura; you must go downstairs again. Promise me you will; and you need not call Gifford,—I don’t require any one; I am much better to-night.”

Very well; Laura would promise not to stay in his room if he should fall asleep; and as she really did think him very much better, she would not summon Gifford.

Mrs. Hammond possessed several useful and attractive accomplishments; among others, that of reading aloud to perfection. She did not exhibit her skill particularly on this occasion—her voice was languid and monotonous; and the author would have had ample reason to complain had he heard his sentences rendered so expressionless. She read on and on, in a sullen monotone; and after a quarter of an hour had elapsed, she had the pleasure of seeing that her kind intention was fulfilled. Her voice had been very soothing, and her husband had fallen into a profound sleep. Then she passed through an open door into her dressing-room, and reappeared, wrapped in a dark

warm cloak, the hood thrown over her head. If any one had taken the place she had so lately occupied at the window, that person would have seen, after the lapse of a few moments, a second figure flit across the moonlit space, and disappear into the darkness beyond.

About half an hour later, Banks tapped at the door of the smoking-room, and was gruffly bidden to "come in" by Captain Bligh.

"If you please, Captain," said Banks, upon whom the atmosphere of that particular apartment always produced a distressingly-choky and eye-smarting effect,—“if you please, Captain, I can't find Sir Charles. He ain't in the library, nor yet in the droring-room, and he's wanted very particular.”

“Perhaps he has gone up to see Mr. Hammond,” suggested Bligh.

“No, Captain, he ain't; I've bin and ast Gifford, and he says as his missis has been along o' the old gentleman since dinner-time, and she's there now, and nobody ain't with them.”

“That's odd,” said Captain Bligh; “but who wants him? Perhaps I might do.”

“I beg your pardon, Captain,” said the peremptory Banks, “but nobody won’t do but Sir Charles hisself. It’s a party as has been sent up from Fishbourne, where my lady comes from, and his orders is to see Sir Charles alone, and not to let out his message to nobody else.”

The good-natured Captain looked extremely grave. Only one occurrence could have rendered so much precaution necessary, and he conjectured at once that that occurrence had taken place.

“I fear Mr. Stanfield is dead,” he said to his companions. “I must go and find Mitford. Just excuse me for a while, and make yourselves comfortable here, will you?—Come with me, Banks, and take care your mistress gets no hint of this person’s being here.”

“There ain’t no fear of that, Captain,” replied the man; “my lady’s in the droring-room, along o’ Lord Dollamore; and I knew that Sir Charles worn’t there, so I didn’t go to look for him.”

The Captain found the messenger in the library, where Banks had sent him to await Sir

Charles's appearance. He was a respectable elderly man, and he answered Captain Bligh's inquiry at once. He had been sent by poor Georgie's old friend, the curate, to convey to Sir Charles Mitford the melancholy intelligence of Mr. Stanfield's death, which had taken place early that morning; and particulars of which event were contained in a letter which he was charged to deliver to the Baronet. He had received special injunctions to communicate the event to Sir Charles alone, and leave it to be "broken" to Lady Mitford by her husband. The simple curate had little thought how difficult Sir Charles would find it to assume even a temporary sympathy with the feelings of his wife.

Captain Bligh ordered refreshments to be served to the bringer of evil tidings; requested him not to communicate with any of the other servants; and strictly enjoining Banks to secrecy, went out of the front-door and into the shrubbery on the left of the house. Mitford was not unaccustomed to take fits of sullen moodiness at times, and the Captain thought that he might perhaps find him walking

about and smoking, in all the enjoyment of his ill-humour.

The intelligent Banks had asked Gifford if he thought it likely that Sir Charles was in his master's room, in the presence of several of the ladies and gentlemen of the household, assembled in a comfortable and spacious apartment which the insolence of a dominant class caused to be known as the servants'-hall. Among the number of those who heard the question and its answer was Mademoiselle Marcelline, Mrs. Hammond's "own maid." She was a trim-looking French girl, who had not any thing remarkable in her appearance except its neatness, or in her manner except its quietness. She was seated at a large table, on which a number of workboxes were placed, for the women-servants at Redmoor greatly affected needlework, and had a good deal of time to devote to it; and she was embroidering a collar with neatness, dexterity, and rapidity, eminently French. Mademoiselle Marcelline made no observation, and did not raise her eyes, or discontinue her work for a moment, during the discussion as to where Sir Charles

could be, which had ensued upon Banks's inquiry. She had spoken only once indeed since his entrance. When Gifford had said Sir Charles could not be in Mr. Hammond's room, because her mistress had been, and was there still, he had asked, "Isn't she there still, mam'selle?" Mam'selle had answered, "Yes, Monsieur Giffore, madame is there still."

Mademoiselle Marcelline was so very quiet a little person, and differed so much from French ladies'-maids in general, by the unobtrusiveness of her manners and her extreme taciturnity—to be sure she spoke very little English, but that circumstance is rarely found to limit the loquacity of her class—that her exit from the servants'-hall was scarcely noticed, when she presently looked at her little Geneva watch, made up her embroidery into a tidy parcel, and went away with her usual noiseless step. Mademoiselle Marcelline mounted the stairs with great deliberation, and smiling a little, until she reached the corridor into which the suite of apartments occupied by the Hammonds opened. The rooms were five in number, and each communicated with the other.

They were two bedrooms, two dressing-rooms, and a bathroom. The latter occupied the central space, and had no external door. Mademoiselle Marcelline entered the last room of the suite, corresponding with that in which Mr. Hammond lay,—this was Laura's bedroom,—and gently locked the door. She passed through the adjoining apartment—her mistress's dressing-room—and paused before a large wardrobe, without shelves, in which hung a number of dresses and cloaks. She opened the doors, but held them one in each hand, looked in for a moment, and then shut them, and smiled still more decidedly. Then she softly locked the door of this room, which opened into the corridor, and passing through the bathroom, secured that of Mr. Hammond's dressing-room also; after which, with more precaution against noise than ever, she glided into the old man's room. He was sleeping soundly still, and his face looked wasted and ashen in the abstraction of slumber. Mademoiselle Marcelline glanced at him, shrugged her shoulders, sat down on a couch at the foot of the bed, where she was effectually screened from view by the heavy

carved bedpost and the voluminous folds of the purple curtain, and waited.

Mean time, Captain Bligh had not succeeded in finding Sir Charles, though he had sought for him in the shrubbery and in the stable-yard. He could not make out whither he had gone, and returned to the house to take counsel with Banks. That functionary suggested that Sir Charles might have gone up to the keeper's house; and though the Captain could not imagine why Sir Charles should have gone thither at such an inconvenient time, as he had no other to offer, he accepted this suggestion, and said he would go thither and look for him.

“ Shall I go with you, Captain ? ” asked Banks, who felt curious to discover what “ Mitford was up to.”

Since Mr. Effingham's visit, and the polite fiction of the yacht—endeared to Mr. Banks by his own joke about the Fleet Prison, which he considered so good that society was injured by its suppression within his own bosom—the incredulous flunkey had experienced an increased share of the curiosity with which their masters' affairs invari-

ably inspire servants. He was much pleased then that Captain Bligh answered,

“Yes, yes, you can come with me.”

The keeper's cottage was not very far from the great house, from which, however, it was entirely hidden by a thick fir-plantation which covered a long and wide space of undulating land, and through which several narrow paths led to the open ground beyond. The Captain and his attendant struck into one of those paths, which led directly in the direction of the keeper's house.

“We can't miss Sir Charles, I think, if he really has gone up to Hutton's,” said the Captain.

“No, sir, I think not, unless he has taken a very roundabout way,” answered Banks.

They walked quickly on for some distance, the Captain's impatience momentarily increasing, and also his doubts that Mitford had gone in this direction at all. At length they reached a point at which the path, cutting the plantation from east to west, was intersected by one running from north to south. Here they paused, and the Captain said testily,

“By Jove, Banks, I hardly know what to do. The messenger from Fishbourne’s shut up in the library all this time, and all the servants in a fuss, and Sir Charles not forthcoming! I wish I had broken the news of her father’s death to Lady Mitford before I came out; it would have been by far the best plan. She’s sure to hear it by accident now.”

The Captain spoke to himself rather than to the servant, and in a particularly emphatic voice—a testimony to his vexation. Then he strode onwards with increased speed, little knowing that he had spoken within the startled hearing of the man whom he was seeking, and who was so near him, as he stood where the paths met, that he could have touched him by stretching out his arm,—touched him and his cowering frightened companion.

They kept a breathless silence until the Captain and Banks were quite out of hearing. Then Sir Charles said:

“What is to be done? Did you hear what Bligh said, Laura? Some one has been sent

from Fishbourne to tell me that Mr. Stanfield is dead, and they are searching for me every where. What a cursed accident! There is not a chance of concealing your absence. My darling, my life, what is to be done?"

She was very pale and trembling, and the words came hard and hoarse, as she replied,

"I know not. If we must brave it out, we must; but there is a chance yet. Do you stay here, and meet Bligh as he comes back; you can be strolling along the cross path. Have you a cigar? No; you are in dinner-dress, of course. Stay; you have an overcoat on; search the pockets. Yes, yes; what luck! Here's a cigar-case, and your light-box hangs to your chain,—I'll never call it vulgar again,—light a cigar at once, and contrive to show the light when you hear them. I will go to the house. You left the side-window open, did you not?"

"Yes, yes." His agitation was increasing; hers was subsiding.

"If I can get into the house unseen, all is right. I can pass through my own rooms into

Hammond's. Send there for me if all is safe; the servants think I am there."

She turned away to leave him; but he caught her in his arms, and said, in a tone of agony,

"Laura! Laura! if I have exposed you to danger—if—"

"Hush!" she said, disengaging herself; "you have not exposed me to danger any more than I have exposed myself; but don't talk of this as a hopeless scrape until we know that there is no way out of it." She was out of sight in an instant.

Mademoiselle Marcelline sat at the foot of Mr. Hammond's bed without the least impatience. She did not fidget, she did not look at the clock, she did not doze. The time passed apparently to her perfect satisfaction. The invalid slept on very peacefully, and the whole scene wore an eminently comfortable aspect. At length her acute ears discerned a light footfall at the end of the corridor, and then she heard the handle of Mrs. Hammond's dressing-room door gently turned—in vain. Then the footstep came on, and another door-handle was turned, equally in vain.

Mademoiselle Marcelline smiled. "It would have been so convenient for madame to have hung her cloak up and smoothed her hair before monsieur should see her, after madame's promenade in the clear of the moon," thought Mademoiselle Marcelline. "What a pity that those tiresome doors should unhappily be locked! What a sorrowful accident!"

The door opened, and Laura looked cautiously into the room. All was as she had left it; the sleeping face of her husband was turned towards her. The pathetic unconsciousness of sleep was upon it; she did not heed the pathos, but the unconsciousness was convenient. The minutest change that would have intimated that any one had entered the room would not have escaped her notice, but there was no such thing. She came in, and softly closed the heavy perfectly-hung door; she made a few steps forward, uttered a deep sigh of relief, and said in an involuntary whisper, "What a risk, and what an escape!"

Her heavy cloak hung upon her; she pushed back the hood, and her chestnut hair, in wild dis-

order, shone with red gleams in the fire-light. She lifted her white hands and snatched impatiently at the tasselled cord which held the garment at the throat; and Mademoiselle Marcelline emerged from the shadow of the bed-curtains, and with perfect propriety and an air of entire respect requested that madame would permit her to remove the cloak, which was so heavy, and also madame's boots, which must be damp, for the promenade of evening had inconveniences.

Laura started violently, and then stood looking at the demure figure before her with a kind of incredulous terror. Mademoiselle Marcelline composedly untied the refractory cords and removed the mantle, which she immediately replaced in the wardrobe. Would madame have the goodness to consider what she had said about the boots, and to go into her dressing-room? Madame followed her like one in a dream. She placed a chair before the dressing-table, and Laura mechanically sat down; she took off her boots and substituted slippers; she restored the symmetry of the crushed dress; she threw a dressing-gown over the beauti-

ful shoulders, folded it respectfully over the bosom, heaving with terror and anger, and began to brush her mistress's hair with a wholly unper-
turbed demeanour. Laura looked at the demure
composed face which appeared over her shoulder
in the glass, and at length she said :

“ How came you in that room ? ”

“ Ah, madame, what a happy chance ! One
came to the salon of the servants, and demanded
of Monsieur Giffore if Sir Charles might be in the
chamber of monsieur. Then Monsieur Giffore
say that no ; that madame was there, and ist here.
And Monsieur Giffore asked me if he have reason ;
and I say, ‘ Certainly, madame is still in the
chamber of monsieur. ’ ”

“ Well,” said Laura, for Mademoiselle Marcel-
line had paused, “ what has that to do with your
being in that room ? ”

“ It has much, if madame will take the trouble
to listen. I know that servants are curious,—ah,
how curious servants are, my God !—and I thought
one of them might have curiosity enough to see
for herself madame, so affectionate, passing the

long, long evening with poor monsieur, who is not gay,—no, he is not gay, they say that in the salon of the servants. So, as it is not agreeable to be listened and spied, and as servants are so curious, I locked the doors of the rooms consecrated to the privacy of madame, and rejoiced to know that madame might read excellent books of exalted piety to monsieur, or refresh her spirits, so tired by her solicitude, with a promenade in the clear of the moon—madame is so poetic!—as she chose, without being teased by observation. I respect also that good Monsieur Giffore, and I would not have him disprove. ‘Madame is still there, mam’sell?’ he asks; and I say, ‘Yes; madame is still there.’ ”

All the time she was speaking, Mademoiselle Marcelline quietly pursued her task. The long silken tresses lay now in a well-brushed shining heap over her left arm, and she looked at them with complacent admiration.

“Heaven! but madame has beautiful hair!” she went on, while Laura, pale and motionless, sat taking into her heart the full meaning of this

terrible complication of her position. "It is, however, fortunate that she does not adopt the English style, for promenades at the clear of the moon are enemy to curls—to those long curls which the young ladies, lastly gone away, and who were so fond of madame, wore. They avoided the damp of the forest in the evening, the young ladies; they were careful of their curls. But madame has not need to be careful of any thing—nothing and nobody can hurt madame, who is so beloved by monsieur. Ah, what a destiny! and monsieur so rich!"

She had by this time braided the shining hair, and was dexterously folding the plaits round and round the small head, after a fashion which Laura had lately adopted. Still her mistress sat silent, with moody downcast eyes. As she interrupted her speech for a moment to take a fresh handful of hairpins from the dressing-table, Banks knocked at the door of the adjoining room. Mademoiselle Marcelline did not raise her voice to bid him enter; always considerate, she remembered that an indiscreet sound might trouble the repose

of the invalid, so she stepped gently to the door and opened it.

“Is Mrs. Hammond here, mam’sell?” asked Banks.

“Oh, but yes, Monsieur Banks, madame is always here.”

“Not exactly,” thought Banks, puzzled by her idiom; but he merely said, “Bad news has reached the family. My lady’s father is dead, which he was a good old gentleman indeed; and she ain’t seen him neither, not for some time; and my lady she’s been a faintin’ away in the libery like any thin’; and Sir Charles, he’s been a holdin’ of her hup, leastways him and Lord Dollymore, and there’s the deuce to pay down there.”

Mademoiselle listened with polite attention to Mr. Banks’s statement of the condition of affairs; but she was not warmly interested.

“Monsieur Banks will pardon me,” she said; “but at present I coif madame; I think he demanded madame?”

“Yes, I did, marm’sell,” said Banks, abashed

and convicted by this quiet little person of undue loquacity; "only I thought you'd like to hear. Mostly servants does; but," here Mr. Banks floundered again, "you ain't much like the rest of us, miss—mam'sell, I mean."

Mademoiselle Marcelline acknowledged the compliment with a very frigid smile, and again inquired what she might have the pleasure of telling madame, on the part of Monsieur Banks.

"Sir Charles begs Mrs. Hammond will come down to the libery if quite convenient to her, as he wishes to speak to her about some necessary arrangements."

Mr. Banks delivered his message with elaboration, and waited the reply with dignity. Mademoiselle Marcelline repeated the communication to her mistress, word for word, and did not suffer the slightest trace of expression to appear in her face.

"Yes, I will go down immediately," said Laura, much relieved at the prospect of escaping from the presence of her maid, and having time to consider her position.

Mr. Banks went away to deliver Mrs. Hammond's message, and mademoiselle, in perfect silence, removed the dressing-gown from her mistress's shoulders ; and Laura, her dress in complete order, and her nerves to all appearance as well arranged, rose from her chair.

“ Give me a lace-shawl,” she said, in her customary imperious manner ; “ if Lady Mitford has lost her father, she will not be gratified by my making my appearance in full-dress, and I have no time to change it.”

“ Madame is so considerate,” remarked Mademoiselle Marcelline, as she folded a web of fine black lace round Mrs. Hammond's form ; “ and Lady Mitford owes her so much. Poor lady, she is sensitive ; she has not the courage of madame. Madame must form her.”

“ Go for Gifford to sit with Mr. Hammond,” said Laura. “ You can wait for me in my room as usual ;” and she walked out of the dressing-room, having previously ordered her maid to unlock the door, without any outward sign of disturbance. Slowly she went down the great stair-

case, and as she went she asked herself, "Shall I tell Charles? Could any worse complication arise out of my concealing this dreadful thing from him?" At length she made up her mind, just as she reached the door of the library. "No," she said, "I will not tell him. He has no nerve, and would blunder, and the less one tells any man the better."

Poor Georgie, now indeed lonely and desolate, had been taken to her room, and induced to lie down on her bed, by the housekeeper and her maid, who proposed to watch by their unhappy mistress all night. She and Sir Charles were to proceed to Fishbourne on the following day. She had earnestly entreated her husband to take her with him, and he had consented. She was quite worn-out and stupefied with grief, and had hardly noticed Mrs. Hammond's presence in the library at all. It was agreed that Lord Dollamore should leave Redmoor on the following day, a little later than Sir Charles and Lady Mitford, and that the Hammonds should go to Torquay as soon as the

physicians would permit their patient to make so great an effort.

“It is impossible to say how soon I shall get back, or how long I may be detained,” said Sir Charles; “and it’s a confounded nuisance having to go.”

Lord Dollamore looked at him with tranquil curiosity, and tapped first his teeth and then his ear with his inseparable cane.

“I hope they will make you comfortable here. Bligh will see to every thing, I know. Perhaps they won’t let Hammond move at all—very likely, for there’s an east wind—and you’ll be here when we return.”

Very gravely Mrs. Hammond answered him: “That will be impossible, Sir Charles. Lady Mitford could not possibly be expected to have any one in her house under such circumstances. Mr. Hammond *must* be brought to Torquay.”

Sir Charles was puzzled; he could not quite understand her tone; he did not think it was assumed entirely, owing to the presence of Lord Dollamore, for that had seldom produced any effect on

Laura. No, she was completely in earnest. She gave her hand to each gentleman in turn, but the clasp she bestowed on each was equally warm; and when Sir Charles, as she passed out of the door, shot one passionate glance at her, unseen by Dollamore, she completely ignored it, and walked gracefully away.

“By Jove!” said Lord Dollamore, when he had gotten rid of Mitford and was safe in his own room, “it was a lucky thing Buttons made his appearance just when he did. I should have hopelessly committed myself in another minute; and then, on the top of that fine piece of sentiment, we should have had the scene of this evening’s news. No matter how she had taken it, I should have been in an awful scrape. If she had taken it well, I should have had to do a frightful amount of sympathy and condolence—the regular ‘water-cart business’ in fact; and if she had taken it ill, egad, she’s just the woman to blurt it all out in a fit of conscience, and to believe that her father’s death is a judgment upon her for not showing me up to Mitford! As it is, the matter remains in a

highly-satisfactory condition ; I am not committed to any thing : I might have been pleading my own cause, or a friend's, or some wholly imaginary personage's ; and I can either resume the argument precisely where I dropped it, if I think proper, or I can cut the whole affair. Bless you, my Buttons !”

As Georgie was driving over to the railway-station on the following day,—her maid and she occupying the inside of the carriage, and Sir Charles, availing himself of his well-known objection to allow any one but himself to drive when he was present, to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with his wife, on the box—she raised her heavy veil for a while, and drawing a letter from her pocket, read and re-read it through her blinding tears. It was from Colonel Alsager. At length Georgie put it away and lay back in the carriage, with closed eyes, thinking of the writer.

“ He has suffered a great deal also,” she thought ; “ and he has more to suffer. How sorely he must repent his neglect of his father ! as sorely

as I repent my neglect of mine." Here the tears, which had already burned her eyelids into a state of excruciating soreness, burst forth again. "What must he have felt when he read his father's letter!—the letter written to be read after the writer's death,—the letter he will show to me, he says, though to no one else in the world, except, I suppose, the young lady whom Sir Peregrine entreated him in it to marry. I wonder if he will,—I wonder if she is nice, and good, and likely to make him happy! It is strange that a similar calamity should have befallen him and me. He can feel for my grief now—I have always felt for his!"

CHAPTER II.

MR. WUFF'S "NEW STAR."

"MISS CONSTANCE GREENWOOD, the new actress!"

"Go and see Constance Greenwood on the 18th!"

"Constance Greenwood as Lady Malkinshaw!"

Such were the placards in enormous letters which glared upon Laurence Alsager from every dead wall and hoarding on his passage from the railway-station to his old rooms in Jermyn Street. Laurence could not forbear smiling as he glanced at them—could not forbear a laugh as, at the club over his dinner, he read the advertisements of the forthcoming appearance of Miss Greenwood at the Theatre Royal, Hatton Garden, for which national establishment she had been secured by the *impresario*, Mr. Wuff, at an expense hitherto unparalleled—at least so said the advertisements.

Yes; Mr. Wuff had done it at last! He had cut himself adrift from the moorings of mediocrity, as his nautical dramatist expressed it, and it was now sink or swim with him. He was "going in a perisher," he said himself; and having set his fortune on a die, he was just waiting to see whether it turned up six or ace.

When Mr. Wuff came into a sum of money on the death of a distant relative, and, forsaking the necessary but hardly popular calling of a sheriff's-officer, took the Theatre Royal, Hatton Garden, and opened it with a revival of the legitimate drama in general and of Shakespearian plays in particular, he made a very great hit. It was so long since any one had attempted to represent Shakespeare, that an entirely new generation had sprung up, which, egged on by its elders, went religiously to the first performance of all the celebrated plays, and tried very hard indeed to think they both understood and liked them. The newspaper press too was very noble on the subject. Mr. Wuff, so said the critics, was the great dramatic resuscitator of the age. What! People had said

that the taste for the legitimate was exploded ! The answer to that was in the crowds that thronged to T. R., Hatton Garden. And then the critics went on to say that the scenery by Mr. Slapp, with wonderful moonlight effects such as had never previously been seen, was thoroughly appreciated ; and that the mechanical arrangement for the appearance of Banquo's ghost amongst the unconscious Thanes was a marvel of theatrical deception. Was it Shakespeare or Slapp who drew ? Buncle, a heavy, ignorant, ill-educated man, who had played fourth-rate parts with the *Dii majores* in those "palmy days" of which we read, and who now, *faute de mieux*, found himself pitchforked into the leading characters, thought it was Shakespeare—and Buncle ! The knowing ones thought it was the novelty of the reproduction and the excellence of Slapp's scenery which caused the success ; and the knowing ones were right. Shakespeare, as interpreted by Buncle, Mrs. Buncle, and Stampede,—whom Buncle always took about with him to play his seconds,—drew for a certain length of time. Then the audience thinned gradually, and

Wuff found it necessary to supplement *King Lear* with the *Harem Beauties*—a ballet supported by the best band of *coryphées* in Europe; and that was a really good stroke of policy. While Bunclé was lying down and dying as Lear, the club-men came trooping into the house; and Bunclé's apostrophes to his dead daughter Cordelia were nearly inaudible in the creaking of boots and the settling into seats. The pit cried "Hush!" and "Shame!" but the swells did not care about the pit, and the curtain fell on Bunclé thirsting for aristocratic blood. The ballet at first attracted largely. As the time for its commencement approached, the military clubs were drained of their members, who went away in a procession of hansoms from Pall Mall to Hatton Garden; and you could have counted more pairs within Wuff's walls at one time than were to be found, save on special occasions, at St. Stephen's.

But the ballet, after a time, ceased to draw; and Mr. Wuff could not supplement it by another, for the *coryphées* had all returned to their allegiance to the manager of the Opera-house,

whose season had just commenced. Mr. Wuff was in despair; he dared not shut the house, for he had to make up his rent, which was required with inexorable punctuality by the committee of gentlemen who owned the theatre. He must try something; but what was it to be? Wuff and his treasurer, Mr. Bond,—always known as Tommy Bond, an apple-faced white-headed old gentleman, who had dropped into the theatrical world no one ever knew whence, and who had held a place of trust with all the great managers of the T. R., Hatton Garden, for thirty years,—were closeted together.

"What's it to be, Tommy?" repeated Mr. Wuff for the twentieth time. "They've had it all round, hot and strong; and what's the caper for 'em now, I don't know."

"What do you think of reviving *Julius Cæsar*? The classic costume has not been seen on these boards for years."

"What! Billy's *Julius Cæsar*? No, thank you! I've had enough of Bill to last me some time—and that brute Buncle drawing fifteen pound a week,

and bellowing his lungs out to thirty people in the pit! No, no! Is there a good lion-and-camel lot about?"

Mr. Bond shuddered; he was frequently prompted to shudder in his conversation with Mr. Wuff. He was a great believer in the elevating tendencies of the drama; and when he thought of lions and camels on the same boards which he had seen trodden at different times by those great actors and rivals, Grumble and Green, he could not refrain from shuddering. But his business instincts made him turn to a file of the *Era* on the table, and he said, after consulting it:

"There's Roker's troupe at North Shields."

"How long since they've been in town?"

"Oh, two years; and then they were only at the Wells—you can scarcely call that town; and it didn't interfere a bit with our people, you know."

"Roker's are performing lions, ain't they?"

"Yes; they'll let him do any thing to them, when they're in a proper state."

"All right! Write to him about terms at once; and send to Darn and tell him we want a

piece to bring out this lot at once. Must be Eastern, because of the camel—long procession, slaves, caskets, and all that kind of thing, and a fight with the lion for Roker. That's all Roker's to do, mind; he can't act a bit."

Mr. Roker was driving such an excellent trade with the pitmen of the North, that he refused to come to London except on terms which Mr. Wuff would not give; and so that enterprising manager was again in a strait. Mr. Trapman had been called into council, had ransacked his books and his brain in search for novelty, but all to no purpose; and things were looking very serious for Mr. Wuff, when one morning Trapman rushed from his office and arrived breathless in the manager's sanctum.

"What is it?" asked Wuff, who was sitting vacantly looking at Bond, poring over files of old play-bills.

"We've got it at last, I think!" said Trapman, pointing to an open letter in his hand. "You've heard of Constance Greenwood?"

"Yes, yes!" struck in Mr. Bond eagerly.

“Milman was here last week,—just arrived from New York,—and he says that for the leading-lady business—modern time, I mean—he’d never seen any thing like her.”

“Yankee, ain’t she?” asked Wuff coldly.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Trapman. “She’s English bred and born; only been out there three months; never played any where before, and made a most tre-mendous hit. I saw the New-York papers about her first night. They’d got up a report that she was the daughter of an English nobleman, and had run away because her father was cruel to her; and this crammed the house. The girl’s acting did the rest. Every one says she’s very clever, and she was making no end of dollars a-night.”

“Well?” said Wuff, who was working up into excitement.

“Oh, I thought you did not care about it,” said Trapman. “I’ve a letter from her here in my hand, saying that she’s taken a sudden desire to England, and wants me to get her an engagement in a first-class theatre. I’ve got newspapers by

the same mail, describing her farewell benefit, and speculating, in the way those chaps do over there, about what can have made her want to go to England so suddenly. But there's no doubt she's a clipper, and I came at once to offer her to you."

"I'll have her!" shouted Wuff, jumping up. "First-class theatre she wants, eh? This is the shop. Let's have a look at her letter?"

"Can't do that,—it's a private letter," said Trapman; "but I'll tell you her terms: ten pound a-night settled, and share after a hundred."

"That'll do. Now, Tommy Bond, just sit down and write a stunnin' advertisement, and put that story about her being a nobleman's daughter into shape,—only make her run away because she was in love, and wanted to earn money for the support of her lover, who was blind.—Eh, Trapman, that ought to wake 'em up?—And send the story to little Shiffon, who does that column of lies, and ask him to stick it in next week.—What's her line, Trapman?"

“Genteel comedy and interesting business of the highest class,—lady of the present day, you know.”

“All right; then I sha’n’t want Buncle.”

“Not a bit; get rid of him at once. But I’ll tell you what; Pontifex has quarrelled with the Parthenium people—he was with me yesterday—and I’d pick him up to support her.”

Mr. Wuff agreed to this, and told Mr. Trapman to take the necessary steps; and that gentleman then took his departure.

“Wasn’t going to let Wuff look at her letter,” said he, as he walked away; “wouldn’t do at all. What a doosed clever gal! What does she say?” and he pulled the letter from his pocket: “‘Not a word to any one until after my appearance. After that I sha’n’t care.’ All right, my dear; you may depend upon me.”

Mr. Wuff went to work with a will, and spared no expense in his bills and advertisements. The nobleman’s daughter’s story was duly filtered through the newspapers, and popular curiosity was excited. Miss Constance Greenwood arrived from

America by the next mail, bringing with her an American play, founded on a French subject, full of interest, and what we should in the present day call sensation, but wretchedly written. This play was given to the accomplished Spofforth; and under his manipulation it became a very capital acting drama, with a splendid character for Miss Greenwood, and very good chances for Pontifex. Wuff, Bond, Spofforth, and Oldboy, the critic of the *Statesman*, had a little dinner at Wuff's house before the evening dress-rehearsal, which Miss Greenwood had requested before the production of the piece; and they were all delighted with what they saw. Oldboy was especially pleased. "I thought," said he, "that lady-like women left the stage with Miss Fortescue; but this girl restores my hopes." And Wuff winked at Spofforth, and they both knew that meant a column and a half the morning after the performance.

Sir Laurence Alsager drove straight from the railway-station to the Mæcenæ Club, where his

servant was waiting for him with his dressing-things. As he pushed through the streets, the placards on the walls announcing the theatrical novelty for the evening recalled to his mind the night of his return from the East. Then he drove to the Club, then he had returned to be present at the first representation of a theatrical novelty; but ah, how different was his state of mind then from what it was now! Then the iron had passed over the slight scratch which he at that time imagined was a wound, and had completely cicatrised it; now a real wound was gaping and bare. Kismet! kismet! the old story. That night he saw Georgie Mitford for the first time; and ever since then what had he not suffered on her account! Ah, what had she herself not suffered, poor child! His absence from London and his manner of life down at Knockholt had precluded him from hearing any recent news of her; and he wondered whether the lapse of time had had any effect on Sir Charles Mitford's mad infatuation, or whether it still continued. More than any thing else, Laurence wanted to know whether Lady Mitford's domestic

misery was known to the world at large, or confined to the few acquaintances who had such splendid opportunities of inspecting it in the quiet of Redmoor. He knew that her first appearance in society had excited a great deal of notice, a great deal of admiration, and, consequently, a great deal of envy; and he was too much a man of the world not to feel certain that any thing to her disadvantage would be sought out with the greatest perseverance, and spread abroad with the greatest alacrity. And it was to her disadvantage, in the eyes of society, that her home was unhappy; there were people in numbers who would declare that the result was her fault; that she was prim, puritanical, bad-tempered; that her jealousy was perfectly ridiculous; that her missy ways and affectation rendered it impossible for any man to live with her. There were numbers of people who would take an opposite view of the question, and who would pity her—not indeed with that pity which is akin to love, but from a feeling springing from a very different source,—a pity which consists in loudly denouncing the cause

for compassion, and wondering how the person to be compassionated can endure what has to be gone through. There would be people who could not understand how any thing otherwise could have been expected: a young person from the *bourgeoisie* introduced into the *nous-autres* class must expect that the silly fancy which had captivated her husband would not last, and must be prepared to take the consequences of her vaulting ambition. The Clanronald and Taffington set would infallibly regard it from this last-mentioned point of view, accordingly.

How Laurence Alsager's blood boiled within him as all these thoughts passed through his mind. During the quietude of his life at Knockholt, he had had sufficient opportunities so thoroughly to catechise himself, so perfectly to dissect the feelings of his breast, as to leave no doubt in his own mind that he loved Lady Mitford deeply and passionately. The notion of the guardian angel, the protecting genius, which he had so encouraged at first, had now entirely faded out, and he had not scrupled to show to himself

the actual state of his feelings towards her. Not that they would ever be known; he had made up his mind to keep them rigidly locked in his own bosom. But still it was worse than horrible to think that the woman in whose service he would willingly have perilled his life, was in all probability dragging on a miserable existence, exposed to the perverse misunderstandings or degrading pity of the world! On these latter points he should soon be assured. They discussed every body at the Mæcenas; and if there had been any thing sufficiently noticeable in the Mitford *ménage* to call for comment, it was sure to receive the freest and most outspoken discussion in the tabak-parliament of the Club.

Meanwhile, the mere notion of being back in London conduced in no small degree to raise Laurence's spirits. His time at Knockholt had been, he felt, far from unprofitably spent; he had had opportunities not merely of examining his own heart, but of making himself acquainted with the hopes and fears, the wishes and prospects of some

of those with whose lives he was to a certain extent concerned. He had had opportunities of carrying out certain pet projects of the good old man, whose last days he had been permitted to console; and he had been enabled to take up that position in his county which was required of him, not merely by the hollow ordinances of "gentility," but by the great binding rivets of society. He hoped in all honesty and humility to be able "to do his duty in that state of life unto which God had called him;" but he felt all the delight of a schoolboy out of bounds in laying-by the county magnate, the landed proprietor, the many-acred wealthy baronet, for a time, and making a very small unit in the grand population of London. The crowded streets, the gas-lamps, the dull rumble of the passing vehicles,—all were delightful to him; and as he drew up at the club-door, he felt happier than he had done for many a long day.

He dressed himself and went down into the coffee-room, which he found thronged. Mr. Wuff's advertisements and bills had been so far fruitful,

that two-thirds of the diners at the Mæcenas seemed from their talk to be going to the Hatton-Garden Theatre. Laurence was welcomed with great cordiality by all who knew him, and had numerous offers of "joining tables;" but he expected George Bertram, and when he found that that pillar of the state did not arrive, he preferred dining by himself. The solitary life he had been leading, the event which had led to that life, the reflections which had engrossed him since he had led it,—all concurred to prevent him from suddenly plunging into the light gossip of a club-room. After dinner, finding that the piece in which Miss Constance Greenwood was to appear did not commence until half-past eight, he went into the smoking-room, where most of the diners had assembled, and in addition to them, Lord Dollamore. He looked up and saw Alsager's entrance; then stretched out his hand, and pointed to a vacant seat on the couch beside him.

"My dear Alsager, delighted to see you,—honestly and truly delighted! How are you? What a hermit you have become! though of

course I understand,—family-business and all that; and what has brought you up at last—not this new play?”

“Well, I can scarcely say that; but I wanted a something to come up for—a something, I mean, beyond law-business—and perhaps this wondrous advertisement of Wuff’s turned the scale.”

“They tell me the gal’s deuced good. Spof-forth, who saw her last night, was here this morning, and says she’s really wonderful. This is the second time you’ve done this sort of thing,—coming back on the first night of a great theatrical event. It’s not half a bad idea, because you see a lot of people you know, and get rid of ‘how-d’ye-do’s’ in one large parcel.”

“There are some who were present on the last occasion whom I shall not see to-night, I suppose,” said Laurence. “I was thinking,” he added, as he saw Dollamore whispering to his stick, “of George Bertram.”

“No!” said Dollamore, “the Blab has been missing for the last fortnight. It’s rumoured that he has gone as a mute into the service

of the Pasha of Egypt. I thought you were alluding to our friends in Devonshire: a nice business that."

"Indeed! I, as you know, have been absent from town for months, and have heard nothing."

"Well, you won't listen to me, I suppose, because you'll imagine I am prejudiced, recollecting all I said to you on the subject in this very room after Spofforth's play. But you won't deny that, so far as you had opportunities of judging while we were down at Redmoor, I was right?"

"Right, so far as your estimation of the man went, certainly—"

"Oh, as for the lady, there is no one can entertain a higher opinion of Lady Mitford than myself. The degradation that that brute is bringing upon her—"

"Degradation! Do you mean to say that Mitford's infidelities are known—about—generally?"

"My dear Alsager, you think I colour and exaggerate. Let us pump that well of candour, Cis Hetherington. If there is an honest opinion

about, it will be procurable from that son of Anak. —Well, Cis, going to the play?”

“Course I am,” responded that scion of the aristocracy, lazily lifting his head from the ottoman; “every body’s going, seems to me. What’s the woman like? Yankee, ain’t she? Don’t like Yankees,—all speak through their noses, and say ‘I guess;’ at least, all that I’ve ever seen do, and that’s only on the stage.”

“She’s not Yankee; she’s an Englishwoman, they tell me; though of course that story of the nobleman’s daughter is all bosh. However, Wuff has worked the oracle splendidly. Every body’s going. Here’s Alsager come up to town on purpose.”

“Is that Alsager sitting next to you?” asked Cis Hetherington, raising himself on his elbow and looking full at Laurence. “I thought it looked like him, and I wondered he didn’t speak to me. But I suppose he’s grown proud since he’s become a Bart.”

“You old idiot! I shook hands with you in the hall as I came in,” said Laurence, laughing. “What’s the news, Cis? how are all your people?”

"First-rate, old boy! Westonhanger's gone abroad—to America, I mean; Sioux Indians, and that sort of thing. Wanted you awfully to go with him, but thought you were doing monseigneur on your *terre*. Asked about you no end, give you my word! And the Duke's really tremendous! 'pon my soul, some fellow ought to put him in a book! Ever since the row about the repeal of the Corn Laws has been coming to a head, he's been like a lunatic. He thinks it's all up with every thing, and is sure we shall have a revolution, and that he'll have his head cut off by the mob and stuck on a pike, and all that kind of thing."

"And Algy Forrester?" asked Dollamore.

"Algy Forrester was here to-day," said Hetherington; "came to me about a devilish unpleasant thing. That fellow Mitford, whom you both know" ("Now, then, listen!" said Dollamore),—"that fellow Mitford has asked him—Algy, I mean—to put him up here. And Algy came to ask if I'd second him, and I told him I'd see Mitford d—d first. And so I would. I ain't a strait-laced party, and don't go in for being particularly vir-

tuous myself; but I'm a bachelor, and am on my own hook. But the way that fellow Mitford treats that nice wife of his is neither more nor less than blackguardly, I think; and so I wouldn't mind telling him, if I'd the chance."

"Hallo, Cis!" said Markham Bowers, who was sitting near; "shut your stupid old mouth. You'll get into a mess if you give tongue like that,—get cut off in the flower of your youth; and then what weeping and wailing there'll be among the ten tribes, and among those unfortunate Christians who have been speculating on your autograph. Not that you're wrong in what you say about Mitford; for if ever a cad walked this earth, that's the man."

"Ah! and isn't she a nice woman?" said Hetherington. "When she first showed in town last season, she took every body's fancy; even Runnymede admired her, and the Duchess asked to be introduced, and they were quite thick. Wonderful! wasn't it? And to think of that snob Mitford treating her as he does, completely neglecting her, while he's——Well, I don't know;

I suppose it's all right; but there ain't many things that would please me better than dropping on to that party—heavy."

"You're always dropping on to parties, Cis," said Bowers; "but you had better keep quiet in this case, please. You would have to make your own chance of getting into the row, for of course the lady's name must not appear—"

"Oh, don't you be afraid of me, Marky; I'm all right!" said Cis, rising and stretching himself. "You won't mind my stamping on Mitford's feet,—accidentally, of course,—if we find him in the stalls." And the two Guardsmen started away together.

"Well," said Lord Dollamore, leaning forward towards his companion, "was I right or wrong?"

"Right! terribly right!" said Alsager, with a set rigid face.

"You would not have accepted my testimony, thinking perhaps that I had motives for exaggeration, or was prompted by an *arrière pensée*, in which, on my word of honour, you're wrong.

But those fellows are merely types of society ; and their opinion, somewhat differently expressed, is society's opinion."

"Has not Mitford's madness cooled down at all?"

"It is worse, far and away,—worse than ever—"

"And that woman?"

"Ah," said Lord Dollamore, "she's been very quiet lately, owing to her husband's death. "Poor old boy! poor old Percy Hammond! But she's up in town, I understand, now; and I don't think—" and here Dollamore's crutch-handled stick was evidently whispering confidences into its master's ear,—“I don't think Master Mitford will find it all straight sailing in that quarter just now.”

"How do you mean? What would induce her to change to him?"

"Well, you see, she's a widow now, with a comparatively small income; for I suspect poor old Percy knew more than he ever let on, and instructed Trivett to prepare his will accordingly. So that, besides wanting a husband, she'll want him rich; for she's one of the best hands at get-

ting through money in England. With a husband *in posse*, Mitford's attentions would not do at all."

"Ah, I see; but is not her character too well known?"

"Not a bit of it; her powers of attraction are enormous still. Why, if I'm rightly informed, a Russian whom you know, I think,—Tchernigow by name,—is making the running there already."

"I know him; he was madly in love with her, I heard, the season before last; followed her to Baden and about."

"That's the man! Well, he's *revenu*—not to his *premier*, which was probably some Cossack peasant-girl—but to one of his *amours*, and is desperate."

"He's enormously wealthy. If she accepted him, there might yet be a chance of happiness for Georgie—Lady Mitford, I mean."

"Don't you believe that for an instant, Alsager!" said Dollamore, looking keenly at him; "you're not posted up in that family history. Matters have gone too far now; there is only one way in which Sir Charles Mitford could

really be of service to his wife, and that is by dying. But I'm afraid she would not think so, poor girl!" Then seeing his companion looking very grave, he said, "Come, it's no use brooding over these matters; let us go the theatre."

The theatre was crammed, as Mr. Wuff had anticipated. The audience was composed of pretty much the same class of people as those present on the first night of Mr. Spofforth's play at the Parthenium; with the exception of those who were most strongly remembered by Alsager. He had known that the Mitfords and Mrs. Hammond could not be there, and there was little to interest him among the audience. The curtain rose on the piece of the evening, and every body's attention concentrated on the stage. Shortly afterwards came the appearance of the new actress, who was hailed with shouts of encouragement and applause by Mr. Wuff's supporters in boxes, pit, and gallery. She seemed not in the least overcome by her reception, but bowed gracefully, and entered immediately on the business of the

piece. The character she played was that of a high-bred wealthy girl, beloved by a young yeoman-farmer of the neighbourhood, who proposes to her, but she mocks at his *gaucheries*, and rejects him with scorn. He accepts his defeat, and goes away to travel on the Continent with his brother. It is not until he is gone that she finds how deeply she had really loved him; but he is gone never to return, and so she accepts the attentions of, and is engaged to, a silly peer. Then comes the Nemesis. The girl's father is ruined, the peer jilts her, and she is left in wretchedness, when the yeoman-farmer comes back a polished gentleman. There is an admirable scene of intensity between them, and, of course, all ends happily. The character of the heroine seemed excellently suited for Miss Greenwood, who, gradually winning the confidence of the audience, worked them to a pitch of enthusiasm in the last scene, and brought down the curtain with a universal verdict of her combining thorough knowledge of the usages of society and lady-like manners with great dramatic power.

Of course she was recalled before the curtain; and then as she swept across the stage, clasping her bouquet to her bosom, and occasionally bowing low, her eyes lit full on those of Laurence Alsager. And then for the first time Laurence Alsager, who had been puzzling his brain about her ever since she appeared on the scene, recollected who she was, and said half aloud, "The woman who wrote me the note!—Miss Gillespie, without a doubt!"

CHAPTER III.

LOVE AND DUTY.

LADY MITFORD was alone on the afternoon of the following day, when Sir Laurence Alsager was announced. She was often alone now; for the world falls readily and easily away, not only from the forsaken, but from the preoccupied—from those to whom its gaieties are childish follies and its interests weariness. She had fallen out of the ranks, as much through inclination as in compliance with the etiquette of mourning; and it came to pass often that the afternoon hours found her, as on this occasion, sitting alone in her splendid, vapid, faultless, soulless home. The softened light which reached her stately figure and irradiated her thoughtful face showed the grace and loveliness which distinguished her untouched, undimmed. Under the discipline of sorrow, under the teaching of dis-

appointment, her face had gained in expression and dignity,—every line and curve had strength added to its former sweetness ; the pure steadfast eyes shone with deeper, more translucent lustre, and the rich lips met each other with firmer purpose and more precision. The perfecting, the refinement of her beauty, were sensibly felt by Alsager as he advanced towards the end of the room where she was seated in the recess between a large window and a glittering fireplace. She sat in a deep low chair of purple velvet ; and as she leaned slightly forward and looked at him coming rapidly towards her, his eye noted every detail of the picture. He saw the glossy hair in its smooth classic bandeaux, the steadfast eyes, the gracious, somewhat grave, smile, the graceful figure in its soft robe of thick mourning silk, and its rich jet trimmings ; he saw the small white hands, gentle but not weak,—one extended towards him in welcome, the other loosely holding an open book. In a minute he was by her side and speaking to her ; but that minute had a deathless memory,—that picture he was to see again and again, in many a place, at

many a time, and it was never to be less beautiful, less divine for him. He loved her—ay, he loved her—this injured woman, this neglected, outraged wife, this woman who was a victim, crushed under the wheels of the triumphal car which had maimed him once on a time, though only slightly, and by a hurt soon healed by the balsam of contempt. Was she crushed, though? There was sorrow in that grand face—indeed, to that look of sorrow it owed its grandeur,—but there was no pining; there was sad experience, but no weak vain retrospection. All the pain of her lot was written upon her face; but none could read there a trace of what would have been its mortification, its bitter humiliation to commoner and coarser minds. It mattered nothing to her that her husband's infatuation and their mutual estrangement were topics for comment to be treated in the style current in society, and she herself an object of that kind of compassion which is so hard to brook: these were small things, too small for her range of vision; she did not see them—did not feel them. She saw the facts, she felt their weight and significance; but

for the rest! If Lady Mitford had progressed rapidly in knowledge of the great world since she had been of it, she had also graduated in other sciences which placed her above and beyond it.

“I am fortunate in finding you at home, Lady Mitford,” said Alsager.

She answered by a smile. They had got beyond the talking of commonplaces to each other, these two, in general; but there was a sense of oppression over them both to-day, and each was conscious that it weighed upon the other. The remembrance of the talk to which he had listened at the Club, of the light discussion of Sir Charles's conduct, of the flippant censure of the woman who had won him from his wife, was very strong upon Alsager; while she,—of what was she thinking? Who could undertake to tell that? who could categorise the medley which must occupy the mind of a woman so situated? Was she suffering the sharp pangs of outraged love? or was she enduring the hardly less keen torture of discovering that that which she had believed to be love, had cherished in her breast as the true deity, had given,

in that belief, to her husband, was not love, but only a skilful (and innocent) counterfeit, only a mock jewel which she had offered in good faith for the flawless pearl of price? Who can tell? She could hardly have answered such a question truly, if she had put it to herself at the close of the interview which began after so commonplace a fashion.

“I have not seen you since your father’s death,” said Lady Mitford, gently; and in a tone which lent the simple words all the effect of a formal condolence. “You have not been long in town, I’m sure?”

“No, indeed,” he said; “I have but just returned. There is so much to be done on these occasions; there are so many forms to be gone through; there is so much immediate business to be transacted, in the interests of the living, that—that,”—he hesitated; for he had neared that precipice so dreaded by all nowadays, the exhibition of natural emotion.

“That one has to wait for leisure to mourn for the dead,” said Lady Mitford. “Ah, yes, I

understand that. But you remain in town now, do you not?"

There was a tone of anxiety in the question which struck on Alsager's ear with a sound of music. She had missed him, then,—she would miss him if he went away again! He loved her well, ay, and worthily, contradictory though that may seem; but his heart was stirred with a joy which he dared not analyse, but could not deny, at the thought. He answered hurriedly, "Yes, I remain here now." And then he changed his tone, and said eagerly,

"Tell me something of yourself. How has it been with you since we met last?"

"Of myself!" she replied sadly; and her colour flushed and faded as she spoke, and her restless fingers trifled with the ornaments of her dress. "Myself is an unprofitable subject, and one I am weary of. I have nothing new to tell,—nothing you would care to hear."

He dissented by an eager gesture; but she appeared not to perceive it, and went on, with attempted gaiety:

“ We have missed you dreadfully, of course. I need not tell you what a void your absence must necessarily make. We all know you are beyond spoiling.”

She looked at him, and something in his face warned her not to pursue this tone. She felt vaguely that the position was unreal, and must be changed. He knew, as she supposed, what she was thinking of; she knew, as he fancied, what he was thinking of; and though, as it happened, each was wrong, it was manifestly absurd to carry on false pretences any longer. Woman-like, she was the first to brave the difficulty of the situation.

“ You have come to me,” she said steadily, and looking at him with the clear upheld gaze peculiar to her, “ because you have heard something which concerns me nearly, and because, man of the world,—of this heartless world around us,—as you are, and accustomed to such things, still you feel for me; because you would have prevented this thing if you could; because you tried to prevent it, and failed; because you knew

—yes, Sir Laurence Alsager, because *you knew* the extent and the power of the danger that menaced me, and my helplessness : say, am I right?—for these reasons you are here to-day.”

The composure of her voice was gone, but not its sweetness ; her colour had faded to a marble paleness, and her hands were firmly clasped together. Alsager had risen as she spoke, and was standing now, leaning against the low velvet-covered mantelpiece. He answered hurriedly, and with scant composure :

“ Yes, Lady Mitford, for these reasons, and for others.”

“ For what others?”

This, almost in a whisper.

“ Never mind them now,” he said impetuously ; and then the superficial restraint which he had imposed upon himself gave way, broke down before that strongest and most terrible of temptations, the sight of the sorrow and the silent confidence of the woman one loves, granted at the moment when a hope, a guilty hope, that that love may not be vain, begins to stir, like life, at one’s

heart. She shrank a little back in the chair, but she looked at him as earnestly as before.

“It is all true, then,” he said,—and there was a tone of deep and bitter hatred in his voice,—“all true. The prophecy I heard among those fellows the first time I ever heard your name—the coarse knowledge, the cynical foresight,—all true. That heartless demon has caught his shallow nature in her shallow lure, and worked the woe of an angel!”

His voice rang with a passionate tremor, his eyes deepened and darkened with the passionate fervour which glowed in them. His impetuous feeling mastered her. She had no power to arrest him by a conventional phrase, though he had overstepped more than conventionality by invading the sacred secrecy of her domestic grief.

“Yes, Lady Mitford,” he went on; “I have returned to find that all I feared,—more than I feared,—has befallen you. It was an unequal contest; you had only innocence and purity, an old-fashioned belief in the stability of human relations and the sanctity of plighted faith; and what weapons were these in such a fight? No wonder

you are vanquished. No wonder she is triumphant—shameless as she is heartless. I wound you,” he said, for she cowered and trembled at his words ; “but I cannot keep silence. I have seen shameful things,—I am no stranger to the dark passages of life ; but this is worse than all. Good God ! to think that a man like Mitford should have had such a chance and have thrown it away ! To think that—”

“Hush, Sir Laurence !” she said, and stretched her hand appealingly towards him ; “I must not hear you. I cannot, I will not affect to misunderstand you ; but there must be no more of this. I am an unhappy woman,—a most wretched wife ; all the world—all the little world we think so great, and suffer to torment us so cruelly—knows that. Pretence between us would be idle ; but confidence is impossible. I cannot discuss Sir Charles Mitford’s conduct with any one, least of all with you.” She seemed to have spoken the last words unawares, or at least involuntarily, for a painful blush rose on her face and throat.

“And why,” he eagerly asked,—“why least of all with me? I have been honoured by your friendship,—I have not forfeited it, have I? I know that conventionality, which is a systematic liar and a transparent hypocrite, would condemn in theory a woman to keep her garments folded decorously over such mortal heart-wounds; I know that poets snivel rhymes which tell us how grand and great, how high and mighty it is ‘to suffer and be strong.’ I know how easy some people find it to see others suffer, and be perfectly strong in the process; but such rubbish is not for you nor for me. I cannot return to London and hear all that I have heard; I cannot come here and look upon you—” his voice faltered, but he forced it into the same hurried composure with which he had been speaking. “I cannot see you as I see you now, and talk to you as an ordinary morning visitor might talk, or even as we have talked together, when these things were coming indeed, but had not yet come.”

She was leaning forward now, her face turned

towards him, but hidden in her hands. He gazed at her with a kindling glance, and strode fiercely back and forward across the wide space which lay before the window.

“I am not a good man,” he went on, “according to your standard of goodness, Lady Mitford; but I am not a bad man according to my own. I have had rough tussles with life, and some heavy falls; but I swear there is a dastardly, cold, heartless ingratitude in this business which I cannot bear; and in the sight of you there is something terrible to me. Men know this man’s history; we know from what degradation you raised him; we are not so blind and coarse that we cannot guess with what fidelity and patience you loved him when it was at its deepest. And now, to see him return to it; to see him, without any excuse of poverty or struggle, in the enjoyment of all that fate and fortune have blindly given him; to see him play the part of a liar and a villain to you—to you—to see you left unprotected, openly neglected and betrayed, to run the gauntlet of

society such as ours! I cannot see all this, Lady Mitford, and pretend that I do not see it; and what is more, you do not wish that I could. You are too true, too womanly, to form such a wish; and you are too honest to express it, in obedience to any laws of cant."

He went near to her; he bent down, he lowered his voice, he gently drew away the hands that hid her face from him; they dropped into her lap, nerveless and idle; the first tears he had ever seen in her eyes dimmed them now.

"You mean kindly, as you have always meant to me, Sir Laurence," she said; "but we cannot discuss this matter,—indeed we cannot. I am weaker than I ought to be,—I should not listen to this; but oh, God help me, I have no friends; I am all alone, all alone!"

If she had been beautiful in the pride and dignity of her sorrowful composure, if his strong heart had quailed and his firm nerve had shrunk at the sight of her pale and placid grief, how far more beautiful was she now, when the

restraint had fallen from her, when the eyes looked at him from the shadow of wet lashes, and the perfect lips trembled with irrepressible emotion!

“No!” he said vehemently; and as he spoke he stood close before her, and stretched his hands towards her, but without taking hers: the gesture was one of mingled denial and appeal, and had no touch of boldness in it;—“no, you are not alone; yes, you have friends,—at least you have one friend. Listen to me,—do not fear to hear me; let *us* at least venture to tell and listen to the truth. This man, to whom you were given as a guardian angel, is quite unworthy of you. You know it; your keen intellect accepts a fact and all its consequences, however terrible to your woman’s heart, and does not palter with the truth. Are you to be always miserable because you have been once mistaken? If you had known, if you had been able to comprehend the real nature of this man, would you, could you ever have loved him?”

She put up her hand with a faint gesture of

protest; but he impetuously waved it away, and went on, once more striding up and down.

“No, no; I must speak! There can be no more reticence now. You would not, you could not have loved him, this heartless, ungrateful profligate, as tasteless and low as he is faithless and vicious,—this scoundrel, who, holding good in his grasp, has deliberately chosen evil. Ay, I *will* say it, Lady Mitford! You *could* not have loved him, and you know it well; you have admitted it to yourself before now, when you little dreamed that any one—that I—would ever dare to put your thought in form and shape before you. What *did* you love? A girl’s fancy,—a shadow, a dream! It was no reality, it had no foundation, and it has vanished. Your imagination drew a picture of an injured victim of circumstances,—a weak being, to be pitied and admired, to be restored and loved! The truth was a selfish scoundrel, who has returned in wealth with fresh zest to the miserable pleasures for which he lived in poverty; a mean-hearted wretch, who could care for your beauty while it

was new to him indeed, but to whose perception *you*, your heart and soul, your intellect and motives, were mysteries as high and as far off as heaven. Are you breaking your heart, Lady Mitford, under the kindly scrutiny of the world, because the thistle has not borne figs and the thorn has not given you purple grapes? Are you sitting down in solitary grief because the animal has done according to its kind, because effect has resulted from cause, because the wisdom of the world, wise in the ways of such men, has verified itself? Do you love this man now? Are you suffering the pangs of jealousy, of despair? No, you do not love him; you are suffering no such pangs. You are truth itself,—the truest and the bravest, as you are the most beautiful of women; and you cannot, you dare not tell me that you love this man still, knowing him as you know him now.” He stopped close beside her, and looked at her with an eager, almost a fierce glance.

“Why do you ask me?” she gasped out faintly. There was a sudden avoidance of him

in her expression, a shadow of fear. "Why do you speak to me thus? Oh, Sir Laurence, this—this is the worst of all." She was not conscious of the effect of the tone in which these words were spoken, of the pathos, the helplessness, the pleading tenderness it implied. But he heard them, and they were enough. They were faint as the murmur of a brook in summer, but mighty as an Alpine storm; and the barriers of conventional restriction, the scruples of conscience, the timidity of a real love, were swept away like straws before their power.

"Why?" he repeated, "because I love you!"

She uttered a faint exclamation; she half rose from her chair, but he caught her hands and stopped her.

"Hush!" he said; "I implore you not to speak till you have heard me! Do not wrong me by supposing that I have come here to urge on your unwilling ear a tale of passion, to take advantage of your husband's crime, your husband's cowardice, to extenuate crime and cowardice in myself. Before God, I have no such meaning! But I

love you—I love you as I never even fancied I loved any woman before; though I am no stranger to the reality or the mockery of passion, though I have received deep and smarting wounds in my time. I wish to make myself no better in your eyes than I am. And I love you—love you so much better than myself, that I would fain see you happy with this man, even with *him*, if it could be. But it cannot, and you know it. You know in your true heart, that if he came back to his allegiance to you now—poor bond of custom as it is—you could not love him, any more than you could return to the toys of your childhood. I read you aright; I know you with the intuitive knowledge which love, and love only, lends to a man, when he would learn the mystery of a woman's nature. You are too noble, too true, to be bound by the petty rules, to be governed by the small scruples which dominate nine-tenths of the women who win the suffrages of society. You have the courage of your truthfulness.”

He stood before her, looking steadfastly down

upon her, his arms tightly folded across his chest, his breath coming quickly in hurried gasps. She had shrunken into the recesses of her velvet chair, and she looked up at him with parted lips and wild eyes, her hands holding the cushions tightly, the fingers hidden in the purple fringes. Was it that she could not speak, or that she would not? However that may have been, she did not, and he went on.

“Yes, yes, I love you. I think you knew it before?” She made no reply. “I think I have loved you from the first,—from the moment when, callous and *blasé* as I had come to believe myself—as, God knows, I had good right to be, if human nature may ever claim such a right,—I could not bear to see the way your fate was drifting, or to hear the chances for and against you calculated, as men calculate such odds. I think I loved you from the moment I perceived how completely you had mistaken your own heart, and how beautifully, how innocently loyal you were to the error. While your delusion lasted, Lady Mitford, you were safe with me

and from me, for in that delusion there was security. While you loved Mitford, and believed that he returned your love, you would never have perceived that any other man loved you. But you are a woman who cannot be partially deceived or undeceived; therefore I tell you now, when your delusion is wholly at an end, when it can come no more to blind your eyes, and rend your heart with the removal of the bandage, that I love you,—devotedly, changelessly, eternally. You must take this fact into account when you meditate upon your future; you must number this among the component parts of your life. Hush! not yet. I am not speaking thus through reckless audacity, availing itself of your position; you know I am not, and you must hear me to the end.”

She had made a movement as if about to speak, but he had again checked her; and they maintained their relative positions, he looking down at her, she looking up at him.

“We are facing facts, Lady Mitford. I love you, not as the man who left you, in your first

year of marriage, for the worthless woman who forsook me for a richer lover, and would have wronged the fool who bought her without a scruple, could she have got me into her power again—not as he loved you, even when he came nearest to the truth of love. That woman, your enemy, your *rival*,”—he spoke the word with a stringent scorn which would have been the keenest punishment in human power to have inflicted on the woman it designated,—“she knows I love you, and she has struck at me through you; struck at me, poor fool—for she is fool as well as fiend—a blow which has recoiled upon herself. She has taught me how much, how well, how devotedly I love you, and learned the lesson herself thereby, for the intuition of hate is no less keen than that of love. But why do I speak of her? Only to make you understand that I am a portion of your fate,—only to lay the whole truth before you; only to make it clear to you that mine is no chance contact, no mere intrusion. I am not a presumptuous fool, who has dared to use a generously-granted friendship as a cover for an

illicit passion. Have patience with me a little longer. Let me tell you all the truth. You cannot dismiss me from your presence as you might another who had dared to love you, and dared to tell you so ; you cannot do this."

"Why?" she asked faintly, but with an angry sparkle in her eyes. For the second time she said that one word.

"Because I have injured you, Lady Mitford,—injured you unconsciously, unintentionally ; and that is a plea which cannot fail, addressed to such as you. Had I never crossed your path, the woman for whom your husband has wronged you would never have crossed it either. I am the object, you are the victim, of the hatred of a she-devil. You don't suppose she cares for Mitford, do you?"

"Not if she ever loved you," was the reply.

Alsager passed it over, but a sudden light flashed into his face.

"Of course she does not. She has played her ruthless game skilfully according to her lights, and your happiness has been staked and lost.

Indirectly, I am the cause of this. Was the feeling which came over me the first time I saw you a presentiment, I wonder? Well, no matter; you see now that I am a portion of your fate. You see now that a hidden tie binds us together, and that the folly, the delusion of my youth, and the mistaken love of your girlhood, have borne mysterious common fruit."

She sat like one enthralled, entranced, and listened to him; she bent her head for a moment as he took an instant's breath, but she did not attempt to speak. His manner changed, grew softer, and his voice fell to almost a whisper:

"May not this mysterious tie of misfortune mean more to us?" he said. "May not the consolation come, as the curse has come, and all the designs of our enemies be disconcerted? I do not say my love is worthy of your acceptance,—I am too much travel-stained in my wanderings in the world's ways to make any such pretension; but it is yours, such as it is—faulty, imperfect, but loyal and eternal. I love you, Lady Mitford, and I ask nothing of you but permission to love

you freely and fully ; I ask your leave to give you all the devotion of my heart, all the loyalty of my life. I know how the world would hold such a demand ; but I care nothing for the world, and I fancy you know it too well to care much for it now. You cherished a delusion long and sacredly ; it was at least a noble one, but it is gone, and the world can neither satisfy you for its loss nor substitute another. Dearest—” he paused ; she shivered, but she said not a word,—“ dearest, what remains ?” Inexpressible tenderness was in his voice, in his bending figure, in his moistened eyes. There was a moment’s silence, and then she spoke, replying to his last words :

“ Duty, Sir Laurence,—duty, the only thing which is not a delusion ; that remains.”

He drew back a little, looking at her. She raised herself in her chair, and pointed to a seat at a little distance from her own. She was deadly pale, but she did not tremble, and her voice was firm and low as she said :

“ Sit down, and listen to me.”

He obeyed, silent and wondering. Perhaps

he had not told himself exactly what he had expected,—perhaps no one ever does, when the emotions of the heart are called into evidence; but he knew that it was not this. Had he more to learn of this woman whom he had so closely studied; had her nature heights which he had not seen, and depths which he had not comprehended? Breathless he waited for her words. In an agony of suspense he looked at her averted face, which appeared to address itself to something in the distance,—which had settled into a wondrous composure at the command of the strong will. He had not estimated that strength of will aright; he had made the common mistake of overlooking a quality because he had not seen it in active employment. There was neither confusion nor weakness in the manner of the woman to whom he had just spoken such words as no woman could hear unmoved; and there mingled strangely with his love something of wonder and of awe.

After a little interval, which seemed endless to him, she turned her face towards him again, laid her hand heavily upon her breast, and spoke :

“You have been cruel to me, Sir Laurence, in all that you have said ; but men, I believe, are always cruel to women if they love them, or have loved them. I acquit you of intentional cruelty, and I accept all you say of the necessity for the truth being spoken between us in the new phase of our relation which you have brought about to-day.”

The intensity of her face deepened, and the pressure of her hand grew heavier. He muttered a few words of protest, but she went on as if she had not heard him.

“You have spoken words to me, Sir Laurence, which I should not have heard ; but they have been spoken, and the wrong cannot be undone. It may be atoned for, and it must. Neither these words nor any other must be spoken between us henceforth—”

He started up.

“You cannot mean this,” he said ; “it is impossible ; I do not believe it,—I will not bear it.”

“Be still and hear me,” she replied ; “I kept silence at your desire,—you will not, I am sure, do

less at mine. I too must speak to you, uninterrupted, in the spirit of that truth of which you have spoken so eloquently and with such sophistry—yes, with such sophistry.”

Once more she paused and sighed.

“Speak to me, then,” he said; and there was true, real anguish in his tone. “Say what you will, but do not be too hard on me. I am only a mortal man; if I have offended you, it is because you are an angel.”

“You have not offended me,” she said very slowly: “perhaps I ought to be offended, but I am not. I think you judge me aright when you say that truth holds the foremost place in and for me: therefore I tell you truth. You have grieved me; you have added a heavy burden to a load which is not very easy to bear, though the world, which you exhort me to despise and to deny, cannot lay a feather’s weight upon it. Your friendship was very dear to me,—very precious; I did not know how dear, I think, until to-day.”

How eagerly he listened to the thrilling voice! how ardently he gazed into the dreamy beautiful

eyes! how breathlessly he kept the silence so hard to maintain!

“If I could use any further disguise with myself, Sir Laurence, if self-deception could have any further power over me, I might terminate this interview here, and tell you, and tell myself, that it should be forgotten. But I have done with self-deception.”

“For God’s sake, don’t speak in that bitter tone!” Alsager said entreatingly; “spare me, if you will not spare yourself.”

“No,” she replied; “I will spare neither you nor myself. Why should I? The world has spared neither of us—will spare neither of us; only it will tell lies, and I will tell truths,—that’s all.”

Her colour was heightened, and her eyes were flashing now; but the pressure of her hand upon her bosom was steady.

“You have read my story aright: I know not by what art or science—but you have read it. If, as you say, you have an involuntary share, an unconscious responsibility in my heavy trial, it is a misfortune, which I put away from my

thoughts ; I hold you in no way accountable. My sorrow is my own ; my delusion is over ; my duty remains."

"Do you speak of duty to Sir Charles Mitford?" asked Alsager with a sneer.

"Yes," she said gently ; "I do. Your tone is unworthy of you, Sir Laurence ; but I pass it by ; for it is the tone of a man of the world, to whom inclination is a law. Can my husband's faithlessness absolve me from fidelity? Is his sin any excuse for my defection from my duty? You say truly, I cannot love him now as I loved him when I did not know him as he is ; but I can do my duty to him still—a hard duty, but imperative. The time will come when this woman will weary of him, of her vain and futile vengeance ; and then—"

"Well, Lady Mitford, and then—?" asked Alsager in a cold hard voice.

She looked at him with eyes in which a holy calm had succeeded to her transient passion, and replied :

"Then he will return to me, and I must be

ready to meet him without a shade upon my conscience, without a blush upon my cheek."

He started up angrily, and exclaimed :

"You pass all comprehension ! What ! You are no longer in error about this man ; the glamour has passed. You know him for the cold cynical profligate he is ; and you talk of welcoming him like a repentant prodigal ; only yourself it is you are prepared to kill—your own pride, your own delicacy, your own heart ! Good God ! what are good women made of, that they set such monstrous codes up for themselves, and adhere to them so mercilessly !"

"He is my husband," she faltered out ; and for a moment her courage seemed to fail. The next she rose, and standing by the mantelpiece, where he had stood before, she went on, with hurry and agitation in her voice : "Don't mistake me. Love is dead and gone for me. But this world is not the be-all and the end-all ; there is an inheritance beyond it, reserved for those who have 'overcome.' Duty is hard, but it is never intolerable to a steadfast will, and a

mind fixed on the truth. Time is long, and the round of wrong is tedious; but the day wears through best to those who subdue impatience, and wrong loses half its bitterness when self is conquered. I have learned my lesson, Sir Laurence, and chosen my part."

"And what is to be mine?" he said, with angry impatience,—“what is to be mine? You moralise charmingly, Lady Mitford; and your system is perfect, with one little exception—and what is that? A mere nothing, a trifle—only a man's heart, only a love that is true! You are all alike, I believe, bad or good, in this,—you will pine after, you will endure any thing for, a man who is false to you, and you will tread upon the heart of one who is true. What do you care? We do not square with the moral code of the good among you, nor with the caprice and devilment of the bad; and so away with us! I am ‘cruel’ to you, forsooth, because I tell you that you no longer love a worthless profligate, who sports with your peace and your honour at the bidding of a wanton! I am ‘cruel’ because I tell you that I,

who have innocently wronged you, love you with every pulse of my heart and every impulse of my will! Is there any cruelty on your side, do you think, when you talk, not puling sentiment—I could more easily pardon that; it would be mere conventional silliness—but these chilly, chilling moralities, which are fine in copy-books, but which men and women abandon with their writing-lessons?”

“Do they?” she said with imperturbable gentleness; “I think not. You are angry and unjust, Sir Laurence,—angry with *me*, unjust to *me*!”

The keen pathos of her tone, its innocent pleading utterly overcame him.

“Yes,” he cried; “I *am* unjust, and you are an angel of goodness; but—I love you,—ah, how I love you!—and you reject me, utterly, utterly. You reject me, and for *him*! You give *her* a double triumph; you lay my life waste once more.”

He stopped in his hurried walk close to her. She laid her hand upon his arm, and they looked

at one another in silence for a little. She broke it first.

“And if I did not reject you, as you say—if I accepted this love, this compensating truth and loyalty, which you offer me, what should I be, Laurence Alsager, but her compeer? Have you thought of that? Have you remembered that there is a law in marriage apart from and above all feeling? Have you considered what she who breaks that law is, in the sight of God, in the unquenchable light of her own conscience, though her conduct were as pure from stain as the ermine of a royal robe? I am speaking, not chilly, chilling moralities, but immortal, immutable truth. In the time to come you will remember it, and believe it; and then there will be no bitterness in your heart when you recollect how I bade you farewell!”

The lustrous eyes looked into his with a gaze as pure as an infant's, as earnest as a sibyl's, and the gentle hand lay motionless upon his arm.

“How you bade me farewell!” he repeated

in a hoarse voice. "What do you mean? Are you sending me from you?"

"Yes," she answered; "I am sending you from me. We have met once too often, and we must meet no more. You say you love me;" she shrank and shivered again,—“and—and I believe you. Therefore you will obey me.”

"No," he said resolutely; "I will not obey you! I will see you,—I must. What is there in my love to frighten or to harm you? I ask for nothing which even your scrupulous conscience might hesitate to give; I seek no change in the relation that has subsisted between us for some time now.”

"Dreams, dreams," she said sadly; "unworthy of your sense,—unworthy of your knowledge of the world. Nothing can ever replace us on our old footing. The words you have spoken to me can never be unsaid. They are words I never ought to have heard — and —" In a moment her firmness deserted her, her voice failed; she sank into a chair, and burst into passionate tears.

“ You would not have them unsaid !” he cried ; “ tell me that you would not ! Tell me that the coldness and the calm which those streaming tears deny are not true, are not real ! Tell me that I am something in your life,—that I might have been more ! Dearest, I reverence as much as I love you ; but give me that one gleam of comfort. It cannot make your heavenly rectitude and purity poorer, while to me it will be boundless riches. Tell me that you could love me if you would ; tell me that the sacred barrier of your conscience is the only one between us ! I swear I will submit to that ! I will not try to shake or to remove it. Nay, more, I will leave you,—if indeed you persist in commanding my absence,—if only you will tell me that under other circumstances you would have loved me. Tell me this ! I ask a great, a priceless boon ; but I do ask it. Dearest, will you not answer me ?” Her agitation, her tears, had reassured him, had broken the spell which her calmness had imposed. The hope that had come to him once or twice during their interview came again now, and stayed.

There was no sound for a while but that of her low rapid sobs. The clocks upon the mantelpieces in the suite of rooms ticked loudly, and their irritating metallic voices mingled strangely with the rushing pulses of Alsager's frame, as he leant over her,—one arm around the back of her chair, the other hand upon its velvet arm. His face was bent above her drooping head; his thick moustache almost touched the waved ridges of her scented hair. He implored her to speak to him; he poured out protestation and entreaty with all the ardour of his strong and fiery nature, with all the eloquence which slumbered in him, unsuspected even by himself. Little by little she ceased to weep, and at length she allowed him to see her face. Again he renewed his entreaties, and she answered him.

“You try me too far, and I am weak. Yes, I would love you, if I might!”

“Then you *do* love me!” he exclaimed. “You and I are no dreaming boy and girl, no Knight and Dame of old romance, but man and woman; and we know that these shades of differ-

ence are merest imagination. We love each other, and we know it. We love each other, and the acknowledgment makes the truth no truer. I am ungenerous, you would say; I am breaking the promise I have but just made. Yes, I am; but I love you—and you love me!” He had dropped on one knee beside her chair now, and as he spoke he caught her hand in his. Without any sign of anger or prudery, she withdrew her hand quietly, but resolutely, and signed to him to rise and be seated. He obeyed her; but exultation shone out from every line and feature of his face.

“You *are* ungenerous,” she said,—“very ungenerous, and very cruel; but I will not the less be true in these the last words I shall say to you. If I have dreamed of a life other than mine, of love well bestowed and faithfully returned, it was only in the most passing, transient visions. My lot is cast; my mind is made up; my heart is fixed. I linger here for a few moments longer because they are the last I shall ever pass alone with you. Do not interrupt me, or I terminate

this interview on the instant. This subject must never be renewed,—indeed it never can be; for you know my resolution, and I know you will respect it. The past remains with us; but the future has no common history for you and me. When I have ceased speaking, and that door has closed behind you, you must remember me, if you do not see me, and regard me if you do, as a woman wholly devoted to her wifely duty, of whom to think otherwise is to do a deadly wrong.”

He stood before her as pale as she had been; something wrathful and something reverential contended in his expression. She waved her hand with a slight gesture, and went on: “Now I have done with myself; there is no more question of me. But of you, Sir Laurence, there is much and serious question. Your life is aimless and unreal. Give it an object and an aim; invest it with truth, occupy it with duty. I am speaking with you face to face for the last time, and I go back to the old relation which you have destroyed for a few minutes. In that relation I speak to you of your father’s death-bed

request. Fulfil it; and by doing so, end this vain and sinful strife,—quell this demon which deludes you.”

“ You mean that I should marry my father’s ex-ward, I presume?” said Alsager coldly.

“ I do.”

“ Thank you, Lady Mitford. Your proposition is full of wisdom, however it may lack feeling. But there are sundry objections to my carrying it into effect. The lady does not love me, nor do I love the lady.”

“ You hardly know her,” Lady Mitford said with a timid smile; “ you have not given yourself any opportunity of testing your power of obedience to your father’s dying wish. You cannot judge of how she would be disposed towards you.” Once more she smiled timidly and sadly. “ You would have little cause to fear ill-success, I should think.”

“ Except that in this case, Lady Mitford, the lady’s affections are preëngaged, and she is doubtless a miracle of constancy.”

“ You speak bitterly, Sir Laurence, but your

bitterness will pass, and your better nature will assert itself."

"Is this all you intend to say to me, Lady Mitford?"

"This is all. My words will supplement themselves in silence and reflection, and you will acknowledge that I have spoken the truth—that I am as true as you believe me."

"And are we to part thus?" he asked in a slightly softened tone.

A quick spasm crossed her face, but she answered him at once, and looked at him as she spoke, "Yes!"

He bowed profoundly. She held out her hand. On the third finger was a heavy-looking seal-ring, which she constantly wore. As he coldly took the hand in his, his eyes fell upon this ring. She marked the look, and when he released her hand, she drew off the ring and offered it to him.

"You are angry with me now," she said; "but your anger will pass away. When no shade of it remains, wear this for my sake, and make its motto, which is mine, yours."

He took the ring, and without looking at it, dropped it into his waistcoat-pocket. Then he stood quite still as she passed him with her usual graceful step, and watched the sweep of her soft black robe as she walked down the long room, and disappeared through a door which opened into her boudoir.

Late that night, Alsager, angry still, dark and wrathful, tossed the ring with a contemptuous frown into a jewel-case; but he first took an impression of it in wax, and read the motto thus: “Fortiter—Fideliter—Feliciter.”

CHAPTER IV.

SIR LAURENCE'S LETTER.

HELEN MANNINGTREE and Mrs. Chisholm pursued their customary mode of life at Knockholt Park after, as before, the departure of Sir Laurence. Helen missed the grave and courteous gentleman whom she had learned to like so much, and her at first distant association with whom had grown into intimacy and confidence. Sir Laurence was a most agreeable companion; well-informed, and entirely without any sort of pretension. He had seen a great deal of the world—in the geographical sense of the term, as well as in every other; and his anecdotes of travel and descriptions of foreign lands had unflagging interest for Helen, whose experience had indeed been narrow, but whose reading had been various and extensive. In the thought-

ful mood into which Alsager had fallen—in the serious frame of mind which had become almost habitual with him now—he would probably have been voted a bore by “society,” supposing that he had placed himself within reach of its suffrages; but Helen knew nothing of the tastes and fashions of the great world, and to her Laurence was all that was most companionable and pleasant. He was not indeed so gifted, so cultivated a creature as Cuthbert Farleigh; but then—who was? who could be expected to be? And Helen, whose circle of acquaintance included a dozen unmarried men at the most, believed with perfect good faith that she had exercised the soundest judgment and discretion in her selection of the Reverend Cuthbert, from “all the world,” as the individual to whom alone she could render unqualified respect and intrust the happiness of her future life. That resolution, before mentioned, by which the curate had bound himself, to himself, to wait until he should be a bishop, or for the occurrence of any other equally improbable event, was rather in the way of Helen's

happiness, either present or future ; but she was not much disquieted by the delay. Cuthbert had seen no symptoms of an alarming nature to indicate any "intentions" on Colonel Alsager's part prior to Sir Peregrine's death, and he was ignorant of the existence of the old Baronet's letter, in which he had urged a marriage with Helen upon Sir Laurence. He had begun to think, within a very few days of Colonel Alsager's arrival at Knockholt, that he had been foolishly apprehensive in the first instance. Was it at all likely that, at Colonel Alsager's age, and in his position, with his opportunities of seeing, and recommending himself to, the fairest and most fascinating women in the world, he should be entirely heart-free and ready to fix his affections upon his father's ward? Of course Cuthbert was quite aware that Laurence Alsager could never by any possibility have met any one half so worthy of admiration and of love as Helen Manningtree ; but he was a young man of candid mind, and ready to acknowledge that a man might be preoccupied to the extent of being unable to recognise the un-

approachable excellence of Helen without being guilty of absolute stupidity or unpardonably bad taste. So, on the whole, these young people were tolerably comfortable in their minds, and felt an equable though unexpressed confidence in their mutual affection and in the future. The circumstance of Sir Peregrine Alsager's will making no mention of Helen—in fact, having been made before she became his ward, and during Lady Alsager's lifetime—had taken them both by surprise, and affected them differently. Helen had always known that her own very moderate income—which Sir Peregrine had always supplemented by a liberal allowance—was all that she actually possessed, or had any positive right to expect. But she had never entertained any doubt that her guardian intended to leave her a handsome provision, and she experienced a considerable shock when she learned that he had not done so. She could not understand it, and she was still more puzzled and surprised when Sir Laurence told her that he found himself a very much richer man than he had ever expected to

be. Helen had too much good sense, and even in her secluded life had learned to estimate facts and to eschew sentimental fallacies; so she did not affect to be indifferent on the subject, or to think that it was quite as well to be poor as to be rich, to be dependent as to be independent; but she did think and feel with very consoling sincerity that Cuthbert would have no more scruples about asking her to share his lot when her own had ceased to be of a nature to contrast with it. So she accepted her altered position cheerfully, and asked Sir Laurence what he would advise her to do, with a true-hearted freedom from anger or jealousy which elevated her to a great height in the mind of the new Baronet. Sir Laurence made her an evasive answer, and begged her to defer any decision on the subject until his return to Knockholt. He was going away, first to town, and then abroad, he told her, most probably; and she and Mrs. Chisholm must remain and take charge there for him. He would keep up the establishment just as it had been, with the exception of the stable department. Helen acquiesced

with great readiness. She was too completely a lady to feel any awkwardness in such an arrangement, and she knew well that Laurence's interests would be best served by her accepting his offer.

“I will stay here then,” she said, “and go on just as usual. I don't know whether you are aware that I was Sir Peregrine's almoner. Am I to be yours? The farm-bailiffs, the keepers, and all the rest of your people, are my excellent good friends. I shall get on capitally with them, and go my old rounds in the village, and so forth. But I want to know what I am to do about the charities, the schools, and the promiscuous applications to the ‘great house.’”

“I would give you unlimited credit with Todd, Helen, for all your requirements in that way, but that I fear you would be too conscientious to make sufficient use of it. But stay; the best plan will be to arrange it with Farleigh. Yes; I'll speak to him, and tell Todd he is to give him any thing he asks for. I daresay he won't mind a little additional trouble in the cause of his poor people; and

you can do the visiting and all that as usual, and report to him."

Sir Laurence looked at Helen as he made this remarkably convenient proposition for rendering the intercourse between the Park and the Rectory (for Cuthbert lived at the rector's house; that is to say, in a corner of it) more frequent than it was at present. Helen grew extremely red, and then turned the conversation.

"So, I suppose," said she to Mrs. Chisholm, after Sir Laurence had taken his leave, and the two women were talking over his visit and all the late events,—“so I suppose we shall live here until Sir Laurence is married; and then, when he brings a handsome, dashing, fashionable Lady Alsager down here, you and I, dear old woman, will go and live in the village; perhaps that pretty little house with the roses and the little white fountain, just big enough for the two ducks that are always swimming in it, may be vacant then; and I daresay Laurence would give it to us rent-free, and we should be very snug there; but we would not have ducks, except for dinner; and

Lady Alsager would have us up to tea, I dare say, when there were no fine people at the Park. What do you say to all this, Mrs. Chisholm? doesn't it sound pleasant? What a cosey little place it is! don't you think so?"

"My dear Helen, how you do run on!" said the calmer Mrs. Chisholm; "you are quite in spirits to-day."

She was; for in her sketch of the rural abode with the roses there had been an unmentioned element. Helen thought the house would be quite the thing for a curate. Helen was always thinking about a curate; and in that respect there was considerable sympathy between her and her companion, for Mrs. Chisholm was almost always thinking of a curate too. Helen's curate was living; Mrs. Chisholm's was dead. The girl's heart was in the dream of the future; the woman's, in the memory of the sacred past.

Cuthbert Farleigh had received the intelligence of Sir Peregrine Alsager's unaccountable conduct towards Helen Manningtree with mingled feelings. He was by no means a commonplace young man,

though not the light of learning and the mirror of chivalry which Helen believed him. Her overestimate of him did him no harm, for he entertained a tolerably correct opinion of himself; and if the future were destined to unite them, it would probably not militate against her own happiness either. The mistake she made was in degree, not in kind,—a distinction which makes all possible difference. A sensible and dutiful woman may find out that her husband is not possessed of the qualities with which she has believed her lover to be endowed, to the extent with which she accredited him, and her love and esteem may not suffer by the discovery. She would probably recognise that if she had overrated him (and what a dreadful woman she would be if she had not!) on some points, she had also failed to discover his merits on others, until the intimacy of domestic life had restored the balance of judgment. The mistake, which lays a woman's life waste in its rectification, is that which endows a man with qualities which he does not possess at all,—the mistake which leads to the conviction that the man she

has married is not the man she loved, and burdens her with an actual duty and a lost ideal. If Helen Manningtree were ever to marry Cuthbert Farleigh, she would incur no such danger; she would have to pay no such price for the indulgence of undisciplined imagination. He was a good and a clever man, and was as highly and wholly disinterested as it is possible for a human being to be, to whom the consideration of meat, drink, clothing, and house-rent is one of rational importance.

He regarded his position with respect to Helen as very much improved by the fact that Sir Peregrine Alsager had not left her the fortune, which the gossips of the neighbourhood had taken for granted, and even announced "on authority." On the other hand, he grieved that she should be deprived of the luxurious home and the opulent manner of life to which she had been so long habituated; and as he was not at all a conceited man,—albeit flattered and exalted by all the ladies in the parish, which is ordinarily the bane of curates,—it did occur to him that perhaps Helen

might have been better and happier if Sir Peregrine had left her the fortune, and he had adhered to his resolution of leaving her to its enjoyment, unwooded by him. Such a supposition was not likely to last long; its cold chill would pass off in the sunshine of free and acknowledged love. Free and acknowledged love? Yes, the curate was going to tell Helen, as soon as he should have learned the particulars of her position, that she had not erred in believing that he loved her, and to ask her to take all the risks and all the cares of a life which could never have any brilliancy or any luxury to offer her, for the sole consideration of sharing them with him. He had not the smallest doubt of his success. Helen's nature was too true, and too well known to him, to render a misgiving possible; still, the near approach of the assurance of his hope made him grave and solemn. The orphan-girl loved and trusted him; without him she was alone—alone in a world which is not very easily gotten through with the best of help and companionship. The sense of a great responsibility rested upon him, and his heart was lifted up

in no merely conventional or professional prayer. So Cuthbert made up his mind, and felt very quiet and solemn about it. That mood would pass away; it would be succeeded by the dazzling delight, the splendid triumph, the fertile fancy, and superhuman hope and exultation of love, as it ought to be; but it is a good omen for any woman whose lover addresses himself to his wooing in such a temper.

Thus it fell out that Helen and Cuthbert, standing together by a window which opened on the broad stone terrace, and watching poor Sir Peregrine's peacocks, as they marched up and down outside, talked of a future which was to be common to them both, and was to date from the expiration of the year of mourning for Sir Peregrine Alsager. Helen had told Cuthbert how she had sketched such a charming picture for Mrs. Chisholm, of the house with the roses; and they had talked a good deal of the nonsense incidental to their position, and which is so much pleasanter than sense,—about whether she had thought of him? and if she had, why she had?—for there is

a subtle resemblance to Jack Bunsby's monologue in the dialogues of lovers;—and then the conversation drifted away to Sir Laurence Alsager.

“We must tell him, my own Helen,” said the curate; “he has been very kind to you, and I daresay will be very much disgusted at your making so poor a marriage.”

The girl looked reproachfully at him, but smiled in a moment, and said, “Go on, Cuthbert; you are not worth contradicting, you know.”

“No, but—” said Cuthbert, remonstrating, “you must let me set the world's view before you. No doubt Sir Laurence will think you very foolish; but he will always be our friend,—I feel sure of that,—though I know he is so different, and lives in so different a world, under so different a system. Sometimes, Helen, I have had an idea that he found out my secret; though I never could see an inch farther into his life and his heart than it was his good pleasure I should look. Yes, my darling, he must know all about us, and soon; for you must remember that it may make a difference in all his plans and arrangements,

if he finds you are not to remain here after next spring."

"I hardly think it will do that," said Helen; "I fancy he will establish Mrs. Chisholm here *en permanence*; that is to say, until he marries."

"Is he likely to marry? Have you heard of any thing of that sort?"

"Oh, no! he has never talked of any girls to me. He has never said any thing the least like intending to marry. The only woman he ever speaks of—and he does talk of her, and sometimes hears from her—is Lady Mitford; you remember, you told me about her marriage,—the daughter of Mr. Stanfield, your old tutor, you know."

"Of course I remember. How strangely things come about! it really seems as if there were only two sets of people in the world; for one never meets any one with whom one has not some link of communication! And Georgie Stanfield is Laurence Alsager's female crony and correspondent! How and where is she?"

"In town, I believe; but I don't know much about her. He used to speak of her vaguely, in

talking to me of the great world and its hollowness, as of one whom he greatly liked and esteemed, and who was unfortunately circumstanced. He said he would have asked Lady Mitford down here in the autumn, if he could have asked her without her husband; but that, of course, was impossible, and he could not invite Sir Charles Mitford. I believe they are very unhappy. Think of that, Cuthbert,—a husband and wife unhappy! a splendid home, with rank and wealth, and misery!” The girl lifted solemn eyes full of wonder and compassion to her lover’s face. “Sir Laurence wished that I could know her, for her sake, he kindly said.”

“I wish you could, Helen; you would comfort her and do her good: and yet I would not have you saddened, my child, and made wise in the possibilities of life, as you must be if you had the confidence of an unhappy wife. You are better without it, darling—far better without it.”

Then the curate remembered the alarm he had felt when Colonel Alsager made his appearance at Knockholt Park; and he confessed it to Helen,

who laughed at him, and pretended to scold him, but who was not a little pleased all the time.

“You stupid Cuthbert!” said the young lady, to whom the curate had ceased to be an object of awe since their engagement; “it never came into Laurence’s head to wish to marry me; and I am certain it never crossed any human being’s imagination but your own that such a thing could ever happen.”

The Reverend Cuthbert was reluctantly obliged to break off the conversation at this point, and go about his parish business. So he took leave of Helen, enjoining her to write to Sir Laurence that very day, and to make him acquainted with their engagement,—as Mrs. Chisholm, who had just entered the room, and to whom he referred the matter, gave it as her decided opinion that the communication should be made by Helen.

The post was not a subject of such overwhelming importance at Knockholt Park, its punctuality was not so earnestly discussed, nor was there as much excitement on its arrival, as at the generality of country-houses. Mrs. Chisholm had very

few correspondents; Helen had only two, exclusive of Sir Laurence; and no letters were "due" at this particular time: hence it happened that the ladies often left the breakfast-table before the arrival of the letter-bag, and that its contents awaited their attention undisturbed through more hours of the day than most people would believe possible. Mrs. Chisholm never read the newspapers until the evening, and Helen never read them at all, being content with Cuthbert's version of public affairs. On this particular morning, however, Helen thought proper to remain in the breakfast-room until the post should arrive. The truth was, she shrunk from the task of writing to Sir Laurence, and she knew she ought to set about it at once; so she lingered and fidgeted about the breakfast-room long after Mrs. Chisholm had betaken herself to her daily confabulation with the housekeeper. Thus she was alone when the letter-bag was brought in, and she turned over its contents, expecting to find them of the usual uninteresting nature. There were several letters for Sir Laurence "to be for-

warded," a number of circulars, a few letters for some of the servants, the customary newspapers, and lastly—a mission for Helen herself. It was a large letter in a blue envelope, and directed in a lawyer-like hand. Helen opened it, feeling a little frightened, and found that the cover enclosed a packet addressed to her, in the hand of Sir Laurence Alsager, and marked "Private."

"What on earth can Laurence be writing to me about that requires such precaution?" thought Helen anxiously; and then she rang the bell, handed over the other letters to the footman for proper distribution, and retired to her own room, where she read the following:

"Dover.

"MY DEAR HELEN,—I am devoting the last evening which I shall pass in England for an indefinite period, to writing to you a letter, which I shall take the precaution of sending so that its existence may be known to none but you, at the present time. A certain portion of its contents must necessarily be communicated to others; but you will use your discretion,—upon which in this,

and all other things, I rely with absolute confidence.

“You must not let this preamble alarm you; there is nothing to occasion you any trouble or sorrow in what I am about to say to you. It will be a long story, and I daresay a clumsily-told one, for I am eminently unready with my pen; but it will interest you, Helen, for my sake, and for your own. When I tell you that this story is not a new one,—that it does not include any thing that has occurred after I left Knockholt, though I am indirectly impelled to write it to you by circumstances which have happened since then,—you will wonder why I did not tell it to you in person, during the period when our companionship was so close and easy,—so delightful to me, and I am quite sure I may add, so pleasant to you. I could not tell you then, because I was not sufficiently sure of myself. I had an experiment to try—an experience to undergo—before I could be certain, even in the limited sense of human security, of my own future; and till these were over and done with, all was vague for me.

They are over and done with now ; and I am going to tell you all about yourself, and a good deal about myself.

“ You know that among the sorrows of my life there is one which must be life-long. It is the remembrance of my conduct to my father, and of the long tacit estrangement which preceded our last meeting, and which, but for a providential interposition, might never have been even so far atoned for and mitigated as it was before his death. It would be difficult to account for this estrangement ; it is impossible to excuse it ; there never was any reproach on either side,—indeed there could not have been on mine, for the fault was all my own,—and there never was any explanation. My father doubtless believed, as he was justified in believing, that any wish of his would have little weight with me,—he seldom expressed one ; and I am convinced that one thing on which he had set his heart very strongly, one paramount desire, he cautiously abstained from expressing, that he might, by keeping me ignorant of it during his lifetime, give it the additional chance of reali-

sation which it might derive from the sanctity of a posthumous appeal to the feelings of an undutiful and careless son, when those feelings should be intensified by unavailing regret. I did learn, dear Helen, after the barrier of eternal silence had been placed between my father and me, that he had cherished one paramount desire, and that he had resorted to such an expedient in order to induce me to respect and to fulfil it.

“My amazement and discomfiture when I found that my father’s will was of so far distant a date that it made no mention of you were great. I could not understand why he had not supplemented the will which existed by another, in which you would be amply provided for, and his wishes concerning your future fully explained. My long and wilful absence from my father had prevented my having any real acquaintance with you. To me you were merely a name,—seldom heard, hardly remembered. Had I not gone to Knockholt when I did, you would have remained so; and there was no one else who could be supposed to take an obligatory interest in you. How

came it, I thought, that my father had taken no precaution against such a contingency—which, in fact, had so nearly been a reality. You will say he trusted to the honour and the gentlemanly feeling of his son; and so I read the riddle also; but reflection showed me that I was wrong. A more strictly just man never lived than my father; and he must have been strictly unjust had he allowed the future fortunes of a young girl whom he had reared and educated—who had been to him as a daughter for years—to depend upon the caprice or the generosity of a man to whom she was an utter stranger, and between whom and herself the tie of blood was of the slightest description. Nor was delicacy less characteristic of my father than justice. (Ah, Helen, how keenly I can see all these things now that he is gone!) He would have shrunk as sensitively as you would from any thing which would have obliged you and me to meet for the first time in the characters of pensioned and pensioner. I knew all this; and I was utterly confounded at the absence of any later will. I had the most complete and diligent search

made ; but in vain. There was no will, Helen, but there was a letter. In the drawer of the desk which my father always used, there was a letter. How do you think it was addressed ? Not to ‘my son’—not to ‘Colonel Alsager ;’ but to ‘Sir Laurence Alsager, Bart.’! It was a painful letter—painful and precious : painful because a tone of sadness, of disappointment, of content in feeling that the writer had nearly reached his term of life, pervaded it ; precious because it was full of pardon and peace, of the fulness of love for his only son. I cannot let you see the letter,—it is too sacred for [any eyes but those for which it was intended ; but I can tell you some of its contents, and I can make you understand its tone. As a mother speaks to her son going forth into the arena of life, the night before their parting, in the dark, on her knees by his bedside, with her head upon his pillow ; as she speaks of the time to come, when she will watch and wait for him, of the time that is past, whose memories are so precious, which she bids him remember and be brave and true ; as she makes light of all his faults and shortcomings,—so

did my dear old father—my father who had grown gray and old; alone, when I might have been with him, and was not—write to me. God bless him, and God forgive me! He never reproached me, living; what punishment he has inflicted upon me, dead! The letter was long; and it varied, I think, through every key in which human tenderness can be sung. But enough of this.

“A portion of the contents concerned you nearly, my dear Helen. I can repeat them to you briefly. I knew, and you know, that your father and my father—very distant relatives—had been playmates in boyhood, and attached friends in manhood. We knew that your father died on his voyage home from India, and just after he had consigned you and your black nurse to the care of the captain of the ship, to be sent, on landing, to Knockholt Park. I believe you have your father's letter to my father, in which he solemnly, but fearlessly, entreats his protection for the orphan child, whose credentials it is to form. He had left your mother and her baby in

an alien grave at Barrackpore, and I suppose he had not the strength to live for you only, 'little Nelly,' as they called you then. At all events, he died; and I knew in a vague kind of way about that, and my father's care of you, and how you grew up with him, and made his home cheerful and happy, which his only son left carelessly, and forsook for long. The letter recapitulated all this, and told me, besides, that your mother had been my father's first love. Perhaps she was also his only love—God knows. He was a good husband to my mother during their brief married life, I am sure; for I remember her well; and she was always smiling and happy. But the girl he loved had preferred Robert Manningtree with nothing but his commission, to Peregrine Alsager with a large estate and a baronetcy for his fortunate future. My father, *preux chevalier* that he was, did not forget to tell me that she never repented or had reason to regret that preference. Thus, Helen, you were a legacy to him, bequeathed not alone by friendship, but by love. As such he accepted you; as such he prized you,

calm and undemonstrative as he was; as such it was the cherished purpose of his life to intrust you *to me*—not that I was to be your guardian in his place, but that I was to be your husband. He thought well of me, in spite of all, you see; he did not despair of his ungracious son, or he never would have dreamed of conferring so great a privilege on me, of suffering you to incur so great a risk. He had had this darling project so strongly in his mind, and yet had been so convinced that any betrayal of it to me would only prevent my seeking you, that my persistent neglect of the old home had a double bitterness for him; and at length, two years ago, hearing a rumour that I was about to marry one of the beauties of the season, he relinquished it, and determined to make a will, bequeathing to you the larger portion of his unentailed property. The rumour was true as to my intentions, but false as to my success. The lady in question jilted me for a richer marriage, thank God! I don't say this from pique, but from conviction; for I have seen her and her husband, and I have seen her since her husband's

death. She did not hold her perjured state long ; nor did she win the prize for which she jilted me. I am a much richer man than her husband ever was, and he has left her comparatively poor. In a storm of rage and disgust I left England, without going to Knockholt—without having seen you since your childhood—without bidding my father farewell. This grieved him much : but I was free ; I was not married. I was labouring under angry and bitter feelings towards all womankind. I should come home again, my father thought, still unmarried, and his hope would be fulfilled. He did not make the will. I remained away much longer than he supposed I should have done, and not nearly so long as in my anger and mortification I had determined to remain. You know the rest, dear Helen—you know that I lingered and dallied with time and duty, and did not go to Knockholt until it was all but too late. A little while before he met with the accident, my father had written a letter somewhat similar in purport ; but he had not seen me then, and I suppose it was not warmly affectionate enough for the old man's

liking, and he wrote that which I now mention at many, and, I fear, painful, intervals of his brief convalescence. It was finished just a week before he died.

“You will have read all this with emotion, Helen; and I daresay at this point your feelings will be very painful. Mine are little less so, and the task of fully explaining them to you is delicate and difficult. The truthfulness, the candour of your nature will come to my assistance when you read, as their remembrance aids me while I write. My first impulse on reading my father's letter was to exult in the thought that there was any thing possible to me by which his wishes could be respected. My second—and it came speedily—was to feel that the marriage he desired between us never could take place. Are you reassured, Helen? Have you been frightened at the image your fancy has created, of a debt of gratitude to be discharged to Sir Peregrine at the cost of your own happiness, or disavowed at the cost of seeming cold, ungrateful, and undutiful? Have you had a vision of me in the character of an importunate

sutor, half imploring a concession, half pressing a right, and wholly distasteful to you? If you have, dismiss it, for it is only a vision, and never will be realised to distress you. Why do I say this? Because I know that not only do you not love me, but that you do love Cuthbert Farleigh. Forgive the plainness and directness with which I allude to a fact yet, perhaps, unavowed to him, but perfectly well known by and acknowledged to yourself. No betrothal could make you more truly his than you have been by the tacit promise of your own heart—I know not for how long, but before I came to Knockholt Park, I am sure. If I had not seen the man, I should equally have discerned the fact, for I am observant; and though I have, I hope, outlived the first exuberance of masculine conceit, I did not err in imputing the tranquil lady-like indifference with which you received me to a preoccupied mind, rather than to an absence of interest or curiosity about the almost unknown son of your guardian. Life at Knockholt Park has little variety or excitement to offer; and the advent of a Guardsman, a demi-

semi-cousin, and an heir-apparent, would have made a little more impression, would it not, had not the Church secured its proper precedence of the Army? I perceived the state of things with satisfaction; for I liked you very much from the first, and I thought Cuthbert a very good fellow; just the man to hold your respect all his life long and to make you happy. In my reflections on your share, then, in the impossibility of the fulfilment of my father's request, I experienced little pain. My own was not so easily disposed of after his death as during his life. I was destined to frustrate his wishes. Had you and I met, as we ought to have done, long before; had I had the good fortune to have seen you and learned to contrast you with the meretricious and heartless of your sex, who had frittered away my heart and soured my temper, perhaps, Helen, I might have won you, and the old man might have been made happy.

“We met under circumstances which made any such destiny for us impossible, for reasons which equally affected both. My preoccupation

was of a different sort from yours ; it had neither present happiness nor future hope in it,—it had much of the elements of doubt and fear ; but it was powerful, far more powerful than I then thought, and powerful it will always be. All this is enigmatical to you, dear Helen, and it must remain so. I would not have said any thing about it, but that I owed it to you, to the friendship which I trust will never know a chill, to prevent your supposing that your share in the frustration of my father's wishes is disproportionate to mine. I would not have you think—as without this explanation you might justly think—that I magnanimously renounce my claims, my pretensions to your love in favour of the actual possessor. No, Helen ; for us both our meeting was too late. We were not to love each other ; I was not to be suffered to win the heart of a true and priceless woman, such as you are, when I had not a heart to give her in exchange. But though we were not to love each other, we were destined to be friends,—friends in the fullest and firmest sense ; and, believe me, friendship between a man and

woman, with its keen sympathy, its unrestrained confidence, and its perfect toleration, is a tie as valuable as it is rare.

“Now I have told you almost all I have to tell about my father's letter. I suppose we shall both feel, and continue always to feel, that there was something hard, something almost cruel in the fate which marked him out for disappointment, and you and me for its ministers. But this must be ; and we must leave it so, and turn to the present and vital interests of our lives. We shall think of him and mourn for him none the less that we will speak of this no more.

“Strong as was my father's desire for our marriage, dear Helen, and his persuasion that it would come to pass, in his abstraction and his want of observation he failed to take Farleigh into account ; or perhaps, like all old people, he did not realise the fact that the child, the girl, had grown into a woman. He did not quite forget to provide for the contingency of its non-fulfilment. ‘If, for any reason, it may not be, Lance,’ he wrote—‘if Florence Hillyard's child is not to be

the mistress of the home which might have been her mother's, see that she has a dowry befitting my daughter and your sister.' No sentence in his letter touched me more with its simple trust than did that.

“ I have seen very clearly into the state of your feelings, as I am sure you allow, and I don't think I have blundered about that of Farleigh's. He has not told you in formal words the fact patent to every one's observation, that he entirely reciprocates your devotion (don't be vexed, Helen; one may pet a curate, you know), because he is poor, and you were likely to be rich. He believes, as every one believes, that you are as poor as himself: a belief, by the way, which does not say much for the general estimate of *my* character—but that does not matter; and in that faith he will not hesitate any longer. Will you be discreet, and say nothing at all of my intention of carrying out this privately-expressed wish of my father? Will you prove your possession of the qualities I give you credit for, by leaving Cuthbert in the belief that he will have in you a portionless

bride, save for your dowry of beauty and worth? I really almost think you will, Helen, especially as, though you do not need any further confirmation of Farleigh's nobility of mind than the silence he has hitherto kept, and the alacrity with which he will now doubtless break it, it will be well for Mrs. Chisholm and for myself, your only friends, to know how amply he fulfils our expectations. I almost think you will; but I intend to make assurance doubly sure by not giving you the slightest satisfaction on the subject of my intentions. When your marriage is near, you shall learn how I mean to fulfil my father's last injunction, but not till then; and if you tell Farleigh any thing about it until I give you leave, I vow I won't give you a shilling.

“You see I have written myself into good spirits, dear Helen; the thought of you cheers me almost as your kindly presence would do. What more have I to say? Not much more of myself, or of yourself, save that the dearest and warmest wish I entertain is for your welfare.

“I shall send from my first halting-place on

the Continent full instructions to Todd, in case my absence should be much prolonged. I cannot speak with any certainty of its duration; it does not depend on my own inclination.

“And now, in conclusion, I am going to ask you to do something for me, which I shall take as the truest proof that the friendship I prize and rely upon is really mine. I am sure you have not forgotten the friend I mentioned to you—Lady Mitford. I have seen her in town, and found her in much grief and perplexity. The cause of her sorrow is not one on which I can venture to enter to you; but it is deep-seated, incurable. I am much distressed for her, and can in no way defend or comfort her. She was an only child, motherless, and brought up in seclusion by her father,—an exemplary country clergyman, but a man whose knowledge of the world was quite theoretical and elementary, and who could not have trained her so that she would know how to encounter such trials as hers; he probably did not know that such could exist. As I told you at Knockholt, she has no female friend; unfortunately she *has* female

enemies—one in particular. My great wish is to procure her the one, and defend her from the other. I may fail in the latter object; but you, Helen, can aid me, if you will, to fulfil the former. I have spoken to her about you, and have assured her that she might trust in your kindness, though your inexperience is far greater than her own. I cannot bring you together now—there is no time or opportunity; but I want you to promise me that, if at any time during my absence from England Lady Mitford asks you to come to her, you will go promptly, and will be to her all that it is in you to be to one unjustly oppressed, cruelly betrayed, and sorely afflicted. Will you do this for me, Helen? and will you give me an assurance that I may rely upon you to do it (this is the only portion of my letter which you need reply to, if you have any feeling that you would rather not) before next Wednesday, and addressed to me at the Hôtel Meurice, Paris?—Always affectionately yours,

“LAURENCE ALSAGER.”

CHAPTER V.

A "TERCEL GENTLE."

SIR LAURENCE ALSAGER'S angry mood was of short duration. The day after that interview in which he spoke words that he had never intended to speak, and heard words which he had never thought to hear, he felt that a great change had fallen upon him. This woman who had rejected his love, not because she did not reciprocate it, but because it was unlawful; this woman who had had the strongest and subtlest temptation which can assail the human heart set before her—the temptation at once of consolation and of retaliation, of revenge upon the husband who had deceived and the enemy who had injured her, and who had met it with utterly disarming rectitude; this woman, to whom duty was dearer than love,—she had changed the face of the world and

the meaning of life for him. He had many times believed a lie, and not seldom had he worshipped a sham; but he has detected the one and exposed the other, and gone on his way, not much the worse for the delusion, and a good deal wiser for the experience. Life had, however, never brought him any thing like this before, and he knew it never would again. He should never love, he could never love, any other woman than this peerless one who could never be his, from whom her own mandate—he knew its power and unchangeableness—had severed him, whom he must leave in the grasp of sorrow and perplexity. He mused long and painfully over the interview of the preceding day, and he asked himself how it was that, dear as she had been to him, early as he had ceased to struggle against her influence, he had never understood the strength, the dignity, the perfect rectitude of her character before. It never occurred to Sir Laurence that he had not looked for these qualities; that he had never studied her disposition but in the most superficial way; that his love for her was founded upon no fine theory

whatsoever; that it had sprung up partly in admiration of her exceeding beauty, partly in chivalrous compassion for her disastrous situation, and found its remaining constituent in a hearty contempt and abhorrence of Sir Charles Mitford. In short, Sir Laurence did not understand that he had done just as other people do,—fallen in love with a woman first, and found out what sort of woman she really was afterwards.

Sir Laurence's reverie had lasted a long time before the consideration of his own immediate movements occupied any place in it. When it did so, he formed his resolution with his accustomed promptitude. He had told them at Knockholt that he might perhaps go abroad; and now abroad he would go. He must leave London; he could not bear to witness the progress of this drama, in which he had so vital an interest, only as an ordinary spectator. He was parted from her; she was right—there could be no pretext of friendship in their case. Even if he could have obscured her clear perception and misguided her judgment; even if he could have persuaded her to

receive him once more on the footing of a friend, he would have disdained to avail himself of such a subterfuge. The surest test a man can apply to the worth and sincerity of his love is to ask himself whether he would deceive its object in order to win her : if he can honestly say no, he is a true lover and a gentleman. Sir Laurence asked himself such a question, and was answered, no. He could not stand the Club-talk ; he could not meet those men to whom she furnished matter for conversation,—not insolent indeed, so far as she was concerned, but intolerable in its easy, *insouciant*, flip-pant slang and indolent speculation in the ears of the man who loved her. He could not stop it ; if he remained in town he must endure it, or forsake the society of all his customary associates, which was not to be thought of. Such a course of proceeding as that, in addition to depriving him of resources and leaving him nothing to do, would give rise to no end of talk and all kinds of sur-mises. If he started off suddenly, nobody knowing why, and went nobody knew where, it would be all right, — it would be only " Alsager's queer

way;" but if he stayed in town and saw no one, or changed his set, then, indeed, that would be quite another matter. One's own set has toleration for one's queer ways, to which they are accustomed, but they decidedly object to any but habitual "queerness;" they will not bear with new developments, with running off the rails.

Yes, he would go; and the sooner the better. There was nothing to detain him now. He would have liked to see Miss Gillespie perhaps; but, after all, what good could it do? Her connection with the Hammonds, and through them with the Mitfords, had long been at an end; her mysterious note had warned him that her power was over; so that what could she do? and what had he to say to her? Persons of her sort were never safe to talk to, and were so full of caprice that she might either resent his visit or ignore the subject of Lady Mitford altogether; if she had ever had any interest in her, and it had been genuine, it was not likely she retained it now. No; he would not linger for the purpose of seeing her,—he would go at once. Whither? To Paris first,

of course; and then he would consider. Was he always to be a wanderer? he thought; was he never to realise any of the good resolves,—to put in practice any of the views he had been indulging in lately? Was Knockholt to remain masterless, because he could not settle down to the interests and the occupations which sufficed for other and better men?—men who had not been exempted from the common lot either;—men, to many of whom their heart's desire had not been granted. Could he not now do as his father had done? No, not yet; the restlessness of mental trouble was upon him; the pain of unaccustomed moral processes; the shivering chill of the dawn of a new kind of light and a new system of thought. No doubt this would not be always so; after a time he could find rest and tranquillity in the duties and enjoyments of a country baronet's existence. Was this what she meant? Was this strength to do, and fidelity in adhering to duty, the noble law by which she ruled her life? Were they to bring him to the happiness which seemed so distant, so impossible?

Were not the words upon the ring her message, her counsel, her command? Ah, well, if so, he might—he would try to follow them some day; but for the present he must get away. Like every wounded animal he must seek refuge in flight; he must get him to the covert.

Sir Laurence Alsager did not remember, amid all his musings, that he was alone in the enjoyment of this resource; that *she* remained where her feet trod on thorns, and heart fed on bitterness—remained in the straight path of her duty, strong and faithful.

Yes, he would go at once,—that evening. He gave his servant the necessary orders, and then applied himself to writing letters on matters of business. While thus engaged a note was brought to him, and he was informed that the bearer awaited the answer. The note was enclosed in an oblong envelope, bordered with black about an inch deep, so that room was barely left for the address. He knew the handwriting well; he had been accustomed to see it in combination with every kind of coquetry in stationery; and he

smiled grimly as he noted the mingled hypocrisy and coquetry of this very pretty and impressive affliction in black and white.

"What the devil is she at now?" thought Sir Laurence, as he broke the accurately-impressed seal. He had not had any communication with Mrs. Hammond since he left Redmoor in the spring; he had heard not quite all perhaps, but enough about her to make him shrink from any further acquaintance with her, as much from disgust of herself as from indignation on Lady Mitford's account; and he gave her too much credit for a sufficiently accurate knowledge of the machinery of London society, and the unfailing circulation of scandal, to entertain any doubt that she was well aware that he must inevitably hear, and had by this time heard, the stories that were rife about her. He was not in the least aware to how great an extent she had been actuated by torturing jealousy of him, though, as he had told Lady Mitford, he knew one of her motives was revenge; but he was prepared to give Laura Hammond credit for any amount of spite of

which human nature is capable; still, what purpose could she have to serve by opening any communication with him? He read the note as he asked himself the question. It was dated from the house in Portman Square, and contained only a few lines. Mrs. Hammond had heard of Sir Laurence Alsager's arrival in town, and was particularly desirous of seeing him. She begged he would send her a line to say whether he could conveniently call upon her the same evening; she said evening, as no doubt his mornings were fully occupied with the business entailed by his acquisition of rank and fortune, on which she begged to offer her congratulations; and she equally, of course, did not go out any where, or receive (ordinary) visitors. She hoped Sir Laurence Alsager would comply with her request, as she wished to speak to him concerning a person in whom he was interested, and whom his acquiescence would materially benefit (underlined), and she remained his most faithfully.

“A snare and a bait,” said Laurence, as he stood with the note in his hand, uncertain what

reply he should make. His first impulse was to write that he was leaving London that afternoon ; but he hesitated to do that, as it occurred to him she would be surprised at the abruptness of such a step, and setting her serpentine sagacity to work, might arrive at guessing something at least proximate to the truth. Curiosity ; a strong conviction that Laura would not venture to tamper with his patience too far, and would not have dared to take this step without some motive ; a vivid recollection of the interview which had taken place between them before the memorable visit to Redmoor, of his threat, and Laura's evident appreciation of its sincerity ; finally, an irresistible longing to hear what Laura might have to say about Lady Mitford, and a vague dread that a refusal might in some indescribable way injure her,—decided him.

He wrote a short formal note, to the effect that Sir Laurence Alsager would have the honour of calling upon Mrs. Hammond at eight o'clock that evening, despatched it, and then returned to his letters.

Sir Laurence did not dine at the Club that

day; he was in no mood to meet the men whom he must have met, and who would have made him pay the price of his popularity by inopportunately insisting on his society. He dined at a private hotel, and eight o'clock found him at the door of Mrs. Hammond's house.

He was shown into an inner drawing-room, which was brilliantly lighted, and where he was left alone for a few minutes. Then Mrs. Hammond appeared, and came towards him holding out her hand.

"I cannot congratulate you on your appearance, Sir Laurence," she said, as she seated herself in a low deep chair and looked up at him. The look was a peculiar one; intent observation and some anxiety were blended in its expression. He had taken a seat at her invitation, and was quite grave and self-possessed, while he preserved with exactness the manner of a man who was there in obedience to a summons, not of his own wish or act, and who was waiting to learn the motive which had dictated it.

Laura Hammond looked handsomer than he

had ever seen her, as she sat in the lighted room in her deep mourning-dress, whose sombre hue and rich material toned down the sensuous style of her beauty, and lent it that last best touch of refinement in which alone it had been wanting. Sir Laurence Alsager observed this increased beauty, but merely with an artistic sense of its attraction. To him Laura Hammond could never be aught but despicable and repulsive; and he was just then in the mood in which a man believes that only one woman in the world is really beautiful. She had conformed to custom in her dress so far as the weeds went, but she did not wear a widow's cap. Nothing would have induced her to disfigure herself by such a detestable invention; and though she knew she should be talked about, she considered that a minor evil. Her fine silky chestnut-hair, preserved from contact with the hideous cap, was banded smoothly on her forehead, and gathered into an unadorned knot at the back of her head, showing the profile and the delicate little ears to perfection. More beautiful than ever she undoubtedly was; but yet, as Laurence

looked at her with close attention, he noticed that she had grown suddenly older in appearance. Even supposing all her former light and dashing manner to be resumed, the sombre dress to be laid aside, and the brilliant toilette in which Laura had been unrivalled among English women to have taken its place, a change had come over her. A line above the brow,—a horizontal line, not the sharp perpendicular mark that intellectual toil sets; a tighter closing of the lips, too seldom closed before; a little, a very little, less elasticity in the muscles which produced and banished the ever-flitting smile,—these were faint, but certain, indications.

“I have not been ill, Mrs. Hammond,” replied Sir Laurence gravely; “but I have had a good deal of trouble lately, and that does not improve one’s looks. But,” he went on, “you wished to see me; may I inquire why? I am leaving town shortly; and—”

He paused; his natural courtesy arrested him. He could not tell Mrs. Hammond so very plainly that he was anxious to get away from her as soon

as possible. She saw it though, and she reddened with sudden anger, which in an instant she brought under control.

"You are amazingly business-like, Sir Laurence! The influence of your late onerous experiences in the character of *Gentilhomme Campagnard*, no doubt. By the way, how do you like it all?"

"All? I hardly catch your meaning. Since my father's death I have been, as you suppose, very much occupied, and I cannot say I like the details of a transfer of property and responsibility much."

"Ah, but the property itself, I meant,—the title and the fortune, the 'county-magnate' business, and the ward; above all, the ward."

She spoke in a playful tone; but she watched him closely, and Sir Laurence saw it.

"She has heard something about Helen, and she is on a false scent," he thought. "Perhaps it is just as well to let her deceive herself."

So he replied, still gravely, still unwarmed by her manner, which was half caressing and half contemptuous:

“They are all good things in their way, Mrs. Hammond; and if their way be not yet mine, mine will be theirs some day, I hope.”

“Ah, then, it’s true!” she exclaimed. “You are really going to marry and settle; you are going to assume the semi-sporting, semi-bucolic, but entirely domestic character, which is so very charming, and which will suit you so perfectly; and henceforth the all-conquering Colonel will be sought for in vain under so admirable a travesty!”

Still he was grave and immovable. Her *persiflage* had no more power to charm, her ridicule to annoy, than her beauty had power to please him. It was all silly chatter; and he wondered at himself as he remembered the time when he preferred the nonsense, occasionally adulterated by slang and invariably spiced with spite, which she had talked then and always, to any words of wit or wisdom. She still watched him, under cover of her light manner, narrowly.

“You know as well as I do what is the ordinary amount of truth in public rumour, Mrs. Hammond. But you must excuse me for again

reminding you that I am here at your request, and that you summoned me hither with some purpose. It was not to talk of *my* affairs and prospects, I presume."

He spoke the last words in a harsh and angry voice involuntarily. Anger against her, and something very like hatred of her, were strong within him, and grew stronger rapidly. He looked at her careless face; he marked her sensuous *soignée* beauty; and he remembered the fair woman whom he had seen struck down by her merciless hand in the dawn of her innocent happiness, in the pride of her hope and love. He would make her say her say and leave her, or he would leave her with it unsaid; he was sorry he had come. What could this woman do but harm to any one; to him, and to *her* most of all?

"No, Colonel Alsager,—I beg your pardon, Sir Laurence,—*I* cannot always remember how times are changed, you see,—it was *not*. It was for a purpose which you may think a little less welcome, and perhaps even more trifling; it was to talk to you—of myself."

“Of yourself, Mrs. Hammond! What can you have to say of yourself that I ought to hear, or you to speak?”

“Much,” she said vehemently; and in a moment her manner changed. He had a perfectly distinct recollection of her on the last two occasions when he and she had spoken together, especially on the last, when she openly defied him; when she had declared that she still loved him; when she had furnished him with the clue to her conduct which he had unravelled for Lady Mitford’s enlightenment; when she had said, “I will break her heart, and then I will spoil her name.”

Had she done so? had this woman fulfilled her threat? Very nearly; she had almost broken Georgie’s heart, and she would certainly ruin her reputation if he—Laurence Alsager—did not resolutely withdraw, and deprive her of any pretext for slander. And so it had come to this: the woman he had undertaken to defend, for whose sake he had foregone so much pleasure and neglected so much duty, could be saved only by his absence! He knew that Laura was “talked of,”

and therefore persons unskilled in the science of society might suppose that she could not do much harm by talking of another woman; but Alsager was an adept, and he knew that a stone will bruise and maim, and even kill, if well-aimed and sufficiently heavy, though the hand that throws it be ever so much stained with sin. He feared—he feared exceedingly for the woman he loved, and whom this she-devil hated. He noted the change in Laura's manner before she spoke, and he feared still more.

“I have much to say, and I *will* say it,” she went on vehemently; “and you shall listen to me! What! am I to have won at last, and at the end of such deception and slavery, the reward I have done all and suffered all for? and then am I to keep a decorous silence, and see it all made waste and worthless? Don't look at me in that grave, polite, criticising way, Laurence, or you will drive me mad!”

Something of menace and something of appeal in her manner, a startling energy in her gesture, and the hoarse intensity of her voice, threw

Alsager off his guard; this was so totally new to him. He had seen her in many moods, but never in one like this. Tenderness, coquetry, a mock gust of passion, all the tricks of fence of the most finished flirt he had seen her play, and he had found them out—perhaps she had never really deceived even when she had most completely fascinated him; but he had never seen her thus, he thought, and he was right. She was in earnest; he was about to understand her fully now. She had risen impetuously from her seat, and approached him, and he had risen also; so they stood confronting each other. There was nothing artificial in the expressive grace of her attitude; her figure was perfect, and she was graceful always—never more so than now, when she was carried away into a forgetfulness of her own beauty, which, if it had been habitual, would have made Laura Hammond irresistible. Her eyes flashed, and her smooth brow reddened; but her beauty gained by every subtle change of expression, as she poured out a torrent of impetuous words.

"Did you think I had forgotten our last meeting and our last parting? Did you think I had forgotten the words you spoke then, and those with which I answered them? Did you think the past was all blotted out, and those three horrid years were gone like an ugly dream; those years during which you banished yourself for love of me,—yes, Sir Laurence Alsager, for me,—you cannot deny it, you can't take *that* from me, you can't transfer that jewel to *her* crown of triumph,—ay, start and stare; I know it all, you see,—and then came back to torture me by indifference, by neglect, by preference of another—and *what* another! my God! that made it a thousand times worse—before my face! What do you take me for that you think I would endure this, and when the time came for speech keep silence!"

She was trembling violently now; but as he looked at her, with all the amazement he felt in his face, she put a strong control on herself and stood quite firmly.

"For God's sake, what do you mean?" stammered Sir Laurence. "What are you talking

about? What is it that you must say? What is it that I have done?"

"You ask me what I mean; you—you—did I not tell you then—when you pleaded to me for the woman who had rivalled me with you—that I loved you? Did I not tell you then, I say, and did you not know it?"

"You did tell me that you loved me then, Mrs. Hammond, and I did not believe you. You had told me the same thing before, you know, many a time, and you married Mr. Hammond. You married him because he was very rich,—perhaps you might have hesitated had he not also been old and silly; but he was, and your calculations have succeeded;—you are rich and free. Once before, when we talked upon this subject, I said we would not go into it any more. To you it cannot be *profitable*" (he laid an emphasis upon the word), "and to me it is very painful. 'That time is dead and buried,' and so let it be. I cannot conceive why you have revived its memory; but, whatever your purpose, it can have no success dependent on me. I have no bitter memory

of it now ; indeed, for some time I have had no memory of it at all. I know it is hard for a woman to believe that a wound inflicted by her can ever heal, and I daresay men show the scars sometimes, and flatter the harmless vanity of their *ci-devant* conquerors. But I am not a man of that stamp, Mrs. Hammond ; I have good healing flesh, I suppose, as the surgeons and the nurses say ; at all events, I have no scars to show."

He made a step in advance, as if to take his hat from a small table ; and she saw that he intended to leave her.

"No," she exclaimed ; "you shall not go ! I am utterly resolved to speak with you ; and you must hear me. I will be as cold and as calm as you are ; but you must hear me, if not for my sake, or your own, for Lady Mitford's !"

She motioned him to his seat, and smiled—a little momentary smile and full of bitterness. He sat down again, and she stood by the mantelpiece, on which she laid her hand, and for a moment rested her head upon the palm. Something forlorn in the attitude caught Alsager's attention ;

then he knew that she was acting, and acting well. Fury, perhaps ferocity, might be natural to Laura Hammond under certain circumstances; but forlornness never. When she next spoke it was in a softer tone, and she kept her face towards him in profile. It was her best look, as he remembered, and as she remembered also; for though she was not acting now in all she said—though she was more real throughout the whole of their interview than she had ever been before, nothing, except indeed it might have been severe bodily pain, could have reduced Laura to perfect reality.

“I believe,” she said, “the best way I can make you understand why I sent for you, and what I want to say to you, is to tell you the truth about those three years.”

“As you please,” he answered; “I cannot conceive how their history can concern me, except that portion of it which I have witnessed; and that has concerned, and does concern me. But I am here at your request, and I will go only at your dismissal.”

“When I married, and you went away,” she

began, "I was not very unhappy at first; there was novelty and success, and there was luxury, which I love," she said with emphatic candour. "Mr. Hammond was not a disagreeable man, and I never suffered him to get into the habit of controlling me. He was inclined to try a little, but I soon convinced him it was useless, and, especially at his age, would make him uncomfortable. So he left off." Her voice hardened now into the clear metallic tone which Laurence remembered so well.

"By degrees, however," she continued, "every thing grew irksome; and a horrid weariness and sense of degradation stole over me; not because I loved wealth and luxury any less, but because of the price I had to pay for it. And you had made it dearer to buy, for you had gone away."

"Yes," he said, "I had gone away; and you would have liked to have me stay, and be experimented on, and victimised for your delight,—I can understand that; but I should have fancied, Mrs. Hammond, you knew me too well to suppose

you could have played such a game as that with me.”

“I would not have played any game with you,” she said—not angrily, rather sadly. “How unjust you are! how unjust men always are! they—”

He interrupted her. “Pray do not indulge me with that senseless complaint which women who, like you, are the bane and the torment of men who love them with an honest, and the utter ruin of men who love them with a dishonest love, make of their victims. I have long ceased to be yours, Mrs. Hammond; but I am not unjust. I say again, you would have made me ridiculous as readily as you had made me wretched. I don’t deny it, you see. I am much astonished, and rather ashamed when forced to remember it; but I am not weak enough to deny a weakness. To be so would argue that it is not entirely corrected.”

He was provoking her to anger, but not altogether unintentionally; his best means of coming at her real purpose would be by throwing her off her guard.

"I say again," she repeated, "you are unjust; I would *not* have played any such game. I would have become used to my position in time; I would have seen you in the world; I would have seen you gradually forgetting me. It would not have been our angry parting, and a dead dull blank,—time to feel to the utmost all the horrors of a marriage without love. No woman, I believe, would sell herself, at least in marriage, which must last, if she could estimate them aright. And then such a meeting as ours! Do you remember it, Laurence?" She stole a very effective look at him here.

"Yes, I remember it," he said shortly.

"A horrid interview we had then,—full of sneers and bitterness on your side, and not in the least real on mine."

"Is this a pleasanter one, Mrs. Hammond?" said Sir Laurence, who perceived that her levity was coming up again, and desired to suppress it. "I cannot perceive the utility of this retrospect."

"I daresay not," she answered coolly; "but

I do." The pretty air of command was entirely lost on Alsager. She saw that it was, and ground her teeth,—a pleasant symptom of passion which she never could suppress. "By the time we met again," she continued, "I was sick and weary—not only of the price I had to pay for the wealth I had bought, but of the wealth itself. Of course I never changed my opinion of the value of money. I don't mean that; but I did not get as much out of the wealth I had purchased as I might have done. I was very much admired, and quite the fashion, but somehow I tired of it all; and then—then, Laurence, I found out why. I found out that I really had more heart than I believed, and that it was in your keeping."

"Pshaw!" he said, angrily and impatiently; "pray don't talk like this. You are drawing on your imagination very largely, and also on my vanity. The latter is quite useless, I assure you."

"Think what you like, say what you will,—I loved you. I knew it by the listlessness that was always upon me; I knew it better by the

disappearance of that listlessness when they said you were coming home ; and I knew it best of all when—when do you think, Sir Laurence Alsager ?”

“I really could not presume to guess when you made such a discovery, Mrs. Hammond.”

“Indeed ! I will tell you, then. I learned it best of all when the first pang of jealousy I had ever felt in my life seized me. I had often heard your name coupled with that of some woman of fashion. I had heard a multitude of speculations about your affairs of the heart ; but I never feared them—I never believed in them ; I never knew that I had so vital an interest in them until your own look, your own manner, your own indecision of purpose about the visit to Redmoor betrayed you to me, and told me who was my rival.”

“Your rival !” said Sir Laurence in astonishment. “Surely you did not suppose I had returned to England to be caught again in *your* toils ?”

“I don’t know what I thought ; I don’t care.

I only know that when you and I parted, you loved me, and were angry with me,—it was passionate love and passionate anger,—and that when you and I met, not only had you ceased to be angry, but you were rapidly succumbing to the influence of another woman—a woman utterly different from me! Not more beautiful,—I deny *that*; she has not the art of being beautiful; she has only the material. A woman whom I hate; whom I should have hated and would have injured, I believe, if you had never seen her. Yes; and you actually dared to menace me on her account; you presumed to pit yourself against me as her champion. You forgot that such championship hardly serves its object, in the eyes of the world.”

Sir Laurence uttered an exclamation of disgust; and was about to rise, when she stepped forward close to him, and laid her hands lightly upon his breast for an instant.

“No, no, Laurence,” she said; “bear with me. I did not mean it; not quite that. Can you not understand me? Ah, my God! how pitiless

men are ! While they want to win us, where is the end of their toleration ? We may sin as we please, provided we do not sin against them and their self-love. But when that is over, they cannot judge us harshly enough ; they have even less pardon and pity for the sins into which they have driven us than for any other."

"You are talking utter nonsense, Mrs. Hammond," said Sir Laurence ; "and nonsense it is painful to me to hear. Your temptations are of your own making, and your sins are of your own counselling, not mine. I would have made you my wife, but you preferred—and I thank you for the choice—another destiny. Am I to blame ? You have chosen to cherish a distempered fancy which has no foundation in truth, and am I the ruthless being who has robbed you of it ? You have chosen to solace the tedium of your uncongenial marriage by a proceeding as vile and unprincipled as any woman ever ventured on, to her eternal shame. Harsh words, Mrs. Hammond, but true ; and now you endeavour to lend an air of melodrama to a transaction which was in reality

as commonplace as it was coarse. You find it hard to put your relation with Sir Charles Mitford on a sentimental footing,—he is hardly a subject for sentiment, I think; and you have invented this tragical theory of an indirect revenge upon me. Tush! I gave you credit for more tact.”

This was well and boldly said; for Sir Laurence had but one object in view,—to do the best he could for Lady Mitford in this encounter with her foe. He knew as he spoke, as he looked into the unmasked face before him—pale and deformed with jarring passions—that the motive was real, though secondary; it had indeed only come to supplement the first, which had led Laura to employ her fascinations upon Sir Charles; but it had always been stronger, and had latterly completely swallowed up the other.

“Shall I never make you understand me?” she said passionately; “will you persist in bringing things that are unreasonable to the touchstone of reason? I don’t know, I don’t care how absurd what I am saying may sound; it is true, true, Laurence Alsager,—as sure as death is true, or

any love that ever was more bitter. Yes, it is true: now think your worst, and say your worst of me; still you must see that I am far more wretched than she is. What had I to endure? What had she? I won her husband from her. If I did, was he a prize, do you think? A selfish, sensual, brainless fool; a man without taste, or manners, or mind; a man who is a living contradiction to the theories of race and education; a man of whom she must have sickened in a year, if she had ever gained sense enough to find him out. She is not very clever, you know, and she might have taken longer for the discovery, if the habitual society of men who are gentlemen had not enlightened her. But she had a more sure and rapid teacher, who brought her consolation too." There was a world of malevolent meaning in the tone in which she said this.

"What do you, what *can* you mean?" he asked.

"Ah, you are getting interested now, Sir Laurence, when my discourse turns on *her*. Wait a little, and I will explain. I asked you what did

she lose ; I need not ask you what did I gain ; the one includes the other.”

“ He was her husband,” said Sir Laurence.

“ Her husband !” repeated Laura, with intense scorn. “ You have caught the cant of the proprieties’ school, have you ? Her husband ! And what were you ? My lover, Laurence. Ay, you may forget, you may deny it ; but you were, the day you landed in England,—I should have only needed opportunity to win you back again. Her husband !” (with a bold hard laugh) “ she might have taken mine, and welcome !”

Sir Laurence looked at her in growing disgust. Lord Dollamore was quite right ; there was a strong dash of vulgarity about Laura Hammond, and it appeared whenever she lost her temper.

“ Yes,” she went on, more and more angrily ; “ think of her, and think of me. She suffered the tortures of jealousy, did she ? of lawful legitimate jealousy, for which good people would give her pity, if she were not too proud to take it. She suffer ! What did I suffer ? I tell you, Laurence Alsager, she *could not* suffer what I suffer ; it is

not in her, any more than she could love as I love. She is a handsome cold egotistical woman, who thinks of her *rights*. Her husband belonged to her, and I took him, and she didn't like it. She felt it much as she would have felt my stealing her pearls or her Dresden china, I daresay; but *suffer!* Why, she's what is called a *good* woman; and if I chose to break with Mitford, he would probably now return to her, for he likes her rather; and she would receive his apologies, and all would be right again. Yes, she'd stoop to this stupid meanness, because he's her *husband*, you know; and matrimony is such a remarkably sacred institution, that a man may do any thing he pleases. And you talk to me of a woman like *her* suffering!"

Sir Laurence made no answer. He was thinking how truly, from her own debased point of view, Laura Hammond read the character of the woman she had injured so deeply.

"You don't answer. Tell me, don't you know she would be reconciled with Mitford to-morrow, if he asked her?"

"I cannot tell you, indeed," he said coldly;

“you had better ‘break with Mitford,’ as you phrase it, and find out.”

“Will you not at least acknowledge that I had to suffer? The time of my bondage was short, but she deprived my freedom of all its value. She has won you, Laurence; and what is it all to me? I don’t believe, in all her well-regulated life, she ever experienced such a pang as I felt when I saw her indifferent to Mitford’s brutal neglect, and to my insolence, one morning, because she had just had a letter from you; a commonplace letter enough, Sir Laurence—she told us all about it—but I never can forget, or forgive the serenity of her face; it seemed as if she had been removed into a world apart from us all.”

How little she dreamed—how far, in her blind furious anger and self-abandonment, she was from dreaming of the secret stealthy delight with which the listener heard her words!

“You impute to Lady Mitford your own ideas, your own indifference to right, Mrs. Hammond; she is a woman who is incapable of wronging her husband, even in thought, though that

husband be no worthier than Mitford. She rules her life by principles, and in her estimate of marriage regards the obligation rather than the individual."

"Indeed! That's a very pretty sentence, Sir Laurence, and you have learned your lesson like a very docile little boy. But hadn't you better reserve it for repetition elsewhere? for really sentiments of such grandeur are quite thrown away on me."

She was exasperated to the highest pitch by his perfect coolness, and tears of rage stood in her eyes. He had preserved an imperturbable composure; neither her passion nor her sarcasm moved him. Desperately she caught at the one hope that remained. She came towards him suddenly, dropped upon her knees by his side, and hid her face, covered with her hands, on his arm, while he sat astonished and confused.

"Laurence!" she sobbed, "listen to me. Do you not know that all the wicked things I say are said because I am miserable; because the love of you and the loss of you have turned me into

something that I dread to think of and to look into? Have some compassion on me! I wronged you, I know; but can you not forgive me? Do you think the prize I won brought me any peace? Be merciful to a woman's vanity and weakness. Am I the only woman who is weak and vain? You did love me once; you could love me now, if you would only put aside your pride, if you would only try to be merciful to the errors which I have so bitterly repented. Laurence, this woman, who has been the cause of all—whose wrongs are upon her own head—what can she ever be to you? You know she is, according to your own account, *too good* to be tempted from her duty, while I—I am free; there is no barrier between us now—and I love you."

She raised her drooping head, she let her hands fall, and she looked at him. The time had been when such a look would have brought Laurence Alsager to her feet; but now, he had said truly, "that time was dead and buried."

He rose with an air of stern determination. She had risen from her knees, and had re-

sumed her chair. She was deadly pale; her eyes were wild and haggard; and she caught her breath with a sort of gasping sob, which threatened a burst of hysterical passion. Laurence spoke low and sadly :

“When you come to think over what you have just said, you will be angry with yourself for having uttered, and with me for having heard, such words. I will not dwell upon them, nor will I voluntarily remember them. If you had never caused me more than the pang which your first faithlessness to myself made me suffer, I might, indeed, have pardoned it, for the sake of the old glamour, and made myself miserable by marrying a woman whom I could not respect, because I had once loved her. But that the woman who jilted me for Percy Hammond’s rupees, then betrayed Hammond for Sir Charles Mitford, and would now discard Mitford for me—by the way, I am a much richer man than Hammond was; barring the widowhood, your speculation has been defective—should dream, in the wildest paroxysms of a woman’s unreasonableness,

that I could be cajoled, or bribed, through my interest in another, to put her in my honoured mother's place, is beyond my comprehension." She looked at him, still with wild haggard eyes, and still she sobbed, but shed no tears.

"Farewell, Mrs. Hammond," said Sir Laurence, as he took his hat, and turned towards the door; "you and I are not likely to meet again. I hope the remembrance of this interview will induce you to consider whether it might not be better for you to endeavour to imitate the woman whom you have not only injured, but vainly endeavoured to traduce."

"Curse her!" hissed Laura, in a tone that was no more like a woman's than were her words. "Let her look to it! I will punish you, Laurence Alsager, through her."

"No, you won't," he said; "for the first move you make in that direction, I will write to Mitford (I shall never be without information), and inform him that you did me the honour to propose to break with him in my favour."

"He would not believe you," she said, in a

voice hardly audible from the intensity of her passion.

"Oh, yes, he would; Mitford is not a fool on every point; and rumour says he's jealous, which is likely to quicken his intellects. At all events, I advise you to let Lady Mitford alone."

"Let her look to it," said Laura; "I owe this to her, and I will pay it."

He smiled, bowed, and left the room. She started from her chair, and listened, with her hands clasped upon her temples, till she heard the half-door shut; then she knew that he was gone—then she knew that her bold game was lost—and she felt that she should never see him more, who was the only man she had ever loved, even after her own cold and shallow fashion. She gave way to no passion now; she smoothed her hair, glanced at the glass, and rang the bell. When it was answered, she directed that Mademoiselle Marcelline should be sent to her. Demure, quiet, and respectful as ever, Mademoiselle Marcelline entered the room.

"Marcelline," said Laura (she addressed her

maid by her name now), "I am going to my room. Come to me in half an hour; I want to talk to you about something."

"A letter came for madame this evening," said mademoiselle; "but I took it from the *valet de chambre*, as I thought madame did not care to be disturbed."

Mrs. Hammond opened the letter. It was from her solicitor, and informed her that the final decision of the court, on her application for the guardianship of her stepdaughter, had been given that day against her. She frowned, then threw the letter down, with a short laugh.

"Every thing is against me, I think. However, it is rather fortunate for Alice."

At the same hour on the following evening Sir Laurence Alsager was writing his letter to Helen Manningtree from Dover.

CHAPTER VI.

NATURE AND ART.

LADY MITFORD'S composure had been shaken by her interview with Sir Laurence Alsager more rudely than by any of the events which had succeeded each other with such rapidity in the course of the short but troublous time since her marriage. She had reckoned upon his friendship to support and his society to cheer her, and now—they must be relinquished. There could be no doubt, no hesitation about that; and she did not doubt or hesitate, but she suffered, as such keenly sensitive and highly-principled natures can suffer, whose only possible course is to do the right thing, and pay, without having counted, the cost.

All the loneliness, all the dreariness of her lot came on her foreboding spirit, as she sat alone in her dressing-room, two days after her parting in-

terview with Sir Laurence. She had been thinking of the day at Redmoor when their first confidence had been interchanged; she had been remembering his counsel, and taking herself to task for having neglected it, or, at any rate, for not having tried more earnestly and more persistently to follow it.

“I must have been to blame in some degree,” she thought; “I ought to have tried to please him more; but—” and then she sighed—“I had been used to please him without trying, and it is hard to realise the change; and before one does realise it, it is too late. I wonder if there is any case in which it would not be too late from the first; I wonder if any woman in the world ever yet succeeded in retaining or recovering the heart of any man when it had once in the least strayed from her. I don’t grieve for myself now,—I cannot; but I blame myself. I might have tried—no doubt I should have failed; but still I might have tried. I might have asserted myself from the moment that they met at Redmoor, and I saw her clasp his hand as she did. But what is the use of asserting oneself, of putting one’s position, one’s conven-

tional rights, against the perverted strength of a man's will? No, no; there is no security where the question is one of feeling; in the insecure holding of love we are but tenants-at-will."

She thought thus mournfully of her own lot, and condemned herself for faults she had not committed; she thought of Alsager, and took herself to task because she could not repress or deny the keen and compensating joy which the knowledge that he loved her gave; she thought of her husband with infinite compassion, with apprehension, and with hopelessness. The downward course had been run with awful rapidity by Sir Charles Mitford. Since he had discarded the gentle influence of Georgie, the benignant restraint, the touch of higher aspiration, and purer tastes had vanished, and he had returned to all the low habits and coarse vices of his earlier career. Georgie knew this vaguely, and she experienced all the horror and disgust which were natural to such a mind as hers. At first, when she recognised in the fullest extent the fact of her husband's infatuation with Mrs. Hammond, she could not understand why he

should not be restrained by that passion, as he had been by his evanescent love for herself, from coarse and debasing pleasures. But she soon found out, by the light of her clear perceptions and the aid of her intuitive refinement of mind, how widely different were the sentiments which she had ignorantly compared; and learned that while there is no temporal salvation for a man so powerful as love, there is no swifter or surer curse and ruin than an illicit passion. When Georgie came to understand this fully, her apprehensions concerning her husband reached a height of intensity which would have been unreasonable, had she not possessed the painful knowledge of what his former career had been. She had hardly understood it at the time indeed, and her father had softened matters down very much, partly through the invincible amiability of his own disposition, and partly because he believed, in simple sincerity, that all "Charley's" misbehaviour had been caused by want of money alone; and that once rich, and holding a responsible position, he would not again be assailed by temptations to disreputable conduct.

Whence it is presumable that the good parson knew a great deal more of the next world than he knew of this.

Lady Mitford's dreary reverie was interrupted by the entrance of her maid, who handed her a letter from Alsager. As she took it in her hand, she saw that it had been sealed with the ring which she had given him, and she broke it open with mingled joy and fear. The letter was brief, kind, and earnest. Sir Laurence told her that he was leaving England, and wished, before doing so, to place within her reach a source of consolation which he felt she might too surely need. Then, in a few words, he told her of his letter to Helen Manningtree; and besought her, in any emergency, in any unpleasantness, if she were ill, or even if she were only lonely,—as he knew she had cultivated no intimacies in her own circle,—to send for Helen. He had not waited for Helen's reply; he knew so well how warm and sincere an acquiescence in his request it would convey. He told her of the attachment existing between Helen and the curate, and said, "Had there been no

other reason for my rejecting your advice, I knew she was, at the time of my father's death, virtually affianced to Cuthbert Farleigh."

Lady Mitford paused in her perusal of the letter at this point.

"Cuthbert Farleigh!" she repeated; "surely it must be the same—it must be poor papa's old pupil; how very odd, if it should be! If *he* had ever mentioned me before him at Knockholt, he would have remembered me."

Her thoughts strayed back to her childhood and her old home, and she sat absorbed in reverie.

"How thoughtful he is for me!" she said to herself softly; "how truly considerate! I will obey him in this and in every thing. I will make this young lady's acquaintance—not just yet, but later, when I am more composed."

And then she thought how delightful it would be to talk with Helen about Laurence; to hear from her all the particulars of his life at Knockholt; to make all those researches and studies which have such an ineffable attraction for loving hearts. There could be nothing wrong in this:

men and angels might scrutinise her feelings towards Laurence Alsager, and find nothing to blame.

There was little more in the letter, which concluded with an expression of the warmest regard.

Lady Mitford felt happier for the receipt of this parting note from Sir Laurence. It seemed to decrease her loneliness—to surround her with an atmosphere of protection. Georgie had never associated much with women in her father's secluded parish. The inhabitants had been chiefly of the lower classes; and since she had emerged from the gushing schoolroom period, she had had none of those intimacies which make up so great a part of the happiness of young womanhood. Perhaps she had concentrated her affections in the object who had proved so unworthy all the more obstinately, and had lavished them upon him all the more unrestrainedly, because she had none of the lesser claimants for them.

She looked forward now with almost girlish pleasure to making Helen's acquaintance and winning her affections, as she determined she would

try to do ; and she was surprised at herself as she felt her spirits rising, and recognised in herself more energy and hopefulness than she had felt for a long time.

Time slipped away, weighted though it was with care, and brought no change in Sir Charles Mitford's evil life. The husband and wife rarely met now ; and when they did, their casual association was distressing to Lady Mitford, and embarrassing to him. Their wealth, the magnitude and style of their establishment, and the routine of life among persons in their position, afforded them facilities for a complete and tacit estrangement, such as the pressure of narrow circumstances would have rendered impossible. They went their separate ways, and were more strange and distant to each other than the merest surface acquaintances. Lady Mitford was, as it was natural to suppose she would be, the last person to hear particulars of her husband's conduct ; but she watched him as closely as her limited opportunities permitted. For some time she had observed that he seemed restless and unhappy, and

that the moroseness and discontent, which had been early indications of his relapse from his improved condition, were trying to the household, and, on the rare occasions when she had to encounter them, distressing to her. He had no air of triumph now; he had no assured complacency of manner: these were gone, and in their place were the symptoms of suffering, of incertitude, of disappointment.

“I suppose she is treating him unkindly,” Lady Mitford thought. “It must be something concerning her which is distressing him; he does not care about any thing else. He is so infatuated with her now, that I verily believe, when he drinks to the frightful excess he sometimes does, it is to stupefy himself between the time he leaves her and the time he sees her again. Poor fellow! poor Charley!”

She pitied him now with all her good and generous heart. Perhaps the time that she had foreseen was near—the time which she had once hoped for, and now dreaded, though prepared to meet it with all the dutifulness of her nature—the

time when the wicked woman who had taken him from her, who had laid the fabric of her happiness low, would tire of him and discard him; and he would seek forgiveness from the wife he had so cruelly wronged.

The moodiness and moroseness, the restlessness and irritability of Sir Charles had been peculiarly noticeable for some time after Lady Mitford had received Sir Laurence's letter, and they had not failed to receive the imprecations of the servants'-hall. Lady Mitford had been aware that much information might have been obtained through that fruitful medium, but she would not at any time have deigned to have recourse to it; and would have shrunk from doing so with additional distaste just now, as she could not avoid perceiving that she was the subject of closer observation than usual on the part of the domestics, especially her own maid and Mr. Banks.

One day, when Lady Mitford returned from her solitary drive, and having alighted from her carriage, was passing through the hall, she was encountered by Captain Bligh, coming quickly

from the library. She saluted him courteously, and was about to pass on, when he begged to be permitted to speak with her. She acquiesced, and they went upstairs and into the long drawing-room.

She knew in a moment that he had come to tell her bad news, and she nerved herself to bear it, whatever it might be, by a strong effort. He waited until she had seated herself, and then said :

“ I fear, Lady Mitford, I can hardly escape some share of your displeasure, incurred by my having undertaken the mission which has brought me here to-day.”

She looked at him, and turned very pale, but she remained quite silent and still.

“ You are frightened, Lady Mitford. Pray don't fear any thing. There is much to grieve you, but no cause for alarm.”

“ Sir Charles—” she stammered.

“ Sir Charles is well ; there is nothing of that sort the matter. But I have a painful task to fulfil. Lady Mitford, are you aware that Sir Charles has left London ?”

She fell back in her seat, and deathlike cold crept through her. She did not faint, but a momentary sensation like fainting passed over her. Her eyes closed, and her hands grew cold and damp. It had come, then, the catastrophe! She was deserted; he had left England with that woman; and it was all over! She was to be alone, and he was utterly ruined; there was no hope, no rescue for him now!

Captain Bligh was not a person adapted to act with discretion in a crisis of this kind. He did not understand women's ways, as he was accustomed to proclaim. He had a kind heart, however, and it supplied the deficiencies of his judgment. He merely handed Lady Mitford a scent-bottle, and waited until she had recovered herself. After a few moments she sat upright and opened her eyes.

“That's right!” said the honest Captain encouragingly; “I knew you would bear it well; I knew you had such pluck. By Jove, I haven't forgotten the ponies!”

“Tell me what you came to say, Captain

Bligh," said Lady Mitford. "I am quite strong now;" and she looked so.

"Well, the truth is, Lady Mitford, things have gone too far, and Sir Charles is conscious of the fact. I would not have done such a thing for any one in the world but him. He and I have always been good friends, though he has done many things I could hardly stand. You mustn't mind my not being polished,—I don't mean to be rude; but I have such unpleasant things to say, that, by Jove, I can't manage to say them pleasantly!" He floundered very much in his speech, and fidgeted distractingly; but she sat quite still and listened to him. At last he blurted out desperately, "The truth is, that she-devil Laura Hammond has driven him mad! She has snubbed him, and tried to throw him over, and gone off to Baden without letting him know."

"Without letting him know! Then they are not gone together? I thank God!" said Georgie emphatically.

"Gone together! No; she never would be such a fool as that, whatever he might be. I beg your

pardon, Lady Mitford. She has gone, as he believes, with the intention of throwing him off entirely, and trying it on with Tchernigow, the Russian, you know; and Mitford would not stand it, and he has gone. He heard something last night which exasperated him, and he came to my rooms this morning—only a small portmanteau with him—and told me he was going. He told me to come down here, and send Banks off to-night with his things. I said every thing I could think of, but it was no use,—he was simply desperate. Then, Lady Mitford”—and here Captain Bligh lowered his voice, and spoke with great gentleness—“then I asked him if he remembered the consequences of this to *you*.”

“To me, Captain Bligh! What worse consequences can come to me than have come already?”

“Many, Lady Mitford, and much worse. You cannot live any longer under the same roof with Sir Charles; the scandal is too open and too great. He will disgrace himself, and make himself ridiculous at Baden, if much more serious

mischief does not ensue ; and you must keep aloof from the scandal.”

“ I am as much aloof from it as I can be here, I think, Captain Bligh,” said poor Georgie ; “ and I will not leave my husband’s house until he bids me. He may find that his going to Baden is useless ; if she is resolved to discard him, she will do so as resolutely and as effectually there as here. No, Captain Bligh ; this is my home, and here I will remain until I see the end of this matter. I will not forsake him, as he has forsaken me, at the beginning of it ; I will not heap additional disgrace upon him, and give this story additional publicity, by leaving his house, unless he has told me, through you, to do so.”

“ No, no, Lady Mitford,” said Bligh ; “ he has not done that. He begged of me to come to you, and tell you that he had gone. He would not try to deceive you, he said ; if he could induce her to allow him to remain with her, he would, and never return to England. Yes, indeed,—so far had his madness driven him : but at all events he would never ask you to see him again ; and what-

ever arrangements you might choose to make, he would be quite prepared to carry into effect. He said he supposed you would not remain here."

"He was mistaken," she said, very quietly and sadly; "I will remain here. Tell me what more passed between you, Captain Bligh."

"Indeed, not much, dear Lady Mitford. He was dreadfully excited and wretched, and looked fearfully ill,—he had been drinking deeply last night, I am sure,—and his manner was agitated and incoherent. He talked of his persecutions and his miseries, as every man who has the best blessings of life at his command and throws them away does talk; and his lamentations about this cursed infatuation of his were mixed up with self-reproaches on your account, and imprecations on the men who have tabooed him, and especially because he was rejected at the *Mæcenas*."

"Poor Charles!" said Lady Mitford musingly; "all the enemies he has ever had could have done him little harm, had he not doubled in his own person the strength of his enemies to injure him. He began ill; and when he made an effort to do well,

some gloomy recollection, some haunting fear, always seemed to keep him back. There was some evil power over him, Captain Bligh, before this woman laid her spells upon him—a power which made him moody and wretched and reckless. This was a subject upon which it was impossible for me to speak to him; and I accounted for it easily enough, and I have no doubt with tolerable correctness. You know, and I know, that the early years of Sir Charles's life were full of dark days and questionable associations. He was unfortunate at least as much as guilty; and not the smallest of the misfortunes of such a career is the power it gives to miscreants of every kind to embitter one's future and tarnish one's fame, to blight the hopes and the efforts with which one endeavours to rise above the mud-deposit of follies and sins repented and abandoned. There has never been a case, I am sure, in which a man who had gone extensively wrong, and who then tried to go right, and got a good chance of doing it, was not pursued and persecuted by harpies of the old brood, whose talons perpetually branded him,

and whose inexorable pursuit kept him constantly depressed and miserable. Then he will be driven to excitement, to dissipation, to any thing which will enable him to forget the torture; but this very necessity deprives all his efforts of vigour, and renders him hopeless of success. I am confident that some such merciless grinding misery lay hidden in Sir Charles's life. I saw it very shortly after we came to town; and I had reason to suspect that he met with some annoyance of the same kind down at Redmoor. But he never told me, and there is no good in our speculating upon any matter of this kind. I can hardly consider myself entitled now to inquire into any affair of his. Did he give you any instructions, Captain Bligh? did he give you any address?"

"No," replied the good-natured Captain, quite saddened and distressed to witness her misery, and moved at the same time to great simple admiration by her composure and firmness, which the Captain denominated "pluck." "He did not say many words to me. He told me to come here and

tell you what I have told you, and he said he would write. Let me leave you now, dear Lady Mitford, and let me return to-morrow and take your commands.”

“Thank you,” she said simply; and then he left her; and perhaps in the whole course of his chequered existence, and among his numerous and varied experiences, he had never felt so much pure and deep respect for any woman as for the deserted wife to whom he had had to disclose the full measure of her sorrow.

The days passed, and no tidings of Sir Charles Mitford came. Georgie had seen Banks, and had given him some directions relative to the things which Sir Charles required him to take to Baden, in an unconcerned and dignified manner, which had impressed that functionary as much as her conduct of the previous day had affected Captain Bligh.

“She’s a deal too good for Mitford, and always was, even before he took to brandy and that ere Laurer ’Ammond,” soliloquised Mr. Banks; “and I hope, for my part, he’ll never come back.”

Mr. Banks left town early in the morning of the day which succeeded the interview between Lady Mitford and Captain Bligh, and Georgie remained in her own rooms the entire day. An agitated restlessness was upon her, a feeling of suspense and apprehension, which deprived her of the power of thinking consecutively, and distracted her sorrow by changing its character. She expected to see Captain Bligh, and in her confused state of mind she had forgotten to say that no other visitors were to be admitted. At three in the afternoon, as she was sitting in her boudoir, striving, quite ineffectually, to fix her attention on some piece of feminine industry, a servant announced,

“ Miss Gillespie.”

Lady Mitford heard the name with unbounded astonishment. At first she associated no idea whatever with it ; she felt certain she had never known any one so designated. But before the bearer of the name entered the room, she had remembered the handsome young woman whose superb singing and sudden disappearance had occasioned so

much wonder and discussion at Redmoor. The association of ideas was not pleasant; and it was with a heightened colour, and something in her manner different from its customary graceful sweetness, that she rose to receive her unlooked-for visitor.

Miss Gillespie was looking very handsome; and the agitation under which she was evidently labouring had not the usual effect of destroying ease and gracefulness. She had always been quiet, and to a certain extent ladylike in her manners. Even in the Lizzie-Ponsford days she had not degenerated into the coarseness which might have been supposed to be an inevitable attendant or result of such a career. The ease and rapidity with which she had mastered the high-comedy style of performance, the finish of her acting, and the perfect appreciation of the refinement and repose which mark the demeanour of the true *grande dame*, afforded ample proof of Miss Gillespie's tact and readiness. She had needed only the accessories, and now she had procured them; and as she walked slowly and gracefully up to the spot

where Lady Mitford stood to receive her, her rich and elegant but studiously-simple dress, her courteous gesture of salutation, and her nicely-modulated voice were all perfect.

“I daresay you have forgotten me, Lady Mitford,” said she, “though you were very kind indeed to me when I accompanied my employers to your house at Redmoor; and your kindness made my position very different from what it had ever been before under similar circumstances.”

“Pray be seated, Miss Gillespie,” said Lady Mitford, softened by her respectful and graceful manner; “I am very glad to know that you have any pleasant recollections of your visit at Redmoor.”

“But you are at a loss to account for my seeking you here, Lady Mitford, and venturing to call upon you without having first asked and obtained your permission.”

Georgie's nature was so truthful that even the little every-day conventional matter-of-course falsehoods of society refused to come trippingly from her tongue. She *was* surprised at Miss

Gillespie's visit, and she had let it appear that she was.

“If I am at a loss to account for your visit,” she said, in her own sweet persuasive manner, “do not therefore suppose that it is not agreeable to me. I am very glad to see you, Miss Gillespie; and I hope it was not any unhappy circumstance which obliged you to leave Redmoor so abruptly at that time.”

“One of the objects of my visit to you to-day, Lady Mitford, is to explain my conduct on that occasion. I am sure you will be infinitely surprised to learn that you were nearly, though unconsciously, concerned in it.”

“I, Miss Gillespie! Surely I had not done any thing—nothing had occurred at Redmoor—”

“No, no; you mistake my meaning, which, indeed, I must explain, if you will permit me to do so, by telling you a long story. Have I your permission, Lady Mitford?”

Georgie's astonishment was increasing. She marked the earnest gaze her strange visitor fixed upon her. She saw how her face softened and

glowed as she looked at her. She knew that this young woman had a kindly feeling towards her; and she was so lonely, so deserted, that she felt grateful for that, though the person who bestowed it upon her was only a humble governess. She stretched out her hand by a sudden impulse, and Miss Gillespie caught and kissed it with intense fervour.

“ You shall stay with me as long as you please, and tell me all your story, Miss Gillespie. I have done nothing to deserve the interest I see you feel in me ; but I thank you for it.”

Her visitor did not immediately reply : she sat looking at Georgie’s face, more beautiful in its expression of grief and courage than when it was at its brightest, as though she were learning the features by heart. Lady Mitford blushed a little under the scrutiny, and smiled, as she said :

“ You look at me very earnestly, Miss Gillespie. What is there in my face to fix your attention ?”

“ There is every thing that I once did not believe in, while I longed to see it. There is beauty,

Lady Mitford—well, I have seen enough of that ; but there is truth and gentleness, sweet self-forgetfulness, and an impulse of kindness to every thing that lives and feels and can suffer. The first time I saw that face I thought of the common saying about the face of an angel ; but I soon ceased to think it was like that. Angels are in heaven, where their sinless and sorrowless sphere lies. Such women as you are on earth, to teach those who, standing afar off, see them, to hope, and believe, and take comfort, because they exist and have their part in the same troubled world with themselves, but always bringing the image and the ideal of a better nearer, and making it real.”

Her voice trembled, and tears stood in her eyes. Georgie wondered more and more.

“ When I have told you my story, Lady Mitford,” she went on, “ you will be able to understand in a degree—you never could quite comprehend it—the effect that such a woman as you produces upon such a woman as I ; for I studied you more closely than you could have suspected in that brief time at Redmoor ; and I hold a clue to

your history, of whose existence you were ignorant.”

“Do not tell me any thing that it will pain you to repeat, Miss Gillespie,” said Georgie, seeing that she hesitated and changed colour.

“In that case I should tell you nothing, Lady Mitford; for there is little in my life that has not been painful. I daresay you would find it difficult to realise, if I could put it before you in the plainest words; and I am sure, even if you did realise it, you would judge it mercifully—you would remember the difficulties and the dangers of such an existence, and suffer them to have their weight as against its sins and sorrows. You know what it is to be motherless, Lady Mitford; but yours was a guarded childhood, hedged about with pious care and fatherly love,—they told me all about you down at Redmoor. Mine was a motherless childhood; and my father was a thief, and the companion of thieves. This is the simple English of the matter. You would not understand the refinements and distinctions by which the dishonest classes describe their different ranks

in the army of thieves ; you could not comprehend the scenes and the influences among which my childhood was passed ; and I will not try to explain them, because they have no bearing upon what it concerns you to hear."

She had rested her arm upon a table beside her chair, and supported her head on her hand.

"My wretched childhood had passed by, and my more wretched girlhood had reached its prime, when I was brought in contact with Sir Charles Mitford."

Georgie recoiled, turned very red, and uttered an exclamation.

"I was associated at that time with some men who made their livelihood in a number of dishonest ways ; and one of them had in his possession a document, by means of which he had maintained a hold over Mitford, then a young man of small means and very indirect expectations. The man I speak of died, and accident placed me in possession of the document. It was a forged bill !"

Lady Mitford covered her face with her hands ; and as Miss Gillespie continued, the slow tears

began to force their way through the slender fingers.

“Others knew of the existence of this bill, Lady Mitford, and I have no doubt whatever that they traded upon their knowledge. Every effort, direct and indirect, was made to get the bill out of my possession; but I resolved to keep it, and every effort failed. Perhaps I might have used it for my own purposes against Sir Charles some day, if I had never seen or known you. It is certain that I should have given it to him, and set him free for ever from an apprehension which constantly beset and tortured him, had I not known how unworthily he was treating you, how completely all the hard lessons of his life of poverty and shifts had failed to correct his low instincts and his utter untrustworthiness. Don't cry, dear Lady Mitford,—your tears pain me keenly; I must draw them forth a little while, and then I trust to dry them.

“I saw Sir Charles when he first visited Mrs. Hammond at Torquay. By that time I had drifted to land somehow, and I had contrived to get my wandering feet within the confines of respectability.

I was quiet, even happy, in Mrs. Hammond's employment, though I soon perceived her to be the most worthless of her sex. That, however, troubled me little; and when Sir Charles came to the house and recognised me, and I said a few words to him which were not pleasant to hear, and I saw that he was in the toils, as he had so often been before, I did not much care either. I disliked and despised him, and I liked to think of the hidden weapon in my possession, and to picture his amazement if he knew that not only was I Lizzie Ponsford,—acquainted with all his doings and all his disreputable associates,—but that I actually held in my possession the document for which he would have given so large a price, and which would have ruined him at any moment. I liked to know that my presence made him uncomfortable, and I suffered him to experience that discomfort to the fullest extent.

“ You are shocked, Lady Mitford; such feelings are incomprehensible to you; but I tell you simply and plainly that they were mine, because I am coming to the portion of my story which concerns

you. I went to Redmoor with Mrs. Hammond, and on the first evening of our visit I saw that you were suspicious and uneasy. I saw you, Lady Mitford; I observed you closely, and I loved you; not so much as I did afterwards, when every day brought some gift, some grace, some beauty of your mind and disposition freshly before me; not so much as I did when your sweet gentleness, your kindly courtesy, your unfailing consideration filled me with sentiments which I had never known before, when for the first time I learned what it was to be cared for as an individual. Do you remember the day you took me to your dressing-room, Lady Mitford, and lent me some of your favourite books, and talked with me of what kind of reading I liked, and showed an interest in me, as if I had been a lady and one of your most considered guests? No, you do not remember it, but I do. Then I determined to use the power I had over him on your behalf. I knew it would not avail long; I knew if even he were rescued from her, he never could realise your hopes, never could be worthy of you; but at least I could control him for

the time. I tried, and succeeded. I threatened him with exposure if he did not desist. I cannot tell you exactly the course of subsequent events,— I have never been able to make that out to my satisfaction ; but I have a theory, which I think is a right one. A few days after I had the interview I have mentioned with Sir Charles, a man appeared who had been mixed up in many of the transactions of the time past to which I had been a party. He met me, and told me a story which I did not believe, but which altered my position completely. He had come down to get me away ; and whether he came as Sir Charles's *employé* or on his own account, I have never been certain. I believe the latter to be the more likely. He had two alternatives at his command : he might expose me if I refused to leave Redmoor quietly, and destroy all my hopes of attaining respectability in future, or he might take the bill from me by force or fraud, if I yielded to his threats. I did neither ; I temporised ; I made an appointment with him for two o'clock on the following day, and I left Redmoor, without clue by which I could be tracked, at day-

break. Let who would be the author of Mr. Effingham's proceeding (he called himself Effingham), I had balked their scheme, and I turned my back on Redmoor with one bitter pang of regret mingled with my triumph. I should see your face, Lady Mitford, no more, and I could no longer interfere to prevent the deadly wrong which was being done by your faithless husband and your false friend!

“All such regrets were, however, utterly vain. The imminent risk of exposure left me no choice. At least I would punish Sir Charles so far: he should never have the bill—he should never have the satisfaction of feeling that that ghost was laid. So I left the only place in which I had ever tasted happiness, and set my face to the hard world again. But before I stole away from your house that morning, I wrote a line to Colonel Alsager, and told him to take up the watch I had been obliged to relinquish. You are astonished, Lady Mitford; and well you may be. I had never exchanged more than a dozen sentences with Colonel Alsager; but I knew that the interest he felt in you was in no way inferior to mine; while his opportunities

of exhibiting it were infinitely greater, and so I wrote to him.”

“What did you do, Miss Gillespie, when you left Redmoor? I fear you had very little money. Forgive me if I offend you, but I gathered that from something Mrs. Hammond said.”

“You are right, Lady Mitford; and it is like you to think of a need which you have never known. I *had* very little money; but I had a friend who put me in the way of earning some—how, I will tell you when I have finished the portion of my story in which you are interested.”

The gentle look of forbearance and compassion in Georgie’s face seemed to touch Miss Gillespie very deeply. Once more she took her hand and kissed it. Then she continued:

“I went to America, and for a long time I heard nothing of you, though I longed most ardently to do so. The echoes of the great world did not reach me in the distant sphere of my toil, and I longed to know how the only person with whom I had ever felt true human sympathy was wearing through her day. This

may seem to you an unnatural and overstrained sentiment; and so it would be in the mind of any one who had any natural ties, or who was less desolate than I; but you must be able to comprehend my life before you could understand these inconsistencies. Let me leave this, then, unexplained, and tell you that I came back to England, and that I have heard all that has befallen you since I went away. I have never felt any thing that has happened to myself in my vagabond life so much. Incidents I heard, but no one could tell me any thing of you individually,—of how you were bearing your trials, of what face you showed the world, which would coldly criticise you—a creature as far beyond its comprehension as any angel in the heaven far beyond their sphere.”

She spoke with intense feeling, and her fine face glowed with the depth of her sympathy and admiration.

“At last I caught sight of Colonel Alsager.”

Georgie blushed, but her visitor did not appear to observe her emotion.

“I knew he could tell me what I thirsted to

know, and I went to his hotel on the following day, but failed to see him; and when I sent a note, asking him to let me speak a few words with him, it was returned. Colonel Alsager had left town. I learned that his father was dead, and he, of course, a baronet now; but I heard nothing further—no one could tell me if his absence were likely to be prolonged. I had the strongest, the most insatiable desire to see you, Lady Mitford. I wanted to see the face that I had never forgotten, and find it as beautiful, as good as ever.”

Georgie smiled sadly. “Ah, Miss Gillespie, I have suffered much, and am greatly changed.”

“Only for the better,” she said eagerly; “only for the better. Every line in your face is lighted up with spiritual light now. When I saw it last, the girlish softness had not left the features and given the expression fair play.”

Her enthusiasm—her feeling—were so real, and there was such a strong dash of the artist in her remarks, that it would have been impossible to resent them. Lady Mitford once more smiled sadly.

“I knew there was no chance that I should see you in any public place—your deep mourning precluded that possibility—and so I resolved to come here and present myself boldly before you. In the ordinary sense of society, between you and me there is a gulf fixed; but I thought your gentleness would span it. It has done so. You have permitted me to speak to you face to face; you have gratified the wish which another might have resented as mere insolent curiosity.”

“Why do you speak thus, Miss Gillespie? Why should there be a gulf between you and me? I am not aware of any reason. I do not despise you because you are a governess, because you use the talents and the education you possess to earn an honourable livelihood. Why do you speak thus?”

Miss Gillespie looked at her, and an expression of deep suffering crossed her face.

“I will explain my meaning presently,” she said; “but now I have something else to say. Is it true that Sir Charles Mitford has followed this woman to Baden? They say so at the clubs, and I heard it this morning. Pardon me, and

tell me. I don't ask the question for my own sake, or out of idle curiosity. I have a serious, a most serious meaning."

"Yes, it is too true," said Lady Mitford.

"Then listen. He must be brought back: he is only gone to mortification and ridicule. I know a great many queer people, and I hear a great many strange things; and I heard this to-day: Mrs. Hammond is going to marry the Russian Prince Tchernigow, a man who is a violent, jealous, brutal wretch,—I know all about him,—a man whose cruelty and vindictiveness are not to be surpassed: her punishment is in safe hands. Dear Lady Mitford, I understand that look. You don't wish her to be punished, I am sure—quite sure of that; but if she marries Tchernigow, she must be. But it is not with that we are concerned: it is to bring *him* home—to rescue him from danger and disgrace and ridicule, for your sake; and you can do it—you, and you only."

Georgie was breathless with astonishment. Miss Gillespie rose and caught her by both hands. Then she went on speaking with great rapidity:

“Yes, I say you can do it. Write to him to-day—now, this very hour—and tell him Lizzie Ponsford has been with you; that *she* holds the bill which he employed that poor wretch Effingham to get for him; that Effingham cheated him from first to last—from the time of the Albatross till the day he went to the bottom of the sea with the Pocahontas. Tell him he shall have it placed in his hands on the day he returns to London. Your letter will reach him when he has learned the faithlessness of the woman for whom he has betrayed you. Do you not think it will touch him, written as you will write it,—with the gentleness, the pity, the pardon it will convey? At the moment of his greatest exasperation, in the full tide of his bitterness, a way of escape from one constant, overhanging, torturing cause of uneasiness will be removed; and by whose hand? Yours!”

She paused, breathless in her excitement, and took from her bosom a paper, which she laid on the table before Lady Mitford, who looked at it pale and trembling.

“You will do as I say, dear Lady Mitford—you will do it for his sake, and your own, and for mine? Let me have the satisfaction of knowing that I have been able to do this service for you—the only service I have ever done any one; the only one, I fear, I have ever wished to do.”

“Oh, no, don’t say that,” said Lady Mitford. “You misjudge yourself; I am sure you do, dear Miss Gillespie, or why should you have felt so much for me, and done me such a service? Do not write hard things against yourself. I will do this—it may succeed; but whether it succeeds or not, I shall be ever grateful to you, ever bless you for this act; and you will let me serve you in turn—you will tell me your wishes, and let me try to carry them out. You said you would tell me how you have been engaged since you left Redmoor.”

“Thank you, dear Lady Mitford,” said Miss Gillespie, in a low deep tone; “but you cannot serve me. I told you there was a gulf fixed between you, the patrician lady, and me. I am an

actress, and my stage-name is Constance Greenwood.”

Lady Mitford wrote the letter to Sir Charles, as her strange visitor had counselled her to do. She suffered much in writing it; she hoped much from its effect. Time rolled over, and she knew that Sir Charles must have received the letter; then she counted the days which must elapse before the answer could arrive, and, arming herself with patience, she waited.

CHAPTER VII.

AMONG THE SPRINGS.

IT was the month of September, and the little town of Baden was full. It is now the big town of Baden, and is still, during its season, filled to overflowing; but the company is by no means so select, so pleasant, so agreeable as it used to be. The *vor-eisenbahn* Baden was as superior to the present excursionists' resort as was the ante-railway Ascot Meeting to what now is merely a succession of Derby-days in Bucks. Then, when you posted in from Strasbourg, or arrived in the *eilwagen* from deadly-lively Carlsruhe, you found Mr. Rheinboldt, the landlord of the Badischer Hof, attended by the stoutest, the best-tempered, and the stupidest even of German porters, coming forward to meet you with the pleasantest of greetings. You had written on beforehand if you were

a wise man, and your old room was ready—one of that little row of snug dormitories set apart for bachelors, and looking on to the trim garden. You had a wash, with more water than you had met with since you left home (they were beginning to understand the English mania for soap-and-water at the Badischer Hof even so long ago), and you made your toilette and came down to the five-o'clock *table-d'hôte*, where you found most of the people who had been there the previous season, and many of their friends whom they had induced to come. Most of the people knew each other or of each other, and there was a sociability among them which the railway has utterly annihilated. Now London sends her bagmen and Paris her *lorettes*; but in those days, if “our Mr. Johnson” got as far as Parry by way of Cally or Bolong, he was looked upon as an intrepid voyager, while very few Parisian ladies, save those of the best class, came into the Grand Duke’s territory.

It was hot in England in that September, but it was hotter at Baden. With the earliest dawn

came thick vapours rolling down from the Black Forest, encompassing the little town with a white and misty shroud, which invariably presaged a sultry day, and invariably kept its promise. All day long the big red-faced sun glared down upon the denizens of the pleasantest corner of Vanity Fair; glared in the early morning upon the water-drinkers sipping the nauseous fluid in the thick and heavy glass tumblers, and tendering their kreutzers to the attendant maidens at the Brunnen; glared upon them as they took the prescribed constitutional walk, and returned to the hotel to breakfast; glared upon the fevered gamblers, who, with last night's excitement only half slept off, with bleared eyes and shaking hands and parched throats, took their places round the gaming-tables as the clock struck noon, and eyed the stolid-faced croupiers as intently as though the chances of the game were to be gleaned from a perusal of their fishy eyes or pursed mouths. The revellers who were starting off for picnics to the Black Forest, or excursions to the Favourite or Eberstein-Schloss, glanced up with terror

at the scorching red ball in the sky, and bade courteous Mr. Rheinboldt, the landlord of the Badischer Hof, to see that plenty of ice was packed with the sparkling Moselle, and to let Karl and Fritz take care that an unlimited supply of umbrellas was placed in the carriage. The Englishmen, whom M. Benazet, the proprietor of the gaming-tables, grateful for their patronage, had provided with shooting, or who had received invitations to the *triebjagd* of some neighbouring landowner, looked with comic wonder, not unmixed with horror, at the green jerkins, fantastic game-bags, couteaux de chasse, or hunting-knives (worn in the belt), and general appearance of their foreign friends; and then when lunch-time arrived, and they saw each German eating his own sausage and drinking from his own particular flask, which he never dreamed of passing, they recollected with dismay the luncheons at similar parties in England, the snowy cloth laid under the shade of the hedge, the luscious game-pie, the cooling claret-cup, the glancing eyes and natty ankles of those who had accompanied the luncheon.

Hot! It was no word for it. It was a blazing, tearing, drying, baking, scorching heat, and it was hotter at Baden than any where else.

So they said at least, and as they were from almost every part of the civilised world, they ought to have known. There were English people, swells, peers and peeresses, bankers and bankeresses, a neat little legal set,—Sir Nisey and Lady Prious, Mr. Tocsin, Q.C., Mr. Serjeant Stentor, and some of the junior members of the bar,—a select assortment of the Stock-Exchange, and some eligible young men from the West-end government-offices. There were joyous Russians, whose names all ended in “vitch” and “gorod,” and were otherwise utterly unpronounceable, who spoke all European languages with equal fluency and facility, and who put down rouleaux of napoleons on the roulette-table where other people staked thalers or florins. There were a few Frenchmen and French ladies; here was an Austrian gross-herzog or grand-duke, there some Prussian cavalry subalterns who could not play at the table because they spent the half-crown of

their daily allowance in roast veal, Bairisch beer, and a horrible compound called "grogs an rhum," which they drank at night, "after," as they said to themselves, "the English fashion."

It had been hotter than ever during the day, but the day was happily past and over, and the moon was streaming on the broad gravelled Platz in front of the Conversations-haus, and the band, stationed in the little oil-lamp-illuminated kiosk, were rattling away at Strauss's waltzes and Labitskey's galops. The gamblers were already thronging the *roulette* and *trente-et-quarante* tables; and of the non-gamblers all such as had ladies with them were promenading and listening to the music, while the others were seated, drinking and smoking. It was a splendid evening; the diners at the late *tables-d'hôte* were wending their way from their hotels to the promenade; the consumers of the German *mittagsessen* were listening to the band in delicious anticipation of the *reh-braten* and the *haring-salad* and the *bok-bier*, or the Ahrbleichart, at which another half-hour would see them hard at work; the clamouring for coffee

was incessant, and the head-waiter, Joseph, who was so like Bouffé, was almost driven out of his wits by the Babel of voices. They chattered, those tall occupants of the little wooden round-tables—how they chattered! They turned round and stared at the promenaders, and made their comments on them after they had passed. They had something to say, some remark, either complimentary or disparaging, to make upon all the ladies. But there was only one man who seemed to attract any special attention, and that was the Russian Prince Tchernigow.

A man of middle height, with brown-black hair, a perfectly bloodless complexion, stern deeply sunken eyes, a stiff moustache bristling over a determined mouth. A man with small hands and feet, and apparently but little muscular development, but strong, brave, and vindictive. A man whose face Lavater might have studied for months without getting beyond the merest rudiments of his science—impassive, unaltering, statuesque. He never played but with rouleaux of napoleons—twenty in a rouleau; and though

the space in front of him was shining with gold at one moment, or laid bare by the sweeping rake of the croupier,—winning or losing, his expression would not change for an instant. He had been to Baden for two or three seasons running, and was beginning to be looked upon as an *habitué*; the croupiers acknowledged his taking his seat, intending to do battle, by a slight grave bow; he had broken the bank more than once, and was a lion among the visitors, and notably amongst the English. Tchernigow's horses and carriages, his bold play, his good shooting, the wonderful way in which he spoke our language, his love of solitude, his taciturnity, his singular *physique*, were all freely discussed at the late *tables-d'hôte* of hotels at which the prince was not staying. His reputation of *beau joueur* caused him to be followed as soon as he was seen going into the rooms, and his play was watched, and humbly imitated by scores. He seldom attended the balls, and very rarely danced, though he valed to perfection; and all the women in the room were eager for his selection. His appear-

ance on the promenade always excited attention, but he never gave the smallest sign of having observed it.

Among those who looked up as Prince Tchernigow passed was Lord Dollamore, who was seated at one of the tables, with no companion save his invariable one—his stick. Dollamore generally came to Baden every year. The place amused him; it was a grand field for the display of the worst passions of human nature,—a study which always afforded him infinite delight. He never played, but he was constantly hovering round the tables; and there was scarcely an incident which happened in the seething crowd, scarcely a change which swept across the faces of the leading actors, that passed unnoticed by him. He did not dance; he would have been prevented by his lameness from indulging in such pastime, even had his taste impelled him to it; but he was a constant attendant at the balls which M. Benazet provided for the amusement of his patrons; and looking on at the actual life before him as he might have looked on the mimic life of a

theatrical representation, he had innumerable conferences with his stick on all he saw and heard, and on the arguments which he deduced therefrom. He immensely enjoyed being seated, as he was then, in the calm autumnal moonlit evening, with a cup of excellent coffee by his side, a cigar in his mouth, and the ever-shifting panorama of human faces passing before him.

“That Tchernigow is really delicious!” he said to himself—or to his stick—as he looked after the Russian, and marked the excitement which he created; “there’s a savage insolence about him which is positively refreshing in these days of bowing and scraping and preposterous politeness. How they chatter, and gape, and nudge each other with their elbows about him! and what a supreme indifference he affects to it all! Affects? Yes, *mon prince*, it is accepted as the real thing by these good people, but we are not to be taken in by veneer, *nous autres!* It would require a very small scratch indeed to pick off the Petersburg-cum-Paris polish, and to arrive at the genuine Calmuck substratum. Only to look at you to tell

that Nature's handwriting never lies; and if ever there were a more delightfully truculent, ruffianly, bloodthirsty savage than yourself, *mon prince*, I am very much out in my ideas. God help the woman on whom you ever get a legitimate hold! Ah, and that reminds me—what has become of the widow? There is no doubt that Tchernigow was badly hit in London. The only man received at her house, the only man permitted to assuage her grief, to wipe away those tears which doubtless flowed so constantly for poor Percy Hammond! What an audacious little devil it is! How pluckily she fought that business of guardianship to the child; and how gracefully she retired from the contest when she saw that she had no chance, and that defeat was inevitable! She's the cleverest woman, in a certain way, that I've ever met with; and I'd take my oath she's playing some long-headed, far-sighted game now, and that Tchernigow is the stake. No more flirtation and coquetry—for the present—*les eaux sont basses*; the widow is hard up, and means to *recoup* herself by a rich marriage. That's why that infatuated

cad Mitford was snubbed so severely. I think she comprehends that Tchernigow will stand no nonsense, and as he is the *parti* at present in view, his will is law. She can't have given up the chase: but how on earth is she working it?"

A smart natty-looking little man in evening dress, with smoothly-brushed hair and elaborately-trimmed whiskers, faint pink coral studs, little jean-boots with glazed tips, irreproachable gloves, and a Gibus hat—a little man who looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox—stopped at Lord Dollamore's table, and with a bow half-deferential, half-familiar, glided into the vacant chair.

"Ah, how do you do, Mr. Aldermaston?" said Lord Dollamore, looking up,—“how do you do? and what is the latest news in this Inferno?"

Every one who knew Mr. Aldermaston made a point of asking him the news, well knowing that they could apply to no better source for the latest gossip and tittle-tattle. Mr. Aldermaston nominally was private secretary to Lord Waterhouse, the First Commissioner at the Inland-Irrigation Office, and he had been selected for that onerous

post for his distinguished personal appearance and his obsequious toadyism. It was not a position involving a great deal of work, though any one noticing the regularity with which a large leather despatch-box, bearing a gilt crown, and "Charles Aldermaston, Esq., P.S., I.I.O.," was deposited for him by an official messenger in the hall of the Alfred Club, might have thought otherwise. The inferior portion of the duty was performed by a clerk, and Mr. Aldermaston contented himself with taking Lord Waterhouse's signature to a few papers occasionally, and receiving a select few of the most distinguished persons who wished for personal interviews. This left him plenty of leisure to pursue his more amusing occupation of purveyor of gossip and inventor and retailer of scandal. In these capacities he was without a rival. He always knew every thing; and if he did not know it, he invented it, which in some respects was better, as it enabled him to flavour his anecdotes with a piquancy which was perhaps wanting in the original. He found occupation for his ears and tongue in a variety of topics; the heaviest subjects were not

excluded, the lightest obtained a place in his *répertoire*. The rumour of the approaching change in the premiership, while passing through the Aldermaston crucible, encountered the report of Mademoiselle de la Normandie's refusal to dance her *pas seul* before Mademoiselle Rivière; the report of Lady Propagand's conversion to Romanism did not prevent Mr. Aldermaston's giving proper additional publicity to the whisper of Miss de Toddler's flight with the milkman.

There were not many people who liked Mr. Aldermaston, though there were a great many who feared him; but Lord Dollamore was among the former class. "He is a *blagueur*," Dollamore used to say; "and a *blagueur* is a detestable beast, but necessary to society; and Aldermaston is certainly clean. He knows how to behave himself, and is in fact an Ananias of polite society. Besides, he amuses me, and there are very few people in the world who amuse me."

So Lord Dollamore always spoke to Mr. Aldermaston at the Club, and encouraged him to tell his anecdotes; and when he found him at Baden, looked

upon him as one of the resources of the place,—a purveyor of news infinitely fresher, more piquant, and more amusing than was to be found in the week-old *Times* or the three-days-old *Galignani*, which he found at Misses Marx's library.

So he again repeated, "And what's the latest news in this Inferno, Mr. Aldermaston?"

"Well, there's very little news here, my lord,—very little indeed; except that young Lord Plaidington is gone—sent away this morning."

"Sent away?"

"Yes; his mother, Lady Macabaw, wouldn't stand it any longer. Last night, Lord Plaidington took too much again, and began throwing the empty champagne-bottles out of the window of the Angleterre; so Lady Macabaw sent him off this morning with his tutor, the Rev. Sandford Merton, and they've gone to Strasburg, on the way to Italy."

"Serve him right, the young cub. I went away early last night—any heavy play late?"

"Yes; a Frenchman whom no one had seen before won a hatful at roulette, and some Englishman whom no one seemed to know backed him

and stood in. They looked like breaking the bank at one time, but they didn't."

"Was Tchernigow at the tables?"

"No; the Prince did not show up at all,—has not been there for the last three nights."

"So much the worse for Benazet; but what does it mean?"

"Well, I've a notion about that that I wouldn't broach to any one but your lordship. I think I've found the clue to that story."

"What story? what clue?"

"Prince Tchernigow's sudden cessation from play. You know what a mania it was with him. It must have been something special to make him give it up."

"And what is the something special?"

"A woman."

"Ah!" said Lord Dollamore, warming at once into interest; "*malheureux en jeu, heureux en amour*,—the converse of the ordinarily-received motto. Has Mademoiselle Féodor arrived from the Gaieté? or who is the siren that charms our Prince from the tables?"

“Mademoiselle Féodor has not arrived, but some one else has. A much more dangerous person than Mademoiselle Féodor, and with much more lasting hopes in view.”

Lord Dollamore looked keenly at his companion, and said, “I begin to find the scent warming; but I make it a rule never to guess. Tell your story, Mr. Aldermaston, please.”

“Well, you know, Lord Dollamore, I’m staying at the *Russie*, and I’ve made myself so agreeable to Malmedie, the landlord there, by little bits of civility, that he generally comes up to my room in the morning and lets me know all that is going on. He showed me a letter that he had about a week ago, written in French, saying that a lady wanted rooms reserved for herself and maid; that she would not dine at the *table-d’hôte*, being an invalid, and coming only for the benefit of the air and the springs, but should require dinner and all her meals served in her own rooms. The French of the letter was excellent, but the idea of retirement looked essentially English. I never knew a Frenchwoman, in however bad a state of health,

who could resist the attractions of society; so, though I said nothing to Malmedie, I guessed at once the lady was English; and as there seemed a mystery, I determined to penetrate it."

Lord Dollamore smiled, and whispered something to his stick; something of which the French word "*chiffonnier*" and the English word "garbage" were component parts; but Mr. Aldermaston did not hear the sentence, and only marking the smile, proceeded:

"They were expected on Wednesday afternoon, and I took care to be about. They came in the *eilwagen* from Carlsruhe,—a deuced fine-looking woman, with her face hidden in a thick black veil, and a very neat trim little French waiting-maid. The servant was French, but the boxes were English,—I'd take my oath of that. There was a substantial solidity about their make, a certainty about their locks and hinges, such as never yet was seen on a French box, I'll stake my existence."

"You have wonderful powers of observation, Mr. Aldermaston," said Dollamore, still grinning.

“Your lordship flatters me. I have a pair of eyes, and I think I can use them. I kept them pretty tightly fixed on the movements of the newcomers. Dinner was sent up to their rooms, but before it went up the lady’s-maid went out. I was strolling about myself, with nothing to do just at that time, so I strolled after her. She went into the Angleterre, and in a few minutes came tripping out again. She went back to the Russie, and so did I. I had nothing to do, and sat down in the porch, behind one of those tubs with the orange-trees, to smoke a cigar. While I was smoking it, who should come up but Prince Tchernigow?”

“Prince Tchernigow!” cried Lord Dollamore. “*Connu!* I’m in full cry now, Mr. Aldermaston. But continue your story.”

“Prince Tchernigow,” continued Mr. Aldermaston, “and no one else. He asked for Madame Poitevin, in which name the rooms had been taken, and he was shown upstairs. He came the next day twice, twice yesterday; he was there this morning; and just now, as I came away

from the *table-d'hôte*, I met him on the steps going in."

"Mr. Aldermaston, you are *impayable!*" said Dollamore. "I must pay a compliment to your perspicacity, even at the risk of forestalling the conclusion of your narrative. But you have told it so admirably, that no man with a grain of sense in his head could avoid seeing that Madame Poitevin is Mrs. Hammond."

"Exactly,—I have not a doubt of it," said the little man; "and if so, I think you and I, my lord, know some one whose state of mind must be awful."

"Yes," said Lord Dollamore, rising from his chair; "I see what you mean, and you're doubtless right. Poor Percy Hammond's relatives must feel it acutely. Good-night, Mr. Aldermaston;" and he bowed and moved off.

"I'm not going to let that little cad indulge in any speculations about the Mitfords," said he to his stick. "That woman's far too good to be discussed by such vermin as that;" by which we may judge that Lord Dollamore's opinion of Lady Mit-

ford had altered as his acquaintance with her had progressed.

The deductions which Mr. Aldermaston had made from this last experiment in espionage were tolerably correct. Laura Hammond was in Baden under the name of Madame Poitevin, and accompanied by the never-failing Marcelline.

She had hurried away from London for two reasons. The first, and by far the most important, was to perfect the conquest of Tchernigow; to clinch home that iron band which for the last two months she had been fitting round the Russian's neck; to bring him to make the offer of his hand at once. The short time passed in London since her husband's death had been spent in looking her future boldly in the face, and calculating within herself how she should mould it for the best. Lord Dollamore was right in one of his conjectures about her: she had made up her mind that the course of her life must henceforth be entirely altered. She knew well enough that even the short time she had been away from London

and its world was sufficient to render her name almost forgotten; and she determined that when it was next mentioned it should be in a very different tone from that formerly adopted towards it. Respectability—that state so often sneered at and ridiculed by her—she now held in the highest veneration, and determined to attain to. She had her work to do; to restore herself in the world's good opinion, and to make, as soon as decency would permit, a good marriage. The last position gained, the first would necessarily follow. All she had to do, she thought, was to keep herself in seclusion and choose her intended victim.

She thought of Sir Laurence Alsager at once. She had yet for him a remnant of what she imagined was love, but what was really thwarted passion. Her feelings were stronger for him than for any other man; and he had large wealth, and a good old family title, and the good opinion of the world. When, after his interview with her, she saw the utter futility of her plans so far as he was concerned, she was enraged, but by no means defeated. The cast must be made in another direc-

tion, and at once. Prince Tchernigow was in town; she knew it, for she had had more than one note from him during her seclusion in the country, and she knew that Tchernigow was hanging on in town on the chance of seeing her. This flashed across her the moment Laurence had quitted her, and her heart gave a great leap. That was the man! He was a prince; he was three times as rich as Alsager, and was known in the best society of every capital in Europe. Life with him as his wife would not be spent buried two-thirds of the year in a great gaunt country-place, where interest in the Sunday-schools and the old women and the clergyman's charities were the excitements; life with him would be one round of gaiety, in which she would be not a follower, but a leader. He had been madly in love with her two years before; and from what she knew of his nature, she believed the passion still remained there. That could be easily ascertained. She would write him a note, bidding him to come and see her.

Tchernigow came at once. He had not been

with Laura ten minutes before her sharp eyes had looked into his heart and read its secrets so far as she was concerned. He was chafing under a latent passion, a thwarted wish. When, just at the close of their companionship at Baden, two years ago, he had ventured to make open protestation of his devotion to her, and she had turned on him with great dignity and snubbed him mercilessly indeed in his manner, but inwardly raging like a volcano. He had never met with similar lessly, he had bowed and left her, cool and cold-treatment. With him it was a question of throwing the handkerchief, to the delight of Nourmahal or whoever might be the lucky one towards whom his highness tossed it. The ladies of the *corps dramatique* of the different Parisian theatres were wild with delight when they heard that Tchernigow had arrived in Paris, and the will of *mon Cosaque*, as he was called by more than one, was supreme and indisputable among them. This was quite a new thing. Not merely to have his proffered love rejected, but to be soundly rated for having dared to proffer it, was to him almost inexplicable.

It lashed him to fury. For the next season he kept away from London, determined to avoid the siren who held him in her toils, yet despised his suit. Then, hearing of her widowhood and her absence from London, he came to England with a half-formed determination in regard to her. He saw her, and almost instantaneously the smouldering fires of his passion were revived, and blazed up more fiercely than ever.

He had more encouragement now, but even now not very much. He was permitted to declare his devotion to her, to rave in his odd wild way about her beauty, to kiss her hand on his arrival and departure—nothing more. Trust Laura Hammond for knowing exactly how to treat a man of Tchernigow's temperament. He came daily; he sat feasting his eyes on her beauty, and listening—sometimes in wonder, but always in admiration—to her conversation, which was now sparkling with wit and fun, now brimming over with sentiment and pathos. Day by day he became more hopelessly entangled by her fascinations, but as yet he had breathed no word about marriage; and to that

end, and that alone, was Laura Hammond leading him on. But when Parliament was dissolved, and town rapidly thinning; when Laura's solicitor had written urgently to her, stating that "the other side" was pressing for a final settlement of affairs—which meant her abdicating her state and taking up her lowered position on her lessened income—Tchernigow called upon her, and while telling her that he was going to Baden, seemed to do more than hint that her hopes would be fulfilled, if she would consent to meet him there so soon as her business was accomplished.

This was the principal motive which had induced her to start for the pretty little Inferno on the borders of the Black Forest. But the other was scarcely less cogent. The fact was, that Laura was wearying rapidly of the attentions of Sir Charles Mitford. Her *caprice* for him was over. He had never had the power of amusing her; and since she knew that Laurence Alsager had left England, she saw that she could no longer wreak her vengeance on him by punishing Lady Mitford through the faithlessness of Sir Charles. Mitford

saw that she was growing weary of him—marked it in a thousand different ways, and raged against it. Occasionally his manner to her would change from what she now called maudlin tenderness to savage ferocity ; he would threaten her vaguely, he would watch her narrowly. It required all Laura's natural genius for intrigue, supplemented by Mdlle. Marcelline's adroitness, to prevent his knowing of Tchernigow's visits. In his blind infatuation he was rapidly forgetting the decencies of life, the *convenances* of society ; he was getting himself more and more talked about ; what was worse, he was getting her talked about again, just at the time when she wanted to be forgotten by all men—save one. Mitford had followed her into the country, and only quitted her on her expressed determination never to speak to him again unless he returned to London at once, and saved her from the gossip of the neighbourhood. She knew he would insist on seeing her constantly when she returned to town. Hence her flight, with only one hour's stoppage in London—and under a feigned name—to Baden.

“‘I pray you come at once,’” said Dollamore, three days after his conversation with Mr. Aldermaston, reading to his stick the contents of a dainty little note which he had just received;—“‘I pray you come at once.—Yours sincerely, Laura Hammond.’ Very much yours sincerely, Laura Hammond, I should think. What the deuce does she want with me? Is she going to drive us three abreast, like the horses in the diligence? and does she think I should like to trot along between Mitford and Tchernigow? Not she! She knows me too well to think any thing of that sort. But then what on earth does she want with me? ‘I pray you come at once.’ Egad, I must go, I suppose, and ask for Madame Poitevin, as she tells me.”

He lounged up to the Hôtel de Russie, asked for Madame Poitevin, and was shown into a room where Laura was sitting, with Marcelline reading to her. Dollamore recollected Marcelline at once; he had an eye for beauty in every class, and had taken not unfavourable notice of the trim little *soubrette* during his stay at Redmoor. He won-

dered now what had caused this sudden elevation of her social status, and did not ascribe it to any good source. But he had little time to wonder about Marcelline, for she rose at once, and passing him with a slight bow, left the room as Mrs. Hammond advanced with outstretched hand. She looked splendidly handsome; her eyes were bright, her cheek flushed, her step elastic. Dollamore thought he had scarcely ever seen her to such advantage.

“You are surprised at my having sent to you, Lord Dollamore?” said she as soon as they were seated.

“No, indeed, Mrs. Hammond; I’m never surprised at any thing. A man who has turned forty and suffers himself to be surprised is an idiot.”

“Turned forty! Well, when you reach that age you shall tell me whether there is truth in that axiom.” (“Flattering me!” said Dollamore to his stick; “wants to borrow money.”) “But at all events you don’t know why I asked you to come.”

“I have not the remotest idea.”

“How should you have? Three hours ago I

myself had no anticipation of the occurrence of circumstances which have induced me to ask you to share a confidence."

"Hallo!" said Dollamore to his stick; "I share a confidence! She ought to have sent for Aldermaston." But he said aloud, "If I can be of any help to you—"

"You can be of the very greatest assistance. You may have heard how I have been left by my husband; how Mr. Hammond's relatives, by their cruel and secret machinations, so worked upon him in his enfeebled state as to induce him to make a most shameful will, by which I was robbed of all that ought to have been mine, and left with a beggarly income!" She had not forgotten that will, and any recurrence to it made her cheek flame in earnest.

Dollamore bowed. He ought to have expressed some pity or some astonishment; but he had never during his life been guilty of any conventionality.

"In this strait," she continued, "I have received succour from a totally unexpected quarter. In the most generous and delicate manner Prince

Tchernigow has this day made me an offer of his hand." (Dollamore said he was never surprised, but if the stick was on the alert it must have heard him whistle.) "We are to be married at once!"

"Very satisfactory indeed," said Dollamore. "Fancy being a princess, with 'vassals and serfs by your side'! Very delicious indeed."

"Oh, I'm so happy!" cried Laura, with that feigned ecstasy of joy which she had so often indulged in; "the Prince is so charming!"

"Is he indeed?" said Dollamore. "Yes; some people require to be known thoroughly before they're appreciated. But what will a friend of ours say to this? I mean Sir Charles Mitford."

"Ah!" said Laura, who turned pale at the name; "that is exactly the subject in which I require your assistance."

"Mine! How can I help you? Suppose he were to come here—"

"It is that I am dreading. I took every precaution to hide my destination. I came here under a feigned name; I have lived in the strictest re-

tirement, having seen no one but the Prince since I have been here ; and yet I never hear a carriage dash up to the door of the hotel but I rush to the window, and concealing myself behind the curtains, look out in the full expectation of seeing him leap into the portico. If he were to come now, under present circumstances, what should I do?—good God, what should I do?”

“What should you do? Tell him to go back again. You are not his wife, for him to bully and curse and order about. You are not bound to give in to his cowardly whims, and need not endure his ruffianly insults.”

“You don’t know him now ; you don’t know how frightful his temper has become to every one who crosses him. No, no, no, we shall be married at once, and leave this place ; and should he come here afterwards, I trust you to tell him nothing more than you can possibly help ; above all, to keep silence as to our intended route.”

“That will be easily managed, by your not telling me which way you intend going. I’ll do what I can to help you, Mrs. Hammond ; but I

may as well say, that the less I am brought into contact with Sir Charles Mitford, the better I shall be pleased."

"At all events you will do as much as I have asked you?" she said.

"I will; and as that principally consists in holding my tongue, I shall have no difficulty in doing it. When are you to be married?"

"To-morrow morning, at Frankfort, where there are both Russian and English embassies; and whence we start to—"

"You forget; I was not to know your route."

"I had forgotten," she said with a smile. She seemed reassured; her colour came again, and as she held out her hand, she said, "I may rely on you?"

"Rigidly to do nothing," he said; and took her hand, and left her.

"She's a very wonderful woman, and she certainly has had a great run of luck," said Dollamore, as he walked back to his hotel. "To think of her getting hold of this Calmuck savage! By

Jove! rich as he is, she'll try and find her way to the bottom of his sack of roubles. Tchernigow is wealthy, but his intendant will have to screw up the moujiks to the last copeck to provide for madame's splendid power of spending. She's evidently completely frightened of Mitford now. It must be sheer brutality that has done that, for he was no match for her in spirit, or any thing else."

As he said this, he arrived at the Badischer Hof, before the door of which was standing a dust-covered carriage with two steaming horses; and in the hall Lord Dollamore saw a man, whose back was towards him, talking earnestly to Mr. Aldermaston. The man turned round at the sound of footsteps, and then Dollamore saw that it was Sir Charles Mitford.

CHAPTER VIII.

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND.

YES; Sir Charles Mitford had arrived in Baden. He had written several times to Mrs. Hammond in her country retreat, and, getting no reply, had called at her London house. The old charwoman there left in attendance was as vague as Mrs. Hammond could possibly have wished her to be about her mistress's movements. She had been there, Lor' bless me, yes, she had been there; but when was it?—We'nesday week, she thought, but won't be by no means certain. It was the day as she had had b'iled rabbit for dinner; she knew that, 'cos she was preparin' the onions when there come that thunderin' rat-tat at the door, which quite discomposed her and made her 'art jump into her mouth. What had happened then? Not much—a puttin' a few things together, which the

missis and the Frenchwoman managed between them. And then she was sent out for a cab; and the cab came, and they all got into it, and the cab went off. Where? She couldn't say; leastways, they would not let her hear the direction—told the cabman to drive straight on, and they would tell him presently; that was all she knew—yes, that was all she knew, and all Mitford could get out of her by the closest cross-questioning. Laura Hammond had escaped him; but of her destination he was absolutely ignorant.

How could he hit upon her track? The old woman—the last person who had seen her—was exhausted and pumped out, and had told next to nothing. Was there no one who could help him in this strait?—no one who could make some suggestion as to the best mode of discovering the fugitive? Yes!—a sudden brilliant thought struck him—the man who had discovered him when, as he thought, he lay so closely hid,—the detective, Inspector Stellfox.

He had given a handsome present to the inspector when he came into his kingdom—how

long ago it seemed!—and he had seen him several times since on public occasions,—at the Opera, at Chiswick Flower-shows, at the Derby, and similar popular resorts. He had the inspector's address somewhere,—at some police-station down in the City; and he went to his desk, and turned over a heterogeneous collection of papers, and found it. Then he sent Banks down to the station-house; and that evening Inspector Stellfox was shown into Sir Charles's study, and placed by him in possession of the facts.

The inspector went to work in his own special way. It was a peculiar job, he said, and not too easy to work out; but he had hopes. He went back to the station-house, and communicated as much as he chose to tell to two of his best men. Then all three went to work. They found out the cabman who had taken Mrs. Hammond to the South-Eastern Railway; they found the porter who had taken the boxes off the cab, and the luggage-labeller who had marked them; they found the tick-clerk who had registered them "in transit," and whose book showed not merely the number of

pounds' weight, but the name in which they were entered. They were booked for Cologne,—one could not in those days register any farther,—and for Cologne Sir Charles started immediately. There he picked up the trace. Two French ladies had arrived by the Ostend train, and gone—not to any of the grand hotels bordering the Rhine, but to a second-rate house, yet quiet and thoroughly respectable for all that—the Brüsseler Hof, kept for the last thirty years by Anton Schumacher. Were they recollected there? Of course they were. Anton Schumacher's eldest son Franz had been rather fetched by the trim appearance of the younger lady, and had gone down with them to the boat, and seen them on board the Königin Victoria, and recommended them specially to the care of the *conducteur*, who was a great friend of his. Where did they take ticket for? Why, at his advice, they took them for Cassel, on the left bank of the river. They were going, as he understood, to Baden-Baden, and he had advised them to sleep at Barth's—a right clean comfortable hotel in Cassel—and then

post on to Frankfurt, where they could spend the afternoon and the night, and so get on right pleasantly to Baden the next day.

To Baden! Sir Charles Mitford's heart sunk within him as he heard the words. Baden! That was where Laura had been so talked about for her desperate carrying on with Tchernigow nearly three years ago. And she was gone there now, and Tchernigow had disappeared from London! Doubtless they had arranged it all between them, and he was thrown overboard and sold. His mind was at once made up: he would follow her there or to the end of the earth; what did it matter to him? He told Banks to pack a small travelling-valise; he called at Bligh's on his way to the station and gave him certain instructions, and he was off. Not a word of farewell to Georgie; not a look of kindness; not a kiss of love for that poor child lying broad awake and listening to his footstep as he stole through the house at early morning! What could he have said to her?—he, going in search of his paramour, who had thrown him over,—what could

he have said to the wife whom he had so cruelly treated, so recklessly betrayed?

So Sir Charles Mitford, after long and tedious days of travel, arrived at Baden, as we have seen; and the first person he encountered, ere he had scarcely put foot in the hall of the Badischer Hof, was Mr. Aldermaston. He had known him in London, and was perfectly aware of his qualification for news. There was no reticence in Sir Charles Mitford now; no coming delicately to the subject; no beating about the bush: all that had vanished long since. Besides, if there had been any delicacy remaining, Mr. Aldermaston was scarcely the kind of man for whom it would have been employed. So Sir Charles said at once, and hurriedly:

“How do, Aldermaston? Been here long?”

“Ah, Sir Charles, how do you do? Just arrived, I see. Yes; I’ve been here—oh, three weeks about.”

“Then you can tell me? Is Mrs. Hammond here?”

“There’s no such name in the *Fremdenblatt*—

the *Gazette des Etrangers*, you know." His little eyes twinkled so, that even Mitford's dull comprehension was aroused.

"But for all that, she's here. Tell me, for God's sake!"

"Well, there's a French lady here,—says she's French, that's to say,—called Madame Poitevin, who might be Mrs. Hammond's twin sister."

"Ah!" Mitford gave a long sigh of relief. "I suppose she's attracted the usual amount of attention among all the people here, eh?"

"She would have, doubtless, had she ever courted it. But the truth is, she has never left her hotel."

"Never left her hotel!" echoed Mitford, obviously delighted. "Which is her hotel? where is she staying?"

"At the Russie, lower down the town."

"Here under a feigned name, and never leaving her rooms,—that's strange," said Mitford.

"Yes; must be dull for her," said little Aldermaston, looking up to see the effect his

words had on his companion; "lives in strict seclusion."

"Does she indeed? Poor girl! poor Laura!"

"Yes,—only one person permitted to see her; only one who is allowed to mingle his tears with hers."

"One person! and who is that?"

"And a friend of hers,—Prince Tchernigow."

"Damnation!" screamed Mitford; "is he here? That cursed Russian with his sallow face has always been hanging about her; and is he here now?"

"Oh, yes, he's here now; has been here for the last month, and has seen her twice every day since she arrived. I happen to know that," said Mr. Aldermaston, "from private sources of information."

"He has, has he? Curse him!" said Mitford, white with rage.

"Oh, yes, he has; and curse him if you like to me," said Mr. Aldermaston. "He's no friend of mine; and if he were, I don't know that I've any right to object because a gentleman curses him."

But I don't think I'd curse him too strongly to Mrs. Hammond when you see her."

"Why not?"

"Well, simply because he's going to be married to her to-morrow morning."

"To be married to her! You lie, sir!—you lie!"

"I say, look here, Mr.—Sir Charles Mitford; there is a point which must not be passed;—thus far shalt thou go, you know, and that sort of thing;—and you must not tell a gentleman he lies—'pon my soul you mustn't!"

"I beg your pardon; I scarcely know what I'm saying. To be married to-morrow morning!—to be married!"

"Oh, yes; it's all right; it's not what you said, you know, but as true as possible. I know it for a fact, because I was at the post-office just now, and I saw letters addressed to the Russian ambassador, and to Mr. Koch, our consul at Frankfurt; and Malmedie told me that the prince's man has been over here to order a carriage and relays for the morning."

“What did you say the name was under which she was passing?”

“Madame Poitevin. But why?”

“Nothing—no matter; now the Hôtel de Russie!—all right;” and he started off up the street.

“*C'est lui! mon Dieu, madame! c'est lui!*”

That was all Mademoiselle Marcelline had time to utter as she opened the door of Mrs. Hammond's rooms to a hasty knock, and a tall figure strode past her. Mademoiselle Marcelline, even in the fading evening light, recognised the well-known form of Sir Charles Mitford; but her exclamation caused Mrs. Hammond to think it was Prince Tchernigow of whom she spoke, and to impute Marcelline's evident terror to the fact that she had not then put the finishing touches to her toilette or her *coiffure*.

When she saw who was her visitor, she made up her mind instantaneously to the line of conduct to be pursued, and said:

“May I ask the meaning, Sir Charles Mit-

ford, of this strange intrusion into a lady's private rooms?"

He stopped still, and winced under her cold words as though cut by a whip. When he regained his voice, he said :

“Laura! Laura! what does this mean?”

“That is what I call upon you to explain. You come unannounced into my rooms, and then ask me what it means. You have been dining, Sir Charles Mitford!”

“Ah, I know what you're up to, then; but you're not right—I'll swear you're not right. Not one drop of any thing have I had for God knows how many hours. But I'm faint, weary, and heart-broken. Tell me, tell me, you heartless devil, is this true that I've heard?” He alternated from maudlin sentimentality to fierce rage, and it was difficult to say under which aspect he was most detestable.

“Let go my hand,” said she, trying to snatch her wrist from his clutch; “let go my hand, or I'll call for assistance! How can I tell whether what you have heard is true or not, when you've not had sense enough to tell me what it is?”

She spoke in a deadly cold metallic voice; and what she said roused him to a pitch of fury. Ever since she had first discovered that he occasionally resorted to the brandy-bottle, she had taunted him with covert allusions to his drinking, well aware that nothing rendered him so savage.

“Curse you!” he said; “that’s your old taunt. Did you not hear me say that nothing had passed my lips for hours? Now, answer me one question, or rather first hear me speak. I know all.”

“Do you?” said she with a sneer; “then you are a cleverer man than I ever imagined you to be!”

“Prince Tchernigow is in Baden.”

“And what of that?”

“He visits you daily—twice a-day?”

“And what of that? Why should he not? What is that to you?”

“Oh, Laura!—oh, my darling Laura! What is it to me, she asks? I, who worship her shadow, who would put my neck down for her to tread upon!—Then he does visit you?”

“ He does visit me. Does that answer content you? You deny that you have been drinking, Sir Charles Mitford, and yet you go on with this senseless rodomontade !”

“ Then let him look out for himself, Laura Hammond !—that’s all I have to say ;—let him look out for himself.”

“ He is perfectly able to do that, if there were occasion. But there is no occasion now !” She took her cue from Dollamore’s hint. “ I am not your wife, Sir Charles Mitford, for you to bully and threaten. You have no hold over me. And if you had, I am not a puny white-faced snivelling schoolgirl, to be put down by big words and black looks !”

“ You are not my wife !” he repeated. “ No, God knows you speak truth in that, at all events ! You are not my wife.”

His voice fell, and the tone in which he uttered these words was very low. Did a thought come over him of the “ white-faced snivelling school-girl” who was his wife, and whom he had quitted without one word of adieu? Did the white face

rise up in judgment before him then, as it would rise up in judgment on a certain grand day? He passed his hand across his eyes and sat silent.

“No, I am not your wife,” she continued, “thank God! I never would have been your wife. And now listen, for this is the last time you and I will ever be alone together; yes—I swear it—the last time! What we have been to each other—the nature of the tie between us—you know as well as I. But what prompted me to permit the establishment of such a tie, you do *not* know, and so I will tell you. Revenge! Sir Charles Mitford, revenge!—that was the sole spur that urged me on to allow my name to be coupled with yours—to allow you to think that you had a hold over me, body and soul. You imagined I cared for you! That poor piece of propriety in England was jealous of me!—jealous of my having robbed her of her pet-lamb, her innocent Southdown! I cared for you then as much as I care for you now—no, I wrong you, I cared for you a little more then, just a little more, because you were useful to me.

Now my need for such a tool is ended, and—I cast you off!”

She stood up as she said these words, and made a motion with her hand, corresponding to the speech, as though throwing him away. He looked at her in astonishment—then his face darkened, and he said :

“ Do you dare to tell me this ?”

“ I dare any thing,” she replied, “ as you might have learnt ere this. Do you recollect the night in the fir-plantation, when your friend Captain Bligh came out in search of you, and we stood together within an arm’s-length of him ? What did I dare then ?”

“ Not so much as you dare now, if you did but know !” said Mitford. “ You knew then that, had the worst come to the worst, you had a man at your feet who was prepared to brave all for you ; who would have scorned the world and all that the world could say ; who would have taken you far away out of the chance of its venom and the breath of its scandal, and devoted his life to securing your happiness. Your reputation was even

then beginning to be tainted; your name had even then been buzzed about, and you would have gained—ay, gained—rather than lost by the fortunate accident which would have made one man your slave for ever!”

“I had no idea you had such a talent for eloquence,” said she calmly. “Even in your maddest access of passion—for you are, I suppose, the ‘one man’ who was prepared to do such mighty things—you never warmed up to say so many sensible words consecutively! But suppose you are arguing on wrong premises? Suppose there is a man who is prepared to do all that that hypothetical ‘one man’ would have dared? Prepared—ay, and able—to do more! More, for that ‘one man’ was married, and could only have placed me virtuously in the eyes of the world after long and tedious legal ceremonies. Suppose that there is now a man able and willing—nay more, dying—to make me his wife, what then?”

“Then,” said Sir Charles, “I go back to what I said before—let him look to himself—let him look to himself!”

“He is perfectly ready to do so, Sir Charles Mitford,” said a low deep voice.

Both turned, and both saw Prince Tchernigow standing in the doorway. Laura gave a great start and rushed to his side. He put his arm calmly round her, and said :

“Do not disturb yourself, Laura ; there is no occasion for fright.”

“Ah !” said Mitford, with a deep inhalation of his breath, “I have found you at last, have I ? You are here, Prince Tchernigow ! So much the better ! Let me tell you, sir, that—”

“Even Sir Charles Mitford will recollect,” said Tchernigow, “that one chooses one’s language in the presence of ladies !” Then, in a lower tone, “I shall be at the rooms in half an hour !”

Mitford nodded sulkily and took up his hat. Then, with a low bow to Mrs. Hammond, he left the room.

An hour had passed, and the space in front of the Kürsaal was thronged as usual. At a table by himself sat Sir Charles Mitford, drinking brandy-

and-water, and ever and anon casting eager glances round him. His eyes were bloodshot, his hand shook as he conveyed the glass to his lips, and his whole face was puckered and livid. The aspect of his face brightened as he saw Prince Tchernigow approaching him. Tchernigow was alone, and was making his way with the utmost deliberation to the table at which he saw Mitford seated. He came up, took off his hat with a grave bow, and remained standing. Mitford swallowed what remained of his drink, and stood up beside him.

“You were waiting for me, M. Mitford?” said Tchernigow. “I am sorry to have detained you; but it was unavoidable. You used words just now—in a moment of anger doubtless—which you are already probably sorry for.”

“They were words which I used intentionally and with deliberation,” said Mitford. “I spoke of some man—then to me unnamed—who had come between me and Mrs. Hammond—”

“I scarcely understand the meaning of the phrase ‘come between,’ M. Mitford. It is doubtless my ignorance of your language to which I

must ascribe it. But how could any one 'come between' a married man and a widow—granting, of course, that the married man is a man of honour?"

Mitford ground his teeth, but was silent.

"And supposing always," continued Tchernigow, "that there was some one sufficiently interested in the widow to object to any 'coming between'?—some one who had proposed himself in marriage to her, and who intended to make her his wife?"

The truth flashed across Mitford in an instant. He was beaten on all sides; but there was yet a chance of revenge.

"And suppose there were such a fool," he said,—“which I very much doubt,—the words I used I would use again, and if need were, I would cram them down his throat!”

“*Eh bien, M. Mitford!*” said Tchernigow, changing his language, but ever keeping his quiet tone,—“*eh bien! M. Mitford, décidément vous êtes un lâche!*”

A crash, a gathering of a little crowd, and the

waiter—who was so like Bouffé—raised Prince Tchernigow from the ground, with a little blood oozing from a spot beneath his temple. “He had stumbled over a chair,” he said; “but it was nothing.”

In deep consultation with his stick, Lord Dollamore was lounging round the outer ring at the roulette-table, when Sir Charles Mitford, with a flushed face and dishevelled hair, with rumpled wristbands and shirt-collar awry, made his way to him, and begged for a few minutes’ conversation apart.

Shrugging his shoulders, and obviously unwilling, Dollamore stepped aside with him into an embrasure of the window, and then Mitford said:

“I am in a mess, and I want your help.”

“In what way?”

“I have had a row with Tchernigow—you can guess about what; he insulted me, and I struck him. He’ll have me out of course, and I want you to act for me.”

Lord Dollamore paused for an instant, and took the stick's advice. Then he said :

“ Look here, Sir Charles Mitford : in the least offensive way possible, I want to tell you that I can't do this.”

“ You refuse me ?”

“ I do. We were acquaintances years ago, when you were quite a boy ; and when you came to your title you renewed the acquaintance. I did not object then ; and had things continued as they were then, I would willingly have stood by you now. But they are not as they were then ; they are entirely changed, and all for the worse. You have been going to the bad rapidly for the last twelve months ; and, in short, have compromised yourself in a manner which renders it impossible for me to be mixed up in any affair of yours.”

“ I understand you perfectly, Lord Dollamore,” said Mitford, in a voice hoarse with rage. “ The next request I make to you—and it shall be very shortly too—will be that you will stand, not by me, but before me !”

“In that case,” said Dollamore, with a bow, —“in that case, Sir Charles Mitford, you will not have to complain of a refusal on my part.”

Mitford said nothing, but he was cut to the quick. He had noticed—he could not, even with his blunted feelings and defiant temper, avoid noticing—that men’s manners towards him had lately much changed; that acquaintances plunged up byestreet as they saw him coming, or buried themselves in the sheets of newspapers when he entered the club-room; but he had never been directly insulted before. He would revenge himself on Dollamore before he left Baden; meanwhile there was business on hand, and who should he ask to be his second? Mr. Aldermaston, of course; and he sought him at once. Mr. Aldermaston was only too delighted. To be second to a baronet in a duel with a prince, and then to have the story to tell afterwards, particularly if one of them killed the other—he didn’t much care which—would set him up for life. Mr. Aldermaston agreed at once, and was put in communication with Prince Tchernigow’s friend; and

the meeting was arranged for sunrise in the Black Forest, just above the entrance to the Murgthal.

Prince Tchernigow called on Laura late in the afternoon on which these preliminaries were arranged. It is needless to say that he did not hint at them to her; indeed such care had he taken, that Laura had no idea Sir Charles Mitford had met the Prince since their first interview in Baden, though probably Mademoiselle Marcelline might have been better informed. But Tchernigow said that on reflection it appeared to him better that she should go to Frankfurt that evening,—it would put a stop to any chance of talk, he said, and he would join her there at the Romischer Kaiser the next morning. Laura agreed, as she would have agreed to any thing he might have proposed—so happy was she just then; and while the visitors were engaged at the late *table-d'hôte*, a carriage drew up to the side-door of the Hôtel de Russie, and Mrs. Hammond and Mademoiselle Marcelline started for Frankfurt.

* * * * *

Lord Dollamore was in the habit of breakfasting late and substantially. The tables were generally laid for the first *table-d'hôte* before the easy-going Englishman came lounging into the *salle-à-manger* about ten o'clock, and sat down to his *bifteck aux pommes* and his half-bottle of Léoville. He was not a minute earlier than usual on the morning after he had refused to act for Mitford, though he felt certain the meeting had taken place. But he thought very little of it; he had seen so many duels amongst foreigners which never came to any thing beyond an interchange of pistol-shots, or which were put an end to after the drawing of first blood by a sabre-scratch. It was not until the door was flung open, and Mr. Aldermaston, with his face ashy pale, with his travelling-clothes on and his courier's bag slung round him, rushed into the room, that Lord Dollamore felt something really serious had happened, and said, "Good God, Aldermaston! what has gone wrong? Speak, man!"

"The worst!" said Aldermaston, whose voice had lost its crisp little society-tone, and who spoke

in a hoarse low whisper, — “the worst! Mitford’s hit!”

“Killed?”

“No, he’s alive still; was at least when I left. We got him into a woodcutter’s hut close at hand, and there’s a German doctor with him; but from all I can make out, there’s no hope. I must be off over the frontier, or I shall get in a mess myself. Send me a line to the Grand Laboureur at Antwerp, and let me know all, will you? Good-bye.”

The scene which he had witnessed seemed to have had the effect of causing Aldermaston to age visibly. His whiskers were lank, his hair dishevelled, the hand which clasped Dollamore’s was cold and clammy; and as he hurried from the room it would have been difficult to recognise in him the usual bright chirpy little news-purveyor.

As soon as he was gone Lord Dollamore ordered a carriage to be got ready, and sent round to the Hôtel d’Angleterre to Mr. Keene, the eminent London surgeon, who had arrived two days before, and who, on hearing what had happened, at once consented to accompany Dollamore

to where the wounded man was lying. As they proceeded in the carriage, they exchanged very few remarks. Mr. Keene whiled away the time by the perusal of the new number of the *Lancet*, which had reached him by that morning's post, and which contained some delightfully-interesting descriptions of difficult operations; and Dollamore was immersed in reflections suggested by the nature of the errand on which he was then journeying. He had always had a poor opinion of life in general; and what he had witnessed lately had not tended to raise it. His prophecies regarding Mitford had been more speedily and more entirely fulfilled than he had expected. Mitford had gone to the bad utterly and speedily; and Lady Mitford had had to run the gauntlet in the fullest acceptation of the phrase,—had afforded a topic for the blasting tongues of all the scandal-mongers in London, from no fault of her own, poor child, but from the baseness and brutality of her husband.

These thoughts occupied him till the carriage arrived at a point beyond which it was impossible for it to proceed further. The man who had driven

Mitford and Aldermaston over in the morning, and who had accompanied Dollamore's carriage as guide to the spot, preceded Lord Dollamore and Mr. Keene over rough ruts and among intertwining trees, until at length they reached the hut. Dollamore pushed the door open and looked in, and saw a figure half-dressed, and with the front of its shirt soaked with blood, lying on a heap of straw in one corner of the wretched hovel; a peasant woman standing in the other corner, with two children huddled round her knees; and by the prostrate figure knelt a placid-looking man in black clothes,—the German doctor. He held up his hand in warning, as the door creaked; but Mitford's eyes, turned that way, had fallen on Dollamore, and he tried to beckon him to approach. Dollamore entered, and knelt down beside him. Mitford's lips were moving rapidly; but Dollamore could distinguish not a word. The dying man evidently comprehended this. With the last remnant of strength he raised himself until his mouth touched Dollamore's ear, and whispered:

“Georgie—forgive—” and fell back dead.

CHAPTER IX.

LAST WORDS.

THE equipage and the establishment, the diamonds and the dress of the Princess Tchernigow, furnished the gay inhabitants of the gayest and most gossiping city in the world with a subject for almost inexhaustible discussion. There was no sameness about them, but an ever-varying change; so that curiosity was never sated, and the last select few who had met the Princess, and told their story of her magnificence, had materials afforded them for a version of the princely splendours which differed materially from the version given by the select few of the immediately preceding occasion. With the proverbial impenetrability of the French to English social facts and customs, the Parisian *beau monde* could not be made to understand that there was "any thing

against" the Princess. They knew and cared nothing about the date at which the former husband of that fortunate lady had departed this life, and that at which he had been replaced by the Prince. Many good-natured and strictly moral English people endeavoured to instruct the Parisian mind on this point, and to make it understand that the Princess would have some difficulty with "society" in her own country. But these *idées insulaires* had no success.

Tchernigow had been popular in Paris before he had gratified it by bringing a new princess to sparkle and glitter, by her beauty and her splendour, in the Bois, at the Opera, at the balls, and at the Court. Paris admired the Calmuck; first because he was so immensely rich, because there was nothing in the place, which contains every thing in the world worth having, that he could not buy; and secondly because he was odd, so *bizarre*; because his character was as much out of the common as his wealth, and his eccentricities afforded them an increasing source of remark and speculation. He was the most polished

Russian that had ever appeared in Parisian society—the most widely removed from the train-oil-drinking and no-shirt-wearing tradition of the Muscovites.

And the Princess? She had not been by any means unknown to fame in Paris. She had visited that city during her first bridal tour, and she had had a great success. The freshness and perfection of her beauty, which owed nothing to artificial means, but could bear any kind or degree of light; the piquancy of her manner, her first-rate seat on horseback, her dancing,—all these things had captivated the Parisians. Then, was she not so interesting, this beautiful little English lady, whose husband was so far from young? It was so charming to see them together, because one knew that in England marriages of reason had no place; and this fair creature must have reposed her affections in the feeble elderly gentleman, to whom she was so delightfully devoted, and who was so proud of her. She had had a train of admirers then, naturally; but it was early days, and there was nothing very *prononcé*.

Mrs. Hammond has been in Paris again and again after that first successful appearance; and if her devotion to the feeble elderly gentleman had been less conspicuous, her beauty and her vivacity had been more so. Of course she was "talked about;" but that mysterious and terrible word has one signification and effect in London, and quite another in Paris; and Mrs. Hammond's reign was undimmed.

When the Prince and Princess Tchernigow made their appearance on the scene in their attractive character of bride and bridegroom, considerable curiosity had been excited about them, quite apart from the legitimate interest to which they were entitled on their separate merits, and to which their union added vigour and intensity. The Baden story had of course got about, with more or less correctness of time, place, and circumstances; and the combination of a duel, involving the death of his adversary, with a wedding, in which the bride had been *affichée* to the slain man, was an irresistibly piquant anecdote,—and "so like" Tchernigow.

The Princess came off remarkably well in the innumerable discussions to which the affair gave rise. In the first place Mitford was dead, which was a great point; and in the second, the catalogue of the Prince's luxuries included some useful and devoted toadies, who made it their business to spread abroad a report which gained ample credence, that the unfortunate Englishman was a violent fellow, who had no manners, and who had assumed a tone towards Mrs. Hammond wholly unjustified by their antecedents; in fact, had persecuted that lady, and been *excessivement brutale*.

So it was all plain-sailing with the Prince and Princess, and even the women took the liveliest interest in the latter. Poor dear creature, they said, how very sad, but how charmingly romantic it was! To think that she had been quite ignorant of the duel, and had not had the least idea that her bridegroom had shot a man just before he had married her! When she discovered it, how strange she must have felt! They wondered if it made her experience for a moment a very little of repulsion. But no, probably not,—the Prince

was really such a gentleman; and the other deplorable person it was impossible to pity.

Prince Tchernigow possessed a mansion in the Champs Elysées; and thither, a short time after the arrival of the pair, all Paris (presentable Paris, of course) flocked to pay their respects, and inspect the magnificence of the possessions in the midst of which Tchernigow had installed his bride—doubtless the most precious of them all. Then came brilliant entertainments, and the Princess achieved at one stroke the almost incredible eminence of being declared by common consent the best-dressed woman in Europe—Paris meaning that continent, of course.

It was at the second of these entertainments that Madame de Soubise remarked to Madame de Somme, in a pregnant little sentence, beginning with the invariable “*dites-donc, chère Adèle,*” that Madame la Princesse seemed a little *distracte*, and had begun to wear rouge like the rest of the world. Madame de Somme acquiesced in her friend’s remark, and further added on her own account, that the English

complexions, undeniably charming, were very evanescent, and that really the Princess had no longer the appearance of being young. It was on the same occasion that several of the company had asked who was the "*petite dame*," so beautifully dressed, so quiet, and yet so *spirituelle*, to whom the Princess was so caressing, and the "best" men were invariably presented. The "*petite dame*" was small and slight, pale-faced, and rather plain, perhaps, than pretty. Her features had nothing remarkable about them, and her figure was redeemed from insignificance only by the taste and richness of her dress. But she was eminently attractive; and before long rumours circulated about the *salons* to the effect that the little lady—the close, the inseparable friend of the Princess; a charming Irish widow, who spoke French remarkably well, but with perhaps the slightest defect in the accent (it is so difficult to be certain that one is taught by persons who are *comme il faut*)—was as witty, as brilliant, as her friend was beautiful. She was so completely at her ease, and she enjoyed herself so much; and

how delightful it was to see the affection which subsisted between the little lady and the Princess ! Did one hint to the former that the Princess looked a little fatigued, she would be all concern and agitation ; she would fly to her cherished Laura, and ask her in fervent tones if the pleasures, the delights of this evening of Paradise had been too much for her ; and the two women would form the prettiest tableau in the world.

Did any of the worshippers at Laura's *canapé*, beside which the Prince, most attentive of bridegrooms, most devoted of men, kept his place steadily all the evening, admire the vivacity, the wit, the grace of the little lady, the Princess would reply warmly, that her dear Lucy was fortunate in possessing such a charming flow of spirits ; and Tchernigow would remark that Madame Seymour was indeed a captivating islander, but that he understood the Irish ladies resembled the French in wit and vivacity.

When the season in Paris approached its termination, the *beau monde* was distressed to learn that the health of the Princess was not in so

satisfactory a condition as the host of friends who were desolated by the intelligence could have desired. She was as much seen as ever; she was the gayest of the gay, the richest of the rich, the most brilliant of the brilliant; but she was not as beautiful at the close of that season as she had been at the beginning; and it was not to be denied that Lady Walford and Mrs. Fane—the last new brides and beauties from the English capital—had as many admirers, if not more.

The Princess still dressed better than any woman in Europe, conventionally defined; and her diamonds at least were unapproachable, though there might possibly be brighter eyes to be seen now under the Paris moonlight and wax-light.

“Going to St. Petersburg, are they?” said Lord Dollamore to his bosom-friend the Malacca cane, as he retreated gracefully from the side of the Princess’s carriage, after a brief conversation with her. “Going to St. Petersburg, are they? She does not look enchanted; on the contrary, rather frightened, I thought. And that little

devil Marcelline doing her beloved compatriots with such perfect composure and success! I would not have lost seeing that for a good deal. Gad, the bow she bestowed upon me when the Princess introduced me would have done credit to a duchess! Madame Seymour, hey?—and Irish! By Jove, I have not enjoyed any thing so much for an age!”

Lord Dollamore walked on chuckling and tapping his ear in his old manner. After a little his face grew graver, and his confidences with his cane were resumed in a different tone.

“What the deuce has come over her, I wonder?” he said. “I see a change; but I don’t exactly know where it is. Is it in her face? is it in her manner? She’s very handsome—she’s wonderfully handsome still, though she rouges; but that’s of course here—every one does it; though it’s not a case of painting the lily, so far as the Parisiennes are concerned. Stop, though: there’s such a thing as an orange-lily—I forgot that. It’s something in the expression, I fancy—something which gives one

an impression that she is thinking of one thing and talking of another, which was never *la belle* Laura's way: she knew her *monde* better than to shock their self-love by any thing of that kind. Yes; that's it, by Jove!" and Lord Dollamore struck himself quite a sharp little blow on the ear; "I've hit it: the expression in her face is fear!"

When Lord Dollamore had stepped back from the side of her carriage, and the horses were once more whirling it along, to the admiration of the multitude, the Princess sank back upon the luxurious cushions with a deep sigh. Madame Seymour looked at her with steady composure and not a little contempt.

"Agitated, are you?" she said; "and quite upset by old memories and all that sort of thing? What a weak fool you are! You are thinking of the last time you and that very estimable nobleman met, I daresay, and feeling quite sentimental. If you would remember, in addition, what you intended to do when that interesting interview took place (I remember it: I thought I never saw any thing cooler or cleverer than his polite unconscious-

ness of the identity of your *dame de compagnie*; he used to walk with me in the shrubberies at Redmoor, and I've given him a kiss occasionally for a guinea),—if you would remember what you intended to do, and how completely you have done it, it would be more to the purpose.”

The Princess turned towards her companion, and said in a hurried broken voice :

“ You are wrong, Marcelline,—you are quite wrong ; I was not thinking of any thing of the kind. I was only thinking of this horrible journey to Russia. It terrifies me.”

“ Yes ; but every thing terrifies you, you know. How odd that Madame la Princesse should not be *enthousiasmé* at the prospect of beholding the ancestral home of Monsieur le Prince, of being presented to the gracious and urbane monarch who rules the Russias and the Russians ! They are a little difficult to rule as individuals, I fear ; but as a nation, no doubt, charming. I should have thought madame would have seized the occasion with transport.”

“ Marcelline,” pleaded Laura, “ don't laugh at

me; I am in deadly terror of this journey. You can save me from it if you will. Do, do, Marcelline! It is all dreadful enough even here, where I have some protection—where at least he dares not kill me. But if I am taken there, to his dreadful country, I shall be quite helpless in his hands. He might kill me there, and none would interfere—no one would even know, perhaps.”

“How ignorant she is!” thought Mademoiselle Marcelline, “and how cowardly! He has impressed himself upon her tolerably effectually, this lacquered savage, and she has succumbed. These Englishwomen are very shallow after all, no matter how bad they may be.”

The Princess still pleaded, and Mademoiselle Marcelline, having derived sufficient amusement just then from her companion’s weakness, and being somewhat fatigued by her importunity, told her at length, and shortly, that she desired to enjoy the drive, and therefore intended to change the subject. For her part, she did not particularly care about going to Russia; she understood that travelling in that empire had not been suffi-

ciently systematised on that scale of comfort indispensable to persons of condition; and, on the whole, she rather thought they were not likely to go to Russia just then.

Madame Seymour's apartments in the Hôtel Tchernigow were among the most luxurious and elegant which that palatial edifice contained. They were inferior to those of the Princess in size alone; in every detail of comfort and sybarite ease they equalled hers. A tiny and delicious little boudoir made one of the *suite*; and this beautiful retreat was the scene that same evening of a rather remarkable conversation. The speakers were the mistress of the gem-like apartment and Prince Tchernigow. The former—dressed in the most tasteful and becoming evening-dress it was possible for human milliners to concoct, and adorned with jewels, which also differed from those worn by the Princess chiefly by their size—and the latter, in his usual faultless attire, had met in the boudoir previous to accompanying the Princess to the very last entertainment at which they intended to appear.

“Well, Marcelline,” said the Prince, “you did me the honour to summon me. What is it? Merely that I should tell you that you never looked so charming?”

“For nothing of the sort,” said she, putting aside the compliment as beneath her notice and beside the question; “I sent for you to tell you that the Princess does not wish to go to St. Petersburg. She is nervous, I believe, and has some strange notions of the impunity of Russian princes on their own versts. At all events, she does not wish to go.”

“I am perfectly aware of that fact, Madame Seymour,” said the Prince, with a peculiar smile; “but we are going to St. Petersburg, *quand même*.”

“Very well,” said Marcelline; and she held her wrist towards the Prince, as a tacit intimation that he was to button her dainty glove. “Then we shall not meet for some time, for I have not the most remote intention of going to St. Petersburg.”

“What!” said the Prince, with an angry start.

“You will not come? You are not serious, Marcelline?”

“I am perfectly serious, Prince Tchernigow. I have no intention whatever of going to St. Petersburg at present, and I beg I may hear no more on the subject. Have the goodness to ascertain if the Princess is ready!” She sat down and turned over the leaves of a book.

The Prince walked two or three times up and down the little apartment, and swore a Cossack oath or two under his breath. Then he stopped opposite to her and said:

“Where will you consent to go to, then, Marcelline?”

“H-m!” She paused, with an exasperating air of indecision. “I don’t exactly know; I think I shouldn’t mind the Mediterranean.”

As she took her place beside the Princess, whose beauty was less brilliant than ever that evening, and whose depression her attendants had not failed to mark, she said, “Don’t look so wretchedly subdued and terrified, Madame la Princesse; you are not going to behold your

princely spouse in the cradle of his race and the midst of a grateful peasantry. You are going to the Mediterranean instead."

And then she said to herself, "Poor wretch! I am glad I saved her from that, for the present. I really object to torturing her, when there's nothing to gain."

Another season, and another, and the Hôtel Tchernigow opened its hospitable doors, and maintained its reputation for splendour, profusion, and fashion. But the health of the Princess afforded more and more reason for solicitude to the host of friends who were desolated by the intelligence that she was indisposed; and the beauty of the Princess began to require that adornment from dress which it had hitherto bestowed upon the utmost resources of decoration. Ugly rumours regarding the princely *ménage* had begun to circulate; and a few, a very few, of those in high places had abated the alacrity with which they had been wont to welcome the appearance of the Muscovite magnate in their *salons*. French society does

not tolerate overt brutality ; and there had been a story about a fall, and a broken arm ; and though no doubt both circumstances were purely accidental, and indeed the fullest particulars were given to the numerous callers, who were so anxious to hear of the dear Princess's progress towards recovery, the matter left an unpleasant impression, which all the efforts made by the Princess to convince the world that she was not only the richest, but the happiest, woman in Paris did not succeed in removing.

What efforts they were ! How she rouged, and dressed, and danced, and talked ! How she drove out with the Prince, and talked to him, and smiled at him ! How she playfully wore the injured arm in a very conspicuous sling, and lamented that she was obliged to let "Alexis" drive her darling ponies for her, until her tiresome arm should be quite well, and how he perfectly ruined them ! How she talked about the polished *parquets* as being so charming, but then so dangerous, — "witness my poor arm, you know," — and held the beautiful limb out for

pity and admiration! How she complained that she could not ride any more that season, the injury having been inflicted on the "bridle-arm;" and exulted in the promise of "Alexis" that if she would only take good care of herself, and get quite well, she should hunt in Leicestershire next season!

It was all very clever, but it did not do; and Tchernigow knew that it did not; and the Princess knew it also, and better.

One night, at the Italiens, an Englishman who had known the Princess in former days saw her in her box, sitting radiantly in the front, while Madame Seymour occupied a less prominent position, and a couple of the most fashionable dandies of the day occupied the background. This gentleman had left a party of ladies in the boxes, and gone down to the stalls, and he now remarked to his companion:

"How awfully she is altered! I never saw such a wreck in so short a time. And surely that lady with her is some one I have seen before. Do you know who she is, Dollamore?"

“Yes, I do, of course. That lady is Madame Seymour, an Irish lady, a widow of large fortune, who is devotedly attached to the Princess Tchernigow. She lives with her,—for her, it almost appears; and she speaks French so like a native, that it is difficult to distinguish any difference.”

“Ah, then, I am wrong; and we don’t know her,” said the gentleman, still looking curiously at the party.

“Well, perhaps you don’t exactly know her,” said Dollamore; “but you are right in thinking you had seen her. Madame Seymour used to be known at Redmoor as Mademoiselle Marceline, and she was Mrs. Hammond’s maid.”

His hearer’s exclamation of astonishment was checked by a sudden commotion in the Princess’s box. She had recognised the English party at the moment when his companion addressed his last question to Lord Dollamore. She had fought hard for a moment against her overwhelming emotion; but the days of Laura’s strength and self-mastery were over, and she fell fainting from her chair.

Very shortly after this occurrence the paternal yearnings of the Czar to behold Prince Tchernigow once more in the land of his birth proved too strong for resistance. The Prince and Princess left France for Holy Russia; and that was the last that was seen of them in Paris.

Miss Constance Greenwood, Miss Gillespie, Lizzie Ponsford — which you will — never saw Lady Mitford after that memorable occasion on which she yielded up possession of the forged bill. A considerable time afterwards Lady Mitford wrote to her a long and sweet letter, in which she reiterated her thanks for the great service which Miss Gillespie — so she still called her — had intended doing her; but she said, “even had the talisman which you left with me possessed the powers which you wished to invest it with, it was useless—it was too late.” Lady Mitford added, that she had not forgotten the name under which Miss Gillespie had told her she was pursuing a theatrical career; that she had made inquiries, and found that “Miss Constance Greenwood” was

spoken of in the highest terms, not merely for her transcendent abilities, but for the rectitude of her conduct. In conclusion, Lady Mitford invited her correspondent to come and stay with her when she would, and not to fail to apply immediately and directly to her when she was in strait or difficulty of any kind.

People had said that Miss Constance Greenwood's stage-tears were the most natural throughout the profession. They were not nearly so natural as those which welled up hot and blinding into her eyes as she perused Lady Mitford's letter, and which showered down thick and heavy on to the paper as she pressed it to her lips. That letter is yellow with age now; but, all stained and tear-blurred as it is, it is the choicest object in that delicate little desk in which Miss Constance Greenwood keeps all her treasures.

Not that she was Miss Constance Greenwood very long after the receipt of that letter. She had risen to the very height of popularity with the public, and had drawn a large amount of money into Mr. Wuff's treasury, when Mr. Wuff sent

for her one day to his room, and told her in confidence that Mr. Frank Likely was going to give up the Parthenium next week and go into the Queen's Bench, where he would remain until he was "whitewashed;" after undergoing which process he and Mrs. Likely would undertake an engagement at the Hatton-Garden Theatre. "And the worst of it is," said Mr. Wuff,—“the worst of it is, my dear, that Mrs. Likely says she won't have any better-looking woman than herself playing leading business in the theatre. That's a compliment to you, my dear; but it seems that you must go; and as I've made an engagement with the Likelys, I am afraid you and I must part at the end of the season.”

Miss Greenwood shrugged her shoulders and bowed her head. She knew that with her present *prestige* any manager in London would be glad to engage her. She was in no hurry, therefore, to seek for work. The Parthenium closed; Mr. Frank Likely's body was seized by the myrmidons of the sheriff; Mr. Wuff's season came to an end; and still Miss Greenwood had not looked after another

engagement, though she had innumerable offers of terms.

How did Sir Laurence Alsager, so far away from England, keep *au courant* with London theatrical matters? Just as Miss Greenwood was weighing two offers in her mind, doubtful which to accept, she had a visit from an old gentleman, who announced himself as Sir Laurence Alsager's solicitor, and handed her a letter—a letter which said that the writer had never forgotten her intended kindness to a certain person; that he had heard of her theatrical success, and desired to serve her. Would she not like to be the lessee of the Parthenium—then, as he understood, vacant? If so, his lawyer had instructions to act in any way she wished; to draw what money she required, and to carry through the arrangement for her. Miss Greenwood gave a little cry of delight; her old love of fun sprung up in her. How glorious it would be to beat the Likelys with their own weapons, and in their own den! She accepted Sir Laurence Alsager's kind proposition, she said; and while the lawyer went to work at his business,

she went to work at hers. She set the eminent Spofforth to work on a new piece; she engaged Dacre Pontifex, who was as distasteful to Mr. Frank Likely as was Miss Greenwood to his wife. She got together a capital stock-company, and took the town by storm. Every thing prospered with her, and at the end of each season she found large gains. She has long since repaid Sir Laurence Alsager's advance; and she has now great wealth, and some one to share it with her. Dacre Pontifex, who had so long made love to her on the stage, at length made love to her in earnest; and as he had always proved himself a thoroughly good fellow, she accepted him, and there is no happier couple in England. They have almost given up acting now; but they still retain the theatre, and are thought highly of by all who know them.

And Lord Dollamore? Lord Dollamore still lives, as well as, and in some respects better than, ever. He superintended all the arrangements for sending Sir Charles Mitford's body to England under the charge of Banks—a duty which that

functionary performed with the greatest reluctance, declaring that he had not been engaged to "wait upon corpses;" and then Dollamore had a long and serious consultation with his stick, the subject of which was whether it would be expedient for him to make any change in his mode of life. The idea of marriage had never entered his head; but now that he knew Lady Mitford was free, he began to experience a curious sensation at his heart, which caused him at first the wildest astonishment, and then a considerable amount of trouble. He had watched Georgie through all her trials and temptations, and the sight had impressed him deeply. For the first time since manhood he confessed (to himself) a belief in virtue, bravery, and selflessness; for the first time in his life he felt an irrepressible yearning towards the possessor of these qualities; and he thought how the companionship of such a woman would illumine the decline of his aimless, purposeless life.

He was for some days in doubt whether he should not return at once to England, and after

a decent interval proceed tentatively to see whether an offer of his hand to Lady Mitford would be likely to be successful; but he finally decided otherwise. He was no longer young; his manner of life was formed; and he doubted whether he should have strength to keep to all his good resolutions—in which case, and in the event of his marriage with Georgie, her old troubles would be renewed when she had less strength to bear them.

There is no doubt, however, that the mere fact of his indulging in such thoughts proved that he was to a certain extent an altered man. His tongue is much less bitter, his manner much less rough, his thoughts much less cynical than they were. The person who suffers most from him now is the *chef* of the Mæcenas, when Dollamore rules the House-Committee. When that unfortunate Frenchman hears from the house-steward that Lord Dollamore has been seen whispering to his stick about an *entrée* or an omelette, he knows what to expect the next day.

* * * * *

When Lady Mitford was told by Captain Bligh, who executed his task with great feeling, if not with profound skill, that her waiting was all in vain,—that her letter had never reached her unfortunate husband, but had been carefully enclosed with the effects of the deceased, and consigned to the custody of Mr. Banks, she was not so completely overwhelmed as might have been expected. She listened patiently to all the details which it was considered necessary to give her, and bore herself with a gentle fortitude which surprised all who saw her.

The remains of the unfortunate Baronet arrived in due time; the funeral was “performed;” and Sir Charles Mitford rested in the family burial-place—the most unfortunate of a race who had been generally rather uninterestingly prosperous.

Lady Mitford found herself very rich. Not only did she come into possession of an ample jointure, but the entire sum destined for a provision for younger children was bequeathed to her, in case of the non-existence or death of such

children. She was very much surprised to find that Sir Charles had made a will, not many months prior to his death, by which he had left her considerable personal property also; so that her position was an enviable one, as far as pecuniary affairs were concerned. How far that was, she had yet to learn. She had courage, resignation, and patience; and she had the good gift of common sense, enabling her to lay plans and make arrangements with judgment and foresight: but she was not cold-hearted, nor callous, and the time lay yet a good way distant at which she could reckon her riches and feel her freedom.

The next heir to the title and entailed estates was a boy named Edward Mitford, whom Lady Mitford had never seen, and who, with his widowed mother, lived in an obscure village in Warwickshire, where the heir to so much wealth and position picked up a very indifferent education at a school of fourth-rate pretensions and sixth-rate performances. No mention of this youth had been made by Sir Charles, who had, very naturally, bestowed no thought upon the distant con-

tingency of his succession. The house in London had been rented by Sir Charles for a term of years; and Lady Mitford determined to retain it in her own possession. Having formed this resolution, and ascertained all that was necessary relative to her position, Lady Mitford wrote to the Reverend Cuthbert Farleigh. She recalled herself to his recollection, and appealed to his kindness. She was very friendless, she said, and wanted advice. Sir Laurence Alsager had told her that the kindness of heart which had been so distinguishing a characteristic of Cuthbert Farleigh in his boyhood was no less conspicuous in his more advanced and responsible years, and she asked him to come to her. She did not make any mention of Helen in the letter; she would defer that until they could talk it over, she thought; and then he would perhaps make her an offer of Helen's society, which she would gladly accept.

The Reverend Cuthbert answered the letter in person; and the meeting between the former friends and companions under such altered cir-

cumstances could hardly have failed to be affecting. Georgie thanked him with all her heart, and felt less lonely and desolate that evening than she had felt since the day on which Sir Laurence Alsager had left her. He had arrived late; and they agreed to postpone the discussion of the serious matters on which Georgie desired his advice until the following day.

As Lady Mitford sat alone that night before the bright fire in her dressing-room, she passed her life before her in mental review. She questioned herself concerning the grief which she felt so keenly, and yet blamed herself for not feeling with still greater acuteness. The oppression, the vague gloom of a great change, of a tremendous shock, from whose first effects she had not suffered so much as from that which succeeded, were on her. The dreadful death of her husband appalled her; less because it was *he* who had been killed, and because he had been killed in so awful a manner, than because it seemed to set the seal of the curse upon their marriage. She saw that marriage now as it was,—a mistake first; then a

disaster ; finally, a catastrophe ;—and she recoiled with horror from the awful lesson of life thus opened out before her.

“Swift and sure,” she thought, “punishment has followed wrong in *his* case. It seems hard, too ; he was not the only man beguiled by a wanton woman, not the only man who betrayed and deserted his wife. Little as I have seen of the world, I have seen instances of the same thing ; but these men, who had as little conscience, had more self-control, more judgment, more self-respect, and did not expose themselves to the risks which he dared, and which have been fatal to him. Poor fellow ! poor Charley !”

Her reveries always ended thus, in sweet womanly compassion and forgiveness. She did not deceive herself ; she did not lament for Sir Charles with the intense and passionate grief of bereavement ; she did not make any false estimate of her loss, or give way to any sentiment in which the perfect truth did not abide ; but she shrank appalled and miserable from the contemplation of so total a wreck as her wretched husband’s life had

been, from the possibilities of sin and suffering which it revealed to her.

Lord Dollamore had written to her,—Banks had brought the letter; and so she learned that the last thought of the dying man had been of her, the last word he had spoken had been her name. Georgie did not attach greater importance to this fact than it deserved. She knew how to discriminate between remorse and repentance too well to make a mistake; but she was very thankful for the message, very thankful that her husband had been permitted to utter it. She knew that in the future, as long as she should live, those words would be a comforting recollection to her; and she fully comprehended how much harder it would all have been to endure, had the silence which had subsisted between her and Sir Charles for several days before he left town never been broken, even by those two gasping, hardly-articulate sounds.

Cuthbert Farleigh and Lady Mitford held a long consultation, as they had agreed to do; and during its progress the curate learned that she

was acquainted with the fact of his engagement to Helen Manningtree; and Lady Mitford imparted to him the permission and counsel Sir Laurence Alsager had given her to ask Helen to come to her in any time of need.

“You have had more than one such time of need, dear Lady Mitford,” said Cuthbert, “since Sir Laurence wrote to you and to Helen; and why have you never made a sign, why have you never asked Helen to come to you?”

“Because I could not think it right, Cuthbert. The trouble I was in was of a peculiar kind,—my sorrow was the result of another’s sin; and I don’t think it would have been right to have brought a young girl like Helen in contact with it. When I think of my own girlhood, when I remember how far I was from the mere knowledge of such perversities in human relations being possible, I am sure I was right.”

Cuthbert Farleigh remembered his own words to Helen,—“You are better without the confidence of an unhappy wife,”—and admired the directness with which the instinct and the principle of

this woman had guided her to a similar conclusion.

“ But now,” she said, “ that is all over. When you and I come to the end of our conversation, let the days which preceded the dark and terrible one of his death”—she paused for a moment to command her voice,—“ let them be consigned to oblivion. There are no faults in the grave ; all is so trifling, so small, so contemptible in the presence of that great mystery. I think it is a happy thing, Cuthbert, that the death of a person who has ever been beloved blots out not only anger, but dulls remembrance. I know this is the truth, that many and many a day I sat brooding over small offences, little slights, trifling but significant departures from the courtesies and the graces of love ; and oh, how miserable such brooding made me ! Well, I forget them all now ; every trace of bitterness has disappeared,—I remember only all the good there was in my poor Charley. Yes, Cuthbert, he is mine again now ; he had ceased to be hers before he was slain ; now he is mine again, and I am not going to dwell on his faults.”

Cuthbert Farleigh was privately of opinion that Lady Mitford proposed to herself an exceedingly limited sphere of contemplation in respect to her late estimable lord ; but he admired, he revered, as every man with the heart of a gentleman must, the simple, beautiful, unreasoning instinct of womanly tenderness.

“ So now,” she went on, “ there can be no harm in Helen’s coming to me. I am a widow so much sadder and more pitiable than other widows, that I cannot talk of him whom I have lost with that free outspoken pride which is so instinctive in other women, and which must be so sweet and so bitter too, so precious and so terrible. I am truly widowed ; for life robbed me of my husband before death came to hide him from my eyes. The world will cease to talk about him soon, and it will forget me when it does not see me. There will be nothing objectionable in the quiet life which I shall ask Helen to share with me until you ask her to leave my home for yours.”

Helen Manningtree obeyed Lady Mitford’s

summons; and from the first hours of their mutual association Sir Laurence Alsager's hopes and expectations were fulfilled. They "suited each other" exactly, and their companionship was beneficial to both.

Helen Manningtree and Mrs. Chisholm corresponded with great regularity with Sir Laurence, now travelling somewhere in the East, and furnishing the most inscrutable addresses for their letters, the attempt to decipher which they ordinarily gave up in despair and pasted them bodily on the envelopes. Their letters were written from London and from Knockholt respectively, and furnished the recipient with the fullest particulars respecting their writers, and the most accurate details of the few events which marked the first year of Lady Mitford's widowhood.

Thus from Helen Sir Laurence learned that the young Sir Edward and his mother had come to town on Lady Mitford's invitation, and that Georgie and the quiet little lady from the country soon became great friends; that the young baronet was a promising boy enough, but given

to idleness, the avoidance of soap-and-water, and the pursuit of useless amusements, such as cricket and fishing, as contra-distinguished from classical and useful learning; that his mother and Lady Mitford having duly consulted the family-advisers, and received from them the simple counsel that they had better manage the boy as they thought proper, had considered that the very best way of managing him would be to establish him comfortably under the charge of a private tutor of unusually desirable attainments.

When Helen next wrote she informed Sir Laurence that the private tutor of unusually desirable attainments had been found in the person of Cuthbert Farleigh, who had, moreover, been provided with a very comfortable living not very far distant from Knockholt, by virtue of a mysterious arrangement whereby somebody gave up this piece of preferment at the present, in consideration of some other "good thing" of a similar kind which would be at the young baronet's disposal in the future. Helen did not understand the arrangement very clearly, but

she had a perfect appreciation of its results ; and though her account of the transaction, as written "out" to Sir Laurence (who, though he wrote vaguely of coming soon, was still beyond the reach of civilisation and spelling), was remarkably confused, two facts appeared with unmistakable clearness. The one was that the family-lawyers were satisfied with the arrangement ("There's no simony in it, then, or bedevilment of that kind," thought Sir Laurence, relieved when he ascertained this first fact); the second was that Helen's marriage could not take place so early as she and Cuthbert had hoped, because since Cuthbert had ceased to be a curate, the cares of property and position had fallen upon him, involving the repairing and altering of his parsonage-house, new furnishing, &c. &c. "So now, as it is so far off, dear Laurence," wrote Helen, "you really must come home in time for my wedding. I think we should have put the event off, at all events, in order to admit of Lady Mitford's being present; and now, as her year's deep mourning will have more than ex-

pired, she has promised to come. Indeed, I rather think our marriage will take place here. You would be much surprised, if you could see her, at her cheerfulness. I am sure it must arise from her perfect forgetfulness of self. She lives entirely for others, and her serenity and sweetness tell that peace is the result. Sir Edward is greatly attached to her; he and Cuthbert also get on very well together. As usual, Lady Mitford sends her kindest regards."

From Mrs. Chisholm Sir Laurence received good tidings of affairs at Knockholt Park. That excellent lady prided herself upon her letter-writing, fondly flattering herself, at times, that she turned her sentences in something of the same manner in which her gifted Augustine had rounded those flowing periods which had been so effective when the departed curate occupied the pulpit at St. Parable's. She liked writing letters, and especially to Sir Laurence; and though she furnished him with plentiful details concerning individuals of whose identity he had the most vague and confused ideas; and though she was

very pathetic indeed on the theme of Cuthbert's removal "to a sphere of, I trust, greatly extended usefulness, but that usefulness to others to be purchased at the price of a relapse into spiritual destitution here very sad to contemplate,"—Sir Laurence liked receiving her letters.

The truth was, his heart yearned towards England and home. He had imposed upon himself a fixed term of absence, and nothing would have induced him to abridge that period; but all his resolution did not check his imagination, did not arrest his fancy, did not quell his longing for its expiration. The smallest details which reached him from the distant households in which he was held in such affectionate remembrance had ineffable charm for him. He found himself, under the most unpropitious circumstances and in the most unheard-of places, writing lengthy epistles to Mrs. Chisholm—letters full of almost feminine inquisitiveness, and enjoining the immediate despatch of voluminous replies. He rejoiced the good lady's heart by the sympathy which he expressed in all the local matters which she detailed;

and he soothed her sorrows concerning the departure of Cuthbert by so dexterous an argument in favour of the almost inevitable eligibility of the curate destined to succeed him, that Mrs. Chisholm actually prepared to receive him with a gracious and hopeful welcome. Sir Laurence was right; only a young man of exemplary piety and conscientious intentions in the direction of parish-work would be at all likely to accept so poor a provision as the curacy at Laneham,—no doubt all would be well; and she hoped dear Cuthbert would not be led away by his preferment. It was, however, melancholy to observe how great a contrast sometimes existed between the lowly and hard-working curate and the proud, lazy, and worldly-minded rector. She trusted such a contrast might never exist in the case of dear Cuthbert.

The simple-minded lady was thinking, as she thus expressed her guileless hopes and fears, of one curate to whom preferment never came, and whom it never could have spoiled. She had a strong conviction that if there should prove to be

any celestial institution at all resembling a bench of bishops in a future state, she should find her Augustine occupying a very prominent place among its occupants.

So the time passed on, and the period appointed for Helen's marriage drew near. The wedding was to be a very quiet one, as Lady Mitford had insisted on its taking place at her house, and the first year of her widowhood would have expired only a few weeks before the time for the marriage.

Mrs. Chisholm, Mrs. Mitford, the young baronet, and the Reverend Cuthbert Farleigh (rector of Everingham and principal on this auspicious occasion), Helen, and her hostess, were assembled at Lady Mitford's house on the last evening but one before the event. They were all together in the drawing-room, and were engaged in discussing the chances for and against the arrival of Sir Laurence Alsager in time for the wedding.

"I am afraid he has made a mistake," said Cuthbert, "about a steamer to Trieste. I can find no announcement of one for a week to come."

"No, no," said Helen; "Laurence said he

would come, and Laurence will be here. I would not give him up if we were all in the church."

"What do you think, Lady Mitford?" asked Sir Edward; "I'm awfully anxious to see this Sir Laurence you and Helen are for ever jawing about,—I'm sure he's awfully jolly, though I suppose he's no end of a swell."

The Reverend Cuthbert Farleigh considered it his duty to correct the young gentleman's vernacular at this juncture, and Lady Mitford did not appear to have heard the question. At all events, she allowed it to remain unanswered.

At that moment a servant brought Helen a note. "Come by hand from the Clarendon, ma'am," he explained.

Helen exclaimed rapturously :

"It's from Laurence! He's in London! We shall see him to-morrow! There, Cuthbert, you incredulous person, will you ever doubt Laurence's promise or dispute my opinion again?"

"Certainly not, after the day after to-morrow, Nelly," replied Cuthbert.

There was a small enclosure in Sir Laurence's

note to Helen, which she had slipped into her pocket unperceived. It bore Lady Mitford's name; but Helen waited until she was about to take leave of her, as usual, for the night at the door of her own room before she handed it to her. When she was alone Georgie opened the note. It was very brief; it contained only three words. They were :

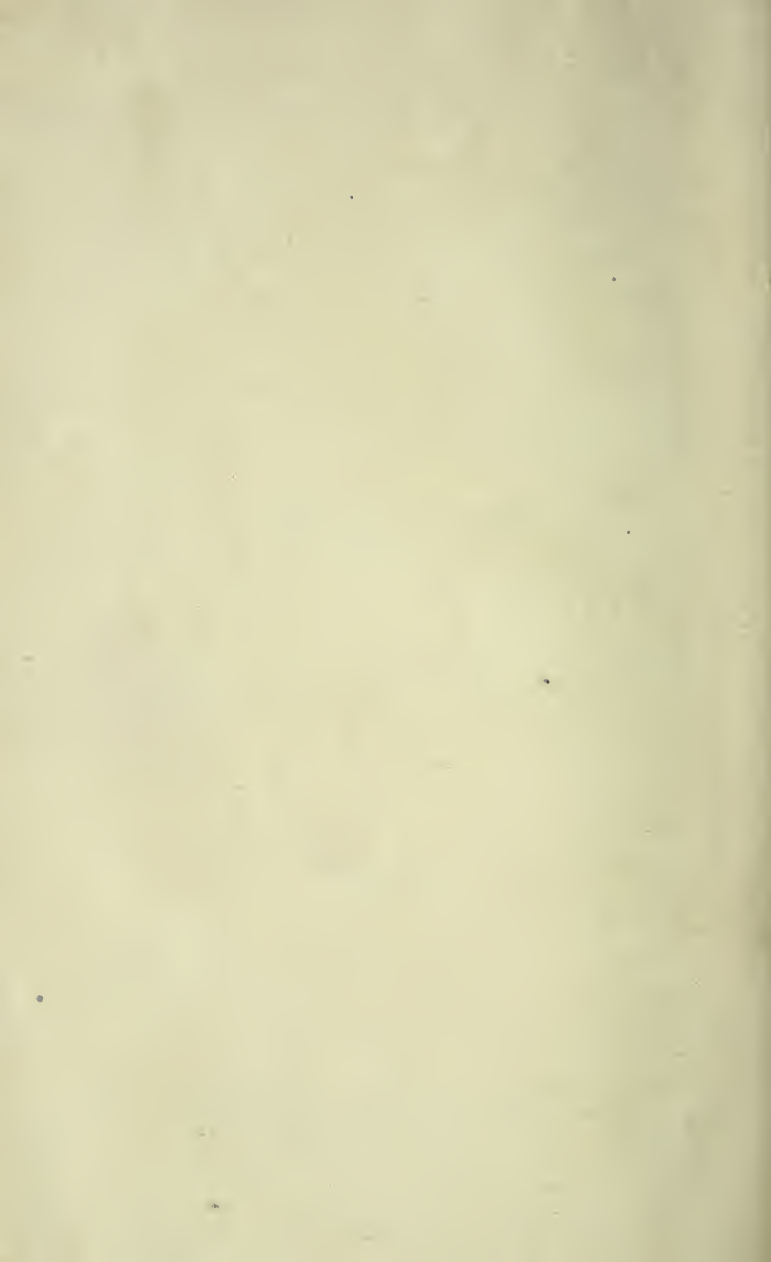
“ FORTITER—FIDELITER—
FELICITER ? ”

Georgie's reply to this query was perfectly satisfactory to Sir Laurence Alsager.

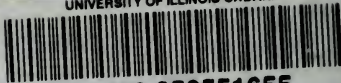
THE END.

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
PANCRAS ROAD, N. W.





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 056551655

