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THE FORTUNES OF THE ASHTONS

VOLUME XVIII



"CAME CLOSE UNDER THE WINDOW"
Photogravure from original by Merrill

"CAME CLOSE UNDER THE WINDOW"
Photographic from original by Merrill

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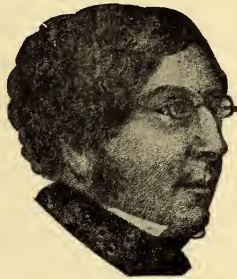
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The Works of
George M. M. Reynolds

The
Fortunes of the Ashtons

Volume III

**The Mysteries of the Court
of London**



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The Oxford Society

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REYNOLDS' WORKS

CHAPTER I

THE FINALE OF THE SYCAMORE EPISODE

IN the meantime what had been passing at the Royal Hotel in that town? At about a quarter past six o'clock two young gentlemen were introduced by the waiter to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room; and that individual received them with every appearance of the warmest friendship. One was barely twenty-two, the other a few months younger still. Both on coming of age had inherited fortunes, both were inexperienced, giddy, gay, and extravagant, anxious to be considered very fine, dashing fellows, and never pausing to reflect at what high price they were purchasing this reputation. There was no kinship between them, but they had been to college together, and their intimacy was renewed when launching themselves upon the great sea of life. They considered Mr. Sycamore to be the very pink of everything that was most admirable, fascinating, and worthy of imitation as a man of fashion, and they were as proud of having obtained his friendship as if they were associating with the highest aristocrat in the land.

Such were the two young gentlemen whom Mr. Sycamore had invited to dinner; and on their being introduced, he ordered the waiter to have the banquet served up at once. The command was promptly obeyed, and Mr. Sycamore sat down to table with his guests. The courses of soup and fish passed off agreeably enough, and Sycamore felt his spirits revive as he perceived that the young gentlemen were in an excellent humour to do justice to the wine. With the

third course the champagne was introduced, and after the first glass the young gentlemen began to grow very talkative, and likewise to show off their airs.

"Well, you speak of fine women down here, Sycamore," said one, running his fingers in an affected manner through his perfumed hair, "but I vow and declare I have not seen any to my taste."

"What! not at bathing-time?" asked Mr. Sycamore, with a knowing look. "Why, my dear fellow, I saw you on the sands for three hours yesterday, nearly all the while the tide served, and you never once had your glass down from your eye."

"'Pon my soul, that's too bad, Sycamore!" said the young gentleman, infinitely delighted at this flattering compliment to his rakish propensities. "I must confess I saw more of Lady Harriet's bust than she usually displays when in evening costume — and yet you know she does dress devilish low."

"Ah!" cried Sycamore, "I always thought there was something between you and Lady Harriet, — especially as her husband neglects her."

"Come, come, Sycamore, don't be scandalous," said the young gentleman, laughing immensely. "Suppose I did dance five times running with Lady Harriet the other evening, and suppose I did sit next to her at supper, and suppose I did ride out on horseback with her next day, why, what then? People of course can draw their own inferences, but I say nothing."

"You are two young rakes," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore, pumping up the merriest laugh he could possibly force by that artificial process, "and I shall really lose my character if I am seen in your company; I shall be set down as bad as yourselves. Come, fill, and pass the champagne."

"It's all this fellow here who leads me into mischief," continued the same young gentleman who had previously been speaking, and who now alluded to his companion, who was just a few months older than himself. "I should like to know how he gets on with that pretty little widow with the sweet blue eyes."

"Oh, if you think I mean matrimony," drawled out the young gentleman thus alluded to, at the same time giving an affected laugh, "you are most gloriously mistaken, and

the little widow knows it. Mind, I do not say that she is of a larking disposition; but suppose she is, and that she takes a fancy to me, and suppose that she has no objection to a little amour upon the sly, — well, is she the worse, or am I the worse? Just answer me that.”

“Not a bit of it,” ejaculated Mr. Sycamore. “But of course we now know what it all means, and on what terms the pretty little widow and you stand together.”

We may as well observe, for the information of the reader, that the Lady Harriet and the pretty little widow thus spoken of were two as virtuous ladies as any in the whole world, and that by no levity, much less impropriety on their parts, had they ever afforded the slightest ground for these diabolically impertinent modes in which their names were mentioned. It is too often the case that the characters of well-principled women are nodded, and winked, and hinted away as a sacrifice to the miserable vanity of profligate coxcombs, who flatter themselves that it is very fine indeed and “quite the thing” to have such little liaisons on hand. Sycamore, as a man of the world, knew perfectly well that it was nothing but mere vaunt and braggadocio on the part of his guests, but he encouraged it, he pretended to believe in it, he ministered to their wretched vanity, and he concluded by telling them that they were two desperate fellows, and that if he had a wife or sisters he would sooner shut them up in convents than allow such irresistibles to approach them. All this elevated the two shallow-brained young gentlemen into perfect ecstasies, and they began talking more largely still, but in somewhat another strain.

“For my part,” said he who was barely twenty-two, “I am getting tired of England; I think I shall go abroad. I have seen so much of life I am pretty near worn out.”

“Well, it’s just the case with me,” observed the other young gentleman; “there’s no enjoyment in pleasure now. When one has had the finest women in England at his command, and revelled so in wine that he can stand anything and has not even the luxury of getting gloriously drunk, he may begin to talk of satiety. ’Pon my word, I’d give anything for a headache next morning after a debauch, by way of a change.”

“Ah, you two fellows have seen *too much* of life!” observed Sycamore, with a deprecating shake of the head, as

if it were a very serious matter indeed. "You have gone at such a devil of a pace. But, after all, there's nothing like it."

"Nothing," said the younger of the two gentlemen. "A short life and a merry one."

"Ah, that's my maxim!" exclaimed the other. "Pass the champagne."

At this moment the waiter entered and whispered to Mr. Sycamore, "A gentleman, sir, wishes to speak to you for a moment. He says he has called about a yacht."

"A yacht?" ejaculated Sycamore, aloud. "It must be a mistake. I have not spoken to any one —"

"The gentleman says, sir," continued the waiter, still in a whisper, "that he must speak to you, and he won't detain you a minute."

"What's his name?" asked Sycamore, growing somewhat uneasy at this announcement of the stranger's pertinacity to obtain an interview with him.

"His name, sir? Oh, he says it is Mr. Smith, and his friend's is Mr. Noakes."

"Ah, he has a friend with him?" said Sycamore; and this circumstance, as well as the two names, which seemed to be most ominously like fictitious ones, sent a cold apprehension to the conscience-stricken individual's heart.

"Don't suffer yourself to be intruded upon now," exclaimed one of the young gentlemen.

"Say that Mr. Sycamore is not within," cried the other, in an authoritative tone to the waiter.

"And if they don't go, pitch them down the stairs," added the first.

"Or toss them out of the window," superadded the second.

"What shall I say, sir?" asked the waiter, who himself looked somewhat embarrassed, as if he had a vague suspicion of impending evil floating in his mind, although he most probably considered Messrs. Smith and Noakes to be sheriffs'-officers, and therefore to have no mission more serious than that of the execution of civil process.

"Are they really gentlemen?" inquired Sycamore, who now felt as if boiling oil were pouring through his veins.

"Well, sir, they told me to say they was," answered the waiter; but he did not think it necessary to state in addition the trifling fact that a half-crown had been thrust into his

hand as a bribe for the representation of the gentility of Messrs. Smith and Noakes.

"I think I had better see them," said Mr. Sycamore, whose perturbation — amounting indeed to anguish — was so plainly visible that the waiter fancied he beheld therein the confirmation of his fears, and the two young gentlemen began to exchange suspicious looks. "Where are they?" inquired Sycamore, as the thought suddenly struck him that he would pass into the next room, put on his hat, and decamp as quickly as his legs would carry him.

"They are on the landing, sir," responded the waiter.

Mr. Sycamore's countenance grew terribly blank as he at once comprehended that the avenue of escape was thus completely closed; while the circumstance that Messrs. Smith and Noakes preferred waiting outside the door rather than being shown to his sitting-room fearfully confirmed all his worst terrors. Nevertheless, he had still sense enough left amidst the anguished confusion of his thoughts to comprehend that the two individuals who sought him were evidently disposed to conduct their proceedings in as delicate a way as possible, and whatever might happen, he himself had no inclination to excite the scandal of exposure.

"Tell them I will come immediately," he said, and he filled a bumper of champagne in the hope of giving himself courage and deadening the frightful horror of his thoughts; but the wine, which a few minutes back had flowed like nectar down his throat, now appeared to remain there as if against the impediment of the feelings which well-nigh suffocated him.

"What the deuce does it all mean, Sycamore?" asked one of the young gentlemen, the instant the waiter had left the room. "Is it a case of tapping on the shoulder? If so, make use of me. I'm your man for a few hundreds."

"And I also," exclaimed the other young gentleman. "Always stick by your friend, and never say die till you're dead. That's my motto."

It was with a ghastly look that Sycamore endeavoured to say something with a laugh of forced cheerfulness, but horribly apprehensive that those who awaited him would lose all patience and come in to seek him if he tarried any longer, he hurried from the room. On the landing he beheld the self-styled Messrs. Smith and Noakes, and one of them

said, "Can we have a little talk together in private, Mr. Sycamore?"

"This way, gentlemen," said the miserable wretch, in a half-choking voice, and he led them into his sitting-room, which in addition to the door that thus opened upon the landing had another communicating with the parlour that served as his dining-room.

The two individuals kept very close upon Mr. Sycamore as they followed him into the room and after they had entered it; and the one who acted as spokesman said, with a significant look, "You will give us credit, sir, for having discharged this unpleasant little duty in as delicate a way as possible. My name isn't Smith, nor is my partner's name Noakes. Allow us to introduce ourselves as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, and Mr. William Withers, both very much at your service."

"Not too loud — not too loud!" gasped Sycamore, indicating the door of communication between the two rooms. "Who are you, gentlemen?" he faltered forth. "Is it — is it — debt?" and the unhappy man would have given worlds at that moment to be told that he was merely about to be consigned to a debtor's gaol; but a secret voice whispered in his soul that it was not for debt.

"Well, sir, we are officers, it is true," replied Mr. Shadbolt, who thought it necessary to break the matter as delicately as possible, inasmuch as he entertained the hope that the reward would be commensurate with the amount of his kind consideration, "but we are not exactly sheriffs'-officers, — though my friend Withers was a few years back, if I don't mistake. You was a bum-bailiff once, Withers, wasn't you?"

"What's that to you?" growled the sulky gentleman, who thought that his comrade was carrying the delicacy of the proceeding to a most unnecessary degree of refinement. "Whatsomever I was once, I'm a detective now."

"You see, sir," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "that there isn't a better-hearted fellow in all the world than my friend Withers; and there isn't a more gentlemanly dog than honest Ike Shadbolt, though he says it of himself which shouldn't say it. Gay and dashing gentlemen like you, sir, will get into trouble; and with such brilliant examples as Doctor Dodd and Mr. Fauntleroy before your eyes, forgery must

be looked upon as one of the genteel little frailties of which human nature is susceptible in this sublunary sphere."

Having thus wound up his truly beautiful and highly edifying speech, — wherein by an ingenious implication he conveyed to the prisoner the precise charge for which he was captured, — Mr. Shadbolt took a pinch of snuff, and affected to be a long time in partaking of that refreshment, which was another piece of delicate consideration on his part, the purpose being to afford Mr. Sycamore leisure to compose his feelings.

"Am I to go with you?" asked the wretched man, his countenance white as a sheet and his whole form trembling nervously.

"In course you be," growled Mr. Withers, who seemed offended at the bare idea of the necessity for such a proceeding being doubted.

"Hold your tongue, Withers," said Mr. Shadbolt. "The fact is, my dear sir, we would cheerfully do without you if we could. It grieves us to disturb you at dinner, but it is impossible to dispense with your society, now that we have had the honour of forming your acquaintance. But no one need know anything about it. And look you here, sir," he added, suddenly lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper, and drawing the prisoner partially aside, "just tip my friend Withers five guineas, and he'll leave those handcuffs that he's got with him all snug at the bottom of his coat pocket. Excuse me, too, for observing that I am not exactly above accepting the same little compliment for myself, as you might possibly suppose I am."

"You will let me keep all I have about me — or all I may get?" said Sycamore, who, now that the bitterness of his arrest was past, began to recover his self-possession.

"You shall experience just such treatment, sir," answered Mr. Shadbolt, "as we should show our own brother if he got into trouble and we was charged with the business."

Sycamore drew out his purse and handed five guineas to Mr. Withers, who was thereupon most graciously pleased to suffer his countenance to expand into a more amiable expression than it had hitherto worn; while Mr. Shadbolt, on receiving a similar gratuity, proclaimed his conviction that Mr. Sycamore was a regular gentleman and should be treated as such.

"Will you let me go into the next room for a few moments?" asked Sycamore, hastily.

"Not if so be as there's a door on t'other side," responded Mr. Withers.

"There is not," answered Sycamore; "there is this door, and there is the one upon the landing —"

"But what do you want?" asked Withers, sulkily.

"Never do you mind what the gentleman wants," said Shadbolt. "Wait an instant, sir."

Thereupon he skipped toward the door of communication, in order to peep through the keyhole and ascertain whether there was a door or not at the farther extremity of the adjoining room. But as he popped his head suddenly down, he caught the twinkling of an eye on the other side of the keyhole; then that eye was abruptly withdrawn, he could see into the next room, and he beheld a young gentleman rapidly retreating toward another young gentleman who sat at the table.

"Your friends have twigged you, sir, I am sorry to say," observed Mr. Shadbolt, turning away from the door and addressing himself to the prisoner. "They have been listening, sir, for I saw an eye, and where an eye can peep an ear can plant itself."

Mr. Sycamore gave utterance to an oath expressive of his bitter vexation and disappointment. The fact is, he had intended to take advantage of the generous offers just now made by the two young gentlemen. The forged bill for which he was arrested was for five hundred pounds, and he had purposed to represent to those young gentlemen that he was in the custody of sheriffs'-officers for a debt to a similar amount, so that if he could manage to obtain that sum from them he would have a chance of hushing up the affair immediately on his arrival in London with the detectives. But this hope was now completely overthrown, and scarcely had Mr. Shadbolt announced to him that "his friends had twigged him," when he heard the bell down-stairs ringing violently. It was the bell of the adjoining room, and the waiter was not very long in answering it, inasmuch as he had been nearly all the time upon the landing, with his own ear applied to the keyhole of the sitting-room where the above-described scene with the officers had taken place.

"Our hats, waiter, immediately, our hats!" the two

young gentlemen in the adjacent apartment were now heard to ejaculate; and then the words "swindler," "forger," "adventurer," "scoundrel," and other equally pleasing appellations were likewise wafted to the wretched Sycamore's ears.

"Good Heaven, what an exposure!" moaned the wretched man, turning away toward the window.

The waiter entered to fetch the two young gentlemen's hats, which had been left in the sitting-room; and he relieved his own feelings by sparring for a moment like clockwork behind Mr. Sycamore's back, at the same time making signs to the two officers, as much as to imply that he knew it all, and that as he was now convinced he should never get a penny piece from Mr. Sycamore for waiting on him, he should very much like to inflict summary chastisement upon the scoundrel. Having performed this pantomime, he said, gruffly, "Did you speak, sir?"

"Who? I? No!" ejaculated Sycamore, startled from his wretched reverie and turning abruptly around.

"Then you had ought to," returned the waiter; and, raising his voice to a higher key, he exclaimed, "You had ought to say what business you have, a swindling scoundrel like you, coming to a respectable hotel, giving your orders like a prince, robbing everybody, and not so much as paying the poor devils of servants which has run their legs off to wait upon you. A precious nice thing to get into the local papers amongst the 'Fashionable Intelligence:' 'The Honourable Talbot Sycamore removed on Wednesday last from the Royal Hotel at Ramsgate to his town house of Newgate.' Dash my wig, such an honourable!" and the waiter, in order to vent his indignant feelings upon something, dashed his white napkin frantically down upon the unoffending carpet.

Comforted by this procedure, he took up the two young gentlemen's hats, and stalked out of the room, leaving the door wide open.

"Let's go at once," said Sycamore, "or the whole hotel will be up in arms."

"I think you have a servant, sir?" said Mr. Shadbolt.

"Perdition take the servant!" rejoined Sycamore, sharply. "Let him shift for himself."

The waiter was holding forth to the two young gentlemen

in the adjacent apartment, on the impropriety of scoundrels in general and Mr. Sycamore in particular, taking up their quarters at first-rate hotels, so that the culprit was enabled to slip out of the establishment, closely accompanied, however, by the two detectives. In the street they met the dapper groom, and he at once comprehended that something was the matter. It was impossible to avoid giving him a suitable explanation, whereupon he darted away, thinking perhaps that it was impolitic for him to reënter the hotel, as he might stand a chance of being given into custody as an aider and abettor of his master in the process of swindling which had been carried on. Neither did he deem it expedient to accompany his master to London, and thus he did indeed fulfill Mr. Sycamore's recommendation, that he should shift for himself.

Barely five minutes had elapsed after Sycamore's departure with the two detectives — and while the waiter was acquainting the barmaid and all the other domestics with the details of the explosion that had just occurred — when a telegraphic despatch was hurriedly brought into the hotel from the railway-station. It contained simply these words: "Give Sycamore and the groom into custody. Leave Mr. Ashton unmolested; he is innocent. I shall be down by the next train."

This was from the landlord of the hotel, who had gone up to London, where he had instituted inquiries with such rapidity and effect as to be enabled to arrive at the conclusions contained in that telegraphic despatch. It was, however, too late to act upon it, for the hand of justice had already laid its grasp upon one of the scoundrels, and the other had decamped.

Christian Ashton entered the hotel at this conjuncture. He was speedily made acquainted with what had occurred, and the telegraphic despatch was shown to him. He was infinitely delighted thus to discover that his own reputation remained perfectly undamaged, and he proceeded to explain the circumstances under which he had withdrawn himself in the forenoon from Mr. Sycamore's employment, and how he had overheard at the tavern the intention on the part of Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers to arrest that individual. The barmaid now understood wherefore our young hero had asked for his bill separately from Sycamore's ac-

count; and this circumstance, together with the promptitude exhibited by Christian in settling it, confirmed the favourable intimation forwarded by the landlord from London.

CHAPTER II

VERNER HOUSE

WHEN he had retired to his own chamber at night, after the exciting events of the stirring day through which he had passed, Christian Ashton reflected upon all those occurrences, and not the least on the mysterious adventure of which he had obtained an initiative glimpse in the neighbourhood of Sir John Steward's residence. As the reader is aware, our young hero's heart was engaged with an unalterable devotion to the charming Isabella Vincent, and therefore it was merely with a genuine compassion and a pure sympathy that he thought of the beautiful and afflicted Laura. He trembled on her behalf for more reasons than one: the character he had heard of Sir John Steward, and which seemed fully justified by the old libertine's gloating looks, was alone sufficient to fill him with such apprehensions, but in addition thereto, he by no means liked the appearance of Mrs. Oxenden. That she was exceedingly handsome we have already said, but she had a certain bold and resolute look, fully indicating the firmness and perseverance with which she would prosecute any enterprise, even though a bad one. She had the thickly pencilled ebon brows and the fiery eyes which denote strong passions; the configuration of her countenance was essentially voluptuous. She was not a woman to inspire love by her beauty, only to excite passion; nor did she herself appear susceptible of the former in its chastest and purest sense, though, on the other hand, she seemed fully capable of experiencing the latter with a glowing and devouring ardour. Between that old man of libertine character and this woman of sternest purpose, the hapless Laura appeared in the eyes of Christian to be as helpless as a lamb between two wolves bent on its destruction.

The reader may have already gleaned a sufficiency of our hero's character to be aware that it was marked by chivalrous magnanimity. His experiences of life were wondrously enlarged since we first beheld him seated with his amiable sister in the lodging at Mrs. Macauley's house in London. He had seen enough of the villainies of the world to fill him with a generous longing to baffle and frustrate them whensoever the opportunity should present itself; and apart from his own naturally noble impulses, he had not failed to profit by the example of Mr. Redcliffe. It is not therefore astonishing if Christian lay awake a considerable time, pondering all he had seen in the close vicinage of Verner House, and that he should also rack his brain for the means of affording Laura that assistance which he felt convinced she required. But sleep came over him ere his mind was settled to any positive course; and when he awoke in the morning, he had to begin his meditations on that point all over again. He was equally uncertain how to act in respect to his own personal concerns, — whether he should leave the hotel and take a cheap lodging, so that he might remain in Ramsgate for a few days in the hope that events might occur to render him useful to Laura, or whether he should remain at the hotel until the morrow and see what that day might bring forth. His doubts in this respect were however set at rest when he descended from his chamber, for the landlord requested him to step into his parlour, where he addressed him in the following manner:

“ I returned home too late last night, Mr. Ashton, to be enabled to have a word with you. You are aware of the mention I felt it my duty to make of you in the telegraphic despatch. As you may easily suppose, my first inquiry on reaching London yesterday afternoon was at the banker's where the villain Sycamore pretended to have a considerable sum of money, and I need hardly tell you that his representations were entirely false. I thence proceeded to the hotel in Piccadilly, and there I learned that the statement you had made me in respect to the mode of your introduction to Sycamore, and the short period of your acquaintance, was strictly correct. In short, I know you to be an honourable young gentleman, and I am even sorry that you should have thought it necessary to liquidate your own account at my hotel, inasmuch as it was incurred under the impression that

it would be paid by your employer. I will not insult you by offering to return the money, but I beg that you will do me the favour to remain here as my guest for as long as it may suit you to stay in Ramsgate. Is there any necessity for your speedy departure? "

"On the contrary," replied Christian, "it suits me well enough to remain here for a few days; and as your proposal is so generously made, in the same friendly spirit do I accept it."

"Use the coffee-room, therefore," said the landlord, "just as if it were your own, and I will take care that every attention shall be shown you. As for that villain Sycamore, he will be punished, and this is a source of satisfaction. Fortunately his boxes contain the greater portion of the goods which he obtained from the tradesmen in this town, and they shall all be returned to them."

"But your loss is a severe one?" remarked Christian.

The landlord shrugged his shoulders, and said, "It is one of the risks which we must run in business."

Here the conversation ended, and our young hero proceeded to the coffee-room, where an excellent breakfast was served up to him, — the waiters displaying as much attention as if he were the best customer they ever had. There were several other gentlemen partaking of their morning meal at the time, but one especially attracted Christian's notice. He was about three and twenty years of age, tall, well made and without being positively handsome, had a good-looking countenance characterized by manly frankness. He however seemed unhappy, or at least troubled in his mind, as might be discerned by the pensiveness of his air, which was, however, interrupted by occasional slight starts, as if he were goaded by some sudden poignancy of feeling. He was handsomely dressed, his appearance was eminently genteel, and when he had occasion to address the waiter it was with the well-bred air of the polished gentleman. Christian had not seen him at the hotel before this occasion, and he presently learned, from some observation which he made to the waiter, that he had only arrived late on the previous evening.

After breakfast, Christian strolled out, and he soon found himself bending his way in the direction of Verner House, which, as already stated, was about three miles distant from

Ramsgate. He traversed the fields, he came in sight of the mansion, and then he stopped short, mentally ejaculating, "But what on earth can I do to assist this poor young lady?"

He knew very well that if he were seen lurking about the premises suspicion would be excited, for his conduct on the preceding evening had more or less angered Mrs. Oxenden. If, therefore, it were imagined inside the dwelling that he entertained the purpose of assisting Laura in whatsoever way she might require a friendly succour, it would only have the effect of increasing the precautions doubtless already taken to keep her in safe custody. At least so thought our hero, for he had made up his mind that she was under terrorism and coercion of some sort, — an opinion which was natural enough after all he had seen on the previous day.

Having reflected for some time within himself, Christian determined to inspect the grounds amidst which Verner House was situated, so that if by any accident Laura should be walking out alone within the enclosure, he might address a few words to her and ascertain whether he could in any way serve her or not. At the same time he was careful to conduct this inspection with all suitable caution, so as not to be seen from the windows of the house. To observe such caution was not difficult, inasmuch as the kitchen garden was surrounded by a high wall, the paddock and orchard by palings of an almost equal altitude, and the adjacent meadows by thick hedges. Climbing up into a tree, which completely concealed him, Christian looked over into the grounds in the rear of the dwelling; he beheld extensive stabling premises, a garden well laid out, and having spacious conservatories, several horses in the paddock, and numerous domestics moving about. Thus everything indicated the wealth of Sir John Steward, while the handsome draperies of the windows formed a criterion of the sumptuousness with which the mansion was furnished. An hour passed, and still Christian sat up in the tree, completely concealed by its thick, embowering foliage. His time was his own, and he thought he might as well spend it in working out a good purpose.

Presently he beheld Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden issue forth from the mansion and walk slowly across a lawn

which separated the kitchen garden from the back part of the premises. They were in deep and earnest discourse together. The old baronet was clad in precisely the same way as on the previous evening, in his dressing-gown, his cap, and slippers. Mrs. Oxenden wore a white muslin wrapper, fastened up to the throat, and which displayed the fine symmetry of her shape to its fullest advantage. Her raven hair hung in heavy tresses, with a sort of studied negligence, upon her admirably sloping shoulders, and there was something majestic and stately in the carriage of her fine tall form, as well as resolute and determined in the gestures with which she gave impressiveness to her discourse. Christian was too far off to catch a syllable that was said, or even to hear the tones of their voices, but he had a keen power of vision, and this enabled him to discern that their conversation was of an earnest character. That it related to Laura he had no doubt, and that it boded nought favourable to her happiness he was equally certain.

For upwards of half an hour did the old baronet and Mrs. Oxenden walk to and fro upon the lawn, thus discoursing. At the expiration of that interval the lady left the old man, and reëntered the dwelling. Sir John remained in the garden, and every now and then he rubbed his hands together, as if with a gloating satisfaction at some idea that was uppermost in his mind. In about twenty minutes two females issued from the mansion; one was immediately recognized by Christian to be the beautiful Laura, the other was a horrible-looking negress with great thick lips and a most repulsive aspect. The young lady was apparelled in a morning dress, but she had on her bonnet, as if she were going for a walk. This, however, might merely be on account of the heat of the sun, for it was now past noon, and its beams poured down with sultry strength. The instant she caught a glimpse of Sir John Steward she shrank back, but the horrible-looking negress seized her roughly by the arm, and appeared to address her in threatening language. Such was our hero's indignation that he was about to spring down from the tree, scale the garden wall, and bound forward to her assistance, when he was suddenly struck by the rashness and folly of such a proceeding, inasmuch as he would be placing himself in a false position by an illegal trespass upon the baronet's grounds. It was, however, difficult for him

to exercise a sufficient degree of patience to keep him there as a mere beholder, in the midst of the dense foliage of that tree.

The negress, we have said, caught the young lady by the arm, and appeared to use threatening language toward her, whereat she seemed smitten with dismay, and she suffered the black woman to lead her along toward the baronet, who was approaching across the grass-plot with his shuffling, shambling gait. He said something to her; Laura averted her countenance as if in mingled anguish and aversion. Sir John went on speaking; she slowly turned her eyes upon him again, she listened with a deepening attention, and then Christian saw the old man take her hand and continue his discourse. That hand of hers lingered in his; she appeared to listen with a deepening interest, but Christian was too far off to discern the precise expression of her countenance, though he thought that it indicated a painful seriousness. Slowly did Sir John Steward insinuate an arm around Laura's waist; for a few moments she did not appear to notice it, but as if all in an instant becoming aware that such was the case, she abruptly disengaged herself. Then the negress spoke and gesticulated vehemently; the baronet made her a sign to be quiet, and he seemed to go on addressing Laura in a coaxing, cajoling strain. This much Christian judged from his gestures, but, whether it were so or not, Laura suddenly interrupted him by clasping her hands and saying something with an air of the most touching appeal. The baronet gave a brief response, and turned aside in one direction, while Laura and the negress, withdrawing in the other, reëntered the mansion.

A few minutes afterward Mrs. Oxenden came forth and rejoined Sir John Steward. They had not been together many moments when a footman in handsome livery accosted them and delivered some message. He withdrew, but shortly reappeared, conducting a gentleman dressed in deep black, and who had the appearance of a clergyman, or, as a second thought suggested to Christian, of a Catholic priest, by certain peculiarities in his apparel. The footman retired, and the visitor in black remained for about ten minutes in conversation with Sir John Steward and Mrs. Oxenden. They then all three slowly entered the mansion together, and as another half-hour passed without the reappearance

of any of those whose proceedings Christian had been watching, he descended from the tree.

It was now two o'clock in the afternoon, and he knew not whether to retrace his way to Ramsgate, or to linger in that neighbourhood with the chance of seeing anything more that might throw the faintest light on what was going on within the precincts of Verner House. He was, however, fearful of being detected in that vicinage, in which case his presence might possibly do more harm than good to Laura's interests. He had less misgiving in respect to the intentions harboured toward her than he had previously entertained; that is to say, he no longer thought it was for an outrageously vile purpose that she had been brought thither, but that matrimonial views were entertained, — or else why the presence of that gentleman in black, who was evidently a minister of religion of some denomination or another? He began to retrace his way toward the town, partially with the idea of acquainting the landlord of the hotel with all he had seen, and asking his advice and assistance; yet his mind was not altogether made up to the adoption of this step, inasmuch as he naturally reflected that the landlord had quite enough to do in attending to his own business without attending to that of others, and that he might, moreover, be reluctant to perform a hostile part toward a man of wealth and influence in the neighbourhood. For an instant Christian thought of boldly addressing himself to a magistrate, but it required only another moment's thought to make him aware that there was not sufficient ground for legal interference in any shape or way. In a word, our young hero could settle his mind to no decisive course of action, and yet he was determined not to abandon the enterprise in which he had embarked.

He entered Ramsgate, and as he was proceeding toward the hotel, he beheld a group of mountebanks exhibiting their antics in the market-place. Three or four, apparelled in a quaint costume, were mounted on high stilts, while a companion in plain clothes was beating a huge drum and running his lips rapidly along a set of Pandean pipes conveniently thrust into his buttoned-up waistcoat. This individual's head was thrown back in the most approved style adopted by those *artistes* who exercise their powers of harmony on that humble and unpretending instrument.

Furiously did he beat the drum, and with most exemplary perseverance did he blow away at the mouth-organ. Christian was about to pass the group, when something peculiar in the appearance of the gentleman who played the drum and Pandean pipes induced him to glance a second time toward that individual. And now Christian stopped short in perfect amazement, when he recognized in the mountebank musician no less a personage than his lordship Baron Raggidbak, late groom of the stole to that illustrious prince his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha!

Yes, there was his lordship, beyond all possibility of doubt. Tall, lean, and lank, more hungry-looking than ever, bearded and moustached, and clad in a shabby suit that seemed to have been originally made for a person at least a foot shorter, the ex-groom of the stole to the illustrious German prince was beating away at the drum and running his mouth rapidly along the Pandean pipes, as already described. What a vicissitude! What a fall had this great man experienced! Christian looked amongst the mountebanks, thinking it by no means improbable he might see the grand duke himself performing his antics on the summit of a pair of stilts, or standing on his head, or twirling a basin upon the top of a stick, or accomplishing any other feat of gymnastics or jugglery. But for the honour of the German petty sovereigns (if those mean trumpery fellows have any honour worth caring for) his Royal Highness of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was not in the mountebank category. Christian did not think it worth while to be recognized by Baron Raggidbak, and therefore when he had a trifle recovered from his amazement, he was moving away. But the stilted mountebank who was especially charged with the duty of collecting the coin with which the public generosity was wont to recompense the authors of these splendid entertainments had his eye upon Christian from the very first moment that he had halted near the group, and the fellow had at once singled him out as the likeliest spectator to drop a silver coin into the basin. He therefore strode after him in some such a manner as that which the fairy tale represents the ogre with the seven-league boots as adopting, and stooping down, apparently at the imminent risk of falling head foremost and breaking his neck, the mountebank balanced himself on one stilt and presented the basin. Christian dropped

a shilling into it, whereat the mountebank was seized with such a violent ecstasy of delight that he whirled himself around on the one stilt, the other being stretched out behind him in a horizontal direction and skimming over the hats, caps, and bonnets of the spectators who happened to come within the range of this peculiar feat.

"You are a perfect gentleman, sir," said the mountebank, when his achievement was finished, and he bowed low to Christian as he thus spoke.

"If you think so," said our hero, with a smile, "you may perhaps answer me a question or two, and I will drop another coin into your basin."

"As many answers as you like, sir," joyously responded the mountebank, "at that rate," and he bent more forward to hear what Christian had to say, placing his hands upon his knees, assuming a sort of squatting position in the air, but dodging the while to and fro or from side to side with little short steps of his stilts, so as to maintain his balance; for it requires but a very limited knowledge of the laws of equilibrium and gravitation to convince any one of our readers that a gentleman thus perched upon high stilts cannot very conveniently stand perfectly still for three moments at a time.

"Who is that person that plays your drum?" inquired Christian. "Never mind why I ask, and don't look around at him, as I do not wish him to see that I am speaking of him."

"He is a poor German devil that we picked up a few months back," replied the mountebank, "and it so happened that we wanted a person to play the drum and the organ —"

"The organ?" said Christian, inquiringly.

"Yes, the mouth-organ, to be sure, — and where is there a nobler instrument?" said the mountebank, with a transient air of indignation; but apparently recollecting that another shilling was at stake, he instantaneously recovered his good humour, and having cut a caper to relieve his feelings, he again bent down to Christian. "Yes," he continued, "we picked up that poor devil some months ago, and as our pardner which used to beat the drum and play the organ had gone into a little temporary retirement — only six months at the mill, for mistaking another gentleman's pocket for his own during the bitter cold weather of March

last, when a man was of course glad to put his hand anywhere to keep it warm — ”

“ Well, well,” interrupted Christian, “ you took this German to supply his place? ”

“ Exactly so, sir, and in all my life I never did see such a feller to eat whatever comes in his way, and to get blazing drunk whenever he has the opportunity. You should hear him in his cups, — what gammon he talks about grand dukes and grooms of the stole, and so on; and he says, too, that he has been a baron and was called ‘ my lord,’ that he has dined with our queen and sat hob-and-nob with Prince Halbert. Of course it’s all lies.”

“ And what name does he bear? ” asked Christian, who did not think it worth while to inform the mountebank that so far from its being all false, it was perfectly consistent with truth.

“ Name? ” ejaculated the mountebank, contemptuously, “ you never heard such a name as he gave himself, but it was an uncommon true one, I can tell you, sir, when he came amongst us. What do you think of Raggidbak as a name to go to bed with? ”

“ A very strange one indeed,” answered Christian; and having dropped the promised extra shilling into the basin, he hurried away, for he saw that Baron Raggidbak was looking toward him over the top of the mouth-organ. On regaining his hotel, our hero made some little alterations in his toilet, and at about five o’clock descended to the coffee-room to give orders in respect to his dinner. At the moment he entered the only person who was there was that tall, handsome young gentleman of about three and twenty, whom he had seen at breakfast in the morning, and whose appearance had so much interested him. This individual was sitting at a table, on which his elbows rested, and his face was buried in his hands; he was evidently absorbed in the deepest thought, and Christian, judging from the melancholy air which he had observed in the morning, fancied that it was a reverie of no very pleasing nature. Our young hero sat down and took up a newspaper, when all of a sudden the interesting stranger at the other table smote his clenched fist upon the board, giving unconscious utterance to some ejaculation expressive of the agitated condition of his mind. It was evident that he had not noticed Christian’s presence,

or else that his mind was so completely abstracted he would have done the same if a dozen persons had been in the room. Suddenly perceiving our hero, his countenance became crimson, he felt deeply ashamed of himself, and he began to falter forth an apology for his singular behaviour.

"Pray do not consider any excuse necessary," interrupted Christian, with so much gentle kindness of manner that he at once made a favourable impression upon the stranger. "I truly regret," added our hero, "that you should have so much cause for affliction."

The stranger gave no immediate response, but surveyed Christian with the air of one who sought to ascertain whether he would make a friend who might merit his confidence, and who would accept it with a kind and sympathizing feeling; for his mind was no doubt in that state when such friendship would prove most truly welcome.

Christian comprehended what was thus passing in his thoughts, but he feared to be obtrusive, and therefore said nothing. By his looks, however, he seemed to invoke that confidence which the afflicted stranger was evidently anxious to impart. There was something so frankly ingenuous in Ashton's countenance, something so nobly magnanimous in the expression of his fine dark eyes, that it was no wonder if the stranger should be thus attracted toward him. Every moment during which the silence lasted the barriers of ceremony and cold formality appeared to be melting away, and at length the stranger said, "You have spoken kindly, sir; you will pardon me for intimating that I have a secret longing to know more of you."

"I will frankly confess," answered Christian, "that I have felt an interest in you; for though older than I by some three or four years, you are nevertheless too young to experience the heavy hand of affliction without exciting sympathy."

The stranger at once grasped our hero's hand, announcing his name to be Edgar Beverley. Christian mentioned his own name, and with characteristic frankness went on to explain that he himself had known his sorrows, together with a twin sister whom he dearly loved, but that after a temporary experience of the world's bitterness, fortune had so far smiled on them both as to place them in comparatively happy positions. Our hero furthermore intimated that he had

been private secretary to the Duke of Marchmont and to the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, as well as to the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles, whose murder was wrapped up in such profound mystery, and he concluded by giving Edgar Beverley a rapid outline of his adventures with Mr. Sycamore.

“Thank you, my new friend, — for such you must permit me to call you, — for your confidence,” said Beverley; then, after a pause, he added, “I likewise have a tale to tell, and I am yearning to unfold it to your ears, but not in this room, where at any moment we may be intruded on by other guests at the hotel. We will have a private apartment and dine together.”

Christian agreed; the bell was rung, the requirement was mentioned to the waiter, who at once led the way to a private sitting-room. Dinner was ordered, and Edgar Beverley went on conversing on general topics. It was evident that he reserved his own history until after the repast, when they might sit together without being continuously interrupted by the entrance of the waiter. Christian found him to be a young man of cultivated intellect, able to discourse on an infinite variety of topics, — the lighter ones without descending to frivolity, the more serious ones without merging into levity or dogmatism. He gathered, however, from his discourse that he was a lieutenant in the army, that his regiment was stationed at Brighton, but that he was on leave of absence. The more our hero saw of him the better he was pleased with his unaffected urbanity, his mild, gentlemanly manners, and the generosity of the sentiments he uttered on those topics which were calculated to evolve the best traits of the disposition. But there was likewise a manliness of spirit, a suitable pride, and a becoming dignity in Edgar Beverley’s character, so that it was evident he was a young man of the loftiest notions of honour and integrity. On the other hand, Christian Ashton himself proved equally agreeable to the lieutenant, and proportionately progressed in his new friend’s favourable opinion.

Dinner was served up; it was somewhat hurriedly disposed of, for Lieutenant Beverley was evidently as anxious to commence his narrative as Christian Ashton was to hear it. The dessert was placed on the table, and when the waiter had withdrawn for good, the serious topic of the evening was entered upon.

CHAPTER III

EDGAR BEVERLEY

“ IN what I am about to relate,” began Edgar Beverley, “ you will pardon me if I do not particularize names, as you will see by the nature of my history that it involves certain delicate matters, and should the results turn out contrary to my apprehensions, in a word, should the sad misgivings which haunt me prove unfounded, I should naturally regret having specially mentioned the names of individuals with disparagement. The reserve, therefore, which on this point I am about to maintain must not be regarded as a want of confidence, but only as a proper and honourable precaution.”

“ Rest assured,” answered Christian, “ that I shall take this precaution on your part as another proof of those good qualities which I have already learned to admire in you.”

“ Thanking you, my new friend, for your favourable opinion,” said Beverley, “ I will at once enter upon my tale. But it is necessary that I should commence with a few particulars relative to my parentage and my family. My father was the younger brother of a man of wealth and title; he was poor, being totally dependent on his commission as a captain in the same service to which I now belong, and he mortally offended all his relatives by wedding a young lady whose beauty and accomplishments constituted her only dower. Of that union I was the sole issue, and my mother died a few weeks after giving me birth. My father was long inconsolable for her loss, until at length he became sensible of his duty toward me, and reflected that as she had left behind her a pledge of her love, the infant ought now to engross all his care. And he became the fondest of parents to me. He obtained the rank of major a few years after my

birth, and though his pay was limited, yet he contrived, by the most rigid economy, to give me a good education. On reaching the age of twelve, I was sent to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, my father bidding me keep it in mind that he had neither money nor interest to procure me a commission, and that I must therefore endeavour to obtain one by the requisite proficiency in my studies. I applied myself thereto with all possible assiduity, and at the age of sixteen I obtained an ensigncy in the ——th regiment of the line. Fortune and misfortune came upon me at the same instant, for on the very day that I read my name in the official gazette as an officer in the Queen's service, my poor father was stricken with paralysis, which in less than a fortnight proved fatal."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of a minute, during which he was visibly struggling against his emotions, and then he resumed his narrative in the following manner:

"I have stated that my father, in contracting a marriage with a portionless young lady, had offended all his relatives, but none more so than his elder brother, who vowed that he would never speak to him again; and that brother kept his word. But when my father was dead, my uncle appeared somewhat to relent, and he sent an invitation to me to visit him during the few weeks that were to elapse between the funeral and the time appointed for me to join my regiment. Now this uncle of mine was a bachelor, exceedingly rich, with the estates strictly entailed, so that I was his heir presumptive. Of course you understand that if he married and had male issue, I at once ceased to be his heir. But from certain circumstances which I do not choose specially to touch upon, he was not considered to be what is called a marrying man. Perhaps, therefore, regarding me as his heir, he wished to unbend toward me, to make himself acquainted with me, and to atone somewhat for his long-continued obduracy toward my poor father. Be all this as it may, he sent for me, as I tell you, to his town mansion at the West End of London, and then, at the age of a little past sixteen, I beheld this uncle of mine for the first time. I could not help it, but I at once conceived toward him a feeling that bordered almost on aversion. Perhaps it was the recollection of his conduct toward my parents, perhaps it was in consequence of certain discreditable rumours which had reached my ears,

perhaps it was in a measure connected with his unprepossessing looks, or it may be that all these three reasons entered into that feeling of aversion which I thus experienced. And he on his part conceived an equal antipathy toward me, which speedily manifested itself when he attempted to play the tyrant while affecting to give sound and useful advice.

“ He authoritatively warned me against ever contracting what he denominated such a mad and improper marriage as that which had alienated my father from all his relatives; and when I somewhat indignantly requested my uncle not to asperse the memories of the dead, and to bear in mind that the lady whom he contemptuously spoke of was my own mother, he flew into a passion, ejaculating, ‘ By Heaven, you have inherited all your father’s self-will, obstinacy, and perverseness!’ From that day forth I saw that he disliked me. My visit to his residence was abridged, and when I was about to depart, to reside elsewhere until the period arrived for joining my regiment, he said, ‘ I shall allow you one hundred a year for the present, and that, in addition to your pay, will keep you handsomely. Follow my advice in all things, and I will increase your allowance in proportion as I have proofs of your obedience, but disobey me in any single particular, and I withdraw the allowance altogether.’ I did not choose to irritate him more than I could help, but he doubtless saw by my manner that my spirit rebelled against this harsh and tyrannical treatment. I joined my regiment, and for three years my conduct appeared to give satisfaction to my uncle, for at the expiration of that time he purchased me a lieutenancy in another regiment, and doubled my original allowance, but he invited me no more to visit him.”

Here Edgar Beverley again paused, but he shortly resumed his narrative in the following strain:

“ About six months ago a detachment of my regiment was ordered from Manchester, where it had been previously quartered, to Brighton. Not to render my tale longer than is absolutely necessary, I will at once proceed to observe that I had not been many days at Brighton, when one evening, at a public ball, I was struck with the extraordinary beauty of a young lady whom for the sake of distinction I shall call by the name of Louisa. At the moment my eyes first settled upon her, she was dancing with a gentleman

unknown to me, and when the quadrille was finished, he handed her to her seat next to a very old gentleman whom I supposed to be her father. I know not exactly how it was, but on that particular evening I could not obtain any information concerning the young lady, for those who were acquainted with her did not happen to fall in my way; and two or three whom I asked had now seen her for the first time, as was the case with myself. Neither could I venture to solicit her hand for a dance, inasmuch as when I applied for the purpose to the master of the ceremonies, he at once assured me that it was useless, as to his certain knowledge she was engaged throughout the evening. He was then obliged to flit away to some other part of the room, and thus my curiosity still continued ungratified.

“It was no wonder that she should thus be engaged so deeply, and that her ivory tablets should be filled with the names of partners for even more dances than she was likely to figure in, for her beauty was of a most captivating nature, and instead of dancing myself, I watched her light, sylphid form as it glided gracefully through the mazes of the quadrilles. On returning to my quarters, I could scarcely sleep for the remainder of the night, so absorbed were my thoughts with the image of the fair one. On the following day, as I was walking in the afternoon along the King’s Road, I beheld the young lady approaching from the opposite direction. She was leaning on the arm of that same old gentleman who was with her at the ball on the previous evening, and as I surveyed them both earnestly and attentively, yet without suffering them to perceive that I was thus marked in my gaze, I noticed that the young lady did not hang upon his arm with that sweet, familiar confidence which a daughter exhibits toward a parent, but that there was a certain degree of timid reserve and even distant bashfulness or constraint in her demeanour toward him. As they passed, I heard him call her ‘Louisa my dear girl,’ and she, in answering his observation, addressed him as — what name shall I use? We will call him ‘Mr. Maxwell,’ for you remember that in my narrative I am using fictitious names.”

“I bear that fully in mind,” observed Christian. “Pray proceed.”

“Well,” continued Lieutenant Beverley, “I heard the young lady address the old gentleman as Mr. Maxwell, and

a chill fell upon my heart, for it instantaneously struck me that he must either be her husband, or else that she was engaged to be married to him; or else wherefore should he have addressed her so familiarly? I cannot explain to you the cruel feeling with which this thought inspired me. It was not that I was as yet completely infatuated with Louisa; it was rather a sentiment of profound compassion on behalf of a lovely young creature who I felt assured had already been sacrificed, or was about to be sacrificed, to a man old enough to be her grandfather. I presently turned, that I might meet them again, but I did not see them any more that day. At length wandering away from the King's Road, I was walking in another part of Brighton, when in my distracted mood I came in somewhat rude contact against a lady who was just issuing forth from a linen-draper's shop. As a matter of course I lifted my cap and made the sincerest apologies. They were accepted with what appeared to be a degree of familiar courtesy that struck me as strange on the part of the lady whom I thus beheld for the first time. She seemed inclined to keep me in conversation, and yet with an air of so much politeness that it would have amounted to actual rudeness on my part to hurry at once away. Methought that her dark eyes were fixed upon me with a somewhat peculiar expression, a certain degree of languishing boldness, which gradually in my estimation assumed the expression of an overture. Do not think me vain, Mr. Ashton. I never was conceited, much less was I a boaster in respect to the other sex."

"Pray do not think it necessary to give me any such assurance," said Christian. "Doubtless this lady was smitten with your appearance; for if I understand you rightly, you were in your uniform, and the fair sex are ever inclined to be captivated by officers."

"I was in my undress-uniform," responded Edgar Beverley, "and I ought perhaps to have informed you that the lady of whom I am speaking was exceedingly handsome, but some few years older than myself. She was a very fine woman, but the longer I contemplated her, the more did her looks impress me with the conviction that she was not altogether as modestly or as virtuously inclined as she ought to have been. Had I chosen at that instant to have initiated a little affair of gallantry, I might have succeeded,

but though I do not mean for an instant to affect that I am more immaculate than other young men upon the point, I certainly had no inclination for an amour at that time, as my thoughts were otherwise engaged. I therefore, after some little conversation, made my bow and walked away. On the following day, between two and three in the afternoon, I was passing along in the neighbourhood of the pavilion, when I encountered this lady again, and her recognition of me was so pointed that I was compelled to stop and converse with her. She gave me to understand by her looks — as eloquently as looks could speak — that she wished our acquaintance to assume a more intimate footing; but handsome though she were, there was something about her which failed to inspire a feeling sufficient to induce me to avail myself of the opportunity to enter upon an amour. She did not mention who she was, nor at the time was she acquainted with my name. She gave me as much encouragement as a woman possibly could, but I affected not to perceive it. At length I observed that her countenance flushed with a sense of spite and mortification, and with a cold bow she passed on her way. A few minutes afterward I had ceased to think of her, — all my thoughts being again concentrated on the image of the beautiful Louisa.

“That same evening I was engaged for a ball given at the house of a wealthy family dwelling at Brighton, and on being introduced to the drawing-room, I speedily singled out that fair creature, who was seated next to her aged companion whom we are calling Mr. Maxwell. Now I was resolved to make some inquiries concerning her; and on speaking to the lady of the house, was informed that the old gentleman who sat next to her was her brother-in-law, he having married her elder sister. You cannot imagine the relief which this intelligence imparted to my mind, nor can you conceive how happy I felt when in a few minutes I found myself introduced to Louisa Neville, — which is the name by which I must now call her. I was her partner in the first quadrille. I danced with her three or four other sets in the course of that evening. I escorted her to the supper-room, her old brother-in-law appearing to be pleased rather than otherwise by my attentions toward his wife’s beautiful sister.

“I asked Miss Neville, in the course of the evening, how

it happened that Mrs. Maxwell herself was not at the party, and she informed me that her sister had no taste for such gaiety, but that, on the other hand, Mr. Maxwell himself was exceedingly fond of society. On the following day I met Mr. Maxwell and Louisa out walking; I joined them, and in the course of conversation learned that Mrs. Maxwell had that day gone to London on a visit to some friends, with whom she purposed to pass four or five weeks. During this interval I saw Mr. Maxwell and his sister-in-law nearly every day, and became more and more enamoured of the beautiful girl. On one occasion I happened to mention my uncle's name, when it appeared that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were exceedingly well acquainted with him; but it also transpired that Louisa knew him not, and had never seen him. I must here inform you, Mr. Ashton, of something I ought to have mentioned before, which is, that my uncle does not bear the name of Beverley, he having adopted another name many years ago, by royal permission, on account of inheriting a certain property from a distant male relative who expressed in his will a desire that this change of name should take place. Thus it was not until I happened specifically to mention the fact of the old baronet alluded to being my uncle, that Mr. Maxwell became aware of it. You must bear all this in mind, inasmuch as it has something to do with another part of the narrative."

"I shall not forget it," observed Christian. "Pray proceed, for your tale interests me much."

"My acquaintance with the beautiful Louisa and her brother-in-law had lasted about six weeks," continued Beverley, "when the latter, remarking that his wife was to return home from London in the course of that day, invited me to dinner in the evening. I joyfully accepted the engagement. I had not as yet visited Mr. Maxwell's residence, but now I was in hope to obtain a footing there. I had learned that he was tolerably well off, and that he lived in genteel though by no means splendid style at a house in Kemp Town. Thither at six in the evening did I proceed, and on being ushered to the drawing-room, was cordially welcomed by Mr. Maxwell, who, with all the uxorious pride of an old husband possessing a comparatively young and certainly very handsome wife, hastened to present me to the lady herself. Conceive my astonishment when, as my

eyes fell upon her, I recognized the one whom I had twice previously encountered, and whose eloquent looks of passion had so unmistakably conveyed those overtures which I had not thought fit to accept. It was quite evident that Mrs. Maxwell had not previously suspected who the invited guest would prove to be. Indeed, as I presently learned, she had only returned from London just in time to dress for dinner, and I therefore concluded there had been no leisure for much discourse between herself, her husband, and her sister. She started for an instant on beholding me, but both of us recovered our self-possession the next moment, — so quickly, indeed, that there was nothing in the manner of either sufficiently striking to catch the observation of Mr. Maxwell and Louisa. Mrs. Maxwell received me as a perfect stranger, — as one, indeed, whom she now beheld for the first time, and I of course treated her in a similar manner.

“ Throughout the evening she was only coldly polite toward me, and her behaviour continued formally reserved until the very last, — as if she merely tolerated me because her husband had happened to invite me, but that I was by no means a welcome guest. A woman, my dear Mr. Ashton, never forgives the mortifying humiliation to which a rejected overture subjects her, and Mrs. Maxwell was the very last of the sex to be propitiated on such a point. Besides, she saw that my attentions were devoted to her beautiful sister Louisa; and thus, though herself a married woman, she experienced the rage of jealousy after having vainly sought to ensnare me by her own charms. I saw that she exercised the completest empire over her old husband, who was uxorious, submissive, and even servile to a degree, but fond, infatuated, and thus wearing the chains of a willing slavery. Mrs. Maxwell, being several years older than her sister, wielded a species of maternal authority over that sister, who, as their parents had long been dead, naturally looked up to her nearest surviving relative with an almost filial respect. I likewise perceived that Louisa stood much in awe of her, and once or twice submitted to be rebuked, for some trifle or another, without manifesting the least rebellious spirit. I therefore sympathized profoundly with that amiable and beautiful creature who was but too evidently under the dominion of an imperious and

tyrannically disposed sister. When I took my leave, a little before eleven in the evening, I received no invitation to repeat my visit; for as Mrs. Maxwell gave no such encouragement, her grovelling old husband dared not of his own accord, while delicacy as well as terrorism forbade Louisa from doing that whence her relatives abstained."

Here Edgar Beverley paused for a few minutes, while Christian Ashton awaited with an increasing impatience for the continuation of the narrative. He longed to ask one or two questions, on account of certain vague and strange suspicions which had gradually been engendered in his mind and which were now floating there, but he restrained his curiosity, resolving thus to curb it until Edgar Beverley's tale should be completed.

"The next time that I beheld Louisa," he resumed, "she was walking with her sister and Mr. Maxwell. I made a movement as if to stop and converse with them, but they passed on, and I saw that it was Mrs. Maxwell who was the cause of my being treated with a coldness amounting to actual discourtesy. Not coldness nor discourtesy on sweet Louisa's part, for she gave me one modest look of tenderness, in silent response to the quick glance of affection which I flung upon her. Weeks passed away, and though I frequently — indeed, nearly every day, met Louisa, she was always accompanied by her relatives, and they never stopped; but there was a secret voice within my soul, telling me that I was very far from being indifferent to the object of my own growing love, and I was continuously racking my brain for some opportunity of seeing her alone or of corresponding with her.

"At length I managed to bribe a servant-maid in the Maxwells' household, and she conveyed a letter to Louisa. It contained the avowal of my passion, — that avowal which I had already so often made by my looks, but which was now for the first time revealed in language. Through the medium of the friendly domestic, I received an answer, couched in the most modest and delicate terms, but giving me to understand that my love was reciprocated.

"Frequent letters were now exchanged between us; and at length — also through the medium of the friendly maid — a secret interview was arranged. This took place in the garden at the back of the house at an early hour in the

morning, before Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were up. Louisa, with tears in her eyes, assured me that she had suffered much on my account, for that her sister was always accusing her of exchanging significant looks with me whenever we happened to pass. Delicacy forbade me from explaining to Louisa the cause of Mrs. Maxwell's rancorous and unforgiving animosity against me, but I made the most solemn protestations of imperishable affection. In short, Mr. Ashton, I spoke as I believe all lovers do speak to the objects of their regard. I told her that I would write to my uncle and beseech his assent to our union, in which case she might act in total independence of her sister's imperious authority; but Louisa, timid and bashful, and trembling at the idea of flying openly in her sister's face, besought me to wait yet awhile, and trust to a favourable change in existing circumstances. I assented, on condition that she would suffer these meetings to be renewed as often as was possible, and I wrung from her a timidly and tremblingly uttered pledge to this effect. Again did weeks pass on, and we met frequently. Oh, the joy of those meetings, when from two fond hearts commingled the transfusing feelings of purest, holiest love!"

Edgar Beverley paused for upwards of a minute, and with a pensive air evidently dwelt upon the happiness of those interviews to which he had just alluded, — a happiness the experience of which he no doubt feared must be regarded as belonging only to the past, and never to be resuscitated.

"My narrative is drawing to a close," he at length resumed. "But before I proceed with it, I ought to inform you that on several occasions during the months which had now flown by since I was first quartered in Brighton, I heard vague whispers to the prejudice of Mrs. Maxwell's character. It was stated that previous to her marriage, which had taken place some few years back, her conduct had been characterized by something more than mere levity, that there was also something mysterious attached to her earlier history, and I remember that on one occasion the opinion was expressed that she had actually been the kept mistress of some very rich man, and that in order to obtain a position she had accepted the offer made to her by the infatuated and doating Maxwell. Whether these rumours were true or not, I was then unable to discover; at all events

I was certain that never did the faintest breath of scandal sully the fair fame of the lovely and virtuous Louisa, for supposing that those reports were correct, Louisa must have been the inmate of a boarding-school at the time her sister was pursuing an equivocal path.

“I now take up the thread of my narrative, and will speedily bring it to a close. About a fortnight back I was seated with Louisa in a shady arbour in the garden, when we were suddenly surprised by the appearance of Mrs. Maxwell. Her countenance was pale with rage, and she stood gazing upon us with fierce looks, — unable however for the first few moments to give utterance to a word. Louisa was overwhelmed with terror, and I myself was not devoid of confusion. At length I recovered a manly firmness, and I told Mrs. Maxwell that I was devotedly attached to her sister, that my intentions were honourable, and that I was ready to fulfil them as soon as circumstances would permit. She seemed on the point of giving vent to ejaculations of rage, and to level the bitterest reproaches at her sister, when, as if struck by a sudden thought, she became all in a moment calm, and bidding Louisa retire into the house, she remained to converse with me. She coldly asked me what were my prospects. I replied, ‘You know that I am the heir presumptive of a wealthy baronet, and without further delay I will appeal to him for his assent to my marriage with your sister.’ She looked at me in a peculiar manner — a manner which I could not understand, and she said, ‘If I had known the first day we met in the streets of Brighton who you were, I should never, never have given you that encouragement which you coldly rejected, and which subjected me to the deepest mortification that a woman can possibly experience.’

“This speech struck me as so strange that I stared at her in stupid amazement. ‘It is of no use for you to continue thus playing a part,’ she said, ‘because you cannot deceive me. I know that from the very first you were aware who I was, and that therefore you rejected the advances which under other circumstances a gay and handsome young man would have willingly availed himself of when made by a woman who may flatter herself that she is not altogether deficient in personal beauty. I repeat that when first we encountered each other in the streets, I

knew not who you were, but you have all along known me, though you seem to have been playing a part to make me imagine that you did not. Of what use was this proceeding on your part? If at the first you had told me candidly who you were, and that you meant to keep my secret not merely as a man of honour, but likewise through delicate consideration on behalf of my sister, think you that I should have regarded you with hate? No, on the contrary I should have been grateful, and most welcome would you have been at our house. But your chilling coldness toward me from the very first, your reserved and forced politeness, were intended to humiliate me, though you were careful to abstain from verbal expressions of contempt and scorn.'

"You may conceive, Mr. Ashton, how infinite was my astonishment while Mrs. Maxwell was thus addressing me. I was stricken speechless, and I continued to gaze upon her with a degree of wonderment which she doubtless began to suspect was truly genuine. She now surveyed me with surprise in her turn, and at length she said, 'Is it possible that I am mistaken? Do you really know nothing?' and then she stopped short, as if fearful of making an admission in case I was really ignorant with regard to the points to which she was thus mysteriously alluding. 'On my soul, madam,' I exclaimed, 'you are speaking to me in the strangest enigmas, and all that you have said compels me to be explicit on certain points, delicate though they are to touch upon. You say that I was cold to you on the first two occasions that we met, but perhaps if my mind had not been full of the loveliness of one who was then a stranger to me, I should have gladly submitted to the influence of your charms. I will ask whether you did not see that I started with surprise on the day that Mr. Maxwell invited me to dine here, and when for the first time I learned who you were?' 'Enough, Mr. Beverley,' interrupted Mrs. Maxwell; 'I have been labouring under a most extraordinary mistake. I have altogether misunderstood you; I have attributed to you motives which I now see you could not possibly have entertained. I must crave your forgiveness, for my conduct has been most ungenerous. Let us speak no more of the past; let us think only of the purpose that has brought you hither, and of the topic which all along ought to have most interested us.'

“Mrs. Maxwell then invited me to enter the house and partake of breakfast. Her husband was both pleased and astonished when she introduced me into the parlour, but she contented herself with the simple observation that there had been some little misapprehension on her part with regard to me, and that it was now cleared up. Louisa was summoned down-stairs, and she could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw me there, nor her ears when her sister repeated the same observation which she had made to her husband. In short, the happiness of Louisa and myself now seemed all but complete, for Mrs. Maxwell was as courteous and kind as she had formerly been cold and distant. I was utterly at a loss to account for all this, but I cared not to waste time in reflection upon it. I surrendered myself completely up to the bliss of Louisa’s society and in being recognized as her accepted suitor.”

Here Edgar Beverley stopped again for a few moments, and then proceeded as follows:

“In the course of that day I had another private interview with Mrs. Maxwell, and she then requested me to be explicit with regard to my intentions. I said that I would write to my uncle that very day, and that, as a proof of my honourable views, I would show her the letter. She was perfectly satisfied, thanked me for the confidence I reposed in her, but did not decline my offer, as methought she might have done, to suffer the letter to pass through her hands. I went to my quarters to write it, and now more forcibly than ever did I recollect my uncle’s imperious injunctions against following in my late father’s footsteps and marrying a penniless girl. But love has hope and faith amongst its elements — ”

“It has,” thought Christian Ashton to himself, as the image of the beauteous Isabella Vincent rose up in his mind.

“And therefore,” continued Edgar Beverley, “I flattered myself that my uncle would be moved on my behalf when I assured him in my letter that my happiness was centred in that fair being who, though without a fortune, was a model of loveliness, amiability, and virtue. When the letter was finished, I sent it in an envelope to Mrs. Maxwell, that she might peruse its contents and then despatch it to the post. You may be sure, Mr. Ashton, that I waited the reply with a considerable degree of suspense, although I

endeavoured to persuade myself that it would prove favourable. The return of post brought me the answer; it was singularly brief and laconic, and was to the effect that my uncle had an attack of the gout, or he would have come personally to Brighton to see into the matter and explain his views, but that he had other means of instituting inquiries, and that in the course of a few days I should hear from him again.

“ Within an hour after the receipt of this letter, a note was handed to me by my servant at my quarters. It was from Mrs. Maxwell, requesting that I would abstain from visiting at the house until I should hear from her again. This requisition struck me as singular, but did not fill me with despair. I remembered that Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell had been acquainted with my uncle; I thought therefore that they might have written to him by the same post which conveyed my own letter, and that they perhaps had received a reply in such a sense as to originate the request that was now conveyed to me. I persuaded myself that my uncle was taking time for reflection, or perhaps waiting to ascertain through some channel or another whether Louisa was in reality all I had represented, and therefore worthy of becoming my wife. I said to myself that if these conjectures were right, my uncle was sure to give a favourable response, because he could only hear everything that was calculated to enhance the amiable Louisa in his estimation; and I even thought he was acting a prudential part in taking time to make such inquiries, inasmuch as though he had known the Maxwells, yet he had never seen Louisa herself, as she was at school at the time her sister and her brother-in-law were acquainted with my uncle in London.

“ Still I was somewhat restless and uneasy at being debarred the pleasure of visiting Louisa for the present, and I penned a note to her for the purpose of conveying comfort during a separation which I besought her to hope was only temporary. I did not, however, know precisely how to convey this note; but as I sauntered near the Maxwells' dwelling — taking care not to be seen from the windows — I met the friendly servant-maid. From her I learned that, in consequence of a letter received in the morning, Mrs. Maxwell had suddenly set off on a journey, and that it was not known whither she had gone. I was likewise told that

Louisa was sitting with her old brother-in-law in the drawing-room, and he appeared, from what I could gather, to have been instructed to keep a watch over her movements. Moreover, the day was a rainy one, and there was no pretext for Louisa to issue forth. The maid undertook to deliver my note, and I returned to the barracks, wondering what this sudden journey on Mrs. Maxwell's part could mean, but connecting it with my own love-affair. On reaching the barracks, I strolled into the mess-room, where four or five of my brother officers were in conversation with a gentleman in plain clothes. This gentleman was an officer in the Guards, and had come down to Brighton on the previous day for a short trip.

“ At the moment I entered, he was relating an anecdote, which speedily became vitally interesting to me. ‘ I was up just now at the railway-station,’ he said, ‘ to make some inquiry relative to a lost carpet-bag; and while I was lounging there, waiting to see a train go off, I fell in with an old flame of mine. I knew her intimately some nine or ten years ago; she was a lovely creature then, she is a splendidly handsome woman still. She passed from my hands into the keeping of a rich old baronet. Stop a moment, and I shall remember his name.’ He reflected for a few instants, and then suddenly recalling to mind the name which he sought, he mentioned that of my own uncle. My brother officers laughingly informed him that he was thus speaking in the presence of the nephew of the old baronet whom he had just mentioned, and he, in a similar laughing mood, exclaimed, ‘ Well, I am sure that Mr. Beverley, if he happens to know this lady, will admire his uncle's taste. Let me see: she married afterward, and turned quite steady, I believe. Who was it that she married? Ah, I recollect! an old fellow with years enough to fit him to be her grandfather, but with some little property, and so she became Mrs. Maxwell.’

“ I should here observe that my love for Louisa had been kept altogether a secret from my brother officers, and thus they neither knew how interested nor how pained I was by the startling disclosure that had just reached my ears. My endeavour to laugh and seem unconcerned was but a sickly one; and I sped to my own room, there to give way to my reflections. Could the tale be true? — but dared I doubt

it? Did it not corroborate the whispers that I had already heard in respect to Mrs. Maxwell's character, and did it not fully account for her strange behaviour toward me while labouring under the idea that I all along knew of her former equivocal connection with my uncle? Nor less did it account for the strange language in which she had addressed me on the morning when she had surprised Louisa and myself together in the garden. I also comprehended why she had so readily accepted my proposal to show her the letter that I was to pen to my uncle. She doubtless wished to be sure of the terms in which I should speak of herself, so that she might positively ascertain whether I was sincere in professing my ignorance of her antecedents. I was deeply grieved to think that Louisa was so closely connected with such a woman, and then I blamed myself for this feeling, inasmuch as I knew Louisa herself to be the most immaculate of beings. While pursuing my reflections, methought that Mrs. Maxwell's journey might now be explained; and I conjectured that she had gone to confer personally with my uncle, who, I should observe, was at his country-seat in this county where you and I, Mr. Ashton, now are."

"Proceed," said Christian, impatiently, for all his former suspicions were now well-nigh strengthened into complete confirmation.

"It will require not many details to complete my tale," resumed Edgar Beverley. "Three days ago I received a note from Mrs. Maxwell, dated from the house at Brighton, and therefore showing that she had returned home. It was to the effect that after mature consideration, and under all circumstances, she begged in the most positive manner to decline on her sister's behalf the proposals of marriage which I had made. The billet contained no more; it was thus cruelly concise and laconic. But scarcely had I read it, and while still labouring under the influence of the dreadful shock it occasioned, another letter was brought to me. This was from my uncle. It professed the deepest regard for my welfare, and went on to state that the inquiries he had instituted in respect to the matter that I had communicated to him were so far from satisfactory he was compelled to put a firm negative upon the request I had made for his assent upon the point. He charged me not to write to him again on the same topic, under penalty of his serious

displeasure, and he added that if I left Brighton with the intention of seeking a personal interview in the hope of inducing him to alter his decision, he should regard it as a downright act of rebellion against his authority, and would order his doors to be closed against me. Such was the letter I received, and I flew off like one frantic to the Maxwells' house to demand explanations. There I learned that Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed together at an early hour that morning (the former had only returned from her journey on the preceding evening). Mr. Maxwell was at home, but he positively refused to see me. The servants knew not whither their mistress and Louisa had gone, but I was determined to find out and seek explanations. I thought that my uncle had been by some means prejudiced against Louisa, and yet if Mrs. Maxwell had really been to him, it did not seem natural to conclude that she would have been the person so prejudicing him against her own sister. There was a hideous mystery in it all, and I knew not what to conjecture. I flew to the railway station, but no ladies answering the description of Mrs. Maxwell and Louisa had departed by any train that morning. An accident which I need not pause to describe put me on their track; they had taken a vehicle to Hastings, and I was resolved to follow. Hurrying back to the barracks, I obtained leave of absence from the superior officer in command, and set off. I traced the two ladies to Hastings; thence they had departed in a post-chaise. I also took a post-chaise, and followed on their track. From the information I received along the road, it appeared evident that Mrs. Maxwell had anticipated pursuit on my part, and that she had exerted all her ingenuity to destroy the traces of her route. She had taken a circuitous one, she had frequently changed vehicles, and she had evidently bribed persons who could give information, and who did give it too for the bribes which I also lavished. To be brief, I succeeded in tracing Mrs. Maxwell and her sister as far as Canterbury, and there the clue was altogether lost. Bewildered what course to adopt — But I need say no more; I came on to Ramsgate."

Edgar Beverley thus abruptly terminated his extraordinary narrative, and Christian at once exclaimed, "I will tell you why you came on to Ramsgate. You thought of ob-

taining an interview with your uncle, but you have suffered the whole of this day to pass, because you have hesitated and trembled; you have been haunted by misgivings, but bewildered by their vagueness and uncertainty — ”

“ Yes, yes, — it is so,” ejaculated Beverley, with mingled amazement and suspense. “ But how — ”

“ Because,” interrupted Christian, speaking rapidly and excitedly, “ by a remarkable series of incidents I have been placed in a position enabling me to throw much light upon that which is at present dark to your view.”

“ You? ” cried Beverley, with a suspense that now reached to fever-point.

“ Yes, — and to prove that it is so,” continued our hero, “ I will at once give you the right names of those whom you have introduced by fictitious ones, — as well as that of your uncle whose name throughout your narrative you have not mentioned at all.”

“ Good heavens, is this possible? ” exclaimed Edgar, starting up from his seat.

“ Yes,” rejoined Christian, “ judge for yourself. Your uncle is Sir John Steward, Mrs. Maxwell is Mrs. Oxenden, and the name of Louisa is a substitute for the real one of Laura.”

“ True,” cried Edgar, in the wildest amazement. “ But how, my dear friend — how — ”

“ Listen,” interrupted Christian, “ and I will tell you everything. But pray be calm and collected.”

Our hero then proceeded to explain all those particulars which have been related to the reader, from the moment when he had seen the breaking-down of the carriage on the previous evening, to that when he descended from his hiding-place in the tree on the day of which we are writing. Edgar Beverley listened with mingled indignation and amazement, and scarcely had Christian finished, when the lieutenant snatched up his hat, exclaiming, “ The foulest treachery is at work, but I will rush to Verner House, I will unmask the conspiracy, I will rescue my beloved Laura, and then let my vile uncle do his worst.”

“ Stop,” said Christian, springing forward to catch Beverley by the arm; “ you will ruin everything by your rashness. The door will be closed against you. It is now nine o'clock in the evening; you will not see Laura, but you will

make her persecutors aware that you are here in the neighbourhood, and they may spirit her off to some other place in the dead of the night. I beseech you to be calm, if you value your happiness and that of the young lady — ”

“ Oh, you are indeed my friend,” exclaimed Beverley, struck by the force of Christian’s words. “ For Heaven’s sake advise me how to act! ”

“ I will,” responded our hero; “ sit down and let us deliberate coolly and collectedly. From what I have told you, it is tolerably evident that your uncle Sir John Steward contemplates marriage — ”

“ Yes, for it was a priest whom you saw,” exclaimed Edgar, “ and Laura is a Catholic. But pray proceed,” he added, with feverish impatience.

“ The only means,” continued our hero, “ will be for you to communicate with the young lady, and obtain information from her how she may be rescued.”

“ Yes, yes; that is indeed the best, the only means,” cried Edgar. “ But how is it to be accomplished? How can a letter be conveyed to her? Who will be the bearer of it? ”

“ Yes, how? who? ” said Christian, reflectingly. “ Oh, I have it, — the mountebank! ” and he sprang up in delight from his seat.

“ What mean you? ” inquired Edgar, with excited quickness.

“ Remain here, — patiently, if you can, — but at all events remain here,” exclaimed our hero, “ and leave it to me,” — with which words he sped from the apartment.

But while bursting into the street to execute the object which he had in view, Christian Ashton little suspected that at this selfsame moment his beloved sister was passing through a painful ordeal, which must be described in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTINA'S ADVENTURES

It was about eight o'clock in the evening; the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton were walking together in the garden attached to the villa at Bayswater. A long pause had followed some conversation on intellectual topics; her Highness fell into a reverie, and Christina was almost as soon absorbed in her own separate thoughts. At length Indora, suddenly arousing herself from her train of meditation, observed, in a kind tone, "I am truly glad that your brother has obtained another situation; I hope he will be comfortable in it. But rest assured, my dear Christina, that if he had not succeeded in thus employing himself, I should have devised the means to do something for him."

"I know and deeply appreciate all your ladyship's goodness," answered our young and beautiful heroine. "You gave us both a signal proof of your generous sympathy on our behalf, when your ladyship bade me proffer a sum of money for Christian's use —"

"And he declined it," observed the princess, "because he had been provident and had a pecuniary resource of his own. That circumstance raised him higher than ever in my estimation. I feel convinced that he will do well, and you have a right to be proud of such a brother."

"We are indeed devotedly attached to each other," responded Christina. "Being twins — our orphan condition likewise — the reliance which we had to place in each other —"

"I understand it all," said the princess. "Those circumstances have combined to strengthen and enhance the love of brother and sister which naturally subsisted between you. And I am glad of this opportunity of giving you the assur-

ance, my dear young friend, that should circumstances soon transpire to induce me to return to my native land, it shall be my care to place you in a position that will render you independent for the future."

Christina was melted to tears by this evidence of generosity and good feeling on the part of the Indian lady, and warmly but tremulously she expressed her gratitude. Almost immediately afterward, the princess entered the house, but Christina lingered in the garden to ramble there a little while longer, for the evening was beautiful, and she was in one of those moods when she wished to be alone with her own thoughts. The reader will not be surprised if when thus alone the image of her beloved friend Zoe rose up in her mind, and that by a very natural association, it likewise conjured up Lord Octavian Meredith to her thoughts. It will be remembered that the young maiden had already so far analyzed her feelings as to be unable to repel the conviction that Octavian was not altogether indifferent to her, but she was ever doing her best and striving her hardest to expel his image from her mind. Indeed, she never contemplated it fixedly; the immaculate purity of her soul would not suffer her mental vision to dwell with passionate intentness upon that image under existing circumstances. Yet she could not altogether prevent it from often and often floating vaguely in her mind, for with all her innocence, with all her anxiety to martyrize her own feelings when she found them passing into a forbidden channel, she could not exercise a complete power over her volition.

Christina remained in the garden, as we have said, after the princess had quitted it on the evening of which we are writing, and for nearly half an hour she was occupied with her thoughts. Presently — when near that fence which has already been so often mentioned as overlooking a contiguous field — she thought she heard a sudden rustling amongst a dense knot of evergreens on one side of the gravel-walk where her delicate feet were treading. For a moment she was startled by the circumstance, but the next instant recovering her self-possession, she conjectured it must have been the rush of a cat, for there was not a sufficient breeze thus to agitate the foliage. She thought to herself, as some tale recently told her by the princess sprang up

in her memory, that if she was in that Eastern lady's native land, she would in a moment have fled wildly away from the spot, lest some monstrous reptile should suddenly fling forth its hideous coils around her, or lest some savage animal should spring forth upon her. She could not help thanking Heaven for having made her the native of a land whose climate, though so much maligned, renders it impossible for such causes of terror to exist, but little suspected she for an instant that where no monstrous snake can conceal its slimy folds, and where no savage animal can hide itself in ambush, a human being with scarcely less treacherous intent may find a lurking place. And so it was on the present occasion, for scarcely had Christina turned to leave the spot where a sudden alarm had for an instant arrested her steps, when she was pounced upon by a man who darted forth from amidst the evergreens. So abrupt was the occurrence — so frightfully quick did it seem to follow upon those ideas of the serpent and the wild beast which had just been flitting through her mind — that it overwhelmed her with terror; insomuch that the very cry which rose up to her lips was checked at the moment it was about to burst forth, and she lost all consciousness.

Sudden as was that attack, — suddenly too as she sank into a swoon, — with an equal suddenness was she made aware, when startled back to life, that some violent altercation was taking place. She was inside a common cab; a man was seated next to her, — a woman with a thick veil opposite. The vehicle had stopped, and the cabman was venting his abuse upon the coachman of another equipage. A glance from the window showed Christina that this scene was taking place close by the Oxford Street entrance to Hyde Park. It was doubtless the sudden shock which the cab sustained on coming into collision with the other vehicle that had startled Christina back to consciousness. That other vehicle was a private carriage, the coachman of which was throwing the blame of the collision upon the cabman, while the latter recriminated in a much coarser style, and with a horrible imprecation he demanded to know who was to pay him for his broken shaft? For the first few moments all this appeared to Christina to be nothing but a dream, — an illusion which was more or less sustained by the duskiness of the hour and the obscurity which therefore prevailed

inside the cab. But the conviction of the scene's reality soon struck her mind; the man was on her left hand, the veiled woman was opposite, the street lamps were glaring on either side, the altercation was taking place close by.

"Sit down, miss," said the woman, vehemently, as Christina in wild affright was about to lower one of the windows, and it was with a foreign accent that this woman spoke.

"I insist upon being suffered to alight," said Christina, with another effort to lower the window, in which, however, she was baffled by the woman seizing her violently by both her wrists.

"The shaft is broken; what is to be done?" hastily said the man who was seated next to Christina, and who was the same that had captured her in the garden.

"The shaft broken?" echoed Madame Angelique, for she indeed it was into whose power our heroine had fallen, and who wore the veil to guard herself against future recognition. "Pray, my dear miss —"

"Release me! I insist upon being released," screamed Christina, and the next instant one of her fair hands was dashed through the glass.

Her shriek thrilled forth; Madame Angelique — almost maddened by the dilemma in which she found herself placed by the collision of the two vehicles, and by the dread of exposure — seized our heroine by the throat, muttering, "Silence, girl, or I will throttle you!"

The mingled terror and pain which the poor girl experienced caused her to swoon off once more, and when for the second time she recovered her consciousness, she found that she was being lifted from a vehicle by a couple of female servants. The first impression which now seized upon her was that she was still in the power of her enemies, and with a scream she released herself from the hold which was upon her. But this hold was a friendly one; a voice which she recognized gave her a kind assurance, for the maid servant who had thus spoken to her was the daughter of that landlady who had originally recommended her as companion to Lady Octavian Meredith. Christina experienced a sudden sense of safety, but had no power of lucid recollection. Stupefied by all that had occurred, and feeling as if her senses were again about to abandon her, —

unable, in a word, to bear up against the effects of this series of incidents through which she was hurried, — she mechanically abandoned herself to the care of the two servant-maids, and was conducted into a house which she had not been enabled to recognize on account of the dimness which came over her vision. Such too was the confusion of her thoughts that though she had recognized the voice of Jessie Giles, and knew it to be a friendly one, it did not at the instant strike her where she had known the girl before; but when placed upon a sofa in a handsomely furnished room, when wine and water was proffered her, and the two domestics were doing all they could to revive her from that listless condition which bordered so closely upon unconsciousness, a light suddenly flashed into the mind of our heroine. She knew where she was. The apartment was indeed familiar enough to her; it was one of the elegantly furnished parlours of Lord Octavian Meredith's residence. Then naturally enough the idea smote her that it was he who had caused her to be carried off, and shocked as well as horrified by the belief of such tremendous perfidy, she burst into tears.

“Let me go hence! let me depart!” she the next moment exclaimed, dashing away those tears, and becoming violently excited with mingled alarm and indignation. “Your vile master shall not keep me here,” and she rushed to the door.

“For Heaven's sake, Miss Ashton, compose yourself!” said Jessie Giles, springing after her. “You are mistaken. It is his lordship who rescued you, and his carriage is ordered to wait to convey you home, wherever it may be.”

Now another revulsion of feelings took place in the bosom of Christina, and she comprehended in a moment all the strength of the insulting suspicion to which she had given way toward Lord Octavian Meredith. She sank upon a seat, and, pressing her hand to her brow, burst into another flood of tears.

“Do pray compose yourself, miss,” repeated Jessie. “You must know that you are in safety here. But it is natural you should be frightened, for from what little his lordship said to us when the carriage stopped at the front door, you have been outrageously treated. Indeed, it was very fortunate our coachman had taken a drop too much and run

against the cab, or else you might not have been delivered from the hands of those people."

"I hope you will not repeat to his lordship," said Christina, earnestly, "the words which I uttered. I was half-wild — I gave vent to anything which came into my head —"

"Here is his lordship," said Jessie, and she at once withdrew from the apartment, followed by her fellow servant.

It was simply from motives of respect that the women retired, for they had not the faintest idea that Christina would not for worlds have thus found herself alone with their master. She had not the power to stop those women; she was shocked at the thought of the insulting suspicion to which she had abandoned herself, and which contrasted so strikingly with the sense of gratitude which on the other hand she ought to have felt toward her deliverer. She could not even rise from her seat as Meredith advanced toward her, and in the gentlest tones of his musical voice inquired if she felt better? It was a perfect consternation of bewilderment that was upon her, — a distressing sense of confused thoughts, and with an utter uncertainty what she ought to say or how she ought to act.

But one word of explanation ere we pursue the thread of our narrative. Meredith, who was returning home in his carriage when the collision took place, — he having been dining at his club, — thrust his head out of the window to put an end to the altercation by telling the cabman who he was and ordering his coachman at once to drive on. Then was heard the sound of the crashing glass of the cab window, instantaneously followed by a shriek, and Meredith, convinced there was something wrong, — though little expecting to meet Christina, — sprang forth from the carriage. Several persons collected upon the spot, and Madame Angélique told them from the window that she was a tradeswoman of respectability, and that she was merely taking home a runaway apprentice. She thought the lie would serve her, as Christina had fainted and therefore could not contradict it. But Meredith insisted on investigating the matter further; he tore open the cab door, he recognized Christina, and an ejaculation of amazement burst from his lips. To take her in his arms and bear her to his own carriage was the work of the next few moments, during

which Madame Angelique and her male accomplice thought it best to beat a retreat, — the infamous woman having hastily slipped a couple of sovereigns into the cabman's hand. The crowd had passed around toward the handsome carriage to which Christina was now consigned; no opposition was therefore offered to the flight of the Frenchwoman and her accomplice, who, we may as well observe, was her own footman, dressed in plain clothes. Lord Octavian Meredith's equipage drove off, and the crowd remained to question the cabman as to the meaning of these proceedings, but he, apprehensive of unpleasant consequences on his own account, vowed and protested he knew nothing more than that he had been hailed a short way off by the party, and that the young girl had apparently stepped into the vehicle without any reluctance on her own side.

Meantime the young nobleman's equipage was rolling away toward the Regent's Park, and his arm supported the inanimate form of the beloved Christina. What unexpected happiness for the adoring Octavian! Would the reader believe us if we were to profess ignorance as to whether he imprinted a kiss upon her cheek? It were contrary to all knowledge of human nature to suppose that he abstained. Yet though they were alone together inside the carriage, and she was unconscious of what was passing, it was with the purest delicacy he sustained her inanimate form; he did not press it with passionate vehemence in his arms; his love for the beautiful Christina was indeed of a holy character, apart from his position as the husband of another, which alone rendered that love unholy.

And now we may resume the thread of our narrative at the point where we interrupted it to give the preceding explanations. Christina and Lord Octavian were alone together in the apartment, — she seated as if transfixed upon the chair, he standing near her, bending slightly down, and breathing inquiries tenderly respectful, as to whether she felt better.

"My lord," she answered, slowly recovering her self-possession, "I have to thank you for the service you have rendered me. I cannot comprehend the meaning of the outrage which dragged me from my home; nor can I conceive who were its perpetrators. But that is of little consequence now, since I am indebted to your lordship for my safety.

"Rest assured, Miss Ashton," responded Meredith, hastening to set himself altogether right in her estimation with regard to one point which he felt might need an explanatory word, "that if I had known where you dwelt, I should have at once conveyed you thither, but I never knew — I was never told — and — and — I never dared to ask."

"With a renewed expression of my thanks to your lordship," said Christina, rising from her seat, "I will now take my departure." Then, as a sudden thought struck her, she added, "May I request that one of the domestics be desired to fetch a vehicle to take me to my home?"

"My carriage is at your service," replied Meredith, who comprehended the meaning of Christina's request. "Hesitate not to make use of it, for most solemnly do I pledge my word that I will not inquire of the domestics who are in attendance upon it, where you dwell."

Christina liked not the arrangement, but she dared not fling another insult at the young nobleman by rejecting it, which would have been tantamount to an expression of mistrust in respect to the pledge he had just given her. She therefore said with modest bashfulness, "I will avail myself of your lordship's kindness."

"O Christina!" suddenly exclaimed Meredith, carried completely away by his feelings of devoted love and ardent admiration, as he gazed upon the beautiful being who stood before him, "wherefore thus cold and distant? Wherefore so freezing in your manner? My God, will you not bestow one kind look upon me, Christina?"

"My lord," she said, with a calm dignity, "you will not ungenerously avail yourself of the painful and embarrassing position into which circumstances have thrown me —"

"O Christina, one word, — only one word!" he vehemently cried. "Is it a sin to love you? Is it a crime to concentrate all my hopes of happiness in this world upon one idea, — the idea that you may yet be my own adored and cherished wife?"

"My lord, I cannot — I will not listen to this language," exclaimed Christina; "it is an insult to Zoe, — an insult to myself," and she moved toward the door.

"Now," cried Meredith, "if you depart in anger, you

will leave me so truly wretched that I shall do something desperate. Yes, by Heaven, Christina — ”

“ Oh, this threat which you have held out before! ” were the wildly uttered words that thrilled from Christina's lips, and she pressed her hand in anguish and bewilderment to her brow.

“ Christina, I am not indifferent to you, ” exclaimed Octavian, in a voice of exultant joy; “ tell me, tell me that I am not indifferent; tell me that you will live for me, as I am living for you, for she cannot live. Oh, speak to me, for God's sake speak to me! ”

He sank at her feet; he seized one of her hands, — the other was pressed against her brow; he was about to convey the former to his lips, but with a sudden and vehement effort she snatched it from him, and the next instant the door closed behind her. Meredith dared not follow; he felt all in a moment that it would indeed be flagrantly insulting to the pure mind of Christina, if he were thus far to forget himself. He sank upon a seat, buried his countenance in his hands, and gave way to his agitated reflections.

Meanwhile Miss Ashton had passed out into the hall, where she found Jessie and the other maid servant. Her ears caught no following footsteps, and she therefore comprehended that the delicacy of Meredith's feelings had prevailed over the strength of his passion. She hesitated not to linger for a few moments in the hall, while Jessie Giles hastened to fetch one of her own bonnets and shawls to lend the young lady. Then — having in the meantime decided not to avail herself of the carriage, for fear that in some insensate moment Octavian should forget the pledge which he had given — she hastened away on foot. She was soon overtaken by an empty cab, which she entered, and in a little less than an hour reached the villa at Bayswater in safety.

There she acquainted the princess, who had been very uneasy at her sudden disappearance, with the particulars of the outrage which had been perpetrated against her, and all that she omitted from the tale was that rapid but exciting scene with Lord Octavian Meredith which we have just been describing. Indora gathered enough from what Christina said, to convince her that the Frenchwoman could be none other than Madame Angélique, but she did not intimate

that she had any knowledge of that disreputable person. Deeply indignant was the princess at the treatment which her young friend had sustained, but she was totally at a loss to conceive what could be the motive of the abduction, unless it were to purvey some fresh victim to the lust of Madame Angelique's patrons. Christina retired at once to her chamber, where she was most kindly ministered unto by the princess herself, who watched by her side until sleep at length closed the young maiden's eyes.

There was one person beneath that roof who understood full well what the outrage meant, and who inwardly deplored its failure, but who outwardly testified sympathy on behalf of our heroine. This was Sagoonah.

CHAPTER V

THE SUPPER EATER

THE scene now changes. On that same evening of which we are writing, a masked ball took place at Buckingham Palace. The invitations, which were most numerous, had been issued to all the principal members of the aristocracy, male and female, and to the most distinguished persons of the fashionable world. As a matter of course all the preparations were of the most splendid and sumptuous description, for royalty has got nothing to do but to dip its hand into the public purse which hard-worked and severely taxed Industry is forced to keep continuously filled, in order to procure all imaginable pleasures for itself, and to entertain its friends, its flatterers, and its hangers-on.

The greater portion of the company appeared in fancy costume, but there were several — chiefly the highest personages, male and female, of the aristocracy — who were apparelled in their usual manner. Amongst those present was the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, who had again run over to England (at the public expense, be it well understood) to visit his illustrious relative; and in order that this faithful chronicle of events may omit no detail calculated to prove interesting to the reader, it must be added that his Royal Highness did actually and veritably wear a new uniform upon the occasion. Little did he suspect, while mingling in the gaieties of Buckingham Palace, that his late groom of the stole had on that very same day been seen by his late English secretary so industriously though somewhat ignominiously employed in beating a drum and running his lips along the tubes of a mouth-organ. There too, amidst that company, was the Duke of Marchmont, who was glad to seek in any scene of excitement a relief

from the vague but painful apprehensions which haunted him in respect to the Princess Indora. In respect to the queen and Prince Albert, the newspapers of the following day assured their readers that her Majesty never appeared in better spirits, and that her illustrious consort was observed to be in the enjoyment of admirable health, which piece of intelligence no doubt afforded the highest satisfaction at all the breakfast-tables where the journals aforesaid were perused on the morning after this grand entertainment.

But for the masked ball itself. All those who wore fancy costume were bound to maintain their *incognito* until two o'clock in the morning, so that there might be no relaxation of the merriment and gaiety until such time as all the wit and humour of the masked unknowns might be exhausted. Even this length of time that was thus prescribed was founded on the calculation that the wit and humour of the aristocratic assemblage would last for several hours; so that when the average dulness of the aristocratic intellect is taken into account, it becomes quite clear that the patrician orders possess an enviable facility of amusing themselves.

Now, it must be understood that the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had come over to England with precisely the same retinue — the illustrious Raggidbak excepted — that he had brought with him on the previous occasion, but upon some private understanding to which he had come with his relative the prince, the grand duke had introduced none of his precious horde at the masked ball of which we are writing. Therefore Count Wronki, the lord steward, the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the lord chamberlain, General Himmelpinken, the master of the horse, Herr Hombogh, the lord privy seal, the Chevalier Kadger, chief equerry, Count Frumpenhausen, the gold stick, and Baron Farthenless, the privy purse, had all been left at Mivart's Hotel to play at dominoes for halfpence, or to rack their brains for the means of procuring some more substantial recreation. Deeply indignant were these great men at what they conceived to be the slight put upon them, and they presently took counsel together to see whether they could possibly indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the gilded saloons of British royalty. All of a sudden a luminous idea struck the Chevalier Kadger, and having communicated it to his worthy compeers, it was unani-

mously voted that he should forthwith put it into execution. The chevalier was about to set forth for the purpose, when he recollected that he should require a cab to take him in haste to Buckingham Palace, and bring him back again to Mivart's Hotel to communicate the result of his mission. Two shillings at the least would be the required fare, and this amount, after some little delay, was scraped together in halfpence from the pockets of those illustrious German noblemen and gentlemen. But when the Chevalier Kadger had departed, strange misgivings sprang up in the breasts of those whom he had left behind, lest he should merely drop into the nearest public-house, drink and smoke out the large funds confided to him for a special purpose, and then come back to assure them with all the impudence in the world that he had been to the palace, but had failed in the accomplishment of his mission. However, there was now no help for it but to wait, and therefore, by way of a little pastime for the next hour or so, those amiable Germans sustained an incessant quarrel amongst themselves. But the result of the proceeding showed that a nicer sense of honour dwelt in the breast of the Chevalier Kadger than his friends gave him credit for; inasmuch as at the expiration of about an hour and a half, he reappeared with a face that was very red and very radiant. The redness arose from a strong glass of brandy and water of which he had partaken in the servants' hall at Buckingham Palace, and the radiancy was derived from the complete success which had crowned his mission; so that after all, the chevalier's companions found they had wrongfully suspected their upright comrade, and that he had not turned into the nearest public-house to drink and smoke out the two shillings accumulated in halfpence.

We now return to Buckingham Palace itself. It was verging toward midnight, and the doors of the refreshment rooms had been thrown open for those who thought fit to avail themselves of the viands and the wines, the fruits and the liqueurs, so profusely set out upon the tables. It was, however, deemed too early for a general influx of the company to these rooms, and but few domestics remained there in attendance. The head butler was nevertheless at his post near the sideboard, and instead of lounging there, he stood statue-like with that prim formality which had

become habitual. Presently a solitary guest, whose form and countenance were completely concealed by a long flowing domino, strolled in a leisurely manner into the refreshment-room, surveyed the profusely covered tables through a small opening in his hood, and then seating himself, began paying his respects to cold chicken and ham. The butler at once let fly the cork of a bottle of champagne, which he placed upon the table near the solitary supper eater, and the contents of that bottle speedily disappeared down the supper eater's throat. But it could scarcely be a matter of surprise that he required so considerable a quantity of wine, inasmuch as it had to wash down a proportionate amount of food, for it was no ordinary supper of which this gentleman had partaken. He kept his hood all the time over his head, and as much over his countenance too as the process of eating and drinking would permit, but this circumstance was no source of marvel to the butler, inasmuch as he knew that the masques were to preserve their *incognito* until a prescribed hour; and with this knowledge likewise, the other domestics in attendance abstained, with a becoming delicacy, from standing anywhere in front of the supper eater, so that they might not have the appearance of being inspired by curiosity to ascertain who he was. Having partaken of a copious repast, emptied the champagne-bottle, and finished off with a few glasses of sherry and port, the gentleman in the domino issued from the room.

About twenty minutes elapsed, during which a few other guests strolled in to partake of wine or lemonade, but of nothing more substantial, and the butler was still maintaining his post at the sideboard, when he was recalled from a temporary fit of abstraction to the fact that the identical domino of the copious supper eater was again introducing itself to his visual perception. The worthy butler of course thought that it could be nothing more than the mere curiosity of an idle loungee strolling in to see how things were progressing in the refreshment-room, but scarcely could that same butler believe his own eyes, when he saw the domino sit down quietly at the table, and commence a vigorous attack upon the viands nearest. It required no small circumstance to shake the butler from the equilibrium of his prim formal dignity, but at this spectacle, which comprised the rapid disappearance of a savoury pie, he certainly did

look aghast. However, he had his duty to perform, and when regaining his self-possession, he lost no time in accomplishing it. Another bottle of champagne was accordingly drawn and placed on the table for the behoof of the supper eater. The meal on this occasion was not less copious than the former one, either in respect to solids or fluids, and having, as the butler thought, not merely appeased but most outrageously gorged his appetite, the domino departed from the refreshment-room.

Three or four other guests almost immediately made their appearance, and thus the attendant domestics had no opportunity to give verbal expression amongst themselves to the wonder which they did not the less experience at the gastronomic feat achieved by the domino. At length, however, the room was once more empty, and the butler was just marvelling within himself whether the great supper eater felt comfortable in the condition of a gorged boa-constrictor, when his eyes settled on the same identical domino once more.

“Surely,” thought the butler to himself, “he is never coming for a third supper?” and the attendant domestics exchanged rapid glances amongst themselves with a similar significancy.

But the domino in question had returned for the most substantial of purposes. Down he sat, deep was the incision which his knife made into the breast of a superb capon, — ham and tongue from neighbouring dishes found their way to his plate, and when the champagne was placed by his side, he quaffed glass after glass with a rapidity and a zest which seemed in perfect keeping with the gigantic magnitude of his appetite. The butler was astounded; he stared at the brilliant chandelier pendant in the centre of the room, to convince himself that he was broad awake, but he could not quite succeed in coming to a conclusion on the point, and still therefore he had a vague idea that he must have been dozing and dreaming, — an impression which lasted for the next twenty minutes that followed the departure of the supper eater from the room.

The guests now began to make their appearance in greater numbers, and some of them sat down at table. The butler became so occupied that his thoughts ceased gradually to dwell with so much intentness upon the incidents we have

been relating, until all of a sudden they were again concentrated on the same point, and with a more powerful intensity than ever, on beholding the reappearance of the particular domino.

“Good heavens!” thought the butler to himself, “is it possible that he is coming for a fourth supper? No, it cannot be. It is a downright physical impossibility. No human creature could have a capacity for such an inordinate amount of food.”

The worthy butler was however wrong, for down sat the domino; again an inroad was commenced upon the viands,—another bottle of champagne was done ample justice to. A vague terror stole over the butler; childhood stories of voracious ghouls came back to his memory, he felt ill at ease, and yet he dared not betray what he had experienced.

“If,” he said to himself, “he had now come just to taste the jelly, the whipped cream, the blanc-mange, or some trifle of that sort, one might possibly understand it, but to think that he should now, on his fourth appearance, sit down to devour the best half of that perigorde pie, is something unnatural to a degree. And then too the wine! It is quite clear that when he gets up from his seat, he will reel about in a terrible state of intoxication.”

But the supper eater did nothing of the sort. When a repast quite as copious as any of the preceding ones had been disposed of, the domino took his departure with an admirable steadiness of gait; so that it seemed as if four bottles of champagne and at least two of sherry and port, to say nothing of a few glasses of liqueur, had produced not the slightest effect upon the brain of that extraordinary unknown. As for the attendant domestics, they would have been almost as much confounded as the butler himself, were it not that the nature of their duties kept him in a more vital state of calamity.

The guests were now crowding more and more to the refreshment-room, and the process of eating and drinking without taking off their masks or throwing back the hoods of their dominoes gave rise to much gaiety and merriment, yet all partially subdued by that well-bred fastidiousness which keeps down laughter to a low key in the saloons of aristocracy or within the walls of royalty's dwelling. Nevertheless, there was quite sufficient animation to wean the

butler away from the unpleasant reflections which had been passing in his mind, until the unfortunate man was destined to receive an almost overpowering shock on beholding the domino make his fifth appearance.

"If he is going to sit down and devour another supper," said the unfortunate and bewildered butler to himself, "I shall know that I am a madman, that I am haunted by delusions, and for fear lest I should do anybody a mischief, I will rush off to Bedlam, knock at the door, and insist upon being taken in."

Yet though the domino had come back for a fifth repast, the butler did not carry out his threat of self-immolation at the shrine of lunacy. But for some minutes he remained transfixed in blank dismay, like one who was gazing upon an apparition from the dead. He even forgot to place more champagne upon the table, until reminded of his duty by his deputy, who was present. The butler gasped as if about to make some observation, but was unable to give utterance to it, and then he proceeded to draw another bottle of champagne. But now a thought struck him.

"He surely would like a bottle of burgundy," he said to himself, "after so much champagne."

And this idea was immediately followed by another. If the butler could but obtain a glimpse of the astounding supper eater's features, it would be a relief to his mind to ascertain that it was really a human face which possessed the organ that took in so huge a quantity of sustenance. The butler accordingly proceeded in person to where the supper eater was seated, and bending down — but not without a certain degree of apprehension, lest he should catch a glimpse of something frightful — he said, "I beg your pardon, sir — my lord — your Grace" — (for he did not of course know which appellation was right) — "but I thought perhaps a little burgundy might now be agreeable."

"Champagne," was the single word which came from the supper eater's lips. It was sternly pronounced, and at the same moment the butler caught a glimpse of a very fierce moustache through the opening in the domino.

Abashed and dismayed, the worthy functionary returned to the sideboard and despatched the champagne to the voracious domino. It was soon disposed of, and the repast devoured upon this occasion was, if anything, more copious

than the preceding ones. The domino then withdrew, walking as steadily as if he had only been drinking water, and not tumbling down dead with apoplexy ere he reached the door, as the astounded butler thought that he assuredly must. He disappeared from the view, and a prolonged sigh emanated from the heart of the miserable butler.

It was now about half-past one o'clock, and the company quitted the refreshment-room to return into the other apartments, to hold themselves in readiness for the general unmasking that was shortly to take place. Once more was the butler left in that room with only the attendant domestics. But he could not keep his eyes away from the gilded portals, and though every instant he really expected to behold the reappearance of the unconscionable supper eater, yet he endeavoured to persuade himself that such an event was beyond the limits of all human possibility. At length some one did appear, but not the domino; it was Prince Albert.

"Well," said his Royal Highness to the butler, "has everything gone off well? Have the company enjoyed themselves?"

"Admirably, may it please your Royal Highness," responded the butler, with a profound bow.

"I am glad of that," said the prince, glancing toward the supper eater. "I am desirous that on such occasions all restraint should be thrown off, and that her Majesty's guests should do ample justice to that which is provided for them."

"I can assure your Royal Highness," responded the butler, "that the most ample justice has been done — especially by one —"

"Ah!" said the prince, "I am glad of it." Then glancing at the butler, he thought he beheld something strange in his look, and he observed, "But about this one to whom you specially alluded?"

"May your Royal Highness forgive me if I am really mad," rejoined the butler, "but as I live, there is one guest, wearing a domino, who has eaten three fowls, a pigeon pie, three parts of a perigorde pie, and cleared six dishes of ham and tongue. He has drunk five bottles of champagne, about three of sherry and port, and not less than a couple of dozen glasses of liqueur."

“Ridiculous,” ejaculated the prince, and confusion was mingled with sternness in his looks, for he knew not whether to think that the butler had really gone mad, or that he was tipsy and therefore forgetting himself.

“I can assure your Royal Highness,” said the unfortunate man, “that I am only dealing with facts. The personage alluded to ate and drank all I have enumerated — And here he is again.”

Yes, sure enough, there was the identical domino gliding into the room, but when just about to seat himself at table, he caught sight of Prince Albert, and appearing to stand aghast for a moment, he made for the door. His Royal Highness was instantaneously seized with the conviction that there was something wrong, and hastening forward, he caught the domino by the arm, — not rudely, but with sufficient force to detain him. At that same instant the queen made her appearance on the spacious landing outside, accompanied by the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and attended by several gentlemen and ladies of her household. A piteous groan came from the lips of the domino, and he fell upon his knees. The queen was seized with amazement, and she mechanically took her husband’s arm, as if for protection, for the idea of some contemplated but discovered outrage flashed through her mind. The hood fell back from the head of the kneeling culprit, and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha exclaimed in astonishment, “It is Count Frumpenhausen — my gold stick.”

Prince Albert at once saw that his illustrious relative’s functionary had some tale to tell which would redound little to the credit of either himself or his ducal master, and he was therefore anxious to avoid anything that savoured of exposure in the presence of the company. Hastily making some excuse, he bade Count Frumpenhausen rise from his knees and follow him to a private apartment, — a request which the discomfited gold stick obeyed with considerable alacrity, for he felt by no means comfortable with so many eyes fixed wonderingly and scrutinizingly upon him. The Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha likewise accompanied the prince, and in a few minutes the three were alone together in another apartment. Then Count Frumpenhausen made a clean breast of it, and revealed everything. It appeared that a German valet who had attended Prince Albert to

this country when he came to espouse the British queen was a near relative of the Chevalier Kadger, and when the grand duke's retinue were deliberating at Mivart's Hotel how they should indemnify themselves for their exclusion from the palace, the chevalier had resolved to seek the counsel and succour of his relative the valet, for he had an idea floating in his ingenious mind that through such assistance himself and his fellow retainers in the ducal service might at least obtain a substantial supper within the palace walls. He accordingly sped to his kinsman, who at first expressed his utter inability to do anything for him, but he presently recollected that a guest who had been seized with a sudden indisposition had departed privately, leaving his domino behind him in an anteroom to which he had retired on first experiencing that sickness. The valet procured the domino, and gave it to the Chevalier Kadger, strictly enjoining him to use it for himself alone, and by no means to transfer it to any of his comrades. But the chevalier was resolved to prove faithful in every respect to his fellow retainers, and on his return to Mivart's, they all sped off on foot together to Buckingham Palace. Being known as the grand duke's retainers, they easily obtained admission to an antechamber, while the Chevalier Kadger kept the domino completely folded under his coat. When the antechamber was gained, he put on the domino, and had no difficulty in gliding into the saloons where the company were assembled, but he had a keen nose for the refreshments, and speedily making his way to the supper-room, he banqueted to his heart's content. The second wearer of the domino was Count Wronki, the duke's lord steward; the third was the chevalier Gumbinnen, the duke's lord chamberlain; the fourth was General Himmelspinken, the master of the horse; the fifth was Herr Humbogh, the ducal privy seal; and the sixth, as the reader is aware, was the Count Frumpenhausen, the gold stick. But this respectable individual had failed to obtain the supper on account of the most inopportune presence of the prince at the time in the refreshment-room, while Baron Farthenless, who was to have been the last wearer of the universal domino, was waiting in hungry expectation until his fellow retainer Frumpenhausen should return to the anteroom to consign the disguising garment to the said baron's shoulders.

Such was the revelation made to Prince Albert and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Both were exceedingly irate, but Frumpenhausen promised never to offend again, and it was found more convenient to bestow pardon upon him than by expulsion from his ducal master's service, to send him adrift in the world to tell the tale of the domino and the suppers. On their way back to Mivart's, Count Frumpenhausen and Baron Farthenless were exceedingly dejected, miserable, and surly, — a state of mind which was by no means mitigated by listening to the complacent terms in which the others eulogized the succulent repast of which they had so luxuriously partaken.

We have said the Duke of Marchmont was a guest at the palace on this occasion, but he departed long before the dénouement of the adventure of the hungry Germans. Indeed, it was scarcely midnight when the duke stole away from the midst of the brilliant assembly, and, entering his carriage, ordered the coachman to drive to the beginning of the street in which Madame Angelique's establishment was situated. His Grace was aware that on this particular evening Christina Ashton was to be carried off, and he was deeply anxious to know the result. It was, however, no part of the infamous Frenchwoman's plan to take Christina to her own house; she feared that it might be too dangerous, and hence the concealment of her features with a thick veil, to avoid recognition on the part of the young damsel at any future time. She had accordingly made an arrangement with the keeper of another den of infamy, but one which was on a far less splendid scale than her own, to receive Christina, to keep her in close custody, and to have her ruin effected, so that under the imperious pressure of circumstances she might resign herself to a life of pollution, and thereby be prevented from returning to those friends to whom she might tell the tale of her abduction. Such was the abominable conspiracy devised for the accomplishment of Christina's ruin, but the reader has seen how providentially it was frustrated by the collision of the two vehicles.

The Duke of Marchmont, alighting from his carriage, and dismissing it, proceeded to Madame Angelique's house. He found the Frenchwoman in her elegantly furnished apartment, plunged into a dejection from which not even frequent

draughts of wine could serve to arouse her. The duke at once saw that something was wrong, and he was speedily made acquainted with all that had occurred. He gave vent to bitter imprecations against the mishap, and then on questioning Madame Angelique more closely as to the personal appearance of the individual who had rescued Christina, he recognized Lord Octavian Meredith.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I have known for a long time that Meredith was deeply in love with this girl, and perhaps she will now fall entirely into his hands."

"And if not," responded Madame Angelique, "she will return to the Lady Indora, perhaps she has already returned, and perhaps Indora conjectures that it is I who had the girl carried off. I feel, my lord, as if troubles were thickening around me —"

"And I also," muttered the duke, with deep concentrated bitterness; then he hastened to add aloud, "But we must do something, my dear madam; we are not to be beaten and baffled in this manner —"

"But what on earth can we do?" asked Madame Angelique, with an air of completest bewilderment.

"Yes, what can we do?" said the duke, almost equally bewildered. "You know that the Lady Indora was already your enemy; you have the certainty that she gave the information against you to the commissioners of police, and now this occurrence will only embitter her ten thousand times more virulently against you, — ay, ten thousand, thousand times."

The duke looked very hard and very significantly at Madame Angelique, who returned his gaze, but evidently at first with only a vague and uncertain idea of what he meant, until the deepening shade upon his countenance, ominous and scowling, gradually excited within her a notion of what was dwelling in his mind. She flung a half-frightened glance around, as if to assure herself that there were no listeners to their discourse, and then she said, in a half-hushed voice, "Explain yourself, my lord; tell me candidly what you mean."

"I mean, Madame Angelique," he responded, likewise in a low, subdued tone, "that the Lady Indora must be made away with by some means or another, whether Sagoonah will accomplish the deed or not."

Madame Angelique reflected profoundly for several minutes, — her looks being bent down the while, and then she said, “But how, my lord? Sagoonah vowed that she would attempt nothing more as long as that girl Christina was beneath her roof, and you see how signally the plan for removing her has failed.”

The Duke of Marchmont now reflected in his turn, but it appeared that he could think of no new project, and was therefore compelled to fall back upon the old one, — namely, of using Sagoonah, through the medium of Madame Angelique, as the instrument of that deed on the accomplishment of which he seemed so bent, for he said, “You must see the ayah again. There is no time to be lost, and it is useless for you to start objections. Sagoonah can alone achieve that which has now become so vitally important to us both. Look you, my dear madam, as sure as fate, exposure and ruin will overtake you, and if you do not wish to find yourself shortly within the walls of Newgate — ”

“Newgate?” echoed the infamous woman, smitten with the direst terror as that dreadful word fell upon her ears, and the look which she fixed upon the equally infamous nobleman was haggard and ghastly.

“Yes, Newgate, Madame Angelique,” repeated the duke impressively; “and at least two years’ imprisonment, if not transportation to one of our horrible penal colonies, for this attempted abduction of the young lady.”

“Good heavens!” murmured the wretched woman, wringing her hands; “to what a pass are things coming. Yes, yes — I must see Sagoonah again, I must ply all my arts and wiles — I must touch her upon those points where I have already found her most sensitive — in a word, I must leave no stone unturned to induce her — your Grace knows what I mean.”

“Yes, you must see her to-morrow,” said the nobleman, “and I conjure you to fail not if you value your own safety. I will call on Meredith on some pretext to-morrow morning early, and I shall easily ascertain whether Christina be there, or whether she have gone back — But no,” he exclaimed, as a thought struck him; “to give myself all this trouble were simply ridiculous, inasmuch as you can at once obtain from the ayah precise information on the point.”

The duke and Madame Angelique continued to discuss

their vile plans for another half-hour, and when Marchmont took his departure, the Frenchwoman sought her couch. But it was long ere she could compose herself to sleep, and when slumber did at length come upon her eyes, it brought with it a succession of hideous haunting dreams.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER PLOT

ON the following day, as early as nine o'clock in the morning, Madame Angelique, disguised in mean apparel, was loitering in the neighbourhood of the princess's villa, and in about a quarter of an hour she was discerned by Sagoonah. The ayah — knowing that the domestics were all engaged indoors at the time, and that the faithful Mark was occupied in counting the numerous articles of splendid silver plate in the pantry — repaired to the fence where she was accustomed to hold her colloquies with the Frenchwoman, and the latter hastened toward her.

“So you failed last night,” said Sagoonah, in a cold voice of contempt; “you entangled the bird in the snare, and then suffered her to escape.”

“Did she return home speedily?” asked Madame Angelique, with feverish impatience.

“Yes, what else could she do? Or what otherwise do you suppose that she would have done?”

“No matter,” rejoined Madame Angelique, quickly. “Does the Lady Indora suspect —”

“I listened,” rejoined Sagoonah, “to the entire tale that Miss Ashton told her ladyship. I remained outside the door, I lost not a word, and I am convinced that her ladyship cannot do otherwise than suspect that you were the person into whose hands Christina fell.”

“Think you that her ladyship will take proceedings against me?” asked the Frenchwoman.

“I know not,” was Sagoonah's cold response; “I cannot always read the Lady Indora's thoughts.”

“You see, Sagoonah,” resumed Madame Angelique, “that I have done my best to carry off Christina, and I have failed.

You must recall the vow you made to the effect that you will attempt nothing more so long as she remains beneath her ladyship's roof. Doubtless you have still the same motive, — yes, you must have — your feeling of rancour against your mistress is still the same, — and now you have an additional interest in removing her as speedily as possible from your path."

"An additional interest?" said Sagoonah, with a slight tincture of curiosity in her accents, and then she coldly added, "I do not understand you."

"I can speedily explain myself," rejoined Madame Angelique, "and I think I can show you that your interests are now mixed up with my own."

A smile of superb contempt curled the thin vermilion lips of the ayah, and she said, as if haughtily spurning the bare idea, "My interests in any way common with your own?"

"I will soon make it apparent," answered Madame Angelique. "Listen attentively. The Lady Indora has already begun to wreak her vengeance upon me, — it matters not how, — but I have the positive proof that it is so," and she shuddered as she thought of Mr. Shadbolt. "This being the case, there can be no doubt that the Lady Indora will go on persecuting me, and even if she be desirous to remain in the background, she can induce Miss Ashton to take legal proceedings of a very serious character against me."

"And in what does all this concern me?" asked Sagoonah, with scornful impatience. "Because I have consented to listen to you on former occasions, to aid your projects, and even to appear to become the instrument for carrying out your views, think you that I will any more mix myself up with the concerns of one whose artifices are so clumsily arranged that they invariably fail? Look at your poltroon duke who feared to seized upon the golden opportunity; look at your own scheme of last night, which the merest accident — a collision of vehicles — served to baffle. No, I will have nought more to do with you or your concerns, until you show yourself worthy of my complicity by removing this girl Ashton from within the walls of the villa."

"I will speedily convince you, Sagoonah," resumed

Madame Angelique, who had listened with the utmost impatience to that long speech which was coldly but disdainfully uttered, — “I will speedily convince you that your interests are more intimately wrapped up in mine than you appear to imagine. What if the Lady Indora continues her persecutions against me; what if in the course of a few days, when the legal machinery is set in motion, she hands me over to the grasp of justice, — think you that in order to let myself down as lightly as possible, I would not tell all?”

“Ah, now I understand you,” exclaimed Sagoonah, her large luminous eyes flashing forth living fires. “You would betray me to my mistress? And if you did so,” continued the Hindu woman, bending a look of mingled scorn and hate upon Madame Angelique, “think you that I would not be avenged? Yes, into the depths of whatsoever dungeon the arm of the law might consign you to, would I penetrate, and my dagger should drink your heart’s blood.”

“For which deed you would hang upon a gibbet,” replied Madame Angelique. “But it is useless — worse than useless — for you and me to stand here threatening each other. At all events we now understand one another, and I have shown you that your own interests are more intimately connected with mine than you had previously imagined.”

Sagoonah reflected for a few moments, and then she said, in a low voice full of concentrated rage, but a rage which was altogether subdued so far as the expression of her countenance was concerned, “Yes, if you, to help yourself, in the case supposed, were to prove thus treacherous, it would go ill with me. Now, woman, what mean you?” asked Sagoonah, sternly. “You have sought me with some fixed plan; you have something settled in your mind. Speak quickly; what is it?”

“The Lady Indora must die,” answered Madame Angelique, in a low, deep, emphatic voice.

“And you mean to add that she must die by my hand?” said Sagoonah. “But it cannot be. Enough has already transpired to the knowledge of Christina Ashton to make her fix the deed upon me if it were accomplished.”

“What if I were to place in your hand a subtle poison?” said Madame Angelique, and she looked up with a sinister aspect into the countenance of the ayah, who bent over the palings.

"No, nothing, nothing, so long as the girl Ashton is beneath that roof," replied Sagoonah, firmly. "She sleeps lightly; she has already more than once detected me in wandering about the premises by night; she has seen me enter the chamber of my mistress, and she impressively told me that the silent hours of darkness are those which Murder chooses wherein to do its dreadful work."

"Ah, she has said that?" muttered Madame Angelique, with a look of mingled terror and vexation.

"Yes, she has said that," responded Sagoonah, impressively, "and think you therefore that if a suspicious deed were done by night within those walls, the Christian girl would not at once lay her hand upon my shoulder, and say, 'It is you who did it.' No, woman," continued Sagoonah, "my hand shall not wield the weapon, nor pour the drop of poison between the lips of my mistress, so long as Christina Ashton is there, and in a position to surrender me up to justice. If we were in mine own country it would be different, and I should defy her. For there the deed might be done under such circumstances as would completely avert suspicion from myself, ay, even though in my former conduct there had been anything suspicious. Yes, were we in mine own native Hindustan," proceeded the ayah, now speaking as if musing with herself rather than actually addressing her observations to Madame Angelique, "this hand of mine would convey to the couch of my mistress some reptile of deadly venom, whose fangs would instil the quick poison into her veins, and whose form would be found coiled up in the morning upon the bosom of its victim."

"And you would do this if you were in India?" said Madame Angelique, whose imagination was horribly prolific in all vile expedients; "you would do this, Sagoonah?"

"Ay, I would do it," was the response, "because the presence of the reptile would tell its own tale, and no one would ask whether it had been conveyed by a human hand to the couch to which it brought death, or whether it had insidiously glided in and nestled there of its own accord. But in this country of yours you have no such venomous things that may be caught in any patch of grass, found amidst the foliage of any tree, or snatched up from the midst of any parterre of flowers."

"But if I told you, Sagoonah," said Madame Angelique,

a devilish idea, which had already taken inception in her mind, expanding quickly there, — “if I told you where in this city of ours there are kept the deadliest specimens of your own reptile races to gratify the curiosity of visitors, would you have the courage — But, no! it is ridiculous. You were only boasting because you believed that there were none of those venomous creatures here; you would not grasp the puff-adder or the cobra di capello in that hand of yours?”

A slight smile of scorn appeared upon the lips of the Hindu woman, and she said, “This hand of mine has often and often clutched the deadliest cobra, and its writhing form has coiled itself around my naked arm. To snatch the reptile deftly by the neck, to hold it in such a way that it could not bend its head so as to plunge its fangs into my flesh, to amuse myself with gazing upon its expanded hood, and in marking the rage that vibrated in its small bright eyes, then with a lightning suddenness to fling it back again into the basket of the serpent charmer, — this was a freak, woman, which I have often and often performed.”

“And you would perform it again, or at least a portion of it?” said Madame Angelique, with a sort of dreadful shuddering joy, as she once more looked up eagerly into the ayah’s countenance.

“Ay, that would I,” answered Sagoonah. “But it is useless thus to speak to one who is incredulous — Ah! now that I bethink me, this very afternoon will the Lady Indora take Christina Ashton to visit some gardens in this metropolis of yours, where there are lions and tigers and other wild beasts pent up in cages, and it is promised that I shall accompany those ladies. If you were there to see, you would soon satisfy yourself whether the eye of the tiger can infuse terror into my heart. I who have seen the fierce animal loose and at large in our Indian jungles, crouching in readiness to spring upon the elephant which bore me in the castle on its back — ”

“And you are going to those gardens this afternoon?” exclaimed Madame Angelique, almost wild with delight; “the coincidence is indeed strange, because I had an idea — ”

“What mean you?” asked Sagoonah.

“I mean,” responded the infamous Frenchwoman, “that

in those very gardens to which you are going, — if thither you indeed go — ”

“ I tell you that just now,” interrupted Sagoonah, impatiently, “ only a minute before I issued forth from the dwelling to join you here, I overheard her ladyship inform Christina of the little plan she meditated to afford her a variety of scene, and thereby cheer her spirits somewhat after the incidents of the past night; and Miss Ashton, who gives a ready assent to everything her benefactress proposes, expressed her thanks. All this was said in my presence, and the Lady Indora added, with a smile, that I should accompany them, for that inasmuch as I had seen the wildest animals free amidst the jungles of my own native land, and full of menacing mischief, I should now behold them pent up behind iron bars, and reduced to subjection, if not to tameness, by the dominant power of man.”

“ Ah, then you will go to those gardens!” exclaimed Madame Angelique. “ But did not your mistress tell you that there you will likewise behold specimens of the deadliest reptiles which belong to your own native Hindustan? ”

“ No,” answered Sagoonah. “ Perhaps her ladyship is ignorant thereof.”

“ And yet it is so,” rejoined Madame Angelique. “ A special house is devoted in those gardens to the keeping of the reptiles, and there will you see them in glass cases. If you have the opportunity, Sagoonah, would you dash your hand through the frontage of one of those cases, seize upon the reptile within, and bear it away with you by some suitable means, — say, for instance, a thick leathern bag that you might have concealed about your person? ”

“ I would do it,” answered Sagoonah. “ But is it possible that such opportunity could present itself? ”

“ I have often visited those gardens,” replied Madame Angelique, “ and have been alone for half an hour at a time in the reptile house.”

“ You love, then, to gaze upon those venomous creatures? ” said Sagoonah, and even under the coldness of her tone and look there was a certain satire perceptible, as if she meant to imply that there was a sympathy between the nature of the Frenchwoman and that of the snakes which she loved to contemplate.

“ Yes, I have frequently stood to gaze upon those reptiles,”

answered Madame Angelique, not choosing to notice that half-covert irony which pervaded Sagoonah's speech. "I tell you that you will find the opportunity if you have the courage to avail yourself of it. Those who may enter the reptile house afterward will believe that the glass has been broken by accident, and that the reptile has glided forth of its own accord. There will be consternation; of that no matter. You will know the secret, but you need not proclaim it. The cobra — if it did really thus escape, as it will be supposed — must go somewhere, and why not find its way to the villa of your mistress? And if to the villa, why not to her own bed? Who, then, shall dare tax you with the deed? Not even Christina Ashton would for an instant entertain the suspicion that the deed was your own."

Sagoonah gazed for a few moments in a sort of astonishment, not altogether unblended with admiration, upon the woman who despite the failure of her former artifices had a devilish ingenuity sufficient for the concoction of such a scheme as this. Then the ayah mused for a few instants more, and at length she said, "Yes, if the opportunity serve, I will do it. And now begone."

Madame Angelique sped away, her heart fiercely yet shudderingly elate with the horrible triumph which she had just achieved in respect to again bending Sagoonah to her purpose.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the Princess Indora and Christina Ashton, attended by Sagoonah, alighted from the carriage at the entrance of the Zoological Gardens in the Regent's Park. We have already said that her Highness, the King of Inderabad's daughter, frequently — indeed, almost daily — rode out in her equipage, but this was the first time that she had visited any public institution or scene of recreation. She had, however, for some time longed to behold those animals which she had often seen wild in her native country, here in complete subjection to the power of man; and she now availed herself of an opportunity when, for the kindest reasons, she sought to cheer Christina's spirits and treat her to a change from that monotony of existence which she feared that her young friend experienced at the villa at Bayswater. She knew nothing of Lord Octavian Meredith's attachment to Christina, nor of the painful incidents connected therewith;

she had therefore no reason to hesitate about bringing our heroine into the vicinage of that nobleman's dwelling, for she knew that it was situated in the Regent's Park. On the other hand, when the proposal to visit the gardens was made to Christina, she had not dared hint that she would rather not proceed into a neighbourhood where she stood a chance of falling in with Lord Octavian, because to have raised any objection of the kind would as a matter of course have necessitated the revelation of those circumstances which maiden modesty and virgin bashfulness naturally prompted her to conceal.

There were very few visitors at the Zoological Gardens on the occasion when the Princess Indora and Christina, attended by Sagoonah, thus visited them. Her Highness wore an Oriental garb, but the very plainest which belonged to her wardrobe, and she had carefully dispensed with much ornament, so as to avoid as much as possible attracting notice. The ayah was clad in her habitual white costume; Christina's toilet displayed an elegant neatness. Three such beings could not possibly enter a public place without striking the notice of those who were also there, few though they were. All three being characterized by a remarkable beauty, — that of Indora so magnificent, that of Sagoonah so darkly splendid, and that of our heroine so exquisitely interesting in its classic perfection, — two of them moreover wearing peculiar costumes, — it was impossible that they could escape special attention. Yet the persons who were there pressed not rudely upon them, but moved as it were at a respectful distance, until when it was whispered by one of the officials that the principal object of interest was an Eastern lady of rank and fortune, and then this announcement was taken as a hint that the little party wished to be as free from observation as possible during their visit to the gardens.

At first Sagoonah kept tolerably close to her mistress and Christina, but gradually she increased the interval between herself and them. This she was easily enabled to do without exciting any particular attention on their part, for it appeared by no means strange that she should linger a little behind them to contemplate some particular animal or bird belonging to a clime far remote and different from her own, and which specimens of natural history she had consequently

never seen before. We will not dwell upon unnecessary details; suffice it to observe that after having inspected the various objects which presented themselves to their view in one portion of the gardens, they passed through the tunnel and entered upon the other division. Facing them was a placard indicating a particular direction, and with these words, "To the Reptiles."

Sagoonah understood them, and a thrill vibrated throughout her entire frame. She felt for something that was concealed under her long white dress, and having assured herself that it was all safe there, she looked for a moment as if she had already achieved some grand triumph; then suddenly relapsing into her wonted demeanour, she followed the princess and our heroine into the reptile house. There, in cases of different sizes, and each having a frontage of thick plate glass, were all the most terrible specimens of the serpent species. In one a huge python, sixteen or seventeen feet long, and as thick in the largest part of its form as a man's thigh, was creeping lazily out of a tank of water; in another an immense boa-constrictor was coiled around the branch of a tree placed there for his comfort and accommodation; more serpents of the same species were to be seen in other cages, — some winding their slimy lengths over the gravel strewn on the floors, others coiled up on thick blankets, or protruding their heads from amidst the folds of horse-cloths, or licking the glass frontages of their dens with their forked tongues. The venomous reptiles were to be seen in much smaller cases on the opposite side of the room. There was the rattlesnake with a host of little ones coiling, writhing, and wriggling about their parent, — a horrible and loathsome brood. There was the puff-adder, with its hideous bloated head, the most transient glance at which was calculated to send a shudder through the frame of the beholder who knew that its bite was death. But not less venomous was the dark cobra, with its head reared up from amidst its coils, its hood expanded, and its throat of a shell-like appearance and whiteness. It was upon this object that Sagoonah's eyes at once riveted themselves, and if any one had observed her at the time, it would have seemed as if those luminous black orbs of hers reflected the reptile-fire which gleamed from the pupils of the hooded snake. But there was no one in the room except herself, her mistress, and

Christina, and quickly averting her eyes from the object of her vivid interest, she affected to bestow her attention on the more monstrous serpents.

"To me, my dear Christina," said the princess, "the aspect of the greater portion of these species of reptiles is more or less familiar, and if you had lived a few years in my native country, you would have become sufficiently accustomed to the same spectacles as to be able to look upon them now without so strange a shudder as that which I perceive has just swept through your form."

"I pray your ladyship to pardon me," said our heroine; "do not deem me foolishly weak, if I assure you that I can remain here no longer to look upon these reptiles."

"Come then, Christina; we will seek some other and more agreeable objects of interest. Sagoonah," added the princess, addressing the ayah in their own native tongue, "you can follow at your leisure if you have any particular wish to remain here awhile and contemplate these creatures, most of which must, however, be sufficiently familiar to you."

"I will follow almost immediately, my lady," responded Sagoonah. "Monsters of this particular species" — and she looked toward the python — "I have never seen before."

The Princess Indora hurried Christina from the snake-room, and as they passed forth, a glow of triumph and satisfaction again thrilled through Sagoonah's form. She watched them until they disappeared from her view by suddenly diverging from the straight path leading from the snake-house along the back of the canal; then she hastened to the door, she issued forth a few paces, her eyes were rapidly swept around, no one was nigh, and she hurried back into the reptile-room. A sinister fire burned in her large dark eyes as she approached the case containing the deadly cobra. He darted his head somewhat forward, as if with an inveterate malignity longing to spring at her, but yet with the instinctive knowledge that there was a barrier of glass between them and that he would only sustain a hurt by dashing himself ineffectually against that transparent frontage. The calm intrepidity of ten thousand amazons was concentrated in the soul of Sagoonah then. She glanced at the arrangements of the cases; she saw that the glass

fronts were made to slide up and down, but that they were fastened by small brass padlocks, one of which was fixed on the top of every case. She tried the padlock above the case in which the cobra lay, and as if Satan himself had purposely lent his aid to further her foul design, the padlock yielded to her hand. The keeper had either omitted to lock it, or else had so slovenly done his work as not to see that the semicircular bolt had not been thrust in far enough to meet the lock itself. But whichever it were, the padlock was now removed by Sagoonah's hand, and again did her eyes flash forth the fire of triumph.

Once more she sped to the entrance of the snake-house and swept her looks around. Still the coast was altogether clear, and she retraced her way toward the deadly cobra's den. Then from beneath the folds of her garments she drew forth a small bag of the thickest and strongest leather, — a bag that was about large enough to contain a fowl or small rabbit. She had so skilfully arranged a piece of whipcord to pass along the top or opening, that it could be closed and drawn tight in the twinkling of an eye, just as a lady's reticule is made to shut. This bag she opened to a suitable width, and placed it in readiness to receive the reptile. Then without the slightest fear — without even so much as the faintest sensation of a curdling of the blood — she lifted the glass with her left hand, having her right in readiness to use at the moment that should seem advisable. The reptile appeared to watch for a few instants the ascending glass, as if it were something to which it was totally unaccustomed, for be it well understood that the glasses of those cases were never raised while the reptiles were in them, and only when they had been driven or lifted into an adjoining empty case by a stout wire passed through a small hole at the top. Thus the cobra now seemed to follow with its cold, vibrating eyes the ascending glass, as if it were something that struck it with a vague terror; then it closed its hood, turned its head around, and began to glide to the back part of the case. Not more quickly could the reptile itself have darted at Sagoonah than was her right hand thrust into the case, and ere her eye could wink she had clutched the serpent by the neck, but so close to its head that it could not possibly turn its mouth sufficiently so as to touch her finger even with its tongue. Its tail was instantaneously coiled round Sagoonah's

dark but admirably modelled arm, but in another moment the head of the reptile was forced into the opening of the bag. A partial drawing of the string constricted the opening to just the limit of the reptile's dimensions, so that it could not turn its head to bite as it gradually glided through her loosening grasp, and just as the point of its tail slipped through her palm, the string was drawn completely tight. Sagoonah then lowered the glass to within about an inch of the bottom of the case, thus giving it the appearance as if the serpent itself by its own efforts had raised it thus far, and she sped to rejoin her mistress and Christina, — the leathern bag with its fearful contents being concealed under her garments. She had not been altogether separated from the princess and our heroine more than five minutes before she thus overtook them, and it was with a demeanour as calm and collected as if nothing at all extraordinary had taken place.

Our young heroine had been shocked and sickened by the contemplation of the reptiles; she felt faint, she looked very pale, and the Princess Indora accordingly resolved to take her home at once. They were in the close vicinage of the revolving gate which affords egress exactly opposite the principal entrance; the carriage was in readiness, and thus within two or three minutes after Sagoonah had rejoined them, they were seated in the equipage once more.

A quarter of an hour had probably elapsed from the departure of the princess, when the principal keeper of the snake-house, on entering the room, was smitten with horror on observing that the glass front of the cobra's case was raised, and that the cobra itself had disappeared. The cold perspiration burst out of the man's forehead, and he shuddered with a convulsing terror as the dreadful thought struck him that from some corner the deadly serpent might spring upon him. But the room is so arranged that a few moments' careful scrutiny is sufficient for the eye to penetrate into every nook, and the keeper, regaining somewhat of his self-possession, was thus enabled to satisfy himself that the cobra was not within that room. He was a prudent man; he did not wish to excite a consternation amongst the visitors in the grounds; he closed the glass of the case, and sped away to the superintending authority of the gardens. This individual was speedily on the spot; there was evidence

to prove that the padlock had been neglected by the under-keeper, and the natural surmise was that the reptile, by dint of its own muscular action, had succeeded in raising the glass. The circumstance was whispered to some of the most trustworthy of the men employed on the grounds, and a search was instituted for the missing snake, but it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that this search terminated unsuccessfully. The matter was consequently hushed up, and to those who inquired what had become of the cobra, the response was given that it had died.

CHAPTER VII

THE COBRA

THE princess, Christina, and Sagoonah returned to the villa, and by the time of their arrival, our heroine's indisposition had passed off. She expressed a hope that her Highness would not accuse her of any foolish affectation, and Indora hastened to reassure her on the point in the most friendly terms.

The hours passed on; it was close upon ten o'clock in the evening, and in a short time the princess would retire to her couch. Sagoonah had the principal charge of her mistress's bedchamber, and she knew perfectly well that the English maid servants would not enter it after she herself had performed the last offices there. She likewise felt tolerably certain that the cobra when once placed in the bed would be too well satisfied with its warm, comfortable quarters to leave them speedily. At all events when the door should be closed, Sagoonah knew full well that the snake could not possibly get out, and therefore even if it should leave the bed and coil itself up in any other part of the room, the ayah calculated upon the hideous certainty that the princess must become the victim of its fangs. She was all the more confident in this respect from certain little circumstances which we may as well mention. Indora's dressing-room joined the bedchamber; there was, as a matter of course, a door of communication between them, but the dressing-room was likewise entered by a door from the passage. It was by this latter door that the princess was wont to seek her dressing-room of an evening, and Sagoonah's presence was never required for any length of time in aiding the princess with her night toilet. Thus by keeping the door of communication closed, Sagoonah knew that the snake would

be confined to the bedchamber, and that she herself would incur no danger, while in the dressing-room, of becoming its victim instead of her mistress. Such were the cold-blooded, fiendish, diabolical calculations which the vile Hindu woman weighed in her mind while pondering the fearful deed of iniquity that she contemplated.

It was close upon ten o'clock when Sagoonah had completed the wonted arrangements in the dressing-room and the bedchamber. She was careful to place in the dressing-room every article that her mistress might need in order that there should be no chance of requiring anything to be fetched from the bedchamber. The arrangements being completed, Sagoonah ascended to her own room, unlocked her box, and stood carefully back for a moment to convince herself that the deadly reptile had not by any means escaped from the leathern bag. Nor had it. Then Sagoonah acquired the further certainty that the strings of the bag were tight, and concealing it beneath the folds of her white drapery, she descended to Indora's chamber. Approaching the bed she drew down the clothes, and with exceeding caution she relaxed the strings of the bag somewhat, keeping her eyes riveted with scrutinizing intentness upon the opening thus made. In about a minute the hideous reptile began to protrude its head, and just as the commencement of its neck was visible, Sagoonah grasped it with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand, — so quickly, so nicely, and with such admirable expertness that the snake had not time to plunge its fangs into her flesh. She now drew it completely out of the bag; again was her arm quickly encircled by its dark slimy folds, but she speedily disengaged the coils from that arm, and with one dexterous effort threw the serpent into the middle of the bed. It instantaneously sprang up to dart at her, but she commenced a low yet quick half-humming, half-singing strain. The reptile was charmed, and its head gradually sank down amidst its coils. Then she covered it up with the bedclothes, and retreated toward the door of the dressing-room, but never once averting her eyes from the couch, lest the deadly serpent should be gliding after her. It did not make its appearance; she entered the dressing-room, and the door closed between herself and the chamber in which she had left the venomous cobra. Ascending to her own room, she deposited the leathern bag in her

trunk, which she relocked, and then proceeded to join her fellow domestics, with an air as settled and composed as that which she had worn when overtaking her mistress and Christina in the Zoological Gardens after her final issue from the snake-house.

Meanwhile the Princess Indora and our heroine were seated together in the elegantly furnished drawing-room, and the timepiece on the mantel proclaimed with its silver tongue the hour of ten. Scarcely had it finished striking when the sounds of a vehicle stopping at the garden-gate were heard, and these were immediately followed by the loud ringing of that gate-bell. The summons was answered, and the Princess Indora expressed to Christina her wonder who could possibly be coming at that hour of the night. In a minute or two Sagoonah made her appearance, and having performed the wonted low salutation, she stood in the attitude of a slave in the presence of the princess, waiting to be questioned.

"What is it, Sagoonah?" asked Indora, who, since Christina had been with her, was accustomed to speak to her ayah in the English language when in the young lady's presence, — not merely because she was unwilling to seem to have any secrets with our heroine, but likewise because she wished to enable Sagoonah to have as much practice as possible in that tongue in which Christina was her tutoress.

"May it please your ladyship," answered the ayah, "two messengers from your royal father humbly solicit an immediate audience."

"Messengers from my dear father?" said Indora, clasping her hands with a gush of filial emotions. "Let them at once be admitted."

Sagoonah bowed and withdrew. Christina rose from her seat, and was likewise about to retire from motives of delicacy, when the princess retained her, saying, "Sit down, my dear friend. These messengers can have no secret to communicate which you may not hear, and even if they had, they would converse with me in a language which you cannot understand."

Our heroine accordingly resumed her seat, and in a few moments Sagoonah introduced the two messengers from the King of Inderabad. The ayah retired, and the messengers prostrated themselves at the feet of her who was heiress

to the crown of their royal master. Both were of the dark Hindu colour, and both were handsomely dressed in their native Oriental garb, — the chief material of their raiment being a dark velvet embroidered and laced with gold. One was a fine tall man, of portly form and commanding presence; his age might have been about fifty, and he was the senior in years as well as in rank. His companion was short of stature, slightly made and thin, with an angular profile, and restless eyes of exceeding sharpness. He was scarcely forty years of age, and Christina perceived that his garb, though handsome, was in several respects less rich than that of his comrade. That they were both devotedly attached to the royal family whom they served, might be judged, — first of all, from the fact of their being chosen as the confidential messengers of the king to his daughter, and secondly, from the look of joy and satisfaction which overspread their countenances the moment they were ushered into the presence of Indora.

But those looks, so expressive of the natural ebullitions of their faithful hearts, almost instantaneously subsided into an air of profoundest respect, as they sank down upon their knees at the feet of the princess. For a moment tears started into Indora's eyes as she beheld those personages whose presence so vividly reminded her of the palatial and paternal home which she had abandoned in order to follow the object of her devoted love to a strange and far-off clime, but quickly conquering her emotions — or at least preventing herself from being led into any further betrayal of them — she addressed the two messengers. She spoke in her native tongue, and though Christina understood it not, yet she comprehended sufficient from the tones and looks of her Highness to enable her to judge that she was speaking most kindly to them, and that she was thanking them for the fidelity and devotion they had displayed. She gave them her hand to kiss; each touched it respectfully with his lips, at the same time bowing profoundly once more. The princess then made a sign for them to rise from their kneeling posture, and as they obeyed, the senior emissary produced a letter which he tendered to her Highness. She took it with a trembling hand, and fresh tears sprang into her eyes as she beheld the superscription in the well-known writing of her father. She motioned the messengers to seat themselves,

and this they did upon an ottoman on the opposite side of the apartment. Hastily wiping away her tears, Indora perused the letter; it was a somewhat lengthy one, and its contents engaged her for upwards of ten minutes.

During this interval Christina occasionally glanced toward the two emissaries, whose peculiar costume she naturally had a certain curiosity to examine, when it gradually occurred to her that the younger messenger was exhibiting a certain feeling of uneasiness. At first he, as well as his comrade, had remained seated with statue-like immovability, but by degrees the younger one began to look around, to give slight starts, to seem even as if he were shuddering and trembling, to sniff the air with his nostrils, and then to fix his naturally piercing eyes upon some corner of the apartment with an additional and increasing keenness. It was evident also to Christina that he strove to surmount whatsoever feeling thus moved him, but that it was gradually growing stronger than himself. Even his companion, the senior messenger, at length perceived it, and bent a reproving look upon his comrade; then the latter became motionless and rigid for another minute or two, but at the expiration thereof he again yielded to that sense of nervous uneasiness which though so visible was yet utterly unaccountable to our wondering heroine.

The Princess Indora finished the perusal of the letter, and for a few minutes she remained absorbed in the reflections which a communication from her father might naturally be supposed to engender in her mind. Then she addressed a few words to the senior emissary, and he responded at some considerable length, as if he were giving explanations in answer to a question put.

"These faithful emissaries," said the princess, addressing herself to Christina, "come as you heard Sagoonah announce, from my royal father. They left Inderabad three months back, and they have travelled by the overland route to this country. From Bombay they were accompanied by an English interpreter, whose services they there procured, and thus they have experienced no difficulty in the prosecution of their journey. They only reached London this evening, and they beg me to excuse them for having come hither at so late an hour, but they judged that I should be only too well satisfied to receive the earliest tidings from my beloved

father. He is well, but he misses me greatly. His letter is full of kindness, and he urges me to return to my native land with the least possible delay. I have been expecting some such summons as this — and yet the purpose which brought me to England is not as yet accomplished. It cannot however be long," continued Indora, in a musing strain rather than actually addressing herself to Christina; "no, it cannot be long ere my object shall be worked out. Heaven has already aided in placing me on the right track! The time, therefore, I feel confident is not far remote when I shall be enabled to obey my father's summons, and it was this idea, Christina, which made me tell you yesterday that if I am soon compelled by circumstances to leave England, you should not find yourself unprovided for."

Our heroine expressed her gratitude with a look fervently bent upon her high-born friend, and then the princess resumed the conversation with the senior emissary. But by this time the uneasiness of the junior one had risen into a sore trouble and agitation. He gathered up his legs completely under him on the ottoman, his slender wiry form appeared to be convulsed with spasmodic writhings, his eyes vibrated with a visible terror, he sniffed the air, the perspiration stood upon his dark, bronzed brow. Indora now observed the condition of the man, and stopping short in some remark which she was addressing to his companion, she gazed upon him with bewildered astonishment. He threw himself at her feet, looked shudderingly around, and then ejaculated something which had the instantaneous effect of making the Princess Indora herself start, as if abruptly smitten with the infection of the man's own terror. But instantaneously recovering her self-possession, she smiled, and addressed him in words the tones of which were evidently fraught with encouragement, as Christina herself could not fail to comprehend.

"You will be amazed, my dear friend," said the princess, addressing herself in English to our heroine, "when I explain to you the reason of all this, — the more so, too, that the coincidence is strange, after we ourselves have only this very day visited a certain place. Compose yourself, Christina, because you know it is as impossible as I have just been endeavouring to persuade this messenger that it is, but he expresses his belief — nay, even his conviction —

that there is a serpent of deadly nature within these walls."

Christina had recoiled with sickness and loathing from the contemplation of the reptiles in the Zoological Gardens, and it was no affected sensation on her part. But she was not a silly, frivolous, weak-minded girl to yield herself to terrors when her own sound and steady judgment gave her every reason to believe that there was no actual foundation for them. She therefore at once said, "Yes, it is impossible, my lady, for we have no venomous reptiles in this country, except the viper and adder, whose bites are seldom if ever fatal, and at all events, I have never read nor heard of one instance of their introducing themselves into houses."

Meanwhile the trembling messenger had risen from his kneeling posture, and slowly but keenly were his looks being plunged into every corner of the room. The senior messenger had started up in consternation when his comrade had ejaculatingly announced his conviction of the presence of a serpent within those walls, but he was somewhat cheered and soothed by the assurances which the princess had given, although he still looked doubtingly upon his Hindu companion.

"It is at least strange," said the princess, speaking more hastily than before to Christina, "for this individual" (alluding to the junior messenger) "was originally one of the most celebrated snake-charmers in all India, until for a particular service rendered my royal father took him into his household and assigned him a confidential post. It is the peculiar instinct, if I may use the term, of some of these snake-charmers that they can actually tell when they are in the vicinage of that most deadly of reptiles, the cobra di capello. Perhaps it is an exhalation from their slimy forms which impregnates the atmosphere, and which, though imperceptible to those unacquainted with the peculiarities of that species of serpent, is nevertheless sufficient to strike the extreme sensitiveness of the astute snake-charmers."

"But as for a cobra being within these walls, my lady," said Christina, "it is simply impossible," and yet as she spoke she shuddered at the bare idea.

"I will question him again," observed the princess. "But look at him! assuredly this is no groundless nor mere panic terror under which he is labouring."

She addressed the Hindu in a few words; his answer was given with rapid utterance and vehement gesticulation, as if while in the expression of a positive conviction he were only held back by a sense of the respect due to a superior from upbraiding her Highness for doubting him.

"He persists in his assertion," said Indora, again turning to our heroine. "Do not alarm yourself, but something must be done. I know this man well; he would not attempt to deceive me — Besides, look at him again, and judge for yourself."

Christina indeed had not taken her eyes off the Hindu; his agitation was painfully increasing, and she was convinced that it was most real. He appeared to be writhing as if in actual torture, shuddering to the innermost confines of his being; his teeth chattered as if with the cold, — the perspiration stood in large drops upon his bronzed forehead. The princess addressed him again; he spoke vehemently, but still with the completest respectfulness, in reply, and he extended his hands as if he asked for something.

"He persists in declaring that there is a cobra in the house," said the princess, again speaking to Christina, and he asks for some musical instrument, which, if he once possessed it, would dispel all his terror and make him feel that he suddenly becomes the master of the serpent with no fear of falling its victim."

"Mark has a flageolet," hastily suggested Christina; "your ladyship knows that he is fond of shutting himself up in his own room and playing it —"

"An excellent thought of yours, my sweet young friend," responded Indora, "and as certain orders must be issued, it is absolutely necessary to summon one of the servants at any risk."

"At any risk, my lady?" said Christina, turning pale. "Then you yourself begin to believe —"

"I know not what to think," interrupted Indora. "On the one hand it seems impossible, but on the other it strikes me that the matter is not to be neglected. The longer I look at that man, the more I am staggered — But we are wasting time, Christina. Have the goodness to ring the bell twice; it is the special summons for Mark."

The bell was rung accordingly, and it was promptly answered, for Mark was in the hall conversing with the English

interpreter who had accompanied the two messengers to the villa. Mark, as the reader will remember, had himself been in India, and he was therefore well pleased to fall in with a fellow countryman who had just arrived from that Orient clime, and who could tell him all the news. Mark's presence in the hall had been productive of one beneficial effect, although he little suspected it, for it prevented the ayah from stealing up-stairs to listen on the landing at what was taking place in the drawing-room, — a proceeding in which the wily Hindu woman was very likely to have indulged, were it not that she dreaded the idea of exciting Mark's suspicion. She had already said in the servants' room that her work was all done up-stairs; no bell summoned her, she had no excuse for ascending those stairs, and they were so situated with respect to the entrance-hall and the landing above that if she had gone up and loitered on the latter, she would have stood every chance of being detected by Mark, who was stationed in the former.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. Mark answered the summons given by the double ringing of the drawing-room bell, and the princess hastily explained to him the strange but serious apprehension entertained by the Hindu messenger. The faithful domestic was himself somewhat staggered, though it was certainly singular for an Englishman to be told that there was a venomous reptile of India within the walls of a dwelling on the outskirts of London, but still he was staggered, because he beheld the excessive agitation of the Hindu, and his experiences of Indian life were sufficient to convince him that it was a real terror under which the emissary was labouring. Besides, Mark was prudent, and he knew full well that as an apprehension was created, it would be better to have it dispelled as soon as possible, no matter whether it should be proved groundless or else justified by the result.

"Say not a word to the other domestics," observed the princess, hurriedly, though not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind; "it will be useless to terrify them —"

"But Sagoonah and Tippoo, my lady, will hear the music," suggested Mark, "and they will know what it means."

"True," ejaculated the princess; then, after a moment's reflection, she added, "Go you first and fetch the flageolet, then return to the servants' hall, see that all the domestics

are there, lock the door, put the key in your pocket, and tell them what you will. At all events you will prevent them from rushing frantically about the house, or escaping into the garden — But go, good Mark, and for Heaven's sake look well on the staircase and elsewhere, for if the horrible suspicion be indeed correct — But go, Mark, I am needlessly wasting time!"

The faithful intendant of Indora's household quitted the room, and immediately he had disappeared, the junior messenger who now seemed to have become more calm said something to the princess.

"He still perseveres in declaring that there is a cobra within the walls of this villa," said the princess to Christina, "but since the door has been opened and shut twice during the last few minutes, he says that his instinctive susceptibility tells him that the reptile is not here, in this room, but in some other, and he thinks overhead."

"Good heavens, the bedchambers!" ejaculated Christina, who at each successive stage of these singular proceedings was more deeply catching the infection of terror, notwithstanding the natural strength of her mind.

"Do not be alarmed," replied the princess, now completely cool and collected; "it may be all an error; it may arise from something exhaling a peculiar odour which strikes upon this man's exquisitely keen sensitiveness, but if, on the other hand, there be really a cobra within these walls, rest assured that by the aid of the music it will be discovered and destroyed."

"But if it should suddenly spring on one of these messengers?" said Christina, with a frightened look of inquiry.

"There is no chance when once the piping begins — But here is Mark, and now the mystery will soon be solved."

The intendant appeared with the flageolet, which he had been to fetch from the servants' hall, and having handed it to the junior emissary, he hastened off again, to do Indora's bidding in respect to locking himself in with the other servants, in the room where they habitually sat. In that room the English interpreter was now seated; there also were Sagoonah and the Indian man servant Tippoo, the groom, and two English females (for the princess had taken an additional maid into her service since Christina became an inmate of the villa). The coachman did not sleep at the

house, and had already gone to his own home. On returning to that room, Mark deliberately locked the door and consigned the key to his pocket. He was the last man in the world — much too sedate and serious — to play a practical joke, and therefore his fellow servants at once comprehended that there was something strange and unusual in progress, while perhaps Sagoonah, having a guilty conscience, might be smitten with the suspicion that the proceeding related to her own infernal project, but if so, she outwardly betrayed nothing.

“What is the meaning of this, Mr. Mark?” inquired the groom, but in that tone of respect which he was always accustomed to adopt toward his mistress’s intendant.

“You need not alarm yourselves,” responded Mark; “it is merely a wise precaution. Every one knows we have a certain species of venomous reptile in this country, and there is some little reason to suppose that one has got into the house.”

“Well, Mr. Mark,” exclaimed the groom, scarcely able to prevent himself from bursting out into a laugh, “and if there should be such a thing as a viper in the house, it is not by locking ourselves in this room that we shall get it out again. I would just as soon tackle it as I did the large rat that I killed in the stable yesterday morning.”

“There happens to be a snake-charmer from India here this evening,” replied Mark, “and perhaps her ladyship has a mind to see whether his skill extends to English reptiles as well as to Asiatic ones. But hark! he has commenced. Those are the sounds of my flageolet.”

The two English maid servants were very much alarmed at the idea of a viper being in the house; the groom now laughed outright, Mark continued serious, and the English interpreter knew not exactly what to think. Tippoo, the Indian man servant, appeared to be suddenly seized with terror as the sounds of the peculiar melody which the junior messenger drew from the flageolet reached the servants’ hall, for Tippoo instantaneously recognized the particular strains used in charming the cobra in his own native land. As for Sagoonah, she saw at once that the presence of the reptile was suspected; she was at no loss to conjecture how the instincts of the quondam snake-charmer must have led to the discovery, she perceived that her project was ruined, and she

inwardly cursed the inauspicious arrival of the messengers on this particular night. But so far as her own personal safety was concerned, she had no dread; she felt convinced that it could not be for an instant suspected that she had brought away the cobra from the gardens, or that she had placed it in the couch of a mistress whom she was believed to love with so sincere and inflexible a devotion.

We must now return to the drawing-room, which Mark had so recently quitted, leaving the junior messenger in possession of the flageolet. This individual made a sign to his superior, who at once drew his keen sharp sword from its sheath, and was thus in readiness to act as circumstances might direct. The junior emissary — whose last remnant of terror had altogether vanished, and who now seemed to be inspired with a confidence as great as his recent alarm — began to play upon the flageolet in a peculiar manner. At the same time he turned himself slowly around, as if moving on a pivot where he was standing, and his searching eyes thus gradually embraced the whole circuit of the apartment. In a few minutes he desisted, and said something to the princess.

“His first impression is fully confirmed,” remarked her Highness to Christina; “he is convinced that the cobra is not in this room, for if so, the reptile would speedily have come dancing forth from its lurking-place. You and I will remain here while they pursue their search elsewhere.”

“And your ladyship does now really believe,” said Christina, shuddering, “that there is such a venomous reptile about these premises?”

“If I were to give you the assurance,” rejoined Indora, “that there is nothing of the kind to be apprehended in my estimation, I should be speaking untruthfully. And yet, on the other hand, I am at a loss to comprehend how it can possibly be. But we shall soon be relieved from uncertainty and suspense.”

Indora now gave the emissaries, in her own native language, some information as to the other apartments, and they quitted the drawing-room together, — the junior one being careful to recommence his play upon the flageolet the instant the door was opened. They issued forth, closing the door behind them, and the peculiar music which the Hindu made upon the instrument continued to reach the ears of Indora

and Christina as the emissaries passed across the landing to another room. The princess sat calm and self-possessed, but Christina could not help experiencing strange sensations creeping over her. What if by any accident the Hindu's instinct had so far failed him, and the music had so far lost its wonted charm, that the serpent — if a serpent indeed there were — was actually in that very room? What if presently it should come gliding forth from beneath some piece of furniture, with that stealthy insidiousness which characterizes the reptile species alone? For aught Christina knew to the contrary, death might be close at hand; the agent of destruction might be noiselessly insinuating itself toward herself or her much-loved benefactress.

“Do not be alarmed, my dear friend,” said the princess, penetrating what was thus passing in the mind of our heroine; “you may rest assured that the instinct of the snake-charmer cannot fail him, especially one who in his time was so famous as this Hindu emissary. You would be astonished to behold those snake-charmers in my own native land. They not merely play with the deadly cobra; they irritate and enrage the reptile, but all the while being careful that the peculiar music is sustained, for if the flow of the melody which constitutes the charm for the serpent and the talisman of the charmer's safety were to cease, that instant were death. There are European travellers and writers who have endeavoured to prove that the poisonous fangs have been torn from the mouth of the cobra before the snake-charmer will venture to play with it, and that therefore the feat resolves itself into a mere piece of jugglery which could be as well performed with the most innocuous of reptiles. But those writers err, for cases have come within mine own experience — or, rather, within my own knowledge — where men have been bitten by the reptiles with which they were playing a little time before, and they had died of those bites. For instance, a few years ago, in my father's sovereign city of Inderabad, an itinerant snake-charmer earned the applause of crowds in every street by the introduction of some novelties into the wonted routine of the performance adopted by men of his class. He retired to rest at night in a hut on the outskirts of the city, — his purse being well filled with coin, and his basket of reptiles — the source of his gains — safely secured, as he thought. In the morning the man was

found dead, and a slight puncture on the cheek — or, rather, two small punctures, close together, and not larger than if they had been formed by the point of a lancet — indicated the cause of his death. One of the cobras had contrived to escape from the basket, and as there was no charming music at the time to fascinate its ear, it plunged its fangs into the flesh of its master. It was found coiled up in a corner of the hut, gorged with some small animal that it had swallowed, and being inert after its meal was easily destroyed.”

While the princess was yet speaking, the sounds of the two emissaries’ footsteps were heard overhead; they were evidently passing along the passage in which the principal bedchambers were situated. The music had never ceased playing from the instant they quitted the drawing-room, and though Christina was somewhat encouraged by the assurance which the princess had ere now given her, she notwithstanding still experienced the cold creeping sensation as if a prolonged shudder were continuously creeping over her.

“Now they are in my chamber,” said the princess, as the footsteps were heard in the apartment precisely over the drawing-room. “Hark! the music plays louder — it grows more rapid. I know its meaning well. Yes, Christina, that man’s instinct did not deceive him. There is assuredly a deadly reptile in the house — Ah! and it is in my own room.”

Our heroine gave a half-stifled shriek of affright as she threw herself into the arms of the princess, weeping and sobbing upon that lady’s bosom, and murmuring in a broken voice, “Just Heaven! if it should prove so, oh, what would have become of your ladyship had not these messengers arrived! It is Providence that has sent them.”

Indora strained her young friend to her breast, and imprinted a kiss upon her pure, polished forehead; then a sudden ejaculation burst from Indora, as the music suddenly ceased in the chamber overhead.

“What is it?” asked Christina, and her breath was suspended with a suspense most poignantly painful.

“It is all over,” responded the princess; “the reptile is discovered and is destroyed. Hark to the joyous tones of those men’s voices. But thither they come.”

And it was so. The two emissaries were descending the stairs with much more rapid steps than when they had

mounted them a few minutes back. The music was not renewed; it was therefore evident that all danger was past and gone. The door opened, and the senior messenger hastened into the room, where falling upon one knee at Indora's feet, he opened a towel which he carried in his hands, and displayed a cobra cut into three pieces. Those fragments of the reptile were yet writhing convulsively, but all real life was out of them, — it was mere spasmodic action which the sections thus displayed, and the snake was incapable of mischief. But Christina averted her looks with ineffable loathing, as well as with a cold, shuddering terror. The princess herself flung but one glance on the remains of the deadly reptile, and in obedience to a sign from her, the messenger covered them up again with the towel. He spoke in answer to some question which the princess put, and then she bade the junior emissary likewise approach. He also knelt, and the princess, drawing from her fingers two rings of immense value, bestowed them respectively upon the two individuals who had thus saved her from destruction.

“ Yes, my dear Christina,” she said, again addressing herself in English to our heroine, and speaking in a voice of profound solemnity, “ Heaven has indeed interposed most signally in my favour. Tranquillize your feelings, exercise a command over yourself, while I tell you what I have just learned from the lips of these men. It appears that the moment they entered my chamber, the instinct of the younger one convinced him in a moment that the reptile was there. Again I say compose yourself, Christina, although I confess that the bare idea makes even myself shudder. Yes, for forth from my bed, from beneath the clothes, from the very place where in another hour I should have lain myself down, glided the hideous reptile. Then was it that the music played more loudly and more rapidly, as we heard it, and the cobra began to dance upon the bedding according to the wont of its species when thus fascinated by a peculiar melody. But its very moments were numbered, for the keen weapon of the senior messenger, glancing like a lightning flash, smote the reptile with unerring aim, and it lay severed, as you have just seen it, upon the bed which might under other circumstances have proved a bed of death to me.”

Christina was so overcome by her varied feelings — thank-

fulness for Indora's providential escape, astonishment at the miraculous manner in which it had been accomplished, and horror at the thought of so deadly a reptile having been in the house — that she nearly fainted. The princess sustained her young friend in her arms, embracing her affectionately; Christina exerted a strong effort to regain her self-possession, and a flood of tears gave her effectual relief.

Mark was now summoned, and the result of the investigation was made known to him, — an announcement which he received with feelings not far different from those which inspired Christina Ashton.

“I cannot understand, my lady,” he said, “how such a reptile could be here, for the veriest child knows that there are none indigenous to this country. It must have escaped from the Zoological Gardens, or else from some itinerant menagerie, but Heaven be thanked for its discovery and destruction, ere dread mischief was wrought by its venomous fangs!”

“I need not remind you, Mark,” observed Indora, “how it suits my purpose to retain a strict *incognita* here, and how desirous I am therefore to avoid attracting any particular notice on the part of the public. It is therefore my pleasure that this occurrence be kept strictly secret, and you will enjoin the English domestics not to speak of it to their acquaintances, nor to make it a subject of gossip amongst the tradesmen with whom we deal. Mention this likewise to the interpreter who accompanies the messengers from my royal father.”

Mark bowed and withdrew, taking the towel and its loathsome contents away with him. We need hardly say that with the exception of Sagoonah, every one in the servants' hall was smitten with horror and astonishment on hearing what Mark had to relate, and on beholding the proofs of his story. But the wily ayah so well played her own part that she seemed to be as much affected as the rest, or even more so. Mark and the groom went forth together to bury the fragments of the cobra in the garden, while Sagoonah, hastening up-stairs, glided into the drawing-room, and falling upon her knees at Indora's feet, took the hand of her Highness and pressed it to her lips, as if in congratulation at the escape of a well-beloved mistress. And Indora, who supposed herself to be thus well beloved, caressingly smoothed

down the long dark hair of her slave, at the same time thanking her for what she naturally conceived to be a proof of her affectionate devotion.

The messengers and the interpreter took their departure from the villa, but it was not until a late hour on this memorable night that the inmates retired to rest, for alike in the drawing-room and in the servants' hall there was much to converse upon.

On the following day Madame Angelique reappeared in that neighbourhood, for under all the circumstances which are known to the reader, she was deeply and painfully anxious to ascertain what progress Sagoonah was making in the diabolical enterprise she had undertaken, — whether it was as yet carried out, and if not, when it would be. The ayah — more or less suspecting that the infamous woman would thus seek her, and wanting to be so sought — was on the lookout. She approached the fence where their colloquies were wont to be held, and Madame Angelique flew thither. At first she thought, by the cold, rigid, statue-like air of the darkly beautiful Hindu, that the deed was already accomplished; in fact, so confident was she that such would be the announcement she was on the point of hearing that she experienced an inward feeling of savage joy. Sagoonah seemed to penetrate what was passing in her mind, for she said in that voice of monotonous coldness which she so often was wont to adopt, “ You are exulting without a cause; the Lady Indora yet lives, and is likely to live long.”

“ Sagoonah — my dear Sagoonah — these words from your lips!” exclaimed Madame Angelique, in mingled disappointment and dismay.

“ Yes, those words from my lips,” responded the ayah, coldly as before. “ Last night the terrible project which you yourself suggested was put in train, and it failed. I tell you that the Lady Indora possesses a charmed life,” continued Sagoonah, with a sudden emphasis half-solemn and half of passionate vehemence, “ and Heaven itself manifests its power on her behalf. To meditate further mischief against her would be to fight against the deities themselves. I will not again dare such an unholy strife. Ask me not for details, — I will give none.”

“ But you must — you must,” exclaimed Madame Angelique, “ for yesterday I visited the gardens after you had

left, I took care to inform myself that your party had been and was gone, I looked in the reptile house and, Sagoonah, the deadly cobra was missing."

"And that cobra was taken away by my hand," rejoined Sagoonah, a terrific brightness suddenly flaming up in her large black eyes. "Think you therefore that the hand which dared grasp the reptile trembled to deposit it in the couch of her to ensure whose death my own was dared? No! I did all that your infernal wickedness suggested, and that my own fearful courage was enabled to accomplish. But Heaven intervened wondrously, miraculously, and the dead reptile — dread now no longer — is buried in this garden. I tell you, woman," added Sagoonah, fiercely, "that those who serve the cause of Hell cannot possibly prevail against the blessed of Heaven, and the Lady Indora is thus blest. Begone — tempt me no more. All your arts and wiles, your cajoleries and your instigations, are vain and fruitless. Never more will I be led by them; never more will I bend to them. Begone, woman, and beware how you seek this place again."

There was a wild eloquence in Sagoonah's language which corresponded effectually and impressively with her aspect, as she thus spoke. Her eyes burned with a supernal lustre; they glowed in the magnificence of their brightness, — their splendour was effulgent, but terrible and overpowering. Her nostrils dilated, her lips wreathed like those of a pythoness when enunciating prophecies with an inspiring frenzy. Her tall form was drawn up to its full height; the swelling bosom upheaved beneath the white draperies that only partially concealed those contours as well rounded as if belonging to a statue of bronze, and altogether the appearance of that Hindu woman struck terror and dismay into the heart of Madame Angelique.

"Begone, I repeat," exclaimed Sagoonah once more, and the milliner shrank cowering back from the fierce lightnings of the ayah's eyes.

Then Sagoonah turned slowly away from the fence, and gave no heed to the Frenchwoman's passionate entreaties that she would stop and listen to her. Madame Angelique waited for a few minutes in the last desperate hope that Sagoonah would yet come back, but she did not, and was presently lost amidst the dense foliage of the evergreens. Then the milliner was compelled to betake herself away from

the neighbourhood of the villa, so bewildered with what had occurred, and by the terrors which oppressed her guilty soul, that she knew not what course next to adopt, and again, as on a former occasion, she was pursued, surrounded, and hemmed in, by the sinister and unaccountable influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VAULT IN THE CHURCH

THE scene now changes to one of those beautiful little villages which are to be found in Westmoreland, where the hills protect the dwellings from the cold winds of winter, and where lakes and rivulets reflect in the summer-time the trees that stand upon their banks. The village to which we would now particularly direct the attention of our readers was situated in a valley; it was more than half-embowered by large trees, whose giant arms, covered with verdure, stretched over the cottages which formed the chief portion of that little assemblage of habitations. It was intersected by a stream, which, after turning the wheel of a water-mill, passed under a rudely constructed wooden bridge, but all in appropriate keeping with the picturesque simplicity of the scene; and thence the rivulet pursued its course, embracing with its sinuosity two sides of the churchyard, and flowing on through the meadows until its serpentine form was lost in the distance. To this village it suits our purpose to give a fictitious name, and we will therefore, with the reader's permission, denominate it Woodbridge.

The church—standing in the midst of its sacred ground crowded with tombstones, many of which were old enough, and showed the remains of quaint and uncouth sculpturing, the others indicating the resting-places of the more recently deceased—was about a quarter of a mile apart from the village itself; and, as we have already said, the churchyard on two sides stretched down to the bank of the river, which there made an abrupt curve. Close by was the parsonage,—a small old-fashioned house, built of bricks of a deep, dingy red, with a little wooden portico, supported by two thin pillars, and there was a tolerably large garden attached to

the dwelling. Not very far off was a small cottage, or, rather, hut, and here dwelt an old man named Carnabie, but who was more familiarly known in the village by his Christian name of Jonathan. He was between sixty and seventy, and for thirty years had filled the united offices of clerk, gravedigger, and bell-ringer in that parish. These situations his father had held before him, and very likely his grandsire also, for aught that we can tell to the contrary. During his parent's lifetime, he used to assist in digging the graves and in opening the vaults, and thus from his very childhood was he brought up to be accustomed to find himself in contact with the ceremonies, the memorials, and the relics of the dead. Perhaps it was this circumstance which had so far influenced his disposition as to render him somewhat cynical and morosely reserved; he had never married, he associated but little with the villagers, and it was a rare occurrence indeed for him to take a seat of an evening in the parlour of the Green Dragon. To his face he was invariably addressed as "Mr. Carnabie," but behind his back he was spoken of as "Old Jonathan." It was reported that his habits were miserly, and that when a light was seen glimmering, at a late hour, through the window of his isolated cottage, he was counting over his hoarded coins. Others, however, said that he was fond of reading, and this rumour appeared to receive its justification from the fact that he was a constant borrower of books from the parson's library. That he was a strange and eccentric character, however, there could be no doubt, and that his feelings were somewhat morbid or peculiar was equally certain, from the fact that he would just as soon dig a grave during the night as in the daytime, and that he was often known to visit the church during the hours when other people slept. The natural inference was that he was utterly exempt from superstitious fears, and likewise that as long habit had rendered him familiar with everything that concerned the dead, so he had a sort of hankering to be incessantly amidst their memorials, their resting-places, and their relics. In personal appearance he was sedate, and had even a venerable look, notwithstanding the cynical eccentricity bordering upon moroseness which marked his disposition and characterized his habits. He was tall and somewhat thin, exceedingly upright, as if years sat lightly upon him; he was still strong and active. Such was Mr. Jonathan

Carnabie, clerk and sexton of the parish church of Woodbridge.

It was about twelve o'clock at night — the very same night on which the incidents of the cobra occurred at the Princess Indora's villa — that a man, rudely appalled, and carrying a stick, which in reference to its dimensions might better be denominated a bludgeon, came wandering through the meadows which the river intersected after its sinuous course left the churchyard. It was a bright and beautiful night, — so bright indeed that print of a moderate size might have been read, but all along the river's banks there was a mist, — very thin, however, and of fleecy whiteness. The man dragged himself on with the painfulness of one who was either in ill-health or else had travelled a considerable distance. Yet he did not support himself on his stick; he for the most part kept it under his arm, or else every now and then took and flourished it with the vexation of a naturally savage disposition, or perhaps with the desire of meeting some one on whom, for predatory motives, it might be worth while to exercise his skill in wielding that formidable bludgeon. Perhaps, if we penetrate into the man's thoughts, and follow their course somewhat, we may be enabled to ascertain the circumstances in which he is placed, and the readers will discover, if they have not already suspected, who he is.

“ Well, I'm blessed if ever a respectable genelman found hisself in such a precious mess as I am in now, — nothink but the glory of having escaped out of the stone jug and knocked the turnkey on the head to cheer me up a bit. Here four days has gone since that there brilliant exploit on my part, and I've tramped a matter of a hundred mile, sneaking along like a half-starved dog; afeard every moment that some feller will tap me on the shoulder, saying, ' Now, then, Barney, you're wanted.' But arter all, it's better to be free to wander through these here fields, even though I must presently stretch myself under a hedge or creep into a barn, with the chance of being took up as a wagrant and sent to the mill as a rogue and waggabone, than to stop in Liverpool gaol with the certainty of dancing upon nothink. Well, this is a consolation, but I shouldn't mind having summut more consoling in the shape of a good hot supper and a jorum of grog. Four whole days and nights, living on charity, just what I could pick up at lonely cottages, and then only getting sum-

mut to eat 'cos why my looks isn't the pleasantest in the world, and when women is by theirselves, and their husbands is out, they don't like such a face as mine to be poked in upon them. Well, arter all, a ugly face has its advantages, for when a chap is in distress, he gets in this way more than would be gived him if his looks was 'ansome, meek, and amiable. But I never see such a part of the country as this here is. Four whole days without meeting a single traveller that was worth stopping, except that jolly stout farmer which had his pistols and made me run for my life. It's a blackguard shame that the people in these parts don't travel as other Christians does, with their gold chains and their purses, or else that if they do, they carries pistols."

Here, to relieve his injured feelings, as he thus thought with ineffable disgust over his supposed wrongs, Mr. Barnes the Burker gave a terrific flourish with his huge bludgeon, as if he was aiming a desperate blow at the people of Lancashire and Westmoreland who would not come forth to be plundered. As he was pursuing his way, he came within sight of the village, — the walls of some of the cottages gleaming white amidst the embowering trees. But there was no satisfaction nor cheering hope in the prospect for him. Without a penny in his pocket, conscious of his forbidding looks, dressed in sordid apparel, he was not insane enough to suppose that the door of any inn or private dwelling in that village would be opened to afford him a welcome reception. And then, too, he felt assured that a hue and cry had been raised the moment his escape was discovered, that advertisements had been sent to all the provincial newspapers, that hand-bills had most likely been circulated, and that therefore his position was anything but a safe and secure one. The reader cannot fail to have understood that, on being captured in London in the manner described in an earlier chapter, he had as a matter of course been transferred to that town which was the scene of the murder for which he would have to stand his trial along with Mrs. Webber, had he not escaped from the gaol. He was a veritable outcast in every sense and meaning of the term, — penniless, houseless, foodless, and a wanderer.

Yet he drew nearer to the village with the hope that something might transpire to relieve his necessities, or else to afford him a barn, shed, or outhouse where he could stretch

his wearied limbs for a few hours ere pursuing his journey again. The path which he was threading through the fields brought him to the gate of the churchyard, and as he sat to rest himself there for a few minutes, he fancied that he beheld a light glimmering through a small window, or loophole, at the very bottom of the wall of the church. The Burker was little prone to superstitious fears, and his curiosity was therefore excited. He entered the churchyard, he advanced toward the little window whence, as he had fancied, the light was really glimmering. This window was more than half-way below the actual level of the churchyard, but the earth had been cut away in a sloping manner toward it, so as to admit the air, if not the light of day, into the place to which it belonged. The Burker, passing amongst the tombstones, and trampling recklessly upon the graves, advanced nearer toward the little window, stooped down, and peeped in. There was an iron grating, but no glass to the window, — if a window it could therefore be thus denominated; and the Burker could obtain a full view of the interior of the vault, for a vault it was. A short but massive pillar rose in the centre, supporting the arched ceiling, which was the floor of the church; several coffins were there, an immense lantern hung to an iron nail fixed in the wall, and an old man in a very plain garb was seated on a block of stone at the foot of the pillar. On the ground were several implements such as might have been used in raising the stone which covered the vault, and which therefore belonged to the pavement of the church. The glare of the lantern, which completely filled the vault, prevented Jonathan Carnabie — for he the old man was — from observing that the argentine beams of the night's splendour were now intercepted at the loophole by the form of an observer. He sat upon that stone, gazing slowly around on the coffins which were ranged against the sides of the vault, and though merely musing with himself, he nevertheless said loud enough to be overheard by the Burker, "Well, there's room sufficient, to be sure, but then the question is, which is its most appropriate place?"

The coffins upon which the old man thus slowly bent his gaze exhibited the proofs that they had been at very different periods consigned to that last resting-place of the shrouded dead whom they enclosed. There were coffins that were so

dilapidated and broken it seemed as if the slightest touch would send them crumbling into dust; others which were somewhat better preserved, others again which evidently belonged to a still more recent period, and two or three which seemed as if it were only within the last few years that they had taken their places in the midst of that family receptacle.

"Well, it is strange," continued the old man in his audible musings, "that I can't at once hit upon the place where this newcomer shall be deposited to-morrow. I suppose my intellect is not as clear as it used to be, and I know that it takes me twice as long to dig a grave in the yard as it did a matter of twenty years back. But then I'm twenty years older, and perhaps I ought to be thinking of who will dig my own grave. Whoever he is, it won't be the same as the one who is to act as clerk, for when I am dead and gone the offices are to be separated. That I know for a fact. I shall look out for an assistant; the people die fast in this village, small as it is, but then there's an astonishing number of old people here. It would really seem as if they had lived on with an understanding that when they all came to a certain date they should die off as fast as possible. Yes, I will have an assistant."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Jonathan Carnabie slowly and deliberately drew forth from his pocket a tolerably large flask, and it was also well filled, as the Burker could judge by the way in which the old man put it to his lips. The draught he took was a moderate one, and then he consigned the flask back again to his pocket.

"Yes, an assistant," resumed Jonathan, in his audible musings; "it is all very fine to talk about an assistant, but where is one to be found? If I cast my eye over all the stout young chaps at Woodbridge and roundabout, I cannot think of one that will in any way do. None of them like old Jonathan, as I know the rascals call me, — Heaven forgive me for using such a strong term as rascals in a church. But about the assistant, — where is he to be found?"

The old man paused, and took another small draught from his flask, as if he thought it would sharpen his intellects and help on his reflections. But now there were two circumstances which had acquired a peculiar interest for Mr. Barnes, whose countenance was cooling itself against the iron bar of the window. The first was that the old sexton wanted

an assistant, and the Burker saw at a glance that the situation would suit him for the present most admirably, inasmuch as it would give him bread and a bed to sleep in, and of all places in the world an out-of-the-way secluded village such as this was perhaps the best calculated to yield him a refuge against the consequences of a hue and cry. His original intention was to push on into the wildest parts of Scotland, but his experiences of an outcast condition were already painful enough to make him wish for something settled, even though it might be nearer to Liverpool than prudence would have exactly suggested. The hope, therefore, of becoming the old sexton's assistant was one of the results arising from his accidental listening at the loophole of the vault. The other was the spectacle of the brandy-flask, which the Burker longed to apply to his lips. But how was he to introduce himself to the old man? Hark! Jonathan Carnabie resumes his musings.

"Yes, I am resolved to have an assistant, — that's settled. But I must have one that will do my bidding in all things without being questioned; that will be tutored into taking as much pride in digging a neat grave and having a care of these vaults as I do myself. Now where is such a person to be found?"

"Here," answered the Burker, for it struck him at the instant that this was the best, as assuredly it was the shortest way of introducing himself to the notice of the individual whose patronage he sought.

The old sexton started, perhaps for the first time in his life smitten with a superstitious terror, but quickly recovering his self-possession, his first thought was that he must have been deceived by some unusual sound. He nevertheless instinctively looked toward the loophole, and on perceiving that the light of the shining heavens was intercepted by a human form, his next impression was that some belated villager was bent on playing off a joke upon him.

"You have nothing to do with me or my concerns," said Jonathan. "Go your ways back to the Green Dragon, unless they have shut up, and in decency they ought, in which case go to your bed."

"I don't happen to have never an acquaintance with the Green Dragon," responded the Burker, "and as for seeking the bed I last slept in — But no matter," he interrupted

himself, as his thoughts had wandered back to the narrow iron bedstead, the hard mattress, and the horsecloth coverlid in the gaol whence he had escaped. "I'm not a native of this here willage, though as respectable for a poor man as any that is."

"How came you here?" asked Jonathan, bluntly.

"I'm out of work," responded the Burker, as indeed he was out of the work which constituted his ordinary occupation before his capture. "I'm on the tramp. I was passing through the churchyard, I saw the light, but not being afeard of ghostesses, I peeped in."

"Not afraid, eh?" said old Jonathan, to whom this was at once a recommendation on the Burker's behalf.

"More afeard of the living than the dead," replied the Burker; "'cos why there's a many people in this world as goes about like roaring lions seeking how they may dewour innocent and unwary chaps like me."

"Rather pious after your own fashion?" said Jonathan Carnabie.

"Wery pious," responded the Burker, "but unassuming, unpretending, doing whatever I'm bid without axing a question, and uncommon strong and active at work."

"And where do you come from?" asked Jonathan.

"From Gowler, — a good way off," replied Mr. Barnes, so that this vague response might have embraced any point of the compass and any conceivable distance.

"But where from?" inquired Jonathan, who though to a certain extent simple-minded through having dwelt all his life in that village, was nevertheless precise and circumstantial enough in his babits to require definite replies to his questions.

"I'm a Lincolnshire man," said the Burker, with a tone of uncommon frankness. "As I have already told you, I'm out of work. The last job I did was for Farmer Nuggans, — perhaps you have heerd talk of him?"

"I can't say that I have," responded the old man. "But you had better step around into the church, and we will talk over the matter here. A few steps to the right will bring you to a little door, and the light from the vault will guide you."

Jonathan Carnabie evidently thought that the vault was the most comfortable place to sit and discourse in, and it was perfectly indifferent to the Burker where he deposited him-

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ORIGINAL BY JIM
"SEATED HIMSELF UPON A COFFIN"

"SEATED HIMSELF UPON A COFFIN"
Photogravure from original by Bird



self so long as he had a chance of carrying out his aims. He proceeded to the little door, he entered the church, and the light from the vault, glimmering feebly, seemed to be a dim, uncertain, ghostly halo hanging about the dead. But the moonbeams were shining through the windows, and they helped to subdue the light of the lantern, or to render it more sickly. They fell upon the pews of dark wood, upon the pulpit standing against one of the thick pillars, and upon three or four monuments with the sculptured effigies of the long defunct warriors whose remains had been buried there. It was evidently a very old church; in former times there had been a castle in the neighbourhood, and hence the monuments to which we have referred. The silence which prevailed until broken by the Burker's heavy stamping feet would have struck solemnly to the soul of any other man, and would have induced him to tread lightly, but he was totally unsusceptible of such impressions, and he went tramping along the aisle, indifferent to the mournful echoes which his nailed boots raised, and which might have been taken for the moanings of the spirits of the departed as they died away under the groined roofs at the farther extremity.

On reaching the mouth of the vault, Barney the Burker descended into it by a flight of stone steps, and he very deliberately seated himself upon a coffin near the block of stone on which Jonathan Carnabie was placed. The old man started at what he considered to be an act of impious desecration, but the Burker, not comprehending the meaning of that movement, fancied it was produced by a nearer view of his own hangdog features, and he exclaimed, "I tell you what it is, my old friend, I know I'm not so 'ansome as some people is, but I'm a deuced sight better; for try me at hard work, or question me as to my morals, or anythink of that sort, and you'll just see what an admirable feller I am."

"I was not thinking of your personal appearance," replied the old sexton, "but I wish you would get off that coffin and go and sit down upon the steps."

"To be sure!" exclaimed the Burker, obeying with alacrity; and then bethinking himself of the sexton's brandy-flask he gave a visible shudder, observing, "It's uncommon cold notwithstanding the season of the year."

"Refresh yourself," said Jonathan, and he handed the flask.

"Your wery good health, sir, and here's wishing you a long life and a merry von," said Mr. Barnes, by way of complimentary preface to a somewhat prolonged application to the contents of the flask.

"A merry life!" exclaimed old Jonathan; "how can you talk in such a light strain? What can the merriment be for one who has all his days been accustomed to dwell amongst the dead, so that the gloom of vaults and sepulchres and the damp of graves have become habitual to him? But you were saying just now that you were the man who would become my assistant —"

"And an uncommon handy feller you'll find me, I can tell you," rejoined the Burker. "But how is it I find you in this here place at such an hour of the night? I don't say it isn't agreeable enough, I like it uncommon; it's quite a change, and wariety is charming."

"This vault," answered old Jonathan, solemnly, "belongs to the Featherstones of Featherstone Hall. It's a very old family, and all these coffins that you see around contain scions of that race. Another — a promising young man as ever you could wish to see — died a few days ago, and he will be buried here to-morrow. There was a marriage in the church this morning, and I could not find it in my heart to raise the stone of this vault till the evening —"

"And you don't mean to say you did it by yourself?" exclaimed the Burker.

"No, I had an assistant in the task," rejoined Jonathan; "but the instant it was over, he hurried away, frightened at the gloom of the building when once the dusk had set in. You see that I am not frightened. I came and sat myself down here to determine where the coffin should be put to-morrow, — and now you know how it is that you find me in such a place at such an hour."

"If I was your assistant," remarked the Burker, "instead of running away the moment work was over, I should like to come down into these here places and have a chat, — more partikler when there's the brandy-flask to keep the cold out of one's throat."

Jonathan Carnabie deliberated with himself for a few minutes, and having decided upon engaging the services of the man who had so singularly offered himself, he proceeded to specify the duties which an assistant would have to per-

form, as well as the present emoluments which he would receive, observing, as an additional inducement, that if Barney conducted himself well he might be certain of succeeding to the office of gravedigger at his (Jonathan's) death. The Burker accepted the proffered terms, and the bargain was sealed with another drain from the brandy-flask.

"And now, my good man," said Jonathan, "as you are doubtless weary and hungered, I will take you to my cottage, where you can refresh and repose yourself for to-night; and to-morrow I can perhaps help you to a cheap lodging with some humble but respectable people."

"I've already took such an affection for you, sir," answered the Burker, "that if you've only got some old shed or outhouse belonging to your place, I would make myself as happy and comfortable as a king. I could turn my hand to a thousand little odd jobs —"

"Well, well, we shall see about it," replied the sexton. "Meantime follow me."

They issued from the vault, and passed out of the church, Jonathan having previously extinguished his lantern. He locked the door with a huge key, and striking into a narrow path, led the way through the churchyard. The Burker was not particular in keeping to the path, but he now and then trampled over the graves, which being presently perceived by the old man, caused him suddenly to stop short.

"You must not set foot upon any one of these sacred hillocks," he said, with his wonted gravity, "and for two reasons. In the first place, because it's desecration, and in the second place, because there are certain families — ay, even amongst the poorest — who pay a trifle annually to have the graves of their deceased relatives kept in good order, — not but that I devote my care to those for which no fee is paid. And here, for instance," added the old man, again stopping short after having slowly walked on a few paces, "here is the best-kept grave in the whole place, and yet I have never received a farthing for attending to it."

He pointed to a grave which had a stone at its head, and in the beautiful clearness of the night it was easy for the Burker to perceive that it was indeed well kept, the turf being all smooth over the hillock, and brambles stretched across to prevent any intrusive sheep from nibbling at the grass.

"Look, you perceive there is no name upon that stone,"

said the sexton, "nothing but the date of the deceased's death — October, 1830."

"And why is there no name?" asked the Burker.

"Because the name which the poor deceased lady possessed was never known," replied Jonathan Carnabie. "She was a stranger, and she died mad — yes, it was a deep, silent, brooding madness. But it is a sad tale, and I cannot tell it you now."

"Who died mad? Who died in the midst of a deep, brooding madness?" exclaimed a wild voice suddenly breaking in upon the momentary silence which followed the old sexton's remark, and at the same time a female, having the appearance of a crazed gipsy, appeared upon the spot as if she had arisen out of the earth or sprung up from behind one of the adjacent tombstones. "Who died mad, I ask you?" she repeated, vehemently. "There are indeed sorrows in this world sufficient to turn the strongest brain, and I have seen those who have felt them — yes, and I have experienced them, too."

"My good woman," said the old sexton, "what are you doing here at this time of night? Where do you come from, and who are you?"

"I know no more whence I come," exclaimed the woman, in a species of wild frenzy, "than the wind itself does. Who I am, matters not to you. But who are you?" and her bright eyes were fixed upon the old sexton, for she did not appear to notice the Burker, who had shrunk back a few paces at her sudden appearance.

"My name is Jonathan Carnabie," was the old man's sententious reply. "I am clerk, bell-ringer, and sexton to this church, and yonder is my habitation."

"And you have spoken of a poor lady who died mad?" said the crazed creature — for such indeed she was. "I would fain ask you a few questions, but they go out of my brain. Something has agitated and excited me — I cannot collect my thoughts now," and she pressed her hand to her forehead. "Another time — another time!" she abruptly exclaimed, and, darting away, passed through the gate and was speedily out of sight.

"The poor creature is demented," said Jonathan Carnabie, "and she catches up anything she may hear fall from the lips of a stranger. Poor woman, she has doubtless some heavy

grief upon her mind! But come along — I had temporarily forgotten that you must be in want of refreshment and repose.”

The old sexton accordingly led the way out of the churchyard, Barnes the Burker following him in silence, for he did not altogether like the strange apparition of that poor crazy woman.

CHAPTER IX

THE MOUNTEBANK

WE must now return to Ramsgate, to take up the thread of our narrative at the moment when we left Christian Ashton rushing out of the Royal Hotel, after having so earnestly bidden Edgar Beverley await his return. Our young hero had a particular aim in view, for it will be remembered that he had just been suggesting to his new friend the necessity of communicating with the imprisoned Laura at Verner House, in order to ascertain by what means her interests could be served or her escape effected. He had bethought himself of the mountebank with whom he had that day conversed in the streets of Ramsgate relative to Baron Raggidbak, and he was now speeding in search of that public performer.

He had proceeded some distance, in the joyous excitement of the idea which had thus struck him, before he began to reflect that it was scarcely probable he should find the mountebanks displaying their antics at that time in the evening, for it was now past nine o'clock. He relaxed his pace, and took time to breathe and to deliberate. In a few moments an individual passed him at a somewhat rapid rate, and he recognized the unmistakable form of the starveling Baron Raggidbak. He was about to rush after the ex-groom of the stole, when he beheld that once high and mighty nobleman plunge into an obscure court, and he was immediately lost to our hero's view.

"He must live with the rest," thought Christian to himself, "and they therefore must be dwelling hereabouts."

He accordingly turned into the same court, but his progress was almost immediately arrested by several persons of both sexes that came pouring forth from a public-house; and though the group was small in number, yet it was quite

sufficient to choke up the narrow place. The excitement was produced by a desperate combat between two men, both of whom were much intoxicated. Baron Raggidbak had evidently passed along ere the portals of that public-house vomited forth its inebriate frequenters, for he was nowhere to be seen amongst the crowd. Christian was soon enabled to force his way amidst the excited group, but his progress had nevertheless been delayed for more than a minute, and as he hurried along the dimly lighted court, the German was nowhere to be seen. There was no outlet at the farther extremity, and therefore it was quite clear that the baron must have entered one of the houses in that court. Christian stepped up to a man who was standing on the threshold of a door gazing in the direction of the pugilists and their backers, and he inquired if the man happened to know whether the mountebanks who had that day been performing in Ramsgate resided anywhere in the court.

"Why, yes, sir," was the man's response, "they're lodging here in my house; but if so be any one of 'em has wrongfully taken to priggings, and you've lost summut, I hope you won't make no noise over it, for I see by your cut that you are a regular gentleman, every inch of you —"

"I can assure you," interrupted Christian, "that I have no such ground of complaint, and indeed no complaint whatsoever to make. But I wish to speak to one of those men."

"Step in, sir," said the man, "and you may see 'em all at supper, as happy as kings, with the exception of the German cove, which didn't like the beautiful dish of tripe and cowheel that my missus took so much trouble to dish up for 'em, so he must needs go and buy hisself some German sassage, and he's only just this minit come back."

"Thank you, I would rather not walk in," replied Christian, who was by no means anxious to encounter the ex-groom of the stole; "but if I described to you the particular individual whom I wish to see, could you not whisper a word in his ear?"

"To be sure, sir," exclaimed the lodging-house keeper. "But, dear me, how them chaps is a fighting! It's Bill Rough-and-ready, which is a costermonger, and Tom Kagmag, which sells cats' meat —"

"Never mind those ruffians," interrupted Christian, by no means interested in the names or avocations of the pugilists.

“Have the kindness to listen to me while I describe the particular mountebank that I wish to converse with.” Then, having given the description, Christian added, “Whisper in his ear that the young gentleman from whom he received two shillings this afternoon desires to say five words to him.”

The lodging-house keeper passed into his dwelling to execute this commission; and while Christian remained standing upon the threshold, he saw that the pugilistic encounter was abruptly brought to an amicable close by the two combatants shaking hands at the instigation of the landlord of the public-house, who came forth thus to act as mediator; so that in a few moments the court was cleared of the uproarious rabble, who plunged back again through the portals of the boozing-ken. Almost immediately afterward the lodging-house keeper reappeared, followed by the mountebank, who was now dressed in plain clothes of a very poor and shabby aspect. On perceiving our hero, he made a profound salutation, and Christian, drawing him out into the court, said, “I have no doubt you are surprised that I should seek you here, but, to come to the point at once, I think you can do me a service, and I need scarcely add that you will be liberally recompensed.”

The mountebank joyously expressed his willingness to serve our young hero, who, having enjoined him to observe the strictest secrecy and discretion, explained the nature of the object which he had in view. The mountebank cheerfully undertook it, and they separated, our young hero's last words being, “You will be sure, therefore, to come to the hotel in the morning for the note.”

Having delivered this parting instruction, Christian sped back to rejoin his friend Edgar Beverley, to whom he explained the arrangements which he had just settled with the itinerant performer. The young lieutenant was well pleased with our hero's plan, and he thanked him warmly for the generous interest he was thus exhibiting on his behalf. He penned a letter for Laura, so that it might be ready when the mountebank should call for it in the morning; and when he and Christian had deliberated some little while longer upon the project which was thus settled, they retired to rest.

It was about noon on the following day that the mountebanks might have been seen marching upon their stilts through the fields in the neighbourhood of Verner House.

In proportion as their forms were exalted into the air, so had their spirits seemed to rise, for they were laughing and joking merrily amongst themselves, one of them every now and then cutting some extraordinary caper, or perhaps pausing to play off a practical joke upon poor Baron Raggidbak, who was toiling on with his huge drum slung behind him and his mouth-organ stuck in his buttoned up coat, ready for melodious use at any moment. The ex-groom of the stole — never a good-tempered man in the best of times — had been still more soured and embittered by vicissitude and adversity; and thus, when one of the mountebanks, lifting up a stilt, knocked his hat over his eyes, or when another knocked it off, or when a third, still more mischievously inclined, inflicted a smart blow with a stilt against the baron's spindle-shanks, he gave vent to his rage in low but deeply uttered German imprecations, and cursed the necessity which held him in such companionship.

But perhaps the reader would like to be informed how it was that his lordship had fallen from his high estate as groom of the stole, and had sunk down into the beater of a drum and the player of a set of Pandean pipes in the train of a troupe of mountebanks. It cannot have been forgotten that though performing the part of the grand duke's groom of the stole in the English metropolis, and there enjoying the style and distinction of Baron Raggidbak, yet when at home in his native city of Quotha (if a city the trumpery place deserved to be called) the worthy German was nothing more than a stable-groom, and his patrician title became lost amidst all other wild and preposterous fictions. But Raggidbak — for this was really his surname — had so managed by hook and by crook to eat and to drink of the best when in the British metropolis, that he found it somewhat difficult to accommodate himself, on his return to Quotha, to the filthy sourcroust and the beer of choleraic acidity which constituted the staple refreshments in the servants' hall at the ducal palace of Quotha, — and not merely in the servants' hall, but now and then in the ducal dining-room itself, when cash was short through non-arrival of subsidies from England.

Raggidbak therefore missed the wine and the ale, the fat capons and the substantial steaks, which he had enjoyed at Mivart's; and in order to supply himself with creature comforts more to his taste than the croust and beer which vied

with each other in sourness, he made away with some of the stablegear and harness belonging to his ducal master. It being perceived that Raggidbak was very often drunk, and the grand duke well knowing that his dependent had no honest nor legitimate means of thus disguising himself in liquor, ordered an inquiry to take place; and behold, the once illustrious Baron Raggidbak, who had been addressed as "my lord" in England, was suddenly discovered and proclaimed to be a petty larcenist. His ignominious dismissal from the ducal service was the immediate consequence, and with an equally unfeeling abruptness — as he considered it to be — he was ordered to betake himself beyond the frontier of the grand duchy. This latter part of the sentence was, however, no real hardship, inasmuch as a comparatively pleasant walk taken in any direction from the ducal capital would bring an individual to the frontier of that paltry little state. To be brief, it was under these circumstances that the injured and ill-used Raggidbak quitted his native city and the ducal service, and made his way into Belgium. But having no regular and formal passports in his possession, and being looked upon in the common light of a rogue and vagabond, he received a hint from the police authorities that he had better leave the country, and on arriving at Ostend, he was provided with a free passage across to Dover. Thus, on arriving in England, this worthy gentleman of broken fortunes was only too glad to accept employment in the company of the mountebanks.

Returning from our digression, we take up the thread of our narrative. It was about noon, as we have said, when the itinerant performers, attended by the German who was alike their musician and their butt, were passing through the fields in the neighbourhood of Verner House. On reaching the front of that mansion, Baron Raggidbak began to beat his drum and to blow away at the Pandean pipes, while his stilted companions commenced their wonted antics, — dancing, capering, and waving wands with ribbons attached to them. At first Sir John Steward was seized with indignation at the idea of a set of persons, whom he regarded as thieves and vagabonds, daring to show off in front of his mansion, the more so inasmuch as they had presumed to open the carriage gate and pass into the enclosure. Being in the commission of the peace, he vowed that he would send them all

to the treadmill, where, instead of capering upon stilts, they should dance upon an everlasting staircase, to the drumming and piping of the starveling German, if the governor of the gaol thought fit to allow such exercise of his musical powers. Now, we must observe that the old baronet, Mrs. Oxenden, and Laura were all three seated in the drawing-room at the time when the itinerant performers appeared in front of the mansion. Laura was deeply dejected, and so completely out of spirits that neither by threats nor by cajolery could Mrs. Oxenden draw her out from that desponding apathy. The position of affairs was most embarrassing for Mrs. Oxenden; she feared lest Sir John Steward should become sickened or disgusted and back out of the purpose which he had hitherto entertained. She therefore caught, all in a moment, at the presence of these mountebanks as the possible means of inspiring her young sister with some little tinge of gaiety, if only for a few transient minutes.

“The rogues and scoundrels!” ejaculated Sir John, who was in an exceeding ill-humour at the dead, lethargic coldness of the beautiful Laura, “I will have them every one sent to the House of Correction, I repeat. Here, let the footmen come — I’ll swear them in as constables. It is a regular breach of the peace. I’ll read the riot act — I’ll — I’ll — play the very devil!”

“Let them proceed, Sir John,” interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, darting upon him a significant look with her superb eyes; and then, in a hasty whisper, she added, “Everything must be done to amuse and cheer Laura’s mind at present.”

“Ay, to be sure!” exclaimed the baronet, “they may be honest, well-intentioned people, after all. Poor fellows! I have wronged them; they are doing their best to pick up an honest penny, and as there just happens to be a halfpenny on the mantelpiece —”

“Nonsense, Sir John!” said Mrs. Oxenden, aside; for we should observe that the meanness of the baronet in some things was proportionate with his lavish extravagance in disbursing gold upon his own sensuous pleasures.

Mrs. Oxenden took out several shillings from her purse, and going forth upon the balcony, she flung them out to the mountebanks, who speedily picked them up. Returning into the room, she accosted her sister, saying, “You know not, my dear Laura, what surprising feats these gymnastic per-

formers are displaying. It is quite entertaining. I feel as if I were a child once more, and could enter into the spirit of them." Then stooping her head toward Laura's ear, she added, "Come, my dear girl, do cheer up a little, shake off this dreadful despondency. You know that I have nothing but your best interests at heart."

"My best interests?" said the young maiden, looking up with an air so woebegone that it would have melted any heart save one of hardest flint.

"Yes, to be sure," whispered Mrs. Oxenden, hastily and also petulantly. "Am I to explain it to you all over and over again? But come, my dear Laura, go out for a few minutes on the balcony; the fresh air will do you good, and the feats of these men will divert you."

Thus speaking, Mrs. Oxenden took her young sister's hand, and led her toward the window; for Laura had relapsed into a state of deepest dejection, so that she suffered herself to be guided as if she were an automaton. She passed out upon the balcony, and Mrs. Oxenden remained with her for a few minutes. At first Laura contemplated the mountebanks in a kind of listless, vacant manner, but by degrees her eyes seemed to display more interest in their proceedings; and Mrs. Oxenden, believing that she was really cheered, returned into the drawing-room to impart this intelligence to the old baronet. The truth was that Laura did experience just that small amount of interest which a mind, sunk deep in lethargic despondency, was calculated to feel at any trifling circumstance that might break in upon the deeply mournful monotony of her thoughts. And yet it was rather the eye than the mind that was thus attracted, for while the poor young lady followed with her looks the exploits of the itinerants, her soul still continued brooding on the afflictions which haunted it.

But she was now alone upon the balcony. The wind blew sharp from the northeast, though the sun was shining brightly, and she drew around her the shawl which her sister had thrown over her shoulders ere conducting her out upon that balcony. One of the mountebanks came close under the window, and suddenly drew forth something from the breast of his party-coloured jacket. Laura observed the action, but considered it to be some part of the performance.

“One word!” said the mountebank, “one word! Quick, young lady! — are you Miss Hall?”

“Yes, that is my name,” was Laura’s hasty response, for she instantaneously perceived there was something significant in the man’s proceedings; and to one in her desperate position the veriest trifle appeared like a straw of hope floating past and to be clutched at by her hand.

“This note,” rejoined the mountebank, “take it quick! It is from Mr. Beverley. We will return to perform again to-morrow at the same hour, and you can then give me the answer.”

It were impossible to describe the wild feelings of joy which thrilled through the frame of the beautiful young maiden as these words reached her ear. She trembled with those emotions for a few instants; she was bewildered with a sense of relief, hope, and happiness. The mountebank made an impatient gesture; the young lady, recalled thereby to her self-possession, flung a rapid glance behind her into the drawing-room, and perceiving that her sister and the old baronet were in earnest conversation together, she took the note from the hand of the friendly performer. The next instant he was dancing and capering away on the top of his stilts with greater elasticity than ever, and in the effusion of his joy at having so successfully executed his commission, he bestowed (with one of the stilts aforesaid) so hearty a thwack across Raggidbak’s shoulders that the mouth-organ for an instant sent forth a peculiar sound which seemed to be composed of a yell and a growl.

Laura had thrust the note into the bosom of her dress, and then she exerted all her powers to avoid the outward betrayal of her feelings that were now so different from those which a few minutes back she had experienced. Mrs. Oxenden returned to the balcony, and said, “You are diverted, Laura?”

“Yes,” replied the young lady, scarcely able to repress a gush of emotions, “more, much more than I could possibly have anticipated.”

“I am glad of it,” said Mrs. Oxenden. “We will have these men again to-morrow.”

Laura was about to give expression to a joyous affirmative, when she was struck by the imprudence of displaying too much interest in these proceedings, and she accordingly held her peace. Her sister called one of the itinerants toward

the balcony; and this individual happened to be the bearer of the letter, as indeed he was also the leader of the troupe.

"Do you purpose, my good man," inquired Mrs. Oxenden, "to remain in this neighbourhood for a day or two?"

"Well, ma'am," replied the fellow, with the ready-witted impudence which, harmless enough, characterizes his class, "we had a particular engagement to be at Canterbury to-morrow, to perform in the presence of the archbishop, his clergy, and all the surrounding nobility and gentry; but if it is your pleasure, ma'am, that we shall attend here again, I'm sure we would put off all the archbishops in the world rather than disappoint you and the young lady."

"In that case," rejoined Mrs. Oxenden, smiling, "you must come hither again to-morrow at the same hour, and here is your retaining fee."

Another silver coin found its way to the hand of the mountebank, and he shortly afterward departed with his comrades, — of course including Baron Raggidbak. On their return into the town, the mountebank at once put off his professional costume, dressed himself in his plain clothes, and proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where Edgar Beverley and Christian were anxiously awaiting his arrival. He communicated to them the result of his mission, and gladdened them still more by the intelligence that circumstances were so far favouring their views that his mountebank troupe had actually been engaged to return to perform in front of Verner House on the morrow. The heart of Edgar Beverley was now elate with hope, and fervid indeed were his expressions of gratitude for the counsel and assistance afforded him by our young hero. The mountebank was liberally rewarded, and he took his departure, promising to fulfil his engagement on the morrow. Lieutenant Beverley was careful to keep indoors throughout that day, for fear lest the old baronet or Mrs. Oxenden might happen to pay a visit to Ramsgate and encounter him in the streets if he were imprudent enough to leave the hotel. Christian kept him company for the greater portion of the day, merely issuing out to take a walk for an hour or two; but during his ramble he saw nothing of either Sir John Steward or Mrs. Oxenden. The two young gentlemen dined together in the evening, and the result of the morrow's proceedings was awaited with some degree of suspense, in which, however, hope was predominant.

CHAPTER X

MRS. OXENDEN

It was evening, and Laura had just retired to her own chamber, at about half-past nine o'clock, under the plea of a severe headache. Her real motive was, however, to find an opportunity for penning an answer to Edgar Beverley's note, and it was only by thus withdrawing at a somewhat early hour that she could hope to find such an occasion, for her chamber was an inner one opening from that occupied by her sister, who thus took care to act as the guardian by night of the young maiden, so as to prevent the possibility of escape. Laura had read her lover's billet; it had filled her with hope, and joy, and gratitude, and though she had done her best to wear the same demeanour as before, yet she had not been altogether able to prevent herself from appearing to be in better spirits.

On retiring to her room, she speedily dismissed the maid who came to attend upon her night toilet, and she was about to sit down to pen a hasty reply to Edgar's note, when she heard the outer door open, and she had only just time to recover from her confusion and trepidation when Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. We ought perhaps to observe that Laura was entirely ignorant — and that the purity of her mind prevented her from suspecting — that her sister's antecedents were not the most correct in the world, and that she had been the kept mistress of several wealthy persons, amongst whom was Sir John Steward.

Mrs. Oxenden, on entering her chamber, embraced her sister with every appearance of the most affectionate cordiality, and, in a tone which seemed fraught with a corresponding sincerity, she said, "Dearest Laura, you know not how happy I am to perceive that you are beginning to cheer up —

or, at all events, that you are not quite so depressed as you have hitherto been. You may think, Laura, that I have played a harsh part toward you, but I was merely doing my duty as a sister who is so much older than yourself that you stand in the light of a daughter toward me."

Laura made no answer; she could scarcely believe that her sister spoke in exact accordance with the truth, and yet it revolted against the natural generosity of her nature to arrive at a contrary conclusion.

"I am sure that you are making up your mind to be reasonable," continued Mrs. Oxenden. "I felt confident that when your mind became sufficiently calm for deliberate reflection, you would see how completely I have been studying your best interests. But you spoke to me this morning in the drawing-room as if you fancied it was otherwise, and perhaps I answered you impatiently, and even unkindly, when I appeared to upbraid you for compelling me to give the same explanations over and over again. I am sorry, dear Laura, if I did thus speak somewhat too hastily, and I was determined to take the first opportunity to remove that impression from your mind."

Laura gazed with her beautiful blue eyes earnestly upon her sister's countenance, as if seeking for the assurance that a real affectionate sincerity characterized all that she had just said; and Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely prevent her looks from quailing beneath that gaze of artless innocence.

"Yes, my dear sister," resumed the wily woman, taking Laura's hand and pressing it between both her own as if with the tenderest cordiality, "I am indeed studying your best interests in everything that I suggest or propose. Suffer me — for the last time, I hope — to reason with you a little upon certain points, and thereby aid you in strengthening your mind and assisting you onward in that better course of feelings which you have for the last few hours displayed. You know, Laura, that Mr. Oxenden's means are limited, that it is a government pension which he enjoys, and that it will die with him. Therefore at his death — which according to all natural probabilities will take place long before my own — I shall be left with such small income as will arise from my husband's present savings and from an insurance on his life. Hitherto, my dear sister, I have been enabled to support you in comfort if not in affluence, and upon this ground

alone I might claim some right to your dutiful obedience, as if I were your mother. But let us view the matter in a different light. You are now of an age when you ought to think of settling in the world. If Mr. Oxenden were to die soon, before you were thus settled, that income which would be a bare maintenance for me would constitute absolute poverty for yourself and me, and without the means of going into society, how could you hope to form an eligible alliance?"

A burning blush overspread the countenance of the young maiden as she said, with more firmness than her timid nature was wont to allow her to display toward her sister, "You know that my heart is already engaged: think you, therefore, that I can possibly listen with a very pleasant feeling to this language of yours, in which you speak of eligible alliances as if they were such mere worldly matters —"

"And so they are," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, vehemently; for she in a moment saw the necessity of reasserting her empire over her delicate-minded sister. "I know full well to what you allude. You would speak of Edgar Beverley, but have I not already told you that according to some long-lost document which has recently come to light, and the existence of which was previously unknown or forgotten, Sir John Steward is enabled to cut off the entail of his estates and to bequeath them to whomsoever he may choose? Have I not likewise informed you, over and over again, that his solicitor is already taking the necessary steps for this purpose, and that he will most probably be here the day after to-morrow with the marriage settlements completed — and likewise," added Mrs. Oxenden, impressively, "with the draft of Sir John Steward's will — that will by virtue of which you are at his death to inherit the great bulk of his wealth, a comparatively small sum being bequeathed to me, and which I am sure my own sister will not grudge me."

"Oh, if you knew how painful it is to me," cried Laura, with a visible shudder, "to hear you thus speculating upon death —"

But then she stopped suddenly short, as the idea struck her that it was useless as well as impolitic to argue upon the point, inasmuch as she was secretly resolved in her own mind never to wed Sir John Steward, and inasmuch, too, as against her fluttering heart rested the billet which had that day brought assurances of love, of succour, and of hope.

“I see, my dear girl,” continued Mrs. Oxenden, who did not rightly comprehend what was passing in her sister’s mind, “that you are doing your best to exercise a becoming control over your feelings, and that when they threaten to get the better of you, you magnanimously check yourself. I am sure that this reiteration of all I have previously told you has its uses and its advantages, and therefore — for the last time, I hope, as I just now said — I will recapitulate those reasonings which I have adopted toward you before. You are aware that Sir John Steward sent for me from Brighton, declaring in his letter that he had a most important communication to make to me; this communication was to the effect that as the conduct of his nephew had been most unduteous in many respects — ”

“Do not vilify Edgar Beverley!” interrupted Laura, unable to restrain herself when aspersions were thrown out against her lover.

“Well, Laura,” continued Mrs. Oxenden, “I will speak in terms as delicate as possible. Putting all Sir John Steward’s reasons out of the question, the substantive fact remains that he determined to avail himself of the recently discovered document to break off the entail and dispose of his property, which is immense, according to his own good-will and pleasure. It is his purpose to make such a settlement that will leave Mr. Beverley in possession of the two hundred pounds which have hitherto been granted to him as an allowance. It is true that at his death Mr. Beverley may, under certain circumstances, succeed to the title; but even if it should be so, what is a title without wealth adequate to its support? A mere encumbrance! To what, then, is Edgar Beverley reduced? To the condition of a poor subaltern, with a couple of hundred a year besides his pay. Would you throw yourself into his arms, when, on the other hand, you may become the bride of a man who is enormously rich, and whose rank will be reflected on yourself? ”

Laura was again on the point of giving a hasty and even indignant answer to these cold-blooded mercenary calculations of her sister, when she was once more struck by the inutility of the course, as well as by the impolicy of saying aught that could possibly excite a suspicion in Mrs. Oxenden’s mind.

“As yet Mr. Beverley,” continued the latter lady, who,

with all her penetration and cunning, could not fathom what was really passing in her sister's mind, and who therefore believed that her own arguments were making the wished-for impression, "as yet Mr. Beverley is in total ignorance of the existence of that document which enables his uncle to disinherit him. He clings to the belief — as indeed he himself assured me at Brighton not long since — that he is the heir presumptive to Sir John's estates, which he supposes to be inalienable so far as the rigour of the entail is concerned. But he will find himself mistaken. Sir John does not however wish that the intelligence should be communicated to him until all proceedings now pending be finished and settled. My dear Laura, what more need I urge, what more need I say? On the one hand, a title and wealth await you; on the other hand, a title, perhaps, but inevitable poverty. And then you must consider, my dear sister, that you owe some duteness and gratitude toward me; and by assenting to this marriage with Sir John Steward, you will place me beyond the reach of anxious cares for the future."

"Enough, sister, enough!" said Laura. "I have nothing to reply to your arguments."

Mrs. Oxenden could scarcely keep back an exclamation of wild, tumultuous joy, as, interpreting her sister's response according to her own wishes, she beheld therein the triumph of her schemes. She embraced the young maiden, lavishing caresses upon her; and then she issued from the chamber, with the intimation that she must rejoin Sir John for another half-hour in the drawing-room ere she could retire to rest.

When Laura was alone she wept for a few moments at the thought of having played the hypocrite in the presence of her sister, and in having suffered her to depart under a false impression with regard to her sentiments and views. But she soon ceased to trouble and agitate herself on this point, for naturally ingenuous and truth-loving though she were, yet she could not help feeling that whatsoever duplicity or concealment she had just been practising was not merely venial, but even justifiable under existing circumstances. Hastily wiping away her tears, she sat down to pen her letter to Edgar Beverley.

In the meantime Mrs. Oxenden had returned to the drawing-room, where the baronet was half-reclining upon a sofa, sipping a glass of choice liqueur. Mrs. Oxenden placed her-

self in a chair near him, and with triumph upon her countenance, she said, "Laura has yielded finally and completely, as I all along assured you that she would."

"Then the marriage may be celebrated by the priest to-morrow?" exclaimed Sir John, in a tone of hasty inquiry; "and we can set off immediately afterward to have the Protestant ceremony performed by special license in London, according to our original plan?"

"I fear that it cannot be so," answered Mrs. Oxenden, "for you know that the priest had scruples in pronouncing the nuptial blessing unless Laura gave her fullest and completest assent. This she has only just done; she will require to-morrow to think well over it, for I am as intimately acquainted with her disposition as it is possible to be. But the day after —"

"Ah, I understand you," growled Sir John, surlily. "You are a woman of the world, and you will have all the settlements signed and sealed before you give me your sister. Do you think I shall fly from my word? Do you suppose I am not sincere in disinheriting a younker for whom I have no more love nor affection than for the veriest stranger, but whom, on the contrary, I am inclined to hate because he shows his father's independent spirit, or do you think that I shall fly away from the bargain which is to make over ten thousand pounds to you as the price for your charming sister?"

"I wish you would not use such coarse, blunt language, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, as a flush appeared upon her handsome countenance.

"Coarse language, indeed!" he ejaculated, and then he gave a still coarser laugh. "Why, look you, my dear friend, let us not shut our eyes to the true nature of the transaction, because when we have to deliberate over it, it is inconvenient to blink the truth and go beating about the bush. Besides, you and I have known each other long enough and well enough to have no disguise between us."

"Well, my dear Sir John," said Mrs. Oxenden, deeming it expedient to cajole and conciliate the old man as much as possible, "have it entirely your own way, and put the matter in whatsoever light you may think fit."

"All I want is this," continued the baronet, — "that you

shall not flatter yourself I am your dupe, or that you have caught me as a veritable dotard in your meshes."

"Good heavens, Sir John!" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, frightened lest things were about to take a turn but little in accordance with her hopes and views, "how can you think of talking in a strain so ungenerous, so unkind —"

"Well, well," interrupted the baronet, who was really under the influence of this deep, designing woman, but who wished to persuade himself that it was otherwise and that he was altogether independent in his own mode of action, "we will not get to angry words; but now that affairs are growing toward a termination, it is just as well for us to understand each other. Look you, how rests the matter? I receive communications from Brighton, from my nephew and yourself, to the effect that he has fallen desperately in love with your sister Laura. I at once send off for you to come to me and receive personal explanations, because I think they are due to you after all that in previous years had taken place betwixt you and me. You come accordingly, and I then tell you in confidence that I mean to disinherit my nephew, as I possess the power to do so, and that I mean to marry, in the hope of having an heir. Then you draw me such a picture of your beautiful sister that you make the blood thrill in my veins —"

"But why this recapitulation," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, "of all that is so well known to us both?"

"Because I am resolved," returned Sir John, somewhat gruffly, "that the matter shall be established clearly between us in all its details. Well, as I was saying, you straightway drew me such a picture of your sister that I was quite ravished by it, and fancied myself altogether young again. Patience! — do not interrupt me. I told you at the time that if the original proved only half as charming as the portraiture, I would gladly make her Lady Steward. Now, I do not hesitate to confess that skilful as you are in the art of word-painting, and vivid as your verbal delineation was of Laura's charms, you adhered strictly to the truth, you did not exaggerate —"

"Well, I am glad to hear that my promises and your hopes were completely fulfilled," interjected Mrs. Oxenden.

"Oh, yes," ejaculated Sir John, "I freely admit that such

was the case. But in another sense you deceived me somewhat."

"Deceived you?" ejaculated Mrs. Oxenden.

"Yes," rejoined the baronet, "but yet I do not think you did it wilfully. I fancied from what you said that I should find her less coy, — or, at all events, more susceptible of kind assiduities and attentions."

"You could scarcely expect, Sir John," observed Mrs. Oxenden, "that a young maiden on being introduced to you for the first time —"

"Yes, my dear friend," interposed the baronet, "but during your journey from Brighton to Ramsgate you broke your mind to her, you told her that she must banish Edgar Beverley from her recollection, and that she must prepare herself to look upon me as her future husband."

"All this I did, Sir John, as you are well aware," answered Mrs. Oxenden, impressively; "and though not remarkable for any peculiar nicety of feelings, I can assure you it was a task which I should by no means like to have to execute over again."

"Well, well, I give you credit for all good intentions," remarked Sir John, "but still you must allow that my first meeting with your sister was but little flattering to me. First she looked at me in a sort of wild bewilderment, as if she had not rightly comprehended whom I was, and then, when you formally mentioned my name, she positively gave a shriek."

"But you should make allowances, Sir John, for the circumstances which attended our arrival. The breaking down of the post-chaise, and then you will admit, too, that your costume was not precisely that which becomes you best."

"It is the one though that I like the best," answered the baronet; "it leaves me comfortable and easy," and he stretched himself out upon the sofa, for he was still attired in the very same manner as that to which reference had been just made. "Well," he continued, "we will put aside the circumstances of our first meeting; but do you not recollect what trouble you had to get the girl down into the garden to say a few words to me yesterday morning, and how all my cajoleries and protestations and representations appeared either to frighten her or else to be thrown away upon her?"

"But what is the use of recapitulating all these things,"

inquired Mrs. Oxenden, impatiently, "since the final consent has just been given?"

"Ah! my recommendation that the old negress should be placed in attendance upon her doubtless went for something," observed Sir John, with a complacent air. "It was a sort of terrorism which mingled usefully with your arguments and with my attentions; so, you perceive, there was a blending of influences under which the sweet girl could not help yielding. Well, as you say, the final consent is given, and I am satisfied. But now we come to the point. I want you to understand that I have done all this with my eyes open, and that I have not been led into it by any intrigues or designs on your part. I wanted a wife, and you have found me one. It has saved me a world of trouble in respect to courtship; and besides, I might have travelled all over England without finding a young creature so completely to my taste. Then, as to the bargain which was settled between us, it was clear and specific enough, and shall be faithfully kept. You are to receive ten thousand pounds as a sort of acknowledgment for having conducted the affair with delicacy and success, I am to settle three thousand a year upon your sister, — and all these things shall be done. I have, moreover, promised to make my will in her favour so far as the residue of my property is concerned, and that likewise will I do. My attorney will be here by the first train the day after to-morrow. That will be at noon, and everything shall be at once settled. But again I tell you that you must not run away with the idea you are dealing with an old dotard."

"For shame, Sir John, to impute such a thing to me, or to pay so ill a compliment to your own self!" and there was a most artfully devised commingling of apparent vexation and complimentary cajolery in Mrs. Oxenden's look and manner as well as in her words.

"Now, are you sure," asked the baronet, "that Edgar Beverley could not possibly get upon your track when you left Brighton?"

"Totally impossible," answered Mrs. Oxenden, "the precautions which I took were so well arranged. But why did you ask the question? What fear can you entertain concerning him? You have it in your power to disinherit him; he cannot therefore assume a menacing or dictatorial atti-

tude, and he is, moreover, at your mercy for the allowance you give him, and which, with quite enough generosity, you are about to convert into a permanent annuity."

"True, true," said the old baronet. "I don't know what reason I should have to stand in any fear of that self-sufficient jackanapes; nevertheless, love between young people sometimes leads to strange unforeseen incidents, and we do know there is a proverb which says that it laughs at locksmiths."

"Trust me, Sir John, for the safe-keeping of my sister Laura. What with the negress in one room and myself in another, she could not possibly escape at night; and as for the daytime — But really it is altogether unnecessary to give you these assurances, for Laura has been overcome by my arguments, her assent is final, and I know her well enough to be aware that when once she makes up her mind to a particular course, and that course is dictated by me, she will not seek to retract nor to deviate from it. By the bye, how simple a thing it was which gave the first turn in our favour. Trivial and even stupid as the idea might have seemed at the time, it is not the less a fact that the performance of those mountebanks whom you were going to send to prison cheered her spirits and produced that revulsion which has progressed during the remainder of the day, and has this evening rendered her completely docile and pliant."

"Well," observed the baronet, "we must keep her amused to-morrow; but she must not be suffered to set foot outside the premises, except in the garden at the back of the house —"

"Leave everything to me," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "You see that Laura's mind is so artless and innocent, it is the least thing childish, — or at all events girlish, — and she is amused by a trifle. Only think, Sir John, of what an amiable, unsophisticated young creature you are about to have as a wife! But as for the amusements of to-morrow, I took care to tell those itinerant jugglers to come again, and I will make them stop as long as Laura appears to be diverted with them."

The conversation between this most delectable couple was carried on for a little while longer, and then they separated to their respective chambers, — Mrs. Oxenden to reflect with secret triumph on those schemes which were to give her immediate possession of ten thousand pounds, and the pros-

pective control of her sister's wealth at the old baronet's death, and the old baronet himself to gloat over the idea of soon folding in his arms the loveliest being on whom his eyes had ever yet settled.

CHAPTER XI

EDGAR AND CHRISTIAN

It was about two o'clock on the following day, and Edgar Beverley was pacing to and fro in his apartment at the Royal Hotel in an agitated and anxious manner. Christian was seated at the table, and every now and then he enjoined his friend to be composed, for that everything would be sure to go right.

"It is two o'clock," said Beverley, consulting his watch, "and our friend the mountebank ought to be back by this time."

"How can we tell in what manner he may be delayed?" asked our hero.

"But what if Laura should not have an opportunity of slipping the note into his hand?" exclaimed the lieutenant, who was conjuring up all kinds of misadventures, and, in ordinary parlance, was actually meeting them half-way, — a weakness which is common and yet natural enough on the part of those who love.

But before Christian had time to give him an answer, the door opened, and the friendly mountebank made his appearance. Edgar surveyed him with the intensest anxiety, but it only lasted for a few instants, inasmuch as the man drew forth a billet which he presented to the lieutenant.

"Heaven be thanked!" ejaculated Beverley, and recognizing the handwriting, he pressed the letter to his lips.

"You had better withdraw now," said Christian to the mountebank; "but come back presently, in case there be aught else wherein your services may be rendered available."

The juggler retired, and in the meanwhile Edgar Beverley had torn open the precious billet and was deeply absorbed

in its contents. Christian glanced at him for a moment, to assure himself that all was right, and the look which he thus flung led to a satisfactory conclusion, inasmuch as his friend's countenance was radiant with joy.

"Yes, my dear Ashton," exclaimed Beverley, grasping our hero's hand, when the perusal of the letter was finished, "the hopes you have held out will be realized. Here, read for yourself."

"No," responded Christian, "a communication of that kind is sacred."

"But, my dear friend," rejoined Edgar, quickly, "I have no secrets from you. Besides, should I not be wanting in a proper confidence, — would it not be unkind, ungenerous —"

"Lovers," interposed Christian, "write to each other in that fond, endearing strain which constitutes the sanctity as well as the charm of their correspondence. I can assure you that I have a delicacy in reading the letter. Pray sit down and tell me all that it is necessary for me to know for the furtherance of the plans in which I am so heartily and so gladly succouring you."

"You shall have your own way," answered Beverley. "But perhaps you will be surprised that I am thus happy and joyous when I tell you that this very note, which gives me the assurance of my Laura's unwavering love, and of her readiness to be rescued by me from an odious captivity, likewise acquaints me with the fact that I am nought but a poor lieutenant, who henceforth must look upon himself as having nothing but his pay."

"I can of course understand," said Christian, "that if you run away with Miss Hall — whom, by the by, you denominated Neville in your history —"

"Because her name is Laura Neville Hall," remarked Edgar.

"I was about to say," resumed Christian, "that I can well understand how your uncle will at once stop your allowance; but he cannot alienate from you your rightful heritage if he should die without lawful male issue."

"Yes, but he has that power," answered Beverley; "this note conveys to me the fact. Some old document, which a lawyer has just disinterred from amidst dusty, mouldering papers, establishes the right of breaking off the entail. What

care I for that? Laura will be mine, and if we be poor in one sense, we shall be rich in the wealth of our heart's love. Oh, yes, my dear Ashton, I am supremely happy, I am full of hope and confidence. We will scatter all difficulties to the winds, and never, never will you have served a more grateful friend than I shall prove myself to you."

"I know it," answered Christian. "And now tell me, what course are we next to pursue?"

"It is as we suspected," resumed Beverley. "My villainous uncle seeks to make Laura his bride, and her vile sister — alas, that I should be thus compelled to speak of my beloved's nearest relative! — is the chief agent in carrying out the hoped-for sacrifice of youth and innocence to old age and iniquity. But by some means Laura has succeeded in lulling them into security, and by a wrong interpretation of certain words she has uttered they flatter themselves that she has given her consent. Not, however, that their vigilance is relaxed; on the contrary —"

"We will baffle them, however watchful they may be," exclaimed Christian. "Pray proceed."

"It appears that Laura sleeps in a chamber situated between two others," continued Beverley. "The first — which opens from the landing — is occupied by her sister, Mrs. Oxenden; then comes her own; and beyond that is a dressing-room in which a bed has been made up for the accommodation of a horrible negress whose influence has been used to coerce and intimidate the poor girl."

"But is there a window to Miss Hall's apartment?" inquired Christian, hastily. "I mean, is there a window looking upon the front or back of the house?"

"It looks upon the front," answered Beverley, "and she has so accurately described it in her letter that we cannot possibly mistake it. She moreover tells me that it will not be difficult for her to retire to her chamber at about half-past nine o'clock this evening; the negress will not seek the dressing-room until ten, and Mrs. Oxenden will not repair to her own chamber until half an hour later. Whatever, therefore, is to be done must be accomplished between half-past nine and ten o'clock."

"There are thirty good minutes," exclaimed Christian, "and almost as many seconds would be sufficient for our purpose. We will enlist the services of the friendly mounte-

bank, we will have a post-chaise-and-four in waiting, and if success do not crown our enterprise, I shall never have been more mistaken in all my life."

Our hero and the lieutenant continued to deliberate upon the details of their plan until the friendly juggler returned to the hotel. He received his instructions, together with a liberal reward for the faithful execution of his mission of that day, and the man took his departure infinitely delighted with the lucrative employment which he had thus temporarily found.

In the same way that love at one time feeds itself with the wildest hopes, so at another does it torture itself with a thousand anxieties. Yet, paradoxical though the phrases may seem, love's hopes are ever interwoven with mistrust, and its apprehensions are permeated with beams of hopefulness. Love hopes on in the face of despair itself, and it sometimes despairs when it ought to hope. It is a passion which in its association with other sentiments is made up of contradictions; but as the river receives all confluent streamlets and absorbs those varied and insignificant waters in its own rolling volume, so does the tide of love's passion flow onward and onward, amalgamating in one flood the different feelings and discrepant emotions which become its undercurrents, and with their conflicting elements serve to swell and give a forward impetus to the whole. And then, too, this river which we are metaphorically taking as an illustration of love's progress pursues its course at one time amidst dark, frowning rocks, blackening its surface with their shadows, and shutting out the sun of hope; but at another time it meanders through smiling meads, where its banks are garlanded with flowers, and where its transparent waters shine brilliantly, with the sunbeams playing upon its bosom and kissing all its gentle ripples.

For well has the poet said that "the course of true love never did run smooth," and if we take the passion from its first inception in the human breast, trace its progress, and study its track, until it at length bears Hymen's bark exultingly upon its bosom, we shall find that there is no more appropriate similitude than that which is furnished by the course of some of earth's proudest rivers. For is not love at first like a little silver stream in the profundities of a wilderness, always flowing and swelling onward, though not always

seen, then widening and deepening, now diverted from its course by some obstacle, now dammed up until the weight of its waters break down the impediment; thus sometimes free and sometimes checked, though never altogether subdued, until its channel becomes broad and deep and its waters expand into a glorious flood. Oh, wherefore have novelists and poets ever taken love as their most favourite theme? Why has the minstrel made it the subject of his harmony, and the limner illustrated its episodes upon his canvas? Is it not because it is the most important passion which the human heart can possibly know, a source alike of the sublimest happiness and the profoundest misery, sometimes a blessing, at others a curse, and often proving the pivot upon which turn the mightiest deeds as well as the gravest occurrences ever beholden upon the theatre of the world? What reader, therefore, will ever quarrel with his author if for a space he digress to discourse upon the varied elements which form the compound of love, or to expatiate upon the immensity of its influence over the hearts as well as the transactions of human beings?

But we set out by observing that if love at one time feed itself upon the purest manna of hope, so at another does it voluntarily distil drops of bitterness into the cup which it drinks. Nor was the love of Edgar Beverley an exception to this rule. At first Laura's letter had inspired him with enthusiastic hope, but subsequently, during the hours which elapsed ere it was time to enter upon the execution of the settled plan, the young lieutenant gave way to a thousand torturing fears. Christian did all he could to soothe and tranquillize his friend, and to make him revert to the belief that everything would go right; but Christian himself, if similarly situated at the moment in respect to Isabella, would have been harassed by precisely the same apprehensions. We will not therefore unnecessarily extend this portion of our narrative, but without further preface we will proceed to a description of the scenes which occurred in the evening of that memorable day.

At about twenty minutes past nine o'clock, a post-chaise-and-four advanced at a slow pace into the neighbourhood of Verner House, the postilions thus gently walking their horses in order as much as possible to avoid the chance of the sounds of the equipage being heard within the walls of

the habitation. The chaise contained three persons, Edgar Beverley, Christian Ashton, and the friendly mountebank, — this last-mentioned individual being, as a matter of course, attired in his plain clothes. The equipage halted at a distance of barely a hundred yards from the house, it being deemed expedient to have it thus close to the scene of action in case of the principal actors themselves being pressed hard by pursuit. Moreover, the spot chosen for the halting-place of the vehicle was completely embowered by the trees skirting both sides of the road, and the boughs of which interlacingly joined overhead. Beverley, Ashton, and the mountebank alighted from the chaise; the postilions, already well instructed, and likewise liberally remunerated, retained their seats upon their horses; and the three individuals advanced cautiously, like a reconnoitring party, toward the house. They however soon stopped by the side of a thick hedge, and thence they drew forth a ladder which the mountebank and one of his companions had procured and concealed there in the course of the evening, according to the instructions given by the lieutenant and Christian. But scarcely had they thus possessed themselves of this necessary implement for the scaling of the fortress when, through the deep gloom of the evening, a female form was all in an instant descried advancing rapidly toward them. The woman had just passed by the equipage; she had therefore seen it, she was proceeding in the same direction as themselves, and if she belonged to Verner House, she would of course give the alarm. All this struck Edgar and his coadjutors in a moment, but just as the lieutenant was about to whisper some rapid words of consultation, our young hero's lips sent forth an ejaculation of "The negress!"

At the same moment he sprang forward and caught her by the arm. He had recognized her at once; her hideous countenance, as well as her apparel, pointed her out as the same whom he had seen in the garden, and to whom Laura Hall had specially alluded in her letter to Edgar Beverley. The woman, on being thus seized upon, gave vent to a shriek of terror; but Christian, vehemently bidding her remain silent, assured her that she had nothing to fear if she held her peace. She was much alarmed, and tremblingly besought that no mischief might be done her.

"Be silent," reiterated Christian, "and you have no

ground for apprehension. Proceed! proceed!" he instantaneously added, thus addressing himself to Beverley; "you must leave me to take charge of this woman until —"

But having spoken this last word significantly, he stopped suddenly short, and Beverley hastened away with the mountebank, the last-mentioned individual carrying the ladder over his shoulder. Christian had seen at a single mental glance that as it was absolutely necessary to keep the negress there as a prisoner until Laura's flight should be ensured, he himself was the most proper person to hold her in such custody. Edgar Beverley's presence in the rescue of his beloved was of course absolutely necessary, and Christian felt that the mountebank might not possibly be quite so firm or strenuous as he himself would be in holding the negress fast.

"She may hold out promises of heavier bribes from Sir John than Edgar can give," thought our hero to himself, "and the juggler might be tempted. The guardianship of this woman for the present shall consequently be my own care."

So soon as Beverley and the mountebank had hastened away from the spot, Christian said to the negress, "I have already assured you that no harm will befall you if you remain silent and motionless on the spot where you now stand. But I charge you not to trust too much to my forbearance, for I should be little inclined to stand upon punctilious terms with one who has been instrumental in keeping an innocent young lady in an odious captivity."

The horrible black woman was completely overawed by Christian's words and manner, which he purposely rendered fierce and threatening, and she continued quiet.

In the meantime Edgar Beverley and the mountebank had advanced toward the mansion, and the former had no difficulty in at once discovering which was the chamber occupied by his beloved Laura. Indeed, at the very moment that he and his assistant arrived in front of the dwelling, a light appeared in that particular room. Edgar's heart beat quickly; his ear could catch its pulsations as he and the mountebank paused in front of Verner House to assure themselves that no one else was lurking about outside. The night was very dark, but perfectly mild, and no suspicious sound reached them, nor could their eyes, straining

to penetrate through the obscurity, discern any human form moving about. The ladder was accordingly planted against the window of Laura's chamber, and Edgar, rapidly ascending it, tapped gently at the glass. The few moments which followed ere the summons was answered were full of acutest suspense for the lieutenant, inasmuch as he could not see into the room, the heavy draperies being drawn completely over the casement, and it might not be Laura who was there, or if it were, it was by no means certain that she was alone. Her sister or a maid servant might happen to be with her, although her note to her lover had given rise to a hope in altogether a contrary sense.

The suspense of Edgar Beverley was not, however, of long duration; the draperies parted in the centre, and the well-beloved Laura appeared to his view. Oh, with what ecstasy beat his heart, what joy thrilled through his form! The light of the wax candles inside the chamber beamed upon his countenance, and a kindred animation of wild delight irradiated the young maiden's features as she recognized him who was dearer to her than any being in the world beside. Nevertheless, caution was not lost sight of, the window was opened gently, and then Laura's fair hand was pressed to Edgar's lips.

"Come, dearest, come," he said in a low but fervid whisper; "the chaise is waiting, there must not be an instant's delay."

"Dearest Edgar!" murmured the damsel, her joy being so excessive that her emotions now found vent in tears. "You know not how much I have suffered — But never, never, Edgar," she added, more firmly, and likewise with a sudden access of solemnity, "never, never will I forget all this goodness on your part."

She pressed his hand, and flew to put on her bonnet and shawl, but her heart fluttered and her hand trembled so that she felt as if she had incurred the danger of being as much overpowered by joy as but a short time back she stood the chance of being overwhelmed with affliction. At length, however, after the lapse of some moments, — which seemed ages to the impatient lover, — she was ready attired, and she rejoined him at the window. Still so timid and nervous was she, however, that he perceived at a glance she would not be able to descend the ladder without the most

careful assistance, and vaulting over the window-sill, he sprang into the room, that he might help her out first, and thus be enabled to hold her hand as she descended the ladder. But at that very instant the sound of a door opening in the first room of the suite reached the ears of the lovers, and Laura, suddenly becoming pale as death, faintly ejaculated, "My sister!"

Not for a single instant did Edgar Beverley lose his presence of mind; on the contrary, it all in a moment received the most vivid impulse, and with one spring across the room he reached the door of communication between the two chambers. The handle of that door was already turning in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden, when the key itself was turned by Edgar Beverley, and the next instant he was by Laura's side again.

"Open the door, Laura!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. Oxenden from the opposite side of the secured portal. "Open the door directly, I command you!"

"Energy, dearest Laura, energy and courage, for God's sake!" whispered Beverley. "The least hesitation, and everything is lost."

But as Mrs. Oxenden's voice continued to peal from the opposite side of the door, the poor damsel was almost overwhelmed with affright; in such dread did she stand of her sister, that she could not possibly conquer her terrors. Nevertheless, by some little exertion on her own part, but more through the assistance of her lover, she passed over the window-sill and got upon the ladder, at the same time that the voice of Mrs. Oxenden suddenly ceased to be heard from the opposite side of the door, though the excitement experienced by both the lovers prevented them from hearing the sounds of the unprincipled woman's rapidly retreating footsteps.

The crisis was now a serious one, for though Beverley was determined to defend Laura with his very life, if necessary, yet he likewise knew that his uncle had a numerous retinue of male dependents, and that he would not scruple to urge them to any deed of violence. However, by the joint assistance of her lover and the mountebank, Laura descended the ladder, and reached the ground in safety. Then away toward the post-chaise! But all in an instant the front door of the mansion opened, Sir John Steward and

Mrs. Oxenden rushed out first, a troop of men servants followed next, and from a side door three or four other male dependents rushed out, darting toward the road, and thus cutting off the progress of the fugitives. Beverley had caught up Laura in his arms, and was hastening with all his speed toward the post-chaise, when he was seized upon by some of the old baronet's myrmidons. Laura fainted. To have loosened his hold upon her would have been to drop her upon the ground, but to retain her was to render himself powerless for defence. Supporting her, therefore, as well as he could on his left arm, he dealt such vigorous blows with his right as speedily to shake off his two foremost assailants; the mountebank ably assisted him, and the next instant Christian, whose ears had caught the disturbance, arrived upon the spot. Our young hero and the mountebank did all they possibly could to clear the way for Edgar's passage towards the post-chaise; they valorously sought to bring all the brunt of the conflict upon themselves, but a violent blow with a stout stick grasped by a sturdy footman levelled Christian with the ground; the mountebank, perceiving that all was over, took to his heels and fled precipitately; Beverley and Laura were made prisoners.

"Bring them all into the house," vociferated Sir John, "and as a magistrate will I deal with these ruffians. Mrs. Oxenden, take charge of your sister."

These mandates were obeyed; the still insensible Laura was borne by Mrs. Oxenden and the negress (who in the meanwhile had come upon the spot) into the mansion, whither Edgar and Christian were likewise forcibly conducted.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAWYER

OUR young hero had been stunned for a few moments by the severe blow he received, but he quickly recovered his consciousness, to find himself in the power of half a dozen stalwart and determined fellows, while a glance showed him that such was likewise the fate of his friend Beverley. The enterprise had therefore completely failed, and the aspect of affairs was even worse than before the adventure was undertaken. Beverley maintained a dignified silence, he being determined to wait and see what course his uncle would have the hardihood to adopt, yet inwardly his feelings were those of the acutest disappointment and grief. As for Christian, he likewise held his peace for the present, and his own sorrow at the failure of the enterprise was scarcely less poignant than that of his friend Beverley.

Sir John Steward, with a fierce triumph depicted upon his countenance, led the way into the dining-room, where he seated himself at the head of the table. Edgar and Christian were in the grasp of some seven or eight lackeys and grooms, and they were of course powerless against the numerical strength of the enemy. Mrs. Oxenden was temporarily absent in charge of her sister.

"Now I intend," said Sir John Steward, "to investigate this matter magisterially, and without the slightest reference to my relationship with one of the prisoners — But surely," he ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting himself, "I have seen you before?" and he fixed his eyes upon Christian.

"Yes," responded our hero, in a firm voice, "we met on the occasion when your intended victim was first brought by her infamous sister to your house."

"You impertinent young scoundrel!" exclaimed Sir John

Steward, half-springing from his seat in a furious rage, "how dare you make use of such vile and opprobrious terms as these?"

"This young gentleman," said Beverley, alluding to Christian, "is a friend of mine, and on his behalf I hurl back the term scoundrel in your teeth."

"Oh, oh, a pretty set of fellows we have got to deal with!" said Sir John Steward.

Here Mrs. Oxenden suddenly made her appearance, and as her eyes fell upon Christian Ashton, she instantaneously recognized him.

"I always suspected, sir," she said, with a fierce flashing of her dark eyes, and a scornful drawing-up of her fine person, "that you were some insolent meddler in affairs which did not concern you."

"To succour an innocent and virtuous young lady," responded our hero, haughtily, "is a paramount duty on the part of even the veriest stranger. That duty I took upon myself, and if I have failed in the attempt, my own conscience will enable me to endure with pride and satisfaction any reproaches which your lips, madam, may fling out against me, or any punishment which Sir John Steward in his capacity as a magistrate may be enabled to inflict."

"Nobly spoken, my gallant young friend!" exclaimed Edgar Beverley, "and rest assured that though the cause of right and justice, truth and virtue, may suffer defeat, yet that chastisement will sooner or later overtake the triumphant wrong-doers. Sir John Steward, I tell you to your face —"

"Silence, sir!" vociferated the baronet. "Hold them fast, my worthy fellows, and we will presently see how these two moral-preaching upstarts will relish a condemnation to the county gaol. For here is downright burglary, violence, assault and battery, abduction — I don't know but that it amounts to — to —"

And the baronet stopped short for want of some term, to express a more heinous crime than any he had yet specified.

"This young man," said Mrs. Oxenden, intimating our hero, "forcibly stopped the negress and retained her for several minutes a prisoner in the road, close by the spot where a post-chaise was in waiting."

"Coercion and intimidation," vociferated Sir John,

“almost highway robbery. I must make out the committal of these misdemeanants for six weeks as rogues and vagabonds — ”

“Sir John Steward,” interrupted Edgar Beverley, with a haughty indignation, “remember that I am an officer in the queen’s service.”

“And therefore,” retorted the baronet, “all the more completely bound to maintain law and order.”

“You are determined to compel me to speak out,” resumed Beverley, in the same haughtily indignant tones as before, and with corresponding looks. “Sir John Steward — ”

“Silence!” again vociferated the old baronet, waving his hand furiously. “I do not treat you as a nephew — I discard you, I disown you.”

“You were already prepared to do so,” replied Edgar, drawing his tall form up proudly in the midst of his custodians, “before the incidents of this evening. Rest assured that I should feel myself but little flattered or complimented by being spoken of in the world as the relative of such as you. And now, Sir John Steward, you shall hear me. You may exercise your power tyrannously over my liberty, but you cannot place a gag between my lips. I accuse you of keeping a young lady within these walls against her will, I accuse you of contemplating the coercion of this young lady into a marriage which is loathsome and repugnant to her, I accuse you of leaguings and connivings with an infamous woman — ”

“Sir John Steward,” cried Mrs. Oxenden, her countenance livid with rage, “is this abominable language to be tolerated? ”

“It is shocking,” interjected Beverley, “that a man should be compelled to speak thus of a woman, but with you, Mrs. Oxenden, I consider myself bound to keep no terms and to be swayed by no fastidiousness. Let your friend Sir John Steward dare to pronounce a sentence of imprisonment against me and my generous-hearted companion, and I will unreservedly proclaim — ”

But at this moment there was a loud knocking at the street door, which had been immediately preceded by the sounds of an equipage rolling up to the front of the mansion, although these sounds had passed unheard in

the dining-room on account of the excitement of the scene.

“Who can this be?” ejaculated Sir John. “The present business must be suspended for a moment. I may be wanted — it is possible that it is some one for me. Keep the prisoners in secure custody — And I would advise you, Edgar, to retain a still tongue in your head if you wish me to show you any mercy.”

Beverley flung a scornful look upon his uncle, but he made no verbal remark; he felt that he ought to do as much as he possibly could to procure the release of the young friend whose generous services on his behalf had involved him in the present dilemma. Sir John Steward issued from the room, accompanied by Mrs. Oxenden, Edgar and Christian remaining in the custody of the domestics.

As the baronet and his female accomplice passed forth into the hall, a footman was just opening the front door and giving admittance to a middle-aged gentleman, from the side-pocket of whose overcoat peeped forth some parchments and other deeds. This was Mr. Andrews, the London attorney, whose arrival was not expected until the morrow. He was an active, bustling individual, talked with great volubility, and though really of good manners, was nevertheless inclined to be somewhat too servilely obsequious toward his wealthy clients. He was not exactly an unprincipled person; he would not of his own accord perform a dishonest action, but he was what might be termed a sharp practitioner, — doing everything that the law allowed for the side that he espoused, and believing that it was perfectly consistent with the character of an honourable man to avail himself of whatsoever quirks and chicaneries might be evolved during the course of his professional proceedings.

Such was the attorney who now received a hearty welcome from Sir John Steward, and in a few rapidly uttered words Mr. Andrews explained how it was that he had come on the eve of the day when he was expected to arrive. The deeds were all finished, he found that there was a late train, and he thought that he might just as well run down from London at once, instead of waiting until the morrow, as he saw by the tenor of Sir John Steward's letters that he was anxious to get the business settled as soon as possible. Mr. Andrews was duly complimented by the baronet for

the zeal which he had thus displayed, and as he had come to take up his temporary quarters at Verner House, the vehicle which he had hired to bring him from the railway-station was at once dismissed. Having been introduced to Mrs. Oxenden, the lawyer was conducted to the drawing-room, where the baronet hastily explained to him the position of affairs in respect to Edgar Beverley and Christian. Mrs. Oxenden temporarily quitted the room in order to revisit her sister, and when the door closed behind her, the lawyer drew his chair nearer to that occupied by the baronet, at the same time observing, "This is a nasty business, Sir John, a very nasty business, and you must manage it with great delicacy. Pray excuse me, but —"

"What do you mean?" inquired the baronet. "Is it all right about the deed breaking off the entail and thereby disinheriting my gracious nephew?"

"All right, my dear sir," responded the lawyer, with a smile half-obsequious, half-professionally significant. "It is amongst these papers here," and he pointed to the documents which lay before him upon the table.

"Then let me sign it at once," exclaimed the old baronet, in his greedy haste thus to avenge himself upon the nephew whom he detested.

"Softly, softly, Sir John!" said the lawyer. "With all due deference, the matter cannot be settled in such a railway speed. I am bound to read the document over to you —"

"Nonsense! nonsense!" ejaculated the baronet. "We can dispense with all formalities —"

"But, my dear Sir John," again interposed the attorney, — and it was with another obsequious smile, — "the document must be attested by competent witnesses. Now, pray listen to me. Here are all the deeds, — marriage-settlements, draft of will, and everything that you have ordered, but do let them stand over until we have first discussed the affair which seems to press with the most importance."

"Well, well," said the baronet, "no doubt you are right, and, after all, something must be done at once in respect to this scapegrace of a nephew of mine and his friend."

"Pardon me for appearing to dictate, my dear Sir John," resumed Mr. Andrews, "but you really must not treat the matter magisterially. It would perhaps be all the better for me," he went on to observe, with a chuckle, "because

you would be certain to have actions for false imprisonment brought against you."

"And what do I care?" exclaimed the baronet. "I have the means of paying the damages."

"True, my dear sir," rejoined the lawyer, "but you have not the means of preventing the scandal. Excuse me, but, as you are aware, though I never saw the lady until this evening, it is no secret to me that Mrs. Oxenden was your mistress some years ago; doubtless Mr. Beverley is equally sensible of this fact, and you know, my dear Sir John, it would not be pleasant if the world came to know that you had married the sister of your former paramour. Come, do be reasonable. You are a man of sound sense, of great intelligence, though a trifle hasty perhaps — and it would be well to treat this matter with prudence and policy."

"What course do you recommend?" asked the baronet. "In plain terms, all I want to do is to keep this nephew of mine fast until after the marriage knot is tied, for between you and me, Andrews, I don't mind admitting that if I set him free to-night, and though it is settled that the beautiful Laura is to be mine before to-morrow's noon, yet in the meanwhile —"

"I understand, Sir John," interjected the lawyer; "your nephew is so desperately enamoured of the young lady that he would even set fire to the very house with the chance of being enabled to carry her off in the scramble. Well, well, but there is still a means of settling the affair amicably. What should you say to allowing your nephew five hundred a year, if he would sign a paper renouncing all pretension to the hand of Miss Hall, and if he would immediately afterward take himself off to join his regiment at Brighton? You were going to make the two hundred a year a permanent settlement; it is only flinging in three hundred more, and what is that to a man of wealth such as you are?"

"But of what earthly use," inquired the baronet, petulantly, "is a document of the nature you mention? He may sign it as a stratagem to procure his freedom, — and the stupid adage is, you know, that all stratagems are allowable in love as well as in war."

"This is the use," rejoined Mr. Andrews; "that you can display the document to Miss Hall; she will at once perceive that Mr. Beverley's worldly interests ride para-

mount over his love, and the natural pride of woman will induce her to discard him from her heart for ever."

"On my soul, this is capital!" ejaculated Sir John Steward, clutching at the idea the moment that it was fully expounded to him. "Why, my dear Andrews, you are as well versed in love-affairs as you are in those of the law. But what course do you mean to adopt?"

"Will you be guided by me, Sir John?" asked the attorney.

"To be sure! to be sure! You are managing matters so well —"

"Then let us have Mr. Beverley up here at once. He must be alone with us, — the servants can wait outside the drawing-room door, — and I dare say the windows are high enough to prevent an escape. Shall I ring the bell?"

Sir John Steward nodded an assent; the bell was rung, a servant answered the summons, the order was given, and in a couple of minutes Edgar Beverley was introduced to the drawing-room. The baronet strove to render the expression of his countenance as sternly grave as possible, as he bade the domestics retire but wait on the landing outside; Edgar advanced into the room with a dignified demeanour, and took a seat some distance from the table.

"This gentleman," said Sir John Steward, "is Mr. Andrews, my solicitor, and he is desirous of having some little conversation with you."

"Then, as a gentleman versed in the law," at once observed Edgar, addressing himself to the attorney, "you will perhaps inform Sir John Steward that it may be dangerous to keep my friend Mr. Ashton any longer in the custody of a set of lackeys, for what he has helped me to do — or rather to attempt — here this evening can be justified by every principle of rectitude and honour."

"There will be no harm, Mr. Beverley," replied the solicitor, "in your friend remaining a few minutes longer in his present position, inasmuch as I hope that you will both very shortly go away together in freedom and in peace, as the result of the discourse I am about to hold with you."

"Proceed, sir," said Edgar, coldly.

"My dear sir," resumed Mr. Andrews, with a bland smile, "you cannot possibly entertain any animosity against me. If you do, I am sorry for it. But let us come to the point.

This document, Mr. Beverley," — and he lifted the deed from the table as he spoke, — "will have the effect, when duly signed by Sir John Stewart, of breaking off the entail of his estates and enabling him to bequeath them to whomsoever he may think fit. You must therefore understand that inasmuch as you will henceforth have no prospective interest in your uncle's property, you become entirely dependent upon his bounty. But on his behalf, I offer to secure you the sum of five hundred a year, on condition that you now at once sign a paper which I in a few minutes will draw up to the effect that you renounce all claim and pretension to the hand of Miss Hall."

Edgar Beverley sprang up from his seat in so violent an agitation that for an instant it appeared as if he were on the point of inflicting summary chastisement upon the person of the solicitor, but the next moment, restraining the extreme violence of his feelings, he darted one withering glance upon his uncle, and then addressed the attorney in the following manner:

"Your position, sir, as the mere hireling agent for another, secures you from the effects of my resentment. But hear me reject with scorn and indignation the base — the infamous proposal you have made me. As for receiving anything from what you have termed the bounty of my uncle, I should loathe myself were I to condescend to such despicable meanness. But when that falsely called bounty is offered as the price for a love which is above all price, no words are adequate for the expression of my disgust and indignation. And now I demand that I may at once be free to depart hence, — my young companion likewise, — or, by Heaven! there shall be lives lost ere I am again overpowered"

"Then, by Heaven," exclaimed Sir John Stewart, rising up from his seat in a paroxysm of ungovernable rage, "you shall see before you leave this house that I am thoroughly in earnest in disowning and disinheriting you, — ay, by deed and by will."

With these words, the baronet rushed to the bell, which he rang violently, and on one of the domestics on the landing hastily answering the summons, the infuriate old man ordered that the butler and another upper-servant should be desired to attend in the drawing-room. Edgar sat unmoved, for though he had just now demanded his liberty, yet it was

entirely on Christian's behalf, for he himself was by no means sorry to remain a little longer in the house, in the almost desperate hope that something would yet transpire in his favour. The butler and another upper-servant speedily made their appearance, and Sir John Steward, still in a towering rage, exclaimed with passionate vehemence, "I want you to witness a deed — a deed which my lawyer will now have the kindness to read over — a deed — a deed — But go on, Mr. Andrews!" added the baronet, with an oath.

The lawyer saw that any further remonstrance would be unavailing, and though after his journey from London, he would much sooner have sat down to a good supper, and then betaken himself to bed, he was nevertheless constrained through fear of displeasing the baronet to commence the reading of the document. The butler and his fellow servant listened with a sort of vacant bewilderment to the technical phrases, the endless circumlocutions, and the labyrinthine language of the deed; the baronet sat with an expression of grim gloating triumph upon his countenance; Edgar Beverley was deliberating in his own mind what plan he could possibly adopt for the rescue of Laura, and so far from listening to the language of the document which was being read, he had no other sensation with regard to it than a continuous droning sound flowing upon his ear. At length, at the expiration of about twenty minutes, Mr. Andrews ceased, and Sir John Steward, greedily snatching up a pen, exclaimed, "Now — now I will do that which is the first step toward cutting you, Edgar, off for ever, and then shall follow the signature of my will. You have got that deed also, Mr. Andrews, eh?"

Scarcely had the attorney answered the question in the affirmative, when the door was burst open, and Laura rushed into the room. The poor girl was like one demented; her hair was floating all dishevelled over her shoulders, her apparel was in disorder, it was even torn in two or three places; in a word, her whole appearance indicated the desperate struggle which she had made to escape from her sister and the negress. And Mrs. Oxenden herself showed signs of her frenzied efforts to hold the persecuted girl back, for she came rushing in with her own hair all disarranged, her toilet in disorder, and with fury flashing from her large dark eyes. All was confusion in a moment; the horrible

negress followed Mrs. Oxenden into the room, some of the servants, likewise, from the landing, the butler and the other domestic who had been called as witnesses, sprang up from their seats, the lawyer seemed stricken with dismay, and Sir John Steward gave vent to a terrible imprecation. But Edgar Beverley, bounding forward, received Laura in his arms.

"Save me! save me!" she wildly shrieked forth. "For Heaven's sake, save me!" and as she clung in frantic terror with her arms thrown around her lover's neck, she flung frightened glances over her shoulders at her sister and the negress.

"Give her up, Mr. Beverley," cried Mrs. Oxenden, seizing upon her sister.

"No, never, never to you, vile profligate wretch that you are," thundered forth the lieutenant, snatching the maiden violently from Mrs. Oxenden's grasp, and holding the former as it were on one side, with his upraised right arm he protected her from another attack. "Dare not to lay a finger upon her," he cried, "for I will strike indiscriminately. Yes, by Heaven! I will strike you down, woman though you be."

"Seize upon her! seize upon that obstinate girl!" vociferated Sir John Steward, thus addressing himself to his dependents and stamping his feet with rage. "A hundred guineas to be divided amongst you if you do my bidding."

"No, no!" wildly shrieked forth Laura, as there was a general rush toward the spot where she clung so tenaciously to Edgar.

"Really, my dear Sir John," interposed Mr. Andrews, "I am afraid —"

"Silence, sir," thundered the baronet; "it is my will that rules here."

And so it did indeed too fatally seem, for what was Beverley's strength, encumbered as he was too by the very being he sought to defend, against the overwhelming power of numbers? Besides, he was constrained to limit his resistance within certain bounds for fear of injuring the now almost fainting girl, so that in less than a couple of minutes after the order had gone forth from the infuriate Sir John's lips, the lovers were separated, — Beverley was again in the

grasp of the domestics, Laura in the power of her sister and the negress.

The scene in that drawing-room was now fraught with a vivid and most varied interest. There stood the lieutenant, his garments torn, his countenance pale as death, his lips white and quivering, his chest heaving and falling with rapid pantings after the violence of the struggle and in the continued excitement of his own agitated feelings. On the other side of the same extremity of the apartment was Laura in the grasp of Mrs. Oxenden and the negress; the poor girl had not absolutely swooned, but half-dead with mingled distress and terror, she had sunk upon her knees, and her eyes were fixed in a sort of despairing bewilderment upon her lover. At the table Sir John Steward, with a diabolic expression of countenance, resumed the seat from which he had started, and the lawyer, bending over toward him, whispered, "For Heaven's sake, do not carry all this too far!"

"Now," exclaimed the baronet, not heeding the attorney's well-meant remonstrance, but giving free vent to his vindictive rage and his feelings of ferocious triumph, "instead of having a couple of witnesses to this document which disinherits my nephew, we will have a dozen. Look, Edgar, the pen is in my hand, the ink is in the pen, the deed is before me. At this instant you are my heir, — the next moment, when my name is signed, you will have no more claim upon my property at my decease than the veriest stranger."

"Do your worst," ejaculated Beverley. "I call every one to witness that I care not the value of the very pen which you hold for all the estates you possess. But it is the safety and happiness of this injured, outraged young lady —"

"Ah, but she shall become my bride in spite of you," vociferated Sir John, who was perfectly mad with rage, "and this hand which is about to write the words that will leave you a beggar shall hold hers at the nuptial ceremony."

"Remember, Sir John," exclaimed Edgar, "that Heaven at any moment can paralyze and wither the hand which is stretched forth to do injustice or mischief."

"Silence, wretch. I defy you," vociferated the furious baronet, and again dipping the pen deep down into the ink-

stand, he was about to apply it to the foot of the disinheriting document.

But all in a moment, as he half-raised himself up from his chair to lean the more conveniently over the table, he was seen to give a quick spasmodic start, the pen dropped from his hand, blotting the paper with ink, but in the twinkling of an eye the sable stains were mingled with sanguine ones, for the blood gushed forth from Sir John Steward's mouth, his head fell heavily for an instant upon the table, then his balance was lost, and he sank backward into the armchair. Cries of horror burst forth; the attorney and the butler hastened to his assistance, but he was past all human aid, — in the madness of his fury he had broken a blood vessel, and it was a corpse that lay back in that chair.

Thus all in an instant the poor and humble lieutenant, who was about to be disinherited, cast off, persecuted, and robbed of the maiden of his devoted love, became Sir Edgar Beverley and the possessor of immense wealth.

CHAPTER XIII

THE YOUNG BARONET

THE scene was a frightful one; the sudden death of Sir John Steward, following with such awful quickness upon what thus proved to be a presaging warning on his nephew's part, struck all present with a sense of Heaven's retribution. Edgar himself stood aghast, motionless, statue-like, though every hand which an instant before was upon him fell as if palsied from its fierce ruffian grasp upon his garments. Laura sprang upright as if galvanized, and stood gazing for a few moments in wild horror upon the scene; then with a sudden and half-stifled shriek, she averted her looks, covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out some object of horror, and sank almost fainting upon a chair. Mrs. Oxenden, half-stunned for nearly a minute, was transfixed to the spot, — her wildly-open eyes staring upon the hideous scene as if she were in a fearful state of somnambulism, and then, suddenly startled to a sense of the change which had been wrought in the circumstances of Edgar Beverley, she turned toward her sister, murmuring, "For Heaven's sake forgive me, my dearest Laura!"

But the young maiden, whose brain was in a whirl, had lost all sense of the relationship subsisting between them, and seeing in Mrs. Oxenden nothing more than a bitter enemy who a few minutes back had been mercilessly upbraiding and taunting her for her attempted flight, the young damsel, we say, repulsed with horror the vile woman whose selfishness alone prompted a reconciliation.

Mrs. Oxenden fell back utterly discomfited, and Laura, obedient to a sudden impulse, sprang forward and was once more clasped in the arms of Edgar Beverley. This time there was no one who thought of separating the lovers,

but still the young maiden clung to Edgar as if she were yet without a positive idea of safety.

The attorney saw that the new baronet was in no condition of mind to issue such commands as were requisite under the circumstances, and he therefore undertook that duty himself.

“Remove the body of your late master, begone from the room, every one of you, let Mr. Ashton, who is a prisoner down-stairs, be immediately liberated, tell him what has occurred, and show him the way hither. As for you, vile wretch,” he added, turning to the negress, “tramp! and if you take yourself off from the mansion at once, there will be no harm done.”

Then the lawyer’s eyes settled sternly upon Mrs. Oxenden, as if he meant to issue the same imperious advice to her, but she looked as if she were about to sink down on the carpet in a fit, and Mr. Andrews left the words unspoken. The commands which he had uttered were however promptly obeyed; the negress disappeared in affright, the corpse of the deceased baronet was borne from the apartment, the document on which the blood gushed forth was likewise removed, the posse of domestics withdrew, and in a few moments afterward Christian Ashton entered the drawing-room.

“Laura, dearest Laura,” exclaimed Sir Edgar Beverley, “give your hand in welcome to this, my best and dearest friend, — the being whom next to yourself I must love the most sincerely. You have yet to learn the immensity of obligation which is due from us both to Mr. Ashton.”

The young maiden — who by this time had recovered a sufficiency of her self-possession, if not of positive mental composure, to understand that it was not all a dream, but a startling reality — at once gave her hand to our young hero, whom she then recognized as the same individual that had lent his succour when the accident occurred to the carriage. Christian’s countenance was exceedingly pale, for the news of Sir John Steward’s death had been communicated as abruptly as the incident itself had occurred; and much as he had loathed and abhorred the man, yet he could not remain unsusceptible of horror at his awful fate.

“You experience, my dear Ashton,” said Beverley, “the same feeling as myself. I am shocked and appalled,

but it would savour of the vilest hypocrisy to profess affliction for an occurrence which is Heaven's retribution itself. This is now my mansion, and you, Ashton, are indeed a welcome guest."

At that instant the young baronet's eyes settled upon Mrs. Oxenden, who was advancing with the air of the humblest supplicant. A burning indignation sprang up to his countenance, his arm was already stretching forth to bid her avaunt, his lips were wreathing to form the word "Be-gone," when Laura, smitten with commiseration for the abject appearance of her lately imperious relative, murmured, "Remember, dearest Edgar, she is my sister."

"True," said Beverley, and then he instantaneously recollected that his intended bride could not with decency remain beneath that roof unless in the companionship of a female relation. "Mrs. Oxenden," he went on to observe, "to say that I forgive you is to proclaim as much as you can ever expect to hear from my lips, but you cannot suppose that friendship will exist between us. Remain here for the present; I do not consign your sister to your care. Thank Heaven, I am now in a position to befriend and protect her, but perhaps you will endeavour by your attentions to atone as much as possible for that past conduct which I will forbear from designating by terms as harsh as it merits."

Mrs. Oxenden took Laura's hand, and looked most plaintively in her face, as if to beseech her sympathy, her pardon, and the restoration of her love, but generous-hearted, magnanimous, as well as kindly gentle though the young maiden were, it was nevertheless impossible that she could in a moment put away from her recollection the sense of the bitter wrongs and persecution that she had experienced at the hands of her sister.

"I will not speak a reproachful word to you," she said, in a low, tremulous voice, while tears trickled down her cheeks, "but as for ever again being as we once were toward each other, I fear —"

Laura however left the remainder of the sentence un-uttered, and as she still clung to her lover's arm, she was compelled to turn away from her sister, because Sir Edgar Beverley at the moment was about to address a few words to Mr. Andrews.

“ I bear no animosity, sir, against you,” he said, “ because I am well aware that you have only performed your professional duty, and moreover I have not forgotten that you flung in a word or two with the hope of checking the savage impetuosity of my deceased uncle. If it suit your other engagements, I beg that you will remain here for the present, to superintend the arrangements for the funeral, and to give me all requisite information with regard to a property which I have inherited so abruptly and with which I am so little acquainted.”

The lawyer bowed an assent to the proposal, and then said, “ Does it suit you, Sir Edgar, that I should issue on your behalf any instructions with reference to those varlets who treated yourself and your friend so roughly? ”

“ No, let nothing be changed until the funeral shall have taken place,” rejoined Sir Edgar Beverley.

Shortly afterward the inmates of Verner House separated to their respective chambers, and on the following morning instructions were given with respect to the funeral. Christian at the same time proceeded into Ramsgate, where he inquired for the friendly mountebank, and he found him at his lodging in the obscure court. The news of Sir John Steward’s death had not reached the man’s ears, and he could scarcely believe his own senses when he thus received the intelligence from our young hero.

“ I hope, sir, you do not take me for a coward,” he said, “ that I ran away so precipitately last night — ”

“ Such is not the impression of Sir Edgar Beverley or myself,” interrupted our hero, “ for you bore your part well until you saw that all was lost, and we could not expect you to peril your own safety any further. I come to you thus early, for fear lest you should be thinking of a retreat from the town. Sir Edgar Beverley has sent you a small testimonial of his gratitude, and should circumstances ever transpire to render the services of a friend needful, you must not hesitate to apply to the baronet.”

With these words Christian placed a purse in the hands of the mountebank, and then hurried away. When the itinerant came to examine the contents of that purse, he found himself possessed of a little fortune of twenty guineas; so that the whole court rang with the joyous “ huzzah ” which burst from his lips, and all the inhabitants of the said court were

in a moment electrified as well as amazingly edified by the extraordinary antics which he began to perform.

Our young hero next proceeded to the Royal Hotel, where he liquidated Sir Edgar Beverley's account, and availed himself of the temporary absence of the landlord to settle his own, for be it borne in mind that the generous-hearted proprietor of the establishment had invited him to remain there as long as he thought fit, free of all charge. This was, however, a license which Christian's natural pride would not suffer him to use, and he therefore liquidated his own score with liberality. He ordered the trunks to be forwarded to Verner House, and having thus transacted his business in the town, returned to that mansion. Nothing more worth special notice occurred during that day, and it was at a somewhat early hour in the evening that the inmates withdrew to their respective chambers, for there was a general sense of weariness after the varied and thrilling incidents of the preceding night.

Christian had been perhaps about half an hour in his own room, and was yet but partially undressed, — for he had been sitting down to reflect on all those circumstances in which he had become so mixed up, — when the door slowly opened and Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance. She had completely disapparelled herself of her day costume, and was now attired in the simplest negligee; a muslin wrapper was thrown so loosely around her that it revealed far more of her really superb neck and bosom than was consistent with modesty, and yet there was an utter absence of any indication to prove a studied voluptuous display on her part. Indeed, it all had so natural an air that it appeared as if in the excitement of her feelings she had hurriedly slipped on that muslin wrapper without reference to the closing of its folds in decent propriety. The luxuriant masses of her raven hair fell in heavy tresses upon her admirably sloping shoulders, and the band which circled her waist just drew in the wrapper sufficiently to develop the well-proportioned symmetry of her shape. Her naked feet had been thrust into slippers, and her well-formed ankles, white and well rounded, but of shapely slenderness, glanced beneath the skirt of her dress. Immediately upon making her appearance, she placed her forefinger upon her lip to enjoin silence, and then she closed the door. Christian's countenance flashed

Photograms from original by Merril
"WHEN THE DOOR SLOWLY OPENED"

" WHEN THE DOOR SLOWLY OPENED "

Photogravure from original by Merrill



with mingled surprise and indignation; he was about to bid her begone, when she conveyed to him that indication of silence, and therefore the word to which he was on the point of giving utterance remained unspoken.

"You are surprised, perhaps you are shocked, Mr. Ashton, at this proceeding on my part," began Mrs. Oxenden, her looks expressing the most languishing entreaty as she accosted our young hero, "but I beseech you to hear me with patience."

"It were well, madam," he coldly responded, "if you had chosen a more suitable time and place for any communication which you may have to make me," and he glanced significantly toward the door.

"Mr. Ashton, I am the most miserable of women," quickly resumed Mrs. Oxenden, with a look and tone of passionate entreaty. "I implore you to listen to me."

"Not here — not now," ejaculated Christian. "I insist that you leave me."

"I cannot — I will not!" she rejoined, as if she were half-frenzied. "Ever since your return from the town in the forenoon, I have endeavoured to find an opportunity to speak to you alone, but you would not afford it to me; you seemed to conjecture my object and purposely to avoid me."

"It may be that I did so," answered Christian, "but if you have really anything to say to me, you must postpone it to the morrow, when I will not refuse you the opportunity. But to-night, and here — No, it is impossible, and you do your cause no good, Mrs. Oxenden, by coming to me in such circumstances. I now insist that you leave me."

She turned away from our hero for an instant as if about to seek the door, when suddenly bending her looks upon him again, she said, with so peculiar an expression of countenance that it well suited the words she uttered, "Yes, I will leave you, but it will be to quit the house likewise, — the sea flows at no great distance beneath the cliffs, and it is deep enough to engulf even a miserable woman who has no longer any reason to cumber this world with her presence."

"Wretched creature, what do you mean?" exclaimed our hero, clutching her by the wrist as she appeared about to retreat precipitately from the chamber. "Would you to your other misdeeds add the still greater one of suicide? Would you crown all your past iniquities by so heinous a

crime as this? No, rather study to repent of whatsoever evil you may have done, and at least by your future conduct make such atonement as lies in your power."

"But if every one looks coldly upon me, — if every one seems to scorn and revile me," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, with a tone and look that seemed to express mingled anguish and bitterness, "wherefore should I remain upon earth?"

"That persons look coldly upon you," replied Christian, "is scarcely to be wondered at, as your own conscience must but too faithfully tell you. But that you have been reviled, I do not believe —"

"Nevertheless it is true!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, vehemently. "The day which has just drawn to a close has been for me one prolonged agony. If I have encountered a domestic upon the stairs, he has flung at me some taunt, because they all look upon me as the instigatrix and the cause of the deceased baronet's conduct, — a conduct in which they were more or less implicated, and which they know full well will shortly lead to their dismissal. Just now the maid servants whom I summoned to assist at my night toilet flung insults at me —"

"Can all this be indeed true?" asked Christian, with mingled astonishment and indignation.

"It is true," responded Mrs. Oxenden, the tears trickling down her cheeks, and her half-naked bosom heaving with convulsing sobs. "Oh, it is true, and it is more than I can bear."

"But Sir Edgar Beverley," replied our hero quickly, "is ignorant of this, and not for a moment would he permit it. Whatever you may have been, whatever you may have done, so long as by his sanction you remain beneath his roof it is not for these menials to insult or taunt you; they who were themselves the too ready instruments of their vile master — though Heaven forgive me for speaking thus strongly against him now that he is gone."

"Can you wonder that I am excited? Can you wonder that I am frenzied, — that I am half-mad?" asked Mrs. Oxenden, speaking with vehement rapidity. "My sister looks coldly upon me, Sir Edgar addresses me in monosyllables, you avoid me, Mr. Andrews displays a freezing politeness, which in itself is worse than downright rudeness, the domestics taunt me, and then this evening the maid

servants boldly refuse to obey me; so that well-nigh driven to madness, I resolved to fly to you. And then, too," she added, in a tone that suddenly became soft and languishing, "there was another reason —"

"Listen, Mrs. Oxenden," interrupted our hero. "You are safe from further insult for the remainder of this night. I will take the earliest opportunity to-morrow morning to speak to Sir Edgar. And now leave me."

For an instant Mrs. Oxenden bit her lip with vexation. She had studiously arrayed herself in that meretricious manner in the hope of exercising the influence of her charms upon our hero's passions; she had succeeded in drawing him into conversation, and in already remaining for ten minutes in his room, despite his first peremptory command that she should retire; it was true that he had spoken to her with averted countenance, and that not for a single instant had his eyes lingered upon her voluptuously exposed charms, but still she had flattered herself that she had obtained a sufficient footing in that chamber to give promise of success in the design which she had formed, when all in a moment he had cut her short and once more peremptorily bidden her begone. Thus was it that for an instant she bit her lip with vexation, but the next moment regaining complete control over herself, she resolved to return to her siege batteries and play off the artillery of her charms and wiles on points which she hoped would be more vulnerable and sensitive. Her first aim had been to appeal to his magnanimous sympathy by an exaggeration of some few little slights which she had received at the hands of the domestics, and artfully cunning as she was, she knew that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, for a beautiful woman to engage a man's compassion was already going far toward conquering him completely.

"You bid me quit your chamber, Mr. Ashton," she said, "in a tone which corresponds but indifferently with the generosity of the remarks you had previously made, and with the magnanimity of the feeling you displayed toward me. You have heard me thus far; you must hear me on to the end."

"Mrs. Oxenden, I insist upon your leaving me," exclaimed Christian, in whose mind suspicions of a sinister purpose on her part were engendered by the pertinacity with

which she lingered in his chamber. "This is most indecent — most indecorous. If you have a woman's shame or pride —"

"Oh, now you revile and taunt me likewise — wretched, wretched woman that I am," and weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break, she threw herself with every appearance of frantic distress upon the nearest chair.

"I entreat — I conjure that you will tranquillize yourself," said Christian, bewildered whether to give her credit for the most genuine sincerity, or to behold in her conduct the confirmation of his former suspicion. "These sounds of affliction will be heard, and what will be thought —"

"Oh, speak not unkindly to me," murmured the wily woman, and, as if quite unconscious of her actions, she still further disarranged her dress, so that all the voluptuous contours of her bust were completely exposed.

"Madam," said Christian, indignantly, "leave me this moment, or I myself will seek another chamber, and tomorrow morning will proclaim wherefore I did so."

"Cruel, cruel!" murmured Mrs. Oxenden, "and I who love you madly, — I who have been smitten with an irresistible passion, I who, notwithstanding your coldness, have a heart that burns with fervour for you —"

For a moment Christian Ashton was so completely stupefied by these words that he was transfixed to the spot and rendered speechless. The next instant Mrs. Oxenden's arms were wound about his neck, she strained him to her bosom, she pressed her lips to his cheek, and then another instant, and with an effort the violence of which when exercised toward a female could only be justified by the peculiarity of the circumstances, our young hero disengaged himself from her embrace, Mrs. Oxenden — who was not to be so easily subdued, and who was really inspired with passion on account of the youth's personal beauty, as well as influenced by policy in her endeavour to gain over Sir Edgar Beverley's intimate friend — despaired not of success. Her arts and wiles were to be redoubled in order to secure her triumph. Such was her thought, and falling upon her knees, she stretched forth her arms toward Christian, exclaiming, "Cruel youth! Why thus spurn a woman who is dying for you? Am I repulsive? On the contrary, am I not beautiful?"

“ Will you leave me? ” demanded Christian, vehemently, for he was determined that the scene should end that instant.

“ No, no — I will not, and you cannot be so cruel — ”

Our young hero waited to hear no more, but driven almost to his wit's end, he snatched one of the wax lights from the mantelpiece and hurried from the room. Mrs. Oxenden — whose own sensuous temperament, vicious disposition, and long career of immorality had hitherto rendered her incredulous in respect to the existence of virtue in others, and who believed that at least every man was “ in his heart a rake ” (thus reversing as to sex Pope's memorable assertion) — was astounded at Christian's abrupt disappearance, and it was now her turn to remain stupefied and transfixed on the spot.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEGRESS

THE chamber which our hero had just left was situated in a passage whence communicated the doors of several other sleeping-apartments, which he knew to be unoccupied. Into the first of these did he therefore plunge, but he closed the door with such rapidity that the current of air thus produced extinguished the candle. Between the openings of the window draperies the brightness of the night shone with sufficient clearness to show him at a glance that the bed was untenanted, as he had expected to find it, and he lost not a moment in locking the door, so as to prevent the intrusion of Mrs. Oxenden.

He threw himself upon the bed, and began to reflect upon everything that had just occurred. That she had purposed to play off the artillery of her wiles upon him, and ensnare him into an amour, he could not possibly doubt, and he had therefore no difficulty in conjecturing her motives. There was her passion to gratify, and there were her interests to be served. At any time, and under any circumstances, he would have loathed the woman who could have thus meretriciously sought to throw herself into the arms of a comparative stranger who had given her not the slightest encouragement, but his abhorrence was unspeakably enhanced when he reflected that it was in the house of death that Mrs. Oxenden had thus given way to the influence of her passions and to the current of her worldly interests, — in a house, too, beneath the roof of which her own innocent sister was reposing, and at a time when only twenty-four hours had elapsed since this self-same mansion had proved the scene of a frightful tragedy. Yes, our hero experienced the deepest loathing, the intensest

abhorrence, for that unprincipled and unscrupulous woman, and he resolved to communicate everything to Sir Eggar Beverley in the morning.

He lay thus reflecting for perhaps a quarter of an hour, when he thought that he might just as well disapparel himself completely (for he was only half-undressed) and retire to rest. This he accordingly did, but when he had entered the couch on which he had been previously lying, it was still some time ere slumber began to steal upon his eyes. He was just in that state when the senses are rocking themselves, or, rather, sinking into the dreamy repose which is the last stage preceding the oblivion of profound slumber; his breathing was slow and regular, as if he already slept completely, so that any one might imagine he did really thus sleep. And now it was that he became aware of some sound which, though slight, brought him back in a moment to full wakefulness. He did not however move; he lay perfectly still, and listened. The handle of the door was evidently turning, and then there was the sound as if some one were endeavouring to push or pull it open. Christian's first thought was that Mrs. Oxenden was trying the door, but he knew full well that she could not enter, for he had locked it, as already observed. But, ah! what sound was it which next met his ear? The key itself was turning in the lock, and this could not be effected by any one on the outside of the door, — the individual must be in the room itself. He started up; the extremity of the chamber where the door was situated was involved in almost complete obscurity; yet through the gloom he could distinguish some shape, — a human one. He had no superstitious terror; he sprang from the bed. There was a half-stifled cry, or rather shriek, from the lips of the person who was endeavouring to open the door; at the same moment Christian's hands clutched her garments, for she was a female, and she fell upon her knees, beseeching his mercy. This woman was the negress.

"Silence," ejaculated Christian. "I will do you no harm. Remain quiet for a moment."

Locking the door again, he drew forth the key to prevent her escape until he had questioned her, and then he proceeded to huddle on a portion of his clothing.

"Now," he said, "will you tell me what you are doing here?"

"The new master," replied the negress, alluding to Sir Edgar Beverley, "or, rather, that gentleman, the lawyer, who spoke for him last night, ordered me to leave the house, but I could not; where was I to go? Besides, I hoped that I should be forgiven, so I concealed myself in this room, where I remained all day without a morsel of food. I went down-stairs just now to the pantry to get some; I came up again, but scarcely had I been five minutes in the chamber, when the door opened suddenly — I had forgotten to lock it as I intended to do — and some one rushed in. The light went out so quickly that I could not see who it was, and I thought I had better stay quiet until whoever it might be should fall asleep. I fancied that you slept, sir, and was going to leave the chamber with as little noise as possible —"

"Well, well, I know the rest," observed Christian, and then for a few moments he deliberated with himself what he should do, but remembering that it was impossible to turn a woman out of the house at that hour of the night, — indeed, being incapable of such an act of cruelty, no matter how well it might suit her deserts, — he was about to tell her to seek another apartment, when the thought struck him that her secret presence in the mansion despite of Mr. Andrews' peremptory order to quit it might have some ulterior motive beyond that which she had alleged. He therefore said, "You tell me you had nowhere to go? How long had you been employed in the late Sir John Steward's service?"

"About seven years," replied the woman, and we should observe that she spoke in broken English and execrable grammar, but we do not feel disposed to give any verbal representation of her diction.

"Your duties, if I guess aright," said our hero, "can have been but little creditable to yourself, considering the master whom you served, and such duties are always well remunerated. You must therefore have amassed gold, and yet you will endeavour to make me believe that you are completely pauperized, without the means of providing yourself with a lodging. How do you account for this inconsistency?"

"I do not altogether understand you," said the negress. "I am a stranger in your country —"

"A stranger indeed, and you have been seven years in Sir John Steward's service!" exclaimed Christian, — "a time sufficient to render you familiar enough with the meaning

of our language, and an employment which was only too well calculated to enlarge your experiences. Come, speak frankly; the season for artifice and disguise has gone by; you will do yourself no good by attempting to deceive me."

As Christian thus spoke he strained his eyes hard to study the countenance of the negress in the gloom of that part of the chamber where they stood, but he could not distinguish any of her features except her eyes. She remained silent, but he could judge that her feelings were those of uneasiness, inasmuch as she fidgeted nervously. His former suspicions were strengthened; indeed they amounted to the conviction that the woman had not truthfully explained the cause of her presence in the house.

"Now," he said, "understand me if you can or will," and he spoke with stern decision. "You are here for no good purpose, and if you do not give me the most satisfactory explanation, I shall take measures to detain you for the rest of the night, and to-morrow you will be handed over to the care of a constable. Do you comprehend me?"

"Yes. Pray let me go, sir," said the woman, in a voice of entreaty.

"Ah! now I am more than ever convinced that you are full of treachery and deceit," exclaimed Christian, "and you must speak out. Again will I endeavour to make myself properly understood by you. Deal with me frankly, and as much mercy shall be shown you as can be displayed under such circumstances as may transpire from the revelations you are about to make, but if on the other hand you persist in refusing explanations, then be not astonished if you find yourself severely treated."

This speech was followed by a silence of nearly a minute, during which the negress was evidently deliberating with herself what course she should adopt. At length she said, hesitatingly and timidly, "What if I was to tell you a secret, — a very great secret, Mr. Ashton?"

"Rest assured that it will be all the better for you," responded our hero. "Come, let me put a leading question or two. Mrs. Oxenden knows of your secret presence in the house?"

"No, sir; on my soul she does not," answered the negress, emphatically.

"She does not?" said Christian. "Then why are you

here? Once for all tell me, for I am growing impatient. This secret of yours — ”

“ Will take a long time to explain, sir, and if you have no patience,” added the negress, “ it will be useless — ”

“ Plenty of patience if you will only come to the point,” interrupted our hero. “ It is by no means the most agreeable thing to stand here conversing in the dark — especially,” he thought within himself, suddenly leaving off speaking aloud, “ as I cannot see your black visage and judge of whether you are trifling with me or not. But come,” he added, again addressing himself audibly to the negress; “ here are a couple of chairs within the sphere of the moon-light; let us sit down and converse, and you shall tell me this secret of yours.”

“ Well, I may as well, — indeed I must under all circumstances,” muttered the negress, and she suffered herself to be led forward to a chair near the toilet-table which stood against one of the windows of the room, — Christian himself taking another, so that he exactly faced her.

“ Now,” he said, “ I am all attention.”

“ Perhaps you know, sir,” resumed the negress, “ or perhaps you do not — in which case I must tell you — that when I first came into Sir John Steward’s service, between seven and eight years ago, the masons and bricklayers were altering and repairing this house. Sir John did not habitually live here then, but chiefly in London; but I was put here, along with another woman, to get the house in readiness and set everything to rights, as the masons were just finishing their work.”

“ And what on earth,” ejaculated Christian, “ has all this to do with your presence here to-night? Beware how you trifle with me.”

“ I told you, sir, that the tale would be rather a long one,” answered the negress, “ and if you are already impatient — ”

“ I was wrong,” interposed our hero. “ Continue in your own way.”

“ Well, sir,” resumed the black woman, “ I must tell you that those masons and bricklayers were all sent down from London to do the work, and the moment it was finished they went away, liberally rewarded. And no wonder, for there is a secret connected with the house which I am now going to explain. It is so contrived that there is a room the existence

of which no one suspects who does not already know that secret, and it is reached by a means of communication so cunningly and craftily devised that a person might live a dozen years in the mansion without entertaining the remotest idea of all these mysteries."

"This sounds most strange," said Christian. "How is it possible that such space can be taken up inside a house without the fact being suspected?"

"The secret room," continued the negress, "is very long but very narrow; it is a sort of slip taken off the passage lengthways, on the next story, — the one up above, I mean. It is lighted by a window in the roof, and a very narrow staircase is the means of reaching it. The walls are so thick, or else so well contrived by the masons who made the place, that no one in the adjoining chambers on the one side, or in the passage on the other, could possibly overhear anything that took place in that chamber. The skylight on the roof has a double casement, and this likewise deadens all sound from within. The whole arrangement is as curious as it is clever, for there are devices to maintain a healthful supply of fresh air. In a word, the place must have cost Sir John Steward a great deal of money."

"And now that you have finished the romance of your story," said Christian, who did not believe a syllable of all that had just been told him, though he could not for the life of him conjecture why the negress should be devising such a narrative, "you will perhaps tell me for what uses the mysterious room served?"

"I suppose I need not inform you, sir," continued the black woman, who did not perceive by our hero's tone how her veracity was suspected, "that Sir John Steward was a very gay gentleman, and that many a young girl has fallen his victim?"

"I have indeed heard enough," responded Christian, "to convince me that here at least you are speaking nothing but the truth. But that secret apartment —"

"Often served, sir," rejoined the negress, "as a place of imprisonment for some lovely creature who fell into the snare set for her, or was carried off by violence. Only conceive a young woman brought into this house and consigned to a room like any other, — this one, for instance, — falling off fast asleep, when worn out with fatigue and perhaps with

grief, she had taken some refreshment, for Sir John knew well enough how to drug even tea or coffee, and then awaking to find herself in a living tomb from which it was told her she would never be allowed to go forth until she complied with his desires — ”

“ Good heaven! is this possible? ” exclaimed Christian, his incredulity vanishing, and his interest in the black woman’s tale becoming all the more fearfully vivid as it seemed suddenly to be stamped with truthfulness.

“ It is quite possible, sir, because I have seen it over and over again with my own eyes.”

“ And perhaps, accursed hag, you yourself have aided in all those black satanic villanies? ”

“ There, sir! what mercy have I to expect,” asked the trembling negress, “ at your hands, when you burst out upon me in this way? ”

“ Go on — go on,” said Christian, mastering his burning indignation as well as he was able. “ I will interrupt you no more, if I can help it.”

“ Well, sir, I must trust to your goodness,” continued the black woman. “ As I have already hinted, there has been many and many a victim in that dreadful place, and then, when innocence turned into dishonour and degradation, there was either an anxiety to screen it all on the part of the sufferer, or else, when once lost, she accepted her position of an established mistress, and when cast off, retired with a goodly pension, so that what with one way or another, the secret of that mysterious chamber was never betrayed. And let me tell you, sir, that the device was infallible, for the poor victim, however virtuously inclined, and however strenuously she resisted at first, always succumbed at last, when either worn out in spirit, exhausted, half-maddened, or reduced to desperation.”

Christian was about to give vent to another outburst of his feelings, but he controlled himself, and suffered the negress to proceed.

“ Of all the servants of the house,” she continued, “ myself and the woman of whom I have spoken alone knew the secret of the mysterious chamber. That woman died about a year back, and thus the secret remained with me, for there was no one else in the establishment to whom Sir John thought fit to confide it. However, he and I sufficed

to bear up to that room any drugged and insensible victim — ”

“ And you, I suppose,” said Christian, scarcely able to repress the indignant bitterness of his feelings or prevent them from showing themselves in his accents, — “ you, I suppose, were the attendant upon these unfortunate victims of a hideous lust; you witnessed their tears, you turned a deaf ear to their prayers, — perhaps you used threats — But go on, go on, and let me know to what issue your narrative of abominations is tending.”

“ A few days ago, sir,” continued the negress, “ in the middle of the very night before Mrs. Oxenden arrived from Brighton on her second visit — ”

“ You mean when she brought her sister Laura hither? ” said Christian, inquiringly.

“ Exactly so, sir. In the middle of that night, a certain well-known signal was given, by the pulling of a particular bell at the front door, but which bell rang in Sir John’s room. He speedily got up, and came to summon me. I knew what it meant; the thing had often and often happened before. We went down to the front door, and received a beautiful young creature from the care of a couple of women and a man who had carried her off by force from some place, I don’t know where, and brought her down to Verner House.”

“ And those wretches, I presume,” said Christian, “ were the infamous agents who pandered to Sir John Steward’s lusts, and whom he doubtless kept continually in his pay? ”

“ Just so, sir,” answered the negress. “ They had a roving commission, if I may use the term, empowering them to pick up beauties wherever they could find them, and bring them straight to Verner House. No matter the distance, they might take post-chaises for hundreds of miles; they knew perfectly well that Sir John would pay for them liberally, as well as all their other expenses — ”

“ No doubt,” observed Christian. “ But about this beautiful girl of whom you are speaking? ”

“ She was in a dead swoon, sir, when delivered into our hands,” answered the negress, “ for it seems she had been brought a good many, many miles, and she was worn out with fatigue and grief. Everything was done silently and cautiously as usual, but there was no need to drug whatso-

ever refreshments she stood in need of, for, as I tell you, she was in a swoon, and we took her right up to the secret chamber. Sir John was terribly vexed — ”

“ Vexed! And why? ” asked Christian, astonished at such a remark. “ How could he be vexed? Why was it? ”

“ Because he expected Mrs. Oxenden and her sister next day,” replied the negress; “ he meant to marry the sister, as you already know, and therefore the presence of the new beauty in the secret chamber was an embarrassment and an encumbrance rather than a source of hope and delight.”

“ Then why did he receive her at all? ” asked Christian, fancying that he discerned an inconsistency in the black woman’s tale.

“ Because the agents who had brought her could not possibly take her back,” responded the negress, “ and because, under those circumstances, Sir John made up his mind that he would keep her here until after his marriage with Miss Hall, when it was to be my duty to restore her to freedom, — first binding her by the most fearful of oaths that she would never betray the place to which she had been brought. And then, too, I was to make it appear that I risked everything by conniving at her escape, and that I must throw myself upon her gratitude for keeping the secret. Or if the worst should have happened, Sir John could easily have gone on the Continent with his young bride Laura, whom he hoped to possess, until everything was blown over. Such was the plan, Mr. Ashton, but as you perceive, death has made a wonderful change in the house — ”

“ And the old man possessed not his intended bride,” remarked Christian solemnly, “ and the hand of Heaven itself interposed to prevent that hideous sacrifice. But this young lady of whom you are speaking — ”

“ My tale will soon be ended,” rejoined the negress. “ A few hours back I communicated to the young lady that when night came I would restore her to freedom, and — and — it was my intention to fulfil this promise just now, — indeed I was on the point of ascertaining if the house were all quiet, when you so suddenly burst into the room — ”

“ This room? ” ejaculated Christian. “ Then, it was a falsehood that you were stealing forth to visit the pantry to procure food? ”

"Yes, sir, it certainly was not the truth," answered the negress; "but I am telling you all the truth now —"

"And you must convince me of it," rejoined our young hero. "I will see this young lady. She shall be restored to freedom; she must be made acquainted with all that has taken place —"

"I have told her sir," interrupted the negress, "that she has nothing more to fear, that Sir John Steward is dead, that a new baronet is in possession of the house, and I offered to do everything I could to see her to some place of safety, or to provide her with a post-chaise to take her home —"

"And where does she live? And what is her name? Who is she?" demanded Christian.

"I know not, sir," replied the negress; "she mistrusts me, she will not give me her confidence, she will tell me nothing —"

"And no wonder," observed our hero. "But why take measures to effect her egress so secretly from the house? Why not, when Sir John Steward was smitten down by the hand of death, — why not, I ask, have at once given this poor persecuted young lady her liberty?"

"Ah! Mr. Ashton," said the negress, "do you not understand how embittered Sir Edgar Beverley and that lawyer are against me? And would they not have immediately sent me to prison as the accomplice of the late baronet in keeping this young lady in custody? So I thought I would at least get her quietly out of the house, and then, to tell you the truth, I might shift for myself. You see how candidly I am speaking — I hope you will take it all into account —"

"You have been a very wicked woman," interrupted Christian, "but I do not hesitate to promise that you shall be suffered to depart with impunity, provided that no additional circumstances transpire to stamp you with any deeper iniquity than that which you have confessed. But now let us conclude the business as speedily as possible. You have yet to explain your presence in this room — concealed here all in the dark —"

"A few words will make you acquainted with everything, sir," resumed the negress. "The secret entrance to the staircase leading to the prison chamber is in this room. I had just emerged thence at the moment when you burst in, and if your candle had not so suddenly gone out, you

must have seen me. I dared not move; I kept in the deep shade of that recess, until I fancied you were asleep, and then I endeavoured to leave the chamber stealthily, with the intention of hiding myself in some unoccupied apartment until a more favourable opportunity should present itself for the liberation of the young lady."

"But if the secret entrance to the staircase is in this room," said Christian, "why did you not beat a retreat —"

"Look, sir," ejaculated the negress, and, rising from her chair, she passed toward the recess to which she had just now alluded.

A sharp click — evidently the action of some secret spring — fell upon Christian's ear, and the next moment a strong light threw its rays into the chamber. This occurred with such magical suddenness, and the hideous form of the negress was so abruptly thrown out into strong relief, — the light itself flashed with such lightning celerity upon our young hero's eyes, — that he started and could scarcely repress an ejaculation of wonderment mingled even with a transient terror. He perceived that a door had opened in the wall, and that on the foot of a staircase which was thus revealed within a lamp was standing. It was a lamp with a globe of ground glass; it was of moderate size, too, such as is used for a small parlour, and the negress had evidently left it there to light herself up again on her intended return to the secret chamber.

"If I had opened this door, sir," she said to Christian, "at the instant you burst into the room, you would of course have seen it, and if I had done so when you were in bed, there was the probability of the light flashing upon your eyes and awakening you."

"True," observed our hero; then, having hastily huddled on all the rest of his garments, he said, "And now take that lamp and lead the way."

The negress did as she was ordered, and conducted Christian up a very narrow staircase, the walls of which were wainscoted, and at the top she halted for a moment to draw back the bolt of a door covered with green baize. As this door swung open outwardly, Christian perceived that it was of great thickness, and there was an inner door, also covered with baize, and which opened inward, so that it was but too evident that every precaution had been taken to render the secret chamber a veritable living tomb, — the walls, doors,

and skylights of which should beat back every sound of grief, despair, or anguish which might emanate from the lips of whomsoever Sir John Steward's lustful iniquity rendered a captive there.

The inner door swung open, and the negress, as she thus passed into the room, said, "Fear not, young lady, this gentleman comes for a friendly purpose."

The next instant Christian Ashton crossed the threshold and entered the chamber; ejaculations of mingled joy and astonishment burst from the lips of both himself and the young lady who was a captive there, and the next moment they were clasped in each other's arms.

"Dearest Christian."

"Dearest, dearest Isabella."

And to both did it all appear to be a dream.

CHAPTER XV

ISABELLA AT VERNER HOUSE

THE negress was transfixed with a perfect bewilderment on thus perceiving that our handsome young hero and that beautiful dark-eyed girl were so far from being strangers to each other that they must be either lovers or else brother and sister, but by the fond endearing words which the youth lavished upon the charming Isabella, the black woman was speedily convinced that the former suspicion was the correct one, — namely, that they were lovers.

Isabella was dressed in deep mourning, which she wore for the death of her uncle the Earl of Lascelles, and though the animation of joy was now upon her countenance, and a kindred light was beaming in her swimming eyes, yet had Christian seen her when seated by herself just before she thus flew into his arms, he would with pain and sorrow have observed that she was pale and careworn. Oh, with what rapture did he strain her to his breast, and with what fond confiding love did the beauteous maiden receive and give back his caresses, and then cling to his arm, looking up with affectionate gratitude into his countenance as that of not only her lover, but her deliverer.

“Dearest, dearest Isabella,” said Christian, “you have now nothing more to fear; you will find yourself amongst friends beneath this roof where hitherto you have been in the power of enemies. Oh, we have much to say to each other!”

“Yes, much, much,” murmured the charming girl, and Christian felt that she shuddered with a strong, spasmodic quivering of the form as she clung to his arm. “Oh, I have suffered deeply, deeply, since we parted, — not only here” — and she glanced around the secret chamber (which, we

should observe, was most comfortably furnished, though a horrible prison all the same) — “but likewise in London.”

“My poor Isabella,” said Christian, the tears trickling down his cheeks, and he once more strained her to his breast, both the while totally oblivious, in the rapture of their feelings, that the horrible black woman was present in that chamber. “You stand in need of rest; you will sleep sweetly, my beloved,” continued our hero, “now that you are conscious of safety. To-morrow we will tell each other all that we may mutually have to impart. Come, dearest Isabella, tarry not another instant in this place which you must loathe and abhor. Ah, you are here,” ejaculated Christian, as his eyes now suddenly settled upon the negress while she was about to conduct Miss Vincent from the room.

“The young lady will tell you, sir,” said the black woman, “that I have not been unkind to her.”

“The wretch,” murmured Isabella, shuddering, and then she hastily added, “But we can now afford to forgive her, dear Christian, and I willingly admit that, apart from being my gaoler, I have no cause of complaint against her. She promised me liberty, but I dared not believe her; I dreaded some new treachery, some fresh snare, — indeed, I was so wretched — half-wild, half-mad — that I knew not what to think when she told me of her infamous master’s death, and of strange things that had taken place within the walls of this house.”

“Think not of the past, my beloved,” said Christian, pressing her fair hand in his own; “no one can molest you now, no one will even think of attempting it. As for you,” he continued, addressing himself to the negress, “I promised you impunity under certain circumstances, and nothing has transpired to induce me to fly from my word. Remain you in the house for the rest of the night, but perhaps you will do as well to take your departure at an early hour in the morning. I do not ask if you are possessed of funds, for one who has served Sir John Steward as you have served him cannot possibly fail to have a well-filled purse.”

The black woman’s look showed that our hero was by no means wrong in his surmise, and muttering some words of thanks for the impunity which was guaranteed her she turned to descend the stairs.

“Stop,” exclaimed Christian, darting forward and hold-

ing her back; "we, if you please, will lead the way," for the thought had flashed to his mind that there was a strong bolt to the exterior side of the outer door.

"I have no interest in playing a treacherous part," said the negress.

Our hero took no notice of the observation, but, carrying the lamp in his hand, he conducted Isabella down the staircase, — the negress following with the light which she had taken from the table in the chamber. Christian unlocked the door of the bedroom with which the movable panel in the wall communicated; he conducted Isabella forth, and indicating an unoccupied chamber, gave her the lamp at the door, pressed her hand, and instantaneously withdrew. The negress disappeared to some other part of the building; our hero entered the room where he had established his own temporary quarters, and in the midst of the most delicious thoughts — thoughts of purest, holiest love — a sweet sleep stole upon his eyes.

He awoke at a very early hour in the morning, and for some minutes could scarcely persuade himself that the incidents of the preceding night were not all a dream. The panel door, however, still stood open, and this was a confirmation of the reality of all those occurrences. Curiosity prompted him to examine the door; he discovered where the secret spring was situated, how it worked, and where it had to be touched, on either the inner or outer side, so as to make the door open for egress or ingress. Then, on its being shut he could not help admiring with what exquisite nicety it was made to fit into its setting; so that no eye, however scrutinizing, could possibly detect any indication of the existence of such a door. This survey being finished, and some of his apparel being huddled on, he repaired to his own chamber for the sake of the conveniences of the toilet. Mrs. Oxenden was not there, but he perceived a billet upon the toilet-table; it was addressed to himself, and the handwriting was the beautiful fluid one of a lady. For an instant he hesitated to open it, but this indecision was quickly overruled by the thought that as he had made up his mind to communicate to his friend the baronet everything that had occurred, he would show Sir Edgar this letter likewise, whatsoever its contents might be, and no matter how earnest should be its pleadings for his forbearance, his silence, and his secrecy.

He accordingly opened it. We need not transcribe its contents; suffice it to say that they were of the nature which our young hero had anticipated. In this billet Mrs. Oxenden pleaded the strength of an irresistible passion as an excuse for the conduct of the preceding evening; she appealed to Christian whether he did not consider her sufficiently humiliated and mortified by the rejection of her advances, to abstain from inflicting upon her the additional punishment of exposure; she proclaimed herself a wretched woman, and finished by soliciting his mercy.

Christian's toilet was speedily completed, and he repaired at once to Sir Edgar Beverley's chamber. The young baronet was close upon the termination of his own toilet, and he immediately saw that our hero had something important to communicate. In the fewest possible words Christian related to the wondering Sir Edgar all the incidents of the past night, — how Mrs. Oxenden had sought him in his own chamber, how he had fled to another, how he had there encountered the negress, how she had revealed to him the mysteries of the secret chamber, how he had proceeded thither, and how in the captive he had recognized one as dear to him as Laura was to Sir Edgar Beverley himself.

“And here,” added Christian, “is a billet which I found in my own room just now. I think you will admit, my dear Sir Edgar, that no lenient terms are to be kept with a woman of this character, and that there is nothing unmanly on my part in disregarding her appeal for secrecy, nothing dishonourable in showing the letter to you.”

“On the contrary, my dear Ashton,” answered the baronet, “it was your duty to show me this letter, and for more reasons than one. An assemblage of the most marvellous circumstances has rendered a being who is so dear to you an inmate of Verner House, and she shall be welcomed as a guest with all the warmth of that friendship which is experienced for you. In her Laura will find a companion and a friend, and the necessity for her infamous sister's presence here at once ceases. Moreover, it would be an insult to yourself, and an insult to Miss Vincent, to bring her into contact with a being so degraded, so polluted, as this Mrs. Oxenden. Yes, she shall depart, and within the hour that is passing. Come, my friend, we will go and give all suitable directions for the ensurance of the comfort of Miss Vincent.”

Sir Edgar's toilet was speedily finished; he and our hero descended to the breakfast parlour, and almost immediately afterwards Laura made her appearance. When the usual greetings were exchanged, Sir Edgar addressed his beloved in the following manner:

"My dear Laura, it is with deep regret I have to inform you that fresh circumstances have transpired to prove the impropriety of your sister remaining any longer beneath this roof. For your own reputation's sake there must be an immediate and complete severance between you both. You know me too well to suspect for an instant that I should act unjustly or tyrannically, and you will be satisfied, dear Laura, with my simple assurance of the necessity of this step; you will not ask me for those details which would only shock the purity of your own feelings — "

"Alas, my unhappy sister!" murmured the weeping Laura, "but I know, Edgar, that whatever you do is for the best."

"Thank you, my beloved, for this assurance," exclaimed the baronet. "And now wipe away those tears; it is not for you to be saddened by the iniquity of others. No, no, happiness awaits you, Laura — "

"I enjoy it now," she murmuringly added, "in all respects save on my sister's account."

"And fear not," Beverley hastened to observe, "that you will be without a suitable companion. There is one beneath this roof who is worthy to be your friend, whom you will regard as such, and whom you can love. She herself will explain what circumstances brought her thither, and when I add that she is as dear to Mr. Ashton, as you, my Laura, are to me, I know that it is sufficient to induce you to display every attention. Go, therefore, to Miss Vincent, dearest Laura, and in the meanwhile your sister will take her departure."

The young lady quitted the room, and in about five minutes the baronet rang the bell to inquire, through the medium of one of the female domestics, whether Mrs. Oxenden had yet left her chamber, for we should observe that Laura now no longer occupied the sleeping apartment which was next to the one tenanted by her sister. Christian temporarily withdrew from the breakfast-parlour, while Sir Edgar Beverley had a last interview with Mrs. Oxenden. We need not enter

into minute details of what passed between them on the occasion. Suffice it to say that the lady's eyes flashed malignant fires when she learned that Christian had communicated everything to the baronet, but she was somewhat relieved from the bitterness of her vexation when he assured her that, for the sake of her innocent sister, all further exposure would be avoided, on condition that Mrs. Oxenden would at once withdraw from Verner House. To this she was compelled to assent; she saw that her game had been more than played out, that she was irretrievably ruined in the estimation of Sir Edgar Beverley, and that it was likewise useless to make any further attempt to regain a footing in the household. She did not ask for a parting interview with her sister; she knew that it would be interdicted if she proffered the request. The travelling-carriage was ordered to be gotten in readiness with all possible dispatch, and Mrs. Oxenden took her departure, well-nigh spirit-broken, and completely dejected and desponding.

Soon after this evil-minded woman's peremptory and ignominious dismissal from Verner House, Sir Edgar Beverley and all his guests were assembled in the breakfast-parlour. Laura and Isabella had already become excellent friends; the baronet and Christian were both delighted with the spectacle of the sisterly intimacy which circumstances had caused to spring up all in a moment, as it were, between two such amiable and beautiful beings; while Mr. Andrews, the solicitor, evidently enjoyed the society with which he now mingled, and which seemed so much more worthy to occupy the splendid apartments of Verner House than the deceased baronet and his infamous accomplice Mrs. Oxenden. No secret had been made of the discovery of the mysterious chamber on the highest story of the mansion; every one within those walls was now acquainted with the circumstance, for it was necessary to account for the sudden appearance of Miss Vincent at the house, and it was likewise Sir Edgar Beverley's intention, immediately after his marriage, to set masons and bricklayers to work in order to destroy that chamber and renovate that part of the house in a becoming manner.

Edgar comprehended full well that Christian and Isabella must have much to say to each other. Accordingly, after breakfast, he invited Laura to walk with him in the garden,

Mr. Andrews withdrew to the library to write some letters on business, our hero and Miss Vincent now found themselves alone together.

"With you, my dear Christian," said the young maiden, "I can have no secrets, and yet I am about to speak to you of something which you must keep secret from all the rest of the world — unless, indeed," she added, mournfully, "you shall be of opinion that another course ought to be adopted; in which case I shall be influenced entirely by you. Oh, it is a dreadful subject, and I hope, dear Christian, I hope that you will decide in favour of keeping the secret."

"Good heavens, my dearest Isabella!" exclaimed our hero, astonished and even frightened, for he saw how very pale his beloved became; "what terrible topic is this to which you allude, which you approach with so much diffidence, and over which you are so anxious that the veil of secrecy shall be thrown?"

"Alas, dear Christian, it is indeed a very painful topic," rejoined Isabella, "but I will not keep you any longer in suspense. You know how my poor uncle died —"

"Good God!" ejaculated our hero; "does it allude to his most shocking, horrible murder?"

"It does, — alas, it does indeed!" replied Miss Vincent. "And you will be astonished — you will be startled, ay, and horrified, too — when I speak of the hideous, frightful mystery, which does not appear to be altogether a mystery, for they accuse each other —"

"They! Who, dearest Isabella?" asked Christian, in the consternation of suspense.

"Who?" echoed the young maiden. "Oh, that I should have to tell you that the countess and Adolphus, — my aunt and my cousin —"

"Impossible, Isabella," exclaimed Christian. "What? the beautiful Ethel, so amiable and so kind, and the generous-hearted Adolphus, who conducted himself so handsomely in favouring our own interviews —"

"Alas! it is as I tell you, my dear Christian," responded Isabella, in a tone of the deepest dejection, and with a visible shudder passing through her entire form. "Accident one day rendered me a listener to a few words which passed between them. I was entering the red drawing-room, —"

you remember, it has a large screen drawn before the door, — and I suppose that, though altogether unintentional on my part, I must have opened that door so noiselessly that they did not hear me. I was advancing into the room, but had not at the instant let the door escape from my hand, when I was suddenly transfixed — oh, Christian, I was petrified with horror — on catching the words that were uttered in low, hoarse tones from the lips of each — ”

“ The countess and the young earl? ” said Christian, astounded and horror-stricken by what he thus heard; and then, as a thousand little reminiscences swept like a whirlwind in upon his brain, he for the first time comprehended the illicit connection which had existed between the Countess of Lascelles and Adolphus.

“ Yes, I mean that they were talking within the room, hidden from me by the screen, as I also was hidden from them,” continued Isabella, “ and though their voices were so altered as they spoke, — oh, so altered, — yet did I recognize them. And if any further proof were wanting of who the speakers were, I heard them address one another by their Christian names — ”

“ Good heavens! this is dreadful,” said our young hero. “ But what were the words which they spoke on the occasion? ”

“ Oh, I can too faithfully repeat them,” answered the shuddering Isabella, “ for at the very instant they were uttered, they seemed to impress themselves with a poignant and acute agony upon my brain, as if seared there with a red-hot iron.”

“ This is indeed dreadful,” said Christian, whose countenance was now as pale as that of Isabella herself. “ And those words which they spoke — ”

“ I will tell you,” rejoined the young damsel. “ Lord Osmond — I mean the new Earl of Lascelles, — said to the countess, ‘ Ethel, it is useless for you to persist in this shocking falsehood. As I told you on a former occasion when we spoke on the subject, — the first occasion when we met after the dreadful deed, — it was your hand that did it.’ ‘ No, Adolphus,’ replied the countess, in a voice as low, deep, and hoarse as his own, ‘ you know that you are giving utterance to an untruth as base as it is cowardly; it was your hand that took the old man’s life, murderer that you are.’ ‘ No,’ re-

joined Adolphus, 'I repeat Ethel, it is you who are the murderess.' "

"Dreadful! horrible!" exclaimed Christian. "My poor Isabella, your blood must have curdled in your veins?" "

"No language, dear Christian, can describe what I felt," answered the young lady; "it was indeed dreadful and shocking. I dared not penetrate into the room and face those two. Heaven alone can tell how I regained my own chamber, or whether my presence in that drawing-room had passed undiscovered and unsuspected. But when alone, I reflected on the course I should adopt. To remain any longer beneath that roof was impossible, and to betray to the knowledge of justice what I had heard appeared to me equally out of the question. I could not give up my own relatives to the scaffold. Oh, how strenuously did I endeavour to persuade myself that it was all a delusion, and that my brain, fevered by recent illness and horrors, had led me to misinterpret some words that had caught my ears. But no, it was impossible. As I have already told you, Christian, those dreadful words were seared upon my brain as if with a red-hot iron. But what was I to do? I did not want to let the guilty ones know that I had overheard them, and yet I was resolved to remain no longer in that house of horror and of crime. I so far conquered my feelings as to appear before them once again. It was at luncheon-time. I had previously been ill; they noticed that I was looking paler than ever, and no wonder. I said something about the influence which recent horrors had exercised on my mind — I spoke of the want of change of scene as well as change of air, and the countess herself suggested that I should go into the country for a few weeks, under the care of Mrs. Gardiner the house-keeper. I eagerly caught at the proposition, and said that I would leave that very day. I could not look in the face of either of that wretched pair; I know not therefore whether my words produced any peculiar effect upon them, — in fact I remembered but little more until I found myself seated by the side of Mrs. Gardiner in the travelling-carriage."

"And whither did you go?" inquired Christian.

"Mrs. Gardiner's son has a small farm near Tunbridge in Kent; she herself was anxious to see him and her daughter-in-law, and it had therefore been arranged that we should

proceed thither to pass as long a time as I might think fit. My own maid was likewise in attendance upon me. We reached our destination in the evening, and I found that my new quarters were established in a comfortable little homestead where every attention was shown me. This was about ten days back, and therefore, you see, I had not been there many days before I was seized upon and carried off by the wretches who brought me hither. I must tell you that an ill-looking elderly woman had accosted me in the morning while I was rambling by myself in the fields, and she addressed me in a familiar style which I did not like. I turned indignantly away, and though annoyed for the time, soon ceased to think of the incident, for, alas! dear Christian, I had other and weightier subjects to occupy my thoughts. In the evening I again walked out; I did not ramble very far, but it was in a secluded lane that I was proceeding, when I was pounced upon by a man and a couple of women, — one of the latter being she who had addressed me with such familiar impertinence in the forenoon. To be brief, I was thrust into a post-chaise which was waiting at a little distance; I fell into a deep swoon, and when I came back to consciousness was being borne along at a rapid rate inside that vehicle, and in the horrible companionship which I have mentioned."

"The wretches," ejaculated Christian, his cheeks flushing with indignation, and then he strained Isabella in his arms.

"They used the most horrible menaces," continued the young damsel, "to compel me to remain quiet as we passed through villages or towns, or stopped to change horses. I dared not cry out; I feared for my life, helpless as I was in the power of those people. I have a recollection of the man once alighting at some place where we stopped, and I caught the words that he whispered to an inquiring landlord, 'Poor creature, she is mad; we are taking her to an asylum.' Then I swooned again, and recovered not my senses till I found myself in the chamber whence you delivered me last night. Oh, the distraction of my thoughts, the frenzy of my feelings, as I really fancied at first that I was in a mad-house. But the negress was there; she told me where I was, and assured me that if I would only remain quiet for a day or two, I should be set at freedom. And now, dear Christian, I

have nothing more to tell you. But I have something to ask — ”

“ I understand what it is, dearest Isabella,” exclaimed our hero; “ you are anxious on account of the people at the farm, and what they must think of your sudden disappearance, so incomprehensible to them. You shall write a letter at once to Mrs. Gardiner — And will you not tell her, dear Isabel, that you intend to remain here for two or three weeks until your friend Laura is married? for you cannot possibly leave her, you know, until that event takes place.”

And Christian's eyes eloquently added that which his lips left unspoken, and which might have been interpreted thus: “ And you will not deprive us of the happiness of being together? ”

“ Laura has besought me to remain with her,” murmured the bashfully blushing Isabella, “ and I have promised that I would. But would it be too much, — would it be too far imposing upon Sir Edgar Beverley's hospitality, if I were to order the housekeeper and my maid to join me here? ”

“ Oh, no,” exclaimed Christian; “ it will not offend Sir Edgar, — on the contrary, it will give him pleasure to render your visit here as agreeable as possible. Write your letter, dear Isabel. I will go and speak to Sir Edgar at once, and one of his footmen shall take the very next train for Tunbridge, so that within a few hours Mrs. Gardiner and the others at the farm will be relieved of all anxiety concerning you. Yes, for the sake of appearances, for many, many reasons, your servants must be where you yourself are.”

“ But you have not told me, Christian,” said Isabella, with a look of timid apprehension, as he was about to leave the room, “ what your opinion is — ”

“ Relative to that guilty couple? ” added our hero; then, after a few moments' pause, he said, “ I fear that the secret must be kept, and they must be left to the punishment of their torturing consciences. Besides, there is evidently some dreadful mystery enveloping the affair, or else why those mutual accusations, those denials, and those recriminations? But pen your note, dear Isabel. I now go straight to Sir Edgar Beverley.”

All was done as Christian had suggested. The baronet was only too happy to comply with any request that was made

to him by his young friend Christian, or on behalf of Laura's new friend Isabella. A domestic was despatched to Tunbridge, and in the evening he returned, accompanied by Mrs. Gardiner and Miss Vincent's maid.

CHAPTER XVI

MAKEPEACE

THE scene now changes to the mansion of the late Earl of Lascelles, — that mansion where a horrible murder had been committed a short time back, and whence Isabella Vincent had fled in consternation and horror, as we have just heard her describing the circumstance to Christian Ashton.

It was evening, and the Countess of Lascelles, dressed in deep mourning, was seated on a sofa in the red drawing-room, — that very apartment of which Isabella had spoken. She was pale even to deadly whiteness, haggard and careworn; her sable garments and her snowy white cap of widowhood threw out her pallor into all the ghestlier relief. There was the glitter of a wild and almost frenzied uneasiness in her eyes, as if she felt hers to be a position which was no longer tolerable, but yet as if she were utterly bewildered when endeavouring to make up her mind to any particular course of action. Oh, how different did she seem from that gay, beautiful glittering countess who but a short time back was revelling in all the delights of illicit love with her paramour Adolphus.

Presently the door opened, but so noiselessly did it swing upon its hinges that it was no wonder if Ethel and Osmond had heard it not, when a few days previously Isabella entered and stood transfixed on catching the dreadful words that were then exchanged between them. Who was it that entered now? Adolphus himself, the Earl of Lascelles, as he had been called since the late nobleman's murder. And he too was fearfully altered; he looked a dozen years older than he really was; his cheeks were even more sunken and haggard than those of Ethel herself; he walked with a slow and languid step, as if he were enfeebled and borne down by a

tremendous weight of care. As he appeared from behind the screen, Ethel gave a slight start, but far stronger was that spasmodic shock as it was experienced inwardly. The young Earl of Lascelles took a chair opposite to her; their looks had only met for an instant, and were then averted with a mutual and simultaneous feeling of immense and indescribable horror.

"How long is this state of things to continue?" asked Adolphus, at the expiration of more than a minute's continued silence, and speaking in a voice that sounded hollow and sepulchral.

"What mean you?" inquired Ethel, and for an instant her eyes flashed loathingly and abhorrently upon him whom she had once adored with so strong and devouring a passion.

"I mean, Ethel," answered the young earl, "that we are leading a life which is breaking our hearts and hurrying us to the grave, that the domestics of the household will not much longer entertain the belief that it is affliction for the lost one that is devouring us, and that all this is produced by your obstinacy. For if you would but confess, I would pardon you,—yes, by Heaven, I would pardon you, although we should separate the next moment."

"Coward, thus to persecute a helpless woman," exclaimed Ethel. "It is for you to confess, then I will pardon you; and as you have said, we will separate on the instant. Do you imagine that even if by thus haunting me like a ghost, you drive me mad, and elicit from me in my frenzy the avowal of a crime which I did not commit,—do you imagine, I ask, that if you were thus to succeed in your diabolic purpose, you will deceive that Heaven whose eye penetrates into the secret recesses of your heart? Are you so insensate as to suppose that you can virtually and actually shift the burden of the crime from your own conscience and hurl it upon mine?"

"Enough, Ethel," exclaimed Adolphus, fiercely; "it is I who ought to put all these questions to you. Why do you remain here to haunt me?"

"I will remain here," answered the countess, "until I shall have compelled you to admit your horrible guilt to me."

"And I will remain here," rejoined the young earl, "until I have brought a vile woman to reason."

"This is abominable," cried the countess, her ashy lips quivering with rage. "The world never saw such dastard conduct, — such a cruel, bitter persecution."

"Ah, I may retort the same," said Adolphus, bitterly. "But listen, Ethel. Your conduct is most insensate; it will inevitably lead to suspicion. Circumstances will enmesh you; you will be proved the murderess —"

"No, it is you," she ejaculated, "who will be proved the murderer, and you will suffer accordingly. Think you not that Isabella suspected something when she insisted on leaving the house so suddenly —"

"Yes, she suspected something," interrupted Adolphus, "but it was against yourself that her misgivings rested. The result of your obstinacy, you perceive, has already developed itself; that poor girl has gone mad, — there can be no doubt of it, — and she has fled from the farm in Kent —"

"Yes, but whatever may happen to her," interjected Ethel, "must be charged at your door. Once — once for all, confess. It is only to me that the confession has to be made; it will never pass my lips, but how different will be the terms on which we shall thereafter stand. You will receive my forgiveness, though everything else will be at an end between us; our minds will recover a certain calm, — as much calmness as they can ever hope to experience in this world; we shall separate, and those circumstances which are now calculated to excite suspicion and eventually to fix the crime upon you will cease and have an end."

"No, they are tending to fix the crime upon you," retorted the Earl of Lascelles, with a savage ferocity. "Those are most cunning and most admirable arguments which you have used, and the use thereof proves how well you can anticipate what was about to be uttered from my lips. Come, Ethel, confess, — for Heaven's sake confess!"

The countess made a gesture of scorn and contempt, blended likewise with abhorrence, but said nothing.

"You do not probably know," resumed the young Earl of Lascelles, "how serious matters are growing. There is Makepeace, — too well acquainted with all that weakness into which love betrayed you and me, — Makepeace who succoured and who screened us, — there is this man, I repeat, Ethel, flinging his furtive looks of suspicion upon you —"

"Indeed, Adolphus," interrupted the countess, "I was thinking of giving you the same warning, in the hope that it would lead you to put an end at once to this frightful state of existence for us both, for I can assure you that it is upon you the suspicious looks of Makepeace are furtively thrown."

"Ethel, you will drive me mad," exclaimed Adolphus, starting up from his seat. "One word, Ethel —"

"One word, Adolphus," and the countess, starting up at the same time, confronted the young nobleman, lately her paramour, now the object of her bitterest aversion.

They gazed upon each other with a strange fixity of look, as if each momentarily expected the eyes of the other to quail and be downcast, — as if each wondered that it was not so, and then each withdrawing those regards as if by simultaneous and tacit consent, — Ethel resumed her seat upon the sofa. Adolphus turned upon his heel, and quitted the room with a quicker step than when he had entered it.

He opened the door somewhat abruptly, and he beheld a person gliding away across the landing, as if from the vicinage of that door where he might have been listening. This individual was Makepeace. Adolphus was instantaneously by his side, and clutching him forcibly by the arm, he said, in a low, hoarse voice, "What were you doing there?"

"I, my lord?" said Makepeace, for an instant assuming a look of most candid innocence, but suddenly changing, with the air of one who did not think it worth while to dissemble, he added, in a sort of independent manner, "If your lordship will give me five or ten minutes, I will explain myself."

The Earl of Lascelles was about to fling the fellow away from him as a chastisement for his insolence, but with a strong effort he subdued his boiling passion, and said, "Follow me."

He led the way toward his own chamber, — to reach which an anteroom had to be traversed, and locking the door of that anteroom, the young Earl of Lascelles was tolerably well assured there could be no listeners to whatsoever was about to take place. To convince himself, however, completely upon the point, he looked behind all the draperies in his bedroom, and having done this, he turned toward Makepeace, saying, "And now what is it?"

"Why does your lordship take all these precautions?"

asked the valet, — “locking doors, looking behind curtains — ”

“Because,” interrupted the Earl of Lascelles, and he spoke with a kind of haughty composure, “something tells me that you are about to address me on a delicate topic.”

“What topic, my lord?” asked Makepeace, gazing fixedly upon his master’s countenance.

“When I was insensate enough,” rejoined the earl, speaking as it were between his teeth which were nearly close set, “to suffer you to become acquainted with that love which subsisted between myself and the countess, I little suspected that you would ever think of taking an unworthy advantage of the confidence thus reposed in you.”

“And when, my lord, have I done so?” asked Makepeace, who seemed for an instant staggered by the manner in which he was thus addressed.

“You have not done it yet,” responded the earl, “but I am much mistaken if you are not about to do so now. I should like to be so mistaken. But there was something in your manner a few minutes back upon the landing, — there is something even in your look at this very moment — ”

“Well, my lord,” interrupted Makepeace, not merely recovering his effrontery, but evidently becoming more and more inclined to throw off the mask completely, “and what if I think it high time your lordship should do something for me? What if I mean to demand that which you had not the generosity to offer me?”

“Speak your wishes,” said the Earl of Lascelles, still with an outward appearance of cold and haughty dignity, whatever he might have inwardly felt.

“Look you, my lord,” said Makepeace, and the usually servile, grovelling, bowing menial, who had never before looked as if he had dared say his soul was his own, drew his person upright, thrust his hands into his breeches pockets, and planted himself close in front of the earl with an air of defiance. “Considering all I have done to serve you when you were Lord Osmond, how I winked at your pranks with the old earl’s wife, how I told lies to screen you, and considering also what I could tell if I chose, about the very circumstances that changed your title from simple Lord Osmond to the grand one of Earl of Lascelles, I think that if your lordship was to write me a cheque for ten thousand

pounds, you would only be doing what was fair and proper under the circumstances."

At the commencement of this speech on the part of the insolent valet, the young nobleman experienced the utmost difficulty in preventing himself from striking Makepeace down upon the floor. At the allusion to the circumstances of his amour with the countess, the blood of Adolphus tingled in every vein, and a crimson flush mantled on his previously pale cheeks. But when Makepeace so darkly and unmistakably hinted at the murder of the old earl, Adolphus suddenly became pale as death, the blood appeared to stagnate into ice in his veins, and he quivered visibly.

"Ah," he muttered, "it is as I feared, but I was resolved to ascertain. You have been playing the eavesdropper; you have been listening to-night at the door of the red drawing-room."

"And what if I have?" demanded Makepeace, with dogged brutality of tone and look. "What I heard there only confirmed my previous suspicions. Yes, my lord, I mean what I say. You had better purchase my secrecy; give me ten thousand pounds, and I take myself off, never to trouble you any more."

"Makepeace, hear me," said the Earl of Lascelles, fearfully excited. "It was not because my love betrayed me into such weakness, that I could have been guilty of so horrible a crime —"

"He who would seduce his father's wife," interrupted Makepeace, "would scarcely hesitate to take that father's life."

"Ah!" thought Adolphus to himself, "he does not then, know the terrific secret of my birth. He does not suspect that Ethel is not my mother-in-law, and that the old earl was not my father."

"Come, my lord, what are you thinking of?" demanded the valet; "your lips move but say nothing. Let us cut all this short. You see that I know everything. Who had better reasons than you to make away with the poor old man just as he was on the very point of sending you abroad?"

"Makepeace, I swear that I am innocent," exclaimed Adolphus, vehemently.

"Your lordship would have some difficulty," returned the

valet, with a sneer, "in persuading a jury or in making the House of Lords believe your innocence."

"But you have not overheard me confess guilt," cried Adolphus. "No, in all your listenings, you can have heard nothing but denial on my part."

"But I have heard the countess accuse your lordship of it a dozen times within the last hour," rejoined Makepeace. "In short, you accused each other, and therefore if I said the word, you would both have to go and pit your averments against one another elsewhere."

The Earl of Lascelles was frightfully convinced of the truth of all this; his pale countenance again became ghastlier still, — again, too, did he tremble visibly, as he thought within himself, "The exposure would be hideous — horrible, and one at least would be sure to go to the scaffold."

"Now, my lord, what is your decision?" asked Makepeace, who saw that the victory was his own.

"If I give you this money," was the Earl of Lascelles' answer, "you must not for a moment think it is a bribe for your silence with respect to a terrible crime of which I am incapable, but it shall be given to you to save the honour of a lady from exposure. You shall have the amount, but on condition that you henceforth and for ever leave me unmolested."

"That is a bargain, my lord," replied Makepeace, who knew perfectly well that it rested with his own good-will and pleasure whether he should adhere to it in future years.

"But," continued the Earl of Lascelles, "two or three days may elapse before I shall be enabled to place the amount in your hands, for as yet, as you may have seen, I have had neither heart nor spirit to take any steps to put myself in possession of my late father's property; and though his undisputed heir," — and the young nobleman looked hard in the valet's face, as he thus spoke, to assure himself that the terrific secret of his birth was indeed unsuspected, and the result of the survey was at least on this point altogether satisfactory, — "and though my late father's undisputed heir," he continued, "yet still there are certain little legal formalities to be fulfilled. But I will set about them tomorrow, and I repeat in two or three days —"

"There is no hurry for a day or two, my lord," answered

Makepeace, "provided the bargain is to be considered as good as settled, and you will not fly off from it."

"I will not," returned Adolphus. "And now leave me. I shall remain here in my own chamber for the rest of the evening. You may tell Walter" — thus alluding to his principal body servant — "that I shall not require his services to-night."

"Very good, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, now that his object was gained, at once relapsed into that servile civility of tone, look, and manner which was habitual with him, and bowing low, he issued from the nobleman's presence, doubtless chuckling inwardly at the apparent success of his scheme of extortion.

As for the Earl of Lascelles himself, it may easily be conceived that he was left in a state of mind scarcely to be envied by even a felon lying under sentence of death in a condemned cell.

Makepeace, on closing the door of the antechamber behind him, heard the key turn again violently in the lock, and he knew therefore that the young nobleman was in a condition of fearful excitement.

"Ah! he will remain there for all the rest of the evening," thought Makepeace to himself; "he will not issue thence till the morning. Well, then, so much the better. It affords me the opportunity to carry out that other project which I had in view."

With these words musingly spoken to himself, Makepeace entered the red drawing-room, where the Countess of Lascelles was seated. She did not immediately hear him, and when he passed around the end of the screen into her presence, she thought for a moment that it was Adolphus returning to speak to her. But upon perceiving that it was her late husband's confidential valet, and that he advanced into the room with an air somewhat different from that which he habitually wore, — an air that was in a certain respect strange, though she could not exactly define to herself how it was thus singular, Ethel started, and a feeling seized upon her sending a chill to her heart like a presentiment of evil. He approached nearer to the sofa on which she was half-reclining at the instant he entered, but where, upon perceiving who the individual was, she at once raised herself up to a sitting posture.

“ Pardon me, my lady,” said Makepeace, “ but I wish to have a few words’ conversation with you,” and neither the tone of his voice nor the expression of his countenance was so completely respectful as it was wont to be, though it could not be pronounced downright uncivil.

“ A few words’ conversation with me? ” said the Countess of Lascelleo, and though the worst misgiving relative to something wrong smote her heart at the time, she nevertheless asserted by her tone and manner the dignity of her sex and rank, and drew herself up with the air of a well-bred and high-born lady who is offended.

“ Yes, I said what I mean,” replied Makepeace, who was inspired by his success with the young earl to be more or less prepared to carry matters with a tolerable high hand toward the countess. “ Your ladyship and I must have a little discourse together — ”

“ If it be relative to the affairs of the household,” interrupted Ethel, now choosing to play the part of not seeming to understand what was addressed to her, “ you must speak to his lordship, for as you are aware, I am no longer the mistress here, unless it be upon sufferance.”

“ What I have to say to your ladyship,” exclaimed Makepeace, growing bolder and bolder, or rather displaying more and more hardihood and effrontery, “ has nothing to do with household matters, nor his lordship, nor anybody else except your ladyship and me.”

Ethel’s eyes flashed fire, and the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her countenance. For an instant, however, the thought struck her that Makepeace might be tipsy, and she gazed upon him searchingly and scrutinizingly for a few moments, but though a sinister light did indeed shine in his eyes, it was not that of intoxication, — it was the devouring glow of passion and desire. Ethel could not possibly fail to comprehend it; a burning blush suffused her countenance; she quivered with rage, and with a sense of indignity, of outrage, and of insult, — to which feelings she however dared not give as full and complete an expression as her tortured feelings prompted. At the same time she could not altogether subdue the violence of her emotions, and she said, half-angrily and half in remonstrance, “ Makepeace, something strange has come over you; you are forgetting yourself. I do not understand this conduct on your part.”

“The explanation will be soon given, my lady,” he rejoined, “and I already see by your looks that you are not very far off from understanding it. You need not glance uneasily around; no one will come in. His lordship has just retired for the night; he told me that he had. You and I have got all the discourse to ourselves, and when I tell your ladyship that with a single word I can blow your honour, fame, name, position, safety, and everything else to atoms—”

“Makepeace, what mean you?” ejaculated Ethel, with a strong spasmodic start, and then she nearly sank back, overcome by the weight of those frightful apprehensions which seized upon her.

“I mean this, my lady,” responded the valet, whose hardihood grew greater as he perceived that his intended victim’s misgivings increased; “I know of your amour with the young earl, — I mean when he was Lord Osmond — ”

The wretched countess moaned deeply and covered her face with her hands, for she was only too well aware of the fatal truth of the valet’s words, and never did woman experience a more bitter chastisement for a frailty of which she had been guilty, nor more profoundly regret the comparative levity with which at the time she had treated the fact that circumstances had compelled her paramour Adolphus to make a confidant of this man and to invoke his succour in throwing the old earl off the scent.

“Yes, my lady,” continued Makepeace, “I know of your amour with the young nobleman, but that is almost nothing in comparison with something else that I also know. There is, however, no necessity to make fifty words of what may be told in five, and therefore I may as well at once explain to your ladyship that all the time you were speaking with his lordship just now, my ear was fast fixed against the keyhole, and so I lost not a single word.”

Again did the countess moan, for all in an instant did whatsoever had taken place between Adolphus and herself flash back to her memory. But suddenly raising her eyes, she appeared to regain a certain degree of composure — or at least of mental fortitude — as she said, “You heard me say nothing, Makepeace, which justifies you in treating me in a manner so outrageously disrespectful.”

“On the contrary,” retorted the valet, “I heard his lordship accuse you of a crime — ”

"Silence! enough, enough," ejaculated Ethel. "What is it that you require? Gold? If so, name the sum — But, ah! think not for a minute that it is because I am really guilty — No! criminal though I have been in other respects — But, my God! to have thus to speak in the presence of a menial," said the countess, suddenly turning aside and murmuring these few last words to herself; "it is dreadful — dreadful."

"Gold? No, I need not gold, — at least not yet from you," and here Makepeace suddenly lowered his own voice to an undertone; then again speaking aloud, he added, "No, my lady; it is not gold that I want from your hands. Look you! we are here alone together; no one overhears us, and therefore I may as well tell you —"

"What?" ejaculated Ethel, with a half-shriek as she sank back in affright from the bold insolent looks which the valet bent upon her as he leaned partially toward her. "For Heaven's sake be quick, and let this scene end!"

"It is nearly finished," rejoined Makepeace, "so far as I am concerned; it will be your fault if it is prolonged. In one word, then, you are the handsomest of women, and if to-night, when all the house is quiet, you hear a gentle tap at your chamber door —"

The word "Monster," came up to the very tip of the Countess of Lascelles' tongue, but she could not give utterance to it, for though she had expected some insolent avowal or overture of this sort, yet nevertheless now when it was made it struck her as heavy a blow as if it were perfectly unanticipated. She was seized with consternation and dismay, and she sat gazing with wild, staring eyes upon the valet.

"Yes, now your ladyship understands my meaning," he went on to say, with the air of one who felt he had only to dictate his own terms in order to obtain them, "and I need not tell your ladyship that everything must be kept secret between you and me. Of course you will be silent for your own sake, and your ladyship need not be afraid that before my lord or any of the servants I shall betray what takes place by any familiarity on my part."

Ethel groaned inwardly; she saw how completely she was in the villain's power, for she thought to herself, "If by opposition or resistance on my part he is driven to a vindictive course, there is at least one who will go to the

scaffold," and this was in the same sense as what the young Earl of Lascelles had himself thought half an hour previously.

But all in an instant it flashed to Ethel's mind that if she could only gain a reprieve, if in the desperation of her circumstances she could only secure twenty-four hours' delay, something might turn up, some plan might be hit upon to release herself from the terrible persecutions of this wretch, or at all events she should have time to flee away for ever from the metropolis, or even from England itself.

"I understand you, Makepeace," she said, in a low, deep voice, "but all this has come so suddenly upon me, I am so ill, so very ill, that if you would have mercy, if you would only give me a few hours to reflect — Yes, I am sure you will. You know that a woman, unless utterly depraved, cannot abandon herself to a man all in an instant —"

"She really takes it somewhat better than I thought," said Makepeace to himself, "and perhaps it would be as well —"

"Oh, I see that you will grant my prayer," she exclaimed, clasping her hands entreatingly, "yes, you will grant my prayer. Not another word need pass between us, neither this evening nor during the day to-morrow. But to-morrow night, between eleven and twelve o'clock, when the house is all quiet — And now leave me," she abruptly added.

Makepeace was somewhat inclined to insist upon the achievement of his hoped-for conquest at the early period he had originally named, but he was in his heart naturally a coward, his craven spirit was not altogether superseded by the hardihood of his villainy, and he had already gone as far as at the present time he dared go. He felt that his triumph was ensured for the appointment just given by the countess, and after a few moments' hesitation, he nodded significantly and issued from the room.

"Good heavens!" thought the miserable countess to herself, as she heard the door close behind him, "is it come to this?" and she wrung her hands in despair.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OATHS

IT was about eleven o'clock at night when the Countess of Lascelles issued from her own bedchamber and advanced into the passage with a taper in her hand. She was completely dressed, just the same as when she had retired from the drawing-room half an hour previously, for she had dispensed with the attendance of her tirewomen on some plea or another. She had made up her mind how to act: she purposed to see the Earl of Lascelles and tell him everything that had occurred. At first it was her intention to put off this proceeding until the morrow, but then she recollected, from Makepeace's eavesdropping, how dangerous it was to discourse with Adolphus on particular subjects when the domestics of the establishment were about during the day-time, and moreover she felt that it would be utterly impossible for her to seek her couch until she had unburdened her mind to him who was so recently her paramour.

Pale as death was the Countess of Lascelles as she threaded the passage; the light playing upon her countenance gave it an additional wanness, and with the corpselike face, and dressed in her sable garb, she looked like some restless visitant from another world.

She tapped gently at the door of the young earl's suite of apartments; she knew there was no danger of being overheard by any other inmate of the house, for the sleeping-chambers of the domestics were all at a distance, and Isabella Vincent, be it recollected, was not at the mansion. At first Ethel's summons elicited no response; she knocked again, then she heard rapid footsteps approaching through the ante-chamber, and the voice of Adolphus demanded curtly, "Who is there?"

"It is I," responded Ethel, "and it is of vital consequence that we should have a few words together."

There was a dead silence of several moments on the other side of the door, as if Adolphus were deliberating with himself whether he should open it or not; then suddenly Ethel heard a key turn in the lock, the door opened. She passed into the antechamber, and found the young earl still completely dressed, for no more than herself was he as yet able to court repose in bed.

"Ethel, what means this?" he asked, having closed the door after she had entered, and then he surveyed her attentively for several instants. "Surely it is not a revival of love," he added, bitterly, "which has brought you hither?"

"A truce to levity!" said the countess. "Things have come to such a pass that they are driving me to distraction. We will not again enter upon accusation and recrimination —"

"Ah, then you are come to confess?" ejaculated the young earl, "and I thank God that it is so."

"Dare you take the name of God thus in vain?" asked Ethel, with a voice and look of solemn reproach. "O Adolphus —"

"Yes," interrupted the earl, "I dare appeal to my Maker to attest my vow of innocence in respect to that crime."

"Oh, hear me, Almighty God!" said the countess, slowly sinking upon her knees, and raising her hands upward with an air of most solemn adjuration, — "hear me while I proclaim my innocence of that dreadful deed, and let thy thunderbolt —"

"Ethel, Ethel! for Heaven's sake," exclaimed Adolphus, in horror-stricken dismay, "invoke not a chastisement which may perhaps be only too surely hurled down upon your head."

"Silence! interrupt me not!" responded the countess. "But listen while I call Heaven's thunderbolt to smite me dead at your feet if I am giving utterance to a falsehood."

"What does this mean, what can it mean?" exclaimed the young earl, in an almost stupefied astonishment. "There is an air of sincerity about you — sincerity, too, in your words —"

"Yes, sincerity," added the countess with the same solemn

emphasis as before, "because I am speaking the truth. You feel it as I know it. Look at me, Adolphus. Have I the air of a guilty woman?" and rising up from her knees as she thus spoke, she regarded him steadily in the face. "But you, oh, Adolphus, I conjure you —"

"Nay, observe," he interrupted her; and now his own look, manner, and voice were replete with a solemn sense of awe, "that same vow which you have taken do I dare repeat," and he sank down upon his knees at the same time.

"Adolphus," cried the countess, "add not perjury —"

"Silence!" he exclaimed, in a tone which made her stop short suddenly, and starting back a pace or two she became transfixed to the spot.

Then Adolphus repeated, in solemn averment of his own innocence, that same oath which she had taken in respect to herself, and she heard and looked on in silence. He rose up from his suppliant posture, he gazed upon her with an earnest steadfast scrutiny; she looked upon him in a similar manner.

"Would you swear that oath upon the Bible?" he at length asked, and still more searching was his gaze, as if to penetrate into the nethermost depths of her soul.

"I could repeat that oath upon the Bible," she answered; and though her countenance continued deadly pale, yet was her look firm, quailing not for a single moment. "But would you?"

"Yes! Behold me!" ejaculated Adolphus, and hastening to a book-shelf he took down a copy of the sacred volume.

"Then let us swear," said Ethel. "But if the deed lie not between us two —"

"Oh, if it did not," exclaimed Adolphus, quivering with the strength of his emotions, "if we could only convince each other that it did not — But, ah, Ethel, there is one test — and, alas! alas! I fear that you could not bring yourself to pass through it."

"Still suspicious against me?" said the countess; "and I who, more generous, was beginning to have faith in you and to believe that we had both hitherto been the victims of some horrible mystery, some hideous crime perpetrated by another! But enough! What is this test? There is no

ordeal that I will flinch from encountering to convince you of my innocence. But, alas! Adolphus — ”

“Suspicious now in your turn?” he ejaculated. Then in a solemn voice, and with a corresponding look, he said, “Would you accompany me, Ethel, to the chamber in which the deed itself was perpetrated? Would you stand with me by the side of the couch on which the murdered victim lay, would you place your hand upon the very pillow which was pressed by his head, would you in the other hand grasp the holy volume and then swear — ”

“Yes,” interrupted Ethel, “I would do all that. But you, Adolphus — ”

“And I likewise,” responded the young earl. “Truly there must have been some hideous, horrible mistake, for surely, surely such dread perjury — ”

“I am incapable of it,” ejaculated Ethel. “Of what need to perjure myself to you? Would it not be the most unnecessary of crimes?”

“Yes, and on my part the same,” replied Adolphus, “the most unnecessary of crimes. I know not how it is, but an idea has sprung up in my mind that we perhaps have been too harsh to each other, each too quick in arriving at a conclusion. But, oh, if it were so — But, no, no, it is impossible! The deed must lie between us two, and I know that for myself — ”

“And I know likewise for myself,” ejaculated Ethel, warmly and impatiently, “that — ” But suddenly curbing her returning anger, she added, in a solemn tone, “Come, let us do as you have said; let us proceed to the chamber where the terrible deed took place, and, oh, it is with a light conscience in that respect that I shall swear the oath upon the sacred volume.”

With these words the Countess of Lascelles took up the taper which she had brought with her; but as she lifted it from the table somewhat rapidly, it flickered almost to extinction, and Adolphus said, “We must have a better light than this; we must look well in each other’s countenance. Proceed, Ethel. I will join you in a moment.”

He hastened into his bedchamber, and returned with a lamp which threw forth a strong glare. In silence they proceeded from the anteroom; still in silence, too, and with noiseless steps, like stealthily walking ghosts, they passed

along the passage, and in a minute reached the door of the dressing-room where the late earl had been wont to perform his somewhat elaborate toilet under the auspices of Makepeace. As if smitten with the same feeling and at the same moment, the young earl and the countess flung their looks upon each other; the countenance of each was pale, but full of firm and solemn resolve. They spoke not a word. Adolphus opened the door of the dressing-room, and with the habitual courtesy which in respect to a female prevails with every well-bred man under any circumstances, he stood aside to suffer Ethel to enter first. Without the slightest hesitation she crossed the threshold; she lingered not in the dressing-room for Adolphus to come close up with her as she opened the door of communication with the bedchamber, — that chamber which had proved the scene of the terrific tragedy.

She entered the chamber, Adolphus quickly followed, and once more did they exchange rapid looks, as if each were curious, or we should rather say anxious to ascertain what demeanour was now borne by the other. And both countenances were still expressive of firmness mingled with a solemn awe.

The young Earl of Lascelles deposited the lamp upon a table, and holding the Bible in one hand, he advanced toward the bed, Ethel keeping close by his side.

“Suffer me to take the oath first,” said the countess; “and if for an instant,” she added, “I may have appeared to shudder as I thus approach this couch, it was not in trepidation on account of the oath that I am about to take, but through horrified remembrance of the spectacle which I beheld in this apartment the last time that I was here.”

It can scarcely be necessary to inform the reader that all traces of the hideous tragedy had been cleansed or removed away from the chamber, and that no one unless previously acquainted with the fact could for an instant have suspected that any such foul crime had been perpetrated there.

“And I too shuddered for an instant,” said Adolphus, “and for the same reason. Can you depict to yourself, Ethel, the whole of that dread spectacle? Can you lay your hand upon the satin coverlid of this couch, and fancy within yourself that it is upon the cold corpse of the deceased you are placing that hand as if that corpse were indeed here still?

And if such be the impression under which, assisted by your imagination, you are now standing here, then take this book, kiss it, and swear that you are innocent of your late husband's death."

Unhesitatingly did the Countess of Lascelles receive the book in one hand, while she placed the other upon the pillow of the bed; and when Adolphus had dictated to her an oath couched in terms alike the most solemn and the most terrible, when, too, in a firm voice she had repeated word for word all that he thus dictated, she kissed the sacred volume, adding, in the same tone of solemn resolute confidence, "I swear!"

When this was done, Adolphus gazed upon her for a few moments with the most searching scrutiny, — a scrutiny from which she neither quailed nor shrank, but which she endured with the air of one who was indeed innocent of a foul crime and who had no cause to dread the fathoming of the inmost recesses of her heart, — at least not upon that score. The earl received back the book from her hand, and made a sign for her to commence the administration of the oath unto himself. She repeated precisely the same formula as that which he had dictated to her; and he, with an equal air of sincerity, with the same outward appearance of confidence, with the same absence of any trace of a guilty conscience's internal whispering, pressed the book to his lips and said, "I swear!"

Then the Countess of Lascelles gazed upon him with as deep and earnest a scrutiny as that which she herself had ere now undergone, and he bore it as unflinchingly and as firmly.

"Yes, Adolphus," she said, "you are innocent."

"And you, Ethel," he replied, "you also are innocent."

But did their former love spring up again in their hearts, now that the hideous nightmare of suspicion was lifted also from the soul of each? Did they fly into each other's arms? Were their hands instantaneously clasped? Not so. It is true that they now beheld each other in a different light, but that love of theirs, once so strong, so impassioned, and so tender, had received a shock from which recovery was impossible. A blight had fallen upon it, as upon the most beautiful flower which never again must raise its drooping head from beneath that withering influence. And they gazed upon each other with looks of embarrassment and

constraint, yet the same feeling was in both hearts alike, for each knew that though suspicion was set at rest for ever, yet that the wide gulf which had opened between them could never be completely bridged, that love was done for them, and that even friendship's self would lack the warmth which might enable them to go hand in hand with cheerfulness through the world thenceforth.

All of a sudden they heard a sound as if the outer door of the dressing-room was opening. Again were their glances quickly turned upon one another, but no superstitious fear was expressed in their looks; and then their eyes were rapidly flung in the direction of the chamber door itself, for footsteps were traversing the dressing-room. This last-mentioned door was opened slowly, and a man appeared upon the threshold. That man was Makepeace.

He was only half-dressed; his countenance was ghastly pale, his features were rigid; his eyes, wide open, seemed to be staring upon vacancy, as if the images reflected in them remained only upon the retina and were carried not in unto the brain. Yes, it was indeed evident that those eyes imparted to the man himself no more sense of the objects which were imaged there than the polished mirror could know of the things which its surface reflected. Adolphus and Ethel stood back in silent horror, for it was indeed with a feeling of horror they were now smitten as the truth burst upon them. Makepeace was visiting that chamber of the tragedy in a state of somnambulism!

The valet advanced toward the bed, taking not the slightest notice of Adolphus or the countess, although if his eyes had possessed the active sense of vision as well as the mere inert faculty he could not have failed to see them. He bore no light in his hand, yet he was startled not by the glare of the lamp that was burning upon the table. Toward the bed he went, as we have just said; he extended his arms across it, he gesticulated in a strange manner for a few moments; his features, relaxing from their rigidity, became violently convulsed, his eyes rolled in their sockets, as if with the intense horror of the feelings that now inspired him. Adolphus and Ethel remained motionless and silent, standing aside, but close together, gazing on this dread spectacle, and for an instant they thought that Makepeace beheld them, recognized them, and was about to address them, as

his looks seemed to settle upon them both. But his eyes, having now suddenly ceased to roll, glanced only with a glassy and inanimate light, not as if the mind itself, with the sense peculiar to those orbs, were shining through them. Then the man slowly turned away, and still wrapped in a profound slumber, still iron-bound by the influence of somnambulism, still proceeding mechanically as if a mere walking automaton, he took his departure from the chamber, shutting the door behind him; and a few moments afterward Adolphus and Ethel heard the outer door, namely, that of the dressing-room, likewise close.

“Oh, we have indeed been most unjust toward each other!” cried Adolphus, turning his looks upon the countess. “For that man —”

“Yes, we have been most unjust,” replied Ethel, “for the horrible mystery is now cleared up, and that man is the murderer of his master.”

“Come, let us leave this chamber,” said the young earl, “and thankful ought we to be to Providence for having brought us hither on this occasion to behold what we have just seen. It is a mercy which we perhaps little deserved at the hands of Heaven.”

“And in remembrance thereof,” exclaimed the countess, fervidly, “all the remainder of my life shall be so spent as to prove an atonement for the past.”

They issued forth together, and returned to the ante-chamber where Ethel had previously sought Adolphus.

“Our conversation took such a turn,” said the countess, “almost immediately after I joined you here just now, that I totally lost sight of the real object for which I came. Ah, little, little did I foresee that events were to flow into such a channel as to lead to the mutual conviction of each other’s innocence! I came just now to tell you, Adolphus, that the villain Makepeace, — he whom we have now discovered, beyond the possibility of doubt, to be the assassin of the master who was at least so good and kind to him, he whose guilty conscience conducts him, amidst the restless slumbers of the night, to the scene of his foul crime —”

“What more has this man done?” asked the young earl. “I see that there is something hanging heavy upon your mind, Ethel, or, rather, provoking your indignant sense of sore outrage. And I too am smarting under

the recollection of the miscreant's conduct to me ere now."

"He sought me in the drawing-room," responded Ethel, "some little while after you had left me, he made insolent advances. I felt that I was in his power; he threatened, and, oh, Adolphus, though I knew myself to be innocent, yet I dreaded lest if that man were to tell his tale you would go to the scaffold —"

"By Heaven, Ethel!" interrupted the earl, with impassioned vehemence, "it was the same that I said to myself when I submitted to the extortionate demand he made upon me. For I dreaded lest you, Ethel, should be dragged ignominiously before a tribunal, and from a tribunal to the scaffold."

The young nobleman and the countess now related to each other everything that had respectively taken place with themselves in reference to Makepeace, and hence it appeared that whereas on the one hand Adolphus had taken time for the payment of the money, so on the other hand had Ethel obtained a reprieve — though a brief one — in respect to the surrender of herself to the embraces of Makepeace.

"The circumstances which have this night transpired," said Adolphus, "are not merely accidental, — they have been ordained by Heaven to place us on the right track for the discovery and punishment of the murderer. For our own guilt, Ethel, toward that deceased old man, we have indeed been chastised; the horrible state of suspicion in which we have existed since his death has proved a punishment ample enough, let us hope, to satisfy Heaven's sternest sense of justice. And now let us separate. Retire you to your chamber. Perhaps you may repose more peaceably for the rest of this night than you have hitherto done, and I shall retire to rest in fullest confidence that Heaven will not leave unfinished the work which it has just commenced."

"What course do you purpose to adopt?" asked Ethel. "For remember, Adolphus, that as yet there is but slight evidence to satisfy the world of this man's guilt, though with ourselves it is placed beyond the possibility of doubt."

"I can give you no decisive answer for the present," responded the young earl. "It is a subject which must be deliberated upon, and which likewise depends upon circum-

stances which evidently are not altogether in our own hands, but under the guidance of that Heaven which has thus so strangely but so mercifully placed us on the right track. And now good night, Ethel."

"Good night, Adolphus," and without a hand being shaken between them, but still with a far different feeling toward each other from that which they had entertained until within this hour, they separated.

On the following day, soon after breakfast, a letter was received from Mrs. Gardiner, to the effect that favourable tidings had been obtained relative to Miss Vincent, who was quite safe and well; but she (Mrs. Gardiner) had only a moment's time to pen this hasty announcement for the satisfaction of the earl and of the countess, inasmuch as she was just on the point of setting off to rejoin Miss Vincent at Ramsgate. The housekeeper concluded by promising to write further particulars on the following day, unless she should find on her arrival at Verner House — which was her destination — that Miss Vincent herself had written complete details to the earl and her ladyship.

"But Isabella has not written to us," said Adolphus, "and I am tortured with the idea that she suspects something dreadful on our part. It is for you to write to her, Ethel. Write confidentially to her, tell her that providential circumstances have afforded us a clue to the discovery of the murderer of her uncle; hesitate not to mention the name of Makepeace, for the sooner Isabella's mind is disabused of any horrible suspicion against either you or me, or perhaps both of us, the better."

"I will not fail to write," answered the countess. "And you, Adolphus, what course have you decided upon?"

"I am now going to consult an attorney, to whom I shall communicate everything," Adolphus replied, "and I know that his counsel will be given in a friendly as well as prudential spirit."

Makepeace, utterly unaware of the fact of his somnambulism, utterly unsuspecting therefore of the storm that was gathering above his head, and threatening to turn the tables completely against himself, heard with satisfaction the earl's order for the carriage to be gotten in immediate readiness, for the villainous valet thought that the young nobleman was about to go and investigate his financial affairs for the pur-

pose of providing the sum of ten thousand pounds according to the arrangement already made.

Adolphus remained absent for several hours, during which Ethel experienced some degree of anxiety, for she felt the necessity of the adoption of speedy measures in order to bring the crime completely home to Makepeace, and thus extricate herself from the power which the villain might otherwise still continue to wield with regard to her. It was between four and five in the afternoon when Adolphus returned to the mansion, and he was accompanied by his solicitor, Mr. Slater, who, it was intimated to the domestics, would remain to dinner. Adolphus found an opportunity of speaking a few words to Ethel, conveying a brief outline of the plan which was to be adopted under existing circumstances; and then retiring to his own chamber for the purpose of changing his toilet, he desired his valet to bid Makepeace attend upon him at once.

"I find," said the young earl, when Makepeace entered into his presence, — and it was with no small difficulty that Adolphus could keep a mask upon his countenance to conceal all that he inwardly felt in respect to the murderer, — "I find that by devoting a few hours' attention to my pecuniary affairs I shall be enabled the first thing to-morrow morning to dispose of the sum which you require. I have no doubt you are as ready and willing as I myself am that this business should be settled with the least possible delay. Mr. Slater has brought all his papers with him, and after dinner I purpose to go over them with him. In any case, you may fully understand that early to-morrow morning, immediately after breakfast, you will receive the sum which you have demanded of me, and you will therefore at the same time fulfil your part of the compact by leaving the mansion the instant you have the money in your possession."

"It shall be so, my lord," responded Makepeace, inwardly chuckling at the idea that everything was going on so favourably to his own mercenary views.

On retiring from the presence of the young nobleman, Makepeace proceeded to ascertain where the countess was, in order that he might remind her of the appointment for the coming night, as he supposed it to be the last one which he would have to pass within those walls, and he was resolved that Ethel should not escape from becoming the

victim of his passion, if indeed it was in his power by threats and coercion to hold her to her agreement. Makepeace discovered that as it still wanted a good hour to dinner-time, Mr. Slater had proceeded to the library, where he had covered the table with deeds and documents, in the midst of which he seemed to be buried, while, on the other hand, the countess was alone in the drawing-room. Thither Makepeace accordingly proceeded, and accosting Ethel, he said, "My lady, remember your promise for to-night."

"It is impossible that it can be kept," answered the countess; and, admirably well playing her part, she said, "Now do not bend those angry looks upon me. I am not the mistress of my own actions. The earl has suddenly taken it into his head to have Mr. Slater here to settle all financial matters, for his lordship will leave for the Continent to-morrow."

"Ah, indeed! for the Continent?" ejaculated the valet, and then he muttered to himself, "This, then, accounts for the abruptness with which he is resolved to settle his affairs— But why," he asked of Ethel, "does Mr. Slater's presence here make any difference?"

"Because," replied the countess, "my signature is required to certain deeds relative to the property which devolves upon myself, my jointure, and so forth, and I must sit up to-night to give that signature. Mr. Slater has intimated to me, with an expression of concern for the trouble thus caused, that it may be one or two o'clock in the morning before the business will be terminated."

Not for a single instant did Makepeace suspect the truth of all these statements; indeed, they seemed perfectly natural, and Ethel delivered herself of them with an appearance of the utmost sincerity. The valet reflected for a few moments; he thought to himself that it would be supremely ridiculous for him to loosen his hold upon the countess, and as he had all along intended to render her his victim in more ways than one, he was well pleased to learn that the earl was going abroad, as he flattered himself that it would leave the countess all the more completely defenceless and at his mercy.

"Well, my lady," he said, "there appears to be no help for it to-night; but if the earl does really depart to-morrow, you may expect me to pay you a visit at about eleven to-morrow night, — for which purpose you can leave unlocked

the window of that ground floor room you used latterly to occupy in the old earl's time, and I shall have no difficulty in finding my way to where you will receive me with open arms. Or, what will be better still, you can shift your quarters back to that room and save me a world of trouble. Take care, my lady, that you follow my injunctions and do exactly as I bid, or else — ”

The villainous valet threw a look of dark and menacing significancy upon the countess, who had some difficulty in so far subduing the sense of loathing and abhorrence which she felt toward that man as to be enabled to give him a calm response in accordance with all he demanded at her hands, and he issued from the room. Between this time and the dinner-hour Adolphus and the countess had no opportunity of exchanging a word in private together. When the dinner was over, Mr. Slater and Adolphus adjourned to the library, where they deliberated upon the plan which they had in view for the complete detection of Makepeace; for it is scarcely necessary to inform the reader that the tale of so much important business being in hand that would extend deep into the night was a mere pretext, having two purposes to serve, — the first to prevent Makepeace from suspiciously regarding the lawyer's presence at the mansion, and the second to afford Ethel an excuse for breaking her appointment with that same infamous person.

The twilight was deepening into the shades of night when Adolphus issued from the library, and sought the grounds for the purpose of cooling his brain, which was fevered and excited by the incidents that were now in progress. He had not been in the garden many minutes before he encountered Ethel, for she had come forth to walk for the very same purpose. She now told Adolphus all that had taken place between herself and Makepeace during the hour which preceded dinner; for though Mr. Slater had been made acquainted with every detail of the valet's insolent hopes and intentions, yet the topic was too delicate a one for the countess to touch upon in that gentleman's presence.

“ Everything progresses well,” said Adolphus. “ Makepeace is entirely off his guard, — or, rather, he is lulled into the utmost security. But, ah, what sound was that? ”

“ Hush! ” said Ethel, in a low voice. “ Let us listen. ”

They stopped short, and it appeared to them as if they

heard the noise of some one digging up the earth at a little distance. This noise was so low as to render them still uncertain whether they rightly interpreted its cause, but as every incident now appeared to them to be invested with an importance bearing upon their own circumstances, they resolved to ascertain what these sounds could mean. Noiselessly they advanced over the grass-plot in the direction of the spot whence those sounds appeared to come, until they both fancied that they beheld something white moving behind a clump of evergreens. Nearer still did they advance, their footsteps unheard upon the soft grass, and both threading their way amongst the shrubs and the parterres of flowers with so much caution as not to ruffle a single leaf, until they were near enough to see what was going on without themselves being seen. A man with his coat and waistcoat off was digging in that spot, which was the remotest corner of the grounds, and also the most densely embowered in trees. It was his shirt which had shone white through the foliage and amidst the deepening obscurity of the evening. He was working hard, as if the task he had in hand must be speedily accomplished; he was working, too, with the fullest sense of security and in confidence of remaining undisturbed at that hour when all the domestics were in the servants' hall, and when he fancied the earl, the countess, and Mr. Slater to be deep in the midst of deeds and parchments in the library. For this man was Makepeace.

Adolphus and Ethel were at once smitten with the conviction that this was some new phase which must develop itself in the growing chain of evidence against the murderer of the old earl, and in breathless suspense they continued gazing upon his proceedings, they themselves taking care to continue unseen. They had not tarried many minutes on the spot before they perceived Makepeace stoop down, and from the hole which he had digged he drew forth an object which appeared to be a stone jar, about a foot and a half high and of a proportionate width. At the same instant there was a low but still plainly audible chink of gold coins within the jar, or vase, as Makepeace deposited it upon the ground. He then proceeded to shovel back the earth with all possible despatch. Adolphus touched Ethel, as a signal that they must retire, and they accordingly retreated as cautiously and as noiselessly as they had advanced toward that spot.

Reëntering the mansion, they hastened to the library to inform Mr. Slater of all that they had just seen, and he was as much struck as themselves by the importance of the incident. That the vase contained the golden temptation for which the crime had been perpetrated there could be scarcely any doubt, and that the guilty valet was now disinterring his treasure in order that he might convey it to his own room and consign it to his trunk in readiness for his departure on the following morning, was equally clear. The web of circumstantial evidence was visibly and rapidly closing in around the murderer.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MURDERER

A LITTLE before ten on this same night of which we are writing, Adolphus gave orders for his travelling-carriage to be in readiness at nine o'clock in the morning, and at the same time he intimated that the domestics might retire to bed at their usual hour, no one being needed to sit up for himself, the countess, or Mr. Slater, as they had business to transact which would possibly keep them in the library far into the night.

By eleven o'clock the mansion was silent; the lights were extinguished in all the chambers of the domestics, who had retired about half an hour previously. Adolphus now issued from the library, carrying a light in his hand, and followed by Mr. Slater. They ascended the private staircase, and reached the passage whence opened the suite of apartments occupied by the late earl. Traversing the dressing-room, they passed into the bedchamber, and there Adolphus, having deposited the light upon the toilet-table, left the solicitor by himself. The young earl then rejoined the Countess of Lascelles in the library.

We may as well observe that Mr. Slater was a man of about forty years of age, intelligent and strong-minded, and by no means prone to superstitious fears. He had therefore unhesitatingly volunteered to become the temporary occupant of the chamber where the horrible murder was committed, in the hope that the proceeding might have a particular issue.

The attorney, when left to himself, merely threw off his coat and waistcoat, and lay down beneath the coverlid. As the reader may very well suppose, he had no inclination for sleep, inasmuch as he had a special task to perform. He

therefore lay broad awake, anxiously awaiting the first sound that might indicate the occurrence of that which was expected.

About three-quarters of an hour thus elapsed, when Mr. Slater heard the outer door — namely, that of the dressing-room — opening, and in a few moments the chamber door itself was affording ingress to some one. The light still burned upon the toilet-table, and the somnambulist Makepeace, — half-dressed, as on the preceding night, — with his features rigid, and his eyes fixed as if in a vague, glassy stare, approached the couch. Mr. Slater lay perfectly still, awaiting what would happen. Makepeace bent partially over the bed, and extending his hands, appeared to be feeling for a form that might be sleeping there. His right hand gently touched the lawyer's throat, and the somnambulist drew that hand rapidly away, with the horribly faithful imitation of the manner in which he had no doubt drawn the murderous weapon across the throat of the old nobleman.

"Murderer!" ejaculated Mr. Slater, and springing up, he forcibly grasped the arms of the valet.

It would be impossible to describe the perfect agony of terror, the wildering consternation of horror, which seized upon the guilty wretch as he was thus startled from his sleep, and as his brain was smitten with all the harrowing ideas of detection in the crime which he had been in fancy reënacting.

"Murderer, confess!" exclaimed the lawyer, not leaving Makepeace a moment to collect his ideas or to recover from the fearful shock which he had just sustained.

"I will, I will!" he piteously moaned. "Forgive me, my lord, I meant to do it — I am very wicked —"

And then, all in an instant, recognizing the attorney, Makepeace gave vent to a wild cry of terror and anguish, and sinking upon his knees, he poured forth a perfect volley of ejaculations and entreaties for mercy.

Mr. Slater rang the bell violently, and Adolphus, who had been anxiously expecting this summons, was the first to answer it. Several of the male domestics, springing from their beds, and huddling on a few clothes, sped in the same direction, for the solicitor, with one hand firmly clutching the arm of Makepeace, with the other hand continued tugging at the bell even after the young Earl of Lascelles had entered

the bedchamber. And the sound of this bell was heard likewise by Ethel, to whom the intelligence was thereby conveyed that the detection of Makepeace was complete.

When Adolphus rushed into the chamber, the miserable murderer covered his face with his hands, groaning and sobbing audibly.

"He has confessed! he has confessed!" shouted Slater, who was all the while pulling at the bell. "Let us raise the entire household! Let every one know that the assassin is discovered!"

"Mercy! mercy!" groaned Makepeace, — as if it were possible that he would be allowed to escape, which was the only mercy that could be afforded by those who had him in their custody.

"He has confessed the crime," reiterated Slater. "Heaven itself has at length brought it home to him. Wretched being, did you not know, did you not suspect that you walked in your sleep?"

"No, no!" moaned the miserable man, evidently under the influence of the most appalling horror and consternation.

"Had you no idea," continued the lawyer, with rapid and excited utterance, "that you thus wandered about, that an invisible but irresistible hand guided you to the scene of your foul iniquity?"

"My God, no!" groaned Makepeace, quivering with the indescribable horror of his feelings.

"Blaspheme not, wretch!" ejaculated Slater. "Invoke not the sacred name of the Almighty, miscreant that you are! Had you no idea that —"

Several of the male domestics, who, as we have already stated, were roused from their beds, now entered the room; and the scene which burst upon them was eloquently expressive of the truth. Makepeace was still upon his knees, his eyes glaring in wild horror; Slater still retained a hold upon him. Adolphus, with arms folded, was leaning against the bedpost, gazing upon the murderer with looks of deepest loathing and aversion. The fact that such a scene as this should occur in the very chamber where the foul tragedy had been perpetrated, was sufficient to strike the entering domestics with a full idea of its horrible significancy.

"He has confessed the crime," reiterated Mr. Slater, who

had now desisted from pulling at the bell, "and he will not dare deny it. But if he did, of what use? Look at his countenance now, — Murder's very name is written in blood upon it!"

The domestics fell shudderingly back a pace or two, for there was something fearful indeed in the thought of being in the presence of the wretch who had committed so terrible a crime. It was the same sensation as if they had suddenly found themselves approaching near a huge coiled-up reptile, to touch the slimy folds of which would have been to send a strong tremor quivering throughout their entire forms. And no pen can describe the mingled horror and anguish, the wild, internal agony that was fast asserting its empire over the previous influence of consternation and dismay, that now held possession of the murderer.

"Had you no idea," proceeded Slater, — who, cool though he naturally were, and calm as he had at first been when taking up his quarters in that room, was now considerably excited, — "had you no idea that the slumbers of such a wretch as you could not possibly be tranquil, and that you yourself ought to have mistrusted them lest they should prove the very season and means of leading you into circumstances proper for your detection? Would you believe it?" cried the solicitor, glancing around upon those present, "he came stealthily up to the bed, just as he no doubt advanced when about to accomplish his horrible deed —"

"And as he advanced thither last night," interjected Adolphus, mechanically, at the same time shuddering at the reminiscence itself, as well as at all the associations which it conjured up in his mind.

"Ah, last night?" muttered Makepeace, catching at the young earl's words, and thereby recalled, as it were, to a sense of all the recent past as well as of the frightful present; and then he all in a moment comprehended how it was that measures had been so promptly taken to turn the tables against him.

"What did he say?" exclaimed Mr. Slater, who did not catch the murderer's words. Then, without waiting for any one to give him a response, and still labouring under a strong excitement, from the effect of the scene which had just occurred, and which he was now about to describe, he went on to say, "Yes, he stole up to the bed, he felt about as if

to ascertain exactly where I was lying, he drew his hand across my throat — ”

Groans of horror burst forth from the domestics previously assembled, and from the lips of others who were now entering the room. Makepeace himself groaned, and not for an instant did he dare deny all that had been said.

“ Ah! now I bethink me,” ejaculated Mr. Slater, “ the crock, the jar — ”

“ Yes, the golden temptation,” said Adolphus, “ for which the deed was perpetrated.”

Makepeace gazed with a renewed bewilderment of consternation upon the solicitor and the young earl. Not that this new discovery struck him as making his case one atom worse than it was before, but the wretched man was surprised to find the various evidences of his guilt thus magically transpiring as it were, accumulating upon him, striking him blow upon blow.

“ Keep charge of him, keep charge of him!” exclaimed Mr. Slater. “ You, my lord, will remain to watch over him — or, what is better still, convey him to some place of security until the police can be fetched. Let some one run to the nearest station-house, and let a couple of you accompany me to the wretch’s chamber. I know it not,” added the lawyer to the two foremost domestics who volunteered to go with him; “ you must lead the way.”

The three quitted the room accordingly. Adolphus remained, with some six or seven others, keeping guard upon Makepeace, while one of the footmen, who happened to be completely dressed, hastened off to procure the succour of the police. Until this moment Makepeace had remained upon his knees, for it must be comprehended that what it has taken us some time to relate in reality occupied but a few minutes in its dramatic action. The instant, however, the lawyer and those domestics had quitted the chamber, Makepeace rose up, and signalled his wish to have a few words with the young Earl of Lascelles.

“ Whatsoever you have to say must be said aloud,” observed Adolphus, “ in the presence of these witnesses,” and though he spoke with accents of stern severity, yet he inwardly trembled lest his past amour with Ethel should be revealed and her honour ruined beyond redemption.

“ Your lordship had better suffer me to speak to you in

private," said Makepeace, gradually recovering somewhat of his presence of mind, if not a certain hardihood, with the consciousness that though he were a reptile soon to be trampled to death under the heel of human justice, he had still the sting in his head and his envenomed tongue could inflict no insignificant wound.

For an instant Adolphus was irresolute how to act, but only for an instant. A second thought showed him that no matter what the consequences might be, however fatal to the honour of Ethel, and however damnatory of his own reputation, inasmuch as he passed before the world as the son of the late earl, and consequently as the son-in-law of her with whom he might now perhaps be accused of having intrigued, yet notwithstanding all these considerations, he knew, we say, that he dared not appear to have any secrets with a murderer, much less to be thought capable of making terms with such a wretch.

"I will grant you no private audience," he said, in resolute accents.

"Your lordship can step aside with me into one corner," answered Makepeace, whose keen eye had caught that temporary indecision on the young nobleman's part. "We can whisper together, or these men can withdraw into the dressing-room for a few minutes —"

"And leave his lordship alone with you?" ejaculated several voices, accompanied by looks of horror and abhorrence. "No, no, you would kill him as you did his poor old father."

"His lordship knows," said Makepeace, white as a sheet at the hideous taunt, "whether it be more conducive to his interest to listen to me in private or to compel me to speak out."

This invitation for a secret audience, so unmistakably given, accompanied too with a sort of threat, more than ever compelled Adolphus to take a resolute stand, despite all consequences, and he said firmly, "I remain here to keep guard over you, but not to listen to aught that you may have to communicate. Wretched man, would you not do better to show contrition, to think only of your own awful predicament —"

"Enough of this!" interrupted Makepeace, with increasing hardihood. "I see that it is all over with me, and I

must swing for it, or else — But no matter! My business with life is pretty nearly done, I must die, and that speedily too, but I will not perish unavenged. My lord, here, in the presence of your domestics — ”

“ Silence, villain! ” ejaculated Adolphus, now fearfully excited, so that the servants gazed upon him in mingled wonder and suspicion.

“ You cannot seal my lips, ” said Makepeace, “ and everything shall now come out. You know that you intrigued with your own mother-in-law! ”

Adolphus staggered back, his countenance ghastly white, and the domestics present were naturally enough smitten with the conviction of their master’s guilt of the crime just imputed to him.

“ Yes, you were the lover of your own father’s wife, ” continued Makepeace, “ and now every one may understand, if they did not comprehend it before, why the countess occupied a separate room so long, and that ground floor room too. ”

Adolphus groaned audibly; he could not possibly deny the accusation levelled against him. It was true that he might palliate it by proclaiming the secret of his birth, but this he dared not do. It would have been equivalent to the laying down of his titles and the abandonment of his riches all in an instant. The domestics were convinced of the truth of what Makepeace had just said, murderer though he were, for the ghastly looks, the quivering form, and the horrified appearance of the young earl bore fullest corroboration of the tale. And then, too, the servants quickly called to mind countless little circumstances which had never before made any particular impression upon them, but which now all combined as damning evidence against their master.

“ There! ” said Makepeace, as if in horrible exultation at the exposure he had made, “ it is all out now, and though I may die on the gallows, yet you, my lord, who have cheated me out of my ten thousand pounds, and your beautiful mother-in-law, who cheated me out of her favours, are hopelessly ruined before the world. ”

At this instant the lawyer reappeared, followed by the two servants who had accompanied him, and one of whom carried a stone jar, whence came the chinking sound of gold.

“ It was in his room, carefully packed in his box, ” ex-

claimed the attorney. "We forced the box, and we found it."

"There is no use in denying the whole truth now," said Makepeace; "and if others would only be just as candid," he added, flinging a look of diabolical malignity upon Adolphus, "it would be seen that murder and robbery are not the only crimes that have been committed under this roof."

"Wretch!" exclaimed Slater, with indignation, "think you that for a moment you will mend your own position — But here are the police."

And it was so. A sergeant and a couple of constables made their appearance, accompanied by the domestic who had been to fetch them, and Makepeace was consigned to their custody. That portion of his apparel in which he was deficient — he having been only half-dressed during his somnambulism — was fetched from his chamber, and for a moment, when the handcuffs were put upon him, he winced and turned more ghastly pale than before; but quickly recovering himself, he reassumed a bold, insolent hardihood, and again vociferated forth the tale of the young nobleman's amour with the countess. Those who had not previously heard it from his lips were amazed and shocked; the earl turned aside, groaning with the horror of his anguished, outraged, harrowing feelings, while Makepeace was borne off in the custody of the police constables.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CONFESSION

MAKEPEACE was alone in a cell at the station-house to which he had been conducted. A profound darkness entombed him, and though the night was a warm one, yet did he feel cold to the very marrow of his bones. The handcuffs were upon his wrists; his person had been rigorously searched; every incident and every idea tended to make him now frightfully aware of his awful position. That temporary hardihood which had taken possession of the man when he so cruelly avenged himself against Adolphus and the countess had now altogether forsaken him, and he felt profoundly dejected, — so deeply, deeply desponding that the very tears traced each other down his cheeks.

His imagination grew fevered, and from the midst of the darkness of the cell a form gradually seemed to stand forth, — a gore-stained, ghastly shape, slowly becoming plainer and plainer until to his excited imagination it seemed as if his old master's distorted countenance was gazing upon him. At first the wretch looked and looked, while horror froze his veins, but at length, unable any longer to endure the presence of the spectre which his fevered fancy had conjured up, he shrieked aloud in his mental agony. The massive bolt of the door was drawn back, the bull's-eye light of a lantern flashed in unto the cell, and a constable asked, "What is the matter?"

"For Heaven's sake do not leave me alone!" exclaimed Makepeace; "or give me a light — this darkness is terrible. But stay, send for Mr. Slater — send for him at once. I would speak to him, and then perhaps my mind will be easier!"

"Yes, we will send for him," responded the constable.

"I will leave you this light for a minute, while I despatch some one to the house; and in the meantime, if you wish it, I will remain with you."

The constable acted as he had said. A message was despatched to the mansion to Mr. Slater, and though this gentleman had retired to rest, yet on hearing what was required of him, he immediately rose, hastily apparelled himself, and accompanied the messenger to the station-house. There he was at once introduced to the murderer's cell, and the constable, who in the meanwhile had remained with the criminal, asked whether he should retire, or whether he should still continue there.

"Leave us alone together," said Makepeace, whose voice now sounded awfully hollow to the attorney's ears.

"One moment," said the latter. "From the nature of the message just delivered to me, I conclude, Makepeace, that you purpose to volunteer a full and complete confession of your crime, with all its details. Is it so?"

"It is," was the sepulchraly uttered response.

"You must have a motive for making this confession," continued Mr. Slater. "Is it that at length smitten with remorse, you seek to offer the last and only atonement — poor indeed though it be — which man in such circumstances can make? Or is it that there are some secrets fitted for my ear alone?"

"There is no secret, sir," replied the murderer, "beyond that which relates to the circumstances of the dreadful deed itself."

"In this case," continued the lawyer, "you will have no objection for the confession to be taken down in writing?"

"None," was the murderer's reply, and his voice still sounded as hollow as an echo awakened in the deep gloom of some old cathedral crypt.

"It were better," proceeded the attorney, "that your confession should be made to the ears of two persons. You are sincere in your desire to make a clear breast of it at once, and therefore you cannot object —"

"No, sir," interrupted Makepeace, profoundly dejected, "I leave myself in your hands. Though I have already avowed my guilt, yet until I shall have explained it in all its details, it seems to constitute a secret that sits upon my heart like a weight of lead."

“Procure writing materials,” said Mr. Slater to the constable. “Return with them, that you may act as a witness of the confession which this remorse-stricken being is about to make.”

The constable withdrew, and during his temporary absence a profound silence reigned in the cell, the eyes of Makepeace being bent downward, and the light of the lantern left by the officer playing with a ghastly effect upon his pallid, haggard countenance, which wore an air of the deepest dejection. The constable returned, and Mr. Slater arranged the writing materials in a manner as convenient as the circumstances of the cell would permit. Makepeace continued to be absorbed in his solemnly awful reverie for some minutes before he broke silence, and when he did again speak, his voice was lower and sounded more hollow, more sepulchral than hitherto.

“I mean at once to speak of the particular night when the crime was committed,” began the murderer. “His lordship the late earl had for some time slept apart from her ladyship, and it was my duty to attend upon him in his dressing-room whensoever he performed his toilet. On the evening in question I attended his lordship in that dressing-room, as usual, when he was about to retire for the night; and this, as near as I can recollect, was a quarter to eleven o’clock. There was evidently something which the earl wanted to say to me, and which I knew by his manner was affording him gratification to contemplate. Presently he began by observing that there would shortly be a bridal in the family, and that we should all be very busy for the next few days in making preparations for it; and then he added, ‘Yes, there can be no doubt, Makepeace, everything is going on very comfortably; matters are coming to an issue at last. Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent will go together to the altar.’

“His lordship then proceeded, in his own peculiar style, to descant upon a variety of arrangements which he had already thought of for the bridal, and amongst other things he spoke of the wedding-presents which he intended to make to his niece Miss Vincent. ‘Makepeace,’ he said, ‘the evening before the wedding-day we will have all the gifts arranged upon the table in Isabella’s dressing-room. She shall not know anything about it previously, so that when she retires for the night she will be most agreeably surprised.

I shall go to-morrow to buy a set of diamonds for her, and all sorts of jewels, and they shall be put into a beautiful casket. The countess will of course contribute her presents according to her own good taste. But I tell you what I mean to have for the central ornament of the table. There shall be an elegant porcelain vase, filled with bright new sovereigns, all of her present Majesty's reign. In a word, Makepeace, I mean to have two thousand of them in this vase, and I think the present will be as handsome as unique.'

"I ventured to suggest to his lordship that there might be some difficulty in procuring so many new sovereigns at so short a notice. His lordship smiled, and told me that for some time past — indeed, from the very first moment that he thought of marrying Miss Vincent to his son — he had been thinking and preparing for this particular gift. I had access to all the cupboards in his rooms except one, and of this his lordship was wont to keep the key. He bade me take that key and open the cupboard to which it belonged. I did so, and his lordship, still with a smile, indicated a jar, the mouth of which was covered over with paper, and which I at first took to be a jar of preserves or pickles. His lordship lifted off the paper, and showed me that the jar was nearly filled with bright new sovereigns. He poured a quantity out upon the bed. At that very instant Satan whispered in my ear, that shining gold became an irresistible temptation, and that bed upon which it was thus poured out became the bed of death on which the old man's blood was likewise to be poured out!"

Here Makepeace paused in the midst of his narrative of frightful interest, and which Mr. Slater was duly committing to paper. The murderer shaded his countenance with his hands for nearly a minute, and then slowly resumed his tale in the same deep, hollow voice as before.

"His lordship informed me that there were exactly eighteen hundred sovereigns in that jar, for that whenever he had drawn money from his banker for some weeks past, he had carefully selected the coins of recent mintage and had deposited them there. He added that he should on the morrow call at his banker's and procure a sufficiency to make up the two thousand. After some more conversation, his lordship dismissed me for the night, and I retired to my own chamber. When there alone, the temptation assailed me with increasing

force. Oh, I struggled hard against it, but Satan appeared to be standing by my side and to whisper a thousand arguments into my ear. It seemed as if the tempter said, 'The earl has communicated to no one else the existence of this hoarded treasure; it will not therefore be missed. You need not appropriate a single shilling from his purse, nor a single ring from amongst his jewels. Again, too, there are so many persons beneath this roof, that it will be impossible to fix the deed upon you if you only observe suitable caution. The earl is capricious; you may think yourself necessary to him, but in one of his strange humours he may at any moment send you adrift, and you had better make a provision for yourself now that the means are within your reach.' It was thus that the Evil One appeared to be tempting me, and I could not close my eyes against him. I will not extend this horrible narrative one moment longer than is absolutely necessary. Suffice it, then, to say that I yielded to the temptation. I had retired to my bed, but I rose and slipped on a few things. I was only dressed so far, Mr. Slater," added Makepeace, solemnly, "as I was just now when unconsciously reënacting the crime in imagination, and when you detected me."

There was another pause in the murderer's narrative, but briefer than the former one, and he then continued in the following manner:

"The mansion was all quiet; I crept stealthily downstairs, I sought the lower premises, and procured a carving-knife, which I sharpened on the steel."

The lawyer and the constable shuddered visibly. Makepeace perceived it, and he likewise shuddered, as his eyes looked dread and hollow upon them both for an instant.

"Ah! you may well be shocked," he continued, in a tone which was at first scarcely audible, "you may well recoil to the innermost confines of your being. Would to God," he exclaimed, with sudden and passionate vehemence, "the past could be recalled, — but it cannot! No, it cannot!" he added, his voice again sinking into the solemn lowness of despair. "But let me proceed," for he saw that Mr. Slater had desisted from writing, as there was no necessity to take down irrelevant or mere ejaculatory matter. "Armed with the dreadful weapon, I ascended the stairs, but I already felt as if I were a murderer, and my very shadow upon the walls

which I passed, while carrying a light in my hand, startled and terrified me. Twice I turned to convey the knife down-stairs again and abandon my purpose, but the Tempter was again at my elbow, his words were whispered in my ears, and his huge palm, spread out, seemed to display before my eyes the whole mass of bright, shining gold. I ascended. Noiselessly the door of the dressing-room swung upon its hinges, and I entered. The earl never slept with a night-light in his room; he used to say that it kept him awake. I was afraid to take my candle into the chamber, for fear lest the light, flashing upon his lordship's eyes, should startle and arouse him. I therefore left it in the dressing-room. Listening at the door of communication between that room and the chamber, I could tell by his measured breathing that he slept profoundly. I entered the chamber, and was compelled to let the door close behind me, for it was made thus to swing of itself on its hinges. There was only the faintest glimmer of the moonlight in the room. With naked feet I approached the bed; the surrounding draperies completely concealed the poor old nobleman's form, but I hastily felt with one hand to ascertain the exact position in which he lay. The other hand — the one which grasped the murderous weapon — just touched his throat; he moved, — but the next instant all was over!"

Again did the lawyer and constable shudder; again, too, did Makepeace shudder likewise, and again were his eyes turned upon his two horrified listeners with an awful hollowness of gaze.

"I have but very little more to say," he continued. "The jar of gold, for which I had thus committed the fearful crime, came into my possession, but not another article in that room did I take away with me. I stole down-stairs, and having well cleansed the knife with which the deed was committed, placed it on some dish which remained upon the supper-table in the servants' hall, taking care to bury the blade in the gravy, so that its recent frightful use for another purpose could not possibly be detected. I then stole out of the house, and interred my treasure in the garden. But at the bottom of the same hole I buried likewise my shirt, which was stained with blood. I regained my own room, confident that every precaution had been taken to prevent the authorship of the crime from being brought home to me. And

strange to say, I lay down and slept, and when I awoke in the morning I did not feel as if my dreams had been troubled, so that I was all the more hardened and all the better able to assume an air of perfect innocence. In accordance with my usual duty, I was the first to enter the chamber of the tragedy on that morning. I gave the alarm — But you know all the rest.”

Makepeace ceased speaking, and Mr. Slater said, in a solemn voice, “ You are of course aware that this confession which I have taken down will be produced before the magistrate in whose presence you will have to stand a few hours hence? ”

“ I know it,” answered Makepeace, in a low voice. “ I feel easier now, my mind appears to be relieved of a weight,” and then, after a pause, he added, “ I shall no longer dread to be left alone in the darkness of this cell.”

Mr. Slater and the constable accordingly withdrew; and in the office attached to the station-house they signed their names as attesting witnesses of the murderer’s confession.

An hour afterward the constable visited the cell, in order to see that everything was right, for it is customary to maintain a certain vigilance over prisoners charged with very heinous crimes. But as the officer threw the light of the bull’s-eye into the place, a loud ejaculation burst from his lips on perceiving the position in which the captive appeared to be lying. This was lengthways on the floor, but with his head raised about a foot and hanging completely back. A nearer inspection, instantaneously taken, revealed everything. There were two small holes close together in the plankwork that formed alike a seat and a bed for that cell. Through these holes Makepeace had fastened one end of his neckerchief, the other extremity was fixed with a running noose about his neck, and thus the murderer had succeeded in strangling himself.

It is impossible to suppose that he had contemplated self-destruction at the time when, remorse-stricken, he had made his confession; it must therefore be conjectured that when again left to the awful solitude of that cell, and entombed in its stupendous darkness, his reason had reeled, and he had thus ended his days as a desperate suicide.

CHAPTER XX

THE SELF - SACRIFICE DEMANDED

WE must now return to the Countess of Lascelles. She had retired to her own chamber shortly after Adolphus conducted the lawyer from the library to the room in which the old earl had met his death, and where his murderer was unmasked in the manner already described. It was understood that if Mr. Slater was successful in the aim which had induced him to take up his quarters in that chamber, he was to ring the bell continuously and violently, not merely as a summons for the household, but likewise as a signal that he had succeeded.

On retiring to her chamber, the Countess of Lascelles did not begin to disapparel herself. She had not the slightest inclination for slumber; her mind was agitated with a variety of conflicting feelings. Great was her suspense in respect to the issue of Mr. Slater's experiment, for it was absolutely necessary to combine all possible evidences in order to bring the foul deed completely home to the assassin. She endeavoured to compose herself as much as she was able, and to steady the beatings of her fluttering heart as well as the throbbings of her brain, but these were indeed no easy tasks; and instead of sitting down tranquilly to await the signal so earnestly hoped for, she paced the chamber with quick, uneven steps. Nevertheless, very different indeed was Ethel's present state of mind from what it had recently been when she had so confidently but loathingly regarded Adolphus as a murderer, and when day after day she was plunged into utter bewilderment or excited to the liveliest indignation on hearing herself denounced as a murderess. Yes, now that the horrible mystery had been so far cleared up, a tremendous weight was lifted from her mind; but still there

was much yet to be done, and even when all this should have been accomplished, might Ethel ever hope for the enjoyment of happiness again?

Every now and then she stopped short in her agitated walk, and listened. Surely she had heard the bell? Surely it was tingling in her ear? Surely its vibrating sounds reached her from the distance where it hung? No, it was mere fancy on her part; all was in reality still. It was only that half-singing, half-droning sound which the ear perceives when the blood mounts up into the excited brain. But hark! now indeed the bell rings! The sound is unmistakable; it peals with a violence that reverberates through the mansion. It is the signal of the lawyer's success, and Makepeace is unmasked!

Ethel's first impulse was to rush from the room and repair to the chamber where the scene announced by that signal was taking place. She felt an almost irresistible anxiety to assure herself that the detection of Makepeace was indeed complete, and that to no other or unforeseen circumstance was to be attributed the ringing of that bell. But all in a moment a fearful apprehension seized upon her, — the apprehension lest Makepeace should proclaim her past amour with Adolphus. Her guilty conscience in this respect gave to her alarm the strength and potency of an absolute certainty that what she dreaded could not fail to occur, and thus she no sooner found herself relieved from one source of deepest anxiety than she had to encounter another. She remained in her room, a prey to the most fearful suspense.

All of a sudden one of her maids rushed in half-dressed, exclaiming, "Oh, my lady, my lady, the assassin is discovered! — it is Makepeace!"

"I had foreseen it, I knew that it would be so," responded Ethel, much excited. "It was for this reason that Mr. Slater came to the house."

"Ah!" ejaculated the maid; and then she at once comprehended how it was that her mistress had not as yet retired to rest.

"I will go to the drawing-room," said the countess. "I must hear all particulars; I am full of suspense and anxiety —"

"Suspense and anxiety, my lady?" cried the maid, somewhat in astonishment. "Why, the murderer is dis-

covered! It turns out to be that infamous hypocrite Makepeace who went on so at the time about his poor dear lord — ”

“ I will go to the drawing-room, I tell you,” interrupted Ethel, still more impatiently, “ and do you request his lordship the earl — or Mr. Slater — his lordship will perhaps be better — to come to me there as soon as possible. Go quick, girl, quick! ”

Ethel was very much excited, as the reader may judge from her unguarded as well as broken sentences; and the maid, at first astonished, came to the very natural conclusion that the excitement of all these proceedings had produced a somewhat hysterical effect upon her mistress. She therefore hastened away to do her ladyship's bidding, and returning to the vicinage of the deceased earl's chamber, she reached the dressing-room door just as Makepeace was proclaiming the illicit loves of Ethel and Adolphus. The maid — who was a pure-minded, artless, inexperienced girl enough, and who had never previously suspected that which she now heard — was transfixed with a stupefying consternation. In a few moments, however, she heard the footsteps of Mr. Slater and the two domestics who had accompanied him, descending the upper flight after their successful search for the crock of gold, and the maid, not choosing to be deemed a listener there, hurried away.

But she had not acquitted herself of the mission she had received from Ethel, and when the next minute she thought of it, events were hurrying on with too much rapidity to furnish an immediate opportunity for the delivery of her ladyship's message either to Mr. Slater or the Earl of Lascelles. The officers of justice were coming to take the murderer into custody. Again was the tale of the illicit amour vociferously proclaimed, Makepeace was borne off, some of the domestics dispersed to their own chambers, others continued grouped together upon the landing outside the dressing-room door, to discuss the fearfully exciting incidents which had just occurred, and the lawyer, deeming it better to leave the young earl to himself after the overwhelming exposure, retired to a bedchamber, where, however, as the reader has seen, he was presently aroused to receive the confession of the murderer at the neighbouring station-house.

Adolphus had tarried behind in the fatal chamber where the late earl had met his death, and whence the assassin had just been borne off in the custody of the officers of justice. The unhappy young man threw himself upon his knees by the side of that couch, buried his face in his hands, and sobbed audibly. What was to become of Ethel? How would he himself ever be able to look the world in the face? His position was fearful: it was only just a single shade better than it recently was when subject to the extortionate demands of Makepeace on the one hand and to the accusations levelled against him by the countess on the other.

Meanwhile the young maid servant had retreated into a room on the same landing, in the hope of finding an opportunity to deliver Ethel's message to Adolphus, whom she had not as yet seen emerge from the fatal chamber. She kept the door ajar in the room to which she had thus retreated, and watched for his appearance. Several minutes elapsed, and at length she heard footsteps. She beheld the young earl come forth; a light that was burning in the passage threw its beams upon his countenance, and the damsel felt her blood run cold as she saw how ghastly pale and how convulsed it was. She scarcely dared issue from the room to deliver the message, and yet she felt that under existing circumstances it was one which she ought not to keep back; for after such a frightful exposure the countess and Adolphus might indeed have much to deliberate upon, and that speedily too. Accordingly, mustering all her courage, the lady's-maid came forth, and said to the earl, "My lord, her ladyship bade me inform you that she is in the drawing-room, and desires to see your lordship before you retire to your own chamber."

"Which drawing-room?" asked Adolphus, in a voice so deep and hollow that it made the girl recoil as if from the presence of an animated corpse.

"In the red drawing-room, my lord," she answered, regaining with a mighty effort a sufficiency of self-possession for the purpose.

She then fled away to her own chamber, and Adolphus proceeded to the red drawing-room, saying within himself, "Everything must be revealed to Ethel; it will be useless for me to conceal it. All the domestics would show her by their manner to-morrow that the terrible truth has been pro-

claimed. Good God! what will become of us both? What will become of us? ”

He entered the drawing-room, and as he appeared in the presence of Ethel, she was instantaneously struck by his worn, haggard, ghastly countenance, — a countenance which bespoke a thousand crushing evils, so that all her worst apprehensions were confirmed in an instant. He did not immediately speak, but fixed his eyes upon her; they had a hollow look, and, oh, what a world of care was in their gaze!

“ I understand you but too well, Adolphus,” said the unhappy countess, looking upon him with a gaze which in its expression was awfully akin to his own. “ No sooner have circumstances emptied our cup of misery, which was filled to the brim, than it is replenished to overflowing.” Then after some deep guttural sounds, as if the words stuck in her throat, she added, “ Makepeace has proclaimed everything, — is it not so? ”

“ It is,” he replied. “ The miscreant has resolved that in his death would he do that which should embitter our lives until the end.”

“ And the domestics,” said the countess, “ they now know everything? ”

“ Everything,” responded Adolphus. “ Just Heaven, it is frightful! ”

“ Frightful! ” echoed the miserable lady; and turning aside for a few moments, she covered her face with her hands, her fingers pressing tight against her throbbing brows; but no tears trickled between those fingers, — hers was now a despair too deep to find a relief in weeping. At length, as a thought suddenly struck her, she removed her hands from her face, and turning toward Adolphus, said, “ It is now for you to do that which will materially alter our position before the world, and if not lift the branding disgrace completely from us, at all events divest it of its deepest shade of blackness.”

“ Good Heavens! what mean you, Ethel? ” exclaimed the young earl, starting with sudden affright; for though he put this question, yet was he little at a loss to comprehend the significance of her words.

“ Adolphus, you do understand me,” she answered, at once fathoming all he thought and felt, “ and it is most un-

generous of you not to proclaim without an instant's delay that everything which you can do shall be done."

"Ethel, Ethel!" gasped the young earl, and he could say no more, but sinking on a seat, he gazed in consternation upon her.

"Is it possible, Adolphus, that you do not understand what I mean?" she asked. "Will you thus force me to explain in the most measured terms of language? Well, then, be it so. The world," continued Ethel, impressively, "believes that you are the son of the late Earl of Lascelles, and therefore that I am your stepmother. With such a belief our unfortunate love, when proclaimed, will be regarded as infamy itself; for what, Adolphus, could be more horrible than an amour of so incestuous a dye? Society will drive me with execration from its midst, yourself with scorn and loathing. Is all this to be, when one word spoken from your lips will in a moment reduce our tremendous crime, as it now appears, to a comparatively venial feeling? And that word must be spoken by your lips, Adolphus; it is the sacrifice which you must make for both our sakes. Oh, even then there will yet remain degradation enough for me — but spare me, Adolphus, that branding shame, that crowning infamy!"

"Ethel," responded the young earl, in the same deep, hollow voice as before, "you know not what you ask. You bid me divest myself of my patrician rank, to pluck the coronet from my brow, to resign the broad domains which call me master, to sink into an obscurity which will be total, like a star that goes out, and, what is perhaps worse, to find myself plunged into comparative poverty."

"I have a rich jointure, Adolphus," answered the countess, with difficulty repressing a look of scorn and contempt at the objections which he proffered. "Take it all — I abandon it to you, every shilling; I myself care not for poverty. But as for your title, you must resign it."

"Never!" ejaculated the young earl, goaded almost to madness by the thought.

"And yet there was a time, Adolphus," rejoined Ethel, reproachfully, "when I believed that for my sake you would have abandoned rank, position, everything."

"Oh, but the madness of that love has passed, Ethel, — and not only with myself," cried the young earl, "but also

with you! I cannot do it. To resign a proud title, an immense domain — No, no, I cannot!”

“Coward!” ejaculated the indignant lady, “you cared not to sacrifice me to your passion, but you recoil from the consequences. Did I not exert all my energies to remain virtuous? And was it not your incessant importunity, your frenzied entreaty, yes, even your threat of suicide which dragged me down into the abyss? And now you refuse to proclaim the word which is to mitigate the dark aspect of our iniquity! Why, insensate that you are, you would in reality be a greater gainer than I, for how will the matter stand if you act as you ought to do? You are not the son of the late Earl of Lascelles; not one drop of his blood flows in your veins, and therefore no more discredit will attach to you for having intrigued with the Countess of Lascelles than ever does attach itself to a man who indulges in an affair of gallantry. You will not be spurned by the world, you may still lift your head high. But how different will it be with me! For though relieved from the darkest stain of the stigma, yet enough of its hue will rest upon me to stamp me as a fallen woman. Now, then, sir, what is your decision?”

There was so much determination in the words, looks, and manner of the Countess of Lascelles that Adolphus was smitten with a renewed consternation, and his dismayed looks were riveted upon the countess. At length, as a sudden idea struck him, he sprang up from his seat, exclaiming, “Let us defy the world, Ethel. Let us set its opinion at nought. Let us dwell together, let us give back to each other all that love which we formerly cherished.”

“Never!” she ejaculated, and her eyes flashed sudden fire. “Never, Adolphus, never! The past has been fraught with guilt enough for us both — or at least for me: the future shall be stainless — it is impossible I could sin again.”

“But marriage, Ethel — ”

“Marriage?” she shrieked forth. “What, while the world believes that you were indeed the son of my late husband? Oh,” she added, with the blighting, withering laugh of utter scorn, “to what wretched expedients is your fevered imagination reducing you?”

“Ethel, you may say and do what you like,” exclaimed the young earl, “but you cannot force me — ”

"Cannot force you?" she interrupted him. "And what if I myself proclaim the truth? What if I declare —"

"Who will believe you, Ethel?" interrupted Adolphus. "What would my answer be? That it was a tale devised by an unhappy woman, goaded almost to frenzy by her position, — a tale devised for the purpose of palliating her fault before the world."

"And you would do all this, Adolphus?" said the countess, gazing upon him with an expression so strange, so wild, so sinister, that when he thought of it afterward, he could not possibly fathom what its precise meaning might have been.

He did not immediately give any answer. Though in one sense he felt his position to be a tolerably strong one so far as the revelation of the secret of his birth might be concerned, yet, on the other hand, he was far from being at his ease in respect to a woman who in the present as well as in recent circumstances had displayed a mental energy, a resoluteness, a determination of which she had seemed incapable in those times when she was the soft, the tender, the yielding, fond partner of his guilty love. He therefore saw that everything must be done to conciliate or appease the countess, if possible, short of the absolute concession of that which she had demanded; and his ideas remained fixed upon the project of defying the world and its opinions, of making her his mistress again, or even of marrying her if she thought fit, — anything, in a word, so long as he might place a seal upon her lips with regard to the one tremendous secret that might give him much trouble and annoyance, even if it did not ultimately tear him down altogether from the pedestal of rank and fortune.

While these reflections were passing through the mind of Adolphus, Ethel had turned aside and was again meditating profoundly. Her countenance was of the most ashy pallor, her features were rigid; a sinister light burned steadily in those eyes that had once beamed only with love and tenderness. The bosom which had been wont to palpitate with the softest and most voluptuous sensations was now upheaved and perfectly still. She was motionless as a statue, but all that was passing within rendered her very indifferent indeed from the sculptured marble's inanimation. Adolphus regarded her with a furtive and uneasy look, and when she at

length turned again toward him, he gave a sudden start in evident apprehension that this terrible conflict of words and feelings was to be renewed.

"We have said enough for the present," observed the countess, in a voice of such cold monotony that it afforded not the slightest indication to whatsoever might be passing in her mind. "Let us separate for a few hours, — to rest, if we can, — but at all events let us separate. We shall find an opportunity of speaking to each other again; it must be soon. We will make up our minds how to act, and perhaps — perhaps," she added, her accents now becoming tremulous, and her features relaxing from their rigidity, "perhaps, Adolphus, we must make mutual concessions, so that we may have a due regard for all that has taken place between us, and for all that we may now best do in the interest of us both."

"Ethel, dear Ethel," exclaimed the young earl, scarcely believing his own senses, "you are becoming yourself again. Heaven be thanked that you now speak thus rationally."

"Let us separate, Adolphus," she said, in a still milder tone than that in which she had just spoken, "and it may be that when the storm of excitement is completely passed, and our senses are rescued from the consternation and bewilderment in which they have been lately plunged, we may yet show each other that we are not utterly selfish."

In the exuberance of the hopeful feelings thus suddenly conjured up in the soul of Adolphus, he seized the hand of the countess and pressed it to his lips. She snatched it away, but not with any particular violence, and the next instant hurried from the room.

It was about an hour afterward that the messenger came from the station-house to fetch Mr. Slater to receive the confession of Makepeace; and as neither Adolphus nor Ethel knew that he was thus summoned, — for in their respective chambers they heard not the ringing of the gate bell, — the lawyer bade the domestic who had risen to answer that summons forbear from disturbing his master and the countess, as they must have need of rest. On his return to the mansion, the solicitor sought his couch again; but when he arose at about eight in the morning, it was to receive the intelligence that the murderer had committed suicide in his cell. Then

was it announced by a valet to Adolphus, and by one of her maids to Ethel, that during the past night Makepeace had delivered a full confession of his crime, and that a few hours later he had perished by his own hand.

CHAPTER XXI

BLOOMFIELD

It was eleven in the forenoon. Mr. Slater had taken his departure, and Ethel, who had not descended to the breakfast-table, sent an intimation to Adolphus that she would join him in a few minutes in the library. The young earl proceeded thither to await her coming, and as he paced to and fro with a certain degree of suspense, the following reflections passed through his mind:

“ Now is the crisis of this new phase in my fortunes! Will she yield, or is the warfare to be renewed? Anguish renders the soul capricious, and the mood may have changed again. If so, I must meet her valorously and resolutely. But no, she will be reasonable; she saw last night that I was determined, and she altered visibly at the close of our interview. Why should she not agree with me to defy the world? Wealth procures pleasures that will enable us to live in enjoyment away from that society which banishes us. To love her again — No, that is impossible! The freshness, the enthusiasm, the glow of that love of mine are gone for ever. I feel, I feel that I am an altered man. But to toy with her as a mistress, or to endure her as a wife — Yes, yes, this is possible, this is easy indeed, and it may even be happiness, since it will put an end to strife, it will relieve me from apprehension, it will rescue me from a vortex of perplexities and cares.

The door opened, and the Countess of Lascelles made her appearance. The first glance which Adolphus threw upon her filled him with hopefulness, for though she was still very pale, and looked as if she had passed an utterly sleepless night, yet her features had lost that rigidity which expressed so stern a resoluteness of purpose; and if there were not

actually a conciliatory smile upon her lips, there was at all events a softness of mien that contrasted strikingly with her aspect at their last interview.

"Ethel!" exclaimed the young earl, hastening toward her, "your look renders me happier than I have been for some time past. I see that you intend to be reasonable; we are to deliberate calmly and in a friendly sense. We are not to meet for altercation as enemies, battling as it were for separate and divided interests, but we are to take counsel together for what may be best suited for us both."

"Such is the spirit, Adolphus, in which I meet you this morning," answered Ethel, and she did now really smile sweetly though faintly; it was with a melancholy sweetness, and at the same time she proffered him her hand.

"Dearest Ethel, I love you still," he exclaimed, seizing that hand and conveying it to his lips. "Forgive me if last night I uttered things which were harsh, if I spoke of our love as something which had gone by, never to be recalled."

"And I also, Adolphus," responded the countess, suffering him to retain her hand without the slightest effort to withdraw it, — "I also must crave your forgiveness for the apparent implacability with which I urged a point that my better reason subsequently showed to be impossible of realization. There have been faults on both sides; let us cast a veil over them."

Nothing could exceed the joy with which Adolphus listened to these words. He all of a sudden felt himself to be completely safe; his triumph was ensured with far less trouble than he had anticipated. In the enthusiasm of his feelings, — which the reader must not however mistake for a reviving love toward Ethel, — he snatched her in his arms and strained her to his breast. For a few moments she thus abandoned herself to him, and though she received the kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks, she gave them not back again with her own lips.

"Now, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus, as she gently disengaged herself from his arms, "let us sit down and converse quietly and amicably, lovingly too, — for may I not flatter myself that you have been reflecting upon the proposal I made to you last night?"

"Yes," she responded, and she sat down by his side. "Again must I assure you, my dear Adolphus," she con-

tinued, — and this was the first time that she had used that caressing term of endearment for some weeks past, — “again must I assure you that when last night I rejected your proposals with so much emphatic sternness, I was not the mistress of myself. The intelligence of that frightful exposure had smitten me so cruel a blow, had come upon me with such suddenness — ”

“Speak no more of it, dear Ethel,” interrupted the young earl. “Have we not agreed to throw a veil over the past, to forgive each other, to be lovers again — Ay, and did I not suggest,” added Adolphus, softly, “that we might be husband and wife if you chose?”

“I have made up my mind,” answered Ethel, “to consent to anything that you think fit — on one condition.”

“Name, name it!” exclaimed Adolphus, hastily, for he was smitten with the apprehension that it would be something that he might not be able to grant, and reopen the arena for discussion and altercation.

“It is a very simple thing, my Adolphus,” responded the countess, with increasing softness of tone and winning tenderness of look. “It is merely that you will bear me hence, this very day, at once, — hence, from a place which has so many horrible and saddening associations, hence from the great metropolis where dwell all those whom I may never look in the face again.”

“Is that all?” cried the young earl, infinitely relieved. “Why, dearest Ethel, it is the very thing which I myself should have proposed, for I am sick of scenes whereunto are attached such sad and awful memories.”

“Then it shall be as I say, dear Adolphus,” murmured the countess, again voluntarily abandoning to him her hand, “and I thank you — oh, I thank you for this ready acquiescence with my request. But when shall we depart?”

“This very day, as you have said,” replied Adolphus. “Whither would you choose to go? To Bloomfield? — or on the Continent?”

The countess appeared to reflect for a few moments, and then she said, “Let it be to Bloomfield. Delightful is the scenery in that district; the mansion itself is secluded, there are beautiful walks through avenues and lanes embowered with verdure at this season of the year, the air is

fresh and revivifying, and we may there hope to regain a healthier tone for our mind and spirits."

"In all this I agree with you, Ethel," responded the young earl. "We will depart to-day—or," he added, as a sudden thought struck him, "to-morrow at all events."

"And why not to-day?" inquired Ethel, hastily.

"Because it is possible," responded Adolphus, "that my presence may be required at the coroner's inquest upon the murderer and suicide Makepeace. But I will repair at once and ascertain. Meanwhile you can be making all your preparations for departure."

They then issued from the library, the countess repairing to her own chamber, and Adolphus proceeding to the station-house to learn such particulars as he needed relative to the inquest. He was informed that from a communication just received from the coroner his presence would not be required; the confession of the deceased fully cleared up the mystery of the murder, apart from all other evidence, and in respect to the deed of self-destruction, there was little to be said on the subject, for all was clear and apparent. Adolphus accordingly returned to the mansion, and at two o'clock in the afternoon he took his departure thence, in company with Ethel.

The Bloomfield estate, which had long been in the Lascelles family, was about thirty miles from London, and, as Ethel had already briefly described, it was composed of some of the most beautiful scenery to be found in the county where it was situated. Adolphus had brought with him only one valet, Ethel only one maid, for there were sufficient domestics for all purposes invariably kept at Bloomfield. The arrival of the young earl and of the widowed countess—who was of course believed to be his mother-in-law—was heralded by a messenger sent off on horseback an hour before they started from the metropolis; and notwithstanding the notice was so short, everything was ready for their suitable reception. The same messenger communicated to the household at Bloomfield the intelligence of Makepeace's detection and suicide, and he whispered likewise the exposure which had been made of the amour of Adolphus and Ethel. The servants who listened to these tidings were naturally stricken with astonishment, but it was not their interest to exhibit any other feeling than one of welcome to their master and the

countess, when they alighted from the carriage which drew up in front of that beautiful country-seat.

During the journey from London Ethel had not spoken one word relative to marriage; she had given Adolphus to understand that she would submit to his will in all things, — with the exception however, that she craved some little respite ere she again abandoned herself to him as his mistress. She represented that her husband had only died so recently and had perished so horribly, that so many frightful things had occurred, that her feelings had been so harrowed, that her health had suffered so greatly, and that she stood so much in need of repose and rest, that she felt convinced he would exact from her nothing more than the demeanour of friendship for the present. He, on his side, was only too glad to conciliate her in any way, and to allow her to follow her own inclinations, not to yield an assent; he nevertheless feigned to grant it with reluctance, and to be impatient for the time when all the guilty past should be resuscitated so far as their illicit amour was concerned.

They arrived at Bloomfield, and took possession of the separate suite of chambers prepared for them; but they had their meals together, they passed the day together indoors, or in rambling through the grounds, and thus a week went by. During this interval they received a letter from Isabella, whom the intelligence had in the meantime reached that the guilt of Makepeace was discovered and that the wretched man had himself committed suicide. Miss Vincent wrote the fullest details in respect to all that had occurred to herself, thus accounting for her sudden disappearance from the Gardiners' farm. She did not omit to mention that she had accidentally encountered Christian Ashton at Verner House, nor how he had delivered her from prisonage in the secret chamber. She intimated that it was her purpose to accept the kind invitation of Sir Edgar Beverley and Miss Hall to remain at Verner House until their marriage, which was shortly to take place; and the whole tenor of her letter was kind and affectionate, for she felt that in some strange and unaccountable way she had done her aunt Ethel and her cousin Adolphus an immense injustice by believing that the crime of the old earl's murder rested between them. As for Adolphus and Ethel themselves, they had too much to think of on their own account to pay any particular atten-

tion to the fact of Isabella having fallen in with Christian, and brief was the comment which Adolphus made upon the subject.

"Now that we have agreed," he said, "to bid defiance to the world and set its opinion at nought, and now too, dearest Ethel, that you are improving in health and spirits, and the time must be near at hand when you will throw yourself into my arms again, it were all the better that Isabella should find a home elsewhere. Let her marry young Ashton; we will make them a handsome allowance, and at the same time that we thus rid ourselves of Isabella, we shall be performing all our duty toward her."

Ethel assented, and the subject at once dropped.

After breakfast one morning, when Adolphus and the countess had been about a week at Bloomfield, she said to the young earl, with smiling countenance and caressing look, "You are indeed most kind to devote so much of your time to me — I may say all your time."

"You see, Ethel," he answered, "that I study my best to ensure your happiness. But when will you be altogether mine again?" for he was anxious to rivet as soon as possible the bonds which held them together, though at the same time careful to avoid the appearance of tyrannizing over her actions or in any way forcing her inclinations.

"Soon, dearest Adolphus," she responded, inclining her head upon his shoulder, "soon, — for you are becoming dear to me again — yes, very dear."

"Is it indeed so, Ethel?" he exclaimed, with a gush of feeling that might very well have been taken for the real joy of love itself, whereas it was only the satisfaction of hope at the idea that she would soon be so completely his slave again as to be beyond the reach of any latent inclination that might still exist to proclaim the whole truth to the world according to her proposition a week back at the mansion in the suburbs of London.

"Yes, dearest Adolphus," she responded, still suffering her head to recline upon his shoulder, "I love you — and, when you will," she murmuringly added, "I will be yours again — yours wholly."

Adolphus encircled the lady's slender waist with his arm, drew her face toward him, and imprinted kisses upon it. Whether it were indeed the country air, together with the

unusual amount of walking exercise which she had lately taken, or through an altered state of the mind, or from all these causes united, we cannot say, but certain it is that her appearance was considerably improved during the week that she had already passed at Bloomfield. Still the traces of recent care were perceptible upon her cheeks; her form too was more slender than it was wont to be in the voluptuous symmetry of its proportions. Nevertheless there was still the soft lustre in her large clear blue eyes, still the pearly whiteness of the teeth shining between the parting roses of the lips, still the bright glory of the rich auburn hair. And as Adolphus thus drew her toward him, he felt something like a feeling of tenderness returning, until slowly into his mind came back the recollection of the bitterness of all those altercations which had taken place between them, and in the presence of these recollections the softer feelings gradually disappeared, as twilight recedes when the shades of night come on.

But not by his countenance did he exhibit the change that was thus taking place in his mind. There was a smile upon his features, while bitterness was arising in his heart; for, as the reader comprehends, it was his interest, and therefore his purpose, to play a deep game, to assume everything that was conciliatory to simulate affection, and to veil every thought that might shock or give offence. And Ethel herself had now one arm thrown over his shoulder, and as he was seated, and she was standing by him, or, rather, half-reclining in his arms, she looked down into his countenance. There was a smile upon her features likewise; her eyes appeared fraught with a reviving tenderness, and Adolphus said within himself, "Yes, truly she loves me well again."

"We will go forth to walk," said the countess. "The weather is beautiful, the air is delicious, and there is that wild part of the estate, you know, my dear Adolphus, which we have not yet visited since we were down here, but which is so picturesque."

"You mean the Maiden's Bridge?" said the young earl.

"Yes," exclaimed Ethel; and instantaneously disengaging herself from his arms, she hurried toward the door, adding, "I will put on my bonnet and scarf in a moment, and be with you."

In a few minutes they were walking forth together, the

young widow leaning upon the arm of the young nobleman. There was a heightened colour upon her cheeks, a deeper roseate tinge than for some time past had displayed itself there, and her eyes too appeared to shine with a happier lustre.

The weather was indeed beautiful; the sunbeams irradiated the entire landscape, but there was a breeze which prevented their extreme sultriness from being felt. The way of the rambles led first through the spacious park, then across the fields, in the direction of a wooded dell in the distance.

“Is there not some strange legend attached to the spot which we are about to visit?” inquired the countess, as she walked by the side of Adolphus, leaning on his arm.

“To be sure!” he exclaimed; “did you never hear it? It is that legend which gives its name to the bridge.”

“No, I never heard it,” responded the countess, and suddenly stooping down, she plucked a wild-flower which grew by the side of the pathway. “What is that legend?” she inquired, tearing to pieces the floweret she had just culled.

There was something slightly wayward or peculiar in her manner, as it struck Adolphus for a moment, but attributing it to the return of a certain buoyancy of spirits with the change of scene and the fresh air of Bloomfield, he ceased to think of it.

“And so you never heard the legend of the Maiden’s Bridge?” he said. “And yet methinks this is not your first visit to Bloomfield?”

“No,” she responded, “I was here once before. It was with the late earl,” she added, softly, “and then for so short a time that though I paid a hurried visit to all these scenes of interest, yet I had not leisure to inquire particularly about them. Besides,” she exclaimed, in a gayer tone, “to listen to legends of this sort one must have a companion who can tell them pleasantly or pathetically, as the case may be.”

Adolphus was charmed at this rapidly altering manner of the countess, for never since her husband’s death had she seemed so gay as on the present occasion; and he therefore felt convinced that within a very brief space of time she would abandon herself completely to him again. Besides, with this return of good spirits, there was all the less chance

that she would relapse into the dark, sombre mood that would prompt her to demand the sacrifice of himself.

"After so pretty a compliment to my powers as a legend-teller," he said, smiling, — "a compliment which, though implied rather than pointedly uttered, I am vain enough to take unto myself, — I cannot delay the tale you are so anxious to hear. You have visited the dell before? If it were in Scotland, or in any wilder district than this, it would be called a ravine. Deep and rapid is the stream that runs at the bottom, and for several feet upward above the turbid bosom of the water the sides are perfectly escarped. Do you remember all this, Ethel?"

"Yes, I think so," she answered, "but my recollection of the place is by no means strong, though it is barely eighteen months since I visited it."

"You will presently find my description accurate," continued Adolphus. "But is it not singular that over the most dangerous of places there should be the most dangerous of bridges?"

"The bridge is so little used, doubtless," suggested Ethel, "that it has not been thought worth while to form a larger and a safer one."

"And yet with all the improvements," said Adolphus, "that have been made upon the estate by the late earl and his father before him, is it not astonishing that they should have left that vile old crazy wooden bridge? I vow, Ethel, that to-morrow I will give orders for a new one."

"And perhaps spoil the wild picturesque beauty of the scene," added the countess, "or at all events destroy the interest of the Maiden's Legend."

"But conceive, Ethel, a bridge not more than a yard wide, and with only a rail on one side, so that if some unfortunate creature in a tipsy state, or suddenly seized with giddiness, should be passing over, down he must go, full fifty feet, into the stream beneath, and nothing could save him! For, as I have told you, the sides are all escarped."

"It is indeed dangerous," observed Ethel, "and perhaps you would do well — But, come, it will be time enough to think of a new bridge to-morrow. For the present let me have the legend."

"A legend, by rights," resumed Adolphus, again smiling, "ought to go back for at least two or three hundred years,

whereas this belongs to a period of no more ancient date than about the close of the last century. Indeed, the very cottages that are associated with the tale — for it is a perfectly true one — may be seen in the valley on the other side of the hill bordering the ravine. Those two cottages were inhabited by peasant families, as I suppose they are now. An elderly couple lived in one and an elderly couple in the other. To one couple belonged a son, who of course was exceedingly handsome, or else he would not be fitted for the hero of a romance, much less for a gay deceiver, as he was; while the other couple possessed a daughter, who was as lovely as every heroine ought to be. And it followed — likewise as a natural occurrence in a tale — ”

“ But you tell me,” said Ethel, laughing, “ that it is a true one, and yet you are treating it as a romance? ”

“ It is indeed all true, though I may seem to treat it with a certain gaiety which is rather derived from the infection of your buoyant spirits, my sweet Ethel, than from the nature of the legend itself, which has a termination anything but comic. However, as I was about to observe, the handsome young peasant and the beautiful young damsel fell in love with each other. They were wont to ramble forth on a summer evening, and I know not why, but certain it is that they used to take their station upon the bridge, where they mingled their sweet voices while the stream was gurgling beneath. Matters went on for some months, until at last the young peasant swain — who must have been sadly fickle — was smitten with the beauty of a damsel in the village yonder, the daughter of a small tradesman who had just taken a shop there. He gradually neglected his first love, and devoted his attentions to his new one. Perhaps he thought it preferable to espouse a tradesman’s daughter than a girl in his own sphere, or perhaps he was really more enamoured of his new love than of his old. The neglected fair one reproached him not, but she pined and faded visibly. She avoided him, for her pride would not suffer her to throw herself in the way of one who no longer loved her. At length, in the course of a few months, everything was settled for the bridal of the peasant and the tradesman’s daughter; the village was all excitement and curiosity, for these rural weddings are a source of general glee in the little communities where they take place.

“ And now, Ethel, you must suppose that the eve before the bridal morn had arrived, and the happy swain was returning at an earlier hour than usual from a visit to his intended, so that he might have leisure to complete his preparations for the morrow. It was about nine o'clock on a charming moonlit evening that he was thus passing through the valley on his way back to the cottage where he dwelt with his parents, when a female figure came gliding toward him. It was the deceived and betrayed girl. She at once assured the young man that she came not to reproach him, but to crave a last boon. He was remorse-stricken and afflicted, and he swore to grant it. She said that as their vows had been pledged in the sight of Heaven, and as they had never released each other from those vows, it was only meet and proper that they should do so now, as solemnly as they had plighted them. The poor girl added that the phantasy had seized upon her for this ceremony to take place in its mournfulness where their troth had been pledged in its happiness; and the swain, believing that her intellect was affected, and full of remorseful compassion, assented to whatever she might propose.

“ They proceeded together toward the bridge,— walking in silence side by side, and without touching each other's hands. A young shepherd of their acquaintance, who was close by at the time, — though he himself was unseen, being concealed behind a clump of trees, — heard and beheld all that passed. Inspired by curiosity, he followed them, still unperceived, — which could scarcely have been a difficult task, for they were doubtless absorbed entirely in their own thoughts. They reached the bridge, they entered upon it, and the shepherd posted himself behind a tree, where, in the clear moonlight, he purposed to watch all that took place. They reached the middle of the bridge. At that moment a cloud obscured the moon. The shepherd heard the young maiden's voice saying plaintively, ‘ Forgive me, my well beloved!’ then there was an awful cry, quickly followed by a loud splash in the waters beneath, and all was over. The two bodies were found on the following day about three miles distant, the arms of the girl still tightly clasped around the neck of her faithless but adored swain, yes, as tightly clasped as they must have been when she threw herself with him from the bridge.”

"And that is the Maid's Legend?" said Ethel. "It is truly an affecting tale, but romantic enough to be improbable.

"Think you, then," inquired Adolphus, "that whatsoever is wildly romantic must be mistrusted?"

"It is of course to be received with more caution," responded the countess, "than that which is natural and of every-day occurrence."

"Were it an every-day occurrence," answered the young earl, smiling, "there would be no interest in the tale. But here is the bridge."

For the last few minutes they had been threading their way along a path which ran through a grove, and a slight winding in that path suddenly brought them within sight of the bridge, which was about a dozen yards distant. The gurgling waters in the depth of the ravine now plainly met their ears, and Adolphus said, "The spot is wildly picturesque. I do not know, after all, but that it were a sin to build a new bridge here."

"Oh, I am sure," exclaimed Ethel, "you, my dear Adolphus, will never do it," and thus speaking, she stopped short at the commencement of the bridge, from which point the eye could sweep along the depth of the dell.

"At all events," said the young earl, "I will order another hand-rail to be laid across, for this is positively dangerous."

"Dangerous — no!" ejaculated the countess, with a laugh. "But these cottages of which you were speaking, and where the two families dwelt —"

"They are in the valley behind the eminence on the opposite side of the ravine. That is the tree which, as the legend tells, concealed the shepherd who was a witness of the catastrophe."

"I should like to see the cottages," observed Ethel, "the clump of trees likewise behind which the shepherd was hidden, and the spot where the young maiden met her faithless lover on the memorable night which marked their doom."

"Have you really the courage, Ethel," inquired Adolphus, "to cross the bridge?"

"Oh, the courage!" she ejaculated, laughing gaily. "Is it so grand an achievement, after all? Look, you shall see," and she tripped upon the bridge.

The young earl at once followed her. It was with a light step, and her hand scarcely touching the rail, that she thus advanced till she gained the middle of the bridge. There she stopped short, and looking over the rail, contemplated the foaming water which was flashing brightly in the sunbeams.

"Perhaps it was here, Adolphus," she at length said, turning toward her companion, "here, upon this very spot, that the catastrophe took place?"

"Yes, the legend says," he answered, "that it was in the middle of the bridge, according to the tale which the shepherd subsequently told."

"And here, then, they fell over," said Ethel, "the girl's arms tightly clasped around the neck of him who was the ruin of her happiness?"

"Yes, here," rejoined the young earl, turning around at the same time, as the countess had done, to contemplate the water from the side which was unprotected by the hand-rail.

"Forgive me, Adolphus!" suddenly exclaimed Ethel.

At the same instant her arms were thrown about his neck; tightly were they clasped, a wild and fearful cry thrilled forth from his lips, one desperate struggle to disengage himself, but all in vain. Over they fell, down, down they went. The entire ravine, the grove, and all the adjacent district echoed with the terrific cries of the young lord, but not another sound than the words, "Forgive me, Adolphus!" which she had uttered, came from the lips of Ethel. There was a terrific splash, and away their bodies were borne, the arms of the countess still tight around his neck, her hands clasped, as if those arms and hands of hers constituted an iron vice.

CHAPTER XXII

THE GRAVESTONE

THE reader will not have forgotten that beautiful little village in Westmoreland where Barney the Burker obtained the situation of assistant grave-digger to old Jonathan Carnabie. To this village we must now return.

It was an early hour in the morning, and a female, clad in gipsy-like apparel, stood in the middle of the churchyard, contemplating that gravestone which bore the simple inscription of "October, 1830." There was nothing wild in her look now, nothing wandering nor restless; it was fixed and replete with sadness. For several minutes did she thus stand gazing upon that headstone, as if the singular conciseness of the inscription thus riveted her attention, or else as if there were something in the date which more or less associated itself with certain memories floating in her brain.

The reader of course recognizes Crazy Jane, and it is therefore useless to observe any mystery upon the point. The woman had intervals which, if not positively lucid, were at all events characterized by a certain clearness of perception in comparison with other periods, as, for instance, when she gave the information which led to so startling a turn in the trial of Lettice Rodney. The present occasion was one of the happier moods of her intellect, as she stood gazing upon the tombstone; and if an observer had been nigh, he might probably have perceived that beneath that fixity of look and mournful calmness of countenance there was a certain inward agitation or excitement, arising from the powerful efforts and the straining attempts which the poor woman was making to disentangle her thoughts completely and marshal all her mental associations for the purpose of clear and intelligible review.

"He spoke of a poor mad lady," she presently said, in a murmuring tone to herself, "and who was likely to have been driven mad if not my poor dear mistress? That date — but, ah! my ideas grow confused again — No, no, I cannot rightly understand that which it appears as if I seek and want to comprehend."

She turned away slowly and mournfully; and just at that instant old Jonathan Carnabie and his new assistant were advancing toward the gate of the churchyard.

"Ah," she ejaculated, "there are the men whom I seek! They were together the other night when they said something which struck me so strangely."

"Here is this poor crazy creature again," said old Jonathan. "I wonder why she is hanging about the village? We must find out where she belongs, and have her passed to her parish; it will never do for her to become chargeable to our local rates."

"You are the man, Mr. Carnabie," said the Burker, "to get rid of her. Go and try your eloquence. There! blow me if I haven't forgot the mattock, and I'll just run and fetch it."

"Do," responded the old sexton, and he advanced toward Crazy Jane, who, being at a distance of about fifty yards, had not overheard a single syllable that passed between the sexton and his assistant.

Meanwhile the Burker, turning rapidly away, had sped back to the cottage.

"My poor woman," said Jonathan, accosting Crazy Jane, "you seem to be a houseless wanderer."

"A wanderer? — yes," she ejaculated, "because it is my destiny. My mind will not let me rest. Houseless, did you say? No, not when I choose to ask for an asylum, for who would refuse it to a poor creature such as I am? Besides," she added, after a pause, "I can pay for what I have when payment is required."

Thus speaking, she dived her lank hand down into a pocket, and drew forth a quantity of coin. Silver and half-pence were all jumbled together, and it struck the old sexton that he caught the glitter of two or three pieces of a still more precious metal. But the next instant Crazy Jane had transferred the money back to her pocket, exclaiming, with a sort of triumph, "So you see that I am not altogether a mendicant, though you perhaps took me for one?"

“ I am well pleased, my poor woman,” answered Jonathan, “ to find that you are thus independent of casual charity. But why are you not with your friends? — for to possess money argues to a certain extent the possession of friends — ”

“ Yes, — yes, I have friends,” ejaculated Crazy Jane, — “ friends who sought to do everything for me; but no, my wandering spirit would not suffer me to stay where they placed me. Do you know, old man,” she added, advancing close up to him, and speaking in a low voice, as well as with a certain mysterious significancy of look, “ do you know that if ever I remain long in one place, something whispers in my ear that I must go forth on my travels again, for that there is something which I seek, and that something I must find.”

“ And what is this something which you seek? ” asked the old sexton, in a gentle voice, for he pitied the poor woman.

She had fallen into a deep reverie; she did not hear the question, or if she did, she chose not to answer it, and for upwards of a minute did silence thus prevail. At length suddenly raising her eyes, she fixed her looks upon the gravestone with the strangely brief inscription, and abruptly asked, “ Who lies there? ”

“ A poor lady,” responded old Carnabie, “ who died in this village under very distressing circumstances.”

“ Yes, yes — I remember; you said so the other night,” ejaculated Crazy Jane. “ I heard you telling that man who was with you — But, oh, my memory is so bad!” and then she pressed her hand, as if with a sensation of pain, against her forehead.

“ You told me on that night,” continued Jonathan Carnabie, “ that you wanted to ask me some questions. If you like to put them now, I will give you any information that lies in my power.”

“ That lady,” said Crazy Jane, keeping her eyes still riveted upon the gravestone, “ was she not mad? Did I not hear you say that it was a deep, silent, brooding madness? Yes, yes, those were the words!” cried the poor creature, with a sudden exultation at having recollected them.

“ And what I said was the truth,” answered Jonathan Carnabie. “ It was a sad tale, and if I thought you could understand it, or follow my words while I tell it — ”

“ I shall understand it,” interrupted Jane. “ Yes, my

mind is clearer now, my ideas are collected, I shall be able to listen to you. Proceed, before the cloud again comes over me."

"You see that stone bears the date of October, 1830," began the sexton, "but it was in the beginning of the same year — therefore a matter of eight months before that date — that as I was coming early one morning to open the church to ring the bells for a marriage which was to take place, I saw a female lying across one of the graves with her face downwards. I hastened toward her, and lifted her up. I thought she was dead; she was as pale as a corpse, and as cold as one too. But how beautiful!"

"Ah, beautiful indeed!" murmured Crazy Jane. "But go on, go on. Had she dark hair — long, flowing dark hair?"

"In truth she had not at that time," replied the old sexton, "for her head had been closely shaved."

"Oh, to cut off that beautiful, beautiful hair!" exclaimed the mad woman, clasping her hands and shaking herself as if in rage from head to foot.

"Did you know her, then?" asked old Jonathan, eagerly. "Is it possible that you knew her, or do you only suspect who she was?"

"No matter," interrupted Crazy Jane, impatiently. "Proceed, I tell you."

"Well," continued the sexton, glancing at his singular companion's countenance in order to assure himself, so far as he could judge, that she was in a suitable frame of mind to hear what he had to say, and therefore to render it worth while for him to proceed, "I went and picked up the lady, as I have just told you, — for a lady she was by every appearance, though her dress was much travel-soiled, — and I found that she was in a deep swoon. I bore her off to the parsonage, which you see close by. The rector and his family were all absent at the time, on a visit to some friends in Lancashire; there was no one but a female servant in the house, but she did her best to recover the poor lady from her insensibility. When she opened her eyes —"

"And those eyes," ejaculated Crazy Jane, eagerly, "were large and dark, bright, but sweetly expressive? Oh, methinks I see them now!" and the poor creature suddenly burst forth into an agony of convulsive sobs.

"Truly this woman must have known that lady well,"

thought Jonathan Carnabie to himself; and suffering a minute or two to elapse until Crazy Jane's paroxysm of grief was moderated, he said, slowly and quietly, "Yes, to the best of my recollection the lady had large dark eyes; but as for their lustre, it was gone, and as for their sweetness of expression, it was lost in the dull vacancy of her gaze."

"Poor dear lady!" murmured Crazy Jane. "Oh, what must she have suffered! what must she have suffered! And my sufferings, they have been as nothing in comparison. Do you mean, old man, do you mean that she was mad?"

"I do," answered Jonathan. Then, after a pause, he went on to say: "I was telling you that I conveyed her into the parsonage, where the servant-girl attended upon her; and though she came back to life, it could scarcely be called to consciousness, for the poor creature's mind seemed totally gone. She took no more notice of anything than a child of six months old. Stop, I forgot! Yes, when the maid undressed her, there was a small velvet bag, sewn all round, — a little bag, not near so large as the palm of your hand, — and it was fastened to a black ribbon around her neck. This, as the maid told me, — for of course I was not present when the lady was undressed, — she clutched with a sudden vehemence, crying out, 'No, no, you shall not take it from me!' The girl never meant to take the bag away, and therefore she at once told the poor lady not to be frightened on that score. This was the only thing she seemed to take any notice of, and when she found that the bag was safe, she relapsed into her dull, dead, apathetic condition, having no further regard for anything. A surgeon was sent for, and he said that the poor lady was utterly bereft of her senses, that her mind was a perfect void, that her reason was totally gone. Of course we all thought that as her head was shaved, she had escaped from some lunatic asylum, and that it would not therefore be very difficult to find out where she had come from. Nevertheless, she had evidently been walking far, for her shoes were worn right through, her stockings also, and the soles of her feet were cut and bleeding."

Here Crazy Jane gave a deep convulsive moan, and staggering against the gravestone with the concise inscription, she leaned over it weeping bitterly. Several minutes thus elapsed, until she suddenly raised her countenance again, and then it wore a look so altered, so wild, that the old sexton

felt convinced the poor creature was now no longer in a frame of mind to listen to his story. And she herself speedily made him aware that he was perfectly right.

"No more now!" she ejaculated, "not another word for the present! What you have said is impressed here!" and she pointed vehemently three or four times to her forehead, "but my brain could bear no more," and there was a maniac wildness in her eyes. "Oh, I have already heard too much, too much! Another time, old man, I will come back and hear what more you have to say. Ah! you took me for a beggar and a mendicant," she ejaculated, suddenly stopping short as she was just on the very point of coming away. Then, diving her hand down into her pocket, she brought forth three or four shillings, and flinging them toward him, cried, "Go drink to the health of Crazy Jane!"

With these words she hurried away, and turning the angle of the church, was lost to the view of the old sexton, who stood gazing after her until she thus disappeared.

"She is a strange creature," he muttered to himself, as he stooped down and picked up the coins. "I hope she will keep her word and come back, for she evidently knows something about the poor lady. Or perhaps after all it may only be a portion of her madness? Yet it would be strange, though, that she should know the colour of her hair and eyes, for now that I bethink me, when the poor lady's hair did grow again, it was black. I wonder whether — But we shall see all in good time, no doubt. Crazy Jane is pretty sure to return. But where is that precious assistant of mine all this while?"

We will explain the real cause of the Burker's somewhat abrupt disappearance and prolonged absence, under the pretext of fetching a mattock from old Carnabie's cottage, though he knew perfectly well that the implement had been left along with others, on the previous evening, inside the church porch. The fact is, Mr. Barnes did not like the appearance of the mad woman. On the night that she had so suddenly presented herself to him and the sexton, he was smitten with a certain suspicion, and therefore he had taken very good care not to speak a single word, for fear his voice should be recognized. When she had fled so precipitately, he buoyed himself up with the hope that she would not return again into that neighbourhood, but that her steps, as wayward

and unsettled as her own brain, would carry her elsewhere. Now therefore that she reappeared in the same place, he was again seized with alarm, and yielding to that terror, had suddenly absented himself under the pretext which we have described. From the window of old Carnabie's cottage he watched the woman and the sexton as they stood in discourse together in the churchyard, and as he perceived by her manner and her gesticulations that she was much excited, he feared lest the conversation regarded himself; but when she so precipitately hurried off again, and the sexton stood in a musing manner for a few minutes, the Burker's courage revived.

"If it was me they was talking of," he said to himself, "they would have gone off at once to raise the whole willage and hunt me down like a mad dog."

The Burker thereupon issued forth from the cottage, and hastened to rejoin old Carnabie; but we will interrupt the progress of our narrative for a few moments, to depict the precise nature of the Burker's apprehensions.

He had of course read the newspaper accounts of Lettice Rodney's trial at Liverpool; and beyond what we ourselves have recorded on that subject in our narrative, the journals had given several minute particulars in respect to the female who, without being brought forward in court, had nevertheless, through the medium of another species of deposition, given so important a turn to the proceedings. The caterers for the public press had described her as a poor wandering maniac who had for some years been known in the neighbourhood of Liverpool; they had delineated her personal appearance, and had added that she was usually known by the denomination of Crazy Jane. All these particulars had Barney the Burker read at the time, for they were transferred from the provincial to the London papers; and thus when the woman so suddenly appeared before old Carnabie and himself in Woodbridge churchyard, he had been smitten with the apprehension that she was the person whose testimony, presented in writing to the court, had led to the acquittal of Lettice Rodney, the incarceration of Mrs. Webber, and the subsequent arrest of himself. Still the Burker was not completely sure that this woman who now haunted the neighbourhood of Woodbridge was in reality Crazy Jane, though he had certainly little doubt on the subject.

He rejoined the old sexton, as we have already said, and a furtive look, hastily flung upon Carnabie's countenance, convinced the miscreant that nothing disagreeable or threatening had transpired in reference to himself.

"Well, where is the mattock?" asked Jonathan, somewhat surlily, "and what made you such a long time in looking for it?"

"It was just because I could not find it that I stayed so long," answered the Burker, "and now I recollect, it's along with t'other things in the porch yonder. But you've had that poor mad creetur' a chattering away with you at a gallows' rate."

"I can't rightly make her out," responded the sexton. "She is as demented as one can be in some respects, and yet she seems as if she had a sort of lucidity on one subject."

"And what's that?" inquired the Burker, as if with an air of indifference.

"Why, about the poor lady that is buried here," replied Jonathan, pointing to the grave headed by the stone with the concise inscription. "It appears as if she knew that lady, and so I was telling her the sad, romantic story — which, by the bye, I promised to narrate to you one of these days —"

"Well, but she bolted away again like mad," interjected the Burker.

"Like mad, as she assuredly is," rejoined the sexton. "I was only half-through the story, she got much excited, said she would come back another day, and hurried off precipitately."

"I thought you meant to persuade her to get out of the parish altogether," observed Barnes, "as you wouldn't have no wagrants and waggabone mendicants here?"

"A vagrant she may be, poor creature!" said Jonathan, in a compassionating tone, "and a vagabond too for that matter, for the terms merely mean a wanderer without a settled home, but a mendicant she is not. She has plenty of money —"

"Plenty of money, eh?" said the Burker. "Where the deuce could she get it from?"

"That she did not tell me," answered Jonathan, "but she threw me a — a — sixpence, telling me to drink her

health; and so you and I will have a drop of beer presently, when we have finished our morning's work."

"It must have been a sixpence in halfpence, though," thought the Burker to himself, "for I saw you stoop several times, old feller, to pick the coins up; and I'll be bound it was a handful of silver, or else how should you know she had plenty of money?" But Barnes only thus mused inwardly, and did not give audible expression to his thoughts, for he was particularly careful not to excite in any way the suspicions of the sexton.

"Yes," continued Jonathan, perfectly unconscious of what was passing in the mind of his assistant, "she has got a pocket well filled with coin, and now I bethink me, she said I was to drink the health of Crazy Jane."

"What a rum name to call herself by!" observed Barney; but as he averted his countenance for an instant, its expression was ghastly, for the mention of that name had dissipated whatsoever little doubt there was in his mind, and had confirmed all his worst fears. "And so she's coming back again, is she?" he inquired.

"She says so, and I have no doubt she will," responded the sexton. "She has got something into her head about the poor lady that lies buried there; and I know enough of these crazy people to be aware that when once they do get hold of a particular crotchet, they always stick to it. She is as certain to come back as that you and I are here."

"Poor creature!" said the Burker, affecting a tone of sympathy, although at the same instant he resolved upon the destruction of either the sexton or crazy Jane — and perhaps of both.

"Though you are such a strange-looking fellow," said old Carnabie, "you have got a good heart, that is quite clear. One must not always go by the looks."

"I should rayther think not," ejaculated the Burker, as he walked on by the sexton's side.

The two men proceeded to the accomplishment of the work they had in hand, but all the while the Burker was employed in digging a grave for some recently deceased villager, he was deliberating with himself upon the mode of executing the hideous purpose he now entertained. The toil continued till midday, at which hour Jonathan returned to his cottage, while the Burker proceeded to the public-

house to fetch as much beer as might be purchased with the sixpence which Jonathan gave him, and which he represented as the extent of Crazy Jane's gratuity. After dinner the old sexton had some business to transact in the village, and the Burker's time was now at his own disposal. He repaired to the churchyard, so that in case Jonathan should return earlier than he had intimated he might at once be found; and lighting his pipe, he threw himself on the grass in the shade of a high tombstone, for the day was exceedingly sultry, and the sunbeams poured down with all their unclouded torrid strength. Flinging off his hat, the Burker covered his head with an old cotton handkerchief, and thus made himself as comfortable as possible, while enjoying his pipe and giving way to his reflections.

It will be necessary to observe that since the Burker had been in Jonathan Carnabie's service he had occupied a little outhouse, or we might rather say a shed, attached to the sexton's cottage, and in which a truckle-bedstead had been placed for his accommodation. Mr. Barnes was soon in a condition to judge by Jonathan's habits that he was economical and saving, and he more than suspected that the old man had a little hoard in his cottage. Already had the idea flitted across his brain that he if could acquire a positive certainty on the point, he would help himself to the treasure, — for treasure it would prove to him, no matter how small the amount, — and he might then betake himself to another district, or else get out of the country altogether. Now therefore that the Burker's alarm was excited in respect to the appearance of Crazy Jane in the neighbourhood of the village of Woodbridge, he was resolved to achieve that crime of which he had hitherto but vaguely and dimly thought. But if he could also possess himself of Crazy Jane's money, it would be an addition to the store he anticipated to derive from the other quarter, and the Burker was not a man to stick at a couple of crimes, — no, nor a dozen either, if he could only thereby improve his present depressed condition.

While thus reflecting, and utterly unsuspecting of the possibility of being overheard, Barney began to give audible expression to his thoughts.

“ Yes,” he said, while leisurely smoking his pipe, “ Woodbridge is getting a precious sight too hot to hold such a popu-

"STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CHURCHYARD"
Photograph from original by Bob

“STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CHURCHYARD”
Photogravure from original by Bird



lar gen'leman as myself, and I must take my precious carcass off to another part of the world. That old scoundrel Carnabie is warm, I know he is, and I'll ferret out his hoard before I am a night older. If so be he wakes up, well, then, there's the mattock or the spade or the crowbar as will deuced soon cook his goose for him. And then that accursed she-devil Crazy Jane, which sp'iled all the hash at Liverpool, I shall like to give her a topper on the head, and by jingo, I'll do it, too!"

Having come to this most comforting conclusion, the Burker refilled his pipe, and a person who had been standing behind a tombstone glided noiselessly away over the long grass. That person was Crazy Jane. After a few hours' interval since her discourse with Carnabie, she had returned to the churchyard in a lucid state of mind again, and in the hope of finding him, that he might finish his narrative relative, to the unknown lady who slept beneath the turf for which he had evinced so much care, unrecompensed and unrewarded, throughout so many years. But while wandering amidst the tombstones in the hope of finding Carnabie, crazy Jane had caught a glimpse of the Burker's form, and at once recognizing him as the man whom she had seen with Jonathan, she thought of inquiring where the sexton himself was. She had approached noiselessly and unperceived, though she had not at first studied this degree of caution. Just as she was about to address him, he began to speak, and his voice struck her with an effect as if a heavy blow had been dealt her. She knew it at once; it was that of the man whom she had heard conversing with Mrs. Webber at the back gate of Pollard's house at Liverpool, on the night when the murder of that unfortunate gentleman was accomplished. Crazy Jane glided behind the tombstone, and listened in dumb horror to the words of unmistakable menace that issued from the villain's lips. When he had ceased speaking she glided away, as already stated, and this time she did study to pursue her path as noiselessly as possible.

CHAPTER XXIII

WOODBIDGE

It was eight o'clock in the evening when a post-chaise drove into the little village of Woodbridge, and stopped at the inn. A single traveller alighted, and this was Mr. Redcliffe.

In answer to the inquiries of the landlord, he stated that he might remain a day or two in that place, and he nodded an assent to the proposal that refreshments should be at once served up. These, however, he scarcely touched, and presently strolled forth to woo the gentle breeze of the evening, and perhaps to seek some solitude where for awhile he might be alone with his own thoughts. He had certain inquiries to make in this neighbourhood, but he postponed them until the morrow, for his reflections during the day's travelling had, as was indeed often the case with the unhappy gentleman, excited his feelings to the extremest degree of tension.

His steps took him toward the churchyard. It was now a little past nine o'clock, the evening was beautifully clear, and slowly did Mr. Redcliffe pursue his way through the cemetery, contemplating the gravestones. Presently his eyes settled upon that particular one which has been so often mentioned, and which bore the inscription of "October, 1830." Jonathan Carnabie's care had recently blackened the indented letters forming this inscription, so that it was plainly visible on the gleaming white surface of the stone. Mr. Redcliffe was naturally struck by the singular brevity of this graven memorial of the buried dead, and the date too appeared to give a thrilling keenness to the memories that were floating in his mind.

"Singular epitaph!" he said, in an audible tone.

“Wherefore the absence of any name to indicate to the passer-by who reposes beneath? Was it that the dead who lies here was, when living, so stained with crime that surviving relatives, though bestowing the right of solemn obsequies, yet dared not perpetuate a name that guilt had rendered infamous? And yet it can scarcely be so, for if it were, the remains of this unnamed one would scarcely have found sepulture in consecrated ground.”

At that instant Mr. Redcliffe became aware of a human form approaching along the walk intersecting the churchyard; he saw that it was the form of a woman, and a second glance made him start and ejaculate, “Ah, one of the objects of my search!”

“Mr. Redcliffe,” said Crazy Jane, — for she indeed it was, — and she presented herself with no greeting of courtesy, nor with any apology for her abrupt and secret withdrawal from the asylum which he had provided for her after the trial of Lettice Rodney, — “Mr. Redcliffe, there lies the one concerning whom you have twice or thrice spoken to me.”

Crazy Jane pointed with her lank arm to the grave, and Redcliffe, hastily turning aside, concealed from the woman’s view the unutterable emotions which had suddenly found silent but eloquent expression in his countenance.

“Then she is dead!” he at length lowly murmured to himself, but the woman heard not what he said. “How know you,” he inquired, after another pause of nearly a minute, — “how know you that she lies here?”

“You yourself shall know it from the same source whence I learned it,” answered Jane. “Oh, Mr. Redcliffe, I am not mad at this moment. No, no, never, never for long years have I understood myself so well as at this instant. No, not even when telling all I knew to the magistrates and yourself in respect to the horrible murder at Liverpool. I heard things this morning,” she continued, slowly and gravely, and in a perfectly collected manner, “which have made me reflect in a way that I have not reflected before for a long, long time. A change has taken place within me. I feel it here,” she said, placing her hand upon her brow, “and I feel it here, too,” she added, placing her hand upon her heart.

“I am rejoiced to hear you thus speak, Jane,” replied Redcliffe; but though he spoke of joy, there was neverthe-

less a deep sadness in his tone, — a sadness infused from the fountains of his heart.

“ Yes, sir,” proceeded the woman, “ I felt that I had a mission to accomplish, crazed though I were, — a mission to discover the fate of my beloved mistress; and at the very time when methought my footsteps were most wayward, Heaven itself was guiding them toward the spot where the mystery was to be solved.”

“ But, oh, how is this mystery solved? ” asked Redcliffe, in a voice where pathos and anguish and suspense were so commingled that they seemed to give to his accents a new tone, and at the same time the mournful workings of his countenance expressed such kindred feelings that they appeared to give it a new aspect.

Jane started as if something had suddenly galvanized her, as if some long-slumbering memory of the past was now all in an instant awakened, and with a species of dismayed suspense, strangely blended with a wondering joy that dared not have faith in the source of its own existence, her eyes were fixed keenly and searchingly upon him.

“ Good heavens! ” she ejaculated, “ is it possible? Oh, what wild ideas are these, — ideas of the long lost, yea, even of the dead — ”

“ Hush, Jane, hush! ” said Mr. Redcliffe; “ for Heaven’s sake, hush! I see that you know me.”

“ Yes, as if by an inspiration,” exclaimed the woman, her eyes brightening vividly with the very feeling which she had just expressed. “ But tell me, oh, tell me,” she instantaneously ejaculated, as another reminiscence flashed forcibly to her mind, “ you did not — no, you did not — ”

“ Hush, Jane! I know what you mean,” interrupted Redcliffe. “ No, that heaven above which smiles upon us in its starlit beauty can attest — ”

“ Enough, enough! ” murmured Jane, “ I believe you, oh, I believe you!” and sinking down at his feet, she embraced his knees, sobbing with a variety of conflicting feelings, but amidst which a still wondering joy was the principal.

“ Rise, my poor woman,” said Mr. Redcliffe, so profoundly affected that the tears were streaming down his cheeks, “ rise, I say, faithful, oh, too faithful Jane! — so faithful to the memory of your beloved mistress that your reason has reeled and tottered, and been well-nigh wrecked utterly.

Rise, it is not to me that you must kneel — But we should both kneel, and here, too," he added, pointing toward the nameless grave.

"I have been kneeling there this evening," answered Jane. "I have watered that turf with my tears, for I know whose remains lie beneath. And I invoked the sainted spirit of my beloved mistress, — for a saint in heaven I know she must be, — I invoked her sainted spirit, I say, to intercede at the throne of Eternal Grace that my reason might be given back to me, and a soft voice seemed to whisper in my ear that the prayer was heard and that the boon I craved was granted. Then I arose from over the turf of that grave, and I was departing, when I beheld the form of some one stop here to contemplate the stone. I beheld you stand awhile on this spot; I marvelled who he could be that thus shared with me the deep, deep interest I feel in this grave. I approached, I recognized you."

"And now will you tell me, Jane," asked Mr. Redcliffe, who had listened with profoundest emotions to her statement, "will you tell me whence you learned sufficient to convince you —"

"Mr. Redcliffe, — for by that name will I still call you," interrupted Jane, a sudden reminiscence striking her, — "there is this night a human life to be saved, and he who shall be thus saved will tell you all. My knowledge of everything is but yet partial; the tale to which I listened remains unfinished."

"And this life that is to be saved?" said Mr. Redcliffe, apprehending for a moment that the poor creature's intellect was wandering again; and he gazed upon her anxiously to see if his alarming surmise was well founded.

"No, no," she exclaimed, penetrating what was passing in his mind, "my reason errs not again. It is as I assure you. In that cottage dwells the sexton, who can tell you the tale of this perished one's hapless fate; and his life is in danger, for the miscreant who did the deed at Liverpool is in the neighbourhood — he is there!"

"What!" ejaculated Redcliffe, "Barnes, the murderer of Pollard, the man who escaped from gaol —"

"He is there!" responded Jane, pointing toward the cottage, "and he contemplates another crime. I was determined to frustrate it. That very instant when I encoun-

tered you was I about to repair to the village and invoke the aid of persons there to capture the murderer. I had been thinking for hours how I should best prevent the new crime and hand over the perpetrator of the old one to justice, for I feared, alas! I feared that whatsoever I might say would be taken only as the ravings of a poor crazed creature."

"We will at once adopt measures," ejaculated Redcliffe. "Come with me. Henceforth you must not be a wanderer. Come — But first of all one instant's devotion here."

Thus speaking, he threw himself upon his knees by the side of the grave of the unnamed one; he bent over the turf, he covered his face with his hands, and Jane, who stood at a short distance, could hear the convulsive sobs that came from his troubled breast. When he slowly arose from his suppliant posture, his countenance, as the moonlight fell upon it, was ghastly pale, but yet it was not convulsed; it now wore the expression of a deep, serene, resigned mournfulness.

He and Jane, issuing from the churchyard, proceeded together in the direction of the village, and while walking thither, Mr. Redcliffe asked, "Wherefore did you leave that asylum which I provided for you, and where the people, though in humble circumstances, were so kind and good to you?"

"Have I not said, Mr. Redcliffe," responded his companion, "that I felt there was a mission to be fulfilled, and that by me it must be accomplished? I knew that if I asked permission to leave that home which you provided for me, it would be refused; I therefore stole away, taking with me the contents of the purse you so generously left me. And then, on becoming a wanderer again, I procured for myself the mean apparel which became a wanderer's condition —"

"Enough, enough, Jane!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "I was wrong to question you on the subject. I should have comprehended how your unwearying devotion to the memory of your beloved mistress would have thus rendered you a wanderer until you had ascertained her fate. And I too have been a wanderer," said Mr. Redcliffe, — "a wanderer for the same object, but latterly to seek for you likewise, since I learned your sudden flight from the cottage near Liverpool. It was not accident, it was Heaven itself that brought me to this secluded village, that I might meet with you, and

through you learn the solution of that sad and long-enduring mystery."

They now entered the village, and the landlord of the little inn was astonished when he beheld his new guest returning in the company of that strange and gipsy-like woman. But Mr. Redcliffe, at once making him an imperative sign to ask no questions, said, "Let your wife take charge of this female, and surround her with all possible attentions. Let suitable apparel be provided for her, treat her as you would treat a guest who flourished a well-filled purse before your eyes, but beware how you or any one belonging to you question her impertinently."

The landlord bowed, and at once summoned his wife, whom Jane accompanied with the docile obedience of complete lucidity, as well as of a heart full of gratitude toward the author of this renewed kindness on her behalf.

"Now," said Mr. Redcliffe, "a word with you, landlord," and he beckoned the man into the parlour which he was occupying at the inn. "Have you the courage to accompany me," he inquired, "on a venture that will put one hundred pounds in your pocket?"

The landlord, who was a stout, powerfully built man, of about forty years of age, opened his eyes wide with astonishment, and then said, "A hundred pounds, sir? I have courage to do anything for such a reward."

"Then come with me," answered Redcliffe. "Procure a stout cord, breathe not a syllable to your wife, and the money will be yours. I will explain myself fully as we proceed."

But the landlord stood hesitating; he did not exactly know whether to believe that it was all right and straightforward, or whether it were some lawless adventure into which his guest sought to drag him.

"A felon has escaped from the hands of justice," said Mr. Redcliffe, quickly. "The government has offered fifty pounds for his apprehension, the authorities of Liverpool a like sum, and all this reward shall be yours. Now will you accompany me?"

"Cheerfully, sir," answered the landlord, his hesitation vanishing in a moment, "and I beg your pardon —"

"Enough!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "Procure the cord, conceal it about your person, and follow me without

delay. I shall walk slowly through the village in the direction of the churchyard."

"But would it not be better, sir," inquired the landlord, "to take pistols with us?"

"I have them," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe; and unlocking a mahogany case, he produced a pair of small double-barrelled rifle pistols, which he at once secured about his person.

He then issued forth from the room, and leaving the inn, proceeded slowly along the street. In a few minutes he was joined by the landlord, who intimated that he had with him a cord which would effectually bind the miscreant's limbs when he should be captured. He carried in his hand a stout staff or bludgeon, but Mr. Redcliffe said to him, "We must take the man alive; it is not for us to anticipate the blow which justice has to deal."

"And if in self-defence?" said the landlord.

"That is different," replied Mr. Redcliffe.

"And pray who may this man be, sir?"

"You have heard of the dreadful murder at Liverpool several months back; you know probably that one of the assassins escaped —"

"What! the notorious Barney the Burker?" ejaculated the landlord.

"The very same," returned Redcliffe, "and doubtless you have seen him, too. Know you the assistant of your sexton here?"

"Well," exclaimed the landlord, stopping suddenly short, "if I didn't always say that the fellow had the most hang-dog countenance —"

"Come quick!" exclaimed Redcliffe, "or another murder may be committed ere our object be accomplished."

They walked on together, and on coming within view of the old sexton's cottage, they perceived a light glimmering through one of the ground floor windows. At that very instant the form of a man passed in front of that window, obscuring the light for a moment, and Redcliffe again said, "Come quick!"

The cottage stood in the midst of a little garden, separated by a low paling from the lane by which it was approached; the shed occupied by the Burker was in a yard at the back. The lane itself was bounded by a hedge, which ceased at the commencement of the paling; and there, within the shade

of that hedge, Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord paused to reconnoitre the premises. Some one was knocking at the door with his knuckles; they had no doubt it was the same person whom they had seen pass by the window, they suspected it might be the Burker, but they could not be sure, for there was a little portico formed with trelliswork and covered with jasmine, in the deep shade of which stood the person who was thus knocking at the cottage door.

The Burker however it was, and we will for the present follow him and his proceedings. His coat was buttoned around him, and beneath it he had a crowbar concealed. The fellow had thought to do his murderous work thus early in the night, — for it was little more than half-past ten, — in order that he might have many hours in which to place a considerable distance between himself and Woodbridge ere the foul deed should be discovered. As for Crazy Jane, if he found her not wandering in the neighbourhood after the accomplishment of the crime which he meditated, he would abandon his projects in respect to herself altogether, rather than waste valuable time and run additional risk by searching after her.

Barney the Burker knocked, as we have said, at Jonathan Carnabie's door. The old man was reading in his little parlour when the summons reached his ear, and taking up the light, he proceeded as far as the door, which he did not, however, open.

“Who is it?” he asked from within.

“It's me, sir,” replied the Burker, and his voice was heard by Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord, the latter of whom immediately recognizing it (for he had on one occasion spoken to the man) intimated the same in a low, hurried whisper to Mr. Redcliffe.

“Come,” said this gentleman, also in a whispering tone, “let us creep stealthily along the paling,” for he knew that if the fellow's suspicions were excited, he would at once turn and fly.

“And what do you want?” asked Jonathan Carnabie from within.

“There's a message just come down from the willage,” responded the Burker, “and the boy which brought it is awaiting here to speak to you hisself.”

“And how came you up at this hour?” inquired Jonathan,

still without opening the door; not that the old man had any reason to suspect a sinister motive on the part of his assistant, but his long habit of self-seclusion, and perhaps the little circumstance that he really did possess a small hoard of gold had rendered him particularly cautious.

"I didn't feel inclined to sleep," answered the Burker, "so I took a walk through the churchyard to make sure there was no body-snatchers; and as I was a-coming back, I met this here little boy."

"All right," answered Carnabie; and the door opening, the old man was discerned, carrying a candle in his hand.

The Burker at once pushed himself in; then there was a rush of footsteps immediately after him, the crowbar dropped from beneath the coat which the miscreant, thus suddenly startled, had unbuttoned in readiness, and in the twinkling of an eye a pistol was levelled at his head, while in his ear resounded the terrible words, "Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

It was Mr. Redcliffe who had seized upon him with one hand, while with the other he presented the weapon. The landlord — who was either confused by the suddenness of the proceeding, or else whose vaunted courage became paralyzed in a moment at the sight of the ferocious countenance of the Burker — fumbled to produce the cord from beneath his garments, but though close at his leader's heels, he did not render prompt succour in securing the villain. With one terrific howl of rage the Burker burst from Mr. Redcliffe's grasp, at the same time dashing from his hand the pistol, which instantaneously exploded, without, however, accomplishing any mischief. The dilatory or dastard landlord was dashed violently to the ground, as the Burker sped past with the fury and power of a mad bull.

"Stop, or I fire! I have another pistol!" ejaculated Redcliffe, who had not been hurled down, but merely thrust violently against the door-post.

The Burker made no response, nor did he obey the mandate, but on he rushed with a speed that was almost incredible. Mr. Redcliffe pursued him, calling the landlord to join in the chase. Without waiting to see whether he were obeyed, Mr. Redcliffe darted forward, at the same time drawing forth his remaining weapon, which he did not, however, immediately use. But finding that the assassin, goaded

by his desperate circumstances, was fleeing more quickly than he was enabled to follow, he discharged one of the bullets of the double-barrelled pistol, with the aim and intent of wounding the ruffian in the leg. The ball missed, and on sped Barney. The second bullet was sent flying after him; this likewise failed. But all of a sudden the river revealed itself in its quicksilver brightness to Mr. Redcliffe's view. He heard footsteps behind him; a glance thrown over his shoulder showed him that the landlord was following, and he exclaimed, "Quick, quick! he is in our power!"

But the next moment the Burker plunged into the river. His dark form was seen for a moment struggling amidst the eddies which his leap had thus created, and then it disappeared from the view. A very little lower down, a row of trees skirted each bank, overhanging the river so far as to shut out the clear starlight, and thus throw all that portion of the stream for a couple of hundred yards into the deepest, blackest gloom. Redcliffe and the landlord hurried along the bank, straining their eyes to peep through the dense foliage and catch a glimpse if possible of the waters beneath, but all in vain. Neither heard they any sound like that of a struggling or battling form in those waters, and amidst that depth of gloom they ran to and fro along the bank within and beyond the range of the trees, Redcliffe being ready at the first appearance of the Burker to spring in and grapple with him. But no further trace was discovered of the murderer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FOUR SIRENS

THE scene changes to the sumptuous establishment of Madame Angelique in London, and we must again introduce our readers to the apartment which communicated by means of the mirror-contrived door with the Frenchman's house adjoining.

In this room we shall find four beautiful girls, as on the first occasion when the reader was initiated in the mysteries of this temple of voluptuousness; but of these present four, two were new importations to the Frenchwoman's house of fashionable infamy. Armantine, the French girl, was still there; Linda, the German girl, was likewise still an inmate of the same place; the other two have yet to be described. All four were exquisitely dressed in evening toilet; their charms were displayed, we can scarcely say to the utmost advantage, for this implies a consistency with that modesty without which beauty loses half its fascination, but those lovely contours of bust were exposed in a manner that left but little more to be revealed. And as if too by that which was originally a study, but which had now become a habit, the attitudes of those four girls were full of a voluptuous abandonment, so that if they had been sitting to an artist who sought to depict four different personifications of luxurious sensuousness they could not possibly have chosen better positions, nor could better models have been selected.

Yet there was nothing of the absolute grossness of the ordinary houses of infamy, nor of the manner of their inmates, discernible in that room nor on the part of those four young women. The furniture was all sumptuous, luxurious too, even to the carrying out of Oriental ideas of

such luxury, but no immodest pictures were suspended to the walls; it might have been a room in any palatial mansion the respectability of which was above the breath of scandal. Besides, there was an elegance of taste and an air of refinement presiding over the entire appointments of the room, while the sideboard was covered with the choicest wines and the most delicate confectionery, as well as a variety of fruits; but there was no eager rushing on the part of the young females to this sideboard, and the tempting refreshments remained there comparatively unheeded, thus evidencing that the inmates of the room were accustomed to these and all other luxuries.

Then, as for the attitudes of the girls themselves, it is true that, as we have already said, they were replete with a voluptuous abandonment, and the charms of those lovely creatures were most meretriciously displayed. Still, even here there was a gloss of refinement over all, — an elegant polish which showed that they had all been ladies once, in the common acceptance of the term, whatever name they merited now. The good-breeding which from their infancy was theirs was discernible in their manners; there was nothing improper in their discourse, nor had their looks the bold hardihood of a gross and vulgar harlotry. For a scene of iniquity, it was certainly one of the most fascinating that could possibly be presented to the view, and certainly the best composed and the best appointed in all its details within the limits of the modern Babylon. But then Madame Angelique had ever taken great pride in what she was presumptuous enough to style the “respectability” of her establishment; and as she treated the young women like ladies, and enforced the same demeanour on the part of the female domestics toward them, they on their own part had a certain pride in maintaining a suitable decorum of conversation and manners amongst themselves.

We will now go a little more into detail. Linda, the German girl, was reclining upon an ottoman, negligently toying with her fair tresses, her naked arms and almost completely bared bosom exhibiting the stainless white of a lovely complexion. There was an unspeakable languor about her entire form, and her sensuous abandonment of attitude was displayed with all its most ravishingly dangerous characteristics. Armantine, the French girl, with her dark

glossy hair arranged in bands, and she herself perhaps the least meretriciously attired of the whole four, looking, too, more sweetly and pensively lovely, though lovelier as to actual charms she was not, for it were impossible to award the palm to any one in particular, — Armantine, we say, was placed in a settee near the German girl, with whom she principally conversed.

In a large, cushioned chair languishingly reclined the third of these sirens, — a full-grown beauty, though still quite youthful, and with all the freshness of youth blooming upon her rich, luxuriant charms. There was an air of sensuous indolence about this girl which was different from that of the German; it was the waking dreaminess of a luxurious temperament that appeared to be softly abandoning itself to voluptuous reveries. She was a native of England, and had only recently passed from the keeping of a nobleman — who first seduced her from a genteel and happy home — into Madame Angelique's fashionable temple of infamy. But no remorse had she on account of the home she had left, — or at least, if such a feeling were really in her bosom, she displayed it not, for blended with that air of sensuous lassitude — an air which might be described as luxurious wantonness at rest — was an expression of listless, placid contentment. She had light hair and blue eyes; milk and roses combined to form her complexion; she had full, moist, luscious lips, beautiful teeth, and a form which without being exuberant to fatness, was full, fleshy, but of perfectly symmetrical proportions. She answered to the Christian name of Marion.

Upon the back of the chair in which Marion thus negligently reclined — or, rather, in which she reposed — leaned a tall, slender girl, of sylphid shape, and with such exquisite elegance and grace in all her attitudes and movements that in the days of her virtue she must have been a veritable star in the midst of the brightest galaxy that ever thronged in a ballroom. She had brown hair, remarkably luxuriant in its mass of silken softness, and with a rich natural gloss upon it. Her features were perfectly faultless; her age did not exceed seventeen. She also was an English girl, and she bore the beautiful name of Eglantine. Alas, that one endowed with such loveliness of form and with such mental accomplishments as she possessed, bearing, too, a name so sweet to be murmured by the lips of pure, chaste, and honourable love,

alas, that she should have fallen from virtue's pinnacle and sunk into this degradation, gilded though it were!

Linda, Armantine, Marion, and Eglantine were together in their sumptuous apartment, between nine and ten o'clock in the evening, and they were conversing on various topics, just as four ladies might do in their own drawing-room. Presently the mirror-contrived door opened; the four sirens turned their eyes slowly to see who was about to enter, when an individual who was a stranger to them all made his appearance. He was flashily dressed, but had a vulgar look; and as he took off his hat, he made a most ridiculous attempt at a bow to the young women, so that Armantine and Eglantine could not help laughing, while Linda and Marion so far exerted themselves in their luxurious indolence as to sit up and survey him with more attention.

"Good evening, ladies," said this individual, closing the mirror-door behind him, and advancing with an impudent leering smirk toward those whom he thus addressed. "Don't be alarmed. Perhaps you know me by name, and perhaps you don't. So if the old lady"—thus irreverently, as the girls thought, alluding to Madame Angelique—"hasn't done me the honour of mentioning me to you before, I may as well announce myself as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt. Honest Ike, as my friends Sir Richard Mayne and Colonel Rowan call me."

"Why, I do believe," whispered Marion to her companions, "he alludes to the commissioners of police. When I lived with Lord Beltinge, I frequently heard those names mentioned."

"Well, yes, miss," said Mr. Shadbolt, whose ears were uncommonly keen, and who had caught a portion of that whisper, "the gentlemen are the commissioners of police, and I have the honour to serve under them. Not one of your common vulgar policemen, you know, but a sort of subaltern, — what an ensign or lieutenant is in a regiment in comparison with the colonel."

It was tolerably easy to perceive that Mr. Shadbolt had been drinking, not merely because his countenance was flushed, his speech was rather thick, and his gait a trifle unsteady, but likewise because the hitherto delicately perfumed atmosphere of the apartment had become impregnated, on this individual's entrance, with an odour of rum,

as if he had dropped into two or three wine-vaults in his way, previous to making the present call.

"And pray what do you want, sir?" inquired Marion, now abandoning her voluptuous indolence as much as it was in her sensuously languishing nature to throw it off, "what do you want?" she repeated; for having recently come from beneath aristocratic protection, she was the first to resent the vulgar intrusion.

"Did you ask me, miss, what I would take to drink?" said Mr. Shadbolt, with police-court ease and station-house familiarity. "I have got a detective eye for whatever's good; trust honest Ike Shadbolt for that!" and then he burst out into a loud guffaw at the witticism borrowed from his professional avocations, but the humour of which was lost to the young ladies, who were now all four full of indignation, surprise, and disgust.

Mr. Shadbolt however, nothing abashed, advanced toward the sideboard, and deliberately filled a tumbler with claret, for it was the habit of this exceedingly independent gentleman scornfully to eschew small glasses, and having slowly poured the somewhat copious libation down his throat, he gave a long sigh of pleasure. Then, having thus refreshed himself internally, he relieved his amatory feelings by nodding with a familiar leer at Marion, blowing a kiss from the tips of his fingers to Linda, smirking at Armantine, and extending his arms invitingly toward Eglantine. The young ladies, however, relished these pantomimic displays as little as might be, and they exchanged amongst themselves fresh looks of indignation and disgust. Mr. Shadbolt only laughed, and now with a huge slice of cake in one hand, and a quarter of a pineapple in the other, he leaned against the sideboard, feeding deliberately and still bestowing his glances of tender familiarity on the four hours.

"This is too disgusting!" said Marion. "Eglantine dear, you are nearest, ring the bell — hard! hard!"

"Do if you like," said Mr. Shadbolt, "but depend upon it the old dowager" — thus again irreverently alluding to Madame Angelique — "will give me a most welcome reception. Why, Lord love you all, you sweet creatures, how do you think I could be here in any possible way unless I was one of the privileged? And where is not honest Ike Shadbolt welcome, I should just like for to know?"

Miss Eglantine — thinking there must be more or less truth in the man's words, having the term "police" still ringing ominously in her ear, and afraid of angering one who made himself as completely at home as if he had a conscious right to do so — forbore from pulling the bell, and whispered to Marion, "Had we not better see what he really wants? Perhaps he will explain himself. Monsieur Bertin would scarcely have let him up unless he had full authority from madame."

"Come, sir," said Marion, authoritatively, "explain."

"An explanation of my conduct is quickly given, my dears," said Mr. Shadbolt, "and all the quicker, too, since I see that with regular female curiosity you are all four burning to know what brings your humble servant and ever faithful admirer to this here saloon. There are several reasons. In the first place, I knew very well I should have the pleasure, or at least stand the chance, of meeting some of the sweetest young creatures in all England. In the second place, I knew that the claret was superexcellent and the port stunning. In the third place, I had an eye to the cake and fruit. And in the fourth place, my dears, I have a little private business of a very particular character with the amiable old dowager."

The girls could scarcely repress a smile at the consummate impudence, the cool free-and-easy independence of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, and even the proud Marion suffered her moist red lips to part sufficiently to reveal the brilliancy of her teeth. Mr. Shadbolt continued to leer familiarly at the sirens, while he demolished the cake and the pineapple, and then he helped himself to another tumbler full of wine.

"And now," he said, "that I've refreshed myself a bit, I should take it as civil if either of you young ladies would just show me where I shall find the old dowager."

"We will ring for a servant," said Eglantine, now once more extending her snowy, beautifully modelled arm toward the bell-pull.

"Stop, my dear!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt. "It is not worth while to trouble the slaveys; it would only throw the old lady into a flutter if we were to use so much ceremony, because she knows who I am. Just take the trouble to show me the way yourself; and if we do happen to pass through a dark passage together, I won't snatch a kiss — oh, no, not I

indeed!" and then Mr. Shadbolt was lost for the next half-minute in a series of nods, winks, and amatory leers.

Eglantine consulted Marion with a glance, and the latter said, in a loud, haughty tone, "This scene must positively end, my dear. Ring the bell, and have done with it."

"Perhaps I had better not," whispered Eglantine. "It might only annoy and frighten madame, as this man has already intimidated." Then hastening toward Shadbolt, she said, "Come, follow me."

The detective officer, bowing after his own free-and-easy fashion to the other three young ladies, accompanied Miss Eglantine, who conducted him to Madame Angelique's boudoir, taking very good care, however, to keep sufficiently in advance so as to avoid any practical familiarity which Mr. Shadbolt might in his amatory playfulness think fit to exhibit. Madame Angelique was alone in her luxuriously furnished room; the detective officer was introduced thither, and Eglantine flitted back to the saloon, to communicate to her companions how startled and dismayed the mistress of the establishment looked when Mr. Shadbolt entered the boudoir.

And such indeed was the case. A cold tremor swept through the form of the Frenchwoman, whose conscience for some time past had been so uneasy, and who constantly experienced a sensation as if some fearful calamity would suddenly explode stormlike upon her head. The detective bowed with the air of one who had no necessity to await a welcome greeting, but who felt that he exercised an influence, or indeed an authority, which would ensure him a most civil reception, no matter what the real feeling of the mistress of the house might be.

"Sit down, Mr. Shadbolt, pray be seated," said Madame Angelique, as soon as she had sufficiently recovered from the first shock of terror to be enabled to give utterance to a word; but still her limbs were all trembling, and her voice was full of a nervous trepidation. "I thought — I thought — that is, you led me to believe — that — that it would be a long, long time —"

"Before you saw my beautiful visage again?" added Mr. Shadbolt, with his wonted flippancy. "Well, I believe, ma'am," he continued, as he leisurely smoothed down the ruffled nap of his hat with his coat-sleeve, "I did intimate something of the sort —"

"Yes, and you know," interjected Madame Angelique, eagerly, "I was to give you a hundred a year, and I am sure, Mr. Shadbolt — But perhaps you have got bad news? Perhaps something else has turned up?"

"Well, ma'am, I am sorry to say that such is the case," rejoined the officer. "There isn't a more delicate-minded man in all the world than honest Ike Shadbolt, or one who has more regard for a lady's feelings; I am as tender as a chicken in that respect — But there's persons higher in authority than even Ike Shadbolt."

"I understand," said Madame Angelique, with a shudder. "You mean the commissioners of police?"

"Well, ma'am, I did just allude to those gentlemen," answered the detective. "Now, the long and short of the matter is, they have received another intimation about your house —"

"Oh, Mr. Shadbolt," cried the Frenchwoman, wringing her hands in despair, "I offered to wall up the unfortunate door, or to give up my business in respect to the young ladies, and attend only to the millinery — or even — But you told me so positively that I need do nothing of the sort."

"And I only told you, ma'am," interrupted Shadbolt, "what I thought at the time. But circumstances may alter, and they have altered. Immediately after my former visit, I reported to the commissioners that you had faithfully promised to do all you have just been saying, and they appeared satisfied. I thought that it would all end pleasantly, that they would leave the matter in my hands, and that as long as I made no additional report, they would take it for granted I was keeping a lookout on you, and you were doing all that was necessary. But behold you! this afternoon I was summoned to Scotland Yard, — that's the office of the commissioners, you know, — and was desired to see how you were getting on, but without holding the slightest communication with you. Now, don't flurry yourself, ma'am — you'll see I'm acting a friendly part toward you; but the truth is, the commissioners have been in private communication with the parochial authorities, and — and — these authorities are going to — to — prosecute you. So I'm come to get evidence —"

A half-stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched Frenchwoman, and as she fell back in her chair as if she were

about to go off in a fit, Mr. Shadbolt very considerably filled a glass with wine and held it to her lips; but as she only shook her head impatiently, and waved him off, he drank it himself, coolly observing "that it was a pity it should be wasted."

"What, in the name of Heaven, am I to do?" cried Madame Angelique, wringing her hands. "Do advise me, Mr. Shadbolt. You will find I shall be grateful. What am I to do? Shall I send off the young ladies at once? Shall I shut up the house? I have already thought of all this, but —"

"Look here, ma'am," said the officer, "be calm and cool, we will discuss the matter quietly and comfortably, and I dare say you can get out of the business pleasantly enough in the long run."

"Ah!" said Madame Angelique, with a long sigh of relief, "I thought you would not leave me to be sent to prison — to be ruined —"

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Shadbolt. "Answer me a question or two. I suppose you are pretty warm, — I mean you have got plenty of money, — and if you was to cut this business you wouldn't quite have to go into the workhouse? Come, ma'am, tell the truth," added the officer, seeing that she hesitated how to reply. "Tell the truth, I say, if you want the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

"Well, then," responded the Frenchwoman, "I certainly could retire from business with a tolerable competency if I chose, and indeed I had some thoughts of doing so after your previous visit. Only —"

"Only what?" inquired Shadbolt.

"Only I fancied," added Madame Angelique, "that I was the object of such bitter persecution on the part of that lady at Bayswater whom you and I spoke about that she would pursue me wherever I went, and that it therefore little mattered where I might be or what I did, for that it would always come to the same thing, — I mean that I should ever have to stand on the defensive against her."

While Madame Angelique was thus speaking, Shadbolt passed his hand slowly across his forehead with the air of one who was reflecting in a sort of half-bewilderment, and who was striving to collect his ideas.

"What lady at Bayswater?" he at length said.

“ Did you not tell me the last time you were here,” inquired Madame Angelique, quickly, “ that the information was given to the commissioners by an Indian lady — ”

“ If I did, then I was drunk,” interrupted Shadbolt. “ Ah! by the bye, I do recollect now that you pressed me upon the point. You had got some crotchet in your head, and perhaps I thought it best at the time to leave you in the dark, — or more likely still, I was really in total ignorance myself — ”

“ Then it is not the Lady Indora who is persecuting me? ” exclaimed the Frenchwoman, eagerly.

“ I don't believe the lady you speak of has anything to do in the business,” interjected Shadbolt. “ The truth is, a lawyer in Bedford Row, Holborn, one Coleman by name, but who has a private house in this parish, is at the bottom of the whole affair; and from all I can learn, he has addressed the commissioners most seriously on the subject. Indeed, there's no use disguising the fact, he says he is employed for a wealthy client of his who also lives in the parish, but who chooses to keep in the background.”

“ Mr. Coleman, a solicitor? ” said Madame Angelique, musing reflectively. “ I never heard of him. But then it is true, gentlemen often come to my house under feigned names.”

“ And gather a great many particulars,” added Mr. Shadbolt, significantly. “ Now, you see, ma'am, I am dealing candidly with you. The truth is, the commissioners know that you are not very particular how you entice young girls away from their homes, or even have them carried off by force. They also know that a certain Lettice Rodney who was tried at Liverpool belonged to your establishment — ”

“ Good heavens! ” ejaculated Madame Angelique.

“ They know too,” continued Shadbolt, “ that at the time when she got into all her troubles she was going to Ireland on your business, — to wheedle back a certain Eveleen O'Brien — ”

“ Then Lettice must have betrayed everything! ” cried the Frenchwoman, bitterly.

“ I can't say who betrayed it,” proceeded Shadbolt; “ all I know is, that this is the information given to the commissioners by Mr. Coleman the lawyer. But there's more still to come. It is known you have agents in different parts of the country to look out for young girls and pick them up for your customers who may themselves reside in the country.

Now, what was that affair about a certain Isabella Vincent, who was carried off from a farmhouse somewhere in Kent, down to Ramsgate? ”

“ Heavens! what, is this known too? ” cried the Frenchwoman. “ Well, it was certainly done by agents of mine.”

“ Well, then, you see that it is known,” proceeded Shadbolt. “ And then there’s something else too. Ah! and now I know why you talk of a lady at Bayswater. Did you not have some young person — a Miss Ashton, I think — carried off from a villa down in that neighbourhood, and she was rescued by a young nobleman? ”

“ All this is true! ” exclaimed Madame Angelique; and then in a musing manner she added, “ But if the Lady Indora gave the information about Christina Ashton, how could she possibly know all the other circumstances? ”

“ You may be quite satisfied,” answered Shadbolt, “ that this Indian lady of whom you are talking has nothing to do with the business, so it is no use running your head any longer against that post. I tell you that it all comes from Coleman the lawyer, who is acting for a rich client behind the scenes. Well, you see, ma’am, these circumstances I have been mentioning — and others that are known to the commissioners — have made the matter serious enough. Your enemies are too powerful, and they will break up your establishment for you if you don’t break it up for yourself. You say you are pretty warm; why not retire at once? Go to France.”

Madame Angelique looked bewildered, and in the confusion of her thoughts she was led to confess that on account of certain incidents with regard to the decoying of young women from France, Belgium, and some of the German states, it would be very inconvenient, or even perilous, for her to set foot on the Continent at all.

“ Well, then, remain in England,” ejaculated Mr. Shadbolt. “ Now I will show you how the matter stands. There is to be a prosecution, if my report shows that there is evidence to support it. Of course the commissioners think that I come here only as a spy, and not to give you any private advice. They imagine that whatever I told them after my first visit here was only gleaned in the course of conversation, and not on account of any private understanding betwixt you and me. They believe they can rely upon me, and so

they have sent me here again on this present occasion. Now, I need not make my report for a day or two. I can pretend that I had other business, or that I could not obtain admission. To-morrow, therefore, you can dismiss the girls — ”

“ And give up the establishment,” added Madame Angelique, in a decided tone, for her mind was now relieved in more ways than one, and she was enabled to breathe more freely than she had done for some time past.

“ Why break up the millinery part of the establishment? ” inquired Shadbolt. “ I did not mean that.”

“ The millinery branch,” responded the Frenchwoman, “ is nothing in comparison with the other. Though I have plenty of custom, yet what with long credit, and some of the highest families never thinking of paying at all, what with the expenses, too — Besides, Mr. Shadbolt,” added the milliner, in a tone of confidence, “ half my lady customers would leave me the moment this house ceased to be one of accommodation. So it is decided, — I give up everything, and I retire on my means. As for the girls, I know where to place them at once — And,” added the Frenchwoman to herself, “ I can turn a last penny by each of them.”

“ Well then, retire,” exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt, “ and when you are out of business, I will show you how to make more money than ever you have done while in it.”

“ You? ” ejaculated Madame Angelique.

“ Yes, I, even I, honest Ike Shadbolt! But no matter now; you shall know all when the time comes. Go and settle down in some comfortable place, some pretty little villa on the outskirts, and make yourself as happy as the day is long. I shall come back here in the course of the week, and shall then report to the commissioners that the establishment is broken up, that the girls are all gone, and that the tailor next door has bricked up the means of communication between the two houses. So there will be an end of prosecutions and all other unpleasantness. And now, my dear madam, if you think all this advice of mine, and all the good I am going to do you, is worth anything — ”

“ Oh, to be sure,” ejaculated Madame Angelique, who, though she comprehended all the selfishness of Shadbolt’s disposition, was nevertheless but too glad to secure his good offices.

A liberal gratuity was therefore placed in his hand, and he

took his departure, — the Frenchwoman not thinking it necessary to allow him to retrace his way through the saloon, but ringing the bell for the liveried footman to show him out by the front door of her own house.

About ten minutes afterward the Duke of Marchmont was announced.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MILLINER AND THE DUKE

THE duke, whose countenance was pale and careworn, and who by his looks had evidently suffered much of late, endeavoured to put on the smile of gracious affability as he entered the luxurious apartment where Madame Angelique was seated. It occurred to him that she bowed somewhat more distantly than was her wont, or at least with an air of greater independence, if not actually commingled with coldness. He threw himself upon a seat, glanced at her for a moment, as if to assure himself whether there were really any studied change in her manner, and then he said, "Well, my able friend, assistant, and accomplice, have you thought of any fresh project?"

"I have just decided, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "upon a most serious and important one."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the duke, eagerly. "And it is this that gives you such an air of mingled gravity and confidence? It is one, therefore, that will rid you — or perhaps I may say us — for ever from all fear of vindictive persecution at the hands of Indora?"

"I no longer fear her persecutions, my lord," rejoined the Frenchwoman, and her tone was now unmistakably cold, while her manner was stiff.

"I do not understand you," exclaimed the duke, not knowing what to think. "Has anything happened to Indora? Has anything been done? Have you in your astuteness devised something better than the aid of Sagoonah's dagger or a reptile from the Zoological Gardens?"

"Heaven be thanked," cried the Frenchwoman, "that neither the steel blade nor the serpent did the work of death! My conscience is at least not burdened with that crime."

"Then what do you mean?" asked the nobleman, now completely bewildered, and alarmed likewise by whatsoever appeared strangely sinister in the otherwise incomprehensible look, tone, and manner of Madame Angelique. "What is this project on which you have decided?"

"To break up my establishment altogether, retire into a pleasant little villa, and live in comfort for the rest of my days, apart from all intrigues and the perils thereof."

The Duke of Marchmont was astounded. As the reader is aware, he was in mortal dread of the Princess Indora; he had the most cogent reasons for destroying her life, so that he might silence her for ever, and here was the hitherto useful and willing agent of whom he had made a tool for the purpose of carrying out his fell design, — here she was, we say, suddenly slipping out of his hands!

"You surely cannot be serious?" he at length faltered out. "You would not abandon a business — pardon me, an avocation — which is so lucrative?"

"And which makes me the dupe of others," rejoined Madame Angelique, with emphatic tone and significant look.

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont. "Your words seem pointed, and yet to one who has always been your friend —"

"You have paid me, my lord, for the services which I have rendered," answered Madame Angelique, "and on that score we are quits. But you have endeavoured to render me your instrument in the accomplishment of a deed from which I now recoil with horror, — yes, and even with wonder that I could have ever contemplated it. With all the arts of sophistry you led me to believe that I incurred the most terrific dangers at Indora's hands."

"And had you not the proof?" inquired the duke, vainly endeavouring to conceal the bitter vexation and even the terror which he experienced. "Did not an agent of the police —"

"Yes, he came, certainly, but I was altogether mistaken as to the origin of his visit. In one word, my lord duke, the Lady Indora has nothing to do with this proceeding on the part of the commissioners of police; it all emanates from some wealthy person in the background, who acts through the medium of his attorney, Mr. Coleman."

"Coleman — Coleman?" said the duke, thus repeating the

name in a musing tone. "Surely I have heard it before, and somewhat recently, too. Coleman? Ah, I recollect! — it is that lawyer who has been advancing Armytage such considerable sums of money."

"Do you then know anything of this Mr. Coleman, my lord?" inquired the Frenchwoman. "But it matters not; my mind is made up how to act. I am this evening more at ease than for a long time past I have been, and never, never will I again suffer myself to be beguiled by the representations of one who was all the time endeavouring to serve his own purposes."

"You allude to me," ejaculated the duke, assuming an air of indignation, "and you wrong me. I thought you in danger from that quarter —"

"Well, well, my lord, we will not dispute the point," interrupted Madame Angelique; and then she ironically added, "I have no doubt your Grace will now congratulate me on having acquired the certainty that I am no longer in any peril from that quarter?"

"Oh, of course," exclaimed Marchmont, "if it really is so. But beware, my good friend, how you suffer yourself to be lulled into a false security. It is at such times that the blow falls heaviest —"

"Thank you, my lord," interrupted the milliner, "I am fully prepared to meet all contingencies of that sort. Tomorrow I dismiss the girls, — or rather I find them protectors, as their kind and excellent friend who stands in the light of their mother ought to do."

Madame Angelique chuckled at her own disgusting levity, and the duke for an instant bit his lip with vexation. He saw that the milliner was resolute in the plan she had proclaimed; he saw, too, how hopeless it was to attempt to enlist her services any further in the prosecution of his designs, and he likewise felt how necessary it was to keep on friendly terms with her. A seal must be placed upon her lips in respect to all that had recently occurred; and though for her own sake she would keep silent on those points, yet it by no means suited the duke's interests that she should speak disparagingly of him in any other sense.

"Well, my dear madam," he accordingly said, assuming his blandest tone and his most affable look, "I do indeed congratulate you on this change in your position. I am glad

you have reason to feel so confident in respect to the Lady Indora. And now, as you are about to retire into private life, if there be anything I can do — ”

“ Yes, there is something,” responded Madame Angelique. “ The four girls must be comfortably provided for. I mean to leave off business with a good character, and those charmers of mine must not go forth into the world to proclaim what I have been. So little has actually transpired in respect to the true character of this house that the public in general will give me credit for being a respectable milliner who is retiring on a fortune legitimately obtained.”

“ To be sure, my dear madam,” ejaculated Marchmont; “ you will keep your own counsel with respect to the past, you will provide for the girls, so as to seal their lips; and those friends who have so long patronized your establishment, myself amongst the number, will of course do the best to sustain your respectability by their good report.”

“ I expect nothing less at their hands,” answered Madame Angelique, “ and I purpose to test the sincerity of the friendship of four of my principal patrons. To begin therefore with your Grace, I give you your choice of the four young ladies in the saloon.”

“ Commend me to Eglantine,” exclaimed Marchmont, who at once saw the necessity of yielding to that which was in reality a command on the part of the Frenchwoman. “ Tomorrow I will take handsome apartments somewhere for Eglantine. I will let you know the address in the course of the day, and she can then remove thither.”

“ Eglantine must prove an exception from the choice,” answered Madame Angelique. “ I had forgotten at the moment that I have a particular way of disposing of her. Either of the other three — ”

“ It is impossible, my dear madam,” interrupted the duke, “ that I can take either Armantine or Linda, who have been so long beneath your roof, and who are so well known amongst all your patrons. I should be laughed at, ridiculed — ”

“ Then why not Marion? ” demanded the Frenchwoman. “ And now I bethink me, I can place Armantine and Linda equally as well as I can Eglantine. Therefore, my lord, it must be Marion.”

“ But, my dear Madame Angelique,” said the duke, “ in

the first place, I believe that Marion dislikes me, — you remember I have complained to you of her refusal — ”

“ Mere coyness on her part, or else artifice and stratagem to render herself all the more acceptable when she might choose to surrender.”

“ But there is another reason,” exclaimed the duke.

“ Is this your friendship? ” cried Madame Angelique, with a great show of indignation, and half-starting from her seat.

“ Do not be angry, — we were but discussing the point — ”

“ And it is no longer open for discussion. Take Marion or not, as you think fit,” continued the Frenchwoman, “ but if you refuse, I shall know what value to set upon the friendship of your Grace.”

Marchmont bit his lip almost till the blood came. Madame Angelique’s look was resolutely decisive, and not daring to quarrel with her, he affected to laugh, saying, “ Well, well, I suppose, like all ladies, you must have your own way. So let it be the particular beauty whom you have thus allotted to me.”

“ Be it so; it is settled, my lord,” replied Madame Angelique. “ I have not the slightest doubt that Marion, who has been under the protection of an earl, will feel proud in the long run to own the tender friendship of a duke.”

There was a slight accent of sarcasm in the milliner’s tone, for she was avenging herself, as far as she thought fit, for the conduct of Marchmont in having duped her into becoming the instrument of his own designs, incomprehensible to the Frenchwoman though they were, in respect to Indora. The duke, comprehending Madame Angelique’s meaning, again bit his lip with vexation, but bowing to conceal it, he issued from the room.

On leaving the milliner’s house, the Duke of Marchmont walked slowly along the street, plunged in a deep and painful reverie. He had numerous sources of bitter vexation as well as of alarm, and amongst the former the arrangement just made, or rather just enforced, in respect to Marion, was not the least. He knew that she had been the mistress of the Earl of Beltinge, and he by no means relished the idea of taking up with that nobleman’s discarded paramour. The expense of keeping Marion entered not for a moment into his consideration, for he was wealthy enough to gratify any such phantasy if he had the inclination. But even in the sphere

of vice and immorality the haughty tone of aristocratic feeling prevails; and Marchmont winced at the idea that he, a duke, should be compelled to take under his protection the cast-off mistress of an earl. Were she the discarded paramour of a king, a prince, or even a royal duke, it would have been different. Such was the sensitiveness of a man who hesitated not to make a familiar companion of a woman like Madame Angélique, the keeper of a fashionable house of infamy, — a man too who would have plunged himself into crime to rid his path of an enemy, like Indora, who, as he had reason to believe, was by some means or another threatening his security.

As the Duke of Marchmont was continuing his way slowly, and in deep, brooding thoughtfulness along the street, he encountered some one who suddenly addressed him by name, and looking up, he beheld the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

“My lord, I greet you,” said that unprincipled individual, in a tone of familiarity.

“Ah, so you have returned from Paris?” observed the duke, somewhat coldly.

“Yes, where, I am sorry to say,” responded Stanhope, “I fell in with persons who were cleverer than myself, and the consequence is I am as completely cleared out as ever an unfortunate devil was. I was just thinking to whom I could apply for a little friendly succour, when behold, fortune throws me in the way of your Grace.”

“Then your pocket, I presume, is empty?” said the duke, speaking slowly and in a musing manner, for he was revolving in his mind something that had just occurred to him.

“So empty,” rejoined Stanhope, “that the introduction of such a thing as fifty guineas into that pocket of mine would be a veritable godsend. May I anticipate that for old acquaintance’ sake — and you must remember, my lord, that if that affair with her Grace down at Oaklands ended in failure — ”

“It was not your fault, I admit,” returned the duke, “but you must also recollect that I gave you a liberal reward. Enough, however, on that point. I think I can do something for you now. What would you say if I were to introduce you to-morrow to a handsome suite of apartments, a beautiful girl already installed there as the genius of the

scene, and with an account opened at a banker's in your name to the extent of five hundred pounds?"

"I should say, my lord," replied Stanhope, "that it was a truly ducal manner in getting rid of a mistress of whom your Grace is tired, and that I am so overwhelmed by the favour I at once accept it."

"Then it is a bargain," said Marchmont, "and here is an earnest thereof," he added, slipping his purse into Stanhope's hand. "Come to me to-morrow evening — But no, do not make your appearance in Belgrave Square — Dine with me at the Clarendon Hotel at seven o'clock, and after our wine I will conduct you to the little paradise where a houri's arms will be open to receive you."

"I shall be punctual, my lord," answered Wilson Stanhope. "But one word. Is not this great favour which you are showing me the prelude to something else?"

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont, but the tone in which the question was put convinced Stanhope that his surmise was correct.

"Let me speak frankly, my lord," he said. "I asked for fifty pounds, and you proffer me five hundred. Is this really nothing more than a recompense for taking your cast-off mistress —"

"On my soul, she is no mistress of mine," interrupted the duke. "I have seen her, I have joked with her, but never beyond such companionship has any familiarity been permitted by her. I have endeavoured — But enough. Suffice it for you to know that she has been the mistress of Beltinge, that she is now at Madame Angelique's, and that to-morrow she will be in handsome apartments, ready to receive you."

"Good, my lord," ejaculated Stanhope. "But still I think there is something that lies beyond all this. You require my services in another way, and you are giving me the retaining fee?"

"And if it be so?" said the Duke, pointedly.

"You will find me ready and willing as before. Only let me know at once, that I may shape my arrangements accordingly."

"Then shape them," answered the duke, "according to the impression you have received, and perhaps I may be more explicit to-morrow evening."

With these words Marchmont hastened away; but scarcely had he entered the next street, when he beheld Mr. Armytage proceeding slowly a little way in front of him. The duke immediately overtook him, but ere he spoke a word, he caught a sufficient glimpse of his countenance to indicate that the speculator was occupied in no very agreeable reflections.

"I am afraid the world goes not well with you, Travers?" began the duke.

"Travers?" echoed Armytage, starting. "How imprudent you are, my lord."

"I forgot," said the duke, "it was indeed imprudent. But is my surmise correct? Does the world still go indifferently with you? I need however scarcely ask," added his Grace, with a slight accent of vexation, "for you did not keep faith with me, Armytage, though I plainly told you that it would inconvenience me seriously if you were to fail."

"And perhaps I have been inconvenienced still more," said Armytage, gruffly.

"It was not altogether well of you," resumed the duke. "Upwards of five weeks have elapsed since you borrowed that last sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, with the assurance that in a few days you would be enabled to return it, as by taking up certain bills your credit would be good for fifty thousand. Was not that the way in which you put the matter to me?"

"I daresay it was, my lord," replied Armytage, in a manner much less respectful than he was wont to observe toward his patrician patron.

"I suppose that Mr. Coleman — the gentleman whom you mentioned — disappointed you?" proceeded the duke, adopting a more conciliatory tone than at first. "If it were so, there is certainly some excuse."

Armytage continued silent as he walked in seeming moodiness by the Duke of Marchmont's side along the street.

"Yes, there would be an excuse," continued his Grace, "and therefore I could make allowances for you. But who is this Mr. Coleman?"

"A solicitor. Your lordship knows it already," rejoined Armytage. "I have told you so."

"And did he fly from his word?" inquired the duke.

Again Armytage was silent, but only for a few instants,

and then he said, "To tell your Grace the truth, Mr. Coleman did not fly from his word; he advanced me the money — yes, every farthing of it," added Zoe's father, as if with the bitterness of desperation.

"And you do not mean me to understand that you have lost it all?" exclaimed Marchmont, in dismay. "Why, money appears to melt out of your pocket as quickly as in former times it was wont to pour into it!" Then, as the thought struck his Grace, he said, "By Heaven, Armytage, I am afraid that you gamble?"

"Yes, gamble as some of the highest and wealthiest in the City of London gamble," replied the speculator, — "not as you noblemen and gentlemen gamble at the West End in such places as these," and he glanced toward a flood of light streaming forth from the portals of a splendid club-house they were passing.

"You mean on the stock exchange?" said the duke, inquiringly.

"I mean on the stock exchange," replied Armytage, curtly.

They continued walking on together in silence for a few minutes, — Armytage with his looks bent downward in moody reverie, the Duke of Marchmont in anxious thought, for he was now sorry that he had addressed the speculator at all, inasmuch as he feared lest the interview should end by the demand for another loan.

"And is that enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds," he at length asked, "which you obtained from Mr. Coleman, is it all gone?"

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Armytage, clutching the duke's arm quickly and violently, and looking up into his face with a countenance which, as the nearest gas-lamp streamed upon it, appeared absolutely ghastly. "Surely that question of yours was not prophetic of evil? No, no, I should be utterly, hopelessly ruined."

"Then what, in the name of Heaven, have you done?" inquired the duke, "and why are you in this dreadfully perturbed state of mind?"

"Because I have ventured the whole of that sum upon a speculation which will either in one day, in one hour, I might almost say in one moment, give me a fortune — or on the other hand," he gulped for a moment, and then added, gaspingly, "or beggar me."

"How mad! how foolish!" exclaimed Marchmont.

"Yes, mad and foolish," responded Armytage, with almost the petulance of retort, "if it had been my own money with which I was speculating, but it was not. And therefore what had I to do but to make the best of it? It was neck-or-nothing, riches once more or utter ruin."

"And when will the result be known?" inquired the duke.

"Exactly one month hence," replied Armytage.

"One month? And wherefore are you so desponding and mistrustful now?"

"Because — because," answered the speculator, "I have just been reading the evening paper, and the intelligence is unfavourable for the particular way in which my money is laid out. Nevertheless, things may take a turn, — to-morrow their aspect may be as favourable as to-day it is gloomy. But, oh, what a life to lead, my lord, — at one time exultant with hope, at another cast down into the vortex of despair, yesterday dreaming of countless riches, to-day recoiling in horror from the presence of the grovelling mendicant who crawls past, with the hideous presentiment that his condition is a type of what mine may shortly be!"

There was another pause for some minutes, during which the duke and the speculator continued walking on together, and the silence was suddenly broken by the latter, who said, in a milder and more respectful tone than he had hitherto adopted, "I am afraid your Grace must think I spoke rudely and even brutally just now, but such was the state of my mind —"

"Say no more upon the subject," interrupted Marchmont, who perhaps had his own reasons for not dealing harshly with the speculator. "I can make allowances for you. Your daughter — have you heard from her lately?"

"Ah, my daughter, and young Meredith!" ejaculated Armytage, with a renewal of the petulant bitterness of his tone, "it is this that drives me mad. I care not so much for myself, although it would be shocking enough for a man who has seen such wealth and raised himself to such a position, to sink down into poverty. Ah! you know not all —"

"Tell me everything, Armytage," said the duke; not that he experienced any veritable friendly interest in the man's affairs, but he wished to ascertain the precise position wherein he stood, so that he might thereby measure the amount of

chance there was of any fresh appeals being made to his own purse.

"Your Grace is probably aware," replied Armytage, "that when Lord Octavian Meredith married my daughter I settled upon her the sum of sixty thousand pounds, and I further agreed to allow Meredith a thousand a year for his own pocket-money. Well, my lord, before Zoe went abroad she executed a power of attorney, enabling me to manage her finances for her, so that Lord Octavian should be supplied with a sufficiency to maintain the establishment in the Regent's Park, and I was to remit such sums as Zoe might require for her own expenses."

"And you do not mean me to understand," said the duke, in a deep tone of anxiety, "that you have made away with your daughter's money?"

A moan from the lips of the wretched Armytage conveyed the response. Marchmont was indeed profoundly shocked, for he was at once smitten with the dread that exactions far greater than those previously made, great though these already were, would be sooner or later attempted in respect to his own purse.

"Yes, it is but too true," continued Armytage, in a scarcely audible voice. "The rascality of that man Preston was an ominous date for me. Down to that period everything had gone well, whatsoever I touched seemed to turn into gold; but since then everything has gone wrong, the money, as you just now expressed it, has melted away ten thousand times faster than ever it was previously made or got. Or perhaps I myself have speculated more recklessly, more desperately. And yet how could it be otherwise? I sought to repair the terrible losses I sustained —"

"And your daughter's money is all gone, absolutely gone?" inquired Marchmont, still incredulous in respect to so colossal an evil.

"Yes, gone, gone!" responded Armytage, and again he groaned in bitterness. "Now your Grace can understand why I am so desponding at times, and wherefore I am haunted with such fearful apprehensions. If ruin overtakes me, it will not be ruin for myself alone, but ruin for Zoe, ruin for her husband — ruin therefore for all three."

"And do you really anticipate that this last speculation of yours may turn out wrong?"

“ Again I say, Heaven forbid! But your Grace knows the terrible uncertainties of such ventures. Look you, my lord,” exclaimed Armytage, with a sudden access of fervid, almost wild joy. “ If I succeed, this day month will behold me in possession of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds. With that sum I restore Zoe’s fortune, I pay Coleman, I return your Grace the loan you so kindly advanced — Oh, yes, fortune must favour me; it is impossible it can be otherwise.”

“ And if it should happen to turn out contrary to your expectations,” said the duke, “ have you a very hard man to deal with in this Mr. Coleman? ”

“ To tell your Grace the truth, I can scarcely understand him,” replied Armytage. “ It was not I who originally sought him out; he came to seek me. It was very shortly after that first little embarrassment of mine, which arose from Preston’s failure, you know, and when your Grace so generously advanced me fifty thousand pounds in January last, Mr. Coleman one day called upon me. Apologizing for having introduced himself, he said that he had a wealthy client who wished to lay out his money at good interest, and as he knew that I had excellent opportunities of accommodating the members of the aristocracy and fashionable gentlemen with loans, he had taken the liberty of waiting upon me for the purpose of ascertaining if I would thus use any money he might place in my hands. It was thus our connection commenced.”

“ And who is this wealthy client of Mr. Coleman’s? ” asked the duke, thinking it probable that he might be the same who was secretly urging the lawyer on to the prosecution of Madame Angelique.

“ I do not know,” replied Armytage. “ I never saw him, never even heard his name mentioned. In fact, my lord, I do not believe that there is any such client in the background at all. There are several of these lawyers who lay out their own money at interest, pretending it is that of their clients. They do it to save their respectability and avoid the reputation of usurers. But as I was just now observing to your Grace, I cannot exactly make out this Mr. Coleman. He seemed to force his money upon me, as it were, in the first instance; and afterward, when he found me punctual in my engagements with him, he suddenly appeared to place such unlimited confidence in me — and though I do verily

believe he must have had a suspicion, from one or two little circumstances, that I was not so rich as I appeared to be, yet he unhesitatingly kept his word, and let me have that last sum of fifty thousand — ”

“ Rest assured, Armytage,” interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, “ he suspected nothing of what you fancy, or he would not have been quite so willing to give you his money. By the bye, did you ever hear him speak of being engaged in a prosecution against a certain house of fashionable resort, — you understand what I mean, — a house of a certain description — ”

“ No, never,” responded Armytage. “ When I have been at his office we have conversed on nothing except the business which took me thither. And now, my lord, as I have reached the house where I have a call to make to-night — ”

“ Is it not rather late for a call, Armytage? ” inquired the duke, with a smile.

“ It is a young gentleman, named Softly, belonging to the Guards, and who will be of age in eight or ten months,” replied the financier. “ He wants to raise some money, he has sent for me, and I must therefore keep the time which best pleases himself. And now I bid your Grace good night.”

They separated accordingly, and as the Duke of Marchmont slowly took his way homeward, he revolved in his mind a certain plan which he had formed, and in furtherance of which he intended to enlist the aid of the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

CHAPTER XXVI

MADAME ANGELIQUE'S THREE BILLETS

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast on the following morning, Madame Angelique sat down at her writing-desk and penned three notes, which she despatched to as many different addresses.

At about one in the afternoon an old nobleman, having passed through Monsieur Bertin's house and entered that of the milliner by the mirror-contrived door, found his way to the elegantly appointed boudoir where Madame Angelique was waiting to receive him. He was verging toward his eightieth year. His form was completely bowed; the few straggling hairs of his head were of snowy whiteness, his eyes were bleared, his face was one mass of puckerings and wrinkles, he had lost all his teeth, and the outline of his profile consisted of a number of sharp angles. He was so infirm that he walked with considerable difficulty; he had a continuous hacking cough, and he mumbled and stammered to a degree that rendered him scarcely intelligible. With the whole of one foot and half the other in the grave, deaf, and in his dotage, this nobleman had nevertheless only just returned from an embassy at one of the principal Continental courts after an absence from England of some five or six years.

Lord Wenham — for such was his denomination — had been an old patron of Madame Angelique previous to his appointment to the embassy above alluded to. He was therefore well initiated in the mysteries of her household, but the four young ladies whom the private part of her establishment now contained were complete strangers to him. She had heard of his recent return to the British metropolis, and being resolved to make a last penny out of him before

she gave up business altogether, she had written him the note which now brought him into her presence.

"Why, my dear Madame Angélique," mumbled the old lord, as he deposited himself in an easy chair, — an effort which raised so violent a fit of coughing that for upwards of a minute it seemed as if his enervated frame must be shattered to pieces, — "I vow and protest that you look — ugh! ugh! — this cough of mine! — younger than when I last saw you."

"And yet, my lord," responded the milliner, "the lapse of five years can scarcely make one look younger."

"Ah, very good, very good!" said Lord Wenham, laughing with a chuckle that was hideous as a death-rattle. "Yes, yes, in spite of five years you find me looking — ugh! ugh! — younger also?" for he observed that on account of his deafness he had not caught the precise terms of the milliner's speech.

"You look so young, my lord," exclaimed Madame Angélique, taking advantage of the little error into which he had fallen, and now speaking loud enough to make herself heard, "that I am convinced you are as terrible amongst the fair sex as ever."

"Ah, ah! I understand," said Lord Wenham, "you have got — ugh! ugh! — some sweet creature that you mean to tempt me with, eh? eh? — ugh! ugh!"

"Fully esteeming your lordship's kind patronage," rejoined Madame Angélique, "before you went as ambassador plenipotentiary to the Court of ———, I was resolved to give you the preference for the most beautiful girl that ever confidingly placed herself in my hands. I can assure you, my lord," added the wily woman, with a significant look, "that she is as pure and virtuous as the day she was born, — an immaculate virgin."

The old nobleman leered and licked his lips salaciously.

"It is a positive fact, my lord," continued Madame Angélique. "The truth is, she has recently been left an orphan, and, to be candid, she is a niece of mine. What can I do with her, poor thing, except provide for her in a way of which her beauty renders her so deserving?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" said the old nobleman, who in order that he might not lose a single syllable that fell from

Madame Angelique's lips drew forth an ear-trumpet and listened therewith. "Go on — ugh! ugh!"

"It is all precisely as I have the honour to inform your lordship," continued the woman, "and therefore — But what do you think?" she suddenly ejaculated. "Somehow or another the Duke of Marchmont heard of this lovely creature being under my care, and he came last night and offered me five hundred guineas to take her off my hands. But I said, 'No, no, my lord duke, I have the honour of a nobleman's acquaintance who I know will cheerfully write me a cheque for a thousand, and bear off Miss Eglantine in triumph!' That's what I said, my lord."

"And you meant me?" said Lord Wenham, full of nervous anxiety to obtain possession of the much-vaunted prize, "you meant me, my dear creature — ugh! ugh! this cough of mine! — But you meant me?"

"Certainly I did, my lord. And was I not right?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" responded his lordship. "But can you really guarantee, eh? — you know what I mean — ugh! ugh!"

"That she is innocence itself," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "In short, she is almost too prudish; but I have no doubt that with your lordship's powers of cajolery, those powers which, as the newspapers say, you used to such effect when you put the foreign minister at the Court of — in such a dilemma —"

"Ah, you have heard of that?" said the ancient diplomatist, chuckling. "Egad! I talked his Excellency off to sleep, and when he woke up, he signed the treaty in the twinkling of an eye. But about this Miss Eglantine — what a sweet name! dear me, what a sweet name! — ugh! ugh! ugh!"

"She is yours, therefore, my lord," answered Madame Angelique, "and the bargain is concluded."

"Eh? — stop!" cried his lordship. "I should just like, you know, to see her first of all, — merely, you know — ugh! ugh! — this cough of mine — ugh!"

"To be sure! I will go and fetch her at once. There are writing materials; your lordship can pen the cheque, for if you are not satisfied with the first view of her, your lordship can but cancel the draft."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from the

boudoir, and leaving his lordship in the midst of an ecstatic fit of coughing, she ascended to the private chamber of Miss Eglantine, who had only just completed her toilet. For this paragon of virtue and innocence, who was also tinged with prudery, had been passing the night, and several hours of the forenoon also, in the arms of one of the frequenters of Madame Angelique's establishment.

"Now, my dear girl," said the crafty woman, "I am come to announce to you that your fortune is made. I purpose to give up my business as soon as possible, but in all motherly kindness I mean to provide for the dear girls, yourself included, whom I look upon as my daughters. Here is a nobleman immensely rich, who will take you into his keeping; he will allow you at least eighty pounds a week, and if you play your cards well, you can marry him. To be sure, he is not quite so young as he might be, perhaps sixty or so, though he may look a trifle older; but then there is this to be considered, that you can manage him all the more easily, for he is somewhat in his dotage. Come along with me at once. You must look as modest as possible, and when, in his lordship's presence, I hint at the connection you are about to form with him, you had better shriek out, — not too loud, you know, for fear of being overheard, — and then you can cling to me, and if you choose to go off in a fit, why, it may perhaps be as well. However, in the long run you will yield your consent, and his lordship will provide for you this very day. Of course you understand, my dear, that I am perfectly disinterested in what I am doing for you. My only object is to give you a comfortable position, and I do not get one farthing by it — no, not a fraction."

Eglantine was perfectly willing to fall into the infamous woman's views, and she at once followed Madame Angelique to the boudoir. A glance at the writing-desk showed the milliner that the cheque lay there, ready drawn out, and the instant she had introduced Eglantine to the ex-ambassador, she seized the opportunity while his lordship's eyes riveted gloatingly upon the supposed victim of an aunt's treacherous cupidity to catch up the draft and thrust it amidst the folds of her dress. The entire scene, as previously arranged, was then gone through: the half-subdued shriek was uttered, the prudery was affected, the appeal to the wicked aunt was made by the innocent and virtuous niece, and then the latter sank

gracefully down in a fit, just as an actress swoons or dies upon the stage, though with perhaps a trifle more of voluptuous abandonment of the form. Water was sprinkled upon Eglantine's countenance; she suffered herself to be slowly recovered. She then listened with admirable patience and meekness to Madame Angelique's reasoning, and with an equal degree of exemplary resignation she yielded herself to her destiny.

In the afternoon Lord Wenham came in his carriage to fetch away his paragon of virtue, and he placed her in a sumptuously furnished house which he hired for her accommodation, with an allowance of eighty pounds per week. We may add that in the evening of the very same day on which his lordship paid Madame Angelique a thousand guineas for the beautiful Eglantine and gave the young lady the first instalment of her magnificent income, he most generously and nobly forwarded a cheque for two guineas to the secretary of the Society for the Distribution of Bread amongst the Famishing Poor, and a cheque for twenty guineas to the Association for the Protection of Young Females.

To return, however, to Madame Angelique. Scarcely had she effected her most disinterested arrangement with Lord Wenham, and had dismissed the paralyzed dotting old nobleman, when the second of the three billets which she had despatched in the morning was personally answered by the appearance of a gentleman rejoicing in the name of Mr. White Choker. He was dressed in complete black, and wore a low cravat of snowy fairness. He showed no shirt-collar, and had altogether a very clerical look. His hair was cropped all around like a Puritan's, and was combed sleek and straight down over his forehead. He had a long, pale countenance, the expression of which was so habitually that of sanctimonious self-martyrization and lugubrious demureness, that even when he tried to smile on entering the milliner's boudoir he looked like an undertaker or a funeral-mute making a desperate attempt to appear gay. Very keen-sighted persons, on regarding Mr. White Choker more closely, might have fancied that there was something in the expression of his coarse lips and in the gleaming of his dark deep-set small eyes which denoted the strong passions of the man and the difficulty he had in concealing them beneath the gloss of assumed sanctity and hypocritical cant, but on this point

we ourselves say nothing, for Mr. White Choker was a saint.

Yes, great indeed was he at Exeter Hall at the period of the May meetings. Who could so well declaim against the ignorance and demoralization of the lower classes? Who could whine and moan and weep in such desperate anguish at the benighted condition of the heathen, thousands and thousands of miles off in the islands of the South Pacific? Who could so pathetically enforce the necessity of sending missionaries, and flannel jackets, and hymn-books, and tracts, and all kinds of godly publications, to the poor naked cannibals of those same islands? Who was more ready in putting down his money for the Foreign Bible Society, or in taking up the starving beggar who implored alms of him in a street of the British metropolis? In a word, Mr. White Choker was a veritable saint; his name was considered synonymous with piety and philanthropy themselves, and if it were the fashion in this Protestant country for persons to be canonized, — and before they were dead, too, — Mr. White Choker was the very man whom all the Exeter Hallites would have selected for the honour, and whom the whole bench of bishops would have pronounced worthy thereof.

Of course the reader is fully prepared to hear that so good a man could only have come to Madame Angelique's establishment with one object, namely, to read its proprietress a very long and serious lecture on the wickedness of the life she was leading. And yet somehow or another this was not the worthy gentleman's aim, for, as we have seen, it was in answer to one of the milliner's billets that he now showed himself in her presence.

"My dear Mr. Choker," she began, with one of her most amiable smiles, "I am sure you will be delighted to learn that I have resolved upon retiring from business and living henceforth respectably upon my means."

"Come now, mother," said the white-cravatted gentleman, with a more successful attempt at a laugh than he had previously made, "this is not Exeter Hall, neither is it a committee of the Foreign Cannibal-reclaiming, Negro-Christianizing and Naked-savage-clothing Society. Everything is good in its place and way —"

"And you have come, my dear Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, blandly, "for whatsoever I may have

good in my place and in my way to put at your disposal?"

"That is speaking like a true Chris — I mean like a woman of the world," said Mr. Choker, thus very properly correcting himself.

"It is a long, long time, my dear sir," continued the milliner, "since the light of your countenance shone within my humble habitation; and therefore I thought that I might take the liberty, under peculiar circumstances, of inviting you here on the present occasion."

"The truth is," answered Mr. White Choker, "that hypocritical scoundrel, Obadiah Snufflenose, the vice-president of our society, frequents your house, and as he and I are at daggers-drawn —"

"And yet," exclaimed Madame Angelique, with some degree of astonishment, "I saw the other day a published letter of yours to the gentleman you name, and commencing, 'Dearest and best-beloved brother in the good work, Obadiah Snufflenose —'"

"I tell you once more," said Mr. White Choker, with considerable asperity, "that we are not sitting in committee upon the distribution of that last new tract addressed to all savoury vessels. But d — n the vessels! My dear madam, let's get to business. Why did you send for me?"

"If you were to hear, Mr. White Choker," continued Madame Angelique, "that I have the loveliest German girl beneath this roof, who has only gone astray once — once, upon my honour, and no more —"

"Ah, if I thought I could rely upon you," said Mr. Choker, whose curiosity, as well as a stronger passion, was considerably piqued. "But it was not altogether on account of Snufflenose that I have stayed away from your establishment for the last three or four years; it was because that young creature — you remember her well — that you furnished me, with the solemn assurance she was chastity herself, presented me with — a — a — thumping boy four or five months afterward, and threatened to expose me if I did not provide for the brat. Ah, madam, that was a sad, sad affair —"

"But, my dear friend Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, "we are all liable to error —"

"But such an error as that, my dear madam! Only conceive a thumping boy!" and the white-cravatted gentleman's

countenance became so elongated at the bare thought that at the moment it could have vied with the length of her bright poker itself.

"Well, my dear sir, I admit the thumping boy was a great nuisance, a very great nuisance. But in this case, with my beautiful, charming Linda, who has only fallen once, there cannot be possibly any such apprehension. If you were just to see her — But what do you think?" ejaculated the milliner, thus suddenly interrupting herself. "Old Lord Wenham was here just now, and he actually and positively drew me out a cheque for four hundred guineas for this sweet German. And what did I say? 'No, no, my lord; I have the honour of being acquainted with a gentleman who will give five hundred.'" That's what I said, Mr. Choker."

"But you mentioned no name?" said the saint, anxiously.

"Not for the world!" responded Madame Angelique. "And this dear Linda, who is discretion itself, she will never betray you; but she will go to Exeter Hall when you are to speak, and she will wave the white handkerchief. She will weep, too, at your most pathetic passages, — in fact, she will set an entire benchful of the audience whimpering and sobbing."

"Oh, bother take Exeter Hall at this present moment!" cried the saint, and his interjection was accompanied by a most unsaintlike oath. "You want five hundred guineas for this Linda? Hum! ha! But is she so very beautiful? Is she well formed, stout, luxurious?"

"A superb bust, my dear Mr. Choker. But come, here are writing materials, draw up the cheque, and I will go and fetch the charming Linda, so that you may arrive at a speedy decision."

With these words Madame Angelique quitted the boudoir, and ascended to the chamber of the German girl, who having, like Miss Eglantine, recently dismissed an admirer who regularly visited her twice a week, was finishing her toilet by the aid of a female dependent. The maid was dismissed from the room, and Madame Angelique, having intimated her intention of retiring into private life, proceeded to address the young lady in the following manner:

"It is therefore my duty as well as my pleasure, dear Linda, to provide for yourself and companions. You know what I have just done for Eglantine, and now it is your turn.

A very pious gentleman will take you into his keeping; he will pension you handsomely, and when your child is born, — which I suppose will be in about five months, — he must provide for it liberally, because you will have him completely in your power. He has got a wife and large family, and if you only threaten to go to his house and create a disturbance, you might bring him to any terms. He is immensely rich, and as thorough-paced a hypocrite as ever the sun shone upon. Of course, my dear girl, you will keep your condition a secret as long as you can; and between you and me, I have assured him that you are but one remove from complete chastity — However, you will know how to manage your white-cravatted puritan; and now come and be introduced to him. Stop, you can throw a kerchief over your neck, so as to appear modest, and you can easily suffer it to glide off, as if quite unconsciously, in the bashful confusion of your thoughts."

Linda was well pleased with the arrangements thus sketched forth, and the kerchief being duly thrown over her neck, she accompanied Madame Angelique to the boudoir, where Mr. White Choker had in the meantime penned the cheque for five hundred guineas. Linda appeared all blushing modesty, and her looks were bent down as the saint devoured her with his gloating eyes. There was a little conversation, during which the kerchief glided off from the siren's white neck and voluptuous bosom, and her triumph was complete.

In the evening Mr. White Choker came in a street-cab to fetch away his charmer, and though he dared not use his own private carriage for the purpose, he nevertheless promised that on the following day Linda should have the most beautiful turnout of her own that was to be seen in all London. He installed her in a beautiful little suburban villa, ready furnished, and which he had hired offhand for her immediate accommodation. Then, as an excuse for passing that first night away from home, he assured the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bedside of a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realm of eternal bliss.

Scarcely had Madame Angelique completed her transaction with Mr. White Choker, when the Honourable Augustus Softly was announced. This young gentleman had just en-

tered his twenty-first year, and would inherit on attaining his majority a fortune of sixty thousand pounds, if he had not already anticipated it by bills and bonds to the tune of nearly one-half. He had recently obtained a commission in the Guards, and on being emancipated from the apron strings of his fashionable mamma, he had resolved to see a little of "life." It was however chiefly at night-time that he took his survey of what he termed "life," for inasmuch as he was never in bed until three or four o'clock in the morning, he slept till it was time to turn out for parade, after which he drank so copiously of bottled stout and cherry-brandy at lunch, "just to give a tone to his stomach," that he was usually constrained to go to bed again in order to sleep off the effects of so much liquor and rise refreshed for dinner-time. Then his stomach required a new "tone," and if a couple of bottles of champagne, with other vinous fluids, were capable of affording such tone, the Honourable Augustus Softly certainly adopted the panacea for procuring it. Turning out "to see life" at ten o'clock at night, he had the advantage of the gas-lamps to show him how to break policemen's heads; or else he dropped into some fashionable gambling-house, where there was light sufficient for the black-legs and sharpers there to pillage him most unmercifully, though apparently not light enough to show the young gentleman himself that he was thus fleeced.

In personal appearance the Honourable Augustus Softly was short and thin, totally beardless, though he adopted every known method of inducing a moustache to make its appearance against its own inclination, and his air was altogether so boyish that he did not look above seventeen. He had tolerably regular features, of an aristocratic cast, but the expression of his countenance was insipid and vacant, even to stolidity. Frivolous-minded and shallow-pated, with all the follies of a boy, he rather aped than was endowed with the manners of a man. His idea of "life" seemed to consist in hurrying himself on to rack and ruin as fast as ever he could, raising money at exorbitant interest, plunging into debt, lavishing his gold upon pretended friends, who flattered him to his face and laughed at him behind his back, playing the spendthrift amongst the dissolute and the depraved, thinking it one of the finest things to drop a few hundreds at the gaming-table, and the finest thing of all to let my Lord

Swindlehurst palm off on him for five hundred guineas a horse that would be dear at fifty. Such was Lieutenant Softly's idea of "life;" and this was the young gentleman who, having received Madame Angelique's third billet, now came to answer it in person.

We must observe that the Honourable Augustus Softly had only visited the milliner's establishment on two former occasions, and each of those times Mademoiselle Armantine, the French girl, was absent for some reason or another. This Madame Angelique knew full well; she was consequently aware that the young gentleman had never as yet seen her, and hence the game which she was about to play.

"Well, old lady," he said, on entering the boudoir, — for he thought it mighty fine to adopt a familiar manner with Madame Angelique, and we should incidentally remark that he spoke with the languid, dissipated air and with the drawing-room drawl which are best approved amongst silly young men in fashionable life, — "well, old lady, what on earth could have made you send to drag me out of my comfortable bed at such an unseemly hour in the morning?"

"Yes, it is unseemly," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "I admit it. Only four in the afternoon — in the morning, I mean. But then you see, you fashionable young gentlemen turn night into day, and day into night. Oh, it is positively shocking, you naughty fellows!"

"Why, there's really nothing going on in the daytime," said Mr. Softly, with an air of satiety and disgust. "I am sick of bowing to the same beauties in the Park, sick of lounging up Regent Street; and as for morning calls, why, we of the Guards, you know, never pay them."

"Ah! I repeat, you gentlemen of the Guards are such terrible fellows," said Madame Angelique, with a deprecating look. "You are enough to turn the heads of all the sweet creatures, ravish their hearts —"

"Well, I flatter myself," drawled out Mr. Softly, leaning affectedly back in his chair and caressing his beardless chin with an air of languid listlessness, "we of the Guards are rather overpowering in our way."

"You may well say that, my dear Mr. Softly, for if you only knew why I took the liberty of asking you to favour me with a call this afternoon — morning, I mean —"

"Some precious wickedness, I'll be bound," and Mr.

Softly condescended to give forth a slight laugh, which corresponded amazingly well with his drawing-room drawl.

"Wickedness indeed, you naughty good-for-nothing fellow!" responded the wily woman, shaking her finger at her intended victim. "Here is the sweetest, loveliest, young French girl, who has only been in keeping with the Duke of Marchmont for two months, at the rate of a hundred guineas a week, and who has left him, positively and actually left his Grace, all through you."

"Through me, old lady?" said Augustus, running his fingers through his limp light hair, which hung in what are called rat's tails over his ears. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean that she went to see the Guards parade the other day, and she came running off to me, — for I am her milliner, you must know, — to ask if I could tell her who was that duck of a young officer. And then she described you."

"How delicious, — positively delicious!" said Mr. Softly, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"I knew whom she meant in a moment," continued Madame Angelique, "because when she said that she alluded to the handsomest, the genteelest, and yet the most military-looking of all the young officers, I was perfectly well aware whom she was speaking of; and when I told her that I had the honour of your acquaintance, she nearly fainted with joy, and she vowed that she could be happier with you on fifty guineas a week than with his Grace of Marchmont on two hundred."

"Why, this is as good as a romance!" exclaimed the delighted and credulous Augustus.

"Quite as good," answered Madame Angelique, and she no doubt thought precisely what she said. "Only conceive, my dear Softly, the honour, the fame, and the glory of running off with a duke's mistress. Why, it is better than running off with his wife, because a man of the world is always more sensitive in respect to his mistress than he is to his wife. How you will be spoken about! What a noise you will make, what a sensation! — and all the ladies will smilingly call you the naughty man!"

"'Pon my soul, it will be quite delicious," exclaimed Lieutenant Softly. "But is she beautiful?"

"Beautiful, elegant, and accomplished," rejoined Madame

Angelique. "She is the daughter of an old French marquis, and Marchmont took her, by my aid, from a convent between two and three months ago. She never really liked the duke; her only object was to escape from a seclusion which she abhorred, and as for her virtue, apart from this one little failing, I am ready to guarantee it in a bond of a hundred thousand pounds, or on an affidavit sworn before the lord mayor of London."

Of course such guarantees clinched the argument, — at least in the mind of the credulous, conceited, and frivolous Augustus Softly; and already as elate as he could be with his presumed conquest, he gave vent to his delight in the most extravagant expressions, all of which Madame Angelique carefully echoed, while laughing in her sleeve.

"Feeling confident," she resumed, "that you would grant the dear girl an interview, I sent to request that she would pay me a visit this afternoon. But would you believe it, she is so frenzied with delight, that she orders her maid to pack up, bag and baggage, and away she comes, leaving the splendid apartments the duke had provided for her, and upon her toilet-table a rose-tinted perfumed billet, with a few laconic lines to the effect that she separates from his Grace for ever. I told her that her conduct was madness, as she could not possibly be sure that you would take her under your own protection, — though it is true that old Lord Wenham, who was here just now, and saw her alight at my door, offered me two hundred and fifty guineas if I would use my influence —"

"By Jove, I will just make it double!" ejaculated Softly. "I hope you will not feel offended —"

"I really do not know," said Madame Angelique, with a very serious countenance, "whether I ought to receive anything in a transaction which is really so delicate, and which I merely undertook to manage from motives of pity for the sweet creature and out of regard for you. But if you must write a cheque for five hundred guineas, I cannot think of wounding your feelings by refusing to accept it."

"How lucky I got that loan through Armytage this morning," thought the young lieutenant to himself, as putting aside all his fashionable languor, he flew to the desk to pen the cheque, "or else I should have cut but a

devilish sorry figure with the old lady, and should have lost the French beauty."

"Dear me, what creatures you young Guardsmen are!" said Madame Angelique, as if musing to herself, but taking very good care that the Honourable Augustus Softly should catch the words which she uttered. "I never saw such killing men, — their very looks are sufficient to conquer female hearts in a moment."

"Where is the beauty?" asked Softly, drinking in all this pleasant flattery.

"I will go and fetch her," said Madame Angelique, and she issued from the boudoir.

Mademoiselle Armantine had passed the preceding night in the arms of an *attaché* to a foreign embassy, — not a German one, for Madame Angelique, knowing very well that the German representatives of their native princes were a set of scurvy paupers, never allowed them to set foot in her establishment. The French girl was in an elegant evening toilet, and she looked ravishingly beautiful. Madame Angelique complimented her upon her bewitching appearance, and then addressed her in the ensuing manner:

"You are already aware, my dear Armantine, that I am about to give up my business, and that I have already provided in the handsomest manner for those dear girls Eglantine and Linda. Your turn is now come, and between you and me, my dear, you are the best off. What think you of a young, handsome, and elegant officer of the Guards, exceedingly intelligent and accomplished, witty and clever, not yet of age, but able to raise as much money as he thinks fit?"

Armantine's countenance expressed her satisfaction with the proposed arrangement.

"I am glad that you are pleased," continued Madame Angelique, "and it is all the more delightful to me inasmuch as the trouble I am taking is purely disinterested. But there are one or two little things that I must tell you, my dear young friend."

She then explained the particulars of the tale which she had told the Honourable Augustus Softly, adding, "You can safely give him the same assurance, for I will take care that Marchmont shall not contradict you. I can do anything I like with the duke, and as for that part of the history

which flattered the young officer with the idea of the violent passion you have conceived for him —”

“Trust to me to play my part properly,” interjected Armantine. “Of all men as a protector, I could best fancy an officer in the Guards.”

“He will allow you fifty guineas a week,” rejoined Madame Angelique, “and if within a twelvemonth you do not ruin him completely, it will be your own fault. My dear girl, the reputation of a young lady is never established until she has ruined three or four of her lovers. Look at your celebrated actresses — But no matter. Softly must be dying of impatience, and you must accompany me forthwith. Remember, my dear, bashful tenderness and modest joy, that is your cue.”

The infamous woman thereupon conducted the pliant and willing French girl to the boudoir, and so well did Armantine play her part that the Honourable Augustus Softly was completely ravished by his presumed conquest. Madame Angelique took possession of the cheque unperceived by Armantine, who that same evening left the establishment, to take up her new abode in the splendidly furnished lodgings which her lover had lost no time in engaging for her reception.

CHAPTER XXVII

AMY

THE village of Headcorn is at no great distance from the town of Ashford in the county of Kent. About a quarter of a mile from Headcorn stood a neat little cottage in the midst of a garden, and the place was the property of an elderly woman, — the widow of a small farmer who had held land in that neighbourhood. It was in this cottage that Amy Sutton, formerly lady's-maid to the Duchess of Marchmont, was now lodging.

Some weeks had elapsed since her meeting with Christian Ashton in the train on her journey to Headcorn, and the reason which had induced the unfortunate young woman to seek this retirement could no longer be concealed from the eyes of the world. She was in a way to become a mother.

It was in the afternoon, and Amy was seated alone in the little parlour which she occupied at the cottage. There was a work-basket on the table, but she did not work; there were books on a shelf, but she had recourse to none of them to beguile the time. She was plunged in deep thought, and the expression of her countenance would have shown to an observer, if any at the time were near, that the tenor of her reflections was of a dark, ominously brooding character. She had informed Christian of the exact truth in respect to the black treachery which Marchmont had perpetrated toward her, and she was resolved on vengeance. Amy was naturally one of those dispositions that, coldly implacable when once a determination of this sort was settled, exhibited no feverish impatience to carry it out until opportunity served. She would bide her time, and therefore hers was a character all the more dangerous, and the

revenge she contemplated was all the more certain to be sooner or later wreaked.

But it was not the sense of her wrongs which solely engaged her thoughts; she had to deplore the fall of a sister more beautiful than even she herself was, and whom she had loved as tenderly as her cold disposition would permit her to love at all. She had in the morning of that day received a letter from her sister, and the contents thereof entwined themselves with the reflections that she was pursuing in regard to her own position.

The farmer's widow was no relation to Amy Sutton, but they had become acquainted by some means which it is not worth while pausing to describe; and when Amy had found that the time was approaching when she could no longer be able to conceal her position from the world, she bethought herself of Mrs. Willis as a woman in whom she could confide, and of her rural habitation as a place where she might bring forth in seclusion the offspring of her shame and dishonour. For in such a light does society regard the illegitimately born, although the mother may have been guiltless of wanton frailty, and merely the victim of foulest treachery, as was the case with poor Amy Sutton.

It was in the afternoon, as we have said, that she was sitting in the little parlour at the cottage when her ear caught the sound of footsteps approaching through the garden, and raising her eyes, she beheld Christian Ashton. Her first impulse was to order the servant-girl to deny her to the young gentleman, for he recollected that when they were travelling together, she had not revealed to him the full extent of the misery entailed upon her by the Duke of Marchmont's black criminality. But a second thought determined her to see him. He was already acquainted with nearly everything that regarded her, and of what avail to keep back the rest? Besides, in her solitude she could welcome him as an old acquaintance — almost as a friend; she knew him to be a youth of the strictest probity and honour, and there is no sorrow so desperate but that it may derive a balm, however slight and however evanescent in its effect, from friendly companionship.

Christian was accordingly introduced, and with that air of frank kindness which was natural to him, he proffered his hand, saying, "I would not pass by this neighbourhood,

Amy, without seeing you, although my time is not completely my own."

The unfortunate young woman had instinctively risen on the entrance of one whom she regarded as a superior, and then her condition was at once revealed to his view. His sense of delicacy as well as his generosity however prevented him from betraying that he noticed the circumstance, and in the same considerate mood he at once glided into discourse upon the current topics of the day. He was almost sorry that he had intruded upon the young woman's privacy, painfully situated as she was, but he had presented himself there with a kind motive, for the tale she had told him in the railway carriage had enlisted his sympathy on her behalf.

"You can no longer be ignorant, Mr. Ashton," Amy at length said, while her countenance was suffused with the glow of mingled shame and indignation, "of the reason which led me into this seclusion. I am unhappy — so unhappy, Mr. Ashton, that were it not for the sake of revenge I should not cling to life. But, oh, revenge will be so sweet, — and deadly indeed shall its nature be when the proper time for wreaking it arrives!"

"Great though your wrongs have been, Amy," said Christian, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "think you that you do well thus to keep your mind in a state of incessant excitement by brooding over this hoped-for vengeance?"

"It has become to me the sustaining food of existence," answered the unfortunate young woman, "and if I perish on the scaffold I will have the life of that man. Unless indeed it be possible to wreak some vengeance which he may live to feel —"

"For Heaven's sake, Amy, speak not in this dreadful manner!" exclaimed Christian. "To talk of taking the life of the Duke of Marchmont displays a frightful recklessness in respect to your own life."

"And what have I to live for?" demanded the young woman, with even a fierce sternness. "Not for the child that will be the offspring of mingled outrage and shame. No," she added bitterly, "I loathe and abhor it even before it is born."

"You will think differently," said our young hero, "when the babe nestles in your bosom."

“As soon place a viper there,” ejaculated Amy Sutton. “But I was about to tell you that I have nothing, and can have nothing — save my present hope of vengeance — which binds me to life. When that is accomplished, I shall be ready to die, or in the accomplishment of it I may engulf myself.”

“But have you no relatives,” asked Christian, infinitely pained as well as shocked by the language that flowed from the lips of the unfortunate young woman, — “have you no relatives who could be kind to you now, and who would have to deplore your fate if by your own madness —”

“I have one relative whom I loved, — yes, still love,” responded Amy, in a mournful tone, — “a very near one, — a sister, but she is likewise fallen.”

“By treachery also?” asked Christian.

“No, by her own wantonness and weakness,” rejoined Amy. “I will tell you a brief narrative. We two sisters were left orphans at a somewhat early age; an aunt took charge of Marion, another aunt took charge of me. The aunt who adopted Marion was the richer of the two relatives, and she gave Marion an education fitting for the position of a lady. The aunt who took charge of me brought me up to a genteel servitude — namely, the position of a lady’s-maid. This aunt died when I was between fifteen and sixteen; I went into service, and have ever since earned my bread by mine own honest industry. My aunt taught me thrift, and I have been thrifty, or else I should not now possess the means of retiring awhile from the world, for not one single coin of the gold that the villain Marchmont offered as a recompense for his foul treachery did I accept. But I was about to speak of Marion. It would be difficult to conceive a more lovely creature; she is indeed exquisitely beautiful, and her beauty has proved her ruin. Two years ago the aunt who had adopted her died suddenly, and the property which she intended Marion to inherit was swept away into the possession of strangers, through some informality in the will of the deceased. I recommended Marion to obtain a situation as a governess, for which her accomplishments fitted her. She went into a family in that capacity, but in a short time she became the victim of a seducer. This was the Earl of Beltinge, and with him she lived until very recently. I thought all the while —

or at least until some weeks back — that she was still in her position as a governess, for her letters gave me an assurance to that effect. On leaving the service of the Duchess of Marchmont, I went to see my sister, but instead of finding her living as a preceptress in a respectable family, I found her luxuriating in the gilded infamy which at once proclaimed itself to my comprehension. Then, in the agony of my mind, I revealed everything which related to myself, told her how I had likewise fallen, though Heaven knows through no fault of mine, — and told her likewise who was the author of my ruin. Then I came hither.”

Amy ceased suddenly, and Christian, much pained by the narrative which he had just heard, said, in a gentle voice, “I fear from the manner in which you broke off that you have nothing to add in respect to penitence and reformation on the part of your erring sister?”

“Alas, nothing!” responded Amy Sutton. “So far from seeking to turn into a better path, Marion has taken a downward step in the career which she is pursuing. The Earl of Beltinge discovered that she was faithless to him, and in a moment he discarded her. Yes, mercilessly, though perhaps his severity was justifiable enough, he turned her adrift into the streets, stripping her of every valuable and costly gem with which he had presented her during the time she was under his protection. What resource had she? The unfortunate girl found her way to a house of fashionable infamy, which is not altogether — at least in one sense — unknown to you.”

“To me?” ejaculated Christian, in the most unfeigned astonishment, and then, with a look of indignation he said, “I can assure you, Miss Sutton —”

“I did not mean to offend nor to insult you,” responded the young woman. “The fashionable house of infamy to which I allude is that same Madame Angelique’s —”

“Ah, I comprehend,” cried Christian, — “the place where those dresses were made, the diabolical use of which so nearly proved fatal to the character of the Duchess of Marchmont.”

“The same,” Amy replied, “for the avocation of a dress-maker has been for years carried on by Madame Angelique, as a blind for the loathsome traffic which she pursues behind the scenes.”

"And yet the duchess herself patronized her at one time," observed our hero.

"Yes, but in total ignorance of the real character of that house," rejoined Amy; "and in the same manner Madame Angelique has had many lady customers who knew not the vile nature of the woman whom they thus patronized. But as I was telling you, Marion betook herself to that abode of fashionable infamy, where she dwelt for a short time. There she occasionally met Marchmont, and he, little suspecting that she was my sister, made overtures, which of course she invariably rejected. She left that house the day before yesterday. I have received a letter from her this morning; she tells me that she is now under the protection of a man whose name was at once familiar to me, and will be familiar enough to you. I mean Wilson Stanhope."

"The villain!" ejaculated Christian. "I have more reasons than one for loathing and abhorring that unprincipled man. He grossly insulted my sister, he lent himself, as you are aware, to the iniquitous designs of the Duke of Marchmont, and he insulted one likewise," added our hero, thinking of his well-beloved Isabella, "who is as dear to me as that affectionate and cherished sister to whom I have just alluded."

"Yes, Marion," continued Amy, "is now under the protection of that man, and singular enough is it that through the Duke of Marchmont's agency this change in her circumstances has been brought about. I am as yet unacquainted with all the particulars. Marion had not time to describe them yesterday; she will write to me again to-day, and to-morrow I shall know all."

"But is it possible," exclaimed Christian, shocked at the impression which Amy's statement had just left upon his mind, "that your sister can accept boons at the hands of him who has done such foul wrong unto yourself?"

Amy Sutton did not immediately answer our hero's question, but she looked at him hard in the face with a peculiar expression, and then said, "The unfortunate Marion is not so deeply depraved, nor so lost to every good feeling, that she is indifferent enough to her sister's wrongs as to accept favours from the author of them. No, Mr. Ashton. She will succour me in the pursuance of my re-

venge, if opportunity may serve, and from something which she hints in her letter, there is a chance that her services may prove thus available. But, oh, if Marion could but be reclaimed! it is this that dwells in my mind. And now, after all I have told you of the degradation of my sister, and with your knowledge of my own shame and dishonour, I ask what have I worth living for, unless it be for revenge, and wherefore should I continue to cling to life when once that revenge is accomplished?"

Christian endeavoured to reason with the young woman in a proper manner, but she was deaf to all his remonstrances; her mind was evidently settled upon the wreaking a deadly vengeance of some sort against the Duke of Marchmont, and our hero saw with pain and sorrow that no friendly argument could divert her from her course. He therefore at length rose to depart.

"I have not as yet explained," he said, "the precise motive of my visit, and from something which you yourself let drop, it may be unnecessary to make the offer which I had originally intended. Judging from all you told me in the railway carriage some weeks back, I fancied that you purposed to retire into some seclusion here, and not knowing how you might be situated in a financial point of view —"

"A thousand thanks, Mr. Ashton," responded Amy, "but I have sufficient for all my purposes. Though declining this generous offer, I am not the less sensible of your well-meant kindness, and I shall be for ever grateful."

Christian took his departure, and returning to the station, he proceeded by the next train to London. On his arrival in the British metropolis, he repaired straight to Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and Mrs. Macaulay in person opened the front door to receive him.

"Well, my dear Mr. Ashton, it is quite an age since I saw you," exclaimed the lodging-house keeper, with her blandest smiles and most amiable looks. "Where have you been for the last two months? But, dear me! how you are improving, and what a fine handsome young man you are growing! A lady of my age may pay you such a compliment, you know. But pray walk in. Your room is all ready for your reception. I have got rid of that odious old couple who used to lock up their tea-caddy and decant

their wine for themselves. Would you believe it, Mr. Ashton? they went away without so much as giving the maid a single shilling for herself, and they took off with them the leg and wing of a fowl which they had for the previous day's dinner."

"My room is ready for me, you say?" exclaimed Christian, in astonishment.

"Yes, — to be sure," responded Mrs. Macaulay. "Did not Mr. Redcliffe tell you in his letter —"

"He merely told me that immediately on my arrival in London I was to come to him, and that I need not take up my abode previously at any tavern or lodging-house."

"To be sure not," ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay. "And where was your shrewdness, my dear Mr. Ashton, when you failed to comprehend that Mr. Redcliffe meant you to take up your abode here? All is settled and arranged, and it was on your account I got rid of those odious Johnsons, with their meanness and stinginess. Ah, you have brought all your luggage with you? That's right. But dear me! don't think of paying the cabman till he has carried it upstairs for you. And mind, my man," she added, addressing herself to the individual in question, "that you don't knock the paper off the walls with the corner of that great box. Now do walk in, Mr. Ashton."

"But where is Mr. Redcliffe?" inquired our hero.

"He will be in presently to dinner, — at six o'clock as usual. It is only half-past five, and you have therefore plenty of time for a little chat with me. By the bye, I and that odious Mrs. Sifkin are as much at daggers-drawn as ever, although I gave that magnificent party in token of our reconciliation. But she behaved infamously. She went and told Mrs. Wanklin, who told Mrs. Chowley which keeps the baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road, that I should say that Mr. Hogben had told me that both the Miss Chowleys were setting their caps at Captain Bluff. But here is Mr. Redcliffe, I declare, — a good twenty minutes before his time!"

Christian was not at all sorry that Mrs. Macaulay's garrulity should be cut short by the appearance of his friend, — at whose hands he received a most cordial welcome. Mrs. Macaulay was very anxious to have the paying of the cabman, with whom she would no doubt have got up

a pleasant little dispute as to the amount of his fare, but Christian cut the matter short by slipping into the man's hand a gratuity so liberal that it made him touch his hat to the donor, and then bestow a look of insolent triumph on Mrs. Macaulay.

Christian accompanied Mr. Redcliffe to this gentleman's sitting-room, where dinner was speedily served up. Mr. Redcliffe conversed on general topics during the repast, and as he was evidently postponing his explanation of the reasons which had induced him to send for Christian to London, our hero did not think it proper to put any question on the point. One or two little circumstances, however, struck him. From the very first moment of their acquaintance Mr. Redcliffe's manner had been invariably friendly, but now it was most kind and even affectionate. He moreover contemplated Christian frequently and fixedly, and after those earnest surveys he would sink into a profound reverie. All this our young hero could not possibly fail to notice, and he therefore awaited the coming explanations with all the more eager curiosity.

The repast was cleared away, the dessert and wine were placed upon the table, and Mr. Redcliffe then questioned Christian as to all that he had been recently doing. There was something in that gentleman's manner which invited the fullest confidence, and our hero accordingly revealed to Mr. Redcliffe his love for Isabella Vincent. He related everything which had occurred at Ramsgate, and having brought down the narrative to the point at which it is already known to the reader, he concluded in the following manner:

“Yesterday morning's post brought Miss Vincent a letter, containing the startling announcement that her cousin the Earl of Lascelles, and her aunt the countess, had ceased to exist; so that all in a moment Isabella found herself the heiress of fine estates and immense wealth. When she had recovered from the shock which the intelligence of that fatal accident or double suicide — whichever it was — naturally caused her to experience, the amiable and faithful girl gave me to understand that if the sudden possession of wealth were a source of satisfaction, it was because it would in due time enable her to prove the sincerity of that love which she entertains for me.”

"My dear boy," exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, with a degree of excitement which was very unusual on his part, "I am rejoiced to learn that you have found one who is so eminently deserving of your own devoted love, and who experiences so true a sentiment in return. But continue. What else have you to tell me?"

"The bridal of Sir Edgar Beverley and his beautiful Laura was celebrated yesterday," continued our hero, "and soon after the ceremony they set off for London, where they purpose to pass the honeymoon. Isabella accompanied them. She could not journey alone, and, as a matter of course, it was not discreet for me to travel with her. She has gone to that mansion which she originally entered a few months back in a state of dependence upon her uncle; she has gone to it as its mistress."

"Such is the mutability of human affairs," observed Mr. Redcliffe, solemnly. "But proceed, my dear Christian."

"It was originally arranged," continued our young hero, "that I should remain at Verner House until this morning, and therefore, even if this morning's post had not brought me your kind letter, I should have returned to the metropolis to-day. Rest assured, my dear sir, that I was most anxious to obey your summons with all possible despatch, but still I could not help halting for an hour by the way, to visit an unfortunate creature,— a victim of the Duke of Marchmont's."

"Ah," ejaculated Redcliffe, "when will this man's crimes cease to display themselves to me at every step? When will his career of iniquity be ended?"

"Never, I fear," responded Christian, "until his existence itself ceases."

Our hero then, at Mr. Redcliffe's request, narrated everything he had heard from the lips of the unfortunate young woman, not even omitting the painful episode in respect to her sister Marion. Mr. Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention, and when the youth's narrative was brought to a termination, Mr. Redcliffe addressed him in the following manner:

"My dear Christian, from everything that you have told me, I deduce evidences of your right principles, the generosity of your disposition, and the intrinsic excellence of your character. At the very first I experienced such

an interest in your behalf — indeed such an attachment toward yourself and your sister — that I should have at once proposed to place you in a condition of independence; but I felt how much better it was to leave you to eat the bread of industry for a time. I have kept my eye upon you, and I have also been aware that your sister was most comfortably situated under the friendly care of the Princess of Inderabad. The period has now arrived when you must no longer be left to shift for yourself in the world. I am a lone man, Christian, — this you already know; you may think too that my habits are peculiar, my manners eccentric, and if for a single moment you doubt whether you can be happy beneath the same roof with myself, you shall be provided for elsewhere, until such time when —”

Mr. Redcliffe hesitated for a few instants, and the expression of some strong emotion passed over his countenance. He then added, “Until such time that your beautiful Isabella’s period of mourning shall be ended and you may accompany her to the altar.”

Again Mr. Redcliffe paused; he rose from his seat, paced twice to and fro in the apartment, and returning to his chair, said, “Think not, my dear Christian, that when the day of your marriage arrives, you will lead Miss Vincent to the altar as a dependent on her own fortune. No, you shall have wealth, Christian, — rest assured that you shall have wealth, and at least as an equal shall you lead her to that altar. Perhaps — perhaps —”

But Mr. Redcliffe stopped short, and our young hero, throwing himself at the feet of his benefactor, took his hand and pressed it to his lips. Mr. Redcliffe, who was profoundly affected, smoothed down the curling masses of Christian’s raven hair, — at the same time murmuring, “My dear boy, there is nothing that I will not do for yourself and your sister.”

Christian hastened to assure his benefactor that so far from desiring to separate from him, or to live elsewhere, it would give him the utmost pleasure to dwell beneath the same roof.

“So be it, for the present,” answered Mr. Redcliffe. “As for Christina, let her remain where she is; it is impossible that she can be in better companionship, or with a kinder friend. I have long known the Princess Indora —

But enough, Christian. Let your sister continue to dwell with her Highness — until — ”

And again Mr. Redcliffe stopped short, as if every instant he were afraid that in the excitement of his feelings he should be betrayed into the utterance of something more than he might choose to reveal. But our young hero was himself too full of varied emotions to perceive, much less to suspect the precise nature of those that were agitating his benefactor, and again was his heartfelt gratitude poured forth to Mr. Redcliffe.

This gentleman now said to our hero, “ Tell me, Christian, everything connected with your earlier years; reveal to me in fullest detail all that regards yourself and your sister, from your most infantile recollections down to the period when I first became acquainted with you in London. Do not think it is mere idle curiosity on my part, but I feel so deep an interest in your amiable sister and yourself that everything which in any way concerns you is of importance in my estimation.”

Christian proceeded to comply with his benefactor's request; his narrative was, however, concise enough, and was speedily told.

“ To-morrow,” said Mr. Redcliffe, “ immediately after breakfast you shall go and fetch your sister to pass the day with us. I will give you a note for the Princess Indora, so that her assent shall at once be conceded. Ah, and request your sister, my dear Christian, to bring with her those little relics to which you have just alluded in your narrative, for, as I have said, everything that regards you has an interest in my eyes — and — and I have a curiosity to see those cherished objects which belonged to your deceased mother, and which your uncle Mr. Ashton placed in your hands when you were both old enough to receive possession of them and to appreciate it.”

We need not further extend the description of this touching and pathetically exciting scene which took place between Mr. Redcliffe and our hero. Suffice it to say that the remainder of the evening was passed in most friendly conversation on the part of the benefactor and the recipient of his bounties, so that when Christian retired to his couch he had every reason to felicitate himself upon this evening as being one of the happiest and most fortunate in his somewhat chequered existence.

Immediately after breakfast in the morning, Christian repaired to the villa of the Princess Indora, and on arriving there he was most fervently embraced by his loving and delighted sister. From the princess he experienced a most cordial welcome, and such was the state of his own feelings, with all his present prospects of happiness, that he did not perceive how for a moment Indora trembled, and how the colour went and came on her magnificent countenance, as he presented to her Clement Redcliffe's letter. She retired to another apartment to peruse it, and the twins were left alone together. Then Christian informed his sister of everything that had taken place between himself and Mr. Redcliffe on the preceding evening, and our amiable young heroine was infinitely rejoiced to hear that her beloved brother need no longer consider himself dependent on the precarious chances of employment for the means of subsistence.

By the time Christian's explanations were finished, the Princess of Inderabad returned to the room where she had left them together, and her Highness at once intimated to Christian that it was with infinite pleasure she granted the request conveyed in Mr. Redcliffe's note. But if the twins had been more accustomed to penetrate into the human heart, if they had more curiosity in studying the looks of individuals, they might have suspected that there was more in Mr. Redcliffe's billet than a mere request that Christina might be spared for the day; they would have fancied there was something which was of peculiar interest and importance to the Indian lady likewise.

While on their way in a hired vehicle from Bayswater to Mortimer Street, the twins had leisure for additional explanations. Christian made his delighted sister acquainted with the change that had taken place in respect to Isabella Vincent, — how she had become possessed of an immense fortune, — and how in her altered position she had renewed the assurances of love and constancy toward our hero. And then Christina recited, in fuller details than she had written to her brother when he was at Ramsgate, the particulars of the outrage she had undergone when she was forcibly carried off from the villa, and when she was rescued by Lord Octavian Meredith. The artless girl concealed nothing; she explained to her brother

all that had occurred between herself and the young nobleman, and while Christian expressed his approval of the course she had adopted, he could not help saying to her, in a low, tender, compassionating voice, "I am afraid, my sweet sister, that your affections are indeed more or less centred in Lord Octavian?"

"Christian," replied the weeping, blushing girl, "I have striven — Heaven alone can tell how I have striven — to banish that image from my mind, and I have not been able. I have prayed to God to succour and uphold me in my task, but my very prayers have seemed to impress that image all the more forcibly on the memory of your unhappy sister. I should deem myself very guilty, were it not that I know that we poor weak mortals have no power over volition, and all that we can do is to prevent such circumstances as these from leading us into error."

"Error, my dearest sister," exclaimed Christian; "mention not that word in connection with your own pure and virtuous self."

Christina pressed her brother's hand in token of gratitude for the confidence he thus reposed in her, and of which she knew herself to be so completely worthy, and then she said in a tremulous, hesitating voice, "Must I to Mr. Redcliffe make all these revelations?"

Christian did not immediately answer; he reflected profoundly. At length he said, "No, my sweet sister; these are matters too sacred to be discussed save and except with a very near and dear relative. Mr. Redcliffe is my benefactor, and nothing more. I love him; we must both love him, and if he should demand your fullest confidence in all and every respect, even to your most secret thoughts, then must you speak frankly. But not of your own accord, dear Christina, need you volunteer explanations; it would be with unnecessary spontaneousness inflicting pain upon yourself. Ah! I recollect, in reference to that outrage which made my blood boil, dearest Christina, I wrote to Mr. Redcliffe from Ramsgate, telling him what had happened, immediately after the receipt of your letter describing the circumstances, for I have constantly been in the habit of thus communicating with him who has now proved so generous a benefactor. He assured me last night that he is not ignorant who the vile authoress of the outrage was,

and that she will be punished for that and other offences which have come to his knowledge."

The vehicle now stopped at Mrs. Macaulay's house, and that female herself came forth to welcome Christina.

"Dear me, Miss Ashton," exclaimed the garrulous landlady, "how wonderfully you have improved since last I saw you! I was telling your brother yesterday that he too had improved, but really in respect to yourself —"

"My dear Mrs. Macaulay," said Christina, smiling and blushing, "you are pleased to compliment me, but I can assure you —"

"Oh, no compliment at all," interjected the garrulous landlady, "you are the most beautiful creature that ever honoured the threshold of my house by crossing it. Ah! and there is that odious Mrs. Sifkin looking out of her parlour window and she will be ready to eat her own head off with spite at seeing such an elegant young gentleman and such a charming young lady entering at my door."

"Rather an impossible feat for Mrs. Sifkin to perform, is it not, Mrs. Macaulay?" observed Christian, smiling good-naturedly, "and certainly one far transcending the importance of the occasion."

"Oh, you know not the spite of that odious woman," exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. "It was but the other day she told Mrs. Bunkley, which does my mangling — Ah! I forgot," ejaculated the worthy woman, suddenly interrupting herself, "I have such news for you! Only look here, in yesterday's paper, amongst the list of bankrupts — Mr. Samuel Emmanuel of the great clothing emporium. Gone all to smashes, and serve him right. That great, coarse, vulgar-looking wife of his won't be hung with massive gold chains any more, like a turkey with sausages at Christmas. But I see that you are in a hurry, and Mr. Redcliffe is waiting anxiously for you both."

Mrs. Macaulay — who had hitherto barred the way in the passage that she might indulge in her garrulous propensities and have this little chat with the twins — now stepped aside, and they were enabled to pass her. They ascended to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting-apartment, where Christina experienced the kindest welcome from that gentleman. After a little conversation Mr. Redcliffe inquired whether she had brought with her those memorials of her long deceased mother

which, through Christian, he had expressed a wish to behold.

“Yes,” answered our heroine, with a tone and look of tender sadness, as she produced a small casket of Oriental workmanship, and which was one of the numerous gifts she had received from the Princess of Inderabad.

Mr. Redcliffe took the casket from her hand, and opened it with as reverential an air as the twins themselves could have displayed when proceeding to the contemplation of memorials that so intimately concerned themselves. First he drew forth a long tress of raven hair, — a tress which we have described in an earlier chapter of this narrative as one that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen, — ay, or the envy of a queen! and while he surveyed it with a long and earnest attention, the brother and sister instinctively wound their arms about each other's neck, and pressed each other's hand, as they exchanged looks of unspeakable fondness. Then Mr. Redcliffe drew forth from the casket a beautiful gold watch of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, and as he contemplated it, the tears trickled down his cheeks.

“Yes, Mr. Redcliffe can appreciate,” responded Christina, “the feelings with which you and I, dear brother, have been wont to gaze for hours and hours on the memorials of a mother who was snatched from us ere we had intelligence to comprehend her loss.”

Clement Redcliffe now opened another little packet which he took from the casket, and this packet contained two rings. One has been already described as a wedding-ring; the other, likewise a lady's, was of no considerable value but of exquisite workmanship. And now Mr. Redcliffe proceeded to the window with these two rings, and as he contemplated them, his back was turned toward the orphans. There he remained for at least five minutes — motionless as a statue — with his eyes evidently riveted upon the rings, and the orphans did not approach him. They still felt persuaded that in the goodness of his heart he was deeply touched on their account, while surveying these relics of their long dead mother. It was altogether a scene of the most pathetic interest, and the tears were trickling

down the beautifully handsome face of Christian and the sweetly beautiful countenance of Christina.

Mr. Redcliffe at length turned slowly away from the window. His complexion, which has been described as being made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun, now appeared of a dead white; his face was indeed ghastly pale. That cold, stern look which he had habitually wore, and which was almost saturnine, chilling the beholder who was unaccustomed to it, had totally disappeared, and was succeeded by one of the deepest melancholy; but it was a mournfulness that had something awfully solemn in it. He advanced toward the twins, and taking their hands he said, in a voice that was scarcely audible, "My dear children, — for as such I mean to look upon you henceforth, — I can weep with you over those memorials of the mother who died in your infancy. You love and revere her memory. Oh, never fail thus to cherish, thus to cling to it; for it is sweet to think of a departed parent who is now a saint in heaven."

At the same moment the same idea struck the twins; simultaneously too were their looks bent in eager, anxious inquiry upon Mr. Redcliffe's countenance, and their lips gave utterance at the same moment to precisely the same words.

"Our mother — did you know her?"

Mr. Redcliffe turned aside, raised his hand to his brow, and for an instant seemed to stagger as if under the influence of a hurricane of memories sweeping through his brain. The orphans watched him with a still more earnest gaze, — a still more anxious interest than before, for they felt as if they stood upon the threshold of hitherto unanticipated revealings.

"Yes, I knew her," slowly responded Mr. Redcliffe, again turning toward the brother and sister. "I knew your poor mother. It is this circumstance, my dear children, which inspires me with so vivid an interest on your behalf. But you must ask me no questions at present — I can tell you nothing more yet. The time may shortly come when — But do not press me now. Above all things, breathe not a syllable elsewhere of what has taken place between us. Let it be sufficient for you to know that in me you have found one who will watch over your interests, who will study your

welfare, and who will be unto you both as a friend, a guardian, and a father."

Mr. Redcliffe folded the twins in his arms, and wept over them. They knelt at his feet, murmuring forth in broken voices the expressions of their gratitude, for it was sweet indeed, — ah, it was sweet for this youthful brother and sister to possess the friendship, the guardianship, and the love of one who had known their mother. He raised them up from their kneeling posture; again he embraced them both, and then relocking the casket, he said to Christina, "Keep you these valuables, my dear girl, with the most sedulous care, — keep them, I say, not merely as the memorials of your deceased mother, but as objects which may sooner or later prove of importance in another sense."

"Will you keep them for us?" asked both the twins, speaking as it were in the same breath.

Mr. Redcliffe reflected for a moment, and then he said, "Yes, I will keep them, but I hope and trust it will only be for a short while that I may thus feel it safer to take charge of these valuables, and then shall they be restored unto you. Ask me nothing more now, and let us turn the conversation upon other subjects."

Mr. Redcliffe hastened to lock up the casket in a secure place, and the remainder of the day was passed by himself and the orphans with that affectionate and friendly intercourse which naturally followed the scenes that had taken place, and the new light in which they respectively stood, — namely, he as their guardian and protector, and they as the grateful recipients of his kindness and his bounty.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SMEDLEYS AGAIN

WE must once more request the reader to accompany us to the Smedleys' habitation situated in one of those narrow streets which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. The house had precisely the same appearance as when we first described it in an earlier chapter of this narrative, with the difference that there was a neatly written card in one of the windows, announcing lodgings to let. The brass plate on the front door, indicating the avocation of Mr. Smedley as a gold-beater, was well polished, as was its wont; the gilt arm, clutching the hammer in its fist as a further illustration of that individual's calling, was equally resplendent. The two windows of the first floor had their dark moreen curtains and their white blinds as usual, and Mr. Smedley himself was as constant an attendant at the chapel next door as when we first introduced him to our reader.

It was evening, and Mr. and Mrs. Smedley were seated together in their little parlour on the ground floor. There was a bottle of spirits upon the table, and the somewhat inflamed countenance of Bab Smedley showed that she had been indulging in her predilection for strong waters. Not however that she had imbibed thereof so copiously on the present occasion as to affect her reason, but only sufficient to render her somewhat sharper and more querulous in her observations to her husband. They were discussing the circumstances of their position, and deliberating on the plans which they ought to adopt, but it was in low, whispering voices that they for the most part addressed each other, though every now and then the woman's ejaculations became louder with the petulant impatience of her utterance,

and then Jack Smedley would interpose a timid and hasty "Hush!"

Presently Mrs. Smedley, consulting her husband's silver watch which lay upon the table, said, "It is close upon nine o'clock, Jack; you must be off with that money."

"And I will just take a few of those religious tracts," said Smedley, rising from his seat, "because if I happen to be seen putting anything into those chaps' hands, and if any question is asked, I can easily declare that it was one of these godly publications."

"Be off with you, with your godly publications," ejaculated Bab Smedley with an air of supreme disgust, and she forthwith proceeded to mix herself another glass of spirits and water.

Jack Smedley wrapped a pound's worth of silver in a piece of paper, and deposited the little packet in his waistcoat pocket. He took a handful of the religious tracts, and saying to his wife, "When I come back we will continue our deliberations," he issued from the house.

Glancing hastily up and down the narrow street with the anxious look of a man whose conscience was not so pure that he had nothing to dread, Jack Smedley continued his way. To two or three of his neighbours who were standing on their thresholds, as the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods are accustomed to do, he addressed a passing observation in a tone of the most friendly familiarity, but it was only a very cold response that in each instance he received. Muttering to himself an imprecation against the individuals who were thus frigid toward him, Smedley continued his way, and in about ten minutes he reached Mint Street. Some little improvement had within the last few years been made in this neighbourhood, but it was still at the time at which we are writing — as it also is at the present day — the resort of all society's lowest and vilest outcasts.

Every now and then Jack Smedley looked back to see if he were followed by any suspicious individual, and in order to give a colour to his visit to this vile neighbourhood, he occasionally put a tract into some hand that was thrust forth with the expectation of receiving alms. This proceeding on Mr. Smedley's part brought down upon him the curse of disappointment or the gibe of ridicule, but he cared not.

At length Mr. Smedley reached the corner of a narrow,

diverging street, or, rather, miserable obscure alley, and there he beheld a couple of ill-looking, squalid, ragged youths, standing together. These were the brothers Bill and Tim Scott, and in no way was their hideous personal appearance altered since we first introduced them to the reader.

Now Jack Smedley glanced around him with even a more searching anxiety than he had previously displayed, but flattering himself that the coast was perfectly clear, so far as any suspicious-looking individual was concerned, he took the little packet of money from his waistcoat pocket, and thrust it into the outstretched hand of Bill Scott. The large goggle eyes of the miserable being glistened with a greedy delight, and his stunted brother Tim, catching hold of Jack Smedley's sleeve, asked impatiently, "How much have you gived him? 'cos why he's safe to bilk his own brother, if so be he has a chance."

"You'll find a pound in that paper," responded the gold-beater, quickly. "But don't detain me, and for Heaven's sake don't stand looking about in the street, or go and get drunk at any boozing-ken and make fools of yourselves."

"Never you mind us, Mr. Smedley," said Bill Scott, the elder brother. "But what of Barney? Is he took agin? Or has nuffin been heard on him?"

"Nothing," replied Smedley, "and he has not been retaken, — at least not to my knowledge. I always look at the newspaper —"

"Well, I s'pose Barney will turn up agin some of these here days," said Bill Scott, "and the sooner the better, for I'm getting unkimmon tired of this here hide-and-seek sort of a life."

"You ought to be thankful," responded Smedley, "that you've got such a good friend in me. But I can't stop another moment. This day week, at precisely the same hour —"

"Where is it to be?" asked Bill Scott.

"Where?" and after an instant's musing, Jack Smedley added, "At the back of St. George's Church."

Having thus spoken, the gold-beater turned upon his heel, and retraced his way rapidly along Mint Street, taking care however the while to be more profuse in his tract distribution than while proceeding in the contrary direction.

Frequent were the anxious glances which he rapidly flung around, but he had no particular reason to suspect that he was watched, dogged or followed.

We must, however, see what had in the meantime been taking place at his own house. Immediately after his departure Bab Smedley took a deep draught from the tumbler which she had just filled, and she was sitting in rumination on the topics of their recent discourse, when a knock at the front door startled the woman from her reverie. It was not a single knock; it was not precisely a double one, in the usual acceptance of the term, which means a series of strokes, but it was something between the two. Bab Smedley took up the candle from the table, and hastened to answer the summons. The person whom she found at the door was a middle-aged man, of quiet, sedate, respectable appearance, plainly but decently dressed, and who looked like a clerk or small tradesman.

"Are you the mistress of the house?" asked the individual with a bow that was sufficiently polite.

"I am, sir," responded Bab, "and the master too, for that matter," she thought within herself, for she experienced an unmitigated contempt for her husband, and the feeling was inseparable from her ideas.

"Can I say a few words to you?" asked the stranger.

"To be sure," replied Mrs. Smedley, without however making the slightest move as an invitation for the individual to enter.

"You have lodgings to let?" he said, but looking about him as much as to imply that he would rather speak to her indoors.

"We had, sir," Mrs. Smedley immediately responded, "but they were let this afternoon to a very respectable old couple that have known us for a great many years."

"And yet the bill is still up in the window?" said the applicant, stepping back a space or two to assure himself by another glance that such was the fact.

"Oh, is it?" said Mrs. Smedley, coolly. "Then I forgot to take it down, and I will do so at once. I am sorry you should have had the trouble, sir —"

"Oh, no trouble. But perhaps you may have a spare room — I only want one —"

"No spare room now, sir. Good evening to you," and

Bab Smedley shut the door in the face of the applicant, who seemed much inclined to keep her in discourse.

She returned into the parlour, and at once took down the card announcing that lodgings were to be let. She evidently did not much like the visit, and reseating herself, fell into a gloomy reverie, which was only occasionally interrupted by a recurrence to the spirits and water. In about twenty minutes after the little incident we have described, Jack Smedley returned, and Bab at once vented her ill-humour upon him.

"What was the use of your keeping that card stuck up in the window? I told you more than once that I would not have it, and yet —"

"But, my dear Bab, do hear reason," interrupted her husband, as he resumed his seat at the table.

"Yes, when you can talk it and not before," exclaimed the vigaro. "But what have you done?"

"Those hungry dogs," responded Jack, "were at the place of appointment, waiting for their weekly money, and I told them where to be the next time it falls due. But don't you think, Bab, it is a very hard thing we should have to allow these fellows a pound a week —"

"How can we help ourselves?" demanded Mrs. Smedley. "Isn't there a warrant out for Bill Scott's apprehension? And isn't he therefore obliged to play at hide-and-seek? And if his brother Tim was to go out priggling in order to keep them both, wouldn't he be dogged and followed, so that Bill would be certain to be arrested? There's no doubt it's hard enough upon us, but we can't help ourselves. As for that card there —"

"Now do listen, Bab," said her husband, entreatingly. "When that cursed business at Liverpool exploded, and your mother got into her present trouble, weren't we obliged to do all we could to keep up the appearance of our own respectability? Didn't we assure the neighbours that it was totally impossible Mrs. Webber could have committed the deed, that there was some terrible mistake, and that her innocence would transpire on the trial?"

"And the neighbours don't believe us," interjected Bab, sullenly.

"No, I'm sorry to say they don't altogether believe us," responded her husband; "or at least don't know exactly

what to think. They speak cool and look distant, but I do my best to ride it with a high hand, and seem as if I did not notice their altered behaviour. Well, I advised that card should be kept up in the window as usual, just as if we felt our own respectability to be totally unimpaired, and as if we were at least conscious of our own innocence. Besides, the keeping up of the card was only a blind, for we agreed that we would not let the lodgings even if anybody applied, because you and I have always so many things to talk about now, and we must not stand the chance of being overheard. And then, too, the Burker may turn up at any moment, — for Barney is such a desperate fellow, he's almost certain to find his way to London, — and if he does, he would be sure to come to us, the worst luck on it."

"There's enough," ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Some one has been to apply for the lodgings, and I don't like his appearance a bit, I can tell you."

"Who?" asked the gold-beater, with a look full of startled anxiety.

"Ah! who?" ejaculated Bab. "How do I know? But who should come prying about this place here, and trying on all sorts of dodges to get in amongst us for more reasons than one —"

"Do you — do you think he was a — a — detective?" asked Jack Smedley, with an awful elongation of his pale countenance.

"As like as not," rejoined Bab, petulantly. "However, I stalled him off. I told him the lodgings were let to a decent old couple. I was precious short with him, and I shut the door. Now, the fact is, Jack, things can't go on like this; I am getting uncommon tired of living constantly on the fidgets —"

"Not more tired than me, I know," exclaimed her husband. "Didn't I propose a bolt to France immediately after your mother got into trouble? But it was you that said we must stick here at all hazards, and when we decided to remain, I did the best I could to keep up a show of respectability."

"Of course I said we would remain," ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Do you think that the house wasn't constantly watched after mother went down to Liverpool to Lettice

Rodney's trial? And it would have been madness for us to have thought of a move, — suspicion would have been excited in a moment. But after that girl Rodney's trial things looked better for us, though they went so dead against mother."

"Yes, I know the detective said at Lettice Rodney's trial," observed Jack Smedley, "that he had nothing to allege against our respectability."

"Well, then," continued Bab, "it was better for us to go on living here, but when two or three weeks back people began asking how it was that the old lodger of ours disappeared so suddenly in the winter —"

"Ah! that was the thing that began to frighten me too," interjected the gold-beater, "and then came the news of the *Burker's* escape, and the fright we've been in lest he should come here to get us both into such trouble that we could never hope to get out of it —"

"That is nothing," interrupted Bab, "in comparison with the other thing we were speaking about before you went out to meet those *Scotts*."

"Ah! you mean your mother?" said Jack Smedley, with a significant look, at the same time that he drew his chair closer to his wife. "Do you — do you really think," he asked, with a very pale face, "that the old woman is likely to peach?"

"I didn't think so at first," answered Bab, "or else I shouldn't have insisted that we were to remain here. But lately, the more I've thought over the matter the more I am convinced there is everything to be dreaded in that quarter. There's no use disguising the fact, Jack; you never was a favourite with mother, and as for any love for me, her daughter, it's all nonsense. If she thought she could do herself any good by turning around upon us and telling how two or three have gone down there —"

"Yes, yes — I know," said Jack Smedley, shuddering, as his wife pointed in a downward direction. "But the quicklime —"

"Well, the quicklime has done its work long ago," interrupted Bab, "even in respect to that man *Smith*, or *Preston*, I should say —"

"By the bye," interrupted Jack, "what have you done with his letter, — you know, — and also the packet of

papers we took out from under the flooring of his house in Cambridge Terrace?"

"Never mind the papers," exclaimed Bab, petulantly; "I have put them where they are safe enough, — though little use they ever stand the chance of being to us or our affairs; for when we made secret inquiries about those young Ashtons, we heard they were living in a wretched poor lodging in Camden Town, and hadn't the means of rewarding any one who would give them up those papers. It has been of no use to make inquiries since, for it is not very likely their condition is much improved. But let us return to what we were saying —"

"Yes, about your mother?" suggested Jack Smedley.

"Well, then, about my mother," continued Bab. "You know what my opinion is; I tell you that mother will peach if it answers her purpose. She has not sent us any reply to the two or three letters we have written, and which I so carefully worded that she could not fail to understand the game we had to play —"

"Perhaps she is offended," observed Jack Smedley, "at our writing in that sort of sanctimonious strain?"

"Offended? nonsense," exclaimed Bab. "How could she be offended? She knows very well that we must be aware all letters going to her would be opened by the gaol authorities, and that we were therefore compelled to write in a particular way. But never mind all this. It is of no use arguing the point. I tell you that if mother lives on to go through her trial and be condemned to death, she will peach as sure as you are Jack Smedley."

"If she lives?" catching at those words which appeared to have some covert meaning.

"Yes, if she lives," answered Bab, repeating those words. "And therefore she must not live, and if you are a man, Jack —"

"I am man enough to do anything to secure our safety," responded the gold-beater. "Only show me how —"

"Now look you," replied Bab; "I understand mother well enough, and a great deal better than you do. She would like to put herself out of the way before the trial comes on, — of that I am convinced. But if the trial is once over, and she is condemned to death, and the croaking parsons

get hold of her, you may depend upon it she will out with everything."

"Then what is to be done?" asked Jack Smedley.

"What is to be done?" echoed his wife, with an air of mingled impatience and contempt; "what should be done but for you to —" and she whispered a few words in the ears of her husband.

"But would you have me do this?" he asked, gazing upon her as if he thought that she could scarcely be in earnest, or that she meant to put him to a test for some other and ulterior purpose.

"Of course I would," rejoined the fiendlike woman; "everything for our own safety. Let what will happen to the Burker, we know that he is staunch, and I feel convinced that nothing could induce him to turn around upon his pals. The more savage and ferocious a person is, the more sure is he or she to be true to friends and associates. As for those Scotts, — we will get them safe out of the country, and then, if once mother is put out of the way, we have got little or nothing to fear."

"Well, I don't know," said Jack Smedley, in a sort of dismayed musing, "I had a very bad dream last night. I thought the black cat was scouring all over the house, that some strange man came in to look after her, that she cut down-stairs into the scullery, hid herself underneath the table and therefore sat right upon that trap-door —"

"Stuff and nonsense, with your black cats," cried Bab Smedley.

"Just wait a moment," interposed Jack. "I thought that the strange man went down into the scullery, found the cat there, discovered the trap-door, and then all in an instant turned into a policeman. But you know, Bab, that the night we did that last piece of business, — I mean Preston's affair, — the cat did cut about the house in such a strange way that I told you at the time I didn't like it; it seemed an omen of evil. But really," asked Jack, abruptly, "what is to prevent us from making a bolt now? Why not get over to France? We may then dispense with this new business about your mother, we need not care what happens to the Burker, and we shall no longer have to pension those Scotts."

"And what if the police have their eye upon us?" de-

manded Mrs. Smedley; "what if that man who came to-night is a detective who wants to get into the house under pretence of being a lodger, that he may all the better play the spy upon us? I tell you I am certain that if we were to make such a move as would show we intended flight, we should both be pounced upon at once on some pretence or another. It is only by staying here, and seeming to rely on our respectability, that we are safe. The police are evidently puzzled about us; they don't know what to think, they fancy we may be all right, and as long as we give them no cause to think otherwise, we are safe. They may try by all kinds of dodges to know more of us and peer into our secrets, but there's no chance of their going to the length of laying hands upon us. We must therefore use the opportunity we now have to get rid of obstacles and overcome perils, so as to make ourselves completely safe. Now, that is my view of the matter, and it must be acted upon," added Bab, peremptorily.

"But what if I go to Liverpool?" asked Jack, considerably reassured, though not completely so, by his wife's arguments.

"Natural enough," she exclaimed, "to see your mother-in-law, to remonstrate with her on her wickedness if she is guilty, to console and strengthen her if she is innocent. Will those reasons do, Jack? Come now, you have played the sanctimonious long enough amongst those snivelling, canting, whining hypocrites next door" — alluding to the chapel — "to be able to perform the same part with great effect at Liverpool. Take a clean white cravat with you, put on your longest face, and don't fear as to the result. What you require is fortunately in the house —"

"How?" exclaimed Smedley.

"The phial of prussic acid," rejoined his wife. "Don't you remember, we found it amongst Preston's effects? Forger as he was, and always trembling at the idea of being arrested, he no doubt had the poison in readiness for any moment. It is lucky for our present purpose, because it would otherwise be dangerous for you just now to go out and buy it."

We need not chronicle any more of the discourse which took place between this delectable husband and wife; suffice it to say that everything was settled between them for the carrying out of their nefarious purpose. At an early

hour in the morning Jack Smedley went amongst two or three of his neighbours, with the intimation that he was going to Liverpool to see his mother-in-law, and he officiously undertook to execute whatsoever commissions they might choose to charge him with. He however received cold and distant responses, to which he had been lately accustomed, but his present purpose was answered, he had openly declared his intention of visiting Liverpool, and if there were really police spies in the neighbourhood, they could not think that he meditated a total flight altogether.

To Liverpool Mr. Smedley repaired, and in the evening he arrived in that town. It was too late for him to see his mother-in-law, but on the following morning, at the earliest hour permitted by the prison regulations, he was introduced into her cell. He found the old woman still in bed, and when he made his appearance, she surveyed him with looks of mingled spite, mistrust, and aversion.

"Well, mother-in-law," said Jack, when the turnkey had retired, "as you didn't write to us, Bab and I thought the best thing to be done was for me to run down and see you."

"I wish I had never seen you at all," answered Mrs. Webber growlingly, — "never in all my life. It was you who concocted this precious business that has got me into such trouble, and, oh, dear! oh, dear! to think how it will end, — to think how it will end!"

The wretched woman sat up in bed, and rocked herself to and fro as she thus spoke. She was frightfully altered. Thin and emaciated, she was worn almost to a skeleton, not by remorse for the crimes she had committed, but with horror at the incessant contemplation of the penalty she would soon have to pay for them. There was something fearful in the expression of her countenance; she seemed like a starved tiger-cat that could have sprung at any one approaching, as if to avenge the doom that appeared certain to overtake herself. Jack Smedley was frightened by her look, while her words seemed to justify all the misgivings which her daughter Barbara had entertained concerning her.

"Come, mother-in-law," he said, plucking up his presence of mind as well as he was able, "don't be angry with me — I did all for the best."

“And the worst has come of it,” interjected Mrs. Webber, sharply, “and I have got to bear all its brunt. I tell you what, Jack,” she went on to say, her eyes glaring with fierceness upon him, “those who commit crimes in concert should also share the punishment in concert; or else there’s no fairness and no justice. I feel as if I was made a scape-goat of —”

“Nonsense, mother-in-law,” exclaimed Jack Smedley. “When people embark in these sort of things, they each and all take their fair and equal chance. It might have happened to Bab, — it might have happened to me.”

“You! you white-livered scoundrel,” ejaculated Mrs. Webber, with a look of withering contempt; “you would have turned around and peached on all the rest the very first instant. Bab too is as selfish as she can be. Look at the letters you have both written me, — full of that canting nonsense of yours, the infection of which Bab seems to have caught.”

“How could we write otherwise?” asked Smedley. “Come, do be reasonable, mother-in-law.”

“Reasonable indeed,” cried the wretched woman, “am I not in a state that is enough to drive one mad? You and my daughter are all for yourselves; you wrote to me when you should have come —”

“The house was watched by the police,” interjected Smedley, “and therefore —”

“How is it, then, that you are here now?” demanded Mrs. Webber, sharply, “and what devil’s business has brought you to me? Can you help me to escape, Jack? Can you with all your art and cunning set me free, as the Burker has liberated himself?”

“If it were possible,” responded Smedley, “I should —”

“Possible,” cried Mrs. Webber, contemptuously. “Nothing is possible with you, except sneaking villainy and covert cowardly crime. But anything bold, — no, nothing of the sort. Look you, Jack Smedley, if I go to the scaffold it shall not be alone.”

“Mother-in-law,” he ejaculated, vehemently.

“Hold your tongue, and listen. Companionship is always sweet, and not the less so in death. At all events it will be a consolation for me to know that I am not the most miserable person in existence at that last instant.”

"But, mother-in-law," faltered forth Jack Smedley, with a countenance white as a sheet, "would you hang your own daughter?"

"She leaves me here to be hanged," retorted the woman, fiercely; "she does not come near me."

"She has sent you plenty of money, mother-in-law," interposed Jack, in accents of remonstrance and deprecation.

"Yes, to fee counsel in a hopeless cause," cried Mrs. Webber. "I tell you what it is; I feel in that state of mind that I could wreak a vengeance upon the whole world. All the bonds of kith and kin are broken; I know nobody but enemies. That is my state of mind. And if you had the gibbet looming ever before your eyes, if you had a sensation as of a cord ever around your neck, if you had night and day to look death in the face, — you, Jack Smedley, would feel even worse than I do. It is enough to drive one crazed — crazed — crazed."

Again the old woman rocked herself to and fro, and her son-in-law felt as if his purpose were completely frustrated. He knew not what to say next; there was a perfect consternation in his mind. He thought that she might even denounce him as the accomplice of her numerous crimes, the instant the turnkey should come back to conduct him away from her cell.

"Jack Smedley," she said, at length breaking a somewhat long pause, "tell me for what purpose you have come here now. If I thought it was to serve me in any way, if I thought you had the courage to furnish me the means of escape —"

"Tell me what those means are, mother-in-law," quickly ejaculated the gold-beater, "and I promise you they shall be forthcoming. Do you want a file, a crowbar, a rope ladder —"

"Fool," interrupted the old woman with bitterest scorn, "how can I, a poor, weak, feeble creature, reduced to the mere shadow of what I was, — how can I accomplish that which a strong, powerful, determined man, as the Burker, could only just succeed in effecting? No, it is not by such means as those that I may escape hence. But there is something which will enable me to evade the ordeal of trial, the horror of condemnation, ay, and that last hideous frightful scene which I shudder to contemplate. And more too, — it

is something that will save me from the horrible chance of betraying my own daughter in my madness."

"And that something?" ejaculated Smedley, with the almost breathless eagerness of suspense.

Mrs. Webber looked very hard at him for nearly a minute, and then a word — a single word — came in a slow whisper from her lips, — a word which made her son-in-law start suddenly, although what she had previously said had more than half-prepared him for the climax.

And that one word was, "Poison!"

"Do you mean it, mother-in-law?" he asked, clutching her wrist and looking her intently in the face.

"I mean it," she responded. "But of what use," was her immediate contemptuous addition, "is it for me to make such a request, since I already see that your craven heart —"

"Enough, mother-in-law. You do not understand me," hurriedly whispered the gold-beater. "I have poison with me."

"Poison with you?" she echoed, a wild joy flashing forth in unearthly light from her eyes. "Is it possible? But how? You are not deceiving me?"

"No, no; I am not deceiving you," rejoined the gold-beater, quickly. "Can you not understand that Bab and I feel ourselves to be environed by dangers? Yes, we know that we are standing upon a mine which may explode at any instant. Therefore we are prepared. We have breathed a solemn vow that the hangman's cord shall never touch our necks. On this we are resolved. Do you remember the phial of poison —"

"Ah! the prussic acid," said Mrs. Webber, eagerly, "which was found amongst Preston" effects?"

"The same," rejoined Smedley. "There is the phial. It contains half the fluid which originally filled it. Bab has the other half."

"And will you give it to me?" demanded the woman, yearning for the deadly venom with as strong an avidity as if she were famished and it was food that she was imploring; "will you surrender up your share? Can you for once in your life, Jack Smedley, do a generous action?"

The gold-beater pretended to hesitate for a few moments, but if his simulated hesitation had only lasted an instant

longer that fierce tiger-cat — his mother-in-law — would have flown at him to tear the phial from his grasp.

“ Yes, take it,” he said, just in time to prevent such a scene, and he placed the phial in her hand.

“ Oh, to cheat the gallows! to avoid the hangman! to escape the horrors of the gazing crowd,” and the woman in an unnatural frenzy of joy pressed the phial to her lips.

“ But my dear mother-in-law,” whispered Jack Smedley, bending down toward her ear, “ you will not take that poison for two or three days? You will not compromise me? ”

“ No, I can afford to spare you now,” answered Mrs. Webber, “ for you have done me at least one service in my lifetime, — a service that gives me the means of death. And now go — leave me. I am no puling foolish creature that can descend to slobbering farewells and sickly leave-takings — But stay one moment. You need not tell Bab that I hinted in my frenzy at the idea of betraying either you or her, for I should not have done it, — it was mere madness at the time. And now go.”

She waved her hand to her son-in-law, who opening the little trap at the door of the cell, called for the turnkey who was stationed at a grating at the end of the passage, and that functionary speedily arrived to afford Jack Smedley egress from the prisoner’s chamber.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SUBTERRANEAN

It was evening, some five or six days after the interview of Jack Smedley with his mother-in-law, and his wife Barbara sat alone in the little parlour at their abode in London. She was reflecting upon what her husband had done at Liverpool, and bestowing an equal part of her attention on the glass of spirits and water which stood on the table. She had been rendered aware of Jack Smedley's successful mission to Mrs. Webber, inasmuch as he had written from Liverpool to his wife, but in a very guarded strain, for fear of the communication being intercepted. They had, however, agreed beforehand between themselves on some phrase that was to be introduced in case of success, while another phrase was to indicate failure. The former had found its introduction into the body of the epistle, and amidst a series of canting sentences and studied hypocrisies, the gold-beater thus found the means of setting his wife's mind at rest on the one grand important point.

Upon this she was cogitating, and dividing, as we have said, her attention between the subject of her thoughts and the liquor to which she had become so wedded. It was nine o'clock, and the servant-girl who attended for a certain period during the day entered to inquire whether anything more were wanted from her this evening. A response was given in the negative; the girl took her departure, and Mrs. Smedley was now alone in the house. She knew not how it was,—she could not account for it,—but assuredly did it seem as if a chill smote her the instant the front door closed behind that girl. Bab Smedley was by no means the woman to yield to the influence of vague presentiments or ungrounded alarms, but she liked not this feeling which took

possession of her, neither could she shake it off. She applied herself with additional vigour to the spirits and water; potations appeared to do her no good,—on the contrary, they seemed to render her all the more nervous. Contemptuously as she had been wont to look upon her husband, she wished he was at home now for companionship's sake.

All of a sudden she fancied she heard a noise in the back part of the house, and for the first time in her life Bab Smedley was seized with such a terror that she could not rise from her chair to ascertain what the sound was. Then as slowly recovering courage she looked around, she started on beholding the great black cat lying on a chair and gazing at her with its large green glassy eyes. She remembered the ominous instinct with which her husband's terrified imagination had endowed the animal on the night of Preston's murder, and she recoiled from the glare of those eyes.

The sound was renewed; this time she became aware that it was a knocking at the back door, and snatching up the candle, she proceeded from the room to answer the summons.

"It must be one of those Scotts, or else the Burker himself," she thought as she threaded the passage; "unless it is Jack come home and got himself into some scrape, for nobody else but one of these would come to the back door at this time of the evening."

She opened the door, and the light flashed upon the hang-dog countenance of Barney the Burker.

Bab Smedley exhibited no surprise, for, as the reader has seen, she was more or less prepared for such a visit. She hastily closed the door, and led the way into the parlour before a single word was spoken between them. The shutter was already fastened outside the window, over which the curtains inside were drawn, and thus there was no fear of the man's presence in that room being perceived from without. Filling Bab's tumbler completely up to the brim with the alcoholic liquor, the Burker drained the contents at a draught, and beyond a slight brief winking of the eyes, no sign on his part indicated the strength or depth of the potation. He threw himself upon a seat, saying, "So here I am at last, Bab, once more in London; though I can't say as how I'm wery sound in limb, or that I'm oversure of being safe in respect to that personal liberty which is the right of every free-born individual."

"And where do you come from?" inquired Mrs. Smedley, who had leisure to observe the care-worn, haggard appearance of the Burker, as well as to judge that he was sinking with fatigue.

"Ah! where do I come from? That's the question," he responded, with a certain degree of rough bitterness in his tone. "Wheresomever there's a quiet ditch that a man may lay down in when he's got no bed, wheresomever there's a lonesome haystack that a houseless wanderer may snatch a snooze under, wheresomever there's fields and woods and all sorts of unfrequented places as far as possible from the towns and villages which a chap doesn't dare enter for fear of seeing a printed description of hisself with 'A Hundred Pound Reward' in big letters a-top, posted up agin the walls, there's the places from which I come."

Having concluded this piece of eloquence after his own fashion, the Burker looked Mrs. Smedley very hard in the face for nearly a minute, as much as to say, "Well, what do you think of that?" and then he brewed himself a tumbler of spirits and water, which he proceeded to drink at a more moderate rate than the previous one.

"Perhaps you would like something to eat?" suggested Mrs. Smedley.

"Well, now you mention it, I think I should like summut," answered the Burker; "though only a minute back I fancied I was past eating, for I ain't broke my fast since eight o'clock this morning, and then I should have got nuffin if I hadn't gived a boy a couple of taps on the head to make him surrender a wedge of bread and cheese he was a-breakfasting on as he went to his work."

Mrs. Smedley proceeded to the larder, whence she quickly returned with some cold beef, bread, and pickles, and the Burker, falling to, speedily made a meal that would have sufficed for half a dozen ordinary appetites. Another tumbler was produced, and Mrs. Smedley joined him in the drinking department.

"And where's Jack?" he inquired, in the midst of his repast.

"Jack's at Liverpool," rejoined Mrs. Smedley, and she explained the object of his mission, not forgetting to add her knowledge of its success, so far as that the phial of poison was conveyed to her mother's hand.

“ Well, I’m blowed,” said the Burker, “ if Jack hasn’t proved hisself to be a feller of more pluck than I’d have gived him credit for. But why is he staying at Liverpool? ”

“ He thought it best to make a show of lingering there a bit, so that he might see the chaplain and a justice of the peace or two, and snivel and whimper and play the hypocrite — ”

“ Ah! ” interrupted the Burker, with a look of approval and envy, “ Jack can come it strong in that there line. Well? ”

“ Because, don’t you see,” continued Bab, “ if he had bolted off immediately after that interview with his mother-in-law, it might have been suspected that he gave her the poison; whereas by staying there for two or three days, and going and talking to the authorities, pretending that he was overwhelmed with grief, that he didn’t know what to think, whether she had really committed the crime, or whether she was the innocent victim of circumstantial evidence — ”

“ Ah, that’s the ticket,” ejaculated the Burker, with his mouth full of beef and bread; “ nothing like coming the artful dodge. And who can do it better than my friend Jack Smedley? ”

“ And so, you see, Jack is stopping at Liverpool,” continued Bab.

“ What the deuce makes that there black cat of your’n stare so uncommon hard? ” suddenly demanded the Burker.

The woman started, for the question which her companion had just put all in a moment riveted the conviction that it had not ere now been mere fancy on her part. But unwilling to confess her fears to herself — still less to reveal them to the Burker — Bab Smedley instantaneously composed her countenance, and in a voice of assumed quiet she said, “ There’s nothing wrong with the cat; she often looks like that.”

“ Then, if it was my cat, I’d pison it, — that’s what I’d do,” rejoined the Burker. “ But how is things going on in London? I suppose you heerd tell of my escape — ”

“ I read it in the newspapers,” answered the woman. “ As for things in London, we’ve allowed the Scotts a pound a week, that’s one thing; and I rather fancy this house is watched by the detectives, that’s another thing.”

"The deuce," growled the Burker. "But I say, Bab —"

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a knock was heard at the front door,—a somewhat commanding kind of summons, and which made both Bab Smedley and the Burker spring up to their feet.

"There's something wrong," hastily whispered the former; "I know there is."

"I'll get out by the back," hastily responded the Burker. "But no," he instantaneously ejaculated; "if there's a plant meant, there'll be people watching at the back. Come quick. I'll go down the trap, and you can pretend you was asleep and didn't hear the knocking at the door. You must stall 'em off somehow or another, Bab."

"Yes, yes; it's the only chance."

As the reader may suppose, this colloquy took place in very hurried whispers, and occupied far less time than we have taken in describing it. Away from the parlour they glided,—Bab shading the light which she carried in her hand; down into the scullery they went, the table was moved away, the bit of carpet also, the trap-door was raised, and into the subterranean went the Burker. Then almost in the twinkling of an eye Bab Smedley restored the little place to its former appearance; she put three or four sauce-pans and articles of crockery and other kitchen implements upon the table, to give it an air as if it had not been recently moved, and she sped up-stairs. Meanwhile the knocking had been repeated in a louder and more imperious manner than before; yet all that we have described since the first summons echoed through the house had not taken more than three minutes.

Then feeling that all her presence of mind was now absolutely necessary — or at least apprehending some emergency which would require this display of her courage — Bab Smedley smoothed her countenance, and with a light in her hand, she proceeded to open the front door. A tall, stout man at once entered the passage, followed by another individual, a glance at whom showed Mrs. Smedley that it was the applicant for the vacant lodging of a few days previous. She kept her countenance admirably, and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I suppose you've come to see Mr. Smedley on business, but he's not at home."

"Not at home, eh?" exclaimed the tall, stout man.

"Are you sure?" and he looked the woman very hard in the face.

"Quite sure," she replied, with the coolest effrontery, which indeed was all the more natural inasmuch as at the instant she was telling the truth. "He's at Liverpool, sir, and if you want anything in the gold-beating way —"

"Shut the door, Tom," interrupted the tall man, turning around abruptly to his companion. "Beg pardon, ma'am," he continued, coolly walking into the parlour, whither Mrs. Smedley followed with the light, "but this is no time for ceremony. We're officers, and we want your husband."

"Officers!" and Mrs. Smedley affected to give a shriek of dismay, as if quite unprepared for the intelligence that thus burst upon her. "Want my husband —"

"Yes, and I'm thinking we're likely to find him too," promptly rejoined the officer, as he glanced at the table. "A late supper, evidently served up in a hurry, no tablecloth, nor nothing tidy, and two tumblers. Come, ma'am, it's no use playing the fool with us; your husband is in the house, and we must search for him. There's a couple of my men at the back part of the premises, and Tom there is keeping the front door. So there's no chance of escape. You had better —"

"Good heavens! what has my poor husband done?" exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, as if overwhelmed with grief. "But it is impossible. Jack is as quiet as the child unborn, and a pious man too, — such a pious man."

"I'm sorry to say," interrupted the detective officer, for such he was, "that if you don't really know anything about it already, you've lost your mother."

"My mother," ejaculated Mrs. Smedley, with a great show of wild astonishment and grief; "you don't surely mean that she has been tried — and — and — already —"

"Executed?" said the officer, calmly finishing the sentence for Mrs. Smedley. "No, not exactly. She's cheated the hangman. In plain terms, ma'am, she poisoned herself in the middle of last night. Your husband took the very first train from Liverpool this morning; he was telegraphed up, but somehow or another we just now missed him at the Euston Square Station, though we afterward learned that such a person did arrive this evening by that particular train. However, we know he must be here."

"My poor mother," sobbed Mrs. Smedley. "But what could my husband —"

"Have to do with it?" ejaculated the officer. "Why, he gave her the poison as a matter of course. Who else could possibly have done it?"

"Oh, sir, I can assure you Jack is incapable of such a thing. He went to Liverpool to see my poor mother, — to teach her which was the right path if she had really gone into the wrong one."

"Come, ma'am; this gammon won't do for us. Tom, let another of our people come in, and you follow me. Sorry to be rude, ma'am; very natural for you to try and screen your husband, but it won't do. Please to favour us with this light."

Bab Smedley had thrown herself upon a chair, in which she now sat rocking herself to and fro with every semblance of being utterly disconsolate, and likewise as if heedless of the words that were spoken to her.

The tall detective took up the candle, and followed by his man Tom, he passed into the back room. No one was there. They ascended the staircase; the upper chambers were speedily searched, but still without success. They descended, and Bab Smedley joined them in the passage, saying, "Well, gentlemen, you see my husband is not in the house, but I almost wish he was that he might convince you of the error under which you labour concerning him. A pious vessel like him, a deacon of the Shining Light's Chapel — it is out of the question. But you have behaved so civil in doing your duty that I hope you'll just step into the parlour for a moment and take a small glass of something?"

"Stop a minute," said the tall detective, "there's a place down-stairs. Come along, Tom."

"Oh, well," said Bab Smedley, still admirably preserving her presence of mind, and simulating an air of mournfulness in which there was no betrayal of anxious apprehension, "you can speedily satisfy yourself in that quarter, and then you shall accept the little refreshment I offer you."

The two detectives descended the stairs, — Bab Smedley following, to procure, as she said, two or three more glasses. Her conduct appeared so natural, her part was performed with such consummate skill, that the detectives began really to think her husband could not be anywhere about the

premises; at the same time that they were not the men to be stayed in the process of their investigation by anything which might possibly be an artifice to divert them from the scent.

The place which we have described as the scullery was reached; the detectives passed at once into the front kitchen, but, as the reader may imagine, without discovering the object of their search. Cupboards were opened, nooks were pried into, but all in vain. They repassed into the scullery; the huge door communicating with the cellar was opened, the interior was inspected, but no Jack Smedley was there. The two officers exchanged quick glances, as much as to imply that the woman had spoken truthfully after all, and that their trouble was vainly taken.

“Now, gentlemen,” said Bab, and it was a very anxious moment for the woman, but her inward feelings were not outwardly betrayed, “you will perhaps come up to the parlour and have a nice drop of something warm?”

“In a minute, ma’am,” answered the tall detective. “But what the deuce does a bit of carpet mean in a place like this?”

He looked searchingly at the gold-beater’s wife as he spoke, and she steadily met that scrutinizing gaze. The next instant he kicked up the carpet with his foot, but the table stood so exactly over the outlines of the trap-door that the carpet was not dislodged sufficiently to reveal them. The keen experienced eye of the detective led to the fancy that he perceived something like a studied artifice in the arrangement of the kitchen utensils and crockery on the little deal table, and lifting it up, he removed it away from the middle of the scullery. At the same instant he glanced furtively toward the woman; it struck him that for a single moment there was the glitter of uneasiness in her eyes, but if so, that betrayal of her feeling was so transient it could not be regarded as a positive certainty. However, the bit of carpet was now kicked completely away, and the outlines of the trap-door were revealed.

“Ah, here is something, Tom,” said the tall detective, stamping with his feet above the mouth of the pit, so that the hollow sound thus produced confirmed the suspicion of the existence of a trap-door.

The next instant it was raised, and at the same moment

a sudden precipitate rush, as if of some wild animal, caused the detectives themselves to start, while a shriek of terror thrilled from the lips of the woman who until this abrupt occurrence had maintained such extraordinary presence of mind. It was the black cat, which had come sweeping down the stairs with a gushing noise of lightning quickness, and making the circuit of the scullery, the animal whisked up the staircase again as if it were wild.

"That's an omen, I suppose," said the tall detective, looking significantly at the gold-beater's wife, who was pale with terror.

"It is enough to startle anybody," she observed, once more by a mighty effort recovering her self-possession. "It's the presence of you strangers that frightens the poor creature. As for the trap-door here, it only covers a well —"

"With steps to it," said the detective, with an ironical smile.

"Yes, with steps down to a certain distance; they are all broken at the bottom, and if you don't mind —"

"You think we shall be drowned? It's a very curious earthy smell for water to send up, and what's more," added the detective, holding the candle over the opening, "I can't catch the reflection of any water at all."

Bab felt convinced it was all up with the *Burker*, and she inwardly trembled on account of herself; for her arrest must necessarily follow, if only for the reason that she was harbouring a criminal on whose head a reward was set. She thought of escape, but how could she effect it? There was a man in the passage up-stairs, and she had been told that the back part of the premises was watched by other officers.

"Now, Tom, hold the light," said the tall detective, "and keep an eye —"

He did not finish the sentence, but nodded significantly, and his sedate, quiet-looking, but not the less resolute subordinate comprehended that the allusion bore reference to *Mrs. Smedley*. Drawing forth a pair of pistols, the detective began to descend the stone steps of the subterranean, while his man held the candle conveniently at the mouth, and the former said, in a stern, decisive tone, "Now *Mr. Smedley*, we know you are here. You had better surrender yourself, for if you attempt any resistance, you will perhaps get a bullet through the head."

This intimation was followed by the click of one pistol, then by that of the other, yet no answer was returned.

“What will the Burker do?” thought Bab to herself, and quick as lightning she revolved in her mind how she could possibly second any endeavour that he might perchance make for the frustration of the officers’ designs.

At the selfsame instant there was another wild rush of the frenzied black cat. This time it was in the passage on the ground floor, but the sounds reached the ears of those in the scullery. The door at the head of the staircase, having doubtless been disturbed by the animal, closed with violence, and the tall detective demanded, “What the deuce is that, Tom?”

“Only that cursed animal again,” was the response, for all was now suddenly still once more.

Mrs. Smedley, having her nerves by this time completely strung for any abrupt or startling occurrence, quickly regained her own self-possession, and pushing the door at the bottom of the staircase, she said, “At all events we won’t have the brute come rushing down here again.”

The door closed and latched itself by the impulse thus given to it, and the officer who answered to the abbreviated Christian name of Tom, exclaimed sternly, “You keep quiet, ma’am. Stand away from that door, and none of your nonsense.”

“She can’t escape, Tom,” observed his superior; “the passage up-stairs is guarded.”

All that followed was now the work of a few instants. Scarcely had the tall detective given utterance to those last words which we have recorded, when there was a rush beneath, a blow was dealt, and he disappeared as if engulfed in the dark depth from the view of his companion who was holding the light. Quick as thought, Bab Smedley threw herself with the fury of a tiger-cat upon the subordinate Tom, and precipitated him headlong down the steps. The sounds of several severely dealt blows coming up from the abyss reached her ears, but she could see nothing; the light had fallen into the pit,—she was enveloped in total darkness. Not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind; she knew where on a shelf there were the means of obtaining another light; a lucifer was struck, and at the very moment

that she applied it to another candle, Barney the Burker emerged from below.

"Are they done for?" was Mrs. Smedley's rapidly put question.

"Let's see," said the Burker, and snatching the candle from her hand, he partially descended the steps, whence almost instantaneously returning, he added, "They're stunned, if not killed. And now what's to be done next?"

Bab, in a hasty whisper, gave the wretch to understand that there was an officer in the passage, and that there were others outside, watching the back premises.

"Take the light — go up quick," said the Burker, "tell the officer he's wanted below, whimper a bit, and say as how your poor husband is took."

The woman instantaneously proceeded to obey Barney's directions, and with the light in her hand, she ascended the stairs. We should observe that from the circumstance of the doors at top and bottom being closed, the officer in the passage had heard little or nothing of what was going on below; or if indeed that suddenly executed movement on the part of Mrs. Smedley, by which Tom was thrown into the pit, had met his ears, it might naturally have been taken for the quick, transient scuffle of an arrest being effected. Leaving the doors open — for she comprehended full well what the Burker's intention was — the infamous woman assumed a look of deep distress, and accosting the officer who had been appointed to keep guard upon the front door, she said, in a whimpering tone, and breaking her words with an apparently convulsing sob, "It's all over. They have taken my poor dear man, and they want you down below. This is the way; there's a light where they are. Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

The woman's part was so well played — and the whole proceeding seemed so natural — that the officer hesitated not for an instant to descend the steps to which she led him, — she herself remaining on the top to light him as he went down. The instant he reached the bottom he was felled by a blow from the Burker's club; Bab Smedley rushed down the stairs, and her ruffian accomplice, at once perceiving that the unfortunate official was stunned, dragged him into the cellar, the huge door of which he closed and bolted. Another quick examination of the subterranean showed the miscreant

that the two detectives still lay motionless at the bottom of the steps, and thus far a complete triumph was gained.

But how to escape? Mrs. Smedley and the Burker had all their wits about them. They quickly ascended to the parlour, where they each partook of a hasty glass of spirits, and the Burker said, "Now put on your things without an instant's delay."

Bab rushed up to her bedchamber; her bonnet and shawl were slipped on; her money, the few trinkets she possessed, and a packet of papers were quickly secured about her person, so that in a couple of minutes she joined the Burker again.

"Now we must make a rush for it," he said. "You go out first, and turn to the left; I'll follow quick and go to the right. We must get out of London as quick as we can, and trust to chances whether as how we ever meet again. But first of all, have you got any blunt?"

Bab Smedley thrust three or four sovereigns into the Burker's hand, and she then issued forth from the front door of the house. Barney kept it about an inch ajar to listen, with his club in readiness to receive any other police officials who might possibly rush in. But all was quiet, and after allowing about a minute's pause, he quitted the habitation, closing the door behind him. Without the slightest molestation he continued his way along the street, and felt himself to be in comparative safety.

There were in reality no more officials in the front part of the Smedleys' house, but a couple were watching in the yard at the back, little dreaming of the utter discomfiture of their comrades within. The whole affair on the part of the detectives had been entered upon so quietly that the neighbours in the street continued utterly unsuspecting of what was going on, and thus no hue and cry was raised when the Burker stole forth. The officers, as the reader has seen, had come hither merely for the arrest of Jack Smedley, but if they could have foreseen that instead of the gold-beater they would have found the Burker, they would have adopted far different precautions and would have invaded the house in a posse.

It might have been ten minutes after the Burker's escape that the tall detective began to recover his senses, for he was only stunned — not killed — by the onslaught he had

experienced. He was, however, much injured, for the miscreant had beaten him about the head and shoulders with his club. On thus coming to himself, the detective heard the subdued moans of his subordinate Tom; and it was yet several minutes before the two men were sufficiently recovered to drag themselves up from the pit. Then they heard a feeble knocking at the cellar-door; they opened it, and found their comrade who had been made a prisoner there, and who was nearly as much injured as themselves. The watchers from the back yard were admitted into the house, but it was only too evident that the Burker and Bab Smedley had escaped.

On the following day the subterranean was thoroughly investigated by the police; the earth at the bottom was dug up, and slight though sufficient traces were discovered to prove that the evidences of foul crimes had been concealed and well-nigh obliterated there. The quicklime, mixed with the soil, afforded a frightful indication of how the dark work had been done, and though no human remains were disinterred, there existed no doubt that more than one victim of murder had been consigned to that subterranean tomb.

CHAPTER XXX

ATALANTA

TURN we now to the lodgings of the Honourable Augustus Softly, the young officer to whom Madame Angelique, on breaking up her establishment, so generously bequeathed Mademoiselle Armantine.

Very beautiful was the French girl, yet far from being so little frail as the milliner had chosen to represent her. Of a fascinating style of loveliness, with all the first freshness of youth sufficiently well preserved, and indeed still youthful, for she was not yet twenty-two, Armantine was fully calculated to make a powerful impression on such a mind as that of Mr. Softly. Her manners were captivating; she had all those little bewitching arts which specially characterize the females of the nation to which she belonged. She was far from deficient in accomplishments, she could draw, play, and sing, and as for dancing, she was a veritable proficient in the art. Thus altogether the Honourable Augustus Softly found her a very enchanting mistress.

Several days had elapsed since the commencement of his acquaintance with Armantine, and one afternoon, at about two o'clock, she arrived at his lodgings, according to an appointment made on the previous day. He purposed to regale her with a champagne luncheon, and he had risen at least an hour earlier than usual for the purpose. The apartment where he received her was decorated in true bachelor fashion: foils and boxing-gloves, hunting whips and fire-arms, fishing-tackle and other accessories to field sports, were scattered about, though Mr. Softly had never angled but once in his life, on which occasion after a whole day's fishing he caught a minnow; he was an execrable shot, and as for hunting, he had not sufficient courage to follow the

hounds. But he was nevertheless fond of boasting of his accomplishments and his feats in all these respects, and he considered it manly to have the articles above enumerated scattered about his apartments.

Mademoiselle Armantine, having flung off her bonnet and shawl, sat down at table, and the champagne soon led to very lively discourse.

"My dear girl," said Softly, after some conversation on general topics, "I ought to consider myself exceedingly fortunate that you should prefer me to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Ah! my dear Augustus," replied the young lady, fixing her eyes tenderly upon him, "to see you at parade was perfectly irresistible. But Madame Angelique told you all about it?"

"Yes, and I certainly felt myself highly flattered. But don't be offended, my dear Armantine," continued Mr. Softly: "I only just want to ask one little question, and that is, did you really never have a lover — you know what I mean — before the duke?"

"Oh, never, never!" exclaimed the French girl, with so much readiness that Mr. Softly was at once convinced of her sincerity.

"And your father —"

"Ah, don't speak of him!" suddenly interrupted Armantine, with a real though transient feeling of remorse.

"Do tell me," said the young gentleman, "something about your earlier life. Drink another glass of champagne; let us laugh and be as gay as possible."

"Well, we will," said Armantine. "Now listen while I tell you a little tale."

"Is it a true one?" asked Softly.

"You shall judge for yourself. About five years ago," continued Armantine, "a young French lady, endowed with tolerable accomplishments, and about as good looking as I am —"

"In that case she was an angel," cried the lieutenant of the Guards.

"She was an angel, then, since you will have it so," resumed Armantine, laughing so as to display her pearly teeth. "Well, this angel was consigned to a convent —"

"I recollect that Madame Angelique —"

"Now, do be silent; pray don't interrupt me," and

"SHE BOXED HIS EARS IN RETURN"
Photograph from original by Merrill

"SHE BOXED HIS EARS IN RETURN"
Photogravure from original by Merrill



Armantine tapped his cheek with her small, snowy white hand. "The young lady I speak of was consigned to a convent, which she relished about as much as you would fancy bread and water for your dinner. Well, she had not been many weeks there when she escaped, and not daring to return home sped to Paris. She knew not exactly how to get her living, and finding it inconvenient to starve, as well as being little disposed to plunge headlong into improper courses — You see, my dear Augustus, it is a very moral tale —"

"But don't let it get too serious," interjected Softly.

"Oh, no," exclaimed Armantine, with another smile; "it is about to take a very lively turn. Being an accomplished dancer, the young lady went boldly to the opera, — not very boldly though, — I mean that the act was bold to go there at all, for she was all modesty and confusion. However, she inquired for the ballet-master, and besought employment. He desired her to afford him a specimen of her abilities, and I suppose that as in consequence of her timidity she acquitted herself with some degree of awkwardness; he chucked her under the chin, no doubt for the purpose of encouraging her. She boxed his ears in return. For a moment he appeared as if about to be desperately angry, but altering his mind he burst out into a hearty laugh, for he was a very good-natured man. This little incident gave the young lady spirits, and then she acquitted herself so well that he resolved to prepare her for the ballet. Then she went through a course of training; her progress was incredible, her proficiency was soon complete. The ballet-master treated her with kindness, protected her from insult, and appeared to have conceived a paternal affection for the young lady after the repulse which his first amatory overture had received. At length the day came when she was to make her appearance in public, and every wall in Paris was covered with immense posters, announcing the intended *début* of Mademoiselle Atalanta, for that was the name which the exquisite imagination of the ballet-master bestowed upon her."

"And a very pretty name too," observed Softly, "but of course not so captivating as Armantine. Pray proceed."

"Atalanta's triumph was immense," continued the French girl, "and the reviews on the following day spoke

of her as a perfect miracle in the Terpsichorean sphere. It may perhaps be as well to observe that out of the dozen principal *critiques* the ballet-master himself wrote seven, all in different strains of eulogy, and the remaining five were penned by the reviewers immediately after the champagne-supper which the director of the opera gave to the gentlemen of the press in the greenroom. But all this apart, Atalanta's triumph was really immense. She appeared as a sylph amongst a mass of clouds; she had wings at her back, flowers in her hair, and whatsoever beauties of form she possessed were developed by the gauzy drapery. The enthusiasm her appearance excited no doubt inspired her to put forth all her powers, and subsequent *critiques* — which were not penned by the friendly ballet-master, and not written under the influence of the director's champagne — pronounced her style of dancing to be a perfect combination of all the elegancies and graces pertaining to the art."

"The ravishing creature," ejaculated Softly. "But I fancy I see in this lovely embodiment of graces and elegancies —"

"Pray anticipate nothing," interjected Armantine, again tapping her foolish young lover's cheek in a playful manner. "You may easily suppose that she had a great many overtures, and was exposed to many temptations, some of which, when rejected, changed into persecution. And now I come to that part which constitutes my motive for telling you this tale. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen — foreign as well as French — who obtained admittance behind the scenes and were allowed the *entrée* of the greenroom was a fierce military-looking Englishman, some forty years of age, who made the most brilliant overtures to Mademoiselle Atalanta, but, along with the rest, he experienced a decisive refusal. He became the most persevering of her persecutors. He had her carried off to a lonely house on the outskirts of Paris, but thence she escaped. A second time was she carried off, and on this occasion to a house of infamy, where the unprincipled Englishman vowed that if she did not submit by fair means, violence should be used, and all Paris should know next day that Atalanta, the supposed paragon of virtue, had passed the night there. She, however, escaped a second time; the police were informed of the outrage, and the Englishman was ordered to leave Paris. His infatuation

took a phase by no means uncommon; it turned from love to hate, and he secretly set himself to work to find out who Mademoiselle Atalanta really was. He succeeded; he communicated with her family, and for the third time was she carried off when leaving the opera, but on this occasion by her father and brother. She was taken back to her convent. This was what the Englishman desired, and he found means of causing a letter to be conveyed to her, intimating that if she would consent to fly with him, he would effect her escape. She showed the letter to the superior; it was conveyed to the police, and the Englishman was turned out of France. Circumstances recently brought Atalanta to London. This very day she has encountered the Englishman, and he has threatened her with his implacable vengeance unless she chooses to place herself under his protection."

"And the charming Atalanta," exclaimed Softly, "is, as I all along suspected, the equally charming Armantine?"

"Put all the charmings out of the question," responded the young lady, with a smile, "and you are right. Now, my dear Augustus, you are acquainted with one episode in my life."

"Yes, and Madame Angelique told me that your father is a marquis," he immediately added.

"Ah! pray do not speak of him," murmured Armantine. "If I were married, it would indeed be very, very different."

"And Madame Angelique," pursued Softly, "helped the Duke of Marchmont to carry you off from the convent two or three months back."

"If you see Marchmont," was the wily French girl's guarded response, "he will tell you all about it."

"I saw him just now," rejoined Softly.

"Ah, indeed," ejaculated Armantine, quickly.

"Yes, he called upon me for a few minutes," rejoined the Honourable Augustus Softly, "about half an hour before you came in. To tell you the truth, being rather proud of my conquest, I spoke of it to the duke, and he said enough to confirm Madame Angelique's tale. But about this Englishman of yours — what is his name?"

"His name? Captain Cartwright," responded Armantine, and then she added, with a visible shudder, "And, oh, he

is so terribly ferocious — such a desperate man. I am sure I should faint if he made his appearance to molest me.”

“Molest you, my dear girl?” exclaimed Mr. Softly, assuming a very valorous look; “not while I am here to defend you. No matter whether swords or pistols, egad! I would teach him a lesson which he should not forget.”

Armantine watched her lover narrowly, but without seeming to do so, as he thus spoke; and she was shrewd and penetrating enough to discover that beneath his parade of magnanimity there was a real cowardice. In truth the Honourable Augustus Softly was as chicken-hearted a young gentleman as ever by such paltriness of disposition disgraced the British uniform. Let the reader recollect that we are by no means drawing him as a type of British officers generally, nor of those of the Guards especially. In his foppery, his conceit, his extravagance, and his dissipated habits, he might certainly be taken as the representative of a large class of military men bearing commissions, but in the cowardice of his nature he constituted an exception.

“Come,” said Armantine, suddenly assuming a most lively air, “we will not talk any more about this odious captain. The champagne ought to put us in good spirits. Come, sing me a song.”

“I never sang in my life, my dear girl,” replied Softly. “The Guards, you know, don’t sing.”

“Well, but we must do something to amuse ourselves,” exclaimed Armantine, now exhibiting all the gaiety and sprightliness that characterize the women of the country to which she belonged. “Ah! there is your uniform. I have a very great mind to try it on and see how it fits me.”

“Do,” exclaimed Softly. “Capital idea! delicious, ’pon my honour!”

Armantine sprang from her seat, laughing merrily, and first of all she put on the Honourable Augustus Softly’s cap with the gold band around it. She looked at herself in the glass, and as the cap rested above the long, flowing, glossy hair, and the countenance wore an expression of mischievous archness, Mademoiselle Armantine looked quite charming. Softly was enraptured; he considered the whole proceeding exquisite, and any one might indeed have envied him the facility with which he was amused.

"Now for the coat," exclaimed Armantine, and she was about to put it on.

"What! over your dress?" said Augustus.

"You wicked fellow, what would you have me do?" and she tapped him playfully on the cheek. "Surely it will fit me as it is. You are not so very stout, neither am I."

Thus speaking, and laughing merrily all the while, Armantine put on the red coat, but she could not fasten it across her bosom. Mr. Softly volunteered his aid, and as he availed himself of the opportunity to snatch divers little licenses with his beautiful mistress, the playful tapping of the cheek was renewed, accompanied by peals of laughter more hilarious than ever. But all of a sudden Armantine's countenance underwent a striking change; a faint shriek burst from her lips, and on the Honourable Augustus Softly turning hastily around in the direction to which her eyes were looking, he started on beholding the cause of her affright.

A very fierce-looking gentleman was standing upon the threshold, holding the door half-open, and surveying the scene. He was tall, and somewhat stoutly built, — his form being indicative of great strength, while the expression of his countenance denoted a veritable fire-eater. He was of the middle age, perhaps a trifle past it, and had gray whiskers and moustaches, — the latter considerably enhancing the fierceness of his look. His brows, naturally thick and overhanging, were now much corrugated, as if with the infuriate feelings which were pent up in his soul, but seeking to have a vent, and determined to find one too. He wore a sort of semimilitary apparel, of a somewhat antiquated and well-nigh exploded fashion. A surtout coat, all frogged and braided over the breast, and fastening with hooks and eyes, fitted tight to his strongly built person, and was closed up to the throat. He had gray trousers, with red stripes, and on his head was a species of foraging-cap. He wore buckskin gloves, and had altogether the air of a military man of the old school.

Mr. Softly's fears at once suggested that Armantine's terror could have been created by nothing but the appearance of Captain Cartwright, and that therefore the formidable Captain Cartwright this fierce-looking individual must assuredly be.

"Save me from him, my dear Augustus," said Armantine,

flinging her arms about the neck of her lover, and clinging to him as if in the very frenzy of terror.

"Oh, yes, yes! I'll — I'll save you, my dear," stammered the young Guardsman, with a very pale countenance. "But perhaps the gentleman — the captain, I mean, for I suppose it is Captain Cartwright to whom I have the honour of speaking — will be so good as to explain —"

"Explain, sir?" ejaculated the fierce-looking individual, now seeming ten thousand times more fierce than at first; "I never explain, unless it is with such things as these," and he pointed toward a sword and a pistol-case which lay upon a side table.

"Perhaps, sir," said Mr. Softly, plucking up all the courage he could possibly call to his aid in order to meet the present crisis, "if you were to do me the honour to — to sit down — and — and take a glass of wine —"

"My demeanour here, sir," interrupted the captain, closing the door violently behind him, "depends entirely on the answers I receive to a few questions I am going to put. In that young lady, sir, I entertain a very deep interest —"

"Don't for Heaven's sake irritate him, my dearest Augustus," whispered Armantine, as with countenance averted from Captain Cartwright she tremblingly clung to her lover's arm.

"A very deep interest," continued the fierce-looking intruder, "and moreover I have her father's authority for taking any step that may seem good to me according to circumstances."

"Ah, my poor father," murmured Armantine. "But pray, my dear Augustus, do not — do not anger this dreadful man, or he will kill us both outright."

"I may at one time have entertained a tender sentiment for that young lady," continued Captain Cartwright, "but circumstances have occurred to alter that feeling, and now it is a fraternal or paternal regard that I experience for her. I have traced her hither. If you tell me, Mr. Softly, that she is your wife, I shall be satisfied — I shall rejoice — I shall fill a bumper of champagne — and what is more, I shall drink it."

Here, as if to render his words all the more impressive, Captain Cartwright struck the table such a violent blow with his clenched fist that Mr. Softly shuddered to the innermost

confines of his being, while his mistress whispered, in a hastier and more tremulous tone than ever, "He is mad; he is desperate. For Heaven's sake say anything — everything to pacify him! I know all your courage, my dear Augustus, but think what a dreadful thing it would be for me if he stretched you weltering in your blood at my feet."

At this horrible idea poor Softly gave vent to a low moan, and he trembled so perceptibly that the reader may marvel how it was that Armantine could whisperingly add, "For both our sakes restrain this dreadful ardour of yours, curb your fiery temper. Tell him everything, promise him everything, or he will massacre us."

Meanwhile Captain Cartwright, having dealt that terribly energetic thump upon the table, took three or four strides to and fro in the apartment as if to compose his excited feeling; but if this were his object, the aim was not reached, for it was with the fiercest possible expression of countenance that he once more accosted the miserable Augustus Softly.

"Yes, sir," continued the fire-eater, "if that young lady is your wife, I shall be happy — I shall rejoice; I shall be enabled to speed to her father with the agreeable intelligence. But if, sir, on the other hand," — and here Captain Cartwright ground his teeth as if with an uncontrollable fury at the bare idea he was about to explain, — "if, sir, you cannot look me frankly in the face and say that she is here without discredit or dishonour to herself, I shall be compelled, sir, — painful though the alternative be, — to imbrue my hands in the blood of a fellow creature."

Having given vent to this frightful threat, Captain Cartwright did not dash his clenched fist upon the table, but he stalked straight up to where the young officer's sword lay, and he deliberately drew the weapon from its sheath.

"Just Heaven, he will murder us!" whispered Armantine, as if in a dying voice. "For my sake — for both our sakes — tell him I am your wife."

"But, my dear girl —"

"Did you speak, sir?" demanded the officer, turning around upon Softly with such fierce abruptness that the unfortunate young gentleman felt his blood all curdling in his veins, his teeth chattering, and his limbs trembling. "Did you speak, sir, I ask? did you give me an answer to my question? Yes or no, is that lady your wife?"

"Ye-e-e-s," replied Augustus, in such a terrible state of bewilderment that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"Yes?" exclaimed Cartwright. "Speak it out more plainly."

"For Heaven's sake," whispered Armantine, "dearest Augustus —"

"Yes, she is my wife," said the young officer, feeling as if by the assertion his life was suddenly saved.

"Then look up, Armantine, and be not abashed," exclaimed Cartwright. "Never mind this masquerading nonsense — dressing yourself up in your husband's regimentals. New-married people are as silly as lovers after all. Mr. Softly, you are a man of honour; I am proud, sir, to make your acquaintance. There is my hand."

While thus speaking, the terrible captain had returned the sword to its sheath, and hastily drawing off his buckskin glove, he presented his hand to Softly. The young gentleman took it, and now Mademoiselle Armantine ventured to look around upon the fierce captain.

"Do not be afraid of me any longer," he said, assuming a milder tone and look. "Here's my hand for you also, and now I can communicate joyous tidings to your father. But, ah! I forgot something. The marriage certificate? I must see it — I must satisfy myself before I compromise my word in communicating with your father."

"Tell him you have left it elsewhere," hastily whispered Armantine. "Tell him anything, for Heaven's sake do! His look is already changing."

"The marriage certificate, sir?" said Captain Cartwright, sternly.

"The certificate? Oh, ye-e-e-s," stammered the Honourable Augustus Softly. "It's all right — it's — it's at a friend's of mine — where we had the wedding-breakfast, — ye-e-e-s, that's it."

"Good," exclaimed Captain Cartwright; "you are a man of honour in every respect, and it rejoices me that I can be proud of your friendship instead of having to wreak a frightful vengeance upon you. Here's to both your healths."

Thus speaking, the now appeased fire-eater filled himself a glass of champagne, and poured the contents down that throat from which such terrible menaces had recently come forth.

“Mr. Softly,” he continued, “I must see this certificate. I can say nothing to Armantine’s father until I have received indisputable evidence that she is your wife. Tomorrow I am engaged to fight a duel in the morning, to trounce a rascal in the afternoon, and to break a fellow’s head at my club in the evening. But the day after, sir, at two o’clock punctually, I shall be here. I don’t like using threats, sir,” and here the captain looked most overpoweringly fierce, “but if the certificate is not forthcoming, I shall be compelled, sir, — disagreeably compelled, — to inflict such a chastisement on you —”

“Oh, Captain Cartwright,” exclaimed Armantine, as if in an agony of terror, “spare these dreadful threats. The certificate will be forthcoming. Will it not, dear Augustus?” and she looked appealingly at her paramour.

“Ye-e-e-s — oh, yes,” responded the miserable Softly, who again felt that all the blood was curdling in his veins and that his hair was standing on end.

“Good,” exclaimed the captain. “The day after tomorrow at two o’clock I shall be here.”

He then stalked out of the room, closing the door violently behind him, and the miserable Mr. Augustus Softly sank with a hollow groan into an armchair. He looked the very picture of wretchedness, but Armantine filled him a glass of wine, seated herself on his knee, wound her arm about his neck, and plied all her most witching cajoleries, — lavished too all the most tender caresses, with such effect that the young gentleman rallied sufficiently to envisage his position and discuss it within himself.

What was to be done? To appeal to a magistrate for protection against the fire-eater would be virtually to avow a dastard inability to protect himself. To run away from London at a moment when he knew he could not procure leave of absence from his regiment would be to renounce his commission, and when the reason should be known, to be cut by everybody as a coward. Yet the certificate must be forthcoming. Would the date of it matter so long as it was displayed? Certainly not. Then the only alternative which could be adopted was the marriage of the Honourable Augustus Softly with Mademoiselle Armantine by special license on the morrow.

All these reflections passed through Mr. Softly’s brain,

as Armantine doffed the red coat and the cap. He looked at her. She was exquisitely shaped; her countenance was beautiful. But then, to marry one's mistress. Still it was better than to be sacrificed to the vengeance of a blood-thirsty fire-eater, and Mr. Softly came to the conclusion that it was the best course he could possibly adopt. Armantine fully comprehended all that was passing in his mind; she lavished her caresses upon him, she declared how much she loved him, she said everything to gratify his vanity and minister to his pride, she protested that she was ready and willing to make any sacrifice to ensure his happiness, — she would even flee from the country, though her own heart should break, but she dreaded the vengeance of the terrible Cartwright on account of her dear Augustus.

Could Mr. Softly resist all this? Impossible. He drank glass after glass of champagne. His blood was heated with the wine and with Armantine's seductive caresses — he likewise experienced an awful horror of Captain Cartwright, and thus, amidst the strange and unnatural confusion of his feelings and bewilderment of his thoughts, he decided on securing the charmer as his wife, and thereby averting the hideous vengeance of the fire-eater.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE OLD LORD AND HIS MISTRESS

THE scene now changes to the sumptuously furnished house which Lord Wenham had hired for the accommodation of his beautiful Eglantine, who was passed off on him as the immaculate niece of the not very immaculate Madame Angelique. The reader will not have forgotten that his lordship was an octogenarian, with bowed form, wrinkled face, an absence of teeth, a continuous hacking cough, and a mumbling, stammering mode of speech. Well-nigh in his dotage, he had placed implicit confidence in the specious tale of Eglantine's virtue, and in the specious manner in which the young lady had played her part toward her "wicked aunt." Immensely rich, and a widower, the antiquated nobleman thought that he had a perfect right to minister to his own pleasures, and he had not therefore hesitated to form this most expensive connection.

It was in the forenoon on the day following the incidents which we have related in the preceding chapter, and if we peep into an exquisitely furnished boudoir at Miss Eglantine's new abode, we shall find the young lady and her ancient protector seated at breakfast. His lordship had passed the night at the house, and he was completely infatuated, like an old dotard as he was, with his beautiful mistress. We should observe that there had been all the shyness and prudery of a veritable virgin bride in the first instance, and now that some days had elapsed since the connection began, Eglantine appeared to entertain so lively a sense of the old lord's generosity and kindness that she behaved as if she already esteemed and could soon love him.

They were seated, as we have said, at breakfast, — Eglantine in a charming *déshabillé*, Lord Wenham in a dress-

ing-gown and black velvet skull-cap. The contrast was immense, and afforded a striking illustration of the varieties of appearance which human beings may present to the view, — how one may be formed to fascinate and another to disgust, how grace, elegance, and loveliness may belong to youth, and how loathsome ugliness may characterize old age. And yet that old lord was infatuated enough to hug the belief that he had already rendered himself agreeable to Eglantine, that she esteemed him, and that she would soon love him. And he moreover already doted upon her; he would sooner have parted with title and wealth than have separated from her. He was jealous, too, — as jealous as he could be; not because she had given him any reason for the sentiment, nor because he was deficient in conceit of his own merits, but because it is in the nature of all men to be thus jealous of young wives, and still more of young mistresses.

“My dear girl,” he presently said, after having contemplated her for two or three minutes, — “ugh! ugh! this dreadful cough of mine! — you seem pensive to-day? Tell me, my sweet girl — ugh! ugh! if it weren’t for this horrible cough I should feel quite young again! But tell me, what it is that makes you look so pensive?”

“Pensive, am I pensive?” ejaculated Eglantine, as if suddenly starting up from a reverie. “I am sure I did not think I was. And yet —”

“Ugh! ugh! — and yet — ugh! ugh! — this dreadful cough. But why, my dear, did you qualify your assurance? Pray be candid with me — ugh! ugh! If there is anything you want — ugh! ugh! — anything more I can do to ensure your happiness —”

“Your lordship has already done so much for me,” responded Eglantine, “as to leave not a single wish unfulfilled. Indeed, I had never formed any such wishes at all, for I did not foresee what my fate was to be,” and as Eglantine thus spoke in a tremulous voice, she suffered her eyelids to droop, her air became pensive again, and then she hastily passed her kerchief across her brow, as if wiping away tears.

“Come, come, my dear girl,” said the old nobleman, “what — what — ugh! ugh! — perdition take this cough of mine! — ugh! ugh! — what, what is it that makes you so melancholy?”

“To be candid with you, my lord,” answered Eglantine, suddenly looking up with an air of the most artless sincerity into the countenance of her aged protector, “I have been thinking what my uncle would say to me if he knew what I had done, or what he would do to my aunt if he learned to what she has brought me?”

“Your uncle, ugh! Your aunt, ugh! ugh!” stammered and coughed Lord Wenham. “I never knew that there was a Monsieur Angelique. I always thought that madame was either a widow, or at least passed as such. Tell me, my dear — ugh! ugh! ugh! — this cough will be the death of me, ugh! ugh!”

“Madame Angelique is a widow,” explained Eglantine, “but nevertheless I have an uncle. I will tell you how it is. Madame Angelique’s sister married an English gentleman; I am the issue of that union. My parents are dead, as your lordship has already been told, and I was taken at their death into the care of a distant relative. She also died, and then my aunt Angelique took care of me. My late father’s brother has for a long time been abroad, — first in the army, then holding a high situation in the civil service of India, and he is shortly to return home, even if he be not at this moment in England. That is the uncle, my dear lord,” added Eglantine, with a profound sigh, “whom I dread so much.”

“Is he a very stern man — ugh! ugh! — is he so very formidable?” asked Lord Wenham, and then he was seized with such a violent fit of coughing that it was a wonder he was not shaken into the next world.

“I have not seen him since I was about ten or eleven years old,” replied Eglantine, when the fit of coughing was over, “and then my uncle came on a year’s leave to England for the benefit of his health. Oh, I never can forget that countenance of his, — so stern, so threatening, so fierce. Do not, my dear lord, judge all the other members of my family by my aunt Angelique, nor by what I myself have become.”

“Nonsense, nonsense, my dear,” ejaculated Wenham; “don’t talk in this way of yourself. You seem to think — ugh! ugh! — that you have done something most dreadfully bad by living with me. Nothing of the sort — ugh! ugh! ugh! this cough — ugh! ugh! — of mine. It is not as if you had been a wild, giddy girl, with a number of lovers, or as

if you had been one of the regular inmates of Madame Angelique's establishment. But innocent — ugh! ugh! — and virtuous — ugh! ugh! — as you were — ”

“ Ah! still, my lord,” said Eglantine, with another profound sigh, “ I have fallen — I feel it, and how can I look my uncle in the face, should he find me out on his return to England? ”

“ But why need he find you out? ” inquired the old nobleman; “ why — ugh! ugh! — should he discover — ugh! ugh! — where you are? ”

“ How can it possibly be avoided? ” asked Eglantine. “ He will come to London; he is unmarried, childless, and I believe well off. He will ask for his young relative; he will not submit to the evasions and equivocations which my aunt Angelique is sure to use. He is terribly violent, resolutely determined, fierce almost to savageness. He is persevering too, and if he do not extort from Madame Angelique a confession of all that has occurred, he will leave no stone unturned in order to find me out.”

“ Ugh! ugh! — my dear — then we must hide you,” said the old nobleman, and as his voice abruptly rose from its wonted mumbling and stammering into a positive shriek, he yelled forth, “ I couldn't part from you. They sha'n't tear you from me. They sha'n't tear you from me.”

“ Oh, how kind and good your lordship is,” murmured Eglantine, apparently melted to tears, and starting from her seat, she threw her arms around the old dotard's neck, lavishing caresses upon him.

“ You do love me a leetle bit? ” said Wenham, looking up into her face with gloating eyes, and grinning like an ancient goat.

“ Ah, until now I esteemed you,” responded Eglantine, “ but at present I feel — yes, I feel that I love you.” Then gliding back to her seat, she flung upon her old protector a look that seemed to vibrate with mingled tenderness and gratitude.

“ You are a good girl — ugh! ugh! — a very good girl,” said the nobleman, “ and we will go out presently in the carriage to the splendid shawl-shop in Regent Street, where — ugh! ugh! — you shall choose whatever you like.”

“ Ah, my dear lord,” exclaimed Eglantine, “ now you will understand the impossibility of keeping myself concealed

from this terrible uncle of mine, whenever he begins to search for me. How can I remain indoors all day? How can I debar myself the pleasure of accompanying you in your drives? I care not for society or gaiety; with you I can be happy, but complete loneliness and seclusion I can not endure. My uncle must sooner or later find me out — ”

At this moment the door opened, and a shriek pealed from Eglantine's lips. Lord Wenham at first looked aghast, but on perceiving in which direction the eyes of his young mistress were bent, he turned himself around in his chair, and beheld a formidable-looking personage advancing into the room. We may save ourselves the trouble of much description, by declaring at once that the intruder was none other than Captain Cartwright, but on the present occasion he was dressed in plain clothes. Scarcely less fierce however was his aspect than on the preceding day when he presented himself to the Honourable Augustus Softly and Mademoiselle Armantine. His countenance was stern and implacable, and on advancing into the room, he banged the door with such terrific violence that it made the old lord shudder and quake from head to foot with a startled sensation that was immediately followed by a fit of coughing which lasted for several minutes.

Meanwhile Eglantine had covered her face with her hands, and Captain Cartwright, with arms folded across his chest, stood surveying her with the sternest severity.

“ And is it thus,” he said, “ that I find my niece, — the pensioned mistress of a nobleman? I came to England for the purpose of giving you a happy home, and making you the heiress of my wealth; I had buoyed myself up with a thousand fond hopes, — hopes of happiness in my declining years, in the society of a niece who would be unto me as a daughter, and for whom I should find an eligible husband. But all these hopes are destroyed, and my deceased brother's daughter has dishonoured the name of Cartwright, — that name which never was dishonoured before.”

“ Spare me, dear uncle, spare me,” exclaimed Eglantine, flinging herself with every appearance of the wildest grief at Captain Cartwright's feet. “ His lordship is very kind to me — ”

“ Kind to you, Eglantine? ” ejaculated the captain, scornfully; “ what means such kindness as this? ”

"Sir," interrupted the old nobleman, "I — I — ugh! ugh! — would have you know that I — I — ugh! ugh! — am incapable of treating your niece otherwise than — ugh! ugh! — with kindness."

"It is something in your favour, my lord," answered Captain Cartwright, sternly, "but still it will not save you from the chastisement I am bound to inflict upon the seducer of my niece."

"Oh, no, do not touch him! Do not injure a hair of his head," exclaimed Eglantine, starting to her feet and bounding toward the old nobleman, around whose neck her arms were thrown.

"You are a good girl, my dear — ugh! ugh! — you are a good girl," mumbled Wenham. "There! there! don't weep — don't take on so! — sit down, my love — ugh! ugh! — and your uncle will presently grow calmer."

Eglantine retired to her chair, but Captain Cartwright remained standing, his arms still folded, his looks still sternly severe.

"Lord Wenham," he said, "listen to the few words which I have to address unto you. A beloved brother on his death-bed bequeathed his child to my care. I undertook the charge, vowing to fulfil it affectionately and honourably. My avocations recalled me to India, and I left my niece in the care of an elderly female relative in whom I could confide. She paid the debt of nature some little while back, and then Eglantine, after an interval passed with a friend, went under the protection of my sister-in-law Madame Angelique. And such protection it has been! Good heavens, such protection! In a word, my hopes are blighted, and that niece whom to her father on his death-bed I swore to protect and befriend is a fallen creature, and you, my lord, are her seducer."

"But she loves me — ugh! ugh!" shrieked forth Wenham, in that same shrill tone to which his voice had ere now risen, "and you sha'n't part us! — ugh! ugh! — you sha'n't part us."

"Oh, uncle, uncle!" murmured the weeping Eglantine, "pray be not so cruel unto me. Oh, be not cruel unto me!"

"Cruel, niece?" ejaculated Captain Cartwright; "it is you that have been cruel to the memory of your parents, to me, — ay, and unto yourself. But I must tear you hence from this house of infamy. You must go with me, and on

you, my lord, will I inflict such vengeance as the seducer deserves. Not even your years, much less your rank and wealth shall protect you. You are bound to give me satisfaction for the seduction of my niece. A friend of mine will wait upon you presently, and if you refuse, I swear that I will horsewhip you publicly, — not a horsewhipping for mere show, not a simple laying of the whip upon your shoulder, but such a chastisement as shall bring you within a hair's breadth of the grave."

A shriek thrilled from Eglantine's lips; again she flung herself at the captain's feet, again she implored his mercy. But fiercely seizing her by the wrist, he compelled her to rise, and then, as he tossed her from him, she sank back sobbing convulsively into her chair. Meanwhile the old nobleman had been thrown into such a nervous state of excitement by the dread of losing his beautiful mistress, and by the terrific threats of personal chastisement which the fierce captain had flung out, that he was almost suffocated and strangled by another fit of coughing.

"If on my return to England," resumed Captain Cartwright, now addressing Eglantine with mournfulness rather than bitterness perceptible in his tone, "I had found you the honoured wedded wife of this nobleman, or of any other man of station or character, joy would have filled my heart. I should have blessed you — I should have thought with a holy comfort of the manner in which I had fulfilled my vow to your deceased parents; I should not have felt as if I myself were a guilty and perjured being in contemplating the memory of your father. But instead of hailing you as a wife, I find you living in gilded infamy — Oh, it is terrible to think of! and there is no vengeance, my lord, too deadly to be wreaked on you as this orphan girl's seducer."

"But — but," said the nobleman, quivering with nervousness, and shaken by his hacking cough, "but — but — ugh! ugh! — is there no means by which this matter can be settled? I — I will place a very large — ugh! ugh! — sum of money in Eglantine's name —"

"My lord," interrupted Captain Cartwright sternly, "this is adding insult to injury. What? think you that the loss of her honour is to be compensated for by gold? Come, Eglantine, come directly — I insist upon it."

"She sha'n't go," screeched forth the old nobleman, who

looked as if he were goaded almost to frenzy; "she sha'n't go."

"We shall see, my lord," answered Cartwright, coldly. "Eglantine is under age — I am her natural protector and her guardian. If she refuse to accompany me of her own free will, I must put force into requisition. Come, girl, I say, come."

"But my dear sir — ugh! ugh! — I love her," exclaimed Lord Wenham. "She is the only good girl I ever knew. The only one that — ugh! ugh! — did not give herself airs, and therefore — ugh! ugh!"

"But think you, my lord," demanded the captain, "that because you love her, I will leave her here as your pensioned mistress? Heaven forbid! Come, girl, come."

"Well, well," muttered Lord Wenham, "I suppose it must be — ugh! ugh! — it must be. Captain Cartwright — ugh! ugh! But what will the world think? Hang the world! — ugh! ugh! I should not be the first nobleman that — ugh! ugh! Besides, how many have married actresses? And then too, no one need know — ugh! ugh! — that Eglantine lived with me first of all. It has only been a matter of a few days. Captain Cartwright, ahem! — ugh! ugh! — I think — ahem — ugh! — hah! — ahem! — ugh! ugh!"

Thus, what with sometimes muttering to himself, sometimes speaking loud enough to be heard, and coughing incessantly from first to last, the old dotard conveyed an idea of what was passing in his mind.

"You think what, my lord?" demanded Cartwright, as Wenham suddenly stopped short.

"I think, captain — ugh! ugh!" answered the nobleman, "that this little matter — ahem! — hah! — little matter may be perhaps arranged — ugh! ugh! — to the satisfaction of us all. Eglantine is a good girl — and — and — ugh! ugh! — will, I am sure, make a — ahem! — hah! — make a — you know — ugh! — a very good wife."

A wild cry of joy thrilled from Eglantine's lips as she flew toward the old nobleman, and again flinging her arms about his neck, she lavished upon him the tenderest and most endearing caresses.

"My lord," said Captain Cartwright, "you are now performing the part of an honourable man. I esteem and re-

spect you — and I feel convinced that my beloved niece will make you a most excellent wife. You will have the goodness to give me your solemn written undertaking that the marriage shall be solemnized by special license to-morrow, though under circumstances of as much privacy as possible, so that it may not be known to the world that Eglantine lived under your protection as a mistress before she became a wife. Give me this undertaking, my lord, and I will depart for the present. I will not separate you; I will leave you to the discussion of such preliminaries as may be necessary for all that is to take place.”

The old dotard, labouring under a mortal terror of the fierce Captain Cartwright, and equally influenced, though in another sense, by the tender caresses which Eglantine was lavishing upon him, hesitated not to give the written undertaking which the fire-eater demanded.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE INDIAN COMMISSIONERS

THE scene once more changes to Shrubbery Villa, the residence of the Princess Indora in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill and Bayswater. The princess was seated alone in that exquisitely furnished apartment where we found her on the first occasion that she was introduced to our readers. It was at the back of the drawing-room on the first floor, and the style of its appointments was altogether Oriental. The lamp suspended to the ceiling shed its soft, roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass, and the ottomans, with their red velvet cushions, the crimson draperies, with their massive gold fringes, and the carpet of corresponding dyes, appeared to borrow deeper and richer hues from that flood of lustre.

The Princess Indora was seated upon one of the ottomans, and she was arrayed in the most becoming Oriental garb. A caftan of purple velvet, exquisitely embroidered, and brilliant with gems, set off the fine symmetry of her shape to admirable advantage. Confined at the throat and at the waist, the interval that was left open revealed the rounded contours of the gorgeous bust through the gauzy and almost transparent chemisette. She wore satin trousers of an azure colour, embroidered, and trimmed with the richest lace. Made full in the Eastern style, they ballooned down to the ankles, where they were tied; the ankles themselves were bare, and the feet were thrust into morocco slippers of a purple colour ornamented with pearls. According to her custom, the princess wore no corset, nor indeed were any artificial means of support or compression requisite for a form so superbly modelled, and the rich contours of which

sustained themselves as nature intended and as if they were the sculptured delineations of a statue.

Be it recollected that the complexion of the Princess Indora was not of gipsy swarthinness, although it was of Eastern duskiness, and it differed from that of the brunette of our Western clime, inasmuch as it was of a clear pale brown. We have said too — but we may repeat it here — that the skin had all that fine-grained appearance and that animated polish which seemed to indicate that, so far from the first freshness of youth being lost, it still adhered, unmarred and unimpaired, to a matured and voluptuous womanhood. The rich warm blood of her Eastern origin mantled with carnation tint upon the cheeks, gradually softening away until imperceptibly blending with the pale brown purity of the general complexion. To gaze upon the Princess Indora, to observe those masses of luxuriantly flowing hair, dark as night, without wave or curl except at the extremities, but all as soft as silk; that faultless profile, with the straight nose, the short upper lip, and the delicately rounded chin; those coal-black eyes, full of a languishing lustre, and curtained at times by the richest ebon fringes that ever constituted a veil which woman could at pleasure draw over her thoughts; to pass on from that countenance of magnificent beauty, and suffer the eye to wander along the line of the throat, till it joined the neck where the bust expanded into such grandly rounded and voluptuously swelling contours; to travel still onward with the gaze, and follow the sweeping outlines of the arms, bare to the shoulders, and modelled with robustness and yet to the most admirable symmetry; to pursue the contemplation to the feet, which were long and shapely, with high insteps, — to complete this survey of the living, glowing, animated picture would be to feast the eyes with one of the most charming and magnificent creations that ever belonged to the sphere of the female sex.

Such indeed was the Princess Indora, who had now nearly completed her thirty-first year. Ordinarily with Eastern women they are at that age on the wane, their beauty is fading, and in appearance they resemble females five or six years older in our Western climes. But it was not so with Indora. If, in speaking of her age, she had chosen to diminish it by half a dozen years, no one would have questioned the truth of the assertion. In every sense was the lustre of her beauty

undimmed, while the lapse of time appeared only to add to its gorgeousness and its grandeur. There was a dewy freshness on the rich red lips; the teeth which they disclosed were whiter than ivory, even as if arranged by the nicest mechanical art, and in faultless preservation. Her breath was sweet and balmy as that of a youthful maiden's; and, in a word, her appearance was altogether as if she had taken the most studious care to protect her wondrous beauty against all those effects of time and circumstances which could mar its freshness or dim its brightness.

It was at about eight o'clock in the evening that we thus find the Princess Indora seated in her exquisitely furnished apartment, and evidently awaiting some expected arrival. Hopeful happiness was depicted upon her countenance; its light was dancing in the depths of her coal-black eyes, and the flutter of her heart was indicated by the quick swelling and sinking of her bosom. What was passing in the mind of the Princess Indora that she was thus hopeful and happy, and yet to a certain extent agitated with suspense? Was it that she thought of her love, that long, faithful, impassioned, and trustful love of hers, and that she had reason to believe it would shortly be crowned with bliss?

Presently the door opened, and Sagoonah made her appearance. A rapid, searching glance did the ayah fling upon her mistress as she crossed the threshold, for one single moment, too, did the vindictive expression of a tigress pass over the features of the Hindu woman, and then as her eyes instantaneously sank again she stood before the princess with her wonted respectful deference of manner.

"What is it, Sagoonah?" inquired Indora, hastily. "Is it —"

She stopped short, and the colour heightened upon her cheeks, while the other evidences of her suspense were enhanced.

"Two commissioners from Inderabad have arrived in London, my lady," answered Sagoonah, "and they crave an immediate audience."

"Two commissioners?" ejaculated Indora, the colour suddenly vanishing from her cheeks. "What can this mean? Has anything happened to my dear father? It was but the other day that his messengers were here! But speak, Sagoonah, what say they?" and the princess was painfully excited.

“They said nothing, my lady,” answered the ayah, “beyond inquiring in respect to your ladyship’s health and in soliciting an immediate audience. But they are in mourning, my lady — ”

“In mourning?” echoed Indora, with a half-shriek. “Oh, then I must anticipate the worst! But let them enter, introduce them quick!”

Sagoonah hastened to obey the mandate, and in a few moments the two commissioners from Inderabad were ushered into the presence of the princess. One was a venerable old man, in whom Indora at once recognized a faithful and long-attached minister in her father’s service; the other was a personage of middle age and wore a military uniform. Him also Indora knew full well; he was one of her father’s equerries. Both were men of distinction and of high rank, and, as Sagoonah had intimated, they wore the purple emblems of mourning which were customary when death had to be deplored in the kingdom of Inderabad.

The two commissioners prostrated themselves at the feet of Indora; their hearts were evidently full of emotion, and the princess was seized with a mingled consternation and dismay which forbade her from putting the question that had risen up to her lips. At length the elder commissioner murmured forth, in a tremulous voice, “Gracious queen, accept the allegiance which we offer for ourselves and on the part of all your Majesty’s faithful subjects.”

“Ah, then my beloved father is no more!” said Indora, in a deep voice, and covering her countenance with her hands, she burst into tears.

The commissioners rose from their suppliant posture, and stood in attitudes of respect in the presence of her whom they had just hailed as their queen. Indora appeared to forget their presence. At that instant one idea was uppermost in her mind, — that her father was no more, and that he had died while she was far away in a foreign land. Bitterly, bitterly did the lady weep. Oh, if she could only have been there to close her father’s eyes and to receive his last injunctions! Oh, if the wings of a bird could have been given to her at the time, that she might have soared over seas and over lands to minister in the last hours of that beloved father, she would not have to reproach herself now! But she was stricken with remorse, for she felt as if she had been guilty

of a crime in being absent from that sire in his supreme moments. At length she recollected that the commissioners were present; she raised her looks, she wiped her eyes, but in a voice that was deep as if clouded with inward weeping, she said, "Tell me, my friends, how spoke my poor father of his daughter in his last illness?"

"His Majesty," replied the senior commissioner, "commanded us to bear unto our future queen the assurances of that paternal love which had never diminished, of that father's fondness which endured until the end."

"My poor father!" murmured Indora, again weeping. "But what else said he?" she inquired, after a few minutes' pause, and again drying her eyes.

"His Majesty commanded us," responded the chief commissioner, "to assure our future queen that he left her a kingdom in the highest state of prosperity, a well-filled treasury, and a population that has not to complain of oppressive taxes, a large and well-disciplined army that has cheerfully sworn allegiance to your Majesty as its queen, thriving towns, the wealth and civilization of which are not to be outvied by even the cities of the English in other parts of India. In a word, your Majesty is now, by the will of Heaven, called upon to rule over a great and a happy nation, in whose heart your image is enshrined and who will welcome with enthusiastic acclaims their lady sovereign home."

Indora was profoundly affected, not only on account of her father's death, but likewise by the language which the commissioner thus addressed to her. She wept for the memory of her perished sire, she wept likewise to know herself a queen. She wept for the lost one, and she wept because a diadem had descended upon her brows. And there, in that villa, which, sumptuous though it were, was a mere humble cottage in comparison with the gorgeous palaces of Inderabad, — there sat this lady, the queen of one of the mightiest independent nations of the East!

The chief commissioner proceeded to give her Majesty certain details relative to her father's death, and also with reference to the arrangements that had been made for the government of the kingdom until her return. It appeared that only a couple of days after the King of Inderabad had despatched those messengers, who, as we have already seen, waited upon Indora at her villa, he was seized with

a sudden illness, which in a few hours proved fatal. But the instant his physicians told him that the worst was to be apprehended, he ordered all the troops of the capital to be marshalled in the great square in front of the palace, that they might take the oath of allegiance to his daughter who was absent. It was scarcely necessary to require this display of loyalty on their part, for the different regiments, on learning what the object was, marched to the great square proclaiming Indora's name. The dying king ordered his attendants to bear him forth upon a balcony, whence by signs he expressed his gratitude to the troops and their commanders. In a few hours afterward he had ceased to exist. For three days the inhabitants of Inderabad hung their houses with black draperies in token of mourning for their deceased monarch, and then, the funeral being over, there was a brilliant illumination, for three days also, in honour of their lady sovereign. The late king had no near relatives with the exception of Indora, and this was so far fortunate, that there was no pretender to dispute her claim to the throne. A regency was formed, consisting of a council of five of the highest dignitaries of the country, all of whom were devoted to the late monarch and his living daughter, and the two commissioners who now waited upon Indora were at once despatched off to England to communicate all these tidings.

The new queen listened with a profound interest to everything thus imparted to her, and in suitable terms she expressed her acknowledgments to the commissioners for the loving loyalty that had been shown her and for the wise measures that had been adopted. As a token of her gratitude, she bestowed upon each a ring of immense value, and she dismissed them for the present, bidding them return to her upon the morrow.

Indora was now once more alone, but not for many minutes was she left to her reflections, for Sagoonah shortly reappeared, to announce the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe. The commissioners had said nothing to the ayah in respect to the object of their visit, but she suspected what it was, — yes, she suspected that her mistress was now a queen. Indora would have informed her of the fact, but the announcement of the arrival of him whom she had been expecting made her heart flutter once more, and afforded her not the leisure for the moment to hold any conversation with her depend-

ent. She hastily bade Sagoonah introduce Mr. Redcliffe, and the ayah's eyes — those burning, brilliant, haunting eyes — flashed forth strange fires as she turned to execute the bidding of her mistress. During her temporary absence, Queen Indora composed her countenance as well as she was able, but it was difficult indeed for one of her fine feelings and affectionate nature thus to put off even transiently the traces of that sorrow which the intelligence of her father's death had excited in her bosom.

Mr. Redcliffe entered, and Sagoonah, having ushered him in, immediately withdrew from the apartment. We should observe that the incidents we are relating occurred some days after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the twins, when he inspected the memorials of their departed mother; and on this particular evening Christina had gone to pass a few hours with her brother Christian at Mrs. Macaulay's. Sagoonah was not therefore afraid of being detected while listening at the door of the apartment, and she did listen.

Mr. Redcliffe entered, as we have said, and at once taking the hand of the queen, — though he as yet knew not that she was aught more than a princess still, — he said, "Has your Highness reflected well on the note which I sent you the other morning by Christian Ashton?"

"I have reflected," answered Indora, in a tremulous voice, with downcast looks, and with blushing countenance, "and yet there was no need for it, because — because my love could know no change. It is immutable, it is immortal."

"Then, Indora, I am here," resumed Mr. Redcliffe, "to fulfil the pledge which I gave you when last we met within these walls. I told you that I had a self-imposed mission to fulfil, and to investigate circumstances which were enveloped in doubt and mystery. In a word, before I dared think of love again, it was needful that I should ascertain the fate of one who —"

"No more!" interrupted the queen. "I know all!"

"All?" echoed Mr. Redcliffe. "Yes, it must be so, or else you would never have gone —"

"Ah! you know that I went thither?" ejaculated Indora, at once penetrating his thoughts.

"Yes, but let me explain presently," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Tell me, Indora, how did you learn everything —"

"And I also will explain presently," rejoined the Eastern

lady. "First let us speak of that which is nearest to us, and dearest at least to me. You have discovered that she whom you sought is no more — is it not so? Is it not that which you would have me understand?"

"It is," answered Redcliffe. "And now listen to me, Indora. No man can be insensible of the boundless, the illimitable love which you have borne for me, and it is impossible I can repay it with ingratitude. On the former occasions when we met within these walls, I spoke — and perhaps spoke harshly — of my long, long detention in your royal father's capital, but that I have forgotten — or at least forgiven. I know that you love me, Indora; you have given many, many proofs of it, and it is not in my nature — no, by Heaven! it is not in my nature to plant a dagger in such a heart as yours."

"Clement," murmured Indora, "these words from your lips infuse an unknown happiness into my soul."

"Yet listen to me again," resumed Redcliffe, still retaining her hand in his own. "The power of loving as I once loved another" — and his voice faltered — "is dead within me. But if, all other circumstances apart, you can accept the hand of one who will esteem and cherish you, who will lavish upon you all that tenderness which your own long-enduring love so much merits, if you can be contented with an affectionate friendship which in itself will be a real love, then, Indora, you may claim me as a husband."

Tears trickled down the lady's cheeks, for her heart was full of ineffable emotions; the words she would have spoken died upon her lips, but to those lips she pressed Clement Redcliffe's hand.

"Listen to me again, Indora," he continued, himself deeply moved. "You are beautiful, the handsomest of living women. You retain, too, all the first freshness of your youth; the jettiness of your hair will not for years to come be streaked with gray, nor the lustre of your eyes be dimmed. But how different is it with me! Though still in my prime, so far as years are concerned, yet am I prematurely old. My hair is streaked with gray, and oh, if the sorrows, the afflictions, and the wretchedness I have endured be taken into account, it were no marvel if I were bowed down as though it were with an intolerable burden."

"Continue not thus, Clement," interrupted Indora, press-

ing his hand to her bosom and then to her lips. "As I have assured you before, I repeat the assurance now, that I only behold in you the idol of my own imagination. I see you as you were when first I learned to love you in the far-off city of Inderabad, and, oh, I shall ever love you! Though all in an instant your hair were to turn white, and your form were to be bowed, and you were to present the appearance of old age's decrepitude, I should love you, oh, I should love you just the same! And think you, Clement, that there is not gratitude mixed up with this love of mine? Think you I can be unmindful that it was you who were the preceptor of my childhood, who taught me whatsoever accomplishments I possess, and, what is more," added Indora, solemnly, and in the fervour of a grateful piety, "who instructed me in the sublime truths of Christianity? Or again, think you that I am unmindful of how you introduced the arts and sciences of civilization into my father's kingdom, how you taught him a liberal and enlightened policy, and how by virtue of your lessons he was enabled to advance his people to the highest point of prosperity and happiness? No, Clement, I have forgotten nought of all these things, and thus you see how fervid gratitude is interwoven with my love."

Never had Indora seemed more eminently beautiful than while thus giving expression to those eloquent outpourings which flowed from her very heart. There was something sublime as well as something ineffably touching in her loveliness at that moment, something grand and pathetic, splendid, and at the same time indescribably interesting, in her looks. Redcliffe would have been something less or something more than man if he had not experienced a sentiment of pride at the thought of calling this inimitable being his wife. And he did harbour that feeling, not because she was a princess of the loftiest rank; he forgot at the instant her royal descent, he beheld in her only a magnificent, an interesting, a noble-minded, and a loving woman.

"Indora," he said, "never, never can I forget the words you have just spoken; they prove all the generosity of your heart. But listen to me once again. You know all — yes, I am aware that you must know all, and therefore you are not ignorant of the horrible mystery —"

"Oh, Clement, there is justice in Heaven," exclaimed Indora, "and that mystery will be cleared up. But even if

it were not, think you that I — This is however a topic," she ejaculated, "on which we must speak presently."

"Be it so," answered Redcliffe. "And now, Indora, if all these things be well weighed in your mind, and if you be firmly convinced that your life's happiness can be ensured by linking your fate with mine, the affirmative response shall go forth from my lip."

"Clement, I am thine," answered Indora, and her head sank upon his breast.

He clasped her in his arms; she wept with a variety of conflicting feelings, for joy and sorrow were now strangely blended in her heart. Her love was to be crowned with happiness, but she had lost a father.

"Oh, Clement," she murmured, "you know not what I feel, you cannot comprehend it. The hope of long, long years is about to be fulfilled, and I have it in my power to testify unto you all the immensity of the love which I experience. I know that you seek not for titles, that you care not for earthly honours, but you will at least feel a pleasure in being placed in a position which will enable you to do good to your fellow creatures, Clement," she added, in a voice that rose with exultation, "it is not a princess who offers you her hand; it is a queen who can seat you by her side upon a throne, and who will rejoice to see her subjects governed by the wisdom and the philanthropy of such a man."

"Indora, what mean you?" asked Redcliffe in astonishment. "Your father —"

"He is no more," replied the Eastern lady. "This very evening high dignitaries from my own kingdom have sought me here to communicate the intelligence. And, oh, if you found me not weeping and displaying all the evidences of grief on account of my father's death, it was because until this moment I subdued all I felt, I veiled it to the utmost of my power; I would not seem sad when you came to tell me that you would accept me as your bride."

Mr. Redcliffe sympathized with Indora on the loss of her father, and they now went on to converse on those topics to which they had hitherto only alluded distantly, and which they had agreed to postpone until other matters were settled. But we need not penetrate further into the discourse which thus passed between them; suffice it to say that it was long and solemnly interesting to both.

It was a little past ten o'clock when Clement Redcliffe took his leave of Indora, and issued from the apartment, leaving her to reflect upon the two main incidents of the evening, so conflicting and so opposite, one infusing sorrow and the other joy into her heart. Sagoonah had listened at the door until this leave-taking reached her ears, and then she glided down into the hall to be in readiness to open the front door for Mr. Redcliffe. He descended the stairs, he traversed the hall. Sagoonah opened the door, and as he turned to bid her good-night, he was struck by the expression of her large brilliant eyes. They seemed to vibrate upon him with a light that made him for a moment tremble, with a lustre that was so sinister and so supernal it smote him, as it were, with an unknown terror. The recollection flashed to his mind that this was not the first time he had seen those eyes thus flame and burn as they were fixed upon him; he stopped short, and was about to ask Sagoonah wherefore she thus regarded him, when all of a sudden those eyes of hers were cast down, her demeanour became profoundly respectful, and Redcliffe suffered the question to remain unasked.

He bade the ayah good night, and issued from the dwelling; but as he traversed the garden, and thence continued his way along the lane leading toward the main road, he felt as if he were still followed by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CONSERVATORY

THE dusk was setting in on the evening of the following day when two individuals who had been walking and holding a long discourse together in the neighbourhood of Oaklands shook hands and separated. One was Purvis, the old steward who now retraced his way toward Marchmont's ducal seat; the other was Clement Redcliffe, who hastily struck across the fields in the direction of a cottage where he had been wont to take up his quarters on the three or four occasions that he had visited this part of the country.

In a few minutes he reached the road, along which he had to continue his way for about a quarter of a mile in order to arrive at that cottage; but he was destined to experience an adventure ere the walk, brief though it were, was accomplished. For as he was proceeding along, it struck him that he observed a female form lying by the side of the road in the shade of the hedge. He approached the object, and found that his surmise was correct. A female lay motionless there, with her face downward, and Redcliffe was instantaneously smitten with the idea that it was a corpse which he looked upon. He hastened to raise her up, and so far as the obscurity of the evening would permit, he saw that she was decently clad, that she was a woman of tall stature, and that she possessed the remains, if not of actual beauty, at least of a countenance that had not been ill-looking. The woman was comparatively young too, not many years beyond thirty, but she had a haggard, careworn aspect. Her eyes were closed; the warmth of life was however in her, and Redcliffe was thus relieved from the idea that he was gazing upon the victim of a foul crime, or of starvation, exhaustion, or of sudden natural death.

The cottage, as we have said, was at no great distance, and thither Mr. Redcliffe hastily bore the woman in his arms. The occupants of the little habitation at once received her, for they were entirely obedient to the will of Mr. Redcliffe, whose liberality as a paymaster they had experienced on more occasions than one. The unconscious female was placed upon a couch, and by the means adopted to restore her she was so far brought back to life as to leave little or no apprehension as to the result. Still she continued in a state of unconsciousness as to what was passing around her, and having slowly opened her eyes, she closed them again, their temporary expression being full of a listless vacancy.

"She cannot be an ordinary tramp," said Mr. Redcliffe to the woman of the cottage. "Perhaps she is subject to fits."

"Or else she fell down, sir, through sheer exhaustion. For look, her shoes are completely worn through, ay, and the stockings likewise; her poor feet are all cut and bleeding. I will foment them with hot water, and this may likewise tend to bring her back to consciousness."

"Do so," said Mr. Redcliffe. "But perhaps it would be as well to ascertain if we can who she is. Probably," he added, as the circumstances of Crazy Jane flashed to his memory, and suggested the remark he was now making, "she may be some unfortunate idiot who has escaped from her friends, for her apparel is decent, and she has not the air of one who by ordinary circumstances could be reduced to houseless wanderings, penury, and destitution. I will leave this room, and you can join me presently in the parlour, when you have searched her person thoroughly; so that if there should happen to be any letters or papers about her, you can bring them to me."

This scene took place in a bedchamber to which the woman had been borne, and Mr. Redcliffe descended to the parlour which he occupied at the cottage. In about ten minutes the elderly female who was left in attendance upon her, and who was the mistress of the little habitation, rejoined Mr. Redcliffe, who instantaneously perceived that she bore several articles in her hands.

"The poor creature is very far from being a common tramp," said the woman, "for, look here, sir. There is a purse well filled with gold and silver, several jewelry trinkets, and this sealed packet."

Mr. Redcliffe took the articles, and opening the purse, he found that it contained about twenty guineas; the jewels were old-fashioned, and might be worth a similar sum; the sealed packet had no address upon it.

“Is the woman recovering?” he inquired.

“She every now and then opens her eyes, sir,” was the response, “looks vacantly up, and then closes them again. I am pretty sure she will recover; but what are we to do with her? If she has any friends, they may be anxious about her.”

“That is precisely what I am thinking,” said Mr. Redcliffe, “and therefore, although under any circumstances I dislike opening private papers, yet on the present occasion such a course seems absolutely necessary. Go back to the poor woman, do your best for her, and in the meanwhile I will see whether this packet will afford us any clue to the knowledge of who she is.”

The elderly female retired from the parlour, and Mr. Redcliffe broke the seal of the packet. It contained a letter the address of which made him start suddenly, and he unhesitatingly commenced the perusal of the document. It was a long one, and profound was the interest with which Mr. Redcliffe scanned its contents. When he had concluded, he remained for some minutes absorbed in a profound solemn reverie, and then he murmured to himself, “Truly the finger of Heaven has of late been manifesting itself in signal and marvellous ways for the development of the deepest mysteries. Here is another link in the chain of evidence — But who can this woman be?”

In a few minutes the mistress of the cottage reappeared, saying, “Have you discovered, sir, who she is?”

“No,” replied Mr. Redcliffe, “and more than ever am I anxious to make that discovery. By a singular coincidence this letter regards a certain business in which I am deeply interested, but it affords no clue as to who the woman herself may be. Does she get better?”

“She still lingers in a sort of swoon,” was the answer, “but two or three times she has again opened her eyes, and once her lips moved as if she were trying to say something. What do you think, sir, had better be done? Ah, here is my old man come back from the village!” ejaculated the woman, as the cottage door opened at the instant and

heavy footsteps were heard in the little passage which divided the two ground floor rooms of the humble dwelling.

"He must hasten off to the village again and fetch a surgeon," answered Mr. Redcliffe. "Go and tell him to do so."

The woman issued from the room, and her husband almost immediately took his departure again, for the purpose of executing the commission with which he was now charged. His wife returned to the parlour, to see if Mr. Redcliffe had any further instructions to issue.

"I am compelled to go out again presently," said Mr. Redcliffe. "You must therefore continue to do your best for this poor woman, and when the surgeon arrives, you can tell him under what circumstances she was discovered in the road. You may mention, if you choose, that she possesses this money and these trinkets, but you will say nothing about the sealed packet, — of which I shall retain possession, at least for the present. If the poor creature herself returns fully to consciousness before I come back, and if she should ask concerning her property, you can show her that her money and her jewels are safe, and you can tell her that the packet is in the hands of the gentleman who found her in the road, that he will take great care of it, and that he wishes to have some conversation with her in respect to its contents."

Having issued these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe resumed his cloak, for the evening was chill, and a mist was rising. Going forth from the cottage, he pursued his way for a short distance along the road, and thence he struck into the fields, across which he proceeded in the direction of Oaklands. It was now about nine o'clock in the evening, and the mist was growing into the density of a fog. A stranger in those parts would not have found his way toward the mansion through the obscurity, but Mr. Redcliffe appeared to be well acquainted with every inch of the ground, and he soon reached the spacious gardens belonging to the ducal country-seat. He halted at the pediment of a particular statue, and there in a few minutes he was joined by the old steward Purvis.

Only a few words were exchanged between them, and they proceeded together toward the mansion. They reached a large greenhouse or conservatory, which was built against the length of one entire side of the edifice, and into which the

windows of a suite of three rooms opened. The reader will therefore understand that there were means of communication from those rooms with the conservatory, but we must add that there was likewise a door opening from the conservatory itself into the garden. It was toward this door that Purvis and Mr. Redcliffe proceeded, and the old steward opened it by means of a key which he had taken care to have about him. Mr. Redcliffe entered; Purvis gently closed the door behind him, and hurrying away, reëntered the mansion by another mode of ingress.

Into the conservatory looked the windows of the dining-room that was used on ordinary occasions, as well as those of the library and billiard-room. From one of these apartments only were lights now shining, and this was the dining-room. Within that room two individuals were seated at a table covered with dessert and wine; these individuals were the Duke of Marchmont and the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

Mr. Redcliffe advanced cautiously and noiselessly, amidst the rare exotics, the choice plants, and the tropical trees with which the conservatory was crowded, toward the window which was nearest to the table where the duke and his guest were seated. The draperies were so far drawn over all the windows that they only suffered the light to penetrate through narrow openings, and thus, as the reader will understand, the casements themselves were almost completely veiled from the eyes of those who were seated inside the apartment. Through the opening in the curtains Mr. Redcliffe noticed them, and with the utmost caution he unfastened the casement. Doubtless he had been already informed by Purvis that he might risk this much, and he had also received the assurance that the casement would yield to his touch. It did so, and opening it to the extent of two or three inches, he could now overhear whatsoever passed betwixt the duke and his guest. So well built was the conservatory, and so warm was the air therein from the effect of artificial heat, that no draught could penetrate through the opening of the casement, and thus there was nothing to lead the duke and Mr. Stanhope to suspect that the window was open at all. We must add that Stanhope sat with his back to Mr. Redcliffe, and consequently the Duke of Marchmont had his face toward him.

“And now will your Grace at length be explicit?” inquired Stanhope, as he filled his glass from one of the exquisitely cut decanters.

“Let us take a little more wine,” responded the duke, “before we get to the dry details of business.”

“So far from taking any more wine,” said Wilson Stanhope, “I think I ought to keep my head clear, for it can assuredly be no ordinary matter on which your lordship is about to speak.”

“I admit that it is important,” rejoined the duke. “I have already told you so.”

“But more important, I fancy,” observed Stanhope, “than your Grace has hitherto given me to understand. At first you were to enter into explanations the other night at the Clarendon Hotel, when I dined with you.”

“I do not think that I promised to be explicit on that occasion,” answered the duke. “I merely told you that after our wine, on that particular evening, I would take and introduce you to your intended mistress, the beautiful Marion, and I fulfilled my promise. In a word, Stanhope, I have been true to every promise I made you; the five hundred pounds were paid into a banker’s to your account — ”

“Yes, my lord,” interrupted Stanhope, “you have done all this, and it is because you have done so much that I can judge of the importance of the service, whatever it may be, in which you seek to engage me. You could not, or you would not, tell me in London, but you make an appointment for me to meet you privately down here — ”

“To be sure!” ejaculated Marchmont, “where we could dine together *tête-à-tête*, as we have done, and where, without fear of being interrupted or overheard, we may discuss the service that I need at your hands.”

“And now, the sooner that discussion commences, the better,” observed Stanhope. “I am open to almost anything, but I love not suspense. It is like groping one’s way in the dark — And, ah! by the bye, my lord, I hope that whatsoever new task you are about to confide to me will not be baffled and defeated so completely as the former one was — I mean with respect to that affair of the duchess — ”

“Enough!” interrupted the duke, impatiently. “Think you that I could for a moment misunderstand your meaning?”

“And now with regard to the present business?” said Stanhope.

“You are a man,” resumed the Duke of Marchmont, “of expensive habits, accustomed to luxurious living, and the sum of five hundred pounds which I paid into your account the other day will prove but as a drop to the ocean in comparison with your lavish mode of expenditure. Indeed, you are a man, Stanhope, who ought to be able to reckon your money by thousands instead of by hundreds.”

“If all this,” exclaimed Stanhope, “is to lead to the assurance that your Grace can put me in the way of gaining thousands, it will assuredly be the most welcome intelligence that I shall have heard for a very long time past.”

“It is the truth that I am telling you,” rejoined the Duke of Marchmont; and then he added, after a pause, in a lower tone, and fixing his looks significantly upon his guest, “It is not five, nor ten, nor fifteen thousand pounds that I should hesitate to place in your hands, if you could only accomplish the aim which I have in view.”

Mr. Redcliffe fancied that Wilson Stanhope must have been astounded by this announcement, for although he could not see that individual's face, he could nevertheless judge by his manner, as well as by his prolonged silence, that he was gazing in a sort of stupefied amazement upon the Duke of Marchmont. As for the duke himself, he kept his eyes riveted with a peculiar significancy upon Stanhope, as if endeavouring to foreshadow by his looks that further elucidation of his purpose which he hardly knew how to shape in words. For even when villain is talking to villain there is a height of villainy which embarrasses the one how to propose it in all its hideous details to the other. The lustre of the lamp shone full upon the countenance of Marchmont; a few minutes back it had been flushed with wine, but now it was very pale, and it wore so sinister an expression that Redcliffe shuddered, and could even have groaned in his horror, were he not sensible of the necessity of keeping on his guard, and were he not likewise thoroughly master of his feelings and emotions.

“So many thousands of pounds!” said Stanhope, at length breaking that long silence, and speaking as if he were still in a state of wondering incredulity. “Why, my lord,” he added, in a voice that became suddenly hoarse, “it can

be little short of murder that you wish me to do at such a price and for such a reward."

"And if it were," said the duke, in a tone that was scarcely audible to Mr. Redcliffe at the casement, "would you —"

"Would I undertake it? — But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated Mr. Stanhope. "Your Grace is playing a part, — Heaven knows for what purpose! — or else you are joking. And let me tell you that the jest is a very sorry one."

"And if I were not joking," said the duke, "if I were serious —"

"Then I should say," rejoined Stanhope, quickly, "that having got hold of a man whose circumstances were the other day desperate, and may soon become desperate again, you are holding out to him such a temptation — But, pshaw! you do not mean it."

"I tell you that I mean it," answered the duke, with the air of a man who was suddenly resolved to beat about the bush no longer, "but to come to the point."

"You mean it?" said Stanhope, and then there was another long pause, during which they eyed each other with that significancy which characterizes villainy when coming to an understanding with villainy.

"Now listen to me," resumed the Duke of Marchmont. "We are speaking within four walls, and I know it is impossible there can be any one to overhear us. If you fall into my views, good and well, but if you think to draw forth explanations from my lips in order that, without executing my purpose, you may henceforth exercise a power over me, you will be mistaken. For were you perfidiously to breathe a syllable in betrayal of what is now taking place, I should indignantly deny it, and who would believe your word against that of the Duke of Marchmont? You see that I am speaking candidly, Stanhope, — because candour is necessary under the circumstances."

"I do not find fault with your Grace for thus acting," answered Stanhope, "and now at least I know that you are serious. Proceed, my lord; there can be no harm done in giving your explanations."

"They are brief," responded the duke, "and not many minutes need elapse ere you will have to come to a decision. There is a certain woman — a lady I ought to call her — who by some means has mixed herself up most unpleasantly in

certain affairs of mine. She may mean nothing more than what she has hitherto done, or, on the other hand, she may mean a great deal more and is only biding her time. I have every reason to apprehend that this latter supposition is the true one; therefore am I desirous — In plain terms, Stanhope, this woman is an enemy whom — whom I must — Perdition seize it! Let the words be spoken! — whom I must remove from my path. Ask me not for further explanations, but say, and say quickly, Stanhope, to what extent I may count upon your assistance.”

“Now, look you, my lord,” said Wilson Stanhope. “As to whether I will do this or anything else for such a sum as fifteen thousand pounds, is a question speedily settled. I will. But in saying this, I can of course only speak conditionally. If there is very much risk, — so much that one’s neck must approach uncomfortably near a halter, — I should think it is a venture on which you could scarcely expect me to embark. Therefore when I say I will do it, it is in the belief that you have already devised some plan which you merely require me to carry out.”

“I have,” answered the Duke of Marchmont. “The lady of whom I am speaking frequently walks in her garden in the cool of the evening, and although we are now entering upon the autumnal month of September, yet I know that she still continues her rambles in that garden, apparently absorbed in reverie, even after the dusk has closed in. Sometimes she is accompanied by a young lady who lives with her, at other times she is attended by a female servant, but occasionally she is alone. Of this I am assured, for during the last fortnight I have frequently watched in that neighbourhood.”

“Proceed, my lord,” said Stanhope, refilling his glass.

“It is for you to seize an opportunity when she is alone,” continued the Duke of Marchmont. “There are approaches to her residence by which you may steal thither unperceived —”

“Stop, my lord!” said Wilson Stanhope. “All this is very well, and I comprehend you easily enough. A dagger or a pistol would rid you of this female enemy of yours. But what about the reward? If once the deed is done, what guarantee have I that my recompense is forthcoming? Will you give it me first of all?”

"First of all," echoed the duke. "And then what guarantee have I that you will perform your part?"

"Now your Grace sees the difficulty," coolly remarked Wilson Stanhope. "In plain terms, we cannot trust each other. You will not give me the reward beforehand, and I will not undertake the business without the prepayment of the reward. Suppose that I did, and suppose the deed to be done. I come to your Grace, you assume the indignant, you play the virtuous, you repudiate me, and what redress have I? To threaten in such a case would be foolish; your lordship would laugh at my threats. As for carrying them out, it would be madness, because on my part it would be giving my neck to a halter, with only the remote chance that you would swing next to me on the same gibbet."

"You refuse, therefore," said Marchmont.

"I refuse," replied Stanhope, "unless every shilling — No!" he interrupted himself, "I will effect a compromise with you. You have specified the recompense at fifteen thousand pounds; give me the half, seven thousand five hundred, and I swear to do the deed, trusting to your honour to pay me the remainder."

The Duke of Marchmont deliberated for some moments, with vexation and bitter annoyance visibly depicted upon his countenance, but suddenly breaking silence, he exclaimed, "I will do it."

"Give me your cheque, and full particulars in respect to the lady, her whereabouts, and so forth."

"We will settle this matter at once," said the duke. "I should have the cheque-book here, for I brought that writing-case down with me from London this afternoon."

Thus speaking, the villainous nobleman rose from his seat, and proceeding to a side-table, took thence the writing-case to which he had alluded. Resuming his seat, he opened it, and drew forth his cheque-book. At that same instant Mr. Redcliffe opened the casement to a width sufficient to enable him to take his stand upon the threshold, for the window, be it understood, reached to the floor, and thus served the purpose of a glass door. The reader will recollect that he was enveloped in his cloak. He raised his right arm as if in a warning manner; the folds of the cloak flowing over it partially obscured his countenance by intercepting the beams of the lamp which stood upon the table, yet his

face could be seen, though with a shadow upon it, if the Duke of Marchmont were to raise his eyes from the desk. With his left hand Mr. Redcliffe held the crimson drapery aside, and there he stood motionless.

“Now observe,” said the duke, as he began to fill in the date of the cheque, “when you present this at the bank to-morrow, you must appear to be in high glee, and you must, as if boastfully, declare that you had a run of luck to-night and that this was the produce of the card-table. You understand me?”

As the Duke of Marchmont put this question, before he filled in the body of the cheque, he raised his eyes. An ejaculation of horror burst from his lips, the pen fell from his hand, he reeled on his seat and sank senseless on the floor. At that same instant Redcliffe stepped back and closed the casement. The next moment he was outside the conservatory, the door of which he locked, and he hurried away. Regaining the statue where he had encountered Purvis about an hour back, he found the steward again waiting for him there, he having arrived at the place of appointment about ten minutes previously. Redcliffe spoke a few hasty words of explanation, returned the key to the old man, and hurried off.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HAND-BILL

THE Honourable Wilson Stanhope was taken so much by surprise and was seized with so much consternation at the Duke of Marchmont's proceeding that he did not look around to ascertain what was the cause of his Grace's terror. Then, at the same instant that the vile nobleman sank upon the carpet, Stanhope sprang forward to raise him up, and thus when he did fling a glance toward the casement, the drapery had ceased to be agitated. Though utterly unable to comprehend the meaning of the circumstance, Mr. Stanhope thought it would not be well to summon the domestics to the duke's succour; he accordingly bore him to a sofa, loosened his necktie, and by sprinkling water on his countenance, endeavoured to recover him. In a few minutes the duke slowly opened his eyes, gazed vacantly up at Stanhope for a moment, and then, as if smitten by a sudden and terrific recollection, flung his horrified looks toward the casement.

No one was there. The duke raised his hand to his brow, gave a low, subdued groan, and then suddenly starting up, rushed to the window. Flinging aside the draperies, he opened the casement and looked into the conservatory. He could see no one, and stopping short, he again raised his hand to his brow, muttering, "Could it possibly have been the imagination?"

"What in the devil's name ails your Grace?" inquired Wilson Stanhope, who had followed him to the threshold of the window. "What does all this mean? You have absolutely terrified me."

"What does it mean?" asked the duke, gazing vacantly at his questioner. "It means — But no, you cannot understand it."

"Did you suppose, my lord," inquired Stanhope, "that anybody was listening or looking on? For if so we may have placed ourselves in no very comfortable predicament —"

"It was nothing, — rest assured it was nothing," hastily interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, making incredible efforts to regain his self-possession.

"Nothing?" ejaculated Stanhope, impatiently. "It is preposterous to tell me that it was nothing, when you were so awfully alarmed. If I believed in ghosts, I should veritably fancy you had seen one."

"A ghost?" and it was with a countenance as white as a sheet that the Duke of Marchmont now gazed upon the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

"By Heaven," cried the latter, who was himself almost as much alarmed as astonished, "there must be something in all this! Did you fancy that you saw some one? He may have escaped," and Stanhope rushed to the outer door of the conservatory. "Locked! fast locked! But these windows, they belong to other rooms! — and see the casements open! they are not fastened inside! My lord, if it were one of your domestics who is playing the spy upon you, I would counsel you to take heed. As for myself, I wash my hands altogether of the business you propose to me, I will have nothing to do with it. I wish to Heaven that you had not even spoken to me on the subject. There is such a thing as running one's head into a noose at the very instant one thinks that safety and security are the most complete."

Stanhope spoke with considerable vehemence and excitement, and his speech had been interrupted by the hurried visits he paid to the door of the conservatory and to the casements of the adjoining billiard-room and library. The duke listened to him with a sort of dismayed stupefaction, as well as with haggard looks. He spoke not a word, but hastening, or, rather, staggering back like one inebriate into the dining-room, he tossed off a large bumper of wine. Then, still in silence, he replaced his cheque-book in the writing-case, which he was about to lock, when Stanhope, who had followed him thither, laid his hand upon his shoulder. The duke, who had not perceived that he was so near, started with a visible tremor, and again his haggard looks contemplated Stanhope with a kind of vacant dismay.

“ My lord,” said the latter, “ there is something more in all this than I comprehend. Either you were smitten with a real terror or a fanciful one. If the former, there must be a real danger, which I now incur as well as yourself, and if the latter, you must have a very evil conscience. At all events it may be worth your lordship’s while to keep on friendly terms with me, and therefore you will scarcely lock up that writing-desk until you have given me some token of — what shall we call it? — your liberality — that term will do,” and Stanhope chuckled ironically.

For a moment the Duke of Marchmont appeared inclined to resist with indignation his extortionate demand, but a second thought induced him to yield. He accordingly drew forth the cheque-book and filled in a draft for a thousand guineas instead of for upwards of seven times that sum, as he had at first intended. Stanhope took the cheque, glanced at its contents, and on seeing the amount, consigned it to his pocket with a complacent smile, as if he thought that when the sum had been dissipated he might reckon upon procuring more from the same quarter. He did not care to press the duke for any further explanation as to the scene which had taken place; he saw that the topic was an unpleasant one, but he had his suspicion that the hint he had thrown out relative to the darkness of the nobleman’s conscience was very far from being incorrect.

The duke remained abstracted and thoughtful for the rest of the evening, and Stanhope, anxious to escape from such gloomy companionship, retired early to the apartment which was provided for his reception. The instant that Marchmont was left alone, he rang the bell, and ordered Purvis to be immediately sent to him. The old steward soon made his appearance, with his habitual demeanour of respectfulness, and the duke, motioning him to advance close up to where he had halted from a troubled walk to and fro, said, in a deep voice, “ Purvis, something strange again has occurred this evening.”

“ Strange, my lord?” said the old steward. “ And what is it?”

“ You remember that dream of mine — if it were a dream — But I begin to doubt — In short,” added Marchmont, most cruelly perplexed, “ I know not what to think — But who, Purvis,” he suddenly demanded, “ keeps the key of the conservatory?”

"It is always in my custody, my lord," responded the old steward. "When the head-gardener requires it, I give it to him, but he always restores it to me, for as Oaklands is so seldom occupied now by your lordship and her Grace, I am always afraid of a set of idle tramps and vagabonds getting into the place."

"Who has the key at this moment? Who has had it all the evening?" demanded the duke, hastily.

"It is here, my lord," replied Purvis, producing the key, "and the gardener has not had it in his possession since the forenoon."

"But those other rooms," said the duke, "think you that anybody could have penetrated into them?"

"Not without my knowledge, my lord," responded the steward, "or at all events not without the knowledge of at least some of the servants. But may I be so bold as to inquire why your Grace asks?"

"It is strange — most strange!" muttered the duke to himself. "Can the dead reappear? — or if he be living, has he come to revisit these scenes which —"

"I am afraid," said Purvis, "that something unpleasant has occurred to your Grace, for your looks are very much decomposed —"

"Enough for the present!" interrupted Marchmont. "I possess a feverish fancy when I think of certain things. Take care, Purvis, that all the doors are carefully locked before you retire to rest. And look well through all the rooms, behind the draperies, in every nook and corner, indeed, for the house is spacious, and it is so easy for any evil-designing person to enter and hide himself. See that you attend to my instructions, but do not appear to be more assiduous on these points than usual in the presence of the other domestics."

The Duke of Marchmont waved his hand for Purvis to retire, and he then proceeded to his own chamber, where he locked himself in.

We must now return to Mr. Redcliffe. After parting from the old steward at the statue, he sped along in the direction of the cottage, where he had left the unknown woman whom he had picked up in the road, as already described. During the short space of time occupied in retracing his way toward that cottage, Mr. Redcliffe reflected upon all that had oc-

curred at Oaklands, and most painful were these reflections. That Queen Indora was the object of the duke's murderous machinations, he well knew, but that he had paralyzed them he was almost equally certain. And now, on his return to the cottage, he hoped to be enabled to receive some explanation from the stranger-woman's lips as to how she had become possessed of the letter contained in the sealed packet, but he was doomed to disappointment. For, on reëntering the cottage, he at once learned from the mistress thereof that the woman was gone.

"Gone!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe. "What do you mean, that she is gone of her own accord, or that the surgeon ordered her to be removed?"

"No, sir," answered the elderly female, "she went away of her own accord."

Mr. Redcliffe passed into his little parlour, the mistress of the house following him, and he then learned the following explanations:

Shortly after he had left the cottage on his visit to Oaklands, the woman had begun to rally far more rapidly than at first, and she soon recovered her consciousness. She exhibited mingled terror and astonishment at finding herself in a strange place; then she rapidly felt about her person in search of her property. The mistress of the cottage at once bade her banish all alarm from her mind, for that she was where she would be taken care of well; she then showed her that her money and her trinkets were safe. But the stranger-woman demanded the sealed packet which she had had about her person, and then the mistress of the cottage stated what Mr. Redcliffe had bidden her announce, namely, that it was taken care of on her behalf by the gentleman who had picked her up in the road, and that he wished to have some conversation with her on the subject. The stranger-woman demanded who the gentleman was, but the mistress of the cottage, accustomed to be very discreet in all that regarded her occasional lodger, gave some evasive response, which only had the effect of increasing the stranger's apprehensions. She vowed that she must depart that instant, that she had a long journey to perform, and important business on hand, that she could not therefore wait. The elderly female, fancying that her unfortunate guest was half-bereft of reason, entreated her to remain, but nothing could induce her, and

she took her precipitate departure, forcing upon her hostess a few shillings in payment of a pair of shoes which the latter insisted upon her taking as substitutes for her own worn-out ones. Thus, when the surgeon arrived, the woman who was to have been his patient had taken her departure.

"There is something exceedingly mysterious in all this," said Mr. Redcliffe. "That woman is no unfortunate idiot, as I had at first supposed; she must be conscious of some misdeed that she has fled thus precipitately. Did she give you no explanation of how she came to sink down upon the road?"

"She said something about exhaustion," was the reply given by the mistress of the cottage, "but she would not tarry to eat so much as a morsel of bread. She merely took a cup of milk, and when I offered to put some food into a little basket for her, she did not appear to listen; she seemed all in a flurry, as if afraid of something, so that I myself thought she could not be altogether right."

"And the surgeon?" said Mr. Redcliffe, inquiringly.

"He rode across on his pony, and on finding that the woman had gone, he grumbled a little, until I assured him that there was a gentleman here who would pay him handsomely. He then went away better pleased. But my husband is not come back from the village yet, and I can't think what detains him."

Scarcely had the woman thus spoken when the outer door of the cottage was heard to yield to the entrance of some one, and this proved to be the husband on whose account she had been getting anxious.

"Why, what has detained you?" she asked. "You never yet have been given to tipping at the ale-house."

"And I'm not going to do so now, wife," he replied. "But in the first place, there's so thick a mist one can hardly see a yard in front of one; and then Smithers the carrier had just arrived, and he had brought with him some hand-bills from Guildford, which we all got reading at the bar of the Blue Lion."

"And what are the hand-bills about?"

"Oh, about some dreadful things that have been discovered up in London yonder, — a house where it's supposed three or four people have been murdered at different times, and buried with quicklime in a pit. And so these bills are to offer a hundred pounds' reward to anybody who gives the

people into custody — what's their names again? Oh, here it is in large print, John Smedley and his wife Barbara, or fifty pounds for either of them separate."

"Let's look," said the woman, and she proceeded to read one of the hand-bills which her husband had brought with him. "Well, now, this is odd!" she ejaculated, in a voice of mingled wonder and terror. "Why, the description of the woman — dear me, it is the very same! Tall, dark, fine eyes, good teeth, age about three or four and thirty —"

Here the woman's ejaculations were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Redcliffe. The colloquy between the husband and wife had taken place in the passage, and the door of Mr. Redcliffe's parlour stood ajar. He could not therefore help overhearing what thus passed, and when the conversation took the turn just described, he issued forth, inquiring, "What are these hand-bills?"

One was immediately given to him; he hastily scanned its contents, and not a doubt rested in his mind that the woman who had been the object of so much kind attention on his part was proclaimed as a murderess. The old man of the cottage — who, be it recollected, had not seen the woman at all — was stricken with dismay on learning what sort of a character had been within the walls of his dwelling, and he was by no means sorry to find that her stay had been comparatively so brief.

"It were madness," said Mr. Redcliffe, after a few moments' reflection, "to think of overtaking her through this dense fog. Besides, she has got at least an hour and a half's start of us; and then, as she has money too, she will find means of conveyance. My good friends," added Mr. Redcliffe, "as you are well aware that I have no inclination to be talked about, and do not want my name mentioned, it would be quite as well if nothing were said about the vile woman having been in your cottage. The cause of justice will not suffer on that account, for with this distribution of hand-bills all over the country, and with the other means which the police are doubtless taking for the detection of herself and her husband, those wretches cannot possibly escape."

The cottager and his wife, who were accustomed to pay implicit obedience to Mr. Redcliffe, promised to be silent in respect to the subject he had named, and when he took

his departure, at an early hour on the following morning, he rewarded them with even more than his accustomed liberality. But in respect to the paper which had fallen into his possession, what could he think? That its writer had been murdered, and that he was one of the victims to whom the contents of the hand-bill so terribly pointed. Yes, this was the natural though fearful conjecture which suggested itself to Mr. Redcliffe's mind, but he resolved to set inquiries on foot in order to ascertain if any certain clue could possibly be discovered to the fate of the writer of that letter.

CHAPTER XXXV

A STRANGE GUEST AT OAKLANDS

THE Duke of Marchmont, as we have said, retired to his own chamber and locked himself in. But he did not seek his couch; he felt that it were useless to lay himself down thereon, for that he could not sleep. His soul had received a shock far more profound than even Wilson Stanhope himself had suspected at the time.

The duke first of all examined the room carefully, even condescending to look beneath the bed and behind all the draperies, and with an equal degree of scrutiny did he search the dressing-room adjoining. We have used the word condescend because it is ever a humiliating thing for a man to admit even unto himself that he is a coward, and with some haughty minds it is a difficult thing for them to bend to any proceeding that in itself proclaims their cowardice. But the Duke of Marchmont was indeed a coward now, and it was conscience that made him so.

Having completed the investigation of his bedchamber and the dressing-room adjoining, the duke opened his pistol-case and proceeded to load the weapons. But in the midst of the operation he desisted; he pressed his hand to his brow, and murmured to himself, "If he be really alive, can I — can I do this?" and he glanced shudderingly at the pistols in the open case.

He threw himself upon a seat, and reflected profoundly. Slow but deep, gradual but strongly marked, were the workings of his countenance, as varied thoughts passed through his brain.

"What can all this mean?" he asked himself. "What omens are portended? Why was it that she — that Eastern woman — came hither, and why does she seem to be taking

up a cause with which she can have no earthly concern? And why does he haunt me now? Oh, would that I could persuade myself it were all a dream! But if she — that Eastern lady — were removed from my path, and if he — he likewise ceased to exist, what cause of future apprehension would remain? ”

The duke rose from his seat, and slowly paced to and fro in the chamber. At length he halted at the table on which the pistol-case lay, and as if suddenly making up his mind, he muttered between his teeth, while his countenance assumed an air of fierce resolve, “ Yes, by Heaven! anything, no matter what, so long as I clear my path of those who dare plant themselves in it! ”

The duke then finished loading the pistols, and he deposited the case on a small table by the side of his bed.

“ Now, ” he said, with a demoniac savageness settling for the instant upon his features, “ he may come again if he will; and if it be in the corporeal substance that he comes, if it be as a living denizen of this world, by Heaven, his next appearance shall be the last! Without compunction, without remorse, will I stretch him lifeless on the floor. No more pusillanimity on my part, no more vain and idle terrors, for it is only by my coward yielding to them that he has been encouraged to renew his pranks and endeavour to work upon my fears. Fool, fool that I was to betray myself in the presence of Stanhope! But it is for the last time. And now, despite his declaration that he washes his hands of the business I propose to him, he shall undertake it, and by rendering him criminal, by making him an accomplice, I shall cease to be at his mercy, as I now more or less am, for unfortunately the incident of this evening has given him an advantage over me. ”

The Duke of Marchmont endeavoured to persuade himself, or we might even say strove hard to make himself feel, that his mind was now composed and settled once again since he had resolved upon a particular course of action, but he could not shut out from his convictions that his soul had received a shock from which it was by no means so easy to recover. The sense that it was so was brought all the more powerfully home to him when he began to disapparel himself for the purpose of seeking his couch, and then he suddenly stamped his foot with rage as he felt that he was

afraid to go to bed. He walked to and fro, he sat down and took a book, he rose up again, his restlessness was increasing.

"But how could he have got there?" the duke suddenly asked himself. "The door of the conservatory was locked, and no one could have entered the library or the billiard-room unperceived by at least some of the domestics. Ah!" ejaculated the duke within himself, "if he were really there then he must be there now. Egress was impossible."

As this idea struck the Duke of Marchmont, a devilish notion at the same time flashed to his brain. He nerved himself with all his energy to carry it out; he forced upon himself the thought of how much depended upon it; his features grew rigid with desperate resoluteness, and he determined to do that which had just entered his head. Resuming the apparel which he had cast off, the duke secured the pistols about his person, and taking a light, issued from his chamber.

He descended the staircase, and first of all entered the billiard-room. With the taper in one hand and the other ready prepared to seize upon a pistol, the duke searched the place, but found no one. He passed into the library; an equally rigid search was instituted there, and still no one. Thence he passed out into the conservatory, saying to himself, "Perhaps if I had only searched this place well at the time, I might have found him crouched behind one of the trees or in some dark nook."

It was no longer with the slightest scintillation of cowardice, but with a stern, dogged, savage resoluteness of purpose, that the Duke of Marchmont pursued his investigation here, but all to no effect. He examined the outer door, and it was fast locked as when Wilson Stanhope had himself examined it.

"Can he be still in the house?" asked the duke of himself, "or was it after all nought but an illusion? — or worse still, was it — was it a spirit from the other world?"

Now all in an instant his resoluteness melted away, a cold shudder ran through him, his looks were swept in recoiling terror around, and he felt as if the least indication of anything supernatural would crush and overpower him in a moment. A multitude of horrific fancies swept through his brain, his countenance was ghastly white, and he felt his

heart beating with so painful a violence that it appeared as if he had just been abruptly awakened out of a hideous dream.

"Fool, fool that I am!" he said to himself. "At one instant bold to desperation, at another the veriest coward that walks the face of the earth. Perhaps, after all, he is secreted elsewhere in the house, for how, on that other occasion, could he have procured admittance within these walls? By Heaven, I will not rest till I have searched the place throughout!"

Again was the fortitude of the Duke of Marchmont returning, and he was about to issue from the conservatory to return into the library and thence regain the other part of the mansion, when all of a sudden it struck him that he beheld a human countenance looking in at him through the glass. The taper nearly fell from his hand; the next instant the face was gone, but his ear distinctly caught the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Thus satisfied that it was indeed a living being, but having no particular idea of the appearance of that countenance which he had seen looking in upon him, the duke hastened from the conservatory, sped through the library, and in a few moments reached the private door which was so frequently mentioned in earlier chapters of this narrative. Of this door he always had the key; he opened it, and leaving the taper in a recess, he rushed forth.

"Now, by Heaven! if it is he," the duke thought within his own breast, and he found himself nerved with an extraordinary strength of mind, or rather, we should say a satanic resoluteness of purpose, — "if it is he, death — death!"

He stopped and listened; the sounds of footsteps reached his ear from a particular direction, and thither he sped with a swiftness that amazed himself. He could however see nothing, for there was a thick fog, but he knew every inch of his own grounds well, and could thus keep to the gravel walk even though rushing on at so fleet a pace. The retreating footsteps became more distinct. Marchmont then knew that he was in the vicinage of a grass-plot, and by transferring his route to the soft, yielding turf, the sounds of his own steps were no longer audible.

All of a sudden the footsteps of the other ceased; then in a few minutes they appeared to be coming hastily toward him,

and the duke stood still. Nearer came those steps; then they suddenly ceased again, as if the individual was stopping short to listen, and then they came on once more. The Duke of Marchmont had a pistol in each hand, and he was resolved to fire the very moment he should obtain the certainty that it was he whom he sought, he whom he feared, he whose life he had made up his mind to take. Nearer came the footsteps; they were advancing more slowly along the gravel walk; they were heavy steps, as if they were clumsy shoes or coarse boots that were thus treading, and Marchmont thought within himself, "It cannot, after all, be he!"

A few moments put an end to the duke's uncertainty, for a figure was revealed to him through the mist, and he himself was simultaneously revealed to that individual.

"Hands off, whoever you are," growled a ferocious voice, "or I'll dash your brains out, blow me if I don't!"

"Move not another inch," said the duke, with stern intrepidity, "or I send a bullet through your brains."

"I'm only a poor feller," responded the intruder, "which has lost his way in this cursed fog, and I didn't go for to do no harm."

"If that be the case," answered the duke, "I will do you no harm either. But tell me, how came you to look into that conservatory just now?"

"Ah, well, I see you're the same gentleman which was in that place, but I wasn't after no ill. I saw the light, or should rather say, I came right bang agin the place in the midst of the fog, and should have gone smash through it, glass and all, if so be that it wasn't for that there glim as you carried in your hand."

During this brief colloquy the Duke of Marchmont had leisure to contemplate the intruder more narrowly as his eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity which prevailed. A suspicion arose in his mind, and another instant's scrutiny of that villainous hangdog countenance confirmed it. He now knew beyond any further doubt who this man was, and it appeared to him as if he were suddenly thrown in his way in order to become an instrument in the carrying out of his designs.

"My poor fellow," he said, assuming the most compassionating voice, "you are evidently a houseless wanderer, and so far from blaming you for having involuntarily in-

truded on my grounds, I pity you. What can I do for you? Do you require food, and shall I show you a loft over the stable where you may rest yourself for the night? Be not afraid. I am the Duke of Marchmont, and I flatter myself that no poor man has ever had any reason to complain of harshness or unkindness on my part."

"I'm wery much obleeged to your lordship," was the intruder's response, "and if so be 'tisin't axing for too much at this time o' night for a meal of wittels, I should be uncommon thankful."

"Come with me, my poor man," replied the duke, in the same compassionating voice as before, "and I will see what I can do for you. This way."

Marchmont acted as if he had not the slightest suspicion of the fellow's true character, and in this manner he conducted him toward the private door of the house. While proceeding thither, the ill-looking intruder eyed the nobleman askance, in order to penetrate his purpose and assure himself that he was really safe, but he saw nothing on the part of the duke to make him apprehend any treachery. His circumstances were desperate, for though he had money in his pocket, yet he was well-nigh famished, from the simple fact that he had not dared approach any habitation during the day, much less enter any village or hamlet, in order to purchase food. He accordingly resolved to accept the proffered kindness of the duke, for he felt tolerably well convinced that he incurred no peril in so doing.

Marchmont conducted him over the threshold of the private door, which he immediately locked, and taking the taper from the recess, he led the way toward the servants' offices, the ill-looking man following. Proceeding to the larder, the duke said, "Take whatever you fancy; be not afraid, I do not things by halves."

The man lifted down a cold joint; another shelf supplied bread and cheese, and the duke bade him bring the food into the servants' hall. Then his Grace showed him where to draw a jug of strong ale, and bade him sit down and eat. The man most readily and joyously obeyed; he placed himself at the table, and commenced a mighty inroad on the sirloin, prefacing it, however, with a deep draught of the old October ale. The duke sat down at a little distance, and, without appearing to look toward his strange guest,

was nevertheless contemplating him furtively the whole time.

"It's wery kind, my lord," said the man, "for a great nobleman like yourself to take such compassion on a poor, hard-working feller which has had no work to do for the last month —"

"Eat and drink," interrupted Marchmont, "and give me your thanks afterwards. Do not be afraid of making inroads on the provisions; there is more meat in the larder, and there is more ale in the cask."

Thus encouraged, the ill-looking guest renewed his assault on the sirloin, and paid his respects to the ale. He ate with the voracity of one who had been foodless for many, many long hours, as was indeed the case. At length he laid down his knife and fork, and drained the jug.

"Now," said the duke, "replenish that jug, for I must have some little discourse with you. I have already given you the assurance that I do not things by halves, and I must see if I can be of service to you for the future."

The man lost no time in refilling the jug from the barrel of old October, and returning to his seat, he nodded with a sort of respectful familiarity to the duke, saying, "Here's wishing your Grace all 'ealth and 'appiness, and many years to enjoy them good things which you bestows on a poor, honest Christian like myself."

The duke made no response, but rising from his seat, shut the door of the servants' hall, and then returning to his chair, he said, "We must now have a few minutes' discourse."

There was something in the Duke of Marchmont's appearance, something which seemed altered in his manner, that the ill-looking guest did not altogether like. He looked around him, fidgeted on his chair for a moment, appeared inclined to take up his club, which lay near his battered hat at his feet, then flung a furtive glance at the duke again, and then had recourse to the ale jug, as if thence to derive fortitude and encouragement. When he deposited it on the table again, he perceived that the duke was regarding him in a peculiar manner.

"Do not be afraid," said Marchmont, "and do not start nor grow excited, much less attempt any violence. I mean you no harm, but, in a word, I know who you are."

The fellow did start, despite the injunction to the con-

trary, and again he made a motion as if to snatch up his club; but the duke, instantaneously displaying a pistol, said, "Look, you are at my mercy. But be quiet — I tell you again that I will do you no harm. In a word, you can serve me."

"Ah! that's different," exclaimed the fellow. "I always like to hear that my services is needed, 'cos why, it shows that everything is square and aboveboard."

"Yes, I know you," continued the duke. "I recognized you within a few instants after our encounter, and therefore you may judge whether I mean you a mischief, considering the way in which I have treated you. Your name is Barnes, and you are known as the Burker."

"Well, my lord, I don't deny them's my names, titles, and distinctions, and if so be they ain't quite so high and mighty as your own, they're all wery well in their own way. I come of a wery respectable family, my lord; most of my ancestors was great public characters, and went out of the world before the public gaze amidst wery great applause. I'm rayther proud on 'em, though I says it which shouldn't say it."

"Now that you have done this long tirade," said the Duke of Marchmont, "perhaps you will listen to me."

"But first of all, my lord," interrupted the Burker, "perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me how it was you recognized me. I know that I'm a genelman of much renown, and that people in certain quarters makes theirselves uncommon busy in looking arter me and prying into my consarns."

"A few words of explanation will suffice," responded the duke, cutting short that garrulity which received its inspiration from the strength of the October ale. "There have been accurate personal descriptions given of you in newspaper advertisements, placards, and hand-bills."

"Ah, my lord, see what poppularity is!" said the Burker, and he again had recourse to the ale jug.

We may here pause for an instant to explain that the Duke of Marchmont had at the time, for reasons known to the reader, taken a great interest in the trial of Lettice Rodney; he had therefore closely watched the newspapers in order to see whether anything transpired relative to Madame Angelique's establishment, or showed that there

had been a connection in any sort of way between Lettice Rodney and himself. Thus was it that the duke had been led to read the personal description that was given of the *Burker*, when the result of the trial proved that he, *Mrs. Webber*, and another were the actual murderers of the *Liverpool lawyer*. The duke had since thought more than once that *Barney the Burker* was an instrument for whom he could find employment, and thus was it that the personal description of the ruffian had remained so faithfully impressed upon his memory. Infinitely disgusted was his *Grace* now with the coarse, flippant familiarity which the *Burker* displayed under the influence of the ale, for refined villainy loathes vulgar villainy, although there may be no shade of difference between the actual criminality of either, and although the former may condescend or feel itself necessitated to make use of the latter. But *Marchmont* did not choose to assume an overbearing manner, nor to betray his disgust too visibly to the ruffian whose services he was now resolved to put into requisition.

"I can well understand," he said, "how it is that you are a houseless wanderer and that your condition is so deplorable. There is a reward set upon your head, and your predicament is more than ever perilous after your most recent exploits with the police officers at the house somewhere in the southern side of London. Now, if I were to afford you the means of disguise and to give you money, if I were also to hold out to you a prospect of a much larger sum, so that you might escape out of the country and go to America or France, or go out to Australia, — anything, in short —"

"Your lordship may command me in every way," exclaimed the *Burker*, his hideous hangdog countenance testifying the utmost joy. "There's nothing I'd stick at to serve so kind a friend as your *Grace* offers to prove toward me."

"Well and fairly spoken," rejoined the duke. "I do indeed require a most signal service at your hands, and if you fulfil it, all that I have promised shall be done."

We will not dwell any longer upon the conversation that took place between the Duke of *Marchmont* and his miscreant companion; suffice it to say that the latter fully comprehended the dark, iniquitous business that was entrusted to him, and swore to accomplish it. The duke ascended to his

chamber, and there procured a small phial containing a dye for the complexion, a black wig with frizzy curls, and a false moustache, — these articles having been required by his Grace for some masquerading purposes several years back, and having since remained forgotten until now in some nook of his wardrobe. He then took from a cupboard a discarded suit of apparel, which by accident had not yet passed as “perquisite” into the hands of his valet; and descending with these things, the Duke of Marchmont rejoined the Burker, whom he had left in the servants’ hall. The ruffian speedily metamorphosed himself according to the instructions he received and the means placed at his disposal, and of which he availed himself with infinite satisfaction and delight. By the aid of a looking-glass he dyed his complexion with a portion of the liquid furnished by the phial, and the duke informed him how, by the purchase of a few simple things at a chemist’s, to form a similar decoction for future use. The appendage of the moustache concealed that peculiar formation of the Burker’s upper lip which rendered him so easily recognizable; and the garments which the duke supplied him, as well as the wig, aided in the accomplishment of the disguise. From amidst the quantity of boots and shoes which the male domestics of the establishment had left down-stairs to be cleaned by the underlings in the morning, Marchmont bade the Burker choose a pair that would fit him, and he did the same in respect to the hats that were suspended in the servants’ hall. The duke then placed a sum of money in the villain’s hand, and bade him form a bundle of his own cast-off clothes, so that he might sink it in the first pond or stream he should reach.

All these matters being settled, the transmogrified Mr. Barnes took his departure from Oaklands, and the Duke of Marchmont returned to his own chamber.

“It was Satan’s self,” he thought within his own mind, “who threw this fellow in my way to-night. I can now dispense with the services of Stanhope, — which, after all, is an advantage, for he is more squeamish than I had fancied, whereas, on the other hand, this ruffian will do my business without compunction and without remorse. Her fate will soon be sealed; and now I have only to think what is to be done with regard to him, — if indeed it be he himself in the living person, and not a spirit whom I have seen.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SAINT

THE scene again shifts to London. In a well-furnished room, at a beautiful little suburban villa, Mr. White Choker was seated upon a sofa with the mistress whom Madame Angelique had so kindly provided for him. This was Linda, the German beauty. She was dressed in an elegant *déshabillé*, consisting of a French muslin wrapper, and which, though it came up to the throat, nevertheless defined all the voluptuous proportions of her form. The rich masses of her auburn hair enframed her countenance with heavy bands, and were negligently knotted behind the well-shaped head, for it was not yet midday and Linda's toilet had still to be accomplished.

Mr. White Choker was deeply enamoured of his beautiful mistress. Several days had now passed since he first became possessed of her; he firmly believed that she was all but virtuous when she came to his arms, and he was very far from suspecting that she was in the way to become a mother. On the occasion when we now find him seated by her side, he had only just arrived at the villa, where he had not passed the preceding night; for he could not too often adopt toward the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, the excuse "that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bedside of a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realms of eternal bliss."

Mr. White Choker was dressed in precisely the same style as when we first introduced him to the reader, — a black suit, a white neckcloth, displaying no collar, shoes and stockings, the former with very large bows, while a capacious cotton umbrella kept company with his low-crowned hat

which he had deposited on the carpet. How is it that all "saints" carry cotton umbrellas? A "saint" evidently does not consider himself perfect without such an appendage. However rich he may be, you will never see him with a silk umbrella; it is always a cotton one. If you peep into Exeter Hall, a glance will soon satisfy you that all the umbrellas which tap upon the floor at some peculiarly refreshing portion of the speaker's discourse are stout cotton ones, and there shall not be a single silk one amongst them. A cotton umbrella is as inseparable from a gentleman "saint" as a brandy-flask is from a lady "saint," and perhaps there is an equal number of both umbrellas and flasks at every meeting at Exeter Hall or any other resort of the sanctimonious.

But to return to our narrative. Mr. White Choker sat upon the sofa next to Linda, and having toyed for some little while with her, he began to notice that the expression of her countenance was pensive even to mournfulness.

"Tell me, my dear girl," he said, in that whining, canting tone which from long habit he now invariably adopted, so that even his professions of love were conveyed in an Exeter Hall snivel, — "tell me, my dear girl, what oppresses your mind? If you have secret woes, let your loving friend Choker share them, for when you smile, Choker shall smile, and when you weep, the faithful Choker shall weep likewise."

Two pearly tears were now trickling down Linda's cheeks, and Mr. White Choker, perceiving the same, thought it expedient to kiss them away in the first instance, and then to get up a little sympathetic snivel of his own in the second instance. In so doing, he pulled out his white kerchief, and, behold, a bundle of tracts fell upon the floor! They were the newly published effusions of one of the most savoury vessels and most influential members of the Foreign Cannibal-reclaiming, Negro-Christianizing, and Naked-savage-clothing Society; and on receiving them that very morning, Mr. White Choker had assured his trusting and pious wife that he would hasten off to distribute them amongst the "benighted," but instead of doing anything of the sort, he had sped, as we have seen, to the villa which he had hired for his mistress.

"But tell me, my dearest Linda," said Mr. White Choker, when he fancied he had gone through a sufficient process of snivelling, and turning up the whites of his eyes, and sighing, and groaning, "tell me, my love, what it is that ails you?"

If you have any remorse for the life you are leading, set your mind at ease, for the good that I do in the world more than compensates for any leetle indiscretion or weakness of which I may be guilty; and the cloak of my sanctity covereth thee also, my dear sister — But hang it! I am not on the platform now. I really thought I was for the moment. Come, Linda dear, tell your own faithful Choker what it is that afflicts you, and he will do everything that lies in his power to contribute to your happiness.”

“How can I ever tell you the truth?” said Linda, sobbing and weeping, — “you who are so kind and good to me!”

“You speak, my love, as if you had deceived me in some way or another,” said the sanctimonious gentleman, and his countenance grew considerably elongated. “Pray be candid; let me know the worst, whatever it is, — yea, let me know the worst.”

“It is true,” continued Linda, now wringing her hands, “that in one sense you have been deceived — I mean that something has been kept back — ”

“What? what?” asked Mr. White Choker, fidgeting very uneasily upon his seat. “Madame Angelique told me you had only been once astray.”

“Ah! it was not in this that you were deceived, my dear friend,” replied the weeping Linda, “for that was true enough. Oh, I never can tell you!”

“But you must, my dear, you must let me know the entire truth,” said Mr. White Choker. “I can’t conceive what you mean, I can’t understand what it is you have got to tell. But pray be candid. You don’t know what a fidget this uncertainty keeps me in; I am all over with a tremble. You don’t think Snufflenose suspects — ”

“No, nothing of that sort,” responded Linda. “It is not any of your acquaintances — ”

“Then some of your own?” hastily suggested Mr. White Choker. “Oh, my dear, how could you have been so indiscreet? Don’t you know that I am a blessed saint, and that if the odour of my sanctity once became tainted by the breath of scandal — Oh, dear me! dear me! what would they say of me at Exeter Hall?”

“I am very, very unhappy,” sobbed Linda, who appeared as if her heart would break, “and I wish I had never accepted your protection, for I am afraid — ”

"Afraid of what?" asked the saint, still in a feverish excitement.

"That if my husband were only to discover —"

"Your husband?" and Mr. White Choker suddenly put on such a look of blank despair that his appearance was perfectly ludicrous.

Seized with consternation, overcome with dismay, and picturing to himself actions for crim. con. and all sorts of evils, the unfortunate gentleman rolled off the sofa and tumbled over his stout cotton umbrella and his broad-brimmed hat. Then, as he afterward expressed himself, he groaned in spirit, and wished that he had rather become the companion of Esquimaux and white bears of the north pole, or of benighted cannibals in the islands of the South Pacific, than have remained in the more salubrious and civilized region of his birth to have fallen in with a married woman. Linda besought the saint to pick himself up, but as he exhibited no inclination to do anything of the sort, but only lay sprawling and groaning on the floor, with his head crushing his hat and his nose rubbing against his cotton umbrella, the considerate young lady thought she had better try her own hand at picking him up. The saint suffered himself to be overpersuaded, and pressing Linda in his arms, he covered her with kisses, groaning and whining most fearfully for no less a period than five minutes.

"And now tell me," he said, in a voice as if it were a schoolboy whimpering over a task that he could not work out, — "tell me all about this, my dear. How came you to be married? Where is your husband? Who is he? Is he a godly man? Hath he the fear of the Lord before his eyes? But d—n him, whoever he is!" and Mr. White Choker gave utterance to this ejaculation with an unction and emphasis which proved the sincerity with which this most unsaint-like malediction was expressed.

"If you will listen to me," said Linda, who still continued to sob and weep somewhat, "I will tell you all about it. You know I am a native of Germany. My father and mother were genteel people, living at Manheim, and about three years ago an English gentleman was stopping at the hotel exactly facing our residence. He became acquainted with us, and visited us frequently. He was very rich, — a captain in a Hussar regiment."

Linda started as if a voice from the dead had suddenly spoken in her ear, for Mr. White Choker gave a groan so deep and hollow that it was really no wonder the young lady was thus terrified. A captain of Hussars. Good heavens, that his malignant planets should have possibly opened the way to throw him in contact with such a vessel of wrath, as the saint considered every military officer to be. A captain of Hussars. Why, he would sooner face all the Snufflenoses in the world — he would sooner have a committee of inquiry appointed by his society to investigate his character, with the certainty that such committee should consist of all his sworn enemies — than stand the chance of facing a captain of Hussars. He would sooner be scourged thrice around Hyde Park than encounter such an individual. In a word, an hour in the pillory, and being pelted the while with rotten eggs, were a pleasant little pastime in comparison with the risk of being called to an account by a captain of Hussars.

“Pray, my dearest friend, do not make yourself so miserable,” said Linda, plying all her little artifices and wiles, all her wheedlings and coaxings, and all her cajoleries to appease him somewhat. “I am very sorry — I was going to have told you the whole truth, but the instant I saw you, I conceived such an affection for you that I was afraid if you heard I was married —”

“Ah, welladay! the mischief is done, my dear,” groaned Mr. White Choker. “Love is the forbidden fruit, and you are the Eve that tempted this wretched Adam” — and he slapped his breast — “to fall.”

“Let me continue my narrative,” said Linda, with one arm thrown around his neck. “This captain — pray don’t groan so — this captain of Hussars — What? Another groan? Well, I must call him, then, by the name of Cartwright. Though many years older than myself, he sought me as his bride. I did not love him; I hated him from the very instant that I perceived his attentions began to grow marked. On the other hand my parents encouraged his addresses; he boasted of his wealth, he lived in good style, and they thought that such an alliance would be ensuring an excellent position for their daughter. It is the old tale: the child was sacrificed to the wishes of the parents, and I became the bride of the Hussar captain, — I mean of Cartwright,” Linda hastily added, for another sepulchral groan

came up from the cavern-like depths of Mr. White Choker's throat.

She paused for a few minutes, during which she seemed to be sobbing bitterly, while the saint rocked himself to and fro, groaning each time he went backward, and whining each time he went forward, so that what with the alternations of the groan and the whine he made as sweet a music as ever emanated from the human throat.

"Three years have elapsed since that fatal marriage," proceeded Linda, in a low and mournful voice, "but only for one year did I live with that man. He treated me cruelly; he beat me. Oh, you have no idea of his dreadful violence, the infuriate gusts of passion —"

Another terrific groan escaped from Mr. White Choker's lips; his countenance was ghastly, he quivered and shivered in every limb. Visions of horsewhips and horse-pistols, of writs for crim. con., of tribunals filled with big-wigs, of heavy damages, of columns of scandal in the newspapers, of Exeter Hall consternation, of select committees of inquiry, whirled around him as if Pandora's box had just been opened under his very nose and all the evils it contained were about to settle upon him like the plague of locusts. And amidst them all was the hideous countenance of Snufflenose, his great rival and arch-enemy in the sphere of saintdom, grinning maliciously at him. Unhappy Mr. White Choker. What was he to do?

"Yes," continued Linda, "at the expiration of a year I was compelled to leave that dreadful man, and I returned to my parents. He followed me; he told them such tales that they would not believe otherwise than that I myself was in fault, and that he himself was an angel of goodness, kindness, and virtue. They insisted that I should return to him, and in order to avoid such a dreadful fate, I fled from home, I came to England, and obtained a situation as governess in a highly respectable family, but my husband found me out and I was compelled to fly once more. I went to Paris, where I obtained another situation, and it was during one of Madame Angelique's temporary visits to the French capital that I happened to fall in with her. I believed her to be a highly respectable lady, and she begged me if ever I returned to London, to favour her with a call. I promised that I would. My husband came to Paris; I heard persons speaking of

him. I learned that he was ruined, — that he was leading a terribly wild life; I hoped therefore that caring no longer for me, he might desist from his persecutions. But no such thing. He found me out, he insisted upon my returning to him, and again was I compelled to fly."

"And what did you do then, my poor dear Linda?" asked Mr. White Choker, with another deep, lugubrious groan.

"Believing that my husband's debts rendered it unlikely that he would revisit England, I sped back to London, where I soon obtained another situation as governess. But my evil genius haunted me. A few weeks ago my husband reappeared, and again was I compelled to flee from a happy home. I was reduced to despair, and in an evil hour I encountered Madame Angelique. She invited me to her house, I went; its true character soon became known to me. She introduced a gentleman — and — and — from necessity I fell. I saw no one else until I came under your protection."

"And that one gentleman," said Mr. White Choker, shaking his head solemnly; "who is he? Some dashing young spark —"

"No, an elderly gentleman," responded Linda, "and I did hear it whispered that he was some high dignitary of the Church."

"Ah! then, my dear, there was no harm, — no harm at all," said Mr. White Choker. "The sanctity of an individual glosses over any little failing. But about this terrible husband of yours — Dear me! dear me! if I had known all this —"

"Ah! it is the idea of that husband of mine which makes me wretched," moaned Linda.

"And you are almost sure that he will find you out, are you not, my dear girl?" inquired Mr. White Choker, quivering from head to foot.

"Let us hope not," responded Linda, suffering her countenance to assume a more cheerful aspect. "You will not desert me on that account, — oh, tell me that you will not desert me?"

But scarcely were the words spoken, when a terrific knock at the front door thundered through the house, the bell at the same time rang as frantically as if pulled by a lunatic just escaped out of Bedlam, and Mr. White Choker felt as if he were shrivelling up into nothing. But the next instant a

thought struck this saintlike man; the instinct of self-preservation asserted all its power within him; a luminous notion inspired him.

“My dear girl — my dear sweet Linda,” he said, “listen to me attentively. Look as pious, as holy, and as contrite as you can. Verily, we must clothe ourselves with the raiment of hypocrisy as the only armour wherewith to defend ourselves against him who cometh like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Ah! I hear his footsteps. Perdition and the devil take him. But no, no — that is not what I meant.”

Quick as lightning Mr. White Choker scud across the room as if a mad dog were at his heels, and partially opening the door, he flew back to his seat. Then he began to address Linda in a strain which for the first few instants filled her with a perfect astoundment.

“My dear sister in the good cause,” said the saint, with the most approved commingling of snuffle and whine, whimper and snivel, — “yea, verily, we are all sinful creatures — we are all sheep that have strayed from the pasture. It is good, my sister, that I who am a man known in the tabernacles of the pious, and reputed to be a savoury vessel against which no scandal has ever dared breathe a whisper, should in this true brotherly fashion visit you from time to time. It is sweet, my sister, that we should sing hymns together, and anon I will expound unto you that text concerning which we were speaking just now. Well pleased am I to reckon you amongst the sheep of our fold, and you, my sister, will feel your soul refreshed by an attentive listening unto my discourse. Ah! my sweet sister, it is pleasant to escape from the vanities of this wicked world, to buckle on the armour of truth — ”

“By Heaven! it must be precious stout armour that will prevent me from lacerating your precious hide in such a way that your own mother shall not know you.”

Mr. White Choker felt as if he had been suddenly turned into a snowball and was rapidly melting away. The ferocious Cartwright strode into the room with clenched fists and a countenance convulsed with rage. He was dressed in plain clothes, but his moustache seemed fiercer, if possible, than even when he had burst into the presence of Mr. Softly or of Lord Wenham. Linda shrieked and covered her face with

her hands. Mr. White Choker was confounded on finding that his beautiful homily had produced no earthly effect; his countenance was ghastly, he wished that the earth would open and swallow him up. But the flooring of the house appeared by no means disposed to achieve any such spontaneous miracle for his especial behoof, all saint though he were.

"You vile woman!" vociferated Captain Cartwright, "so I have found you out again? But this time in what a position! Not earning your bread honestly as a teacher of the young idea how to shoot, but as the mistress of this hypocritical old vagabond. And talking about shooting, you shall very soon see if I won't try my hand at it. What do you mean, sir, going about seducing men's wives with that precious white choker around your throat?"

"My good friend — my worthy sir — my gallant captain," stammered forth Mr. White Choker, "this dear lady is as pious a vessel —"

"Silence!" roared Captain Cartwright, "or I will very soon show you that your head is a vessel to be broken into a dozen pieces."

"But, my dear sir," resumed the wretched saint, "this is really too outrageous. I am a man respected in the congregations and of good odour in the tabernacles —"

"Such tabernacles as Madame Angelique's house of infamy!" exclaimed Captain Cartwright, "for there you were the other day, and there you met my wife. I can prove it. My lawyers can prove it. A highly respectable firm, sir — Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, Downy & Co., Lincoln's Inn Fields, and if you don't see their names at the back of a writ, laying damages at five thousand pounds, in the course of this very day, when my name is not Hannibal Cæsar Napoleon Cartwright."

The miserable Mr. White Choker, who had risen from his seat, sank back again in perfect dismay at hearing those separate strings of names. The appellations of the legal firm denoted all the chicaneries of the law; the appellations of the gallant plaintiff himself denoted all his bellicose propensities. Meanwhile Linda, sitting apart, kept her countenance covered with her hands, and seemed as if she dared not so much as even steal a furtive glance at her husband, nor put forth a single syllable in appeal for his mercy. But a sudden

idea struck Mr. White Choker; his only resource was to ride it with a high hand, and though it required a very desperate effort to screw up his courage to such a point, yet the circumstances of the case enabled him so to do. It was a sort of neck-or-nothing crisis, — one of those emergencies which give energy to the veriest coward.

Rising up from his seat, he advanced a pace or two toward the ferocious captain, but taking good care to pick up his cotton umbrella, so as to be in readiness to resist any sudden attack, and assuming a look sanctimoniously firm and deprecatingly virtuous, he said, "The character of a good and well-meaning man is not to be aspersed in this style. Peradventure I did verily go to the abode of the woman whom you call Madame Angelique, but it was for the blessed purpose of reclaiming those sheep which had strayed from the fold."

"And so you take one of the sheep," vociferated the captain, "and put her into a handsomely furnished villa?"

"Yea, verily, to reclaim her," responded Mr. White Choker, now speaking with a degree of assurance that astonished himself. "My visits hither have had the most godly purpose. It has been to reason with her on the past, to preach savoury homilies unto her, to infuse refreshing doctrines into her soul —"

"And these precious homilies of yours are so long," retorted the captain, with a ferocious sneer, "that you have to pass the whole night with her at times, eh?"

"Prove it — I defy you to prove it!" ejaculated Mr. White Choker, his assurance heightening into effrontery through the very desperation of his position; and he moreover flattered himself that he could place implicit reliance on the fidelity of the servants belonging to the villa.

"Now look you, Mr. Saint, or whatever you are," exclaimed the captain, "it is all very well for you to assume an air of innocence, but you are safe caught in a trap. I know everything. You won't have a leg to stand upon if you go into a court of justice, and you'll have Mrs. White Choker and all the little Chokers pointing their indignant fingers at a bad husband and a worthless father."

"We shall see," said the saint, gruffly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to go on in this manner before your virtuous wife. Speak to her, sir; she will tell you of what

holy and blessed nature our intercourse has been, so that not even have we gone as far as to exchange the chaste kiss of peace."

"Linda," said Captain Cartwright, now speaking in a tone of mournful reproach, "you imagine that you have had wrongs to complain of at my hands. But my fault has been in loving you all too well —"

"Oh, do not speak to me! I cannot endure it!" cried the weeping Linda. "I feel — oh, I feel that I have wronged you much, that I have exaggerated your little ebullitions of temper —"

"Confess that you have dishonoured me," said the captain; "throw yourself upon your knees at my feet and reveal everything. It will be some atonement —"

"Linda, my love — Mrs. Cartwright, I mean, dear sister in the blessed cause, I would say," stammered out Mr. White Choker, now affrighted, wretched, and discomfited once again, "you would not betray me — I mean — I mean, you would not say anything against me, or tell an untruth —"

"Linda," broke in Captain Cartwright, "I command you to speak with frankness. On what terms are you living with this man? Are you not his mistress?"

"Oh, I must tell the truth! — this is dreadful," shrieked forth Linda, "but I must tell the truth!" Then falling on her knees at Captain Cartwright's feet, she said, "Yes, it is so — alas that I must confess it! But deal mercifully with him; he has treated me well —"

"Enough," said the captain, giving a terrific twirl to his moustache. "Rise, Linda, and compose yourself. You at least have made by this confession all the atonement that was in your power, and though henceforth everything is at an end between us —"

Captain Cartwright stopped short, and turning abruptly around, seemed to be wiping away his tears with a scented cambric handkerchief. Linda rose from her knees, and not daring to throw a single glance upon Mr. White Choker, she sank on a chair apparently convulsed with grief. As for the saint himself, he stood the very picture of wretchedness and misery, but yet there was something ludicrous in the expression of his woebegone countenance.

"Sir," said Captain Cartwright, advancing toward him,

“ what reparation can you make me for having torn an angel from my arms? ”

“ My good friend — my very dear friend,” faltered the saint, “ I — I — don’t think you could have missed the angel very much, seeing that she has long been absent from your arms.”

“ She would have come back, sir, and I should have received her were she not thus polluted. But enough of this trifling,” ejaculated the captain, with a fierce sternness. “ Will you dare deny any longer that this lady — my wife — is your mistress? Come, sir, speak out, or by Heaven — ”

“ Pray, pray don’t use any violence,” implored the wretched Mr. White Choker. “ I — I confess that appearances are against me: but — but — for the sake of my family, whom I have brought up as savoury vessels, having the fear of the Lord before their eyes — ”

“ Sir, I myself am a Christian,” interrupted Captain Cartwright, “ and I can forgive so far as forgiveness be possible. But you must confess, sir — ”

“ Well, well, I confess — and — and — if five hundred or a thousand pounds — will — will — hush up this little matter — and make all things pleasant — ”

At that moment footsteps were heard coming from the landing. An individual, with an air of jaunty self-sufficiency, and very gaily dressed, made his appearance, the door having continued ajar the whole time. Mr. White Choker was now perfectly aghast, for the conviction smote him that a witness had overheard everything that had taken place; and he might have been knocked down with a straw when Captain Cartwright said, “ This, sir, is Mr. Downy, a member of the legal firm of which I have spoken.”

Mr. Downy closed the door, and seating himself at the table, drew forth a bundle of papers, tied around with red tape, and of that ominous length, fold, and general appearance which seemed to indicate that all the moral tortures of the law might be wielded at the discretion of this gentleman.

“ A very painful business, Mr. Choker, a very painful business,” said Mr. Downy. “ Sorry to be compelled to serve process on a pious gentleman like yourself. But it can’t be helped. If saints will be sinners, you know, — ha! ha! — they must take the consequences. Let me see,” continued the legal gentleman, as he proceeded to fill up a long

slip of parchment and then arranged a corresponding slip of ordinary paper to be likewise filled up. "Here's the original, and here's the copy. Damages five thousand, eh, captain?"

"Not a farthing less, sir!" responded Cartwright, fiercely, as if he were offended that there could even be a doubt as to the price that he put upon the angel he had lost.

"Very good, captain," said Mr. Downy, "damages five thousand. You hear, Mr. Choker? I keep the original; where shall I serve the copy? Will you take it, or will you refer me to your solicitors, or shall I just leave it at your own house as I pass by the door presently? It will be no trouble; I will give it into Mrs. Choker's own hand, and none of the servants will know anything about it. The trial will come on in November — Court of Common Pleas. Ah! it will be a rare excitement, as sure as my name is honest Ike — I mean Downy."

The reader may conceive the awful state of mind into which Mr. White Choker was thrown by these terrible proceedings. Five thousand pounds damages, a writ ready drawn out, and the whole affair certain to obtain a fearful publicity in the course of the day! The miserable saint looked at Mr. Downy, but beheld not the least encouragement in the insolently leering expression of his countenance. He looked at the captain, but this gallant officer of Hussars was twirling his fierce moustache with the sternest resoluteness of purpose. He looked toward Linda, but that fallen angel whose departed virtue was appraised at five thousand pounds was still covering her features with her hands and sobbing convulsively. Mr. White Choker turned up his eyes to the ceiling, and gave vent to a hollow groan. Mr. Downy, approaching him with an air of jaunty familiarity, held the ominous copy of the writ between his finger and thumb, and as if suddenly recollecting something, he said, "By the bye, there will be one witness we shall want, and perhaps, Mr. Choker, you would have no objection to give me his address. I mean Mr. Snufflenose."

This was the crowning stone of the entire fabric of Mr. White Choker's misery. Snufflenose of all persons, as a witness against him! He was now desperate. Clutching Mr. Downy by the lapel of his coat, he dragged him aside, hastily whispering with nervous agitation, "For Heaven's sake get this settled! Pray save me from exposure; I could

not survive it. It would be my death. Only conceive, a man in my position to be dragged before a tribunal! Talk to the captain, offer him a sum, implore him to be reasonable.'

"Look you here, Mr. Choker," said Mr. Downy, drawing the saint into a window recess, "I am not a harsh man, and our firm is above pressing on a case for mere paltry costs. You will do well to settle it, for it is a terrible black affair, beats 'Higgins versus Wiggins' all to smashes, and 'Biggins versus Sniggins' all to shivers. Come, you're pretty warm, — ha! ha! ha! — warm in two ways," chuckled Mr. Downy, who seemed of a jocular disposition, "warm in love and warm in purse. Now then, what shall we say? Three thousand?"

"Three thousand?" groaned Mr. White Choker, with a countenance uncommonly blank. "It's a very large sum —"

"Yes, but the injury inflicted is very large also," responded Mr. Downy. "Take my advice, — it's only six and eightpence you know," and here the facetious gentleman chuckled again. "Don't haggle at a few pounds. To settle it for three thousand, and a fifty-pound note for my costs, will be dirt cheap. In fact, between you and me and the post," added Mr. Downy, in a mysteriously confidential whisper, "the captain will be a cursed fool if he settles it at all. He's got a capital case, — a capital case. Why, sir, it beats cock-fighting."

Mr. Downy evidently thought that this last argument was a smasher, and poor Mr. White Choker was too miserably bewildered to discern any incongruity in the metaphor. He pleaded hard for Mr. Downy to reduce the demand to a couple of thousand, but the legal gentleman was obstinate. At length he said, "Well, I must see what I can do. I have a great respect for a pious man like yourself, and I shouldn't like to see you driven out of society, and poor Mrs. White Choker drowning herself in the Serpentine, leaving all the little Chokers to misery and wretchedness. No, no; that isn't the way business is done by honest Ike Shad — Mr. Downy, I mean, of the eminent firm of Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, and Co."

With these words the pseudo-lawyer — whom our readers have had no difficulty in recognizing as an old acquaintance — accosted Captain Cartwright, and drew him aside. Mr.

White Choker kept groaning inwardly, as he watched them with most anxious suspense. For several minutes Mr. Downy appeared to be pleading very energetically on the saint's behalf, so far as could be judged from his gesticulations, while the captain seemed to be listening with a stern and dogged resoluteness. At length this gallant gentleman, as if growing impatient, exclaimed vehemently, "No, not one farthing less. Serve the writ, Mr. Downy."

"No, no," cried the wretched saint, imploringly; "let us settle it at once — anyhow."

"It's the best thing you can do, my dear sir," hastily whispered Mr. Downy, as he again accosted the unfortunate Mr. White Choker. "Sit down and draw the cheque — three thousand and fifty guineas."

"Pounds," said the miserable victim.

"Guineas," rejoined Mr. Downy, emphatically. "The captain will only treat with guineas as a basis: that is his ultimatum."

Mr. White Choker gave another deep groan, it being about the six hundredth that had come up from his cavern-like throat on this memorable day, but resigning himself to his fate, he sat down and drew up the cheque according to dictation.

"And now," said Mr. Downy, "we will pitch these things into the grate," and he tore up the writs, both original and copy, into infinitesimal pieces, for fear lest they should be collected in order to form the groundwork of a prosecution for conspiracy to extort money under false pretences.

Having written the cheque, Mr. White Choker's mind became relieved of a considerable load, and he looked toward the chair which Linda had occupied a few moments back. But she was gone; she had flitted from the room.

"And now good morning to you, sir," said Captain Cartwright. "For your own sake you will keep this business as secret as possible."

"Good bye, old fellow," said Mr. Downy, with a singular leer upon his countenance. "You behaved uncommon well after all, and you'll bless the moment you listened to the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

The captain and his acolyte passed out of the room, closing the door behind them. For a few instants Mr. White Choker sat bewildered. A suspicion had flashed to his mind; its

growth was marvellously rapid; it amounted to a certainty, — he saw that he was done. He started up to his feet; he stood for an instant, and then he rushed to the door. Just as he opened it, he heard a sort of titter or giggle in a female voice. Was it possible? the musical voice of his Linda! She was descending the stairs with the two men. Mr. Choker was on the very point of shouting out “Stop, thieves!” when it struck him that he would be thereby provoking the very scandal and exposure which he had paid so heavily to avoid. He dashed his hand against his forehead, and gave vent to a curse bitter enough to electrify ten thousand Exeter Hall audiences if there had been so many and if they had happened to hear it. He rushed to the window, and lo! he beheld Captain Cartwright gallantly handing Linda into a cab, both of them evidently in the highest possible spirits. As for Mr. Downy — or honest Ike Shadbolt, as he had proclaimed himself to be — he was almost convulsed with laughter, and looking up toward the window, he waved his hand with the most impudent familiarity at Mr. White Choker. The cab drove off at a rattling pace, and we need hardly inform the reader that its first destination was the establishment of the saint’s bankers in order to get the cheque cashed.

Mr. Choker, on beholding the vehicle thus disappear, rushed up-stairs to Linda’s chamber, and a glance at its condition showed him that she had carried off all the jewels and valuables which he had presented to her. A similar research in the dining-room made the saint painfully aware that the handsome service of plate he had bought for her use had likewise disappeared. He threw himself on a sofa, buried his head in the cushions, moaned and groaned, swore and snivelled, whined and whimpered — and wished himself at the hottest place he could think of, and in the society of a personage whose name must not be mentioned to polite ears.

But the cup of his humiliations and miseries, though full enough, Heaven knows! was yet to be made to overflow. The servants, consisting of a footman and three females, had got something more than an inkling of what had passed, for they had been carefully listening on the stairs. Accordingly, these amiable beings, on whose trustworthiness the saint had flattered himself he could so implicitly rely, suddenly made their appearance in a posse, and requested to know his in-

tentions. With affrighted looks he intimated his purpose to pay them their wages at once and decline their further services. The footman, as spokesman, made sundry and divers demands for compensation in lieu of proper notice, and he pretty plainly intimated that something in the shape of hush-money must likewise be forthcoming. To all these demands Mr. Choker found himself compelled to submit, and it cost him a pretty penny to purchase the silence of those individuals. The villa was given up that very day, and Mr. White Choker returned into the bosom of his family a wiser if not a better man. But the next time he attended the committee of the Foreign Cannibal-reclaiming, Negro-Christianizing, and Naked-savage-clothing Society, he for a long time sat on thorns for fear lest the affair should have got wind. As Snufflenose was however silent, Mr. Choker gathered courage, but for many a long day afterward he groaned as he walked about, and at night his excellent better half fancied that he must be troubled with indigestion because of the restlessness of his dreams.

END OF VOLUME XVIII.

