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GERVASE CASTONEL;

OR,

THE SIX GRAY POWDERS.

A TALE.

BY MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "MRS. HALLIBURTON'S TROUBLES." THE "HEIR TO ASHLEY," "CASTLE WAFER," ETC.

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GERVASE CASTONEL;

OR,

THE SIX GRAY POWDERS.

CHAPTER I.

HOW THE NEW SURGEON CAME TO THE VILLAGE OF EBURY TO SETTLE, AND OF ANOTHER STRANGE PERSON.

A POWERFUL sensation was created one day in the village of Ebury, by a report that somebody had taken the long-uninhabited house, with the stone balcony and green verandah, which was situate in the centre of the street.

Who could have hired it? the whole village were asking, one of another. Those cousins of the Smiths? or the people who had come on a visit to the Hall, and professed to like Ebury so well? No, none of these; it was a stranger from London, quite unknown to everybody: for there soon appeared a shining zinc plate on the newly-varnished oak door bearing in large, to-be-read-at-a-great-distance-off-letters, "Mr. Gervase Castonel. Consulting Surgeon."

Ebury was in an ecstasy. A fashionable doctor was what the place wanted above all things; as to Winninton, he was nothing but an apothecary, old now, and stupid. Only three days before (so the tale went round the whist-tables), when he was called in to Mrs. Major Acre, an elderly dowager, he had the insolence to tell her he could do her little good; that if she would eat less and walk more, she would not want a doctor. They had put up with Winninton, especially when he had his young and agreeable partner, a gentleman of fortune and position, who had joined him some time before. But this gentleman's wife had fallen into ill health, which had caused him to quit Ebury, and seek a warmer climate.

Mr. Gervase Castonel arrived, and took possession of his residence. You all know how fond we are apt to be of fresh faces, but you cannot know how rapturously fond Ebury at once grew of his. And yet, to a dispassionate observer, it was not a prepossessing face; it was silent, pale, and unfathomable, with a gray, impenetrable eye that disliked to look at you, and dark hair. They tried to guess his age: some said five-and-twenty, some thirty; it is most probable he was near the latter, a small-made man, of middle height.

Poor Mr. Winninton! he had attended Ebury and the county round for forty years, walking unostentatiously on his two legs, and never, unless the distance was really beyond them, using a horse or carriage, and then it was borrowed or hired. But he had to witness the *debut* of Mr. Castonel in a stylish cab with a tiger behind it; both of the newest London importation; Mr. Castonel's arms being emblazoned on the cab, and Mr. Castonel's taste on the boy's dress. He never stirred a professional yard without this cab: did a patient at the next door call him in, the cab took him there. Generally the boy would be hoisted up, holding on by the back straps, after the approved manner

of tigers; sometimes, when it was Mr. Castonel's pleasure not to drive himself, he sat by his master's side and took the reins. Mr. Castonel had a habit of sitting very back in his cab, and the lad also, so that when its head was up they were invisible; and in this way the cab would go dashing at a fierce rate up and down the street. Until Ebury became familiar with this peculiarity, it was the cause of no end of terror; the pedestrians believing that the spirited horse, without a guide, was making for their unfortunate bodies. Two of these horses were possessed by Mr. Castonel, fine, valuable animals, and one or other was always to be seen, with the cab behind him. Sure never did a stranger fall into so extensive a practice (to judge by appearances), as did Mr. Gervase Castonel.

The first patient he was summoned to was Mrs. Major Acre. It may be observed that a family in Ebury wrote a note of invitation to Mrs. Major Acre and omitted the "Major." She at once returned the letter, with an intimation that Mrs. *Major* Acre declined acquaintance with them: so we will take care not to fall under a similar calamity. Mr. Castonel was called in to Mrs. Major Acre, and she was charmed with him. He sympathized so feelingly with her ailments; but assured her that in a little time, under his treatment, she would not have a symptom left. That horrid Winninton, she imparted to him, had told her she wanted nothing but walking and fasting. Oh, as to Winninton, Mr. Castonel rejoined, with a contemptuous curl of his wire-drawn, impenetrable lips, what could be expected of an apothecary? He (Mr. Castonel) hoped soon to leave no patients to the mercy of *him*. And this was repeated by Mrs. Major Acre wherever she went: and she took care to go everywhere to laud the praises of the consulting surgeon: so that people almost longed for a tender fit of illness, that they might put themselves under the bland and fostering care of Mr. Castonel.

Nor was there only one house taken, nor only one stranger who had come to settle in Ebury. At the same time, a lady, attended by one female servant, —a young and handsome lady, it was said, became the tenant of Beech Lodge. Her name no one knew, her business was no one's business. She lived secluded—declined visitors, and rarely if ever stirred out. It was not until some time afterward that it was found that she was an acquaintance—a family connection, he carelessly observed—of the new surgeon. Gossip kept a sharp scrutiny on the couple, but even gossip could make nothing out. The newcome lady was circumspect—rather haughtily so, however; and except the fact of her seclusion, which was highly censurable in such a place as Ebury, she gave no offence. Gossip would have grown tired of her, and turned its attention to some one else, and did when any one else came, but in default of new matter, the mysterious lady at Beech Lodge gave rise to the most earnest conjecture, and served as a standing dish at the Ebury tea-tables.

CHAPTER II.

ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE NEW SURGEON TO THE OLD SURGEON'S NIECE.

Time goes on with us all, and it did with Ebury. In six months not a single patient remained with Mr. Winninton; all had flown to Mr. Gervase Castonel: for that gentleman, in spite of his flaring zinc plate, proved to be a general practitioner. We must except one or two intimate friends of Mr. Winninton's; and we must except the poor, those who could not pay. Mr. Castonel had made an ostentatious announcement that he should give advice gratis from nine to ten o'clock on Tuesdays and Fridays, but the few poor who accepted the invitation found him so repellant and unsympathizing, that they were thankful to return to kind old Mr. Winninton, who had not only attended them without charge at their own homes, but had done much toward sup-

plying their bodily wants. Mr. Winninton had been neglectful of gain; perhaps his having no family rendered him so. He had never married, he and his sister having always lived together: but just before her death, a niece, Caroline Hall, then left an orphan, came home to them. To describe his affection for this girl would be impossible: it may be questioned if Caroline returned it as it deserved—but when is the love of the aged for the young ever repaid in kind? The pleasure and delights of visiting filled her heart, and her uncle's home and society were only regarded as things to be escaped from. Was he yet awake to this? There was something worse for him to awake to, by-and-by, something that as yet he suspected not. He was much changed: had been changing ever since the establishment in Ebury of Mr. Castonel: his face had acquired a gray cast like his hair, his merry tongue was hushed, and people said he looked as if his heart were breaking. It is hard to bear ingratitude: ingratitude from those with whom we have lived for sixty years. It was not for the value of the practice: no, no: he had that which would last him his life, and leave something behind him: but it was the unkindness, that was telling upon Mr. Winninton, the desertion of him for a stranger, one in reality less skilled than he was.

Frances Chavasse stood in her mother's drawing-room, and, with her, the daughter of the Rector of Ebury, the Reverend Christopher Leicester. Ellen Leicester had come in after dinner to spend the afternoon; for Ebury, though it called itself an aristocratic place, usually dined in the middle of the day. They were both lovely girls, about nineteen, though unlike in feature as in disposition. They were called the beauties of Ebury. Caroline Hall got classed with them also, but it arose from her constantly associating with them, not from her good looks. She was two or three years older, had a sallow face with dark hair, and lively, pleasant dark eyes. An absurd story had gone abroad, but died away again: that Mr. Castonel, upon being asked which of the three was most to his taste, replied that only one of them was, but he'd marry the three, for all that.

The two young ladies were talking eagerly, for Mrs. Major Acre had just paid them a visit, and disclosed a piece of intelligence which completely astounded her hearers—that Miss Hall was about to be married to Mr. Castonel.

"It is impossible that it can be true," Mrs. Chavasse and her daughter had exclaimed in the same quick, positive, eager tone, for they were the counterpart of each other in manner. "Old Winninton hates Mr. Castonel like poison."

"I know he does. And I was told it was for that very reason Mr. Castonel is bent upon having her," said Mrs. Major; "that he may mortify the old apothecary, and take from him the only treasure he has left—Caroline."

"Oh, that's all Ebury gossip," decided Mrs. Chavasse. "A well-established man like Mr. Castonel will take care to marry according to his fancy, not to gratify pique. Mr. Winninton will never give his consent."

"He has given it," answered the major's widow. "Caroline's will is law, there. I wish she may find it so in her new home."

"Well," added Mrs. Chavasse, dubiously, "I don't know that Mr. Castonel is altogether the man I should choose to give a daughter to. Such curious things are said of him—about that mysterious person, you know."

"Grapes are sour," thought Mrs. Major Acre to herself. "And now I have told you the news, I must go," she said, rising. "Good-by to you all. My compliments at the parsonage, my dear Miss Ellen."

Mrs. Chavasse went out with the lady, and it happened that immediately afterward Caroline Hall entered. Ellen and Frances regarded her with a curiosity they had never yet manifested, and Frances spoke impulsively.

"How sly you are over it, Caroline! —Now, don't go to deny it, or you'll put me in a temper. We know all about it, just as much as yourself. If

you chose to keep it from others, you might have told Ellen and me."

"How could I tell you what I did not know myself?"

"Nay, Caroline, you must have known it," interposed the sweet, gentle voice of Ellen Leicester.

"I did not know I was going to be married. You might have seen there was"—she hesitated and blushed—"an attachment between myself and Mr. Castonel, if your eyes had been open."

"I declare I never saw any thing that could cause me to think he was attached to you," abruptly uttered Miss Chavasse, looking at her.

"Nor I," repeated Ellen Leicester. And the young ladies spoke truly.

"I may have seen you talking together in evening society, perhaps even gone the length of a little dash of flirtation," said Miss Chavasse. "But what has that to do with marriage? Everybody flirts. I shall have a dozen flirtations before I settle down to marry."

"That all depends upon the disposition," returned Miss Hall. "You may, but Ellen Leicester never will."

"Ellen dare not," laughed Frances. "She would draw down the old walls of the parsonage about her ears if *she* committed so heinous a sin. But I must return to what I said, Caroline Hall, that it was unfriendly not to let us know it."

"The puzzle is, how you know it now," observed Caroline. "The interview, when Mr. Castonel asked my uncle for me, only took place last night, and I have not spoken of it to any one."

"Oh, news travels fast enough in Ebury," answered Frances, carelessly. "If I were to cut my finger now, every house would know it before to-night. Mr. Winninton may have mentioned it."

"I am quite sure that it has not passed his lips."

"Then the report must have come from Mr. Castonel?" exclaimed Frances. "How very strange!"

"My uncle is not well to-day," added Miss Hall, "and has seen no one. He has got a great fire made up in the drawing-room, and is stewing himself close to it. The room's as hot as an oven."

"A fire, this weather!" repeated Frances. "What is the matter with him?"

"Nothing particular that I know of. He sits and sighs, and never speaks. He only spoke once between breakfast and dinner: and that was to ask me if I felt Mr. Castonel was a man calculated to make me happy. Of course he is."

"Caroline," whispered Miss Leicester, "do you not fear it is your marriage that is preying on his spirits?"

"I know it is. He would not consent for a long while. The interview was any thing but agreeable. He and Mr. Castonel were together at first, and then I was called in. At last he gave it. But he does not like Mr. Castonel. I suppose from his having taken his practice from him."

"A very good reason too," said Miss Chavasse, bluntly.

"Oh, I don't know," carelessly returned Caroline. "It is all luck in this world. If people persist in sending for Gervase, he can't refuse to go. My uncle is old now."

Ellen Leicester looked up, reproach seated in her deep blue eyes. But Caroline Hall resumed:

"It is more than dislike that he has taken to Mr. Castonel; it is prejudice. He cried like a child after Gervase was gone, saying he would rather I had chosen any one else in the world; he had rather I had kept single for life, than marry Mr. Castonel. And Muff says she heard him sobbing and groaning on his pillow all night long."

"And oh, Caroline," exclaimed Ellen Leicester, in a shocked, hushed tone, "can you think of marrying him now?"

"My uncle has consented," said Caroline, evasively.

"Yes; but in what way? If you have any spark of dutiful feeling, you will now prove your gratitude to your uncle for all his love and care of you."

"Prove it, how?"

"By giving up Mr. Castonel."

Caroline Hall turned and looked at

her, then spoke impressively, "It is easy to talk, Ellen Leicester, but when the time comes for you to love, and should *he* be unacceptable to your parents, you will then understand how impossible is what you ask of me. That calamity may come."

"Never," was the almost scornful reply of Miss Leicester. "My father and mother's wishes will ever be first with me."

"I tell you, you know nothing about it," repeated Caroline. "Remember my words hereafter."

"Do not cavil about what you will never agree upon," interrupted Miss Chavasse. "When is the wedding to be, Caroline?"

"I suppose almost immediately. So Mr. Castonel wishes."

"He is not so great a favorite in the place as he was when he first came. People also say that he is a general admirer. So take care, Caroline."

"I know few people with whom he is not a favorite," retorted Caroline, warmly. "My uncle is one; Mr. Leicester, I believe, is another. Are there any more?"

"You need not take me up so sharply," laughed Frances. "I only repeated what I have heard. Take your things off, Caroline, and remain to tea."

Caroline Hall hesitated. "My uncle is so lonely. Still," she added, after a pause, "I can do him no good, and as to trying to raise his spirits, it's a hopeless task. Yes, I will stay, Frances."

She was glad to accept any excuse to get away from the home she had so little inclination for, utterly regardless of the lonely hours of the poor old man. Frances, careless and pleased, hastened to help her off with her things. But Ellen Leicester, more considerate, painfully reproached her in her heart of hearts.

Mr. Castonel found his way that evening to the house of Mr. Chavasse. Soon after he came, Mrs. Chavasse, who was in her garden, saw the rector pass. She went to the gate, and leaned over it to shake hands with him.

"Have you heard the news?" she asked, being one who was ever ready to retail gossip. "Caroline Hall is going to be married."

"Indeed!" he answered, in an accent of surprise. "I have been much at Mr. Winninton's lately, and have heard nothing of it."

"She marries Mr. Castonel."

There was a pause. The clergyman seemed as if unable to comprehend the words. "Mrs. Chavasse, I hope you are under a mistake," he said at last. "I think you are."

"No; it was all settled yesterday with old Winninton. Caroline told me so herself: she and Mr. Castonel are both here now."

"I am grieved to hear it! Mr. Castonel is not the man I would give a child to."

"That's just what I said. Will you walk in?"

"Not now. I will call for Ellen by-and-by."

"Not before nine," said Mrs. Chavasse.

There were those in Ebury who had called Mr. Castonel an attractive man, but I think it would have puzzled them to tell in what his attractions lay. He was by no means good-looking; though perhaps not what could be called plain: one peculiarity of his, was, that he hated music; and in society he was silent, rather than otherwise. Yet he generally found favor with the ladies: they are pretty certain to like one who has the reputation of being a general admirer. Had a stranger, that evening, been present in the drawing-room of Mrs. Chavasse, he would not have suspected Mr. Castonel was on the point of marriage with Miss Hall, for his gallant attentions to Frances Chavasse and Ellen Leicester—his evident admiration for both, were inconsistently apparent—especially considering the presence of Caroline. What she thought, it is impossible to say. She left early, and Mr. Castonel attended her as far as her home.

Mr. Leicester had taken his way to the house of Mr. Winninton. The surgeon was cowering over the fire, as Caroline had described. He shook hands with Mr. Leicester without rising, and pointed in silence to a chair. He looked very ill; scarcely able to speak.

"I have heard some tidings about Caroline," began the rector.

Mr. Winninton groaned. "Oh, my friend, my pastor," he said, "I have need of strong consolation under this affliction."

"You disapprove, no doubt, of Mr. Castonel?"

"Disapprove!" he repeated, roused to energy; "believe me, I would rather Caroline went before me, than leave her the wife of Gervase Castonel."

"Then why have you consented?"

"I had no help for it," he sadly uttered. "They were before me, in this room, both of them, and they told me they only cared for each other. Mr. Castonel informed me that if I refused my consent it was of little consequence, for he should take her without it. She is infatuated with him: and how and where they can have met so frequently, as it appears they have done, is a wonder to me. Oh, he is of mean, dishonorable spirit! And I have my doubts about his liking her—*liking* her, even."

"Then why should he seek to marry her?" cried the rector, in surprise.

"I know not. I have been thinking about it all night and all day, and can come to no conclusion. Save one," he added, dropping his voice, "which is firm upon me, and will not leave me: the conviction that he will not treat her well. Would you," he asked, suddenly looking up, "would you give him Ellen?"

"No," most emphatically replied Mr. Leicester. "I believe him to be a bad, immoral man. My calling takes me continually amongst the poor, and I can tell you Mr. Castonel is much more warmly welcomed by the daughters than the parents. But nothing tangible has hitherto been brought against him. He is a deep man."

"His covert behavior as to Caroline, proves his depth. What about that strange person who followed him to Ebury, and took the little lodge? You know what I mean."

"I can learn nothing of her," answered Mr. Leicester. "She lives on, there, with that female attendant. I called once, but she told me she must beg to decline my visits, as she wished to live in strict retirement. I suppose I should not have seen her at all, but the other person was out, and she came to the door."

"I met her once," said Mr. Winninton. "She is very handsome."

"Too handsome and too young to be living in so mysterious a way," remarked the rector, significantly. "She has evidently been reared as a gentlewoman: her accent and manner are perfectly ladylike and refined. Did you mention her to Mr. Castonel?"

"I did. And he answered in an indifferent, haughty manner, that the lady was a connection of his own family, who chose, for reasons of her own, good and upright, though they were kept secret, to pass her days just now in retirement. He added, that her character was unimpeachable, and no one, to him, should dare impugn it. What could I answer?"

"Very true. And it *may* be as he says: though the circumstances wear so suspicious an appearance."

"Oh, that he had never come to Ebury!" exclaimed the surgeon, clasping his hands with emotion. "Not for the injury he has done to me professionally: and I believe *striven* to do, for there was room for us both: I have forgiven him this with all my heart, as it becomes a Christian near the grave to do. But my conviction tells me he is a bad man, a mysterious man—yes, my friend, I repeat it, a mysterious man—I feel him to be so, though it is an assertion I cannot explain; and I feel that he will assure Caroline's misery instead of happiness."

"Still, unless he is attached to her, I do not see why he should wed her," repeated the rector. "She has no fortune to tempt his cupidity."

"Nor do I see it," replied Mr. Winninton. "But it is so."

Mr. Leicester sat there an hour, and then proceeded to visit some cottages. On his return, he cut across the fields, a near way, for he found it was getting dusk, and close upon the time he intended to call for Ellen. As he passed the corner of Beech Wood, a retired spot just there, near to the pretty, but

very small lodge originally built for a gamekeeper, who should he suddenly encounter but its present inmate, the lady he and Mr. Winninton had been speaking of. Her arm was within Mr. Castonel's, and she was talking rapidly, in a tone as it seemed, of remonstrance. The gentlemen bowed as they passed each other; both coldly; and had Mr. Leicester turned to scan the doctor's face, he would have seen on it a sneer of malignant triumph.

"I never saw a case more open to suspicion in my life," muttered the clergyman to himself. "And he just come from the presence of his wife, that is to be!"

CHAPTER III.

OF THE OLD MAN'S PRESENTIMENTS, AND SOME MYSTERIOUS REMARKS OF THE YOUNGER MAN.

"Come, Hannah, look alive," cried Mrs. Muff, some two months subsequent to the above details; wash those decanters first: there's one short, but I'll see to that. Now, you need not touch the knives: Jem will clean them all in the morning. Do as I bid you, and then get out and dust the best china."

"There's the door bell," said Hannah.

"Go and answer it, and don't be an hour over it. I dare say it's the man with the potted meats. Tell him the rolls must be here in the morning by ten o'clock."

A most valuable personage was Mrs. Muff in her vocation, and highly respected throughout Ebury. An upright, portly, kindly-looking woman, of four or five-and-fifty, with an auburn "front," whose curls were always scrupulously smooth. She had for many years held the important situation of housekeeper at the Hall: but changes had occurred there, as they do in many places. On the death of Mr. Winninton's sister, she had accepted the post of housekeeper to him, and had been there ever since. Hannah, a damsel of twenty, being under her.

"Well, was it the baker?" she demanded, as Hannah returned to the kitchen.

"No, ma'am. It was another wedding present for Miss Caroline, with Mrs. Major Acre's compliments. I took it up to her: she's in the drawing-room with Mr. Castonel."

"Ah!" groaned the housekeeper.—"Look at the dust on those glasses, Hannah. I thought you said you had wiped them."

"And what harm, ma'am, either?" returned Hannah, who understood very well the nature of the groan. "She'll be his wife to-morrow."

"Who said there was harm?" sharply retorted Mrs. Muff. "Only—my poor master!—he is so lonely, and it is the last evening she'll be here. Where are you running off to, now? I told you to finish the decanters."

"Master called out for some coal as I passed the parlor," answered Hannah. "The puzzle to me is, how he can bear a fire, this sultry August weather."

"Ah, child, you'll come to the end of many puzzles before you arrive at my years. Master's old and chilly, and breaking up as fast as he can break. I'll take the coal in myself."

Mr. Winninton did not look up, as the housekeeper put the coal on. But afterwards, when she was busy at the sideboard, he called out in a sudden, quick tone—"Mrs. Muff."

"Sir?" she answered.

"What are you doing there?"

"I am changing the sherry wine, sir, into the odd decanter. We want this one to put ready with the others."

"For the show to-morrow?" he went on.

"To be sure, sir. For nothing else."

"Ay, Muff, put every thing in order," he continued. "Don't let it be said that I opposed any of their wishes; an old man like I am, whom they would be glad to see out of the world. And you need not trouble yourself to put things up afterwards: they will be wanted again."

"For what purpose, sir?" she inquired.

"For the funeral."

Mrs. Muff, as she said afterwards, was struck all of a heap. And Mr. Winnington resumed:

"After a wedding comes a burying. She is beginning the cares of life, and I am giving them up forever. And something tells me she will have her share of them. I shall not be here to stand by her, Muff, so you must."

The housekeeper trembled as she heard. He had a queer look on his face that she did not like.

"I'll do what I can, sir," she said. "But when Miss Caroline has left here, that will be but little."

"You can go where she goes, Muff."

"Perhaps not, sir."

"Perhaps yes. Will you promise to do so if you can—if any possible way is open? Promise me," he added, eagerly and feverishly.

"Well, sir," she answered, to humor him, "if it shall be agreeable to all parties, yes, I will."

"And you will shield her from him, as far as you can?"

"Yes," repeated the housekeeper, most imperfectly understanding what Caroline was to be shielded from.

"Now, Mrs. Muff," he concluded, in a solemn tone, "that's a death bargain. Remember it."

"You don't seem well, sir," was Mrs. Muff's rejoinder. "Shall I call Miss Caroline to you?"

"No," he sadly answered. "Let her be."

She was in the drawing-room with Mr. Castonel, as has been stated; laughing, talking, joking, unmindful of her fond uncle, who was dying underneath. Her dress was a cool summer muslin, very pretty, with its open sleeves, her dark hair was worn in bands, and her dark eyes were animated. She began showing him some of the presents she had received that day, and slipped a bracelet on her arm to display it.

"That is an elegant bracelet," observed Mr. Castonel. "Who is it from?"

"Ellen Leicester."

"Oh," he hastily rejoined, "I heard it said to-day that she is not going to church with you—that the parson's starch will not let her."

"It is true," said Caroline. I did not tell you of it, Gervase, because I thought it might annoy you, as it had done me."

"Annoy *me!* Oh dear no. Let me hear what his objections were: what he said."

"I only gathered the substance of them from Mrs. Leicester. You know my uncle does not approve our union, though he did give his consent. So on that score, I believe, Mr. Leicester declined to allow Ellen to be one of my bridesmaids—that he would not directly sanction what he was pleased to call an undutiful measure."

"I wonder he condescends to marry us," remarked Mr. Castonel, with that peculiar sneer, cunning and malignant, on his face, which even Caroline disliked to see.

"That he could not refuse. It is in his line of duty. Ellen is so vexed. We three had always promised each other that the two left would be bridesmaids to whichever was married first, I, Ellen, and Frances Chavasse."

Mr. Castonel laughed, a strange, ringing laugh, as if something amused him much; and Caroline looked at him in surprise.

The wedding-day dawned; not too promisingly. In the first place, the fine, brilliant weather had suddenly changed, and the day rose pouring wet. In the second, Mr. Winnington, who, however, had never intended to go to church with them, was too ill to rise. Miss Chavasse was bridesmaid, and by half-past ten, Gervase Castonel and Caroline Hall had been united for better, for worse, until *death* did them part. Next came the breakfast, the Rev. Mr. Leicester, who had officiated, declining to go and partake of it, and then the bride and bridegroom started off in a carriage-and-four to spend a short honeymoon. Before they returned, Mr. Winnington was dead.

A very singular remark was made by Mr. Castonel, on his return, when he was informed of his former rival's death. It was the tiger, John, who mentioned it.

"Dead, is he!" said Mr. Castonel

thoughtfully. "I did not want him to die—just yet."

What did he mean by "just yet?"

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. MUFF DREAMS, AND THE DREAM COMES OUT MORE THAN DREAMS GENERALLY DO.

Again, reader, six months have elapsed, for time, as I told you, slipped on at Ebury as fast as it does at other places. No medical opponent had started, so Mr. Castonel had the professional swing of the whole place, and was getting on in it at railway speed. We are now in the cold, drizzly month of February, and it is a drizzling, dirty, wretched day. In the bright kitchen, however, of Mr. Castonel, little signs are seen of the outside weather. The fire burns clear, and the kettle sings on it, the square of carpet, never put down till the cooking is over, extends itself before the hearth, and good Mrs. Muff is presiding over all, her feet on a warm footstool, and her spectacles on nose, for she has drawn the stand before her on which rests her Bible. Presently a visitor came in, a figure clothed in travelling attire, limp and moist, introduced by the tiger, John, who had encountered it at the door, as he was going out on an errand for his master.

"My goodness me, Hannah! it's never you?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is," was Hannah's reply, with a very low obeisance to Mrs. Muff.

"And why did you not come yesterday, as was agreed upon?"

"It rained so hard with us, mother said I had better wait; but as to-day turned out little better, I came through it. She'd have paid for a inside place, ma'am, but the coach was full, so I came outside."

"Well, get off your wet things, and we'll have a cup of tea," said Mrs. Muff, rising, and setting the tea-things.

"Mother sends her duty to you, ma'am," said Hannah, as she sat down to the tea-table, after obeying directions, "and bade me say she was kindly obliged to you for thinking of me and getting me a place under you again."

"Ah! we little thought some months back, that we should ever be serving Mr. Castonel."

"Nothing was ever further from my thoughts, ma'am."

"I wished to come and live with Miss Caroline; I had my own reasons for it," resumed Mrs. Muff; "and as luck had it, she had a breeze with the maids here, after she came home, and gave them both warning. I fancy they had done as they liked too long, under Mr. Castonel, to put up with the control of a mistress, and Miss Caroline, if put out, can be pretty sharp and hasty. However, they were leaving, and I heard of it, and came after the place. Miss Caroline—dear! I mean Mrs. Castonel—thought I ought to look out for a superior one to hers, but said she should be too glad to take me if I did not think so. So here I came, and here I have been; and when, a week ago, the girl under me misbehaved herself, I thought of you and spoke to mistress, so we sent for you. Now you know how it has all happened, Hannah."

"Yes, ma'am, and thank you. Is Miss Caroline well?"

"Mrs. Castonel," interrupted the housekeeper. "Did you not hear me correct myself? She is getting better."

"Has she been ill?" returned Hannah.

"Ill! I believe you. It was a near touch, Hannah, whether she lived or died."

"What has been the matter, ma'am."

"A mis—— Never you mind what," said the old lady, arresting her speech before the ominous word popped out, "she has been ill, but is getting better; and that's enough. I'll step up and ask if she wants any thing."

Hannah cast her eyes around the kitchen: it looked a very comfortable one, and she thought she should be happy enough in her new abode. Every thing was bright and clean to a fault, betokening two plain facts, the presiding genius of Mrs. Muff, and plenty of work

for Hannah, who knew she should have to keep things as she found them.

"Mrs. Castonel will have some tea presently, not just yet," said Mrs. Muff, returning, "How ill she does look! Her face has no more color in it than a corpse. It put me in mind of my dream."

"Have you had a bad dream lately, ma'am?" inquired Hannah. For there was not a more inveterate dreamer, or interpreter of dreams, than Mrs. Muff, and nothing loth was she to find a listener for them.

"Indeed I have," she answered, "and a dream that I don't like. It was just three nights ago. I had gone to bed, dead asleep, having been up part of several back nights with my mistress, and I undressed in no time, and was asleep as quick. All on a sudden, for I remembered no event that seemed to lead to it, I thought I saw my old master———"

"The squire?" interrupted Hannah.

"Not the squire: what put him in your head? Mr. Winninton. I thought I saw him standing at the foot of the bed, and after looking at me fixedly, as if to draw my attention, he turned his head slowly towards the door. I heard the stairs creaking, as if somebody was coming up, step by step, and we both kept our eyes on the door, waiting in expectation. It began to move on its hinges, very slowly, and I was struck with horror, for who should appear at it but——"

"Ah-a-a-a-ah!" shrieked Hannah, whose feelings being previously wrought up to a shrieking pitch, received their climax, for at that very moment a loud noise was heard outside the kitchen door, which was only pushed to, not closed.

"What a simpleton you be!" wrathfully exclaimed Mrs. Muff, who, however, had edged her own chair into close contact with Hannah's. "I dare say it is only master in his laboratory."

After the lapse of a few reassuring seconds, Mrs. Muff moved toward the door, looked out, and then went toward a small room contiguous to it,

"It is as I thought," she said, coming back and closing the door; "it is master in his laboratory. But now that's an odd thing," she added, musingly.

"What is odd, ma'am?"

"Why, how master could have come down and gone in there without my hearing him. I left him sitting with mistress. Perhaps she has dozed off, she does sometimes at dusk, and he crept down softly, for fear of disturbing her."

"But what was the noise?" asked Hannah, breathlessly.

"Law, child! d'ye fear it was a ghost? It was only Mr. Castonel let fall one of the little drawers and it went down with a clatter. And that's another odd thing, now I come to think of it, for I always believed that top drawer to be a dummy drawer. It has no lock and no knob, like the others."

"What is a dummy drawer?" repeated Hannah.

"A false drawer, child, one that won't open. John thinks so too, for last Saturday, when he was cleaning the laboratory, I went in for some string to tie up the beef olives I was making for dinner. He was on the steps, stretching up his duster to that very drawer, and he called out, 'This here drawer is just like your head, Madam Muff.'

"'How so?' asked I.

"'Cause he has got nothing in the inside of him,' said he, in his impudent way, and rushed off the steps into the garden, fearing I should box his ears. But it is this very drawer master has now let fall, and there were two or three little papers and phials, I saw, scattered on the floor. I was stepping in, asking if I could help him to pick them up, but he looked at me as black as thunder, and roared out, 'No. Go away and mind your own business.' Didn't you hear him?"

"I heard a man's voice," replied Hannah; "I did not know it was Mr. Castonel's. But about the dream, ma'am: you did not finish it."

"True, and it's worth finishing," answered the housekeeper, settling herself in her chair. "Where was I? Oh—I thought at the foot of the bed

stood Mr. Winninton, and when the footsteps came close, and the door opened—so slowly, Hannah, and we watching in suspense all the time—who should it be but Mr. and Mrs. Castonel. She was in her grave-clothes, a flannel dress and cap, edged with white quilled ribbon, and she looked, for all the world, as she looks this night. He had got hold of her hand, and he handed her in, remaining himself at the door, and my old master bent forward and took her by the other hand. Mr. Winninton looked at me, as much as to say, Do you see this? and then they both turned and gazed after Mr. Castonel. I heard his footsteps descending the stairs, and upon looking again at the foot of the bed, they were both gone. I woke up in a dreadful fright, and could not get to sleep again for two hours."

"It's a mercy it wasn't me that dreamt it," observed Hannah. "I should have rose the house, screeching."

"It was a nasty dream," added Mrs. Muff, "and if mistress had not been out of all danger, and getting better as fast as she can get, I should say it betokened—something not over pleasant."

She was interrupted by Mrs. Castonel's bell. It was for a cup of tea, and Mrs. Muff took it up. As she passed the laboratory she saw that Mr. Castonel was in it still. Mrs. Castonel was seated in an arm-chair by her bedroom fire.

"Then you have not been asleep, ma'am?" observed Mrs. Muff, perceiving that her mistress had the candles lighted and was reading.

"No, I have not felt sleepy this evening. Let Hannah come up when I ring next. I should like to see her."

Scarcely had Mrs. Muff regained the kitchen, when the bell rang again, so she sent up Hannnh.

"Ah, Hannah, how d'ye do?" said Mrs. Castonel.

"I am nicely, thank you, miss—ma'am," answered Hannah, who did not stand in half the awe of "Miss Caroline" that she did of the formidable Mrs. Muff. "I am sorry to find you are not well, ma'am."

"I have been ill, but I am much better. So much better that I should have gone down-stairs to-day, had it not been so damp and chilly."

Hannah never took her eyes off Mrs. Castonel as she spoke; she was thinking how very much she was changed; apart from her paleness and aspect of ill health. Her eyes appeared darker, and there was a look of care in them. She wore a cap, and her dark hair was nearly hidden under it.

"Now, Hannah," she said, "I hope you have made up your mind to do your work well, and help Mrs. Muff all that you can. There is a deal more work to do here than there was at my uncle's."

"Yes ma'am," answered Hannah.

"Especially in running up and down stairs you must save Mrs. Muff; your legs are younger than hers. Let me see that you do, and then I shall be pleased with you."

"I'll try," repeated Hannah. "Shall I take your cup for some more tea, ma'am?"

"I should like some," was Mrs. Castonel's reply, "but I don't know that I may have it. This morning Mr. Castonel said it was bad for me, and made me nervous, and would not let me drink a second cup."

Hannah stood waiting, not knowing whether to take the cup or not.

"Is Mr. Castonel in his study?"

"If you please, ma'am, which place is that?"

"The front room on the left-hand side, opening opposite to the dining-parlor," said Mrs. Castonel.

"I don't think it is there then," replied Hannah. "He is in the little room where the bottles are, next the kitchen. I forget, ma'am, what Mrs. Muff called it."

"Oh, is he? Set this door open, Hannah."

The girl obeyed, and Mrs. Castonel called to him. "Gervase!"

He heard her, and came immediately to the foot of the stairs. "What is it?" he asked.

"May I have another cup of tea?"

He ran up-stairs and entered the

room. "Have you taken your tea already?" he said, in an accent of surprise and displeasure. "I told you to wait till seven o'clock."

"I was so thirsty. Do say I may have another cup, Gervase. I am sure it will not hurt me."

"Bring up half a cup," he said to the servant, "and some more bread-and-butter. If you drink, Caroline, you must eat."

Hannah went down-stairs. She procured what was wanted, and was carrying it from the kitchen again, when Mr. Castonel came out of the laboratory, to which, it appeared, he had returned.

"Give it me," he said to Hannah. "I will take it myself to your mistress."

So he proceeded up-stairs with the little waiter, and Hannah returned to the kitchen. "How much she's altered!" was her exclamation, as she closed the door.

"What did she say to you?" questioned Mrs. Muff.

"Well, ma'am, she told me to be attentive, and to save your legs," returned Hannah. "I never knew Miss Caroline so thoughtful before. I thought it was not in her."

"And that has surprised me, that she should evince so much lately," assented Mrs. Muff. "Thoughtfulness does not come to the young suddenly. It's a thing that only comes with years—or sorrow."

"Sorrow!" echoed Hannah. "Miss Caroline can't have any sorrow."

"Not—not that I know of," somewhat dubiously responded the housekeeper.

"Is Mr. Castonel fond of her? Does he make her a good husband?" asked Hannah, full of woman's curiosity on such points.

"What should hinder him?" testily retorted Mrs. Muff.

"Has that—that strange lady left the place?" was Hannah's next question. "She that, people said, had something to do with Mr. Castonel.

"What to do with him?" was the sharp demand.

"Was his cousin, ma'am, or sister-in-law, or some relation of that sort," explained Hannah, with a face demure enough to disarm the anger of the fastidious Mrs. Muff.

"I believe she has not left," was the stiff response; "I know nothing about her."

"Do you suppose Miss Caroline does?" added Hannah.

"Of course she does, all particulars," returned Mrs. Muff, with a peculiar sniff, which she invariably gave when forcing her tongue to an untruth. "But it's not your business, so you may just put it out of your head, and never say any more about it. And you may begin and wash up the tea-things. John don't deserve any tea for not coming in, and I have a great mind to make him go without. He is always stopping in the street to play."

Hannah was rising to obey, when the bedroom bell rang most violently, and Mr. Castonel was heard bursting out of the room, and calling loudly for assistance.

"Whatever can be the matter?" was the terrified exclamation of Mrs. Muff. "Mistress has never dropped asleep, and fallen off her chair into the fire! Follow me up-stairs, girl. And that lazy tiger a playing truant!"

Not for many a year had the housekeeper flown up-stairs so quickly. Hannah followed more slowly, from a vague consciousness of dread—of what she might see; the dream she had shuddered at, being before her mind in vivid colors. Mrs. Castonel was in convulsions.

About the same hour, or a little later, Mr. Leicester returned to his home, having been absent since morning. "Well!" he cheerily said, as he took his seat by the fire, "have you any news? A whole day from the parish seems a long absence to me."

"I think not," answered Mrs. Leicester. "Except that I went to see Caroline Castonel to-day, and she is getting on nicely."

"I am glad to hear it. Is she quite out of danger?"

"Completely so."

"She told mamma that she should be at church on Sunday," added Ellen.

"Yes, but I told her that would be imprudent," returned Mrs. Leicester. "However, she will soon be well now."

At that moment the church bell rang out with its three times two, denoting the recent departure of a soul. The church, situate at the end of the village street, was immediately opposite the parsonage, the main road dividing them. The sound struck upon their ears loud and full; very solemnly in the stillness of the winter's night.

Consternation fell upon all. No one was ill in the village, at least, ill enough for death. Could a sister—for they knew, by the strokes, it was not a male—have been called away suddenly?

'The passing-bell!" uttered the rector, rising from his seat in agitation. "And I to have been absent! Have I been summoned out?" he hurriedly asked of Mrs. Leicester.

"No; I assure you, no. Not any one has been for you. Neither have we heard speak of any illness."

Mr. Leicester touched the bell-rope at his elbow. A maid servant answered it. Benjamin was attending to his horse. "Step over," said the rector, "and inquire who is dead."

She departed. A couple of minutes at the most would see her back again. They had all risen from their seats, and stood in an expecting, almost a reverent attitude. The bell was striking out fast strokes now. The girl returned, looking terrified.

"It is the passing-bell, sir, for Mrs. Castonel."

The morning was cold and misty, and the Reverend Mr. Leicester felt a strange chill and lowness of spirits, for which he could not account, when he stepped into the chariot that was to convey him to Mr. Castonel's.

Mrs. Chavasse and Frances came into the parsonage. Ostensibly for the purpose of inviting Ellen to spend the following day with them: in reality to see the funeral. They had not long to wait.

The undertaker came first in his hatband and scarf, and then the black chariot containing the Reverend Mr. Leicester. Before the hearse walked six carriers, and the mourning-coach came last. It was a plain, respectable funeral.

It drew up at the churchyard gate, in full view of the parsonage windows, all of which had their blinds closely drawn, out of respect for the dead. But they managed to peep at it behind the blinds.

The rector stepped out first, and stood waiting at the church door in his officiating dress, his book open in his hands. There was some little delay in getting the burden from the hearse, but at length the carriers had it on their shoulders, and bore it up the path with measured, even steps, themselves being nearly hidden by the pall. Mr. Castonel followed, his handkerchief to his face. He betrayed at that moment no outward sign of emotion, but his face could not have been exceeded in whiteness by that of his dead wife.

"Oh!" said Ellen, shivering, and turning from the light, as she burst into tears, "what a dreadful sequel it is to the day when he last got out of a carriage at that churchyard gate, and she was with him, in her gay happiness! Poor Mr. Castonel, how he must need consolation!"

"It is nothing of a funeral, after all," said Mrs. Chavasse, discontentedly; "no pall-bearers, nor mutes, nor any thing. I wonder he did not have some!"

CHAPTER V.

OF THE STRANGE WOMAN AT BEECH LODGE, AND THE STRANGE SCENE GOING ON THERE.

Beech Lodge was a queer, quaint place—a cottage set far back among the trees — built after the fashion of a gamekeeper's lodge, which it had been, as we have said before, and hence the name; but a comfortable dwelling enough, when, as in this instance, the family was small. Here dwelt the retired female, of whose coming and continued residence all Ebury went into spasms of wonder—a wonder grown

chronic, and not to be abated by time. Had the lady been seen sufficiently near and often, Ebury would have admired still more. As Mr. Leicester had observed, she had the manners of a gentlewoman, and she was young and handsome. What Mr. Leicester did not observe, however, was a wedding-ring on the customary finger.

It was the day after the funeral of Mrs. Castonel, and a strange scene was being performed in the gamekeeper's lodge.

In the little drawing-room sat Gervase Castonel, quietly, mockingly it would seem; but the young and handsome woman was not quiet, neither was she seated. She paced the room at times, gracefully but vehemently, and spoke as vehemently as she walked.

Mr. Castonel responded in the same style as he sat; and his quiet, mocking manner added fuel to the flame in his companion's mind. At length he spoke, with some irritation in his tone:

"It is idle to talk so, Lavinia. What does it all matter to you? *You* chose your own position. If this thing grows irksome, you know the alternative. Disgrace to your proud race, for their name, lineage, and all will come out. Did you ever know me fail in a promise for evil?"

"Do you expect me to stand by, and see you commit"—

"Hush! that will do. You have hinted that before. Do not say it, when you have no proof. Have I not spared *him* and you?"

She burst into tears, and threw herself into a chair, sobbing violently.

"What do I gain?" he continued. "I think that was your question just now. What can that concern you? It is my whim—my will. Say that I gratify my passions—can *you* object to that?"

She started up, and stood over him with clenched hands.

"I will expose all."

"Remember your oath—remember every thing, and then do it."

Another burst of tears on the part of the woman, who sank back again in the chair, was followed by a low, mocking laugh on the part of Mr. Castonel.

"I am a mourner," said he. "You should not disturb my sadness with these harsh words. Have pity on the sorrows of an unfortunate husband."

"You are a fiend."

"Oh, no; fiends only exist in stage-plays, and in story-books—now and then in a pantomime. Beside, you did not always think so. I remember very well when I was a sort of seraph. Lucifer fell, and why not Gervase Castonel. It is a good name that—almost as good as Richard"—

"Ah!"

"Why interrupt me? I was about to utter a name that would please you almost as much as mine. I spared him—you know why, and on what terms."

"Why was I born?" moaned the woman.

"For some wise purpose, probably. You should not trouble your brains with mysteries. Live quietly here, no one disturbs you. In spite of the past, I guard your reputation, and your peace. Am I not kind? If I amuse myself, why object? There was a time when you had a right to do it—that day has passed."

"But you will not repeat this act?"

"In due time—yes. I have said that I will take the three. Shall I not be repaid threefold? Having lost a wife, shall I not marry again? Is not matrimony a pleasant estate, and an honorable?"

There was some hidden meaning in the words, for the woman shuddered convulsively. Then she came forward again, and threw herself on her knees before the surgeon.

He looked at her contemptuously, and laughed.

"That posture would suit an actress, or a nun. You are neither—only a duke's daughter. I am—well, just now, I am only a country surgeon. Some people would call me an apothecary. Merit and standing is never appreciated. I have forgiven partly, but not punished enough. Beside, there are others to punish."

She looked up in astonishment.

"There is something in my history you do not know. I may tell you some day, or I may not. Let us talk of something else."

The woman arose from her knees.

"I am powerless," she said, "I will do as you order."

"You are wise, after all. Have you means enough?"

"Ample."

"Does Mary serve you well?"

"I have no complaint to make."

"Of course not; when she fails in her duty, there are others to replace her. If you have means enough for your needs, and no complaints of your servant, and no more lectures to read me, I might as well go. I have the honor to bid you a very good-night, madam. May you have all the quiet rest, and pleasant dreams, a good conscience can afford."

He rose, bowed formally, and with a light, mocking laugh, left the room.

When he had gone, the woman sank on her knees again. She was not in prayer. The clenched hands, the compressed lips, and the convulsed features, showed that a thousand evil passions, and not devotion, were at work within her.

The surgeon kept on his way with a light step, but as he came near a dark lane in the village, he slackened his pace, and looked around. A female figure emerged from the lane. The party was closely muffled, but the two had evidently been expecting each other, for they conversed in a low tone for some time, both standing in the darkest shadow of the adjoining house. At length the surgeon parted the hood which the female wore, and stooping, kissed her. Just then, some one came along, when the female ran hastily into the lane, and the surgeon crouched back, until the stranger had passed. In a few minutes he followed.

And this was the day after his wife's funeral! What gossip for Ebury, if it had been known! But Ebury was profoundly ignorant of the matter.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS ELLEN AND HER LOVER, AND THE COMING DOWNFALL OF A YOUNG LADY'S HOPES.

The hot day had nearly passed, and the sun, approaching its setting, threw the tall shade of the trees across the garden of Mrs. Chavasse. The large window of a pleasant room opened on to it, and in this room stood a fair, graceful girl, with one of the loveliest faces ever seen in Ebury. Her dark blue eyes were bent on the ground; as well they might be: the rose of her cheek had deepened to crimson; as well it might do; for a gentleman's arm had fondly encircled her waist, and his lips had pushed aside the cluster of soft hair, and were rendering deeper that damask cheek. Alas, that her whole attitude, as she stood there, should tell of such rapturous happiness!

Neither was an inhabitant of that house; both had come in to pay an evening visit, and the young lady had thrown off her bonnet and mantle. It may be these visits were accidental; but if so, they took place nearly every evening. It happened that Mrs. and Miss Chavasse on this occasion were out, but expected to enter every minute; so, being alone, they were improving on the time.

And this from Miss Leicester, the carefully brought-up daughter of the rector of Ebury! That she should repose quietly in the embrace of that man without attempting to withdraw from it! Yes: and *love* has caused some of us to do as much. But oh, that the deep, ardent affection, of which Ellen Leicester was so eminently capable, had been directed into any other channel than the one it was irrevocably fixed in!

For he who stood beside her was Gervase Castonel. It was not that he had once been married, but it was that there were some who deemed him a bad man, a mysterious man, with his sinister expression of face, when he did not care to check it, and his covert ways. Why should he have cast his coils round Ellen Leicester? why have striven to gain

her love when there were so many others whose welcome to him would have carried with it no alloy? It would almost seem that Mr. Castonel went by the rules of contrary, as the children say in their play-game. The only persons into whose houses he had not been received, and who had both taken so strange and unconquerable a dislike to him, were the late Mr. Winninton and the Reverend Mr. Leicester. Yet he had chosen his first wife in the niece of the first, and it seemed likely (to us who are in the secret) that he was seeking a second in the daughter of the last. Strange that he should have been able to do his work so effectually; that Ellen Leicester, so good and dutiful, should have been won over to a passion for him, little short of infatuation, and that it should have been kept so secret from the whole world! Never was there a man who could go more mysteriously to work than Gervase Castonel.

"You speak of a second marriage, Ellen, my love," he was saying, "but how often have I told you that this scarcely applies to me. Were it that I had lived with her years of happiness, or that I had loved her, then your objections might have reason. I repeat to you, however much you may despise me for it, that I married her, caring only for you. Before I was awake to my own sensations, I had gone too far to retract; I had asked for her of old Winninton, and in honor I was obliged to keep to my hasty engagement. Even in our early marriage days I knew that I loved but you: sleeping or waking, it was you who were present to me, and I would awake from sleep, from dreams of my real idol, to caress thanklessly my false one! Oh, Ellen! you may disbelieve and refuse to love me, but in mercy say it not."

There was great honey in the words of Mr. Castonel, there was greater honey in his tone, and Ellen Leicester's heart beat more rapidly within her. *She* disbelieve aught asserted by him!

"Ellen, you judge wrongly," was his reply, as she whispered something in his ear. "It *is* a duty sometimes to leave father and mother."

"But not disobediently, not wilfully. And I know that they would never consent. You know it also, Gervase."

"My darling Ellen, this is nonsense. Suppose I were to yield to your scruples, and marry another in my anger? What then, Ellen?"

"I think it would kill me," she murmured.

"And because Mr. and Mrs. Leicester have taken an unjust prejudice against me, both our lives are to be rendered miserable! Would that be justice? Suppose you were my wife; do suppose it, only for a moment, Ellen; suppose that we were irrevocably united, we should then not have consent to ask, but forgiveness."

She looked earnestly at him, and as his true meaning came across her, the mild expression of her deep blue eyes gave place to terror.

"Oh, Gervase," she implored, clasping his arm in agitation, "never say that again? As you value my peace here and hereafter, do not tempt me to disobedience. I mistook your meaning, did I not?" she continued in a rapid tone of terror. "Gervase, I say, did I not mistake you?"

He felt that he had been too hasty: the right time was not come. But it would: for never did Gervase Castonel set his will upon a thing, that he left unfulfilled.

Miss Chavasse entered. Ellen Leicester was in the garden then: she had glided out on hearing her approach. And Mr. Castonel was seated back in an arm-chair, intent upon a newspaper.

"Oh!" exclaimed Frances, "I am sorry we should have been out. I am sure we are obliged to you for waiting for us, Mr. Castonel."

"I have not waited long; but if I had waited the whole evening I should be amply repaid now." He spoke softly and impressively, as he detained her hand in his: and from his manner then, it might well have been thought that he intended Frances Chavasse for his wife; at least it never could have been believed he was so ardently pursuing another.

"And Ellen Leicester is here!" added

Frances, "for that's her bonnet. Have you seen her?"

"Who? Miss Leicester? Yes, I believe I did see her. But I was so engaged with this paper. Here is some interesting medical evidence in it."

"Is there?" But at that moment Ellen Leicester came to the window. "How long have you been here?" asked Frances.

"About an hour," was Miss Leicester's answer.

"What an awful girl for truth that is!" was the angry mental comment of Mr. Castonel.

"I must say you have proved yourselves sociable companions," remarked Frances. "You mope in the garden, Ellen, and Mr. Castonel pores over an old newspaper! Let us have a song."

Now Mr. Castonel hated singing, but Frances sat down to the piano, and he was pleased to stand behind her and clasp the hand of Ellen Leicester. Yet Frances, had she been asked, would have said Mr. Castonel's attention was given to herself; ay, and gloried in saying it, for she liked the man, and would have had no objection to become his second wife. It may be, that she was scheming for it. Thus they remained till the night came on, and the moon was up. Frances, never tired of displaying her rich voice, and Ellen Leicester content to stand by his side had the standing lasted forever. Moonlight singing-meetings are dangerous things.

A servant came for Ellen Leicester, and Mr. Castonel walked home with her. They went not the front way, but through the lane, which brought them to the back door of the rectory. Was it that Ellen shrank from going openly, lest her parents might see from the windows that Mr. Castonel was her companion? He lingered with her for a few moments at the gate, and when she entered she found her mother alone: the rector was out. To her it had been a delicious walk, and she felt that life would be indeed a blank, if not shared with Gervase Castonel.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERIOUS RESIDENT OF BEECH LODGE HIRES A SPY, WHO SEEMS LIKELY TO BE OF LITTLE VALUE.

A BOY, in a showy livery, and having a basket in his hand, was loitering along the street, one day. Presently he came in front of Beech Lodge. The servant girl there, who had apparently been watching, beckoned him to come over.

"Me, ma'am," inquiringly said John, for it was Mr. Castonel's tiger, and he hesitated.

The woman nodded affirmatively, whereupon John crossed, and entering the little gate, came to the house.

"My mistress wants to see you," said the girl.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll come in as soon as I scrape my feet."

She led him into the little parlor, where the lady was ready to receive him.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"John, ma'am."

"Do you like spending money, John?"

"Do I? Oh, just you try me, ma'am."

The lady handed him a shilling.

"You can have this very frequently, if you can keep your tongue still to others, and use it to me."

"Very well, ma'am."

"Does your master visit much now?"

"Yes, ma'am; there's a good many sick, just now."

"I do not mean that. Does he pay many visits to young ladies?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. He visits at Mr. Chavasse's a great deal."

"Miss Chavasse is very handsome, is she not?"

"Oh, lor', ma'am, isn't she though! They say that master's going to marry her."

"Ah!"

"I don't think so though."

"No? why not?"

"I can see when I keep my eyes open. He's after Miss Leicester, *I* know."

"That is the rector's daughter."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And is she handsome, too?"

"Handsomer nor 'tother. She's a beauty, she is."

"Are there no other ladies?"

"No, ma'am."

"None who come to visit him?"

"Yes, ma'am, patients."

"If any come, let me know, and you may depend on me for a little pocket-money."

"Yes, ma'am," and John bowed himself and his basket out.

"If she wants information for her money, here's the shop where they keep it," said John, as he walked along, tossing the shilling about in his trowsers pocket, "and it's always on hand suited to customers. Oh!"

His last exclamation was occasioned by the sudden appearance of his master, who seemed to come from out of the ground, or behind one of the beech-trees, and John did not feel quite sure which.

"So you have been into Beech Lodge," he asked.

"Yes, sir—they called me over."

"What did they want?"

"The lady there—missus—what is her name, sir?"

"Never mind the name. What did she want?"

"Oh, nothing, sir—just asked after your health—that's all, sir."

"John, you are lying to me. You were not called in for any such purpose. You had better tell the truth, for if I find that you deceive me, you will lose your place. She offered you money to act the spy on me. Was that it?"

"She wanted to know about the young ladies you visit, sir?"

"Exactly. You have my permission to earn what money you can in that way—only remember this: I will always give you the news you are to carry. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now go on, and deliver your medicines."

John touched his hat, and departed.

"I hope he'll have something for me pretty soon," said John, "a shilling won't last long."

It was evident that the information to be obtained by the lady was not always to be reliable. In intrigue or in war, you cannot always rely upon your spies. They may be in the interest of the enemy, or they may cheat both parties.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO GENTLEMEN SEEM TO HAVE NO VERY GOOD OPINION OF THE HERO OF THE STORY.

Ellen had been invited to spend the next evening with Miss Chavasse, as was a frequent occurrence, and it was chiefly in these evening meetings that her love had grown up and ripened. Mr. Castonel was ever a welcome visitor to Mrs. Chavasse, and Frances had laughed, and talked, and flirted with him, till a warmer feeling had arisen in her heart. He had all the practice of Ebury, being the only resident medical man, so in a pecuniary point of view, he was a desirable match for Frances. Little deemed they that Ellen Leicester was his attraction. A tacit sort of rivalry with Ellen existed in the mind of Frances: she thought of her as a rival in beauty, a rival in position, a rival in the favor of Ebury. But she was really fond of Ellen, always anxious to have her by her side, and it never once entered into her brain that Mr. Castonel, who was under cold displeasure at the rectory, should seek the favor of Ellen.

Again went Ellen that evening to the house of Mrs. Chavasse, and again went Mr. Castonel. They, the three, passed it in the garden, a large rambling place, nearly as full of weeds as of flowers. They roamed about the different walks, they sat on the benches; Mr. Castonel's attention being given chiefly to Frances, not to Ellen, his custom when with both. Frances possessed her mother's old talent for flirtation, and Mr. Castonel was nothing loth to exercise it. And so, the evening passed, and the summer moon rose in its course.

"Oh!" suddenly cried Frances as they were returning to the house, "I have forgotten the bay leaves mamma told me to gather. Now I must go back all down to the end of the garden."

She probably thought Mr. Castonel would follow her. He did not. He turned to Ellen Leicester, and drawing her amongst the thick trees, clasped her to him.

"I shall wish you good-night now, my darling," he murmured, "this moment is too precious to be lost. Oh, Ellen! are things to go on like this forever? It is true these evening meetings are a consolation to us, for they are spent in the presence of each other, but the hours which ought to be yours, and yours only, are thrown away in idle nonsense with Frances Chavasse. Oh, that we had indeed a right to be together and alone! When is that time to come?—*for come it must, Ellen.* When two people love as we do, and no justifiable impediment exists to its being legally ratified, that ratification will take place sooner or later. Think of this," he murmured, reluctantly releasing her, as the steps of Miss Chavasse were heard drawing near.

"I expected you were in the house by this time," she exclaimed, breathlessly, "and you are only where I left you."

"We waited for you," said Mr. Castonel.

"Very considerate of you!" was the reply of Frances, spoken in a tone of pique. She *had* expected Mr. Castonel to follow her.

They walked on towards the house, Mr. Castonel giving his arm to Frances. Talking was heard in the drawing-room, and they recognized the voice of Mr. Leicester.

"I will go round here," said Mr. Castonel, indicating a path which led to a side gate of egress. "If I enter, they will keep me talking; and I have a patient to see."

He extended a hand to each, as he spoke, by way of farewell, but Frances turned along the path with him. Ellen sat down on a garden-chair and waited. The voices from the house came distinctly to her ear in the quiet night.

"They will be in directly," Mrs. Chavasse was saying. "Mr. Castonel is with them. He and Frances grow greater friends than ever."

"Beware of that friendship," interrupted Mr. Leicester. "It may lead to something more."

"And what if it should," asked Mrs. Chavasse.

The rector paused, as if in surprise. "Do I understand you rightly, Mrs. Chavasse—that you would suffer Frances to become his wife?"

"Who is going to marry Frances?" inquired Mr. Chavasse, entering, and hearing the last words.

"Nobody," answered his wife. "We were speculating on Mr. Castonel's attention to her becoming more particular. I'm sure anybody might be proud to have him; he must be earning a large income."

"My objection to Mr. Castonel is to his character," returned the clergyman. "He is a bad man, living an irregular life. The world may call it gallantry: I call it sin."

"You allude to that mysterious girl who followed him down here," said Mrs. Chavasse. "You know what he told Mr. Winninton—that it was a relation, a lady of family and character. Of course it is singular, her living on, here, in the way she does, but it may be quite right, for all that."

"I saw him stealing off there last night, as I came home," observed the rector. "But I do not allude only to that. There are other things I could tell you of: some that happened during the lifetime of his wife."

"Then I tell you what," interrupted Mr. Chavasse, in his bluff, hearty manner, "a man of that sort should never have a daughter of mine. So mind what you and Frances are about, Mrs. Chavasse."

"That's just like papa," whispered Frances, who had returned to Ellen Leicester. "Speaking fiercely one minute, eating his words the next. Mamma always turns him round her little finger."

"As you value your daughter's hap-

piness, keep her from Mr. Castonel," resumed the minister. "I doubt him in more ways than one."

"Do listen to your papa, Ellen," again whispered Frances. "How prejudiced he is against Mr. Castonel."

"My dear father is prejudiced against him," was Ellen's thought. "He says he met him stealing off to her house last night—if he did but know he was stealing back from bringing me home!"

Ellen was mistaken. It was later that the rector had met Mr. Castonel.

"Must I give him up!" she went on, in mental anguish. "It will cost me the greatest of all earthly misery: perhaps even my life. But I cannot have the curse of disobedience on my soul. I must, I *will* give him up."

Ah, Ellen Leicester! you little know how such good resolutions fail when *one* is present with you to combat them! However, nourish your intention for the present, if you will. It will come to the same.

"Ellen, I say," Frances continued to whisper, "what is it that prejudices your papa against Mr. Castonel? Caroline told me herself, after her marriage, that that person was a relative of his, one almost like a sister. You heard her say so."

Ellen Leicester did not answer, and Frances turned towards her. It may have been the effect of the moonlight, but her face looked cold and white as the snow in winter.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. CASTONEL ASTONISHES HIS HOUSEKEEPER WITH A COMMUNICATION, BUT ASTONISHES MR. LEICESTER STILL MORE WITHOUT ONE.

It was a fine evening in October. Mr. Castonel had dined, and the tiger lighted the lamp, and placed it, with the port-wine, on the table before him. Mr. Castonel was particularly fond of a glass of good port; but he let it remain untouched on this day, for he was buried in thought. He was a slight-made man, neither handsome nor plain, and his unfathomable gray eyes never looked you in the face. He rang the bell, and the tiger answered it.

"Send Mrs. Muff to me. And, John, don't leave the house. I shall want you."

The housekeeper came in, closed the door, and came towards him. He was then pouring out his first glass of wine.

"Muff," he began, "there's a small black portmanteau somewhere about the house. A hand portmanteau."

"Yes sir. It is in the closet by John's room."

"Get it out, and put a week's change of linen into it. Did the tailor send home some new clothes to-day?"

"He did sir, and I ordered Hannah to take them up-stairs."

"They must be put in. And my shaving tackle, and such things. I am going out for a few days."

Mrs. Muff was thunderstruck. She had never known Mr. Castonel to leave Ebury, since he had settled in it, except on the occasion of his marriage.

"You have given me a surprise, sir," she said, "but I'll see to the things. Do you want them for to-morrow?"

"For this evening."

Mrs. Muff thought her ears must have deceived her. The last coach for the distant railway station had left. Besides, she had heard Mr. Castonel make an appointment in Ebury for the following day at twelve. "*This* evening, sir?" she repeated. "The coaches have all gone. The last drove by as John was bringing out the dinner tray."

"For this evening," repeated Mr. Castonel, without further comment. "In half an hour's time. And, Muff, you must get the house cleaned and put thoroughly in order while I am away. Let the dressing-room adjoining my bedchamber be made ready for use, the scent-bottles and trumpery put on the dressing-table, as it was in—in the time of Mrs. Castonel."

This was the climax. Mrs. Muff's speech failed her.

"This is Tuesday. I intend to be home on Monday next. I shall proba-

bly bring a—a person—a companion home with me."

"A what, sir?" demanded Mrs. Muff.

"A friend will accompany me, I say."

"Very well, sir, which room shall I get ready?"

"Room! What for?"

Mrs. Muff was growing bewildered. "I thought you said a gentleman was returning with you, sir. I asked which bed-chamber I should prepare for him."

"My own."

"Certainly, sir," answered the housekeeper, hesitatingly. "And, in that case, which room shall I prepare for you?"

Mr. Castonel laughed; such a strange laugh. "I will tell you then," he replied. "You must also send for the gardener, and get the garden done up. Send to-morrow morning, and let him begin. John can help him: he will not have much to do while I am away."

"Except mischief," added the housekeeper. "I'll keep him to it, sir."

"And, Muff, if anybody comes after me to-night, no matter who, or how late, say I am gone to an urgent case in the country, and send them to Mr. Rice. You remember, now, *no matter who.* You may tell the whole town to-morrow, and the devil besides, for all it can signify then."

"Tell what, sir?"

"That I am gone out for a week's holiday."

Mrs. Muff withdrew, utterly stupefied. She thought that she was beside herself, or else that Mr. Castonel was.

That same evening, not very long after, Ellen Leicester, attended by a maid, left her home, for she had promised to take tea with Mrs. Chavasse. In passing a lonely part of the road, where the way branched off to the railroad, they came upon Mr. Castonel. He shook hands with Miss Leicester, and gave her his arm, saying that he was also bound for Mrs. Chavasse's. "I will take charge of you now," he added; "you need not trouble your maid to come any further."

"Very true," murmured Ellen. "Martha," she said, turning to the servant, "if you would like two or three hours for yourself to-night, you may have them. Perhaps you would like to go home and see your mother."

The girl thanked her, and departed cheerfully towards the village. Could she have peered beyond a turning in the way, she might have seen a post-carriage drawn up, evidently waiting for travellers.

The time went on to nine. The rector and his wife sat over the fire, the former shivering, for he had caught a violent cold. "I suppose you have some nitre in the house?" he suddenly observed.

"Really—I fear not," answered Mrs. Leicester. "But I can send for some. Will you touch the bell?"

"Is Benjamin in?" demanded Mrs. Leicester of the maid who answered it.

"No, ma'am. Master said he was to go and see how Thomas Shipley was, and he is gone."

"Then tell Martha to put her bonnet on. She must fetch some nitre."

"Martha is not come in, ma'am, since she went out to take Miss Leicester."

"No!" uttered Mrs. Leicester, in surprise. "Why, that was at six o'clock. I wonder where she is stopping."

Benjamin came in, and was sent for the nitre, and soon Martha's voice was heard in the kitchen. Mrs. Leicester ordered her in.

"Martha, what do you mean by stopping out without leave?"

"Betsy has been on at me about it in the kitchen," was the girl's reply. "But it is Miss Ellen's fault. She told me I might have a few hours for myself."

"When did she tell you that?" demanded Mrs. Leicester, doubting if Ellen had said it.

"When we came to Piebald Corner. Mr. Castonel was standing there, and he said he would see Miss Ellen safe to Mrs. Chavasse's, and it was then she told me."

The rector looked up, anger on his face.

"Did you leave her with Mr. Castonel?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Then understand, Martha, for the future. If you go out to attend Miss Leicester, *you are to attend her.* You

have done wrong. It is not seemly for Miss Leicester to be abroad in the evening without one of her own attendants."

"Now, this has finished it," he continued to his wife, as the girl withdrew. "Ellen shall not go there again unless you are with her. Mr. Castonel! how dared he? I would rather Ellen made a companion of the poorest and lowest person in the village. And should there be any engagement growing up between him and Frances, I will not have Ellen there to countenance it with her presence."

"Poor Mr. Winninton prejudiced you against Mr. Castonel," observed Mrs. Leicester. "I do not admire or like him, but I think less ill of him than you do. Perhaps Frances might do worse."

The clergyman turned his head and looked at her. "I will ask you a home question, Susan. Would you like to see him marry Ellen?"

"Oh no, no!" and Mrs. Leicester almost shuddered as she spoke. "Not for worlds."

"Yet you would see him the husband of Frances Chavasse; your early friend's child!"

Mrs. Leicester hesitated before she spoke. "It is that I hope to see Ellen the wife of a religious man, a good man, and I fear Mrs. Chavasse does not heed that for Frances. She looks to social fitness, to position, to Mr. Castonel's being in favor with the world. But Ellen—no, no, I trust never to see her the wife of such a man as Mr. Castonel."

The minister covered his face with his hands. "I would rather read the burial service over her."

When Benjamin returned, he was dispatched for Miss Leicester, and told to make haste. But he came back and said Miss Leicester was not there.

"Not there!" exclaimed the rector. "Why, where have you been for her? I told you to go to Mrs. Chavasse's."

"That's where I have been, sir."

"Then you have made some stupid blunder. She must be there."

"I don't think I made the blunder, sir," returned Benjamin, who was a simple-spoken man of forty. "When I told 'em I had come for Miss Ellen, one of their maids joked, and said then I had come to the wrong house, but she took in the message, and Mrs. Chavasse came out to me. She said as they had expected Miss Ellen to tea, and waited for her, but she did not come."

Nothing could exceed the indignation of the rector. Where was Ellen? Where could she be gone? Was it possible that Mr. Castonel had persuaded her to go visiting any where else? In spite of his wife's remonstrances, who assured him he was too ill to go, and would catch his death, he turned out in search of her; and Mrs. Leicester, worried and angry, laid all the blame upon Martha, who immediately began to cry her eyes out.

Before noon the next day, Ebury was ringing with the elopement of Mr. Castonel and Ellen Leicester.

CHAPTER X.

"WHEN THE CAT IS AWAY, THE MICE WILL PLAY"—AND A TIGER IS A SPECIES OF CAT.

During the absence of the runaways, John had very little to do, in spite of the threats of Mrs. Muff. But if John had not much to attend to in a legitimate way, he made himself business in a highly improper fashion. For the youth was highly curious, tormented with a thirst for forbidden knowledge, and a desire to discover any thing that might be in the nature of a secret. He opened all the out-of-the-way drawers of the laboratory—in this case, however, with another object. Mr. Rice was very apt to put the liquorice-root, of which John was excessively fond, in strange places, to keep it from his jaws. His visit to the drawers was more on that account.

There was one place into which John was very anxious to peep, namely, Mr. Castonel's desk; but it was always kept locked, and the surgeon carried the key. The old-fashioned secretary, where the greater part of Mr. Castonel's papers were kept, was another object of curis

osity; but the key of this was with the other key, on a ring; and the ring was in his master's pocket. John's curiosity was ungratified, and his fondness for discovery met no reward.

One day, during his master's absence, John went into the laboratory to get the medicine ordered by Mr. Rice for the day's patients. The assistant was absent. John cast his eyes on the desk. No one was looking, and he tried the lid, but it was immovable.

"I would like to see inside of it," he said. "Why, look here," he continued, "if master has'nt been and gone and left a piece of one of his private papers a sticking out from a crack. Here's a queer go."

A doubled slip of paper that protruded from between the lid and the body of the desk, occasioned John's surprise. He tried to work it out, but it was caught by something. He persevered, and had got it one-third out, by the corner, when it parted in his hand. He had only obtained less than one half of an old envelope. He thrust it hurriedly into his pocket, and, seizing the medicine, left the house.

So soon as he came to a place free from observation, John examined his prize. His countenance fell.

The postmark was there—Cartington, in Shropshire—and all the rest was as follows:—

"To
LADY LAVINIA .....
No. 13 Watexl ....."

"Very provoking!" exclaimed John. "If I could have got it all. Hallo! here's a piece of the letter inside. But that's only a corner, and has but a few words, and I can't make head nor tail of 'em. 'Lady Lavinia!' I wonder what kind of a lady. It ain't a baron-knight's lady, I know; and what is master a doing with it? That's the question."

Much as he undervalued this prize, John put it carefully away in his pocket. If Mr. Castonel were ever to find it out! John shivered at the thought, and came very near dropping his basket, whereby several bottles would have come to speedy grief.

When John got back his first business was to conceal his plunder in a place no one would be apt to look into but himself.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WIFE HAS A PREMONITION OF HER FATE.—A FULFILLED PRESENTIMENT.

MR. and Mrs. Castonel, returned to Ebury, and the whole place flocked to pay them the wedding visit. The disobedience of Ellen Leicester was no business of theirs, that they should mark their sense of it. And Ellen—had it not been for the recollection of her offended parents and the unjustifiable part she had acted—how supreme, how intense, would have been her happiness! Her whole existence lay in her husband; she could see no fault in him; and could they then have tasted of the Tree of Life, so that the present might be forever, she might have given up all wish of a hereafter. Amongst the visitors, went Mrs. and Miss Chavasse; and, whatever mortification might have been in their hearts, it was not suffered to appear; that would never have done. So Mrs. Chavasse contented herself with abusing, elsewhere, the somewhat faded furniture, and thanking fate that *her* daughter had not been taken to a home so carelessly appointed.

Months went by, and how felt Ellen Castonel? Why, the fruits of her conduct were beginning to come home to her. She had received the forgiveness of her parents, for when she went to them in prayer and penitence, and knelt at her father's feet, the minister, though he strove hard to spurn her away according to his resolution, yet he was enfeebled in health, enfeebled by sorrow, and it ended in his falling on her neck, with sobs of agony, and forgiving her. It had been well could he as easily have forgotten. In these few months he had become a bowed, broken man. His hair had changed from brown to gray,

and it was rumored that he had never, since, enjoyed a whole night's rest. Could this fail to tell on Ellen? who, excepting that one strange and unaccountable act, had always been a gentle, loving, obedient daughter. She watched it all, and knew that it had been her work. Moreover, there were arising, within her, doubts of Mr. Castonel—whether he was the idol she had taken him to be. She was also in bad health, her situation causing her a never-ceasing sensation of illness. She looked worn, haggard, wretched; curious comments on which went about Ebury; and the people all agreed that Mrs. Castonel did not seem to repose on a bed of roses.

"There's a row up-stairs," exclaimed the tiger to Hannah, one day in April. "Missis is sobbing and crying buckets full, and master has been a blowing of her up."

"How do you know? Where are they?" said Hannah.

"In the drawing-room. I went up to ask what medicine was to go out, but they were too busy to see me. I heard master a roaring as I went up the stairs, like he roared at me one day, and nearly frightened my skin off me. It was something about missis going so much to the parsonage; she said it was her duty, and he said it wasn't. She was lying on the sofa, a sobbing and moaning awful."

"I think you must have peeped in," cried Hannah. "For shame of you!"

"In course I did. Would'nt you? Oh dear no, I dare say not! Master was kneeling down then, a kissing of her, and asking her to forget what he'd said in his passion, and to get herself calm, for that it would do her unknown harm. And he vowed if she'd only stop crying, that he'd take her hisself to the parsonage this evening, and stop the whole of it with her——"

"What is that you are saying?" sharply demanded Mrs. Muff, putting her head into the kitchen.

"I was a telling Hannah she'd best sew that there button on my best livery trousers, what came off 'em last Sunday, or she'd get her neck pulled," answered the lad, vaulting away.

Whether the tiger's information was correct, and that excitement was likely to have an injurious effect upon Mrs. Castonel, certain it is, that the following day she was seized with illness. The nature of it was such as to destroy hopes of offspring, and precisely similar to that which had preceded the death of the first Mrs. Castonel.

"What an extraordinary thing!" cried Mrs. Chavasse, when the news reached her; "it looks like fatality. Caroline had been six months married when she fell ill; and now in just the same period of time, Ellen falls ill! I hope she will not follow her fate out to the last, and die of it."

"For the matter of that, we never knew what the first Mrs. Castonel did die of," returned Mrs. Major Acre, who was sitting there. "She was recovering from her sickness; indeed, it may be said that she had recovered from it; and she went off suddenly one evening, nobody knew with what."

"Mr. Castonel said it was perfectly satisfactory to medical men," said Mrs. Chavasse. "There are so many dangerous tricks and turns of maladies, you know, only clear to them."

For several days Ellen Castonel was very ill. Not perhaps in absolute danger, but sufficiently near it to excite apprehension. Then she began to get better. During this time nothing could exceed the affection and kindness of Mr. Castonel: his attention was a marvel of admiration, allowed to be so, even by Mrs. Leicester.

One afternoon, when she was dressed and in her drawing-room, Mrs. and Miss Chavasse called. They were the first visitors who had been admitted. Frances offered to remain the rest of the day, but Mrs. Chavasse overruled it: Ellen was not strong enough, she said, to bear so many hours' incessant gossiping.

Mr. Castonel came in while they sat there. He was in high spirits, laughed and talked, almost flirted with Frances, as in former days, when she had erroneously deemed he had a motive in it. When they left, he attended them to the door, gay and attractive as ever in the eyes of Frances; and she pondered

how Ellen could ever appear sad with such a husband. Mr. Castonel then went into his laboratory, where he busied himself for half an hour. When he returned up-stairs, Ellen was in tears.

"Don't be angry with me, Gervase. This lowness of spirits will come on, and I cannot help it. I fear it is a bad omen."

Mr. Castonel turned away his head, and coughed.

"An omen of what, Ellen?"

"That I shall never recover."

"You have recovered. Come, come, Ellen, cheer up. I thought Mrs. Chavasse's visit had done you good."

"Last evening, when I sat by myself for so many hours, I could not help thinking of poor Caroline. I wondered what it could be she died of, and——"

"Ellen!" burst forth Mr. Castonel, "it is wrong and wicked to encourage such absurd thoughts. You asked me the other day, when you were lying ill, what it was she died of, and I explained it. It is not going to occur to you."

"No, no," she answered, "I am not really afraid. It is only in the dull evening hours, when I am alone, that I get these foolish fancies. If you could be always with me, they would not come. Try and stay with me to-night, Gervase."

"My darling, I have not left you one evening since you were ill, till the last, and then it was not by choice. I know of nothing to call me forth to-night. Should any thing arise unexpectedly, I must go, as Rice is away. In that case, I should tell Muff to remain with you."

She still wept silently. It seemed that her spirits had sunk into a low state, and nothing just then could arouse them. Mr. Castonel stood and looked down at her, his elbow leaning on the mantel-piece.

"Would you like Mr. and Mrs. Leicester to come this evening?" he asked.

"Oh!" she cried, clasping her hands and half rising from her chair, the pallid hue giving place to crimson on her lovely face, and the light of excitement rising in her sweet blue eyes—"oh, Gervase, if you would but let me ask them! Papa has never been here to stay an evening with me: he would come now. It would do me more good than every thing else. Indeed I should not have these fears then."

He went to a table and wrote a brief note, putting it into Ellen's hands to read. It was to the effect that his wife was in low spirits, and much wished them both to come to tea and spend the evening with her.

"Thank you, thank you, dearest Gervase," she exclaimed, "you have made me happy. Oh, papa!"

"Ellen," he said, gazing into her eyes, "confess. You love your father better than you do me."

"You know to the contrary, Gervase. I love him with a different love. I left him for you," she added, in a low, almost a reproachful tone, as she leaned forward and hid her face upon her husband's arm, "and people say that it is killing him."

The tiger was dispatched with the note to the parsonage, and brought back a verbal answer that Mr. and Mrs. Leicester would soon follow him.

They both came. They sat with Ellen and her husband. Mrs. Leicester made tea; and for once Ellen was happy. There appeared to be more social feeling between her husband and father than she had ever hoped for, and a joyous vision fleeted across her of time bringing about a thorough reconciliation, and of their all being happy together. She laughed, she talked, she almost sang; and Mr. and Mrs. Leicester inquired what had become of the lowness of spirits spoken of in Mr. Castonel's note. He answered pleasantly that their presence had scared it away, and that if they did not mind the trouble of coming out, it might be well to try the experiment again on the following evening; he could see it was the best medicine for his dearest Ellen. They promised to do so, even Mr. Leicester. Especially, he added, as he must now leave almost directly.

The glow on Ellen's face faded. "Why leave, papa?"

"My dear, there is a vestry meeting to-night, and I must attend it. Your mamma can stay."

"Will you not return when it is over?" resumed Ellen, anxiously.

"No. It will not be over till late. It is likely to be a stormy one."

"But you will come to-morrow? And remain longer?" she feverishly added.

"Child, I have said so."

"Upon one condition—that she does not excite herself over it," interposed Mr. Castonel, affectionately laying his hand upon his wife's. "Add that proviso, sir."

"Oh, if Ellen is to excite herself, of course that would stop it," returned the rector, with a smile. The first smile his countenance had worn since her disobedience.

Ellen saw it, and her heart rose up in thankfulness within her. "Dearest papa," she whispered, leaning towards him, "I will be quite calm. It will be right in time between us all: I see it will. I am so happy!"

At seven o'clock they heard the little bell tinkle out, calling together the members of the select vestry, and Mr. Leicester took his departure. His wife remained with Ellen, Mr. Castonel also; nothing called him out; and they spent a happy, cordial evening. When she rose to leave, Mr. Castonel rang the bell for Mrs. Muff to attend her. He would not leave Ellen.

"What nonsense!" said Mrs. Leicester. "As if any one would run away with me! I shall be at home in five minutes. I need not trouble Mrs. Muff."

"It will do Muff good," said Ellen. "She has never stirred out since my illness. And then, mamma, she can bring back the receipt you spoke of."

"Good-night, my dear," said Mrs. Leicester, stooping to kiss her. "Do you feel yourself better for our visit?"

"I feel quite well, mamma," was Ellen's joyous answer. "Nothing whatever is the matter with me now. Only," she added, laughing, "that I am a little thirsty."

"That is soon remedied," said Mr. Castonel. "I will get you some wine and water, Ellen."

"How thankful I am to see your mistress so much better," exclaimed Mrs. Leicester, as she and Mrs. Muff walked along.

"Ma'am, you cannot be more thankful than I am. I have been upon thorns ever since she was taken ill. Poor Mrs. Castonel—I mean Miss Caroline—having been cut off suddenly by the same illness, was enough to make me fearful."

"Poor Caroline!" sighed Mrs. Leicester, with more truth than caution, "I wish she had lived."

"She is better off," was the reply of the housekeeper. "There is nothing but crosses and cares for us who are left. I hope, ma'am, you and Mr. Leicester will come in often now. You can have no conception of the effect it has had upon my mistress to-night: she is a thousand pounds nearer being well."

Mrs. Leicester turned to her. "Do you think Mr. Castonel makes her a good husband? You and I, Mrs. Muff," she added, in a tone which seemed to bespeak apology for herself, "knew each other years before this stranger ever came near the place, and I speak to you as I would not to others. He seems affectionate, kind, but—what do you think?"

"I cannot answer you, ma'am," replied Mrs. Muff, "I wish I could. Before us he is all kindness to her; and yet—I don't know why it should be, but I have my doubts of its being sincere. I force the feeling down, and say to myself that I was set against Mr. Castonel at the first, through the injury he did my old master. I had my doubts in the same way of his sincerity to his first wife. And yet, I don't notice it in his manners to other people."

"Does he go to see that—person now?" asked Mrs. Leicester, lowering her tone.

"Well, ma'am, I can't say. All I know is, that the other—servant, or whatever she may be—who lives with her, was at our house lately."

"Indeed!"

"It was a night or two before my mistress was taken ill. There came a quiet knock at the door. John was

out, and Hannah was up-stairs, turning down the beds, so I answered it myself. She asked for Mr. Castonel. I did not know her in the dusk, and was about to show her into the study, where master sees his patients, but it flashed over me who it was; and I said Mr. Castonel was not at liberty, and shut the door in her face."

"Was Mr. Castonel at home?"

"He was in the drawing-room with my mistress. And I believe must have seen her from the windows, for he came down-stairs almost directly, and went out."

"Did Ellen—did Mrs. Castonel see her?" breathlessly inquired Mrs. Leicester.

"Ma'am, I have my doubts she did. No sooner was Mr. Castonel gone, than the drawing-room bell rang, and I went up. It was for the lamp. While I was lighting it, my mistress said, 'Muff, who was that at the door?'

"That put me in a flutter, but I gathered my wits together, and answered that it was a person from the new pork-shop—for of course I would not tell her the truth."

"'What did they want?' asked my mistress.

"'Brought the bill, ma'am,' said I. For luckily the new pork people had sent in their bill that day. And I took it out of my pocket, and laid it on the table by her.

"'What could the person want, walking before the house afterwards, and looking up at the windows?' then questioned my mistress.

"'Quite impossible for me to tell, ma'am,' I said; and I won't deny that the question took me aback. 'Perhaps they wanted a little fresh air, as it's a warmish night, and the street is open just here!'"

"Was that all that passed?" demanded Mrs. Leicester.

"That was all. Mr. Castonel was not in for two hours afterwards, and I heard him tell my mistress he had been out to a most difficult case. I'll be whipped if I believed him."

"Is he out much in an evening?"

"Very often, he used to be, before my mistress was taken ill. He is always ready with an excuse—it's this patient, or it's that patient, that wants him and keeps him. But I never remember Mr. Winnington to have had these evening calls upon his time."

They reached the parsonage, and entered it. The housekeeper was to take back the receipt for some particularly nourishing jelly, which Mrs. Leicester had been recommending for Ellen. It was not immediately found, and Mrs. Muff sat with her in the parlor, talking still. The rector came in from the vestry meeting, and she rose to leave.

Conscious that she had remained longer than was absolutely needful, Mrs. Muff walked briskly home. She had gained the door, and was feeling in her pocket for the latch-key, she possessing one, and Mr. Castonel the other, when the door was flung violently open, and the tiger sprang out, for all the world like a tiger, very nearly upsetting Mrs. Muff, and sending her backwards down the steps.

"You audacious, good-for-nothing monkey!" she exclaimed, giving him a smart box on the ears. "You saw me standing there, I suppose, and did it for the purpose."

"Did I do it for the purpose?" retorted John. "You just go in and see whether I did it for the purpose. I'm a-going to get the horse, and tear off without saddle or bridle for the first doctor I can fetch. It's like as if Mr. Rice had took his two days' holiday just now, a purpose not to be in the town!"

He rushed round towards the stables, and Mrs. Muff entered. Hannah met her with a shriek, and a face as white as ashes. "Mrs. Castonel!—Oh! Mrs. Castonel!" was all she cried.

"What is it?" asked the terrified Mrs. Muff.

"It is spasms, or convulsions, or something of the sort," sobbed Hannah, "but I'm sure she's dying. She's writhing just as Miss Caroline did. I am sure she is dying."

Once more, as connected with this history, rang out the passing-bell of

Ebury. And when the startled inhabitants, those who were late sitters-up, opened their doors, and strove to learn who had gone to their reckoning, they shrank from the answer with horror and dismay.

"The young, the beautiful, the second Mrs. Castonel."

And again a funeral started from the house of the surgeon to take its way to the church. But this time it was a stranger who occupied the clergyman's chariot. Mr. Leicester's task was a more painful one; he followed as second mourner. Many people were in the churchyard, and their curiosity was intensely gratified at witnessing the violent grief of Mr. Castonel. The rector's emotion was less conspicuous, but his feeble form was bowed, his steps tottered, and his gray hair streamed in the wind. On the conclusion of the ceremony, Mr. Castonel stepped into the mourning coach, solemnly to be conveyed home again at a mourning pace; but the rector passed aside, and entered the parsonage. The sexton, a spare man in a brown wig, was shovelling in the earth upon the coffin and shedding tears. He had carried Ellen many a time over the same spot when she was a little child.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER STRANGER COMES TO EBURY, AND SEEMS TO BE ON THE LOOK-OUT FOR INFORMATION.

A WEEK after the funeral of the second Mrs. Castonel (Ellen Leicester, that had been), Ebury had a visitor. Visitors were never plenty in the place, and the advent of a stranger broke the monotony of village life, and gave rise to a deal of comment. In this case, however, there was more than ordinary cause for the tongues of the gossips to wag actively, and from Mrs. Major Acre, down, they all had employment.

The stranger was a man to set conjecture at defiance. He was a very well-dressed personage, indeed, with quiet and refined manners, and an air of ease and self-possession which betokened an assured position. On the other hand, it was to be noticed that he lodged at the little village inn, that he brought no letters to any one in the place, was attended by no body-servant, and his luggage consisted of a dressing-case, a portmanteau, and an umbrella. As for his name, that was his own property, which he seemed ready to surrender to no one; and his business seemed to be his own also, which he kept in his exclusive possession. Ebury was in that part of England known in old times as Mercia, where the law had been centuries before, that every stranger in coming was obliged to blow a horn and proclaim his business, on pain of being considered a thief; and though the people of Ebury did not carry out the custom of their forefathers to the harsh letter, they considered the reserve to be very suspicious, at least. There was one comfort—he had an ample store of money for his present purposes. The landlord of the inn was convinced of that by actual demonstration, and the conviction partly satisfied the publican, though he would fain have known more of his mysterious guest.

But if the stranger was reticent in regard to his own affairs, he was curious enough about those of other people. At first, he asked no questions, and sat dreamily enough, either in his own chamber or the tap-room, where occasionally he descended to smoke a curious looking red pipe, with a reed stem, and to read the newspaper. The second day after his arrival he chanced to look through the window, as Mr. Castonel emerged from the recesses of his cab, and entered the door of a house on the opposite side of the way.

The stranger summoned the landlord.

"Mr. Jenks," said he, "does the owner of that cab live in the house yonder?"

"The owner of that cab, sir? oh, no, sir. That is Mr. Castonel, sir, the surgeon of these parts, sir. He has gone there to see a patient, sir."

"Mr. Castonel. Is that his name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Does his wife live with him?"

"Oh, no, sir! She died a week ago. You see he is in mourning. She was a very fine woman, sir."

"Dead!"

The tone of the stranger had in it so much of horror and despair, that the landlord looked at him in surprise. The other threw off the feeling, if any such existed, by an effort, and in an indifferent way put another question.

"Of what disease did she die?"

"I don't quite know, sir. The other wife died in the same way. It was a sort of convulsions, as I heard, sir."

"The other wife! Then he was married a second time?"

"Yes, sir—to the rector's daughter. It was a runaway match, sir. Miss Leicester, a very pretty young lady, indeed."

"And the first wife died in the same way?"

"Yes, sir, so it is said. She was Miss Hall, Mr. Winninton's niece. Mr. Winninton was our apothecary when Mr. Castonel came here to settle. Mr. Castonel first took his practice, and then he took his niece. It quite broke the old man's heart, sir, and he never held his head up afterward, sir."

"Mr. Castonel was a widower then, when he came here?"

"I'm sure I don't know, and not knowing, can't say, sir. Nobody knows much about him here. May-be his cousin could tell, sir; but she never sees anybody to say any thing to."

"His cousin?"

"Yes, sir, if she is his cousin. Some say she's a sister-in-law. She lives at Beech Lodge, just out of town. She is quite the lady, sir; every one says that, who ever saw her. To be sure, when she first came here people used to talk harsh-like about her and him; but she is so much the lady, and he's such a proper gentleman, that it all died away—anyhow, pretty much."

"And he's a proper gentleman, eh?"

"Oh, quite, sir, quite. A little gay among the ladies, perhaps. They do say that Mary Shipley—but that is gossip. Women will talk, sir; they've nothing else to do, some of 'em. There's my wife, sir" (here the cautious landlord's voice sank to a whisper), "she never could abide Mr. Castonel, and she says that Mary Shipley is not the only one; but I never saw any thing myself, never."

"And this cousin lives alone, you say?"

"Yes, sir—no, sir. She has a servant, a very quiet woman—never has a word for any one."

The stranger pursued his questioning until he had obtained a description of the female recluse, and then inquired particularly about the precise location of Beech Lodge. Having received an accurate description of the spot, he dismissed the landlord, and quietly finished his pipe alone.

That afternoon, rather late, the stranger strolled leisurely out of the village. On arriving in front of Beech Lodge, he glanced around, and seeing no one in view, crossed the road, and tapped at the door of the cottage.

The servant girl who came at the summons, stared at the visitor in surprise. Without noticing this, he inquired for her mistress.

"She is in, sir; but she is not at home to any one."

Without replying, he pushed her aside, and entered the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS INTERVIEW BETWEEN TWO MYSTERIOUS PERSONS.

The woman, whose name and position were so much of a mystery to Ebury, was seated at a work-stand, with a tambour-frame before her, busily engaged in embroidery, as the stranger entered. She did not hear his approach, and it was not until she felt a light touch on her shoulder that she looked up. In an instant she started to her feet, dropping her work, while her face was covered with an almost death-like pallor.

"*You* here!" she exclaimed. "Do you know that he——"

"Oh, yes," he interrupted; "I know

it. But it strikes me that he is playing a very strange game; and for what purpose, or to what end, is not very clear. But, why you endure it, is a puzzle still more startling."

"You know my promise, and yours?"

"Oh, I am here by the merest accident. I only returned from America a short while since. By way of rest, I came to what I thought the quietest quarter of England. Here I found him, and from the description I had of a lonely woman, supposed I should find you. I learned enough to-day from my gossipy landlord to see that our *friend*"—he laid a bitter emphasis on the last word—"is—as they say among the Yankees—cutting a broad swathe. I can see why you make no audible demur to his proceedings; but, why remain here at all?"

"I dare not do otherwise. But go—go—if *he* should meet you!"

"Let him meet. It is possible that he may meet me, before I leave England."

"Avoid him, Richard, for your own sake—well, then—for mine!"

"Lavinia, that is an adjuration I cannot well resist."

"Yes, for my sake, go!"

"I will; but if his tyranny becomes so insupportable that you can bear it no farther, let me know it. I will give you my address, and you can write to me by the first packet."

The woman wrung her hands in agony.

"I dare not. Go at once. He may come at any moment. If he be provoked, you do not know him as well as I, he would stop at nothing. I have tried in every way—have offered every thing; but I cannot bend him, or alter his purpose. Ah! you don't know how inflexible he is!"

"But, what is it I hear about these women—these wives of his—their mysterious deaths?"

"Don't ask me—it is too fearful; and yet it is only suspicion. Would you destroy me? Is that the return for all I have suffered—all I suffer? He has those letters—I am in his power. It would not hurt *you*, but——"

"I understand your reproach. I will go, Lavinia. I leave England in a week; but I shall return again to remain here in defiance of him. I will see then if there be no means to rescue you, without risk to yourself. Good-by."

He bent over her, and before she could divine or resist his purpose, kissed her forehead. He then went out.

The woman stood there, rooted, as it were, to the spot. The blood which had receded from her face, now rushed back in a full tide, covering face, neck, and arms, with a deep crimson flush. She passed to the window, and looked out at the stranger, who strode on without turning. A bend in the road hid him from sight, and then the woman tottered to a chair into which she sank, sobbing passionately.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COMING OF THE NEW CURATE, AND HIS PRIVATE ENGAGEMENT.

A YOUNG and somewhat shy-looking man was making his way down the street of a country village. He appeared to be a stranger, and his clerical coat and white neckcloth betokened his calling. It would seem he was in search of some house that he could not readily find, for he peered curiously at several through his spectacles as he passed them. As he neared one, a handsome house with a green verandah, a cab, painted black, came dashing up, stopped, and there descended from it a gentleman and his servant in the deepest mourning. The stranger approached the master, and courteously touched his hat.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "can you obligingly point out to me the rectory? I understood it to be somewhere here."

"At the end of the street, five minutes lower down. Opposite the church."

"*This* end of the street?" resumed

the stranger, pointing to the way he had been journeying.

"I'll show the gentleman which it is," cried a fine boy of fourteen, who appeared to be growing out of his jacket.

"What, is it you, Arthur?" said the owner of the cab. "Where did you spring from?"

The young gentleman had sprung from behind the cab, but he did not choose to say so. "I say, sir," he exclaimed, slipping the question, "you have not seen mamma anywhere, have you?"

"No."

"Oh, well, it's not my fault. She told me to meet her somewhere here as I came home from school, and she'd take me to have my hair cut. Old Brookes did not do it to please her last time, so she said she'd go and see it done. Now, sir," he added to the stranger, "I'll show you Mr. Leicester's?'

They walked along together. "Do you know," said the boy, suddenly looking at his companion, "I can guess who you are? You are the new curate."

The stranger smiled. "How do you guess that?"

"Because you look like it. And we know Mr. Leicester had engaged one; the other did not suit. He is too ill now to do it all himself. Mamma says she is sure he won't live long. Do you know Mr. Castonel?"

"No. Who is Mr. Castonel?"

"Why, that was Mr. Castonel, and that was his cab. Did you see how black they were?"

"Yes. He appeared to be in deep mourning."

"It is for his wife. She was so pretty, and we all liked her so. She was Ellen Leicester, and Mr. Castonel ran away with her, and she died. That was last spring, and it's since then that Mr. Leicester has got so ill. His first wife died too."

"Whose first wife?" returned the stranger, scarcely making sense of the boy's tale.

"Mr. Castonel's."

"Are you speaking of the gentleman of whom I inquired my way? He looks young to have had two wives."

"He has, though. He is a doctor, and has all the practice. He keeps two assistants now. Do you know Mr. Tuck?"

"I do not know any one in Ebury."

"Oh, don't you? There's Mr. Leicester's," added the lad, pointing to a house, lower down, as they came to a turning in the street. "And now I have shown it you, I must go back, for if mamma comes and I don't meet her, she'll blow me up."

"I thank you for bringing me," said Mr. Hurst. "I hope we shall soon be better acquainted. Tell me your name."

"Arthur Chavasse. I am to be what you are. A parson."

"Indeed. I hope you will make a good one."

"I don't know. Last week when I sent the ball through the window and gave Lucy a black eye, papa and mamma were in a passion with me, and they said I had too much devil in me for a parson."

"I am sorry to hear that," was the grave answer.

"I have not got half the devil that some chaps have," continued Master Arthur. "I only leap hedges, and climb trees, and wade streams, and all that. I don't see what harm that can do a fellow, even if he is to be a parson."

"I fear it would seem to point that he might be more fitted for other callings in life."

"Then I just wish you'd tell them so at home. I don't want to be a parson; it's too tame a life for me. Good-by, sir."

He flew away, a high-spirited generous lad; and the curate—for such he was—looked after him. Then he turned in at the rectory gate.

He was shown into the room where the Reverend Mr. Leicester and his wife were sitting. Two sad, gray-haired people, the former very feeble, but not with age. Arthur Chavasse had given a pretty accurate account of matters. From the time that their only child had run away with Mr. Castonel, they had been breaking in health; but since her

death, which had occurred six months subsequently, the rector may be said to have been a dying man.

There was certainly a fatality attending the wives of Mr. Castonel, and he appeared to mourn them with sincerity, especially the last. His attire was as black as black could be: he had put his cab in black; the crape on his hat extended from the brim to the crown, and he wore a mourning pin and a mourning ring with Ellen's hair in it. He abstained from all gayety, took a friendly cup of tea occasionally with Mr. and Mrs. Chavasse, and paid a formal visit to the rector and Mrs. Leicester once a month.

The new curate, Mr. Hurst, was approved of by Ebury. He was possessed of an amazing stock of dry, book erudition, but was retiring and shy to a fault. He took up his abode at the parish beadle's, who let furnished lodgings, very comfortable and quiet. One day he received a visit from Mr. Chavasse, a bluff, hearty, good-tempered man, who was steward to the estate of the Earl of Eastberry, a neighboring nobleman.

"I was talking to Mr. Leicester yesterday," began Mr. Chavasse, shaking hands, "and he told me he thought you were open to a teaching engagement for an hour or so in the afternoons."

"Certainly," answered the curate, coughing in the nervous manner habitual to him when taken by surprise, "I would have no objection to employ my time in that way, when my duties for the day are over."

"That rascal of a boy of mine, Arthur—the lad has good abilities, I know, for in that respect he takes after his mother and Frances, yet there are nothing but complaints from the school about his not getting on."

"Do you not fancy that his abilities may lie in a different direction—that he may be formed by nature for a more bustling life than a clerical one?" the curate ventured to suggest.

"Why, of course, if he has not got it in him, it would be of no use to force him to be a parson; but there's such an opening. Lord Eastberry has promised me a living for him. Now it has struck me that if you would come, say at four o'clock, which is the hour he leaves school, and hammer something into him till half-past five, or six, we might see what stuff he is really made of. What do you say?"

"I could accept the engagement for every evening except Saturday," answered Mr. Hurst.

"All right," cried Mr. Chavasse. "One day lost out of the six won't matter. And now, sir, what shall you charge?"

The curate hesitated and blushed, and then named a very low sum.

"If it were not that I have so many children pulling at me, I should say it was too little by half," observed the straight-forward Mr. Chavasse; "but I can't stand a high figure. My eldest son has turned out wild, and he is a shocking expense to me. Shall we begin on Monday?"

"If you please. I shall be ready."

"And mind," he added, "that you always stop and take your tea with us, when you have no better engagement. I shall tell Mrs. Chavasse to insist on that part of the bargain."

Thus it came to pass that the Reverend Mr. Hurst became very intimate at the house of Mrs. Chavasse.

CHAPTER XV.

MARY SHIPLEY TRIES TO MELT THE HEART OF MR. CASTONEL.

The autumn, winter, spring passed; and, with summer, things seemed to be brightening again. We speak of Mr. Castonel. He discarded his gloomy attire, his cab was repainted a claret color, and he went again into general society. His practice flourished; if he had lost his own wives he seemed lucky in saving those of other men. His assistants, like himself, had plenty to do. The gossips began to speculate whether he would marry again. "Surely not!" cried the timid ones, shaking their heads with a shudder; "who would venture upon him?"

Mr. Castonel was in his laboratory,

writing, one evening, when John entered.

"There's a patient wants to see you, sir."

"Who is it, John?"

"I don't know, sir. It's a woman, I believe, but her face is all muffled up. She says she's got the tooth-ache, and's afraid of catching cold in her jaw."

"Send her in."

"Master says you're to go in there," was John's remark to the woman in waiting. The latter, who had on a light cloak, with a hood, the latter thrown over her head, and the front of it kept nearly closed with her left hand, obeyed his order, and went into the room.

Mr. Castonel recognized her before she showed her face.

"Now, Mary," he said, "what do you want to bother me about *this* time? Is the baby sick?"

"Yes."

"What appears to be the matter?"

"It's feverish, and tosses about a good deal."

"Over-fed, I dare say. I will send Mr. Rice to see it in the morning. If he reports any thing serious, I will attend to it myself. A little mild medicine will bring it all right again. Well! what do you wait for? What else do you want?"

"Oh, Mr. Castonel!" said the girl imploringly, "you know what you promised."

"Indeed I don't," replied the surgeon. "I have promised a great many silly things in my time, I dare say. What is the particular promise to which you refer?"

"You said that when the child—*our* child—was two years old, you would do me right for its sake. It will soon be that time."

"Pooh! pooh! stuff and nonsense!"

"You know you did."

"Now, do go away, girl. What do you come here for, anyhow? Do you really suppose yourself a fit wife for a man in my position?"

"You thought me fit to be the mother of your child."

"That's a different sort of thing."

The girl looked at him intently, and a dark, red spot burned on her pale cheek. In spite of his effrontery, and habitual coolness, the surgeon shrunk.

"See here!" she said, and the words seemed to hiss, in their concentrated energy, through her half-closed teeth. "I have a witness of what you said. There was some one in the next room, just before the babe was born, that heard you promise then. She won't forget what you said, if you do. She is ready to swear to the words. You owned too that you promised me marriage at the beginning. Mr. Lennox, the lawyer, says it is good ground for an action. There now."

"So you have told all to Mr. Lennox, then? You are going to try the law, eh?"

"No, I didn't tell him; but *she* asked him one day, if so and so was the case, what could be done, without mentioning names, and he said, he did, that he could make any man walk up in such a case, or pay smartly for it."

"And who is *she?*"

"I shan't tell you. You'll find out, if necessary, quick enough."

He laid his hand gently on her shoulder, and gave a queer smile.

"Suppose," he said, "I were to marry you. Where would be your action then?"

"Oh, Mr. Castonel!"

"Why, you foolish creature, I always intended to keep my promise, and I would tell your witness so, if she were here. Why not? You know I married, because I was forced to do it, from circumstances; but I never cared for any one but you. But I could not make you my wife in Ebury. It would ruin my practice, and bring want to you. I will soon be able to wind up my affairs, and then we can go to America together. There, no one will know your past history, or mine, or the child's."

"If you only meant it, I——"

"Of course I do. Look me in the face, and see if I am not telling the truth."

"But you married Miss Leicester."

"I was so bound up, I was obliged to. I cared nothing for her, and you ought to know it. *As long as the child*

is alive, you have a tie on me that I can't break, and have no desire to. Besides," he added, jocularly, "you have that witness always, and Mr. Lennox is ready for a job. To be sure, you would only get my money, while by waiting you would get me."

"But ——"

"Now, don't fret yourself with doubts, my dear. I will send over Mr. Rice to see the little darling. I have some writing to do, or I would go myself. If it is seriously ill, I will come, anyhow. Ah! if I can only get my affairs through here satisfactorily, we will be very happy together in a new world."

He bent forward and kissed her. She burst into tears.

"Ah, Mr. Castonel! if you only mean it."

"I *do* mean it. You shall see."

The girl wiped her eyes, and as he talked on, her face cleared. There was music in his tones, and her face brightened. She suffered him at length to lead her to the door, where he bade her good-by, and she went home happy.

When she had gone, the surgeon laughed a low, singular laugh, as usual.

"So," he muttered, "you have a witness, have you, my lady? Who can it be? The old dame, I wonder. No matter! The promise was only conditional. We shall see. That Scotch lawyer is poking his sharp nose into my affairs. It may come to the ears of Frances."

Mr. Castonel paced to and fro, for some time, in thought.

"It will not do now," he said, at length. "There is no need of haste. Plenty of time yet."

CHAPTER XVI.

WHICH TELLS HOW THE CURATE FLEW IN THE FLAME, AND GOT SINGED, AND OF THE FATE OF A BABE, WITH SOMETHING OF TWO LOVE-SCENES.

The child of Mary Shipley got well, but a month or so after it was sick again. And this was what came of it.

One hot afternoon Mr. Rice, one of the qualified assistant-surgeons of Mr. Castonel, was walking along a field path. The growing corn, rising on either side of him, was ripening, and the gay insects hummed pleasantly. He had just quitted a cottage, one of an humble row called Beech Cottages, situated near. "Ah, how d'ye do?" cried he. "A lovely afternoon."

"Very." It was the curate who had met him. "Have you been far?"

"Only to Gaffer Shipley's. Mr. Castonel received some message this morning about the child: he did not choose to go himself, but sent me."

"Is it ill?" cried the curate, in a tone of alarm. "It is not baptized. I never can get to see the mother about it."

"Ill, no. A trifle feverish. The poor do cram their children with such unwholesome food."

"I am on my way to Thomas Shipley's myself," observed Mr. Hurst. "Mr. Leicester asked me if I had seen him this week, so I thought I'd take a walk this way and call upon a few of them. Mr. Leicester seems to have a great regard for that old man."

"A decent man, I believe, he has been all his life," returned Mr. Rice. "And since his daughter forgot herself, people have wished to show him more respect than before."

"By the way," said the curate, "whose is the child?"

Mr. Rice laughed. "You had better ask that question of Mr. Castonel. *I* don't know."

They shook hands and parted: the surgeon proceeding to the residence of Mr. Castonel, where he busied himself for some little time, making up medicine. He had just concluded his task when Mr. Castonel entered.

"Well," said he, "what was the matter down at Shipley's?"

"Oh, nothing. Child somewhat feverish and its bowels out of order. I have made up these powders for it. They will set it to rights."

"And that?" added Mr. Castonel, glancing from the powders to a bottle of mixture.

"For Mrs. Acre. I am off now to old Flockaway's."

As Mr. Rice quitted the laboratory, he met the tiger. "Some medicine to go out, John."

"Where to, sir?"

"Mr. Castonel will tell you. He is there."

John went into the laboratory. "Mr. Rice says there's some medicine to go out, sir."

Mr. Castonel did not reply immediately. He was writing something on a slip of paper.

"Go to the library," he said, handing it to John, "and inquire whether this book has arrived. If so, bring it."

"Can't I take the medicine at the same time, sir?"

"Do as you are bid, and nothing more," rejoined Mr. Castonel. "Bring me the book, if it is there, and then go with the medicine. You see where it is for: the mixture to Mrs. Acre's, the powders to Thomas Shipley's."

The tiger went off, whistling, and his master remained in the laboratory. But when the boy returned, he was no longer there.

"Hannah!" sang out the lad.

"What do you want with Hannah?" demanded the housekeeper, putting her head outside the kitchen door.

"Bid her tell master as the library says he never ordered the book at all, as they heered on: but if he wants it they can get it from London. Perhaps you'll condescend to tell him yourself, Madam Muff." He took up the medicine as he spoke, and went out again.

Meanwhile the Reverend Mr. Hurst had left the corn-field, and proceeded to Gaffer Shipley's. The Gaffer—as he was styled in the village—lay in his bed in the back room. A fall from a ladder had laid him on it, and he would never rise again. Dame Vaughan was in the front room, sewing. She had been hired to attend the house, during a recent illness of Mary Shipley's. "He is asleep, sir," she whispered, when she saw the curate about to enter: "he dropped off just now, and I think it will do him good."

Mr. Hurst nodded and drew away. He was bound to several cottages in the neighborhood, so he went to them first, and returned afterwards to Shipley's. The Gaffer was awake then.

"I'm ailing much, sir," he said. "Give my humble duty to Mr. Leicester, and thank him for asking. I'm as hot as I can be to-day. My skin feels burning."

"Did you tell this to Mr. Rice. He might have given you something."

"No, sir, I did'nt. I had dropped off asleep when he was here, and Dame Vaughan never thought of it. I may be better to-morrow, and then I shan't want physic."

As the Gaffer spoke, Mr. Hurst saw the entrance of Mr. Castonel's tiger, the door being open between the two rooms. "Powders for somebody, Dame Vaughan," said he. "Who's ill?"

"This little one," replied Dame Vaughan, pointing to the infant on her lap.

"That young scaramouch! I thought, perhaps, the Gaffer might be a going to walk it."

"The Gaffer, poor man, ain't at all well," said Dame Vaughan.

"I say," resumed the lad, "where's Mary? What's she gone into hiding for? Nobody have set eyes on her this age. Give her my compliments, and—"

At that moment the boy caught sight of Mr. Hurst. It was quite enough. He touched his hat, backed out and set off home.

When the curate passed through the front room to leave, he stopped and looked down at the baby. "It does not appear to be very ill, Mrs. Vaughan."

"No, sir, it's as live and peart as can be, this afternoon. I did not see much the matter with it this morning, for my own part, only Mary"—she hesitated—"Mary would send to tell Mr. Castonel."

"Where is Mary?"

"She's up-stairs," whispered the woman. "She made off there, sir, when she saw you a coming. Poor thing, she don't like yet to face the gentlefolks."

As Dame Vaughan spoke, she was opening the packet left by the tiger. It contained six small neat white papers, which her curiosity led her to examine. They disclosed an insignificant portion of gray-colored powder.

"I know what that is," she observed;

"the very best physic you can give to a child. Will you please to read the direction for me, sir?"

"'One of these powders to be taken night and morning. Mary Shipley's infant.'"

"Ah, that's just what Mr. Rice said. Thank you, sir. Good day. I'll tell Mary what you say about bringing the baby to church."

It was then nearly four o'clock, and the curate, after calling in at home to wash his hands and brush his hair, made the best of his way to the house of Mr. Chavasse, scarcely knowing whether he was progressing thither on his head or his heels. That house contained all he could imagine of beauty, and goodness, and love. It was *his* world. Had he not been a clergyman, he might have said his paradise.

Arthur was already in the study. And when the lessons were over, the curate entered the drawing-room, he and his fluttering heart. There she was, with her graceful form, her fine features, and her dark, brilliant eye. To him there was but one lovely face on earth, and it was that of Frances Chavasse.

To him she was a perfect contrast. Open in manner, ready and pleasant in speech, the Reverend Mr. Hurst, when he first knew her, could only gaze at her through his spectacles with amazed admiration. She detected his homage; she soon detected his love; and, true to her vain nature, she gave it encouragement. Vanity was Frances Chavasse's ruling passion. She was this evening attired in a pink muslin dress, very pretty and showy, and when Mr. Hurst entered she was standing before the chimney-glass, putting some fresh-gathered roses into her dark hair. That poor beating heart of his leaped into his mouth at the sight.

"See what I am doing," she said, perceiving his approach in the glass. "For fun."

He took the hand she carelessly extended behind; took it, and clasped it, and retained it; for it had come, now, that he no longer strove so arduously to conceal his love.

"Are they not pretty roses, Mr. Hurst? I got them off that tree by the lower garden. You know it. Here's just one left. I will give it to you."

"And I," he whispered, taking it from her hand, "will keep it forever."

"Oh," cried Frances, laughing, "what a collection you must have, if you have kept all I have given you! You might set up a museum of dried flowers."

Arthur ran in, and looked at the table, with a blank face. "Why is tea not ready? It has struck six."

"Mamma has gone out: we shall not have tea till she comes home," answered Frances. "Papa is not come in either."

"Then I can't wait," cried Arthur, ruefully. "I shan't wait."

"I would faint if I were you," retorted Frances. "I know you must be famished; though you did eat enough dinner for six, at one o'clock."

"I want to be off to cricket," returned the lad. "I shall get my tea in the kitchen. What have you been sticking those things in your head for?"

"For you to admire."

"Ah! I expect it is for somebody else to admire. Take care, sir," added the boy, significantly; "she will flirt your heart out, and then turn round and say she didn't mean it."

A glimpse of angry passion flashed into the face of Frances. But Arthur escaped from the room.

"Don't mind him," whispered the curate. "All boys are the same."

"All are not the same," said Frances, crossly. "Were you the same when you were young?"

"I never had a sister," sighed the curate. He drew her hand within his arm, and they rambled into the garden. He had long been screwing up his courage to speak more seriously to her, and he thought he would do it now.

"I hope I shall not always remain a curate," he began, by way of introduction.

"I hope not," assented Frances.

"If I were to"—here he was stopped by his nervous cough—"to go into housekeeping, how much do you think it would take?"

"Housekeeping! I suppose you mean, set up a house and keep servants?"

"Yes," coughed the curate. "Were I lucky enough to obtain a preferment of two hundred a year, would it do?"

"You would have hard work to spend it all, *you* would. Look at that lime-tree: pretty, is it not?"

"Not by myself," returned the curate, with a rosy hue on his thin cheek. "If I had——one to share it with me?"

"That's another thing," said Frances, with a laugh. "She might be fond of dress and nonsense, as I am, and then she would spend you out of house and home."

"Oh, Frances," he murmured, his nervous tone giving place to an impassioned one, as he clasped her hands in his, and turned his spectacles lovingly upon her face, "I know I ought not yet to speak of it; but, give me a hope—that should the time come when I am justified in asking for you, I shall not ask in vain."

Frances drew her hands away, and speeded towards the house. "It will be early enough to talk of that when the time does come," was her light answer. To the simple mind of Mr. Hurst it conveyed all he wished for.

Mrs. Chavasse came in. And scarcely had they sat down to tea, when one of the servants appeared and said that a boy wanted Mr. Hurst.

"Don't disturb yourself!" cried Mr. Chavasse, as the curate was rising. "Let Nancy ask what he wants."

"It is Ned Long, the mason's boy, from Beech Cottages," said the servant.

"What can he want?" wondered the curate. "I gave them relief to-day."

"Send him round to the window, Nancy," said Mr. Chavasse.

A young ragamuffin, in a very dilapidated state of clothes, was soon discerned approaching the large window, which was open to the ground. He took off an old blue cap, and displayed a shock head of light hair.

"What is it, Ned?" cried the curate.

"Please, sir," answered the lad, lifting his sunburnt, freckled countenance, "I have been to Mr. Leicester's, and he telled me to come and ask whether Mr. Hurst was here."

"Well, you see I am," replied Mr. Hurst, with a half smile.

"He said, please, as I was to tell you what I had telled him, and would you go on quick, and he'd get a fly and come after, but he was too bad to walk."

"Go where?" cried the curate. "To Mr. Leicester's?"

"No sir, to Gaffer Shipley's. He's took awful."

"How? Is he worse?"

"He's a dying, sir; Dame Vaughan said I was to say so. He can't hold hisself still on his bed for screeching. And the babby's a dying and a screeching; it's on Dame Vaughan's lap, it is, and she says they won't be alive many minutes, and it's the physic as she give 'em."

They had risen, all of them, and gathered round the window, looking at the boy. Mrs. Chavasse spoke, in her sharp, hasty way.

"What is it you are saying, Ned Long? Tell your tale properly. Who is it that is dying down at Shipley's?"

"The Gaffer, ma'am, and the babby."

"Both?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I never heard of such a thing. You must have brought your tale wrong, boy."

"Dame Vaughan says as it's the physic."

"What physic?"

"I doesn't know."

"I never saw such a stupid boy! who is to make out what he means?" irritably repeated Mrs. Chavasse, her curiosity forcibly excited. "Mr. Hurst—— Why, where's Mr. Hurst? He has never gone without tasting his tea!"

He had, and was striding over the ground towards Thomas Shipley's cottage. A strange scene presented itself there. The baby was lying dead, and the old man, on his bed, seemed in danger of dissolution. "Whatever is the cause of this?" questioned the curate.

"I don't know what's the cause," sobbed Dame Vaughan. "I hope no blame won't be laid to me."

It appeared that the Gaffer had had his tea at four o'clock, and seemed refreshed and better after it. At six, when Dame Vaughan undressed the infant, she remarked that it appeared so well as scarcely to need the powder.

"Suppose we give father one of the powders?" suggested Mary, a modest-looking, gentle girl, who, until recent events, had been in high favor in the village. "If they are fever powders, it might do him good: and it couldn't do him harm, any way."

"Ay, sure; it's a good thought," assented Dame Vaughan. "We'll give him one to-night and another in the morning. This child won't want 'em all."

So they mixed up two powders. Giving old Shipley his, first, lest he should fall asleep; and the other to the child. Soon after the latter had swallowed it, it began to scream, and writhe, and toss convulsively. Its legs were drawn up, and then stretched out stiff, while its face, to use Dame Vaughan's words, was not then the face of a baby. The neighbors came flocking in, and, suddenly, sounds were heard from Gaffer Shipley's bed: he was screaming and writhing like the child. Widow Thorpe's boy was dispatched for Mr. Castonel, and another, as we have seen, to Mr. Leicester's.

The boy, Thorpe, was flying along, proud to be of service and full of excitement, when, by a piece of good fortune, which Dame Vaughan declared she should ever be thankful for, he espied Mr. Castonel. "He was a standing outside the lodge where the strange lady lives," said the boy, afterwards, "and if he had been a waiting for me, he couldn't have been a standing out better." The boy made up to him, panting. "Please, sir, will you run down to Gaffer Shipley's?"

"What for?" asked Mr. Castonel.

"They are both a howling horrid, sir. Dame Vaughan says it must have been the powders as they took."

"Both who?" quickly demanded Mr. Castonel.

"Mary Shipley's little 'un and the Gaffer, sir. They give 'em a powder apiece, and mother says——"

"What the ——!" burst forth Mr. Castonel, glaring on the boy. "Who gave one to old Shipley?"

Master Thorpe shrank aside. He did not, just then, like the face of Mr. Castonel. "Here," added the surgeon, writing a line on the leaf of his pocket-book, and tearing it out, "take that to my house. Mr. Rice will give you something to bring down. Run all the way."

The boy ran one way, Mr. Castonel ran the other. He flew over the ground at his utmost speed and was soon at the cottage. The baby was dead: Mary was stretched over it, sobbing and crying, and the gossips were crying over *her*.

"Now, the first thing, a clearance," exclaimed the surgeon, "and then I may come to the bottom of this. Leave the cottage, every one of you."

He held the door open and the women filed out. Then he turned to Dame Vaughan. "Have you any warm water?"

"Not a drain, sir," she sobbed, and the fire's out. It was the powders and it couldn't have been nothing else. Mr. Rice must have sent poison in mistake for wholesome physic."

"I should think not," remarked Mr. Castonel. "Let me see those that are left. Mary," he irritably added, "don't sob and moan in that way; that will do no good. One, two, three, four. Are these all?"

"All sir," replied Dame Vaughan. "Six come, and them's the four what's left."

Mr. Castonel carried them in his hand through the room where Thomas Shipley was lying, and went out at the back door, which he closed after him, and examined them alone in the yard. Possibly for the greater light.

"There is nothing wrong with these powders," he said when he returned. "However, Dame Vaughan, you had best take charge of them, lest they should be asked for."

"I'll lock 'em up in Mary's drawer," she sobbed. "I know it was the powders, and I'll stick to it till I drops."

"Do so at once. Here, take them.

And then go amongst the neighbors and see if you can borrow some warm water. If we can get a quart of it down the Gaffer's throat, till what I have sent for comes, so much the better. Hollca! where are you off to?"

"I thought you told me to fetch some warm water," answered Dame Vaughan, arresting her footsteps.

"But I did not tell you to leave the key in the drawer. The powders are perfectly harmless, but it may be as well, in justice to Mr. Rice, to let other people think so."

Mr. Rice and young Thorpe came together, full pelt, and it was soon after their entrance that Mr. Hurst appeared. When the Gaffer had been attended to, Dame Vaughan returned to the powders.

"The powders were all right," said Mr. Rice, "I'll stake my life upon it. Where are they? They were only *hydrargyrus cum creta*," he added, to Mr. Castonel.

"I know they were. I have examined them."

Dame Vaughan unlocked the drawer, and put the powders on the table before Mr. Rice. He opened all four of the papers. The curate, Mr. Castonel, and Dame Vaughan, stood and watched him. "These are the powders I sent," he observed. "They are quite right. They are only the common gray powder, Dame Vaughan."

Dame Vaughan still looked unconvinced.

"Let her take charge of them," said Mr. Castonel. "It may be more satisfactory."

"Is it possible," interposed the curate, "that the powders can in any way have been changed?—wrong ones administered?"

Mr. Castonel turned his eye upon him, an eye that looked as if it would have liked to strike him, dead as the child.

"No, sir," he coldly said, "I should think it is not possible. Did you wish to cast a suspicion on Mrs. Vaughan?"

"Nay," cried the curate, "certainly not. I would not cast a suspicion upon any one. It was but an idea that occurred to me, and I spoke it out."

Gaffer Shipley recovered, the baby was buried, and the affair remained a mystery. A mystery that has never been positively solved. Other medical men, upon being pressed into the inquiry, pronounced the powders to be an innocent and proper medicine, frequently given to children.

That same night, at the early starlight hour, Frances Chavasse was lingering still in their garden. She looked frequently to a side gate, by which visitors, who were familiar with the house, sometimes entered. It seemed that she was restless; anxious; impatient. Whoever she was expecting, he kept her waiting long. Was it Mr. Hurst?

It was not Mr. Hurst who entered; it was Mr. Castonel. What! were *they* lovers? Surely yes; for he strained her to his heart, and held her to him, and covered her face with his impassioned kisses: as he had, in other days, ay, even in that same garden, strained to him Caroline Hall and Ellen Leicester. Was his love for her genuine? Had it been for his former wives? No matter: theirs had been for him: and neither had loved him more entirely than did Frances Chavasse. Verily Mr. Castonel must have possessed powers of fascination unknown to other men! Frances had played herself off upon the unhappy curate, partly to gratify her vanity, partly as a blind, for she and Mr. Castonel had long had an understanding in secret.

"The Reverend Mr. Hurst has been explicit to-night," whispered Frances, in a mocking tone.

"The fool!" interrupted Mr. Castonel; and the glare of his eye was like it had been twice before that evening. Frances did not see it; she was leaning on his breast.

"He asked me how much it would take to keep two," she went on, laughing. "And would I have him if he got a rich living of two hundred a year. Gervase, I think, I do think, he will nearly die when—when—he knows."

"I hope he will," fiercely uttered Mr. Castonel. "Frances, the time is drawing near that I shall speak to your father."

CHAPTER XVII.

OF A TAP-ROOM CONVERSATION, AND A HYPOTHETICAL CASE PUT FORWARD BY THE BLACKSMITH.

Mr. Tuck and Mr. Jenks were in close confabulation over the London paper, a copy of which Mr. Jenks took at second-hand. Mr. Tuck did not consider it beneath his dignity as assistant surgeon to drop in, now and then, at the Three Pigeons, with the jolly frequenters of whose tap-room he was a favorite. If he were nobody in the estimation of Mr. Castonel; if he were looked down upon by the dowagers as a young man who had failed to establish himself in his profession, he was nevertheless an oracle to one class, and that was the working-men who regaled themselves o' nights with the ale and whiskey of Mr. Jenks.

On this occasion, however, there was no one with the two but Strang, the master-blacksmith, who was a rising man, pecuniarily, and owned the premises whereon stood his house, and his workshop—a double affair, for he did a bit of wheelwright work occasionally, in mending wagons, and tiring wagon-wheels. The three were discussing the details of a murder trial, with which all London was ringing at the time. A lawyer, of some note, had been convicted of a series of deliberate murders. The victims were clients of his own, whose lives he had first insured for small sums, in various offices. It was not the murders alone, but the inadequacy of motive that puzzled the trio.

"Just to think of it," said the blacksmith. "He pisoned Jenkins for ten poun'. If it had been a thousan' poun', I could make it out. But where's the temptation of ten poun'—a bit 'o money that a man 'd spend in less 'n a year, in tobaccy an' swipes. It 's extrao'nary, to say nothink else."

"Yes, sir, as you say, it is extraordinary," chimed in the landlord. 'And ten pound too, sir. Very strange, I must say."

"He don't seem to've made more by it than four hundred poun' altogether," repeated the blacksmith.

"Yes, sir, four hundred and ten pound," replied the more accurate publican.

"I think I have it," broke in Tuck.

The rest waited his explanation patiently.

"He was crazy," said Tuck.

"Ah, yes, I shouldn't wonder, sir," replied the complaisant Jenks. "Seems that would explain it, sir, naturally enough. Oh, yes, sir—as you say, he was very much crazy, no doubt."

"Crazy!" sneered the blacksmith. "That's the new dodge, now-a-days. A fellow wants money, an' he's bound to get it, someway. The devil puts it into his head to pisen people, an' he pisens 'em, an' they say he's crazy."

"You don't understand it," persevered Tuck. "It is what we medical men call a homicidal mania. You see there is the case of a dog, who goes mad and bites everybody he meets — his own master first, probably."

"Yes — but they kill him — don't they?"

"Ah, but he's a dog, you know."

"An' t'other's worse—yes—worse!" cried the blacksmith, bringing down his ponderous fist on the table, until the glasses danced and reeled as though the liquor that had been in them had affected their heads—"a dog has his nature, an' can't help that; but a man that'll pisen another for ten poun'—he ought to have his head on an anvil, an' me a poundin' it, with my sledge. That's all!"

"But men are crazy in various ways," persisted Tuck. "I was a good deal in a lunatic asylum when I was studying medicine, and saw some queer fellows, I can tell you. There was one man who was just as sensible as you or I, only on one thing. He was mad on cats."

"Cats?" echoed the blacksmith.

"Cats, sir," echoed, with a variation, the landlord.

"Cats," continued Tuck. "He was first noticed as having a great hatred of them—killing them in every way possible. He wasn't content with those that came on his own place, but he'd

entice the neighbors' cats with bits of meat, and chop their heads off. At last, he got to be a nuisance. They brought him up before the magistrates at Bow street. He told 'em that it had been revealed to him that the devil was going about in the shape of a cat, and if he happened to hit the right one, there would be no devil any more—so he intended to keep on. So they began to see into his case, and the long and short of it was, they put him in the asylum."

"Well, I don't know but I'm a little crazy that way myself," replied Strang. "I hate cats. But that's not pisenin' human bein's."

"It's not the poisoning that makes me think him crazy. It's the absence of sufficient motive."

"The motive's the devil—that's the motive," said the blacksmith. "Look here! There's Mr. Castonel has lost two of his wives. Sposen—I say sposen—he had pisened both of 'em."

"Oh, that's not a supposable thing," replied Tuck, rather shocked at the hypothetic case.

"I d' know," said the other, "stranger things than that have happened. But I say sposen he had. Now he didn't never live a cat an' dog life with 'em, that I ever heerd on—they was amazin' fond on him, every one says—an' he couldn't make nothink by it, for neither of 'em had any money. Now would you call him crazy, sposen he'd done it."

"Well, I should, most certainly," said Tuck.

"I'd do nothink of the kind," retorted the blacksmith. "I'd say he had the devil in him, an' nothink but the rope round his neck would fetch him out. That lawyer was no more crazy than you are. He got dwellin' on the idea of money till a sovereign was as big as a wagon wheel, an' ten of 'em seemed a fortin. That's the state of the case, Mr. Tuck, you may depend on it."

"It may be," admitted the assistant surgeon.

"Exactly, as you say, sir, it may be," chorused the landlord, glad to find an approximation to one opinion in the minds of his guests.

"An' furthermore, likewise," resumed the blacksmith, whose eloquence was aroused in a stream, and was carrying him along—"it's my opinion that half the deviltry an' wickedness of men an' women, that's in bedlams, is sot down to madness, which it isn't. I had a uncle that got cracked in his upper story—so the doctors said—an' used to tear his clothes to pieces. I noticed one thing pretty plain—they was always his old clothes."

"Did they ever give him any new ones?" pointedly inquired Tuck.

"Of course they didn't. What was the use, when they know'd he'd tear 'em up? New clothes!"

And the blacksmith fairly snorted at the preposterous supposition.

"But you had no mode of comparison, if you didn't give him the new clothes," responded Tuck.

"Anan?" ejaculated Strang.

"I mean that he might have torn the new ones too, if he had them."

"Oh! I know he wouldn't," persisted the other.

Like the "because" of a woman, or the hammer of an auctioneer, or a determination of the House of Commons to take the main question, this cut off all discussion. Could there be a stronger reason than the knowledge of a self-willed man? What was science, in the shape of Tuck—a small specimen, it must be granted—to do with such an obstacle?

Nevertheless, Tuck, though silenced, was not convinced.

As for the landlord, he was in some mental distress. After getting his guests to a state where he could agree with both, to find them now of diverse opinions was distressing. Like a good diplomatist, he changed the point of issue, by the introduction of a pot of stout apiece—a parting libation, so to speak, to the goddess of harmony.

"What a fool that Strang is," said Tuck to himself on his way home. "To even suppose that Mr. Castonel would poison anybody. But 'sposen,' as Strang says, he had, then he would be mad, beyond doubt. But I can't conceive what put such an illustration into

the man's head. Poison—pooh! pooh! I won't even think of it."

But he did think of it, at times. The idea was so preposterous, that it would enter his mind, whether he would or not.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OF A SILLY MOTHER'S DISPLAY, AND HOW THE SURGEON, THIS TIME, MAKES A GRAND WEDDING.

One Saturday afternoon, in September, the Reverend Mr. Leicester sent for his curate. It was to inform him that he found himself unable to preach on the morrow, as had been his intention.

"Are you worse?" inquired Mr. Hurst.

"A little thing upsets me now, and I have heard some news to-day, which, whether true or not, will take me days to get over, for it has brought back to me too forcibly, one who is gone. Who is that?" quickly added the rector, as a shout was heard outside the window.

"It is only Arthur Chavasse. I met him at the gate, and he ran in with me."

"Let him come in, let him come in," cried Mr. Leicester, eagerly. "He can tell me if it be true." Mr. Hurst called to him.

"How are you, sir?" said Arthur, holding out his hand, "and how is Mrs. Leicester?"

The rector shook his head. "As well, my boy, as we can expect to be on this side the grave. Arthur, when you shall be as I am, health and strength gone, there is only one thing will give you comfort."

"And what's that, sir?" asked Arthur, fearlessly.

"The remembrance of a well-spent life: a conscience that says you have done good in it, not evil. Good to your fellow-creatures, for Christ's sake, who did so much good for you."

"But are we to have no play?" inquired Arthur, whose ideas of "doing good," like those of too many others, savored but of gloom.

"Ay, play; play, my boy, while you may; youth is the season for it. But, in the midst of it, love your fellow-creatures; be ever ready to do them a kindness; should any fancied injury rise up in your heart, whispering you to return evil for evil, oh! yield not to the impulse. You will be thankful for it when your days are numbered."

"Yes, sir. There's a boy outside has gone off with my cricket-bat. It's Tom Chewton. I was going after him to give him a drubbing. Perhaps I had better make him hand over the bat, and leave the drubbing out?"

"Certainly," replied Mr. Leicester, while the curate turned away his head to hide a smile. "Arthur, I have heard to-day that you are going to lose your sister Frances."

"To lose her!" echoed the boy. "Oh yes, I know what you mean. And I am sure it's true, although Mrs. Frances is so sly over it, else why should she be having such heaps of new clothes? I said to her the other day, 'I reckon I shall get some rides inside the cab now, instead of behind it,' and she turned scarlet and threw a cushion at me."

"It is really so, then! that she marries Mr. Castonel!"

"He has been making love to her this year past, only they did it on the sly," continued Arthur. "*I* saw. She's always interfering with us boys: we shall have twice the fun when she's gone. Where's Mr. Hurst?"

"Take this, Arthur," cried the rector, handing him a fine pear which was on the table. "Good-by, my lad."

"Thank you, sir. Good-by. I'll leave out Tom Chewton's drubbing."

Arthur ran out. Mr. Hurst stood at the end of the path, against the iron railings. "Isn't this a stunning pear? I——Why, what's the matter, sir?"

"A spasm," gasped the curate. "Run off to your playfellows, Arthur."

"Will you eat this pear, sir?" said the boy, gazing with concern at his white face. "It may do you good. I have only taken one bite out of it."

"No, no, my lad. Eat it yourself and run away."

Arthur did as he was bid, and the miserable clergyman, feeling himself what he was, a dupe, dragged his footsteps towards his home. The sun shone brilliantly, but the heart's sunshine had gone out from him forever.

The news took Ebury by surprise. What! marry Frances Chavasse, the early friend of his two first wives! Some of them remembered the nonsensical declaration attributed to Mr. Castonel when he first came to Ebury—that only one of the three young ladies was to his taste, but he would marry them all. The "one" being generally supposed to indicate Ellen Leicester.

The preparations, commenced for the marriage, were on an extensive scale. The tiger flew one day into the kitchen at his master's, with the news that there was a new chariot in the course of construction, and that he was no longer to be a despised tiger in buttons, but a footman in a splendid livery.

"A pretty footman you will make!" was the slighting response of the housekeeper, whilst Hannah suspended her ironing in admiration.

"And the new coachman's to be under me," he continued, dancing round in a circle three feet wide. "Of course I shall have the upper hand of *him*. So don't you go for to disparage me before him, Madam Muff, if you please."

"Did master say he was to be under you?" inquired Hannah.

"It's to be such a gorgeous livery," the tiger went on, evading the question, "lavender and gold, or pink and amber, one o' them two, with spangled vest to match. And there's going to be a new lady's-maid, Mrs. Muff, over you."

"John!" uttered the housekeeper, in a tone of warning.

"She's hired o' purpose," persisted the tiger, dodging out of Mrs. Muff's way, and improving upon his invention. "And the house is to be gutted of this precious shabby old furniture, and bran new put in, from cellar to garret. The beds is to be of silk, and the tables of ivory, and the walls is to be gilded, and one o' the rooms is to have a glass floor, that Miss Chavasse may see her feet in it. I know what—if master is determined to have her, he's paying for her."

He dodged away, for Mrs. Muff's countenance was growing ominous. But, setting aside a few inaccuracies, inventions, and embellishments of his own, the tiger's information was, on the whole, correct; and Mrs. Chavasse and her daughter were lifted out of their common sphere into one that savored not of sober reality. They revelled in the fine clothes making for Frances, in the luxurious establishment preparing to receive her, in the wondering admiration of Ebury; and they revelled in the triumph over Mrs. Leicester. If her daughter had once been preferred to Frances, their turn had come now: there had been no costly furniture, or painted carriages, or superfluity of servants prepared for Ellen.

These preparations, in all their magnitude, burst, without warning, upon the astonished senses of Mr. Chavasse. He turned all over in a cold perspiration, and went storming into the presence of his wife and daughter. Mrs. Chavasse always, as she expressed it, "managed" her husband, consequently she had taken her own time for telling him; but it happened that he heard the news from another quarter. We allude more particularly now to the pomp and show contemplated for the wedding-day; it was that raised the ire of Mr. Chavasse.

"What a couple of born idiots you must be! I have been told Frances is going to have four bridesmaids."

"Well?"

"And a thundering heap of noise and parade: horses and carriages, and servants and favors——"

"Now don't put yourself out," equably interposed Mrs. Chavasse.

"And not satisfied with all that, you are going to have flowers strewed up the churchyard path for her to walk upon!" And his voice almost rose to a scream. "Hadn't you better have a carpet laid down along the street?"

"I did think of that," was Mrs. Chavasse's cool reply.

"Goodness be gracious to me! The

place will think I have turned fool, to suffer it."

"Let them," said Mrs. Chavasse. "Her wedding does not come every day."

"I had a misgiving that something was going on, I declare I had, when you badgered me into asking Lord Eastberry to give her away," continued Mr. Chavasse, rubbing his heated face. "I wish I hadn't. What a fool *he*'ll think me! A land-steward's daughter marrying a country surgeon, and coming out in this style! It's disgusting."

"My dear, you'll make yourself ill. Speak lower. Frances, this is the wrong pattern."

"And that's not the worst of it. Mrs. Chavasse, listen, for I will be heard. It is perfectly barbarous to enact all this in the eyes of the rector and Mrs. Leicester. I shall never be able to look them in the face again."

"You'll get over that."

"Any one but you would have a woman's feelings on the matter. I tell you it is nothing less than a direct insult to them—a wicked triumph over their dead child. You ought to shrink from it, Frances, if your mother does not."

But poor Mr. Chavasse could get no satisfaction from either, though he nearly talked himself into a fever. Mrs. Chavasse always had been mistress, and always would be. Everybody, save Mrs. Chavasse herself, thought and *knew* that what she was doing was ridiculous and absurd. Even Mr. Castonel dreaded the display. But nothing stopped Mrs. Chavasse, and the wedding-day rose in triumph. It was a sunny day in December, less cold than is usual: but Ebury was in too much excitement to think of cold. Never had such a wedding been seen there. You might have walked on the people's heads all round the church, and in the church you could not have walked at all. When the crowd saw the flowers on the narrow path between the graves—lovely flowers from the gardens of Eastberry—they asked each other what could possess Mrs. Chavasse.

The bridal procession started. The quiet carriage of the dean of a neighboring cathedral city led the way. He was an easy, good-natured dean, loving good cheer, even when it came in the shape of a wedding breakfast, and Mrs. Chavasse had manœuvred to get him to officiate, "to meet the Earl of Eastberry," so his carriage headed the van. But, ah reader! whose equipage is this which follows? It is new and handsome, the harness of its fine horses glitters with ornaments, the purple-and-drab liveries of its servants look wonderful in the sun. Mr. Castonel's arms are on its panels, and Mr. Castonel himself, impervious as ever to the general eye, sits inside it. Behind—can it be? yes, it is our old friend the tiger, a really good-looking youth in his new appurtenances: his dignity, however, is somewhat marred by the familiar nods and winks he bestows upon his friends in the crowd. Now comes the fashionable carriage of the Earl of Eastberry with its showy emblazonments and its prancing steeds. The bride sits in it, with her vanity, and her beauty, and her rich attire; the earl (as good-natured a man as the dean) is opposite to her, lounging carelessly; Mrs. Chavasse puffed up with pride, looks out on all sides, demanding the admiration of the spectators; and Mr. Chavasse sits with a red face, and does not dare to look at all, for he is thoroughly ashamed of the whole affair, and of the string of carriages yet to come.

The intention of Mr. and Mrs. Leicester to leave home for the day had been frustrated, for the rector had slipped down some stairs the previous night and injured his ankle. They sat at home in all their misery, listening to the gay show outside, and to the wedding-bells. The remembrance of their lost child was wringing their hearts; her loving childhood, her endearing manners, her extreme beauty, *her disobedience*, and her melancholy death. Verily this pomp and pageantry was to them an insult, as Mr. Chavasse had said: an inexcusable and bitter mockery. It was Ellen's husband that was being made happy with another; it was Ellen's early friend who was now to usurp her place. Oh, Mrs. Cha-

vasse! did it never once occur to you, that day, to read a lesson from the past? You sat by your child's side, swelling with folly and exultation, but did no warning, no shadow fall upon you? Already had Mr. Castonel wedded two flowers as fair as she, and where are they? No, no; the imagination of Mrs. Chavasse, at its widest range, never extended to so dreadful a fate for Frances.

"What with weddings and buryings, he has played a tolerable part at this church," observed one of the mob, gazing after Mr. Castonel.

Yes he had: but he made the marriage responses as clearly and firmly as though he had never made them to others, then lying within a few yards of him. He knelt there, and vowed to love and cherish her, and when the links were fastened he led her out through the admiring crowd, over the crushed flowers, to the new carriage. John, not a whit less vain, just then, than his new mistress, held the door open, and Frances entered it. She could not have told whether her pride was greater at taking her seat, for the first time, in a chariot of her own, or during the few minutes that she had occupied the coroneted carriage of the Earl of Eastberry.

More pomp, more display, more vanity at the breakfast, where Frances sat on the right hand of Lord Eastberry, and Mrs. Chavasse on that of the dean, and then the new carriage drew up again, with four horses and two postboys, and Hannah, instead of John, seated behind it. A little delay, to the intense gratification of the assembled mob, and Mr. and Mrs. Castonel came out and entered it to be conveyed on the first stage of their honeymoon. A singular circumstance occurred as they were whirled along. Leaning over a roadside gate, and looking openly at the chariot, watching for it, with a scornful triumph on her handsome face, stood the strange lady who inhabited the lodge. She waved her hand at Mr. Castonel, and the latter, with a sudden rush of red to his impassive countenance, leaned back in the carriage. Frances did not speak: she saw it; but the time had scarcely come for her to inquire particulars about his mysterious relation. Ere Mr. Castonel had well recovered his equanimity, they flew by another gate, and there, peeping only, and concealing herself as much as possible, rose the pale, sad face of Mary Shipley. Mr. Castonel drew back again. Frances spoke now.

"Gervase! Mary Shipley was hiding herself at that gate; peeping at us. How strange! Did you see her?"

"My dearest, no. I see but you. You are mine now, Frances, forever."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BETRAYED GIRL FINDS ASSISTANCE FOR REVENGE UPON HER WRONGER.

"Did you see the grand marriage today, Mary?" inquired Dame Vaughan of Mary Shipley.

Mary, whose eyes bore the mark of recent tears, looked up from her sewing work, and nodded assent.

"How proud Miss Frances looked, to be sure," continued the old woman; "sitting up in her grand carriage. I wonder she ain't afeard. Two wives a dyin' afore the year's out, and here's a third to go."

"She looked very happy," said Mary, with a sigh.

"Happy! That's now. They all looked happy when they were first married; but wait—she'll see her trouble too. What have you been crying for, I wonder?"

"I saw some of poor babe's things, when I opened yonder chest of drawers."

Ah! there's more of his work. Well, it 'll all be found out some day, for all he's such a fine gentleman."

"He's a perjured wretch!" cried Mary. "God's curse 'll follow him."

"I'd make him pay for his wickedness to me, if I was in your place, Mary; that's what I would," exclaimed the dame. "If he'd only a knowed that I overheerd him promise to marry you, then I'd ha' been sure he sent poison to the babe. He's none too good to do it. That's the way, in my opinion, he served

his wives. There's been no good in Ebury since he came here, and there can't be none till he goes away."

Mary shuddered. For had she not told Mr. Castonel that she had a witness to his conditional promise. And did she not remember his words: "As long as the child is alive you have a tie on me, which I cannot break." But what evidence?

"I wish I knew," she murmured.

"That's just what I wish," said the dame. "If I could only get at the rights of it, and may-be I can too. There's them behind that intends to look in it."

Mary was interested at this.

"Who?" she asked.

"A gentleman, and he *is* a gentleman too, and gave me a half-crown." And the old woman triumphantly exhibited the silver.

Mary looked her astonishment.

"I'll tell you," continued the other. "Don't you remember my telling you, nigh a year ago, about a strange gentleman that was staying at the Three Pigeons? I did some charing for Mr. Jenks then, and I saw him."

"Yes."

"Well, he's come back. I saw him to-day, and he asked after you."

"After me?"

"Yes. He says he wants to inquire about the way your little one died; and he is coming here this very night. I expect him any moment."

"I can't see him, dame," said Mary, "and then father wouldn't like it."

"Best see him," persisted the old woman.

"But what good will it do?"

"You don't know what might come of it."

Mary looked into the fire, and thought, while the old woman bustled about. Just then there was a rap at the cottage door.

"Here I am, dame," said a voice, as the door was opened, and the stranger shook the snow from his hat—"here I am, white as a plum-cake."

"Lor! so you be. It's a snowing finely, sir. Give me your hat, and take a seat. This be Mary Shipley, sir, as you were asking about."

"Mary," said the stranger, "I must see you alone for a few minutes."

"You can say any thing before the dame, sir," replied Mary.

"A very nice old woman, indeed," responded the other, "but I have reasons of my own for the request. You're not afraid of me, I hope."

"No, sir; but——"

"Pray go to—go anywhere," cried he to the dame. "You'll know all, Mrs. Vaughan, some day, but not now."

The dame said that she'd slip into a neighbor's, and after seeing that old Shipley, who was bed-ridden, was asleep, she put on her shawl and bonnet, and went out.

A long conversation ensued between the parties present. He obtained from her the whole details of her child's sickness and death; but she would not admit that Mr. Castonel was the father. The information gained appeared to be satisfactory on the whole; and the stranger left the place before Mrs. Vaughan returned. As he was going, Mary Shipley put a question.

"You aren't a detective policeman, sir—are you?"

"No, my dear; but no detective policeman can work up a case half so certainly, as a resolute and determined man, who has a purpose."

CHAPTER XX.

WHICH TELLS OF ANOTHER SINGULAR MIDNIGHT DREAM, IN CHRISTMAS TIMES.

A GENIAL Christmas Eve, bright and frosty, and merrily blazed the fire in a comfortable kitchen of one of the best houses in a country village. It was the residence of the surgeon, and he was out on his wedding tour, having just espoused his third wife.

They were expected home that night, and preparations for the following day's feast were active, being presided over by the housekeeper, Mrs. Muff, a staid, respectable personage, far above the gra de of a common servant. She was

very busy, standing at the table, when the surgeon's tiger (we must still call him so, though he had recently assumed the garb of a footman) came into the kitchen, drew a chair right in front of the great fire, and sat down, as if he meant to roast himself.

"John," said Mrs. Muff, "I'll trouble you to move from there."

John sat on, without stirring.

"Do you hear?" repeated the housekeeper. "I want to come to the fire every minute, and how can I do so, with you planted there?"

"What a shame it is!" grumbled John, drawing himself and his chair away, for he was completely under the dominion of Mrs. Muff. "Whoever heerd of cooking a dinner the night afore you want to eat it?—except the pudding."

"I must put things forward, and do what can be done: there will be too much left for to-morrow, even then, with all the Chavasses dining here. For I don't stop away from morning service on Christmas Day. I never did yet."

The tiger screwed up his mouth, as if giving vent to a long whistle: taking care that no sound of it reached the ears of Mrs. Muff.

"You can take the christmas and dress the rooms. Saving enough, mind, for the kitchen. And then, John, you can lay the cloth in the dining-room, and carry in the tea-things."

"There's lots of time for that," returned John.

"It has struck eight, and Mr. Castonel's letter said nine. Do as I bid you."

She was interrupted by the sound of young voices, rising in song, outside.

"There's another set!" cried John, indignantly. "That makes the third lot we have had here to-night."

"When they have finished, you may look out and bring me word how many there are," said Mrs. Muff.

John left the kitchen, his arms full of holly and ivy. Presently he came back.

"There's no less than five of them little devils."

Mrs. Muff, with a stern reprimand, dived into her pockets, and brought forth five halfpence. "Give them one apiece, John."

"If it was me, now, as was missis, instead of you, I should favor 'em with a bucket of water from a up-stairs window," was John's response, as he ungraciously took the halfpence. "They'll only go and send others. Suppose master and missis and the new carriage should just drive up, and find them rascallions a squeaking round the door!"

"Christmas would not be Christmas without its carols," returned Mrs. Muff. "I remember, the first winter you were down here, you came on the same errand to old Mr. Winninton's, and got a mince-pie and a penny out of me."

"Ah," replied John, "but I was a young donkey then."

It was past ten when the carriage rolled up to the door. John flew to open it, and Mrs. Muff, in her black silk gown and white apron, stood in the hall, drawing on her leather mittens. Frances, Mrs. Castonel, happy and blooming, sprang from the carriage and entered her new home. Mrs. Muff led the way to the dining-room. It looked bright and cheering, with its large fire, its blazing lamp, and well-spread table, half supper, half tea. "I will go up-stairs first," said the young bride, "and take these wraps off."

Mr. Castonel came in, a slight man of middle height, scarcely yet five-and-thirty, and the tiger followed him. "Well, John," said he, "how has Mr. Rice got on with the patients?"

"Pretty well, sir. None of 'em be dead, and some be well. But they have been a grumbling."

"Grumbling! What about?"

"They say if a doctor gets married, he has no right to go away like other folks, and that this is the third time you have served 'em so. It was gouty old Flockaway said the most. He have had another attack; and he was so cranky Mr. Rice wouldn't go anigh him, and he can't abear Mr. Tuck."

The surgeon laughed. "What's coming in for tea, John?"

"Some muffins, sir. And Mrs. Muff

says she knows as that will be one of the best tongues you have cut into."

"Fetch in what there is to come. It is late."

As the tiger withdrew, Mrs. Castonel entered. Her husband's arms were open to receive her. "Oh, Gervase," she exclaimed, "how kind of you to have every thing in such beautiful order for me!"

"Welcome, a thousand times welcome to your home, my love!" he whispered. "May it ever appear to you as bright as it does now!"

Loving words; loving manner! But, alas! they had been proffered before, with the same apparently earnest sincerity: once to Caroline Hall and again to sweet Ellen Leicester.

"If you don't send in them muffins, ma'am, without further delay, master says he'll know the reason why," was the tiger's salutation to Mrs. Muff.

She was buttering them, and listening to Hannah's account of the journey, who had attended Mrs. Castonel. She turned to give him the plate, but stopped and started, for the church bells had rung out a joyous peal.

"It cannot be midnight!" she exclaimed.

"Midnight!" sarcastically echoed the tiger. "It wants a good hour and a half o' that. There's the clock afore you."

"Then what possesses the bells?"

"Well, you be rightly named," returned the tiger, "for you *be* a muff, a out-and-outer. Them bells is for master and missis; not for Christmas. I know. The ringers is sitting up, and heerd the carriage rattle up the street. Hark, how they are a clapping the steam on! They'll think to get a double Christmas-box from master."

Just before Mr. Castonel went to his room that night, the bells again struck out. They were ringing-in Christmas. He stood and listened to them, a peculiar expression in his unfathomable eyes, in his passionless face, whose emotions were so completely under control. Was he speculating upon what the next year should bring forth, ere those Christmas bells should again sound? The next year! The clock struck out: he counted its strokes: Twelve! Then he took his candle and went up-stairs. And the bells began again.

"A merry Christmas to you, Frances," he said, as he entered the chamber; "a merry Christmas, and plenty of them."

"Thank you," she laughed. "I think it must be good luck to have it wished to me the moment it comes in."

While she was speaking, a loud summons was heard at the house door. It was a messenger for Mr. Castonel, from one of his best patients. He hurried out, and Mrs. Castonel composed herself to sleep.

A singular dream visited Mrs. Castonel. She thought she was sporting, in her girlhood's days, in her father's large old garden, with her companions, Caroline Hall and Ellen Leicester. How gay they were, how *happy*; for the sense of present happiness was greater than ever Frances had experienced in reality; ay, although she had married where she passionately loved. They were dressed as if for a rejoicing, all in white, but the materials of her own attire appeared to be of surpassing richness. A table, laid out for feasting, was lighted by a lamp; but a lamp that gave a brilliant and unearthly light, overpowering the glare of day. The table and lamp in her own dining-room that night had probably given the coloring to this part of her dream. The garden was not exactly like her father's, either; in form alone it bore a resemblance to it; it was more what Frances had sometimes imagined of Eden; flowers, birds, light, and the sensation of joyous gladness, all were too beautiful for earth. The banquet appeared to be waiting for them, whilst they waited the presence of another. He came; and it was Gervase Castonel. He advanced with a smile for all, and beckoned them to take their places at table. A fierce jealousy arose in Frances's heart: what business had he to smile upon the others? But, imperceptibly, the others were gone; without Frances having noticed the manner of their departure. The old happiness came back again; the ecstatic sense of bliss in the present;

and she put her arm within his, to walk round that lovely garden. Then she remembered her companions, and asked Mr. Castonel where they had gone. He said he would show her; and, approaching a door in the hedge, pushed it open. Frances looked out, and the fearful contrast to the lovely spot she had quitted, struck the most terrifying agony to her breast; for, beyond, all was utter darkness. She shrank back with a shudder, but Mr. Castonel, with a fiendish laugh, pushed her through, and a voice called out, "To your doom! to your doom!" If *his* voice, it was much altered. Frances awoke with the horror, but the most heavenly music was sounding in her ears; so heavenly, that it chased away her terror, and she thought herself again in that happy garden.

She half opened her eyes; she was but half awake, and still were heard the strains of that sweet music. Had she gone to sleep, and woke up in heaven? for surely such music was never heard on earth. *It was the thought that occurred to her, in her half-conscious state.* The music died away in the air, and Frances sat up in bed, and rubbed her eyes, and wondered: and just then Mr. Castonel returned. "What is it?" she cried, bewildered, "what is it?"

"The Waits!" replied Mr. Castonel. "What did you think it was, Frances?"

"Only the Waits!" And then, with a rushing fear, came back the dreadful part of her ominous dream; and she broke into sobs, and strove to tell it him.

But these night-terrors pass away with the glare of day; sometimes pass and leave no sign, even in the remembrance.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEREIN THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER FINDS IT PROFITABLE TO BUY A LIVE TIGER.

Mr. Castonel's young footman was going along the street, gayly enough, thinking of a neighboring lady's maid, whose corkscrew ringlets and taper waist had struck his fancy, when he felt himself tapped on the shoulder.

He turned, and saw a stranger. It is unnecessary to describe *him*. He was the same who had once before made his appearance in Ebury, to the great wonder of the wiseacres.

John touched his hat. His quick eye took in the manner and bearing of the one before him, and he saw he was a gentleman bred.

"You are Mr. Castonel's servant?" said the other.

"Yes, sir."

"I want to have some conversation with you. Can you keep a secret?"

John grinned.

"If it's worth my while, sir, I can."

"Very well. Say nothing to any one about the matter, but call and see me, at the Three Pigeons, to-night, at eight o'clock, and I'll make it worth your while."

"Very good, sir. Who shall I ask for?'

"Oh—yes—very well—ask for—for Mr. Smith."

"I'll come, sir."

And they parted.

"That chap," said John, as he pursued his way, "wants to find out something. May-be I know, and may-be I don't. I saw him before, too. If I aint mistaken I saw him come out of Beech Lodge, once on a time. There's some kind of a lark going on, I'm sure. I might tell master, but I wouldn't make much out of that, I know. Mum's the word, and make what I can."

Before he went to fulfil his appointment with the stranger, he stole up to his chamber in the garret, and, from a chink behind the mantel-piece, obtained the slip of paper which he had got from his master's desk. He had an idea it might be useful. Then, after getting permission to spend a couple of hours abroad, he made his way to the Three Pigeons.

"Is there a Mr. Smith staying here?" he asked of the landlord.

"Yes—he left word if any one called, they were to be sent to his room. It's the Blue Parlor, on the first floor. You know the way."

John found his way there, and, on knocking, was admitted. The stranger was there. John stood, hat in hand.

"Take that chair, and seat yourself," said Mr. Smith.

John hesitated.

"Be seated."

John obeyed, and the stranger locked the door.

"Now, young man, there is a sovereign. I want to ask a few questions."

"Yes, sir—thank you, sir."

"Are you curious about your master's affairs?"

"Me, sir—oh, no, sir."

"You never peer into his drawers, or examine his letters, when he is away?"

John felt his face burn, from the words and under the gaze of the stranger, but he managed to stammer out a denial.

"Don't lie. I have paid you for the truth. Haven't you a letter now that don't belong to you?"

John looked alarmed.

"Don't be frightened. No harm will come to you. Speak out."

"I haven't any letter, sir—only a bit of an envelope, that—that I picked up. There is nothing on that—only the name of Lady Lavinia."

"Ha! what do *you* know of Lady Lavinia?"

"Nothing, sir—only it's on the paper."

"Let me see it."

John produced it, as though it were burning his fingers.

The stranger's face brightened as he saw it.

"Where is the rest?" he asked.

"I don't know, sir."

The stranger produced another sovereign, and laid it on the table before him.

"It's in master's desk, I think."

"Very good—take the money. There are two other letters like the rest of this. Produce the whole three here, and I'll make those two sovereigns twenty."

"But, if they're there, sir, they're locked up."

"Can you pick a lock?"

"No, sir."

"Your education has been shamefully neglected. Can you take an impression in wax of the key-hole?"

"No, sir."

"Well—I'll show you how. Do that, and I'll have a key made."

The stranger took some wax, and taught John how to fit the key.

"Now," he said, "can you do it?"

"I think I can, sir."

"Very good. Take the key-hole—not of the desk, but of the secretary, and leave it here. Call here, in a week, and you will find a note for you, with a key enclosed. When you bring me the letters, I will give you twenty pounds. Do not fail, or this scrap of paper may give you trouble. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir—I'll do it, sir."

"Very well; you may go. But first listen." And he gave John some special instructions.

John slipped off as expeditiously as possible. He was rather frightened, but saw that he was in the stranger's power. To be sure, he might confess all to Mr. Castonel. He was not sure of his treatment in that case, and then—the twenty pounds. That last weighty argument decided him.

"It's worth trying," he said.

He did try, and succeeded. The stranger was as good as his word. In a week's time the key was ready.

John watched his time. One day Mr. Castonel was called to visit a patient, at a distance. Mr. Rice was away, so was Mr. Tuck. There was a deal of sickness just then. John slid into the laboratory so soon as his master was gone. It was nearly dark, and he was about to approach the desk, when he heard the footsteps of his master returning. He crouched down behind a couple of boxes, in one corner.

Mr. Castonel glanced around, and went to his desk. The key was in the lock.

"A pretty trick," said the surgeon. He opened the desk, took out a packet, and went to his secretary. He unlocked this, deposited the papers, and put the key in his pocket. Then he went out, and locked the laboratory door.

John was not much annoyed at that.

He could readily shove back the catch from the inside, and he knew he could lock it again, for Mr. Castonel always left the laboratory key on the sill above the door. But time was precious. He opened the secretary, found what he sought, abstracted the letters from their envelopes, and substituted blank sheets of paper therefor, as he had been directed to do by the stranger. He managed to open the door, found the key where he expected it would be, and locked the laboratory again. It was now dark, and he soon made his way to the Three Pigeons.

The stranger received the stolen letters with a satisfied smile, read them over with apparent satisfaction, and then quietly held them in the flame of the candle till they lighted, threw them on the hearth, and watched them until they were entirely consumed.

"There is your money," he said to John.

The latter pocketed the bribe, with all the greater satisfaction that the evidence of his guilt had been destroyed.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN OLD DOCTOR RETURNS TO EBURY TO THE ANNOYANCE OF MR. CASTONEL.

THE heads and eyes of Ebury were turned towards a gay and handsome chariot that went careering down the street, attended by its coachman and footman. A lady and gentleman were in it, she in brilliant attire; Mr. and Mrs. Castonel were returning their wedding visits. It stopped at the gate of the rectory.

"Don't stay long, Frances," he whispered to her. "I always feel frozen into stone when I am in the presence of those two old people."

Mrs. Castonel smiled, and sailed into the rectory drawing-room, in all her finery; but she really did, for a moment, forget her triumph, when she saw the saddened look of poor Mrs. Leicester, and the mourning robes still worn for Ellen. Mrs. Leicester had not paid, as it is called, the wedding visit; she had felt unequal to it; her card and an apology of illness had been her substitutes. Frances sat five minutes, and from thence the carriage was ordered to her old home. It encountered Mr. Hurst: he took off his hat, and the red color flushed his cheek. Frances alone returned his bow.

Mrs. Chavasse was in no pleasant temper. She was grumbling at her husband, because he had kept the dinner waiting. He was standing before the fire, in his velveteen coat and leather gaiters, warming his frostbitten hands.

"I can't help it," said he. "If I were to neglect Lord Eastberry's business, he would soon get another steward, and where would you all be then? You have been making calls, I suppose, Frances."

"Only at the rectory, papa."

Mr. Chavasse turned sharply round from the fire, and faced his daughter.

"The rectory! In that trim."

Frances felt annoyed. "What trim? What do you mean, papa?"

"*I* should have gone in a quiet way, to call there," returned Mr. Chavasse. "Gone afoot, and left some of those gewgaws and bracelets at home. You might have stepped in and taken a quiet cup of tea with them; any thing like that."

"In the name of wonder, what for?" sharply spoke up Mrs. Chavasse. "Frances has gone just as I should have gone."

Mr. Chavasse did not continue the subject. "Will you stay and have some dinner, Frances?"

"And eat it half cold," interposed Mrs. Chavasse.

"I would not stay for the world, papa. I have other calls to make, and Emily Lomax is coming to dine with me afterwards, that we may lay down the plans for my ball. It will be such a beautiful ball, papa: the best ever given in Ebury."

"Mind you have plenty of wax-lights, Frances," advised her mother.

"Oh, I shall have every thing; lights, and hot-house plants, and champagne in abundance. Gervase lets me have it all my own way."

"Do not begin that too soon," said Mr. Chavasse, nodding at his son-in-law.

"Where's the use of contradiction?" laughed the surgeon, as they rose to leave:

"For when a woman will, she will, depend on't,
And when she won't, she won't; and there's an end on't."

Frances Castonel was just then the envy of Ebury, at least of all who considered ease and gayety the only happiness of life. Parties at home, parties abroad; dress, jewels, equipage, show; not a care clouded her countenance, not a doubt of the future fell on her mind; and the shadows, of those who were gone, haunted her not.

One wet day, at an early hour, when she was not likely to meet other visitors, Mrs. Leicester called. She had thought, by delay, to gain composure; but it failed her; and, after greeting Frances, she placed her hands on her face, and burst into bitter tears.

"You must forgive me, Frances," she sobbed. "The last time I entered this house, it was for the purpose of seeing my child in her coffin."

Frances felt dreadfully uncomfortable, wondering what she could say, and wishing the visit was over. As ill luck would have it, she had been hunting in a lumber closet that morning, and had come upon a painting and two drawings, done by the late Mrs. Castonel. One of them bore her name in the corner, "Ellen Castonel." Frances had carried them down in her hand, and put them on the table, wishing, now, she had put them in the fire instead.

"These are poor Ellen's," exclaimed Mrs. Leicester, as her eye fell on them. "She did them just before her death. I have wondered what became of them, but did not like to ask. Would you mind giving me one, Frances? This, with her name on it: it is her own writing."

"All, take them all, dear Mrs. Leicester."

"I would thankfully do so, but perhaps Mr. Castonel values them."

"Indeed, no," answered Frances, with inexcusable want of consideration; "you may depend he has never looked at them since they were done. I rummaged them out of an old lumber closet this morning."

Mrs. Leicester took the drawings in silence, and then took the hand of Frances. "I am but a poor hand at compliments now," she murmured; "but I entreat you to believe, Frances, that you have my best wishes for your happiness, as sincerely as I wished it for my own child. May you and Mr. Castonel be happy."

About this time, rumors began to be circulated in Ebury, that a medical gentleman, who was formerly in practice in it, was about to return.

"You had better take care of your p's and q's," cried old Flockaway one day to Mr. Rice. "If it's true that Ailsa is coming back, I wouldn't give a hundred a year for the practice that will be left for Mr. Castonel."

"How so?" demanded the assistant-surgeon, who had been a stranger to the place when Mr Ailsa was in it. "Mr. Castonel is liked here."

"Liked in other folks's absence," groaned old Flockaway, who was a martyr to the gout. "He has had nobody to oppose him, so has had full swing. But just let Ailsa come, and you 'll see. All Ebury will tell you that Castonel is not fit to tie his shoes."

"I suppose there is room for both of them."

"There' ll be more room for one than the other," persisted the martyr. "If a royal duke came and set up doctoring here, he'd get no custom against Ailsa."

The news proved true; and Mr. Ailsa and his family arrived at his house, which had been let during his absence. An unassuming, gentlemanlike man, with a placid countenance. "Little Tuck," his usual appellation, an undersized little fellow with a squeaking voice, who had once been an apprentice under Mr. Ailsa, was the first to run in to see him.

"We are all so glad to see you back, sir," he said, insensibly falling into his old, respectful mode of speech. "Mrs. Ailsa is looking well too."

"I am well," she answered. "No more need of foreign climates for me.

But you must have plenty of news to tell us about Ebury."

"Oh, law!" echoed little Tuck, "I shan't know where to begin. First of all, I am living here. Second assistant to Mr. Castonel."

"You had set up for yourself in Brenton when I left," observed the surgeon.

"Yes, but it didn't answer," replied Mr. Tuck, with a doleful look. "I'm afraid I kept too many horses. So I thought the shortest way would be to cut it, before any smash came; and I sold off, and came over here, and hired myself to Mr. Castonel."

"He has played a conspicuous part in Ebury, has he not, this Mr. Castonel?"

"Yes, he has. He came dashing down here from London, with a cab and a tiger and two splendid horses; and got all the practice away from poor old Winninton, and married his niece against his will. When Mr. Winninton died, folks said it was of a broken heart."

"And then she died, did she not?" said Mrs. Ailsa.

"She did. Mr. Castonel's next move was to run away with Ellen Leicester. And she died."

"What did they die of?" asked the doctor.

"I can't tell," replied Mr. Tuck. "I asked Rice one day, and he said he never knew; he could not make it out. They had both been ill but were recovering, and went off suddenly in convulsions. And now he has married Frances Chavasse."

"I should have felt afraid to try him," laughed Mrs. Ailsa.

"Oh, was she though!" responded the little man. "She and her mother were all cock-a-hoop over it, and have looked down on Ebury ever since. They'll hardly speak to me in the street. Frances served out poor Hurst, I'm afraid. I know he was wild after her."

"Who is Hurst?"

"The curate. Poor Mr. Leicester is no longer able to take the duty. Ellen's running away with Mr. Castonel nearly did him up, and her death finished it. I fear he is on his last legs."

"What sort of a man is this Mr. Castonel? Do you like him?"

"*I* don't. I don't understand him."

"Not understand him?"

"I don't," repeated Mr. Tuck, with a very decided shake of the head, "I don't understand him. He's got a look of the eye that's queer. I wish you would take me on as assistant, Mr. Ailsa. I'd come to you for half what he gives. You'll get plenty of practice back. People will be glad to return to you; for, somehow, Mr. Castonel has gone down in favor. They talk more about that strange woman."

Mr. Ailsa looked up. "What are you speaking of."

"Well, when Mr. Castonel first came down here, she followed him, and brought a maid with her, and she has lived ever since in Beech Lodge, Squire Hardwick's gamekeeper's formerly."

"Who is she?"

"There's the puzzle. She is young, and very handsome, and quite a lady. Mr. Castonel gives out that it's a relation. He goes to see her, but nobody else does."

"Curious!" remarked Mr. Ailsa.

"By the way, you remember Mary Shipley, ma'am?"

"Yes, indeed," returned Mrs. Ailsa. "Mary was a good girl. I would have taken her abroad with me, if she could have left her father."

"Lucky for her, if you had, ma'am," was the blunt rejoinder of Mr. Tuck, "for she has gone all wrong."

"Gone wrong! Mary?"

"And Mr. Castonel gets the blame. But he is a sly fellow, and some people think him a lamb. Mary tells nothing, but she appears to be sinking into a decline."

"I am grieved to hear this," returned Mrs. Ailsa. "Her mother was nurse at the Hall when we were children, and she named Mary after me."

"It appears to me," observed Mr. Ailsa, arousing himself from a reverie, "that your friend, Mr. Castonel, has not brought happiness to Ebury, take it for all in all."

"He has brought plenty of unhappiness and plenty of death," replied Mr.

Tuck. "I don't say it is his fault," added the little man, "but it's his misfortune."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEREIN THE THIRD WIFE YIELDS TO THE FATE OF HER PREDECESSORS.

"WHAT a row there is, over this Ailsa!" exclaimed Mr. Castonel, as he sat down that same night with his wife. "Tuck looked in just now, dancing mad with excitement, because 'Mr. Ailsa was come, and he had been sitting with him.' Who is Ailsa, pray?"

"You know, Gervase; you have often heard of him lately," replied Mrs. Castonel, answering the letter rather than the spirit of his words. "Every one is saying he will take your practice from you; even mamma thinks he will prove a formidable rival."

"What is there in him to be formidable?" slightingly returned Mr. Castonel. "I'll sew him up, Frances, as I did old Winninton."

"If you mean to imply ruin by 'sewing-up,' I think not," laughed Mrs. Castonel. "He has a large fortune, and his wife is connected with half the great people of the county. She was Miss Hardwick of the Hall, and the nicest girl in the world."

"Oh, yes! I know. I remember her, a very little girl with curled hair, and pantalettes."

"Why, Gervase, I never knew you had been here before. You never told me that."

I never thought to. I was here once, when—when I was very young. But why did Ailsa leave if he was so popular?"

His wife was sickly and the air of Italy and the south of France was good for her. How I should like to live in Italy. It must be charming."

"Well—if I have good luck you shall go there, some day."

"Oh, thank you, Gervase. You are *so* kind. But tell me how you came to be here years ago."

"Oh, it's a long story. Some of these days when I've lots of time, I'll tell you. I have to go to a case tonight."

"Don't be long, dear."

"Of course not—not longer than I can help."

And off went the surgeon. His wife thought it strange that he had not mentioned the case, when he came in. Beside, no one had sent for him during that day. But she was soon deep in the latest novel, and the matter faded from her mind. She never did hear of Mr. Castonel's early days, for matters of more importance succeeded.

The popular opinion as to Mr. Ailsa's success was not groundless; for of eighteen patients who fell ill in the next three weeks, counting rich and poor, seventeen of them went to Mr. Ailsa, though he never solicited a single case.

How the world would get on without gossip few people can tell. One day Mrs. Major Acre, who was by no means a taciturn or a cautious woman, paid a visit to Mrs. Castonel. "Now, my dear," she said to Frances, "I should recommend Mr. Castonel to call Ailsa out."

Frances glanced at her with an amused look. "Oh, the patients will come back to my husband. They will not all stop with James Ailsa."

"I don't mean that," returned Mrs. Major Acre. "Some stupid people have gone over to him, but you can't call a man out for the caprices of others. No, my dear. But James Ailsa has made very free remarks upon your husband."

"Indeed!"

"It seems Mrs. Ailsa has wormed out of Mary Shipley who it was that led her into mischief—you know the Hardwicks always took an interest in those Shipleys—and Mary has confessed to Mrs. Ailsa what she never would to any one else."

"And who was it?" asked Frances.

"Mr. Castonel."

A vivid fire rushed into the cheeks of Frances.

"And I hear Ailsa declares that, had he been in Eburv at the time, he should

have taken upon himself to bring Mr. Castonel before the justices for it. They have forbidden her to let him go there any more."

"He does not go there," cried Frances, vehemently.

"I wouldn't take an oath one way or the other, but if he does, child, he'd not be likely to tell you," observed the senseless old lady. "There's no answering for men. My dead husband had a saying of his own, that he was fond of treating his brother officers to, 'Do any thing you like, boys, but never let the women know it.' Meaning us wives, my dear."

Frances sat like one stupefied.

"And now I am going on to your mamma's, and——"

"Oh, pray do not say any thing of this to mamma," interrupted Frances, rising in excitement. "She would write word to papa, and——pray do not, Mrs. Acre!"

"As you please, child. If I don't, other people will. It's known all over Ebury."

When Mr. Castonel entered, Frances met him with passion. "You have deceived me throughout!" she cried—"you have deceived papa! And rather than be a dupe, I would leave you and go home to live again. Papa would not let me stay here. I know his sentiments. He spoke to me about this very subject, and begged me not to marry you till it was cleared up. I will not stay here."

Mr. Castonel looked, as the saying is, taken by storm. "What on earth is the matter, Frances? I am guilty of no deceit."

"Equivocation will only make matters worse. Oh, I shall go mad! I shall go mad! To think that people should be able to say the same of me that they did of Caroline Hall and Ellen Leicester!"

Mr. Castonel's countenance flushed red, and then became deadly pale. He faltered forth, rather than spoke—"And what did they say of Caroline and Ellen?"

"That you neglected them for others."

"Oh." The perfectly negligent tone of the ejaculation, and the relieved and half mocking face, did not tend to calm the anger of Mrs. Castonel.

"I know the truth now about Mary Shipley. It has been disclosed to me to-day. Papa questioned you on that report himself, and you denied that there was truth in it."

"There was no truth in it," was the calm reply of Mr. Castonel. "Why did you not tell me what you meant, before exciting yourself thus, Frances? I could have reassured you."

We will leave Mr. Castonel to his reassuring. Merely observing that he did succeed in his task, and so fully, that his wife was ready to go down on her knees for having doubted him. Verily he possessed some subtle power, did Mr. Castonel.

June came in, and strange, strange to say, news went out to Ebury of the illness of Mrs. Castonel. Strange, because her symptoms were the same as those which had attacked Mr. Castonel's first and second wives, destroying prospects of an heir.

Mrs. Chavasse arrived in hot haste. Frances laughed at her perturbation. "You have sent for Mr. Ailsa, of course," said Mrs. Chavasse.

"Mr. Ailsa shall attend no wife of mine," was the determined rejoinder of the surgeon. "I'll see his coffin walk, first."

"Listen, Mr. Castonel. You have lost two wives; it may have been through negligence in not having good advice; I know not. You shall not lose my daughter, if I can prevent it. Not an hour shall go over without further advice."

"Call in any medical man you please, except Ailsa," said Mr. Castonel, "I should wish it done."

"You have taken a prejudice against him," retorted Mrs. Chavasse. "None are so desirable, because he is on the spot."

"Ailsa shall never darken my doors. I will send an express to the county town for one or other of the physicians. Which will you have?"

"Dr. Wilson," answered Mrs. Chavasse. "And meanwhile let Mr. Rice come in."

So it was done. Mr. Rice paid a visit to Mrs. Castonel, and declared she was in no danger whatever.

"I hope not," said Mrs. Chavasse. "I think not. But past events are enough to terrify me."

"True," assented Mr. Rice.

Dr. Wilson came, in the course of the day. "No danger," he said, just as Mr. Rice had done.

The following day, however, Mrs. Castonel was worse; and, the day after that, her life was despaired of. Her own state of excitement contributed to the danger. She woke up that morning from a doze, and whether she had dreamt any thing to terrify her was uncertain, but she started up in bed, her eyes glaring wildly. Mr. Castonel was then alone with her.

"Oh, Gervase, I am in danger! I know I am in danger!"

"My dear, no." For of course it was his duty to soothe her. "Calm yourself, Frances."

"Oh," she cried, clasping him in deep distress, "can I be going to die? Must I indeed follow Ellen Leicester? I who have thought nothing of death—who deemed it so far off!"

"Be quiet, Frances, I insist upon it," he angrily exclaimed. "You will do yourself incalculable mischief."

"*What will my doom be?* Gervase, do you remember my dream? What have I done that I should be cut off in the midst of my happiness? But not without warning. That dream was my warning, and I neglected it."

"Frances——"

"Yet what had they done, Caroline and Ellen? Oh, Gervase, save me! what will you do without me? Save me, save me! Let not this terrible fate be mine."

Mr. Castonel strove to hold her still, but she shook awfully; and as to stopping her words, he might as well have tried to stem a torrent in its course.

"The grave! the grave! the grave for *me!* I who have lived but in pleasure!"

"My dear Frances, what are you raving of? If you have lived in pleasure, it has been innocent pleasure."

"Oh yes, innocent in itself. If I had but thought of God with it, and striven to please Him; and I never did! *There* lay the sin; not in the pleasure. Oh, save me! Fetch Dr. Wilson. I must not die."

They calmed her after awhile, and for a day or two her life hung upon a thread. Then she began to get slowly better. But there were anxious faces still, those around her bedside, her husband's, her mother's, good old Mrs. Muff's; for they remembered it was when they were apparently recovering, that the first and the second Mrs. Castonel had died. A few more days, and Frances sat up in her dressing-room, gay as ever. All danger was really over, and Mrs. Chavasse returned home.

"Gervase," she said, taking her husband's hand, "what a goose I was to frighten myself!"

"Ay, you were, Frances. But you would not listen to me then, when I told you so."

"I may go into the drawing-room to-morrow, and see visitors, may I not?"

"To be sure you may."

"Then ring the bell, please. I must send Hannah to order me a very pretty cap."

It was Mrs. Muff who answered it, not Hannah. Mr. Castonel left the room as she came in.

"I am to go into the drawing-room, to-morrow," said Mrs. Castonel. "Do you know it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I heard Mr. Rice say you might."

"And admit visitors."

"I did not hear him say that, but I should think there's no reason against it," replied the housekeeper.

"So I'll tell you what I want done," added Mrs. Castonel. "Hannah must go to the milliners' and desire them to send me some sitting-up caps, to choose one from. If they have none ready they must make me one. Something simple and elegant. Shall I have it trimmed with white ribbons or pink?"

Mrs. Muff thought pink, as her mistress was just now so pale.

"Yes, pink; nothing suits my complexion like pink," cried Frances, all her old vanity in full force. "Send Han-

nah immediately. I am impatient to try it on."

The cap came, but not till night, and Frances had a glass brought to her, and sat figuring off before it, declaring she had never looked so well: if she were but a little older, she would take to caps for good. Mr. Castonel looked on, and laughed at her.

"It is getting time for you to be in bed, Frances," he said. "You must not presume too much upon your recovery."

"I am not tired in the least," she replied. "I will not go till I have had my supper. I never felt better."

"Do you know who they say is dying?" he resumed.

"No."

"Mr. Leicester."

"Mr. Leicester!"

"It is thought to be his last night. So, I hear, is the opinion of his friend and chum, Ailsa."

Mrs. Castonel did not like the tone. "Poor man! poor Mr. Leicester!" she sighed. "Well, they have had their share of sorrow. How papa and mamma would have grieved for me: I have thought of it since my illness: and we are many of us, while Ellen was their only child. I wonder who will get the living. I hope it will be some nice social young parson." Oh, Frances! worldly wise.

"I hope it will be anybody rather than Mr. Hurst," said the surgeon, spitefully.

"What happy days we shall have together again, Gervase!" she went on. "What should you have done if I had died."

"The best I could," answered Mr. Castonel.

At that moment Mrs. Muff came in with the light supper of her mistress, and remained with her while she eat it, Mr. Castonel descending to his laboratory. As she was carrying down the waiter again, a ring came to the door-bell, and John brushed past to answer it.

"Mr. Castonel at home?"

"Safe and sound," was the tiger's rejoinder, for the applicant was a page in buttons, of his acquaintance.

"Then he must come as fast as he can pelt to missis. She's in a fit."

"You are wanted at Mrs. Major Acre's directly, sir," said John, hastily entering the laboratory. "She's took in a fit."

Mr. Castonel had taken out one of the little drawers — to John's amazement. For the lad had always believed that particular drawer to be a sham drawer. There appeared to be a paper or two in it, and a phial. The latter the surgeon held in his hand, and in reply to the message he muttered something, which, to John's ears, sounded very like "Curse it!"

"I never knew, sir, as that drawer opened. I——"

"Begone!" thundered Mr. Castonel, turning on his servant a look so full of evil, that the young man bounded back some yards.

"Am I to go anywhere?" he stammered, not understanding.

"Go out and find Mr. Rice," raved his master. "Send him to Mrs. Acre's."

Scarcely had John departed, when there came a second messenger for Mr. Castonel. "If he did not go at once, Mrs. Major Acre would be dead." Thus pressed, he took his hat and hurried out, after waiting a minute to put things straight in the laboratory. Mr. Rice, however, had arrived at Mrs. Major Acre's, and Mr. Castonel returned home.

On the next morning, Mrs. Leicester and Mr. Ailsa stood around the rector's dying bed. He lay partially insensible: he had so lain ever since daylight. "Do you not think Dr. Wilson late?" whispered Mrs. Leicester. "It is half-past seven."

"I expected him before this," replied Mr. Ailsa. "But, dear Mrs. Leicester, he can do no good."

"I know it," she answered through her tears.

At that moment there rang out the deep tones of the passing-bell, denoting that an immortal soul had been called away. One of the chamber windows was open, to admit air, and the sound came booming in from the opposite church. It aroused the rector.

"Have my people mistaken the moment of my departure?" he murmured.

"Or is it that one of my fellow-brethren is called with me?"

Mrs. Leicester leaned over him, and gently spoke, her ear having noted the strokes more accurately than that of the dying man. "It must be, I fear, for Mrs. Acre. It is for a woman."

"I fancy not for Mrs. Acre," observed Mr. Ailsa. "Mr. Rice left her, last night, out of danger."

It was striking out now, fast and loud. Mrs. Leicester noticed her husband's anxious eye. "Who goes with me?" he panted—"who goes with me?" and, just then little Tuck stole into the room, with a whitened face.

"Who is the bell tolling for?" asked Mrs. Leicester.

"For Mrs. Castonel. She died in the night."

With a sharp cry the rector struggled up in bed. What fear, what horror was it that distorted his countenance, as he grasped Mr. Ailsa's arm and strove to speak? They never knew, for he fell back speechless.

"Oh, where can Dr. Wilson be?" sobbed Mrs. Leicester. "Why is he not here?"

"He will not be long," whispered Mr. Tuck. "He was met outside the village, and taken to Mrs. Chavasse. The shock has brought on an attack of paralysis. Poor Castonel, Rice says, is in a lamentable state."

"What did she die of?" marvelled Mr. Ailsa.

"What did the others die of?" retorted Mr. Tuck. "Convulsions of some sort. Nobody knows. I never heard of such an unlucky man."

He was interrupted by a movement from Mrs. Leicester. The minister's spirit had passed away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OF THE BURIAL, AND THE CROWD, AND THE PUBLIC INDIGNATION.

It was the brightest day possible, and the sun shone on Ebury churchyard gayly and hotly. The two funerals had been fixed for the same day: but not intentionally. The bell had tolled from an early hour in the morning, out of respect to its regretted minister. Mr. Leicester's interment was fixed for ten o'clock, Mrs. Castonel's for eleven; consequently, no sooner had the clock struck nine, than stragglers began to move towards the churchyard, and soon they increased to parties, and soon to shoals. All Ebury went there, and more than Ebury. They talked to one another (as if seeking an excuse) of paying the last tribute of respect to their many-years rector, but there was a more powerful inducement in their hearts—that of witnessing the funeral of Mr. Castonel's wife, and of staring at him.

All the well-dressed people, and all who possessed pews, entered the church, till it was crammed in every nook, scarcely leaving room for the coffins to pass up the aisle. The mob held possession of the churchyard, and there was not an inch of land, no, nor of a grave, but what was alive with feet.

They saw it file out of the rectory and cross the road, a simple funeral, Mr. Hurst officiating. The coffin was borne by eight laborers, old parishioners, and the mourners followed with many friends, Squire Hardwick of the Hall and Mr. Ailsa walking next the relatives. And so the body was consigned to the ground, and the traces of the first funeral passed away.

But what was that, compared with the show which followed? With its mutes, and its feathers, and its black chariots, and its hearse, and its mourning coaches, and its velvet trappings, and its pall-bearers, and its training-scarfs and hatbands, and its white handkerchiefs! The mutes alone, with their solemn faces and sticks of office, struck dumb the fry of infantry who had congregated amongst their elders.

"Look at him! look at him!" whispered the mob as Mr. Castonel moved up the path by slow degrees after the body, the beadle and sexton clearing the way with difficulty. "Don't he look white? His handkerchief, as he's a covering his face with, ain't whiter."

"Enough to make him. He——"

"Hush-sh-sh! See who's a following of him! It's Mr. Chavasse. A sobbing like a child, for all he be such a great stout gentleman!"

"But Mr. Chavasse were still in foreign parts, and knowed nothing o' the death!"

"They sent him word, I heered. And he come over the sea in a carriage and six, to be in time for it, and got here at half-after nine this morning. How he's a crying!"

"And his eldest son a walking with him, and Master Arthur and the other behind, all a crying too. Poor things!"

"It seems but yesterday that Miss Chavasse come here in Lord Eastberry's carriage, like a queen. Who so proud as she, in her veils and her feathers?"

"Queens die as well as other folks. It's said Mrs. Chavasse won't be long after her. She have had a shocking seizure."

"Well, it's a fearsome thing for the poor young lady to have been cut off so sudden."

"It were as fearsome a thing for the other two. And worse. For Miss Chavasse might have took warning by them, and not have had him."

"I know what I know," interrupted Dame Vaughan, who made one of the spectators. "That I should like to clear up what it was as did cut 'em off."

Murmurs were arising amongst the crowd. "Ay, what was it? what took 'em?"

"What took that baby of Mary Shipley's, as was a lying safe and well on my knee two minutes afore it went into the agony?" persisted Dame Vaughan. "I have not forgot that, if others has. The physic I give to it was supplied from Mr. Castonel's stock."

"I heerd," broke in a young girl, "as this Mrs. Castonel died of convulsions."

"So they all did, so they all did. The wretch! the mur——"

"Come, come, you women," interrupted a man, "this ain't law nor gospel. Keep civil tongues in your heads."

But the cue had been given, the popular feeling arose, and hisses, groans, and ill words were poured upon Mr. Castonel. He could not look whiter or more impenetrable than he had done before, but he doubtless wished the beadle put to the torture for not forcing a passage quicker, that he might get inside the church. As soon as that object was attained, the beadle rushed back amongst the crowd, and used his tongue and his stick vigorously; and what with that, and his formidable cocked hat, he succeeded in enforcing silence.

So Frances, Mrs. Castonel, was laid in her grave, like unto the two fair flowers who had gone before her, and the procession returned, in its course, and disappeared. And the mob disappeared in its wake, after winding up with three groans for Mr. Castonel.

Mr. Castonel had looked around at the crowd, before he got into his carriage to return home, and his glance had taken in, quick as it was, the many whose eyes glared at him so savagely. But there was one face which he had not seen. Its owner had been pretty busy too. He had gone from one to another in the crowd before Mr. Castonel came, and with a hint here, and a fierce whisper elsewhere, had excited the popular mind almost to madness. It was the mysterious stranger whom no one knew, and who always, when he came to town, staid at the Three Pigeons.

CHAPTER XXV.

SUSPICION AND DISTRUST ENTER THE MIND OF A BEREAVED FATHER.

A GENTLEMAN who had attended the funeral of the rector made his way, as the mob dispersed, towards the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Chavasse, the parents of the ill-fated young lady just interred. It was Mr. Ailsa. He had been called in to Mrs. Chavasse; for the fearful shock of her daughter's death had brought on an attack of paralysis. The medical men had no fears for her

life, but they knew she would remain a paralyzed cripple; that she had suddenly passed from a gay, middle-aged woman, to a miserable, decrepid old one.

As Mr. Ailsa was passing down the stairs from her chamber, a door was pushed open, his hand was grasped, and he was pulled into the darkened parlor. It was by Mr. Chavasse, who tried to speak, but failed, and, sitting down, sobbed like a child. It was the first time they had met for years; for, since Ailsa's return, Mr. Chavasse had been away in Scotland, examining into some agricultural improvements, with the Earl of Eastberry, to whom he was land-steward. The news of his daughter's death had brought him home.

"Oh, Ailsa, my dear friend, could you not have saved her?"

"I was not her attendant," was Mr. Ailsa's reply. "Mr. Rice and Dr. Wilson no doubt did all they could; not to speak of her husband."

"Is it true that she was getting well? I know nothing. I only reached here in time for the funeral, and my wife is not in a state to give me particulars, even if she knows them."

"I hear that she was getting well. She had been ill, as you are probably aware, but had recovered so far as to be out of danger."

"Entirely so?"

"As Mr. Rice tells me."

"And then she was taken suddenly with convulsions."

Mr. Ailsa nodded.

"And died. As the other wives had died."

Mr. Ailsa sat silent.

"Did you ever hear of three wives, the wives of one man, having been thus attacked? Did you *ever* hear of so strange a coincidence?"

"Not to my recollection."

"And that when they were recovering, as they all were, that they should suddenly die of convulsions?"

Mr. Ailsa looked distressed.

"Do you know," added Mr. Chavasse, lowering his voice, "the thought crossed my mind this morning to stop the funeral But somehow I shrank from the hubbub it would have caused; and my grief held such full hold upon me. I said to myself, if I do cause an inquiry, it will not bring my child back to life."

"Very true," murmured Mr. Ailsa.

"Had I arrived yesterday, perhaps I should have entered upon it. I am sure I should, had I been here when she died. Speak your thoughts, Ailsa, between ourselves; see you no cause for suspicion?"

"I do not like to answer your question," replied Mr. Ailsa. "Castonel is no personal friend of mine; I never spoke to him: but we professional men are not fond of encouraging reflections upon each other."

"Have you heard of that business at Thomas Shipley's, about the child dying in the strange manner it did!"

"Mrs. Ailsa has heard the particulars from Mary; and Dame Vaughan seized hold of me the other day, and spoke of them."

"Well, was not that a suspicious thing?"

"I think it was a very extraordinary one. But the medicine was made up, and sent, by Mr. Rice, not by Mr. Castonel."

"The fact is this, Ailsa. Each event, each death, taken by itself, would give rise to no suspicion; but when you come to add them together, and look upon them collectively, it is then the mind is staggered. I wish," added Mr. Chavasse, musingly, "I knew the full particulars of my child's death; the details, as they took place."

"You surely can learn them from Mr. Castonel."

"Would he tell?"

"Yes. If he be an innocent man."

"If! Do you know," whispered Mr. Chavasse, "that they groaned at and hissed him in the churchyard today, calling him poisoner?"

"No!"

"They did. What a fool I was," he continued, wringing his hands, "ever to let her have Castonel! It was my wife worried me into it. Ailsa, I must get at the particulars of her death-bed. I shall not rest till I do.

If Castonel will not furnish them, I'll ask Mrs. Muff."

Mr. Chavasse remained irresolute all day. At the dusk hour he stole through the twilight to the house of his son-in-law. But Mr. Castonel had also stolen out somewhere under cover of the night. The faithful upper servant and housekeeper of *all* the Mrs. Castonels came to him in the dining-room, and the two sat down and sobbed one against the other.

"What did she die of?" groaned Mr. Chavasse.

"Sir," said Mrs. Muff, "I know no more than you. When she went to bed, she was as well as I was, and ten times merrier, talking about a new cap she had bought, and the visitors she would see on the morrow. That was about half-past nine, and by eleven we were all a-bed in the house. In the middle of the night—if you killed me, I couldn't tell you the time, for in my flurry I never looked, but it may have been about two—their bedroom bell, the one which is hung by John's door on the top landing, in case Mr. Castonel is called out and wants him in the night, rang out such a dreadful peal, loud and long, as brought us all out of our beds; and master was shouting from his chamber. The others stopped to put a few things on, but I ran down in my night-clothes. Sir, in ten minutes, Mrs. Castonel was dead."

"How did she seem when you got to her? How did she look?"

"She was writhing on the bed in awful agony, screaming and flinging her arms about. Mr. Castonel called it convulsions. I suppose it was. It was just as the other two poor young ladies went off. He was in a fine state, and threw himself on the body afterwards, and sobbed as if his heart would break."

"Did she take any thing in the night?"

"Nothing, except some barley-water. She had drunk that, for the glass was empty."

"Mrs. Muff," he whispered, taking her hand with a beseeching look, "do you feel that there has always been fair play?"

"The merciful goodness knows, sir. I can't help asking myself all sorts of ugly questions, and then I am vexed at doing it. I know one thing; that it's an unlucky house, and as soon as to-morrow comes, I take myself out of it. I could not stop. Mr. Castonel owes me three months' wages, and if he says I have no right to them, for leaving without warning, why he must keep them. Hannah neither won't stay. I had hard work to make her remain for the funeral."

"You saw them all after death. How did they look?"

"I saw them all, and noticed nothing extraordinary. But Mr. Castonel had the coffins screwed down quickly."

"Has any thing ever happened to excite your suspicions?"

"I cannot say it has. Though one circumstance has been much in my mind the last few days. The evening of the death of the first Mrs. Castonel, I and Hannah were seated in the kitchen, when we heard a noise in the laboratory. I went to see, and there was Mr. Castonel, who must have stolen down stairs and gone in without noise. He had let fall one of the little drawers, and I saw a phial and a paper or two on the floor. He was in a fierce rage with me for looking in. But the curious part is, that he had always passed off that drawer for a dummy drawer."

Mr. Chavasse did not speak. He listened eagerly.

"And on the night of your poor daughter's death, sir, he had got that same drawer out again. John went in, and saw him with it, and Mr. Castonel —to use the lad's words—howled at him and chivied him back again. 'What a odd thing it is, Mrs. Muff,' said he to me, that same evening, 'that I should always have took that drawer for a sham!'"

"Did you notice him at the drawer when his second wife died, poor Ellen Leicester?"

"No. But he may have gone to it every day of his life, without my seeing him. The curious point is, that he should have been seen at it on these

two particular nights, and by neither of us at any other time. Oh, sir! whether it has been bad luck, or whether it has been any thing worse, what a mercy if this man had never come near Ebury!"

"It would have been a mercy," echoed poor Mr. Chavasse.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER UNDERTAKES TO EXCITE SUSPICION STILL FURTHER.

There was a visitor at Mr. Hardwick's house, and the two had been in earnest conference for some time. The stranger—Mr. Smith, or whatever his name might be, had been arguing his point with some earnestness.

"You make out that portion of the case very well," said the squire; "but it is all suspicion after all. There is a possibility that Mr. Castonel might have changed the powders; but there is not enough evidence to proceed on. Mrs. Vaughan is a very prejudiced old woman, and sees things in the light of her hate. Understand me that I would be willing enough, as a magistrate, to attend to this, but were I to be too forward, and nothing come of it, Mr. Castonel would make me suffer. There is no apparent motive for such an act on his part."

"There is a motive, and a strong one, with an utterly unprincipled man. I wormed this out of the old dame. He was the father of the child."

"That would show less motive, or none, for its destruction, unless you make him out a perfect fiend."

"B t suppose he made a conditional prom e that he would marry the mother, when he was a widower, if the child were then alive."

"Did he make such a promise?"

"Mrs. Vaughan will swear that she overheard him."

Just then Mr. Chavasse was announced. He took no note of the stranger, so great was his excitement.

"I tell you, Squire Hardwick," said he, "I must have an inquest; my poor child's body shall be examined. I *will* know whether she has been poisoned or not. If there has been foul play, he shall suffer for it. They shall all be taken up—all—all."

"And Mary Shipley's baby too," said the stranger.

"And that too. I don't know you, sir, but I thank you for the suggestion. I should like to know about this Castonel—who he was originally—where he came from. No one knows. Maybe he has no right to the name."

"You are mistaken there," said the other; "he has a right to the name."

"Possibly; but that woman at Beech Lodge could tell. A cousin—a pretty cousin she. It's my opinion that she's nothing more nor less than—"

"Stop, sir," thundered the other, angrily, without remembering that he was not in his own house. "I will not suffer you to say any thing against that lady."

Mr. Chavasse looked astonished.

"I assure you," continued the stranger, resuming his ordinary tone, "that there has been, and could be no intercourse between that lady and Mr. Castonel, other than proper. I could satisfy you of that by four words; but I should not do so now. You will know all some time, and in the mean while you may take my word for it. No man shall impugn that lady's conduct or character in my presence with impunity."

"Why, that is what Mr. Castonel himself said to poor Mr. Winninton," said Chavasse.

"Did he? So much the better for him. It was his duty to do so."

"Duty."

"I said—duty. Rest easy, all will be explained before long. Have your inquest—your examination—I was endeavoring to persuade Mr. Hardwick to the step when you came in. But he wants an affidavit of probable cause."

"I'll make one, then," replied Chavasse.

"Suppose we have an informal inquiry first," suggested the cautious magistrate. "Let us have the parties who

can throw any light on it, and examine what they have to say carefully, before we commit ourselves. Feeling should not have its way in a matter like this, which is too serious to go at, except with coolness and caution."

"Your daughter has not been murdered," observed Mr. Chavasse, bitterly.

"Very true," replied the magistrate, calmly. "But we have no evidence yet that yours has been. Come, now, don't interrupt, but hear me out. There is a series of remarkable facts, that in connection are suspicious—the point to determine is, whether they are enough to act as a defence in case we fail, and are prosecuted for false arrest."

"I would spend every shilling I have in the world to get justice done on the murderer of my daughter."

"Granted; but not to merely find that you could prove no murder at all. Besides, as you said just now, I have had no daughter murdered, which is no evidence that I do not sympathize with you, but explains why I go to work with more deliberation. There is one great obstacle as yet."

"Obstacle?"

"Yes. I was speaking of it to this gentleman before you came in. It is the apparent absence of any motive for such wholesale slaughter."

"Motive!—why—abundant."

"Very good—what is it?"

Mr. Chavasse was silent for a minute or more, and then he broke out vehemently—

"He has poisoned them—there is no doubt of it."

"I fear so," said Mr. Hardwick, "but still there is no impelling reason. We may get a clue to it by a little management."

"Management!" burst forth Mr. Chavasse, again, "I am sick of management. All I want is a straightforward, thorough, square investigation. Let us get to the bottom of the business by a direct mode. If he didn't murder my daughter, let him show his innocence."

"Softly," answered the magistrate, almost provoked into a smile, "you forget that it is not the rule of English law to ask a man to prove his innocence; though an English public may do such a thing. His innocence is presumed until we show something to the contrary."

"Oh, I know all that—that's of course; but I mean let us go at it at once in a direct way. Let him be committed to await an investigation."

"He must be arrested first, and it requires an examination before he can be committed, and sufficient *prima facie* evidence, backed by an affidavit, for even a warrant."

"Did you never hear of murders being done without any apparent motive?" asked the stranger.

"Certainly; but if no motive at all be shown, it may lead to his escape. Look at it. He had nothing to gain by the death of his wives."

"Yes, but his first two were in the way of his marrying Frances, where he might gain something," suggested Mr. Chavasse.

"Which tells against the theory of his having poisoned your daughter," returned the other. "His hope of money through her was in her surviving you. So far as self-interest went, it was in favor of his guarding her life with jealous care."

"It seems to me you are arguing his case for him," said Mr. Chavasse, moodily.

"Trust me," returned the magistrate, "that the barrister who defends him would put it in a stronger way. It is clear that the motive was not interest."

"It might have been hate," interposed the stranger.

"Possibly; but what is the evidence of its existence? There were no quarrels between him and his wives. In your daughter's case, you told me once, yourself, that he lavished on her every thing that the tenderest husband could, and more than you would, were you in his place. So far as you know, or the public know, their relations were of the most affectionate kind. Even the sharp-sighted Mrs. Muff knows of no difficulty between the two. So you see there is no ground for that motive to stand on."

"Suppose he had no motive, but just sheer, downright desire to kill them."

"It would be hard to put that idea before a court. A smart barrister would make it acquit his client, if the facts were doubtful."

"But if we can show that they *did* take poison—that the poison could have been given by no one but him—if we can bring up the baby-case, where there was a motive," interposed the stranger, "what then?"

"I fear you would only build up a basis on which a smart counsel would rear a very pretty fabric of insanity. The days of Blue Beard are past. Men are not supposed to poison three young and handsome wives in succession, without apparent cause, and in the last instance against their own interest."

"What do you propose to do—dismiss the case when it comes before you officially?" queried the stranger.

"No! the circumstances are such as to give rise to grave suspicions, sufficient to justify me, perhaps, in acting as a magistrate. If a coroner's jury should find a verdict, as it probably would, the commitment would inevitably follow. But I am anxious that, if he be guilty—"

"If! He is guilty!" exclaimed Mr. Chavasse.

"Admit that I believe it so—that we are all three here satisfied of his guilt, it will not weaken the case against him, if we sift all the evidence carefully. You know what grounds you have to go on, in the first place; and then you may get a clue to the motive, which will make it surer."

"We have heard the witnesses already."

"No—only a portion, and then in a discursive way. I propose that we shall get Mr. Tuck before us."

"And Mr. Rice?"

"Probably; but we will get little out of him, unless in a court, or before the coroner. He is in Mr. Castonel's employ, and, knowing the examination to be extra-magisterial, would probably have nothing to say. What we get must be voluntary. Mr. Tuck is not of the same nature, and we may glean a deal from him. I thought of the tiger, but he is rather sharp, and may not be managed."

"Leave him to me," said the stranger, with a slight chuckle of confidence. "He is a mercenary young cur, and I can squeeze him as dry as a sponge. When I have done with him you will find little more to extract."

"You may get too much," rejoined Mr. Hardwick, drily.

"Never fear for that."

"I mean that it may not be reliable."

"I understand you; but I can sift the wheat from his chaff, without arguing very much shrewdness on my part. I have had occasion to do it once or twice before."

"I rely more upon John and Hannah's evidence, than even Mrs. Muff's," continued the magistrate. "Hannah is talkative, and therefore inquisitive; though Mrs. Muff is prudent, and likely to have rebuffed her, she has no doubt gleaned a good deal, and many matters not likely to have impressed her, which will come out, may guide us."

"Hannah was lady's maid?" inquired the stranger.

"No—in the kitchen; but don't you know that the kitchen knows most of the parlor? All people are at the mercy of their servants, in the matter of secrets, and the lower you get down the ladder the more is picked up. What does not astonish your valet makes your scullion ponder."

There was some force in this last observation of Mr. Hardwick, and it seemed to strike the other two. At least it was not contested.

"I think," continued the magistrate, "that by the time we have sifted what is at hand, some indications of further evidence may appear."

"And when do you propose to have the examination?" asked Mr. Chavasse.

"As soon as possible. To-morrow, at farthest."

"I should like to be present," said the stranger.

"There is no reason why you should not. I will have them summoned here quietly—Mrs. Muff, Hannah, John, Mr. Tuck, Dame Vaughan, and Mary Shipley—in fact, all of those who probably

know any thing before us, and sound the depth of the evidence."

"Very well—but it shall not rest, any way."

The stranger, promising to be present at the proposed inquiry, was about to leave the house. Mr. Chavasse stopped him.

"Did you know that man before he came to Ebury?"

"Yes."

"Was he—was he respectable?"

"He was so considered."

"Is Castonel really his name?"

"It is. I never knew him by any other name." The stranger left. Mr. Hardwick turned to his friend.

"What do you mean, Chavasse, by harping on the name of Castonel?"

"Mr. Hardwick, I always thought that Castonel's features were familiar, and I think I can place them. Do you remember when you and I were boys—my father was an attorney employed by yours, in all his business?"

"Yes."

"You remember a kind of half-tiger, half-page in your father's service, by the name of George Briggs?"

"Yes—he left, or was turned off or something. I have a remembrance of hearing some one—my father or some one else say, that he was connected with a good family, by the mother's side."

"Well, he fell in love with Mrs. Leicester—she wasn't Mrs. Leicester then, you know, but engaged—and between us all we badgered him almost to death, poor fellow; I believe we drove him away among us—Winninton and I particularly."

"More shame to you all. Well?"

"Castonel has his face—that is, as I would think it to be, grown older."

"Nonsense, Chavasse! Castonel I have seen and spoken with too often—he has attended here professionally. He is a gentleman in manner, and I should judge one by breeding."

"True," replied Chavasse, "but they called this boy, 'Gentleman George.' He was noted for manners above his station."

"What does it matter, after all? Suppose it were so, what then?"

"Nothing; but it is strange."

"Oh, you will see a thousand such resemblances. It is scarcely possible that this man can be 'Gentleman George.'"

"What of him?" asked Ailsa, who came in with his wife, on a visit to the Hall, and overheard the last word as he entered.

"We were talking of him," said Hardwick. "I wonder what became of the fellow."

"I did hear," replied Ailsa, "a few years since. His mother's uncle adopted and educated him, and left him a few thousand pounds, on condition of changing his name. He was bred to medicine."

"Go on," said Chavasse. "What became of him then?"

"He ran away with the daughter of the Duke of Carberry, whom he got acquainted with somehow, and, though the Duke never recognized him, cut quite a figure in London."

"And his name?"

"I never had curiosity enough to ask."

"Castonel and George Briggs are one and the same, as sure as you are all there," said Chavasse. "Don't you remember his face?"

"I never saw him," answered Ailsa.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE INTERVIEW IN THE LABORATORY, AND THE STRANGE SECRET DRAWER.

On the following afternoon John was in the laboratory, when Mr. Rice and Mr. Tuck came in.

"Here's a pretty state of things," exclaimed the tiger. "Mother Muff's gone off, and Hannah's gone off; leaving me, and master, and Ralph in the house, to do the work for ourselves."

"Gone off!" echoed Mr. Rice. "What for?"

"You must ask 'em that," returned the tiger. "Hannah said the house smelt of poison."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Mr. Rice. "Go with this mixture to Mrs. Major Acre's."

"I tell you what," cried little Tuck, as John went out, "Mr. Castonel will find it no pleasant matter. It must be a dreadful cut-up to the feelings to have an inquiry pending whether you have not carried on a wholesale system of poisoning."

"What do you mean?" cried Mr. Rice, staring at him.

"Chavasse is bent on an inquiry. He has taken some suspicion in his head, about foul play. So the body is to come up, and an inquest to be held."

"Mrs. Castonel's body?" cried Mr. Rice, quickly. "Nonsense!"

"Mrs. Castonel the third. And if they find any thing queer, Mrs. Castonel the second, and Mrs. Castonel the first, will follow. While they are about it, too, they may disinter that child of Mary Shipley's."

"Where did you hear all this?" demanded Mr. Rice, incredulously.

"Oh, I heard it. Mr. Chavasse was wavering over it yesterday, but he has been at the Hall to-day, and laid his suspicions and information before Squire Hardwick. I say, you see this set of drawers?"

"Well?" resumed Mr. Rice, casting up his eyes.

"There's something up about that top one being a secret drawer, and not a dummy; and they say it has got something inside it that won't do to be looked at."

"I do not believe it is a drawer," observed Mr. Rice. "I never knew it was."

"Nor I," rejoined little Tuck. "Hand me the steps, will you. I'll have a look."

"Let the steps alone, and the drawer too," said Mr. Rice. "Whether it's wrong or right, we need not draw ourselves into the affair. Better keep out of it."

"Well, perhaps you are right. What do you think Mr. Francis Hardwick said?"

"I had rather not hear. How was old Flockaway?"

"My!" ejaculated little Tuck. "I never went. I forgot it."

"Then I'll go now. I suppose this gossip put it out of your head."

"It did. I say though, Rice, isn't it a horrid go for Castonel?"

It must have been a "horrid go" for Mr. Castonel to hear this; and hear it he did, for he was seated outside the open window. Had he placed himself there to listen? No one had ever known him to sit down on that bench before.

Mr. Rice left the house, and Mr. Tuck cast his eyes on the drawers. He was a good-natured, harmless little fellow, but liked to indulge his curiosity. "Shall I look, or shall I not?" soliloquized he. "There is an old proverb that says 'Discretion is the best part of valor.' Oh, bother discretion! Here goes. There's nobody at home to see me."

He set the steps against the case of drawers, and mounted up, his eager hand outstretched. But at that moment a head and shoulders slowly rose before the window, and Mr. Tuck, in his fright, and the steps, nearly came down together. For it was Mr. Castonel.

"Are you searching for any thing?" equably demanded Mr. Castonel.

"Nothing, sir," stammered Mr. Tuck, putting up the steps very humbly.

"Come out here," said Mr. Castonel.

Mr. Tuck went out. Had he been detected poisoning Mr. Castonel, he could hardly have felt more ashamed, more unjustifiably prying. Mr. Castonel made room for him on the bench beside him.

"I thought you were out, sir," he awkwardly began.

"No," answered Mr. Castonel. "I sat down here an hour ago, and"—he coughed — "dropped asleep. Your voice, talking with Mr. Rice, awoke me."

"Oh, my heart!" groaned Mr. Tuck to himself, becoming very hot. "He must have heard all we said. Did you, sir?" he asked aloud, following out his thoughts.

"Did I what?" demanded Mr. Castonel, turning upon him his sinister eye. He knew he had got him safe—

that simple little Tuck was no match for him.

"Hear the—the—stuff—that I and Rice were saying?"

"I heard the stuff *you* were saying," curtly rejoined Mr. Castonel.

"Of course I ought not to have repeated it, sir; but it will be all over the village to-morrow, without me. I am very sorry for it."

"So am I," responded Mr. Castonel. "Sorry the people should be such fools."

"And I hope it will be cleared up," added Mr. Tuck.

"You do not believe there is any thing to clear up, do you?" almost savagely retorted Mr. Castonel.

"I mean the reports," deprecated little Tuck.

"But I ask you if you believe there can be any thing to clear up?" repeated Mr. Castonel.

"No, sir, not now that I am talking with you. I don't know whether I believed it, or not, up at the Hall. I was struck all in a maze there."

"What brought you at the Hall?"

"They sent for me."

"Who?"

"Squire Hardwick. No; stop; I think it was Mr. Chavasse. Or the two together: I don't know."

"What for?"

Mr. Tuck hesitated.

"I am a wrongfully accused man," burst forth Mr. Castonel. "Even you were ready enough, but now, to accuse me to Rice. Who is it that is asking for a coroner's inquest?"

"Mr. Chavasse."

"Upon what grounds. Speak up. Don't equivocate."

"I am not equivocating, sir," cried little Tuck. "And as you heard what I said to Mr. Rice, you know the chief facts. But I don't like to repeat these things to your face."

"I wish you to repeat them. I must know what they charge me with. An innocent man can listen to slander unmoved."

"And you *are* innocent!" cried Mr. Tuck, brightening up.

"Innocent! Innocent of the death of my dear wives! I would have died to save them."

"Then I'll tell you all I did hear, sir," answered simple, credulous little Tuck. "Mr. Chavasse has got something in his head about Mrs.—— your late wife."

"Got what? Speak out."

"He says he wants to prove whether she came fairly by her death. Perhaps," added Mr. Tuck, in a conciliating tone, for he did shrink from his present task—"perhaps he fears something may have been given to her by mistake."

"No innuendoes," was the rough answer. "I shan't wince. He fears I may have poisoned her, that's what it is."

"Well," warmly cried little Tuck, "*I* don't fear it now."

"Who went to Francis Hardwick's?"

"Mr. Chavasse was there, and they had me up, and Mrs. Muff; and the squire asked Mr. Ailsa to be present, that he might judge whether there were medical grounds to go upon. And Dame Vaughan came up——"

"Why did not Francis Hardwick have the whole parish up?" angrily interrupted the surgeon.

"Dame Vaughan was not sent for. She went of her own accord. Mr. Chavasse had met her in the morning, and asked her something, and she went up. It was about those powders that she complained, when Mary Shipley's child died. She had nothing to say about Mrs. Castonel. She vowed those powders were poison."

"Mr. Rice made them up and sent them, whatever they were."

"But Dame Vaughan said Mr. Castonel might have changed what Mr. Rice made up. She said, in fact, she'd almost be upon her oath he did, and that she had asked John, who said it was Mr. Castonel gave the powders into his hand, and that Mr. Rice was not present. Mr. Ailsa said he never heard a woman go on so, and the squire threatened to turn her out of the justice-room unless she could be calm."

"Did you hear her?"

"Of course not. They had us in, one at a time, to the justice-room—as

the poor call it. The squire and Mr. Ailsa sat together at the table, and Mr. Chavasse sat on that low bench under the window, with his head bent on to his knees. Dame Vaughan has got an awful tongue. She said she was an old fool; and, if she had not been one, the wickedness would have been brought to light at the time."

Mr. Castonel looked up sharply. "She is a fool. What did she mean?"

"Why, she said she gave the remaining four powders into your hands, after the baby died; and let you take them into the yard, by yourself, at Shipley's cottage, so that you had plenty of time to—to——"

"To what? Speak out, I say again."

"To walk off with the poison, and leave wholesome powders in its stead. She said, also——"

"Go on," laughed Mr. Castonel, apparently quite at his ease,—much more so than his assistant, who spoke with frequent hesitation.

"That you must have planted yourself purposely in the boy's way, who went after you, so as to run down to Thomas Shipley's and secure the poison, before Mr. Rice or anybody could come."

"She's a lady!" ironically uttered Mr. Castonel.

"She is that," responded little Tuck. "She protested she would dig the baby up with her own hands, without any spade, if the magistrates would but go into the matter. Squire Hardwick told her it was quite an after consideration whether they went into it at all, and that it had nothing to do with the subject under notice."

"I'll 'dig' her!" uttered Mr. Castonel. "What did they ask Mrs. Muff?"

"I don't know what they asked her, but I believe she was cautious, and couldn't or wouldn't say, one way or the other, whether she suspected or not. Oh—and who else do you think came to the Hall?"

"All Ebury, probably."

"Mrs. Leicester."

"Mrs. Leicester? Who next. What did she want?"

"Mrs. Leicester, in her widow's weeds. She was in there, ever so long, with Mr. Chavasse and the squire, and Ailsa, and that strange gentleman."

"What strange gentleman?"

"I don't know, sir. Him that was here once or twice before, and put up at the Three Pigeons."

"Gentleman! A queer place."

"Well, he looks like a gentleman. He took a great interest in the matter, and cross-questioned me like a lawyer. The old dame says he is the one that is going to put things to rights; and one of the servants thinks he is a great London detective. I don't think that. He is a gentleman, though."

"What does he look like?"

"Well—he's rather taller than shorter—and his eyes are—well, I don't know what color—and—well, I didn't take notice of but one thing about him."

"What was that?"

"It wasn't much. It was a scar on his left wrist, that showed once when he raised his hand."

Mr. Castonel winced a little.

"Well, what brought Mrs. Leicester there?"

"Mr. Chavasse had been to the rectory and had an interview with her in the morning, and she came up. We gathered that she objected to Ellen—to Mrs. Cas—to the remains of her daughter being disturbed, and that Squire Hardwick promised they should not be, unless the ends of justice peremptorily demanded it."

"What questions did they ask you?"

"They asked me very few, because I had nothing to tell," replied little Tuck. "When Mr. Chavasse found that I had not interfered with his daughter's illness, in fact, had not seen her, he said he was sorry to have troubled me; that they ought to have had Mr. Rice up instead."

"Have they written to the coroner?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Squire Hardwick said the affair looked gravely suspicious, and that an inquest was indispensable. He said—shall I tell you what else he said, sir?"

"Tell! Of course."

"His opinion was, that the fact of three young wives dying in so sudden

and mysterious a manner, afforded uncommon scope for doubt, even without the attendance of other suspicious circumstances."

"What 'other?'"

"That's more than I can say. Unless he meant what that beldame, Dame Vaughan, set afloat."

"Tush!" scornfully retorted Mr. Castonel. And then he sat for some minutes in a reverie. Little Mr. Tuck rose.

"Do you want me any longer, sir? I have not had my tea."

"No," said the surgeon. "Have you told all?"

"Every word, sir."

"What were you saying to Mr. Rice about that case of drawers?" returned Mr. Castonel, half turning his head towards the spot where they stood.

"Oh, I forgot that; I did indeed. Some of them say that topmost drawer is not a——"

"Don't speak so vaguely. Who?"

"I'm blest if I know who," said Mr. Tuck, after considering. "They asked me, and I said I always took that topmost drawer to be a dummy, but they say it is not; that there's something inside it, and that you had it out the evenings that your wives died. Of course they meant to insinuate that—that——"

"That I keep a subtile poison in it," sneered Mr. Castonel, "and have been dealing it out in doses. Any more?"

"That is all, sir."

"Good. You need not say, outside, that you have told me this. I am glad I know who my enemies are."

"I will not say a word to any one, sir," earnestly replied the little man. "You may rely upon me. Good evening."

Mr. Tuck departed. Mr. Castonel remained on the bench. As the former hastened up the street, thinking what an aspersed man the surgeon was, he encountered Mr. Ailsa.

"Now I'll just ask the question," thought he. "I'm sure if I can let Castonel know any thing certain, it is what I ought to do, with so many against him. I say, sir," quoth he aloud, "have they written to the coroner yet?"

"Not yet. Mr. Francis Hardwick wished to confer with a brother magistrate first. Mr. Chavasse did not consult him in his magisterial capacity, but as a friend. He——"

"Are you sure?" interrupted Mr. Tuck.

"Quite sure. If any magistrate has to interfere, it will not be my brother-in-law: he is acting solely as Mr. Chavasse's private friend."

"Perhaps it is not decided that there will be any inquest," said Mr. Tuck, briskly.

"Oh yes, that is decided, Mr. Chavasse demands it. The coroner will be written to to-morrow."

"Do you know, Mr. Ailsa, I do believe Castonel is as innocent as you or I."

"I hope he is. It will be a most horrible blow to all parties interested, should the contrary be proved."

"He says he would have died to save his wives. Oh, he must be innocent."

"I heartily wish he may be. Good evening. I am on my way to see Mrs. Chavasse."

"Will she get better?"

"Better. But never well."

James Ailsa continued his way, and Mr. Tuck continued his. But suddenly he stopped and ruminated.

"Suppose I go back, and tell Castonel at once! That would be one grain of comfort. I know I should want a many grains if I were in his shoes."

So he turned back to the house of Mr. Castonel. But instead of ringing at the front door and bringing Mr. Castonel to open it, he walked round to the side of the house and tried the back garden door, which, as he knew, was occasionally left unlocked, though against orders. It was open, and Mr. Tuck went in. Mr. Castonel was not on the bench then, and Mr. Tuck entered the house by the little door next the surgery.

The first object he saw was Mr. Castonel, mounted on the very steps, as he had been, and in the very same place.

And he held the "dummy" drawer in one hand, and grasped some papers and a phial with the other.

"Hallo!" cried Mr. Castonel, dashing the papers and phial into it, and the drawer back into its place, as he rapidly descended, "how did you get in? I heard you go."

"I came in by the garden door."

"Who has done that? Who has dared to leave it unfastened?" raved Mr. Castonel, with his awful glare.

That glare had never yet been turned upon Mr. Tuck. He did not like it, and he confessed afterwards that he felt as if he would prefer to be safe outside the house, rather than alone in it with Mr. Castonel. He had the presence of mind (he called it so) to speak in a careless tone.

"One of the servants, no doubt. Very stupid of them, for boys may get in and steal the gooseberries: little odds to them whether they are green or ripe. I came back to tell you, sir, that they have not written to the coroner. I met Mr. Ailsa as I left here, and put the question to him point-blank, and he said they had not; so I thought you might like to know it. He told me something else, too: that Mr. Chavasse did not formally lay a charge before Mr. Francis Hardwick: he only consulted him as a friend."

"Oh," cried Mr. Castonel.

"Mr. Ailsa supposes they will write to the coroner to-morrow," added Mr. Tuck. "But to-day is one day, and to-morrow is another; and before to-morrow comes they may change their mind, sir, and let the matter drop."

"They may write if they choose," said Mr. Castonel, "I want no favor from them. I have been forcing that drawer out, Tuck," he continued, with a cough, "and find there's a paper of magnesia in it, and some hartshorn in a phial. They must have been there for ages,—ever since the drawers were appropriated when I first came into the house."

"Then you never did have it out, as they say?" eagerly cried Mr. Tuck.

"Not that I have any recollection of. I suppose its not being used must have caused the impression to get abroad that it was a dummy drawer. Had any curious person applied to me upon the point, I could have told them that it was *not* a dummy."

"It looks like a dummy, sir," rejoined Mr. Tuck. "It has no knob, and no lock to it, like the others. Why has it not?"

"How should I know why?" retorted Mr. Castonel. "I did not make the drawers."

"Well, sir, good evening once more," concluded little Tuck. "I thought you might like to hear that there's nothing yet but smoke."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER HAS AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. CASTONEL, AND AN ECLAIRCISSEMENT, WHICH IS ONLY CLEAR TO THE TWO.

Mr. Castonel sat alone that evening, lost in reflection. His musings were apparently not very pleasant, if the changes that came over his countenance were any indication. At length he rose to go out. As he did so he heard a footstep in the hall, which he supposed to be that of John.

"Come in," he said, "I want you here."

"And you have me here," said a voice, sneeringly.

The surgeon started in some surprise, for confronting him, just inside the door, stood Mr. Smith, or whatever else he might be named, the stranger who had lodged at the Three Pigeons.

"Oh, *you* are here," said Mr. Castonel, in a tone of bitterness. "You have left America, and undertaken to meddle in my affairs. Rather bold, I fancy."

"I know of no reason why I should not come from America, if I think proper; and as to meddling in affairs of yours, they are likely to be public affairs very shortly. I am only anticipating events a little."

"You impudent scoundrel!" And the surgeon's face grew livid as he spoke.

"You know of no reason why you should not come from America! I know of a reason why you should take a longer voyage, and at her majesty's expense."

"You are mistaken."

"Am I? I have the check itself. Will your impudence lie down the fixed signature? Bah! Sir Richard! The penniless baronet will be the felon baronet, if I but say the word."

"You are dreaming, man. I do not understand you. Check! What check? There is no check! That is like your story about those letters of mine, found in Lady Lavinia's possession. You frightened her with that absurd story long enough. There never were any letters."

"Indeed! Let her or you provoke me too much, and I will produce them to your confusion, and her shame."

"Not if you can help it. Your allowance from the duke would stop then, eh? But you have no such letters—you never had them."

"We shall see."

"No doubt we shall. But you will have to be quick about it. The officers of justice will interfere with your movements otherwise."

Mr. Castonel laughed.

"Oh, you refer to the gossip of Ebury," said he. "The professional jealousy of James Ailsa, and the wounded pride of his wife's family, are at the bottom of the foul and false charge."

"And the mother of your child."

"Pooh!"

"I have traced all that out, man. There is not a circumstance which I have not noted. If you have done it, and I believe you have, you cannot well escape."

"I defy you."

"So be it; but if that fails, there is the big——"

"Bah!" interrupted the surgeon, "they are all dead. In short, Sir Richard, your talk is absurd. You are in my power, and so is she."

"On the contrary, you are in mine. I called to give you fair warning. To-morrow will test the truth of my words, and yours."

The stranger glided out, leaving Mr. Castonel in a rage almost speechless. At length he said—

"We will see!"

He took a light, and went to the laboratory, locking the door after him. An examination of the secretary followed. He drew out the three envelopes. The moment he saw them, he laughed sarcastically.

"So, Sir Richard," he cried, "you defy me, do you? More shame to you, for *she* will suffer—*her* name, *her* family—*you* are right. But not about the forgery—not about the forgery."

He was removing one of the envelopes as he spoke the last words; and then took out what appeared to be a letter. As he opened it, he found it to be a sheet of paper entirely blank, without writing of any kind on it. Astonished beyond words, he hastily opened the others. The enclosures of each were similar.

The surgeon sank into a chair, and engaged in thought.

"She is out of my reach," he said, at length. "Now, if he has got the check by the same means, he had reason to defy me. But her evidence must be out of the way, somehow."

He mused again.

"Can I cajole her? If not, then——"

He obtained a packet from one of the drawers, which he thrust in his vest pocket. The enclosures, with their blank contents, were replaced; and then the surgeon pursued his first intention, and left the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHEREIN THE FOX IS RUN TO EARTH AT LAST.

A SMALL, better class of cottage, built in the form of a lodge and so called, stood alone amidst trees which nearly surrounded it, a whole grove of them, thick, and high, and lofty. Had the trees possessed human ears, they might have detected sounds, late that night, inside the cottage: unusual sounds; of dispute, and then commotion, and then distress: and afterwards the outer door

was flung open, and a woman-servant sprang out of it with a smothered shriek, took her way at top speed towards the village, and rang a loud peal at the lodgings of Mr. Rice. That gentleman was just on the point of stepping into bed. He turned to the window, opened it, and looked out in his night-shirt.

"It's here, isn't it, that Mr. Castonel's partner lives?" a woman breathlessly uttered.

"That's near enough. Yes. What's wanted?"

"Oh—I did not know you in the flurry, sir. Please to come this instant to Mr. Castonel. There's not a moment to lose."

"To Mr. Castonel? Where?"

"He is down at Beech Lodge. Make haste, sir, or he may be dead before you come."

"*He* dead! Mr. Castonel! What in the world is the matter with him?"

"Poison, I believe: please to bring your remedies for it."

"Here"—for she was striding away—"what description of poison?"

"I can't tell. You had better come and see, sir, instead of wasting time."

Full of consternation and alarm, Mr. Rice thrust on a pair of trousers over his night-shirt, and a coat, and came out that way, without a waistcoat or neck-tie. He rang at Mr. Castonel's.

"Law bless us!" cried John in his surprise, as he flung open the door, "I didn't expect you, sir; I thought it was master. I'm a sitting up for him."

Mr. Rice vouchsafed no answer; he was too hurried. He collected what he wanted from the surgery, and turned to the door again.

"Do you know any thing of master, sir, whether he ain't a coming home?" demanded the tiger, looking with curiosity at the signs of Mr. Rice's hasty toilet, and his as hasty movements.

"Your master is ill. He has been taken ill at Beech Lodge. Where's Ralph?"

"He's gone to bed, sir."

"Call him up to mind the house, and you come after me down there. You may be useful."

Away sped Mr. Rice again. Just before he turned off to the fields, he met Mr. and Mrs. Ailsa, near to the gate of their own house. They were walking home from the Hall.

"What's the matter?" cried Mr. Ailsa.

"I can't wait to tell you," was Mr. Rice's hurried answer, without arresting his steps. "I fear Castonel has destroyed himself. One of those women has been up to me from Beech Lodge. He is there."

"I will go with you, I may be of service," eagerly cried Mr. Ailsa. "How many more tragedies are we to have? Mary, my dear, can you run in alone?"

"Oh yes, yes, James, lose no time."

The two women—the young and handsome lady, about whom so much mystery had existed, and the woman-servant—were standing outside the Lodge, looking out for Mr. Rice, when the surgeons approached.

"You are too late."

They did not know which spoke, they pressed on, in-doors. Mr. Rice half turned his head at a noise behind him. It was the tiger galloping down. In the small sitting-room, stretched on the floor, between the table and the fire-place, was Mr. Castonel. Dead.

The servant followed them into the room. Not so her mistress.

"Too true," uttered Mr. Rice, "he has committed suicide. What's this?"

He was looking on the table. A decanter of wine and two glasses were there. One of the glasses was full, the other had been emptied. The woman was sobbing violently, and seemed to have lost all idea of caution or self-control.

"I can't say I ever liked him," she said, "but it's horrible to see a man, well one minute, and the next die before one's eyes."

"What has led to this?" inquired Mr. Rice.

"He came here about eight o'clock, and he had a violent quarrel with my mistress. I heard bits of it here and there."

"Well?"

"It grew very bitter, and my mistress at length flew into a state of frenzy, and

came to the door and called me in, that I might be a witness to her words, she said. I had never seen her in such a state before, nor anybody else, and she knelt down and swore a solemn oath that things should go on in the way they had been going on no longer, and that she would declare the truth to the world, and force him to acknowledge it, be the consequences what they might. That calmed Mr. Castonel; though for the matter of that he had not been so violent, but I think his cold sneers provoked her. He looked at her with a curious expression, and sat down on the sofa and seemed to be thinking. Then he told me to get the wine and some wine-glasses, and——"

"What are you saying?" interrupted a calm voice, and the mistress of the Lodge appeared. "Any information necessary for these gentlemen I can give myself."

The servant shrank from the room, and began talking to John in the kitchen. The lady confronted the surgeons, keeping the table between herself and the body.

"Can you do nothing for him?"

"Nothing, I grieve to say," replied Mr. Ailsa, speaking with involuntary respect, in spite of his prejudices. Whatever may have been that lady's history, she had the bearing and manners of a refined gentlewoman.

"He must have been dead a quarter of an hour," added Mr. Rice. "Did he wilfully poison himself?"

"No," was the lady's calm answer.

Mr. Rice paused, probably in surprise. "Then could it have been taken in mistake?"

"Neither that. I gave it him."

They both stood staring at her. Was she to be believed?—so quiet, so collected, so lovely looking! How were they to act? An indistinct idea of having her secured ran through Mr. Rice's mind. But he did not know how to set about it, or whether he would be justified.

"I will give you an outline of the circumstances," she proceeded. "He—"

"Madam," interrupted James Ailsa, "it—I beg your pardon—but it may be my duty to caution you not to criminate yourself."

A proud smile of self-possession, one full of meaning, arose to her lips. "I wish to tell you," she answered.

"May it not be well to reserve it for the coroner's inquest?"

"No. I should be an ineligible witness for *him* in any court of law."

"Why ineligible for him?" involuntarily inquired Mr. Rice.

"Either for or against him. My testimony would not be taken."

Her words to them were as riddles; and they waited in silence.

"He came down here to-night, and we quarrelled. No matter what the quarrel was about: it was such that we had never had before. He calmed down, apparently. I knew that the more smiling he was without, the more tempestuous he was within. I stood here. Here," she added, advancing to the mantel-piece, but still not looking at what lay beneath her, and placing her elbow on the shelf and her hand before her eyes, "I stood in this way. He was pouring out some wine he had asked for, and I watched his movements in the glass, through my fingers. I did not intentionally watch him: my thoughts were far away, and I suspected nothing. Suddenly I saw him slip something from a paper into one of the glasses; I felt sure I saw him; but I had my senses about me, and I took no notice whatever, only drew away and sat down in this chair. He handed me the glass, *the* glass, mind, saying the wisest plan would be to forget our dispute for to-night, for he must be going, and we could discuss the matter at issue another time. I took the glass from him, raised it to my lips, as if to drink, and then, as though by a sudden impulse, put it on the table without tasting it. 'If I am to drink this wine,' I said, 'I must eat a biscuit first. Reach them.'"

The lady paused for a moment, and her hearers waited with breathless interest.

"He knew where they were kept—in that closet," she added, pointing with her finger to a closet opposite the fire-

place, and the two medical men glanced at it. "He opened the door and stepped inside, it is rather deep, and came forth with the biscuits. But in that moment I had changed the glasses. I took a biscuit, began slowly to eat it, and he drank up his wine. In a few minutes he shrieked out convulsively. I sent for aid, ran out, and hid myself amidst the trees, for I was afraid of him. When my servant came back, we went in together, but I think the poison had then done its work. It must have been subtile and deadly."

Mr. Ailsa took up the empty glass, and, with Mr. Rice, examined the few drops left at the bottom. Not at first did they detect the nature of the poison; it was indeed rare and subtile, leaving, where it should be imbibed, but little trace after death.

"She says master's dead," sobbed John, as the gentlemen went out. "It can't be true."

"Too true, John," answered Mr. Rice.

"Sir, did he poison hisself, as she says? Did he do it on purpose?"

"No. He drank a glass of wine, and there was poison in it. He did not know it."

"Oh, my poor master!"

Full of excitement as Ebury had been—and had cause to be—on several previous occasions, it was nothing compared with what rose with the following morning. Mr. Castonel dead! Mr. Castonel poisoned! John ostentatiously closed all the windows of the house, and sat himself outside on the door-step, forgetting dignity in grief, to answer the mass of inquirers. It was Mr. Ailsa who carried the news to Mr. Chavasse.

"Is not this a confirmation of our fears?" exclaimed the latter.

"I fear it looks very like it."

"Oh, it is horrible!" groaned Mr. Chavasse. "Three young and happy girls to have been foully——"

"Nay, nay," interrupted James Ailsa. "Nothing is proved."

"And never will be now," replied poor Mr. Chavasse. "It is a mercy for the rector that he went beforehand."

Before the day was over fresh news had gone out to Ebury—that Mr. Chavasse meant not to pursue the investigation he had contemplated. Where was the use? he argued, since the guilty man—if he was guilty—was gone. Where, indeed? echoed a few judicious friends. But Ebury in general considered itself very shabbily used, and has hardly got over the disappointment to this day.

An inquest, however, there was to be, over Mr., if not Mrs. Castonel, and Ebury's curiosity concentrated itself upon that event. Some gossip told by the parish beadle fanned the flame. When he had gone down to serve the two summonses at the Lodge, and required the name of the lady, she had replied "Castonel."

"Then it is a relative of his, after all!" quoth the village. "And we have been judging so harshly of her and of him!"

"I think I shall call and leave a card, when it's all over, and I am about again," said Mrs. Major Acre. "That is, if she stops here."

The "dummy drawer" was examined previous to the inquest, and found to contain exactly what Mr. Castonel had said, a phial of hartshorn and some magnesia. "Which of course he was putting there," was Dame Vaughan's comment, "when little Tuck caught him on the steps." The drawer had evidently possessed a secret spring, which had been recently wrenched away and was gone.

The day appointed for the inquest dawned, and those who were connected with it, and those who were not, flocked up to the "Hardwick Arms." The strange lady was called in her turn, and the coroner demanded her name.

"Lavinia Castonel. I presume my evidence will be dispensed with, when I state who I am. A wife cannot give evidence in matters that touch upon her husband."

The room stared. "A coroner's court is an exception," called out a voice, which was drowned by the coroner's "hush."

"Lavinia Castonel," said he. "Any relation to the late Mr. Castonel?"

"His wife."

A rising hum—a shock—almost a

shriek. Squire Hardwick interrupted it, surprised out of his magisterial etiquette of silence in another's court.

"It is impossible you can be his wife. You are stating what is not true."

"Mr. Castonel's wife," she calmly repeated. "His widow now."

Great confusion arose, and the coroner was powerless at first to repress it. Possibly he had his curiosity like the rest. Everybody was asking questions: one rose high.

"Had she married him since the death of the last Mrs. Castonel?"

"No, she had not," she replied. "She had married him before he first came to Ebury."

Higher rose the confusion. "Then if she was his wife, what was the position of the unhappy young ladies to whom he had given his name?"

"The inquirers might settle that as they pleased," she carelessly answered. "It was no business of hers. *She* was his lawful wife."

Nothing more, touching this, could be got out of her. She would afford no further explanation, no confirmation of her assertion, or any details. But her calm, equable manner carried a conviction of its truth to half the court. The coroner took her evidence relating to the death of Mr. Castonel: it was exactly what she had told the two medical men, and the maid-servant, so far as she was able, confirmed it. That, at any rate, was truth. The jury believed it, and their verdict was to the effect that Gervase Castonel had met his death at her hands, but that she was justified in what she had done, having acted in self-defence.

So that was the ending of Mr. Castonel and his doings in Ebury: and a very unsatisfactory ending it was, in every sense of the word. The lady and the maid left the place the day subsequent to the inquest, and that was the ending of them. Numerous tales and rumors went abroad; as rumors always do. One said the money to establish Mr. Castonel had been hers, not his, and that she dared not publicly avow herself to be a wife, or it would be lost to her: another, that he had forced her to submit to his apparent marriages under threats, for that he held some dreadful secret of hers in his power, and she feared to gainsay him: another—— But why pursue these reports? Nobody could tell whence they originated, or if they were true or false. The whole affair remains a miserable mystery to Ebury, and probably ever will do so: and its exasperated curiosity has never been able to ascertain whether the three ill-fated young ladies did, or did not, die an unnatural death.

Mr. Castonel was buried in the churchyard by their side, and it took the beadle and four subordinates an hour and a half to clear it of the mob, afterwards. And Mr. Ailsa quietly dropped into his old practice, and took on Mr. Rice and Mr. Tuck and John, for he found there would be work for all. And to the latter's extreme discomposure, he found Mrs. Muff was to be taken on too, and would rule him as of old. And since Ebury subsided into tranquillity, it has become a matter of "good taste" there, never to breathe the name of Gervase Castonel.

But though Ebury as a village never knew the mystery, or the full solution of it, Mr. Chavasse always maintained that Gervase Castonel and George Briggs were the same—which was true enough, probably; for, on inquiry, it was found that the name of George's relative was Castonel—that was on record; but there it stopped. The only circumstance throwing any light on affairs, and that very little, was detailed in a letter from Mr. Chavasse's eldest son, who had gone to America. He had been in Ebury often during Mr. Castonel's residence there, and on one occasion had seen the lady who lived at Beech Lodge.

"I met a gentleman and lady the other evening," he wrote, "in society, by the name of Graham—Mr. and Mrs. Richard Graham. They both assured me they never had been in Ebury—though they are English, beyond doubt. The lady is as like that mysterious woman at Beech Lodge—well, if she hadn't faced me down so calmly, I should say she *was* the same. In fact, I still

think she is. I don't know *him*. I never saw him before. The only thing peculiar about him is a scar across his left wrist, which I noticed once as he raised his hand in conversation."

But what does it all matter? The three young wives are dead, the babe is dead, the surgeon is dead. Till the last day we shall never probably know, though we may suspect. After all, he might have been a very innocent and injured man—the victim of his false wife and her cunning lover—this Gervase Castonel, surgeon.

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