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THE FORTUNES OF THE ASHTONS VOLUME XVII

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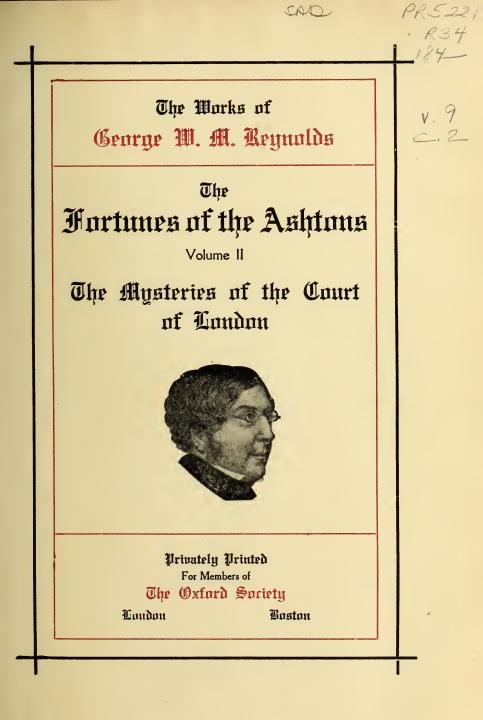
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"HE WAS TAKING A FAREWELL KISS" Page 149





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V



REYNOLDS' WORKS

CHAPTER I

LETTICE RODNEY

IT was about nine o'clock in the morning following the night of which we have been speaking, that Lettice Rodney awoke in a chamber around which her eyes slowly wandered with an expression as if she were not over well satisfied with her quarters. It was a large room, furnished in an antiquated style, and of gloomy aspect, though some recent preparations had evidently been made to give it an air of comfort. The latticed windows were small, the ceiling was low, the walls were of wainscot, the chairs were of a dark wood, massive and heavy. The same might be said of the bedstead, but the bedding materials themselves were all new, and these, together with the draperies, were of a superior quality to the other appointments of the chamber. It was this circumstance which indicated how recent arrangements had been made to render the place more habitable than it would otherwise have been.

Lettice Rodney awoke, as we have said, at about nine o'clock, and looking around her, she seemed smitten with the gloom of her quarters. In a few minutes, however, when she grew more completely awake, a smile appeared upon her exceedingly handsome countenance, as she murmured to herself, "But, after all, it is a change and a novelty, and I am to be most munificently recompensed."

She raised herself up in the couch, rested her elbow upon the pillow, and sustained her head with her hand. In that position she would have formed an admirable study for the

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pencil of an artist. No corset now imprisoned the contours of her shape, which therefore took their own natural and voluptuous developments. Her glossy brown hair floated negligently over the hand which sustained her head, and over the shoulders which were covered with the snowy night-dress. Pleasure and dissipation had not marred the gorgeous beauty of her form; the rounded and full undulations of the bust retained their proper position, as if all the freshness of youth had remained associated with the exuberant charms of a superb womanhood. The sweeping length of her limbs was delineated by the bedclothes: all the flowing outlines of her form were traceable, and could be followed by the eve, if an observer had been present. The semi-languor which accompanies the first few minutes of the morn's awakening gave a certain expression of sensuousness to her countenance, or, rather, softly deepened that which it habitually wore. She was a splendid creature, well-grown and fresh coloured, but the fulness of her contours stopped short just at that degree of luxuriance when they touched upon embonpoint, while the hue upon her cheeks was not the ruddiness of the rustic hoiden, but the carnation glow upon a finely grained skin. Her lips were of coral redness, habitually moist, and seeming to invite fervid kisses, as well as to be enabled to give them back with a kindred ardour. Her teeth were somewhat large, but of ivory whiteness and faultlessly even; her nose was straight, her forehead high. It has already been stated that she was about two and twenty, and since the age of fifteen had she dwelt under the evil auspices of Madame Angelique. Her temperament was naturally luxurious: she had fallen an easy victim to the wiles of that abominable woman, and as she was an orphan, she had no happy home to regret. On the contrary, of the four females whom we introduced to the reader at the milliner's establishment. Lettice was the one least accessible to remorseful feelings, and most inclined to abandon herself fully and completely to the mode of existence she was pursuing.

She lay half-reclining upon her pillow in that apartment around which her eyes wandered by no means lovingly at first; yet, as we have seen, she consoled herself quickly enough for this change in her quarters, by the reflection that there was novelty in it, and that she was embarking in some adventure which would remunerate her well, though she as yet scarcely comprehended the precise nature of the services required at her hands. While she lay thinking, the door opened slowly, and an old woman, with trembling limbs, and head shaking as if it were palsied, made her appearance. She was followed by a buxom-looking young girl of about seventeen, and who was the old woman's granddaughter. This girl carried a large deal box, which was corded, and which she set down upon the floor.

"Ah! then," said Lettice, as she beheld the box, "some one has been this morning?"

"No, ma'am, it was in the middle of the night," answered the old woman, and in a mysterious manner, she added, "It was the duke himself, together with a young gentleman. His Grace told me yesterday morning — as I think I mentioned to you, ma'am — that I was to sit up, as it was most likely some one would be calling."

"I must have slept soundly enough, Mrs. Norwood," observed Lettice, "for I heard no noise of doors opening. I shall get up now. And Phœbe," she added, addressing herself to the girl, "see that you get me the best breakfast you can possibly accomplish. But, dear me, what a place this is, — so lonely and desolate."

"Ah! it was once thriving enough, ma'am," said Mrs. Norwood, "when the late farmer had it."

"And how long has the place been in this condition?" inquired Lettice.

"Oh, upward of the last twelve months, or so," responded the old woman. "His Grace's bailiff let me and my granddaughter live here for nothing, just to keep the rooms aired and take care of the furniture, till some new tenant comes. You see, ma'am, the person who had it last was a bachelor, and he went on at such a pace he soon got ruined and was sent to gaol for debt, where he died of a fever brought on by hard drinking. There was more than a year's rent owing, and so his Grace's bailiff kept the furniture in the house. All the farm stock was sold off, and now there isn't so much as a hen to lay an egg. However, thanks to his Grace's liberality, there is everything in the place to make you comfortable, ma'am, while you are here."

The old woman withdrew, followed by her granddaughter; Lettice rose and dressed herself, and on descending to a parlour on the ground floor, she found an excellent repast in readiness. Scarcely had she finished, when the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the house.

"I am glad that you have come," said Lettice, as he entered the room, and she spoke half-poutingly, half-smilingly, "for really you have consigned me to an abode of incomparable dulness."

"But everything is done, my dear girl, to conduce to your comfort," said his Grace, tapping her familiarly on the cheek. "I ordered these people to attend to your slightest wants, and even to anticipate them. After all, you do not look so very unhappy, and you certainly are not pining away. On the contrary, the fresh air of the country has brought a richer colour to your cheeks, and they invite what I am now about to bestow upon them."

Thus speaking, the duke kissed each plump and carnationhued cheek, and then, by way of variety, he paid a similar compliment to the dewy richness of Lettice Rodney's lips.

"And now that you have thus refreshed yourself, my dear Marchmont," she laughingly and familiarly said, "perhaps you will have the kindness to enter a little more deeply into explanations than you have hitherto done? The box of dresses has arrived, I find — "

"And to-morrow evening, one must be made use of," rejoined the duke. "Listen to me attentively, my dear Lettice, and I will tell you precisely how you are to act."

Marchmont then detailed such explanations as were requisite for the furtherance of his treacherous scheme; but it is not consistent with the immediate requirements of our narrative that we should chronicle them. Suffice it to observe that Lettice Rodney promised to fulfil the duke's instructions on all points, and she received from him an earnest of his munificence in the form of a small casket containing several exquisite and costly articles of jewelry.

"To-morrow night, therefore, my dear Lettice," said the duke, as he rose to take his departure. "But recollect that you do not stir abroad in the daytime; you can take plenty of exercise in the large enclosed garden at the back of the house. I took care," he continued, glancing toward some book-shelves, "to provide you with numerous novels and interesting works, and, by the bye, I have brought you a quantity of newspapers." Thus speaking, his Grace drew forth a packet of journals, which he placed upon the table, and after a little more conversation, he took his departure. Presently the young woman Phœbe entered the room to clear away the breakfast things, and Lettice, who was standing at the window, inquired, "What is the distance from the bottom of this lane to Oaklands?"

"I should think about a mile and a quarter," was Phœbe Norwood's response. "If you are going there, ma'am, you can't possibly mistake the road; it is pretty nearly straight, except close by the pond, where the late duke was murdered, and there it takes a sort of turn."

"Ah," ejaculated Lettice, with a shudder, "the pond where the late duke was murdered is on the roadside?" and then she said to herself, "A comfortable spot to pass at night-time."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," rejoined Phœbe; "that's the spot where his Grace was murdered a matter of eighteen years ago, or thereabouts. Grandmother says," she added, in a half-hushed voice, "that he walks."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lettice, hastily.

"I mean, ma'am," answered the girl, "that the late duke's ghost haunts the place, and what's more, the howlings of his dog have been heard at the same spot in the nighttime."

"How absurd!" ejaculated Lettice, but a shade nevertheless came over her countenance, and for the remainder of the day she felt an oppression of spirits such as she had not experienced for a long, long time.

It must be observed that this day of which we have been writing was Friday. On the following day Christian Ashton had to meet Mr. Redcliffe in the neighbourhood of the turnpike on the Winchester road. The weather was remarkably fine for that January season, and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon of this Saturday, Christian set out on his walk from Oaklands. As he was proceeding through the grounds he perceived the Duchess of Marchmont walking with the Honourable Mr. Stanhope. She was not, however, leaning on his arm; nor was there aught in her look to denote that she experienced any particular pleasure in the society of her companion.

We have already said that Lavinia was in her thirty-second .

year, that she was tall and finely formed. Her hair was of a light auburn, which she habitually wore in massive tresses. and which, as they now floated beneath the simple strawbonnet which she had put on for her ramble, formed a lustrous framework for a countenance of the most interesting beauty. Her profile was faultless. The forehead was high, and dazzlingly fair, — the delicate tracery of blue veins being visible beneath the pure, transparent skin. Her nose was perfectly straight: the eyebrows, many shades darker than the hair, were finely arched. The large blue eyes had a soft and pensive expression; more beauteous eves never graced a female countenance. The lashes were darker still than the brows, and thickly fringed the lids. Nothing could excel the classic chiseling of the lips, which were of bright vermilion, and when the duchess smiled, those lips revealed two rows of teeth resembling pearls. The delicately rounded chin completed the oval of that beauteous countenance, -the complexion of which was chastely fair, with only the tint of the rose-leaf upon the cheeks. To gaze upon that charming face, to observe the goodness of disposition which the large blue eyes expressed, it would seem impossible that any man was possessed of a soul black enough to harbour evil thoughts against this lady. Indeed she possessed every charm of countenance and of figure, as well as of mind, to inspire admiration, love, and respect.

The symmetry of Lavinia's form was complete. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the neck, or the dazzling whiteness of the throat. The shoulders sloped gently, thus imperceptibly as it were blending with the arms. The bust was finely modelled, but modestly concealed by a dress with a high corsage, and this was the invariable style adopted by Lavinia, whose pure taste and delicacy of feeling would have revolted against any meretricious display of her charms. Elegance was the principal characteristic of her gait and carriage, though her height, rather than her bearing, invested her with a certain degree of dignity. There was, however, about her none of that pride, much less that majesty of demeanour, which the imagination is apt to associate with the rank of a duchess. Indeed, to gaze upon her one would have thought that a less brilliant sphere would have far better suited her tastes and disposition; though it must not be inferred from these observations that she was

deficient in any of the becoming qualities for the social position which she occupied.

As Christian passed Mr. Stanhope and the duchess, he raised his hat, and her Grace bestowed upon him a kind word and a friendly smile. While continuing his way, he felt more than ever rejoiced that accident should have rendered him instrumental in discovering the diabolical plots which were in existence against the peace of mind of this amiable lady, and he had such confidence in the wisdom and determination of Clement Redcliffe that he had no doubt as to the complete discomfiture of the conspirators. Hastening onward, he in a short time reached the turnpike, and at a little distance he beheld Mr. Redcliffe walking slowly along. enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat drawn more than ever over his countenance. After hasty greetings were exchanged. Redcliffe conducted Christian across the fields to a lonely little cottage, inhabited by an elderly couple, and here it appeared that he had taken up his quarters. His lodgings consisted of a small but neat parlour and a bedchamber. The dwelling was altogether secluded, and Redcliffe gave Christian to understand that the elderly couple were not of prving or inquisitve dispositions, and that therefore he had been most fortunate in discovering such a retreat.

"And now, my young friend," he said, "what intelligence have you for me?"

Christian stated that Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands, and that he daily walked out with the duchess. He then proceeded to explain how the Duke of Marchmont had made him convey the box to the farmhouse at a late hour on the Thursday night, and how it was left there. Christian also mentioned the circumstance of having seen some shape moving about in the vicinage of the pond during the walk homeward on the occasion referred to.

"I perceive," said Mr. Redeliffe, after having reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, "that the incident you have just related produced some little sensation of awe upon your mind. But the duke, you tell me, bade you be careful how you yielded to superstitious fears. I also respect that advice, and perhaps I can give it with a clearer conscience than he. Yes, Christian, it was no doubt some wayfarer — or midnight wanderer," added Mr. Redeliffe, slowly, "whose form you beheld upon that spot at that hour. But it is clear," he went on to observe, speaking more quickly, "that the plot is now progressing fast, and that the incidents are thickening. It is time that I should explain to you something which I had not the opportunity to do when you came to me last Tuesday evening. To my comprehension there is no mystery in respect to the box. You heard, from Eveleen O'Brien's lips, that it contained dresses which are the precise duplicates of others recently made for the Duchess of Marchmont. Those dresses, Christian, will be doubtless worn by some one who is to personate the duchess — Ah! now you understand the full extent of the villainy of which the duke is capable."

"I do indeed, sir," responded Christian, almost smitten with dismay as the light thus dawned in upon his mind. "But how will you frustrate this portion of the diabolical conspiracy?"

"Fear not, my young friend," answered Redcliffe. "Rest assured that innocence and virtue shall yet triumph over the most villainous treachery. Come to me again the moment you have anything fresh to impart, but if nothing should transpire for a few days, do not visit me until the middle of the ensuing week. We must be upon our guard, so as to take no step that may excite suspicion."

After a little further discourse, Christian took his departure and returned to Oaklands.

It was about eleven o'clock in the night of this same day that Lettice Rodney issued forth from the lonely farmhouse. She wore an ample cloak over her dress; a thick veil covered her countenance. The night was beautiful and starlit; the air was frosty, with an invigorating freshness totally different from that damp chill which makes the form shiver and the teeth chatter. Quickly threading the lane, Lettice entered upon the road, on gaining which she endeavoured to hum an opera air to keep up her spirits, or, rather, to persuade herself that there was no superstitious terror in her mind as she pursued her way in a neighbourhood rendered so fearfully memorable by an appalling murder. All of a sudden, however, she stopped short and turned hastily around, for it struck her that she heard footsteps following over the hard, frost-bound road. At the same instant that she thus looked back, she fancied that she caught a glimpse

of some dark form disappearing in the shade of the hedge which skirted the road. She was not naturally a coward, very far from it, — but she could not help trembling all over, half with a superstitious fear, and half with the dread lest some evil-disposed person should be dogging her footsteps. She was somewhat inclined to retrace her way to the farmhouse, but this would be to abandon the enterprise in which she had embarked, and on account of which she had already received so signal a proof of the Duke of Marchmont's munificence. Therefore, mustering up all her courage, she continued her route.

In a few minutes she reached the pond which she knew to have been the spot where the murder was committed, although she was now threading this road for the first time. Through the folds of her veil her eyes glanced rapidly around, and she could scarcely keep back a scream as she beheld, either in fancy or reality, a dark shape on the opposite side of the hedge which bounded the pond. It instantaneously disappeared, and speeding forward, Lettice strove hard to persuade herself that it was merely imagination.

"Nevertheless," she thought, "if these nocturnal journeys are to be frequently repeated, I must positively solicit his Grace to give me some escort. Not," she added, as she thus mused, "that I am afraid of preternatural appearances, no, no, that is sheer nonsense, — but it is not altogether safe thus to be out so late and in such a lonely road. Yes, assuredly it was only my imagination, and yet it was strange that I should twice fancy I beheld that dark shape."

Lettice continued her way, but frequently glancing around, and ever and anon pausing to listen whether footsteps were in reality pursuing her. Nothing more, however, occurred to frighten her, and as she entered the grounds belonging to Oaklands, she felt ashamed of the apprehensions to which she had given way.

The duke had so accurately described the exact path which she was to take through the shrubberies and the gardens that she had no difficulty in following his instructions, especially as she was so well aided by the clear starlight. That starlight bathed the antique edifice in its argentine lustre, and made the tall chimneys and the pointed roofs stand out in bold relief against the blue sky. All was still, save the rustling of the evergreens as well as of her own dress, and the light tread of her footsteps as she bent her way toward the private door, which, as well as the other details of her route, had been accurately described by the Duke of Marchmont. On reaching that door, she gave three gentle taps, and it was immediately opened by the duke himself. She entered; he closed the door, and conducted her into a little room opening from a passage. Here a light was burning, and he made her sit down and rest herself for a few minutes. He drew the cork of a champagne-bottle, and the exhilarating influence of the wine cheered her spirits to an extent that she resolved to keep silent as to the circumstances which had affrighted her during her walk from the farmhouse:

She now, by the duke's bidding, took off her bonnet and cloak, and she appeared in one of the dresses which had come down in the box.

"It is most fortunate," said Marchmont, "that her Grace wore the exact counterpart of that dress this evening. Now take the veil from the bonnet and just throw it over your head, so as to shade your countenance and cover the hair."

These instructions were obeyed, and the duke said, "You must follow me on tiptoe. We shall not take the candle with us, but there will be light enough through the windows of the staircase and passages to enable you to see your way."

The duke conducted Lettice Rodney up the private staircase along a passage; then they threaded another corridor, thus reaching the extremity of the building, which was farthest from the one whence they had come.

"Here," said the duke, and gently tapping at a door, it was instantaneously opened by the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

Lettice passed in, and the duke hastened away.

The principal lady's-maid of the Duchess of Marchmont was a young woman named Amy Sutton. She was tall and handsome, about four and twenty years of age, and of very excellent character. She was, however, of a cold disposition, which often merged into a morose sullenness when with her fellow servants, though she had never any occasion to display her humours in the presence of her mistress. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and calculating, exceedingly fond of money, but with a certain pride, rather than principle, which prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral

means to augment her hoards. Though handsome, vet if closely regarded, it would be seen that she had a certain decision of look indicating much of her real disposition, and which at times became sinister in its aspect. If ever a fashionable rake or a patrician libertine, seizing an opportunity, ventured to pat her cheek, her eves would flame up and her countenance would express a savage fierceness, and if an improper overture were whispered in her ear, she would unhesitatingly reward the individual with the soundest box that his own ear had ever received. She was too selfish in her disposition to entertain any real affection for her mistress, and too independent in character to simulate that which her heart did not feel. At the same time she was perfectly respectful in her conduct, as well as assiduous in her duties. and as the natural amiability of Lavinia prompted her to be kind and indulgent toward her dependents. Amy Sutton's temper was never put to the test by a word or look on the part of her mistress. Thus it was not difficult for Amy to conceal from her Grace whatsoever was rugged, worldly-minded, or sinister in her constitution, while her honesty, her unimpeachable character, and her regularity in performing her duties rendered her more or less a favourite with her Grace.

It must here be observed that the Duchess of Marchmont, though of such high rank, was not one of those fine ladies who cannot do a single thing for themselves, and who require every detail of the toilet — morning, noon, evening, and night — to be performed by the hands of female attendants. Her Grace, on the contrary, dispensed as much as possible with the attentions of her maids on these points, and only invoked their aid for such services as she could not very well render unto herself. All this the duke of course well knew, and he was therefore aware that when his wife retired for the night, she very speedily dismissed the attendant handmaid whose turn it was to be upon duty, preferring to disapparel herself and arrange her hair with her own hands.

The duchess had sought her chamber about half an hour previous to the introduction of Lettice Rodney into the mansion. It was Amy Sutton's turn to attend upon her Grace, and, as usual, she was dismissed for the night a few minutes after accompanying Lavinia to her chamber. Marchmont had watched from the end of the corridor — himself remaining unseen — until Amy quitted her Grace's room and ascended to her own, and then was it that he stole down the private staircase to await the three raps at the door which were to signalize Lettice Rodney's arrival. He was not kept long waiting, as the reader has seen.

Now that we have given these requisite explanations. we resume the thread of our narrative. Having introduced Lettice into Mr. Stanhope's chamber, the Duke of Marchmont stole up-stairs to the floor above, and knocked at Amy Sutton's door. The maid hastened to open it, for she had not as yet begun to undress herself, and on hearing the summons, it immediately struck her that one of her fellow domestics must be taken ill. She was surprised at beholding the duke, - surprised only, but not startled, for it was in her nature to take things very coolly. For a moment the thought struck her that his Grace was now visiting her for a particular purpose, which she would have resented in no measured terms, but this idea was immediately dissipated when a glance showed her how troubled appeared his countenance. Indeed, Marchmont had studiously put on an excited and agitated look, while perhaps a certain sense of the deep villainy in which he was engaged rendered his features pale, and gave an air of reality to the troubled look which he thus assumed.

Placing his finger upon his lip to enjoin silence, he beckoned the maid to follow him. This she unhesitatingly did, for she saw — or at least fancied she saw — that there was something wrong, and she had no fear of any improper treatment on the duke's part, — in the first place, because he seemed to meditate nothing of the sort, and in the second place, because she had the fullest confidence in her own power to repulse and resent it, if he did. He had come without a light; she was at first about to follow with her own, but he made a sign for her to leave it, and she accompanied him down the staircase.

There was a sitting-room on the same floor as the principal bedchambers of the establishment, and into this Marchmont led Amy.

"Young woman," he said, rendering his voice hoarse and thick, and speaking too in a low tone, as if he were indeed profoundly agitated, "I do not for a minute imagine — I cannot suppose, indeed, that you are an accomplice — "

"In what, my lord?" asked Amy, somewhat indignantly. I am an accomplice in nothing wrong."

"Be not offended," was Marchmont's hasty response. "You will make allowances for me — you will pity me, when you learn the frightful truth."

"What is it my lord?" she demanded.

"Your mistress, Amy," rejoined Marchmont, now forcing himself to speak in accents of deep, concentrated bitterness, — "your mistress is unfaithful to me."

"No, my lord," replied Amy, firmly and indignantly.

"Ah! I do not blame you for thus thinking so well of her Grace. Good heavens! that such profligacy should be concealed by so much apparent meekness! Alas, it is too true, Amy, or else my eyes must have strangely deceived me. But tell me — for I notice not such things generally what kind of a dress was it that your mistress had on this evening? Was it such a one?" and the duke gave some explanations.

"Yes, my lord; that was certainly the dress," responded Amy Sutton. "But it is impossible — "

"I tell you it is but too true," ejaculated the duke, in a tone of passionate vehemence. "I was proceeding to my own chamber, the taper accidentally went out, at that moment I heard light footsteps proceeding with unmistakable stealthiness along the passage. A suspicion that there was something wrong induced me to hide in a doorway and watch — "

"And then, my lord?" said Amy Sutton.

"And then I beheld your mistress proceed along that corridor, and she entered — good heavens! that I should have harboured such a villain — she entered, I tell you, the miscreant Stanhope's chamber."

Naturally cold and unexcitable though Amy Sutton was, she could not help being startled by this intelligence, and when she gazed into the duke's countenance — on which the starlight beamed through the window — she thought she read in his looks, which seemed wild and haggard, the fullest confirmation of the tale. Nevertheless, she said, after a few minutes' silence, "It must be a mistake, my lord. Some other female — "

"But the dress, Amy? How could I possibly be mistaken? The light pouring in through the casement at the end of the corridor showed me the dress. It is true that your mistress seemed to have a veil upon her head — Does she possess a black veil? "

"Yes, my lord, several," responded Amy.

"Well, then, she had a veil upon her head," continued the duke, still speaking as if he were immensely troubled. "Alas, there cannot be a doubt of it. And now I recollect a thousand little things which have hitherto appeared trivial, — a thousand little circumstances which only now assume an air of importance. Vainly have I invited Stanhope to ride out with me, to go hunting or shooting. No, he has always had his excuses; he preferred remaining in the drawing-room — Oh, I shall go mad."

The duke paced to and fro in the apartment, with an agitation so well feigned, that Amy Sutton, shrewd though she were, could not for an instant suppose it to be a mere detestable hypocrisy. She, however, lost none of her habitual coolness, and stepping up to the duke, who accordingly stopped short in his apparently agitated walk, she said, "Nothing is more easy, my lord, than to clear up this matter at once."

"To be sure," he ejaculated, as if suddenly recalled to a sense of what he ought to do, " and that was my motive in fetching you from your room. Go, Amy, to her Grace's apartment. If you should happen to find her there — and God send that you may! — you can easily invent some excuse for the intrusion," but Marchmont perfectly well knew that Amy Sutton was not a person to undertake any such mission, or else he would have been careful to go upon some other tack.

"No, my lord," she at once said in a firm and peremptory manner, "I will not run the risk of being blamed for an impertinent intrusion. It is for your lordship to go to your wife's apartment."

"No, no, Amy," he said, with the air of one who was distracted, "I am not sufficiently the master of my own actions. But we will watch — Yes, that will be the better plan. We will watch in the passage — we will see who it is that issues forth from Stanhope's chamber. I may have wrongly described the dress, but you will be enabled to tell me. Besides, as I have made you my confidante in this most deplorable as well as most delicate business, you must remain with me to keep such watch." "I will, my lord," answered the young woman, "for I cannot help thinking there must be some terrible mistake. But supposing it should be as your Grace fears, you will pardon me for advising that you take no precipitate step?"

"Amy, I am in that state of mind," ejaculated Marchmont, "when any advice is most welcome — most useful. Yours shall be followed, and I thank you for it. Come; we will watch at this door. Even if we stay for hours we will watch."

Marchmont and Amy Sutton accordingly posted themselves at the door of the room where this conversation had taken place. They kept the door ajar in such a manner that they could both look forth into the corridor, and thus in a profound silence did about twenty minutes pass away. Then a door was heard to open gently at a little distance, the duke nudged his companion as if in an excited manner, and she murmured, "Hush!" in the lowest possible tone.

Footsteps were heard stealing along the corridor, then the rustling of a dress, and in about a minute a figure passed with apparent cautiousness along. Of course the reader understands full well that this was none other than Lettice Rodney, who was acting in accordance with the instructions she had received from the duke. The black veil was over her head in such a manner as to conceal her hair and shade her features, but there was quite sufficient light in the passage for Amy to recognize the dress, and when the figure had passed, she retreated a few steps into the room.

"Now, Amy," murmured the duke, in a deep, hollow voice, as he also quitted the door and closed it, "what say you?"

"I am afraid, my lord, that there can be no doubt of it," she responded. "But is your Grace sure that you beheld my mistress enter Mr. Stanhope's room?"

"Can I doubt my own eyes?" asked the duke, "and does not that stealthiness of proceeding which you have just witnessed, — does it not, I say, confirm all I have told you?"

"And now what will your Grace do?" inquired Amy, who was indeed all but convinced that the mistress whom she had hitherto believed the very pattern of virtue, purity, and frankness was the personification of profligacy, viciousness, and hypocrisy.

"What will I do?" cried the duke. "What in Heaven's

name can I do?" he asked, with the air of one who was bewildered and distracted. "It is true that for some time past her Grace and myself have not been on the very best terms together, and I dare say that I have been looked upon as a cruel and hard-hearted husband who ill-treated his wife. But if the world only knew the infirmities of her temper— However, I need not trouble you with such explanations. You ask me what I will do, and you have counselled me to take no precipitate step — "

"And this advice, my lord, I respectfully but earnestly venture to repeat," said Amy Sutton.

"It shall be followed, — rest assured that it shall be followed," responded the duke. "I will create no disturbance; whatever is to be done shall be performed in a suitable and becoming manner. A divorce, — this is the only course."

"And yet, my lord," said Amy, "there is still the possibility of some mistake, for remember that I have not seen her Grace issue from Mr. Stanhope's chamber."

"True," ejaculated the duke, as if now struck by the fact for the first time. "I will do nothing rashly. I will think over it. Do you return to your own room. I need not enjoin you to keep the dreadful affair secret until secrecy becomes no longer possible. You are prudent and discreet. Ah! you advised me kindly, and kindness under such circumstances must be rewarded. Take this purse, and remember, Amy, not a look nor a syllable to your mistress to-morrow to show that she is suspected. And now good night."

"Accept my thanks, my lord," said the lady's-maid, as she clutched the purse and her ear caught the chink of gold. "Good night."

She stole softly back to her own chamber, and a few minutes afterward the Duke of Marchmont, in an equally stealthy manner, went down the private staircase, and rejoined Lettice, who had found her way to the little room to which she was first introduced, and where a light had been left burning.

"Everything goes well," said Marchmont, with a look of triumph, as he poured her out another glass of champagne. "On Monday night you must repeat the performance. I will manage to run down to you between eight and nine o'clock, and tell you which particular dress you are to put on. And now farewell. I see that the business will be brought to a termination much more speedily than I had even dared hope or anticipate at first, and in a few days you will be enabled to return to London."

Lettice took her departure, and the Duke of Marchmont stole up to his own chamber, chuckling at the progress that was already made in the vile conspiracy against his innocent wife.

CHAPTER II

THE POND

According to the plan which he had in view, the Duke of Marchmont observed on the Monday evening what particular dress Lavinia wore, and he was inwardly delighted by the recollection that there was a duplicate thereof in the possession of Lettice at the farmhouse. At about nine o'clock on this evening of which we are now writing, he rose from his chair in the drawing-room, where he was seated with the duchess and the Honourable Wilson Stanhope, and complaining of a dreadful headache, said he should take ε ramble through the grounds with the hope of dispelling it. But on issuing forth from the mansion, he made the best of his way to the farmhouse, gave Lettice the requisite information with regard to the particular dress she was to put on, and then began to retrace his steps homeward.

The evening was very different from that of the Saturday when Lettice took her first trip on her nefarious mission to Oaklands. It was indeed just such an evening as that on which Christian had accompanied the duke, to carry the box to the farmhouse. It was dark and windy, and Marchmont drew his cloak more closely around him as he had to breast that gusty wind on his way back to the mansion. On nearing the pond, the surface of which gave forth a feeble shimmering light, he quickened his pace, but all in a moment he stopped short, and staggered as if about to fall, on beholding a dark form standing on the very spot where he had seen his murdered uncle's corpse on that memorable morning when the foul deed was first discovered by Purvis and Leachley. Yes, unmistakably that form was there, beyond all possibility of doubt it stood upon that spot, motionless as if it were a statue. The Duke of Marchmont stopped

short, we say, and then staggered back a pace or two. A faintness came over him; he passed his hand over his eyes, he looked again: the form was no longer there, but he fancied that he caught a last glimpse of it as it moved farther around the pond, where it either melted into thin air, or was else lost in the deep black shade of the hedge and of the huge trunks of the trees.

"It was nothing, - mere imagination," said Marchmont to himself, now with an almost superhuman effort recovering his self-possession, but he nevertheless hurried along, throwing quick, furtive looks over his shoulder, and he felt not so strong in the conviction that it was really nothing as he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was. Indeed, for a few minutes he was almost staggered in his guilty design with regard to his wife. But when once he entered upon the grounds of Oaklands, he felt more courageous, more strong in his purposes of evil. The influence of the occurrence at the pond had worn off, for his mind was naturally of an iron hardihood, and even if a veritable shape from the dead had confronted him face to face, and laid its cold hand upon him, he was not the man to be deterred from any object which he had taken so much trouble to accomplish. And he endeavoured to confirm himself in his treacherous intents by reflecting that if a divorce were procured in respect to Lavinia, he might in due time conduct another bride to the altar, issue might spring from such new alliance, and the proud title which he bore would not either perish with him, or descend upon some claimant who might rise up from a lower grade of society. And then, too, he hated his wife; her modest virtues and unassuming excellences were in reality gall and wormwood to his evildisposed heart. In short, he had many motives for ridding himself of her.

"Yes, it was all imagination," he said to himself, " and I was a fool for hesitating in my purpose even for a single moment," with which reflection he reëntered the mansion.

Lettice set off from the farmhouse at about eleven o'clock, and though the night was so dark and tempestuous, she experienced no circumstance to renew the alarm which she had felt on the previous occasion. She reached the private door of the mansion at half-past eleven, and was admitted by the duke in the same way as before. A glass of champagne was at hand to cheer and warm her; the cloak and the bonnet were put off, the veil was adjusted over her head, and she was conducted by Marchmont to Mr. Stanhope's chamber.

A few minutes afterward the duke tapped at the door of Amy Sutton's room, and the lady's-maid - who had been prepared for such a summons, if circumstances should arise to render it expedient -- came forth at once, she not having begun to disapparel herself. Silently did she follow his Grace down the stairs, and he led her to the close vicinity of Mr. Stanhope's chamber. Concealing themselves in a place which appeared the most convenient for the purpose of watching, they remained motionless and silent for some while. At length the door of that chamber opened, and Lettice Rodney stole forth, purposely lingering, and appearing to be listening attentively, just within the sphere of light which glimmered forth from the interior of the room. For inasmuch as no stars nor moon were shining on this particular night, it would have been impossible for Amy Sutton to distinguish the dress worn by Lettice, if this plan had not been adopted. Thus the door was left open, and for a few moments did Lettice linger near it, in pursuance of instructions previously given to her by the duke. She passed on, Stanhope closed the door of his chamber, and at the expiration of a minute, the duke said to Amy, in a low, deep whisper, "What think you now?"

"It is impossible, my lord, to disbelieve one's own eyes," answered the lady's-maid.

"Impossible indeed," rejoined Marchmont. "Hasten you up to your own chamber, keep silence as heretofore, and here is a further proof of my liberality."

Amy accepted the gold which was thrust into her hand, and she retraced her way to her room, while Marchmont, at the expiration of a brief interval, descended to rejoin Lettice, who shortly afterward issued forth from the private door of the mansion.

The darkness had deepened with the presence of midnight, and the wind had grown more tempestuous. Lettice Rodney drew her capacious mantle as closely around her as she could, and pressing on through the grounds, she entered upon the road. The moaning of the wind carried superstitious feelings into her soul. She felt that she had been

assisting at a very criminal proceeding, for she comprehended full well that the ruin of an innocent lady was in contemplation. The effects of the champagne cheered her no longer: she was affrighted at the black turpitude wherein she was mixed up, — a turpitude as black as the darkness which surrounded her. It was the first time in her life she had ever experienced feelings so completely remorseful. She struggled against them; she endeavoured to cheer herself with the thought of the reward she had already received and of the further proofs of Marchmont's liberality which she was yet to have, but these reflections failed now as a talisman to expel unpleasant thoughts from her imagination. She wished that she had not entered into this conspiracy. She was not so depraved that if it had been propounded to her all in a moment, she would have plunged headlong into it, but she had been gradually drawn in and enmeshed as it were in its trammels, till she had gone too far to retreat. The pitchy darkness of the night and the mournful moaning of the wind filled her soul with images of terror.

How she wished that she had not to pass the pond, or that it was already passed. How glad she should be, she said to herself, when once more safe in her chamber at the farmhouse. Marchmont had told her that she would not again have to visit Oaklands at night, and this was at least some consolation. But, oh, how she wished that the remainder of the route was accomplished!

It was so dark that she could scarcely see her way, and thus her progress was slow, while ever and anon the wind seemed to be speaking to her in human tones, as if reproaching her for the wickedness wherein she had played a part. And then, too, these sounds — at times when the wind sank somewhat — resembled the moans of murder borne upon the agitated air. Occasionally, too, she fancied that she heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind, and she shuddered at the thought of being seized upon by lurking robbers, - shuddered, too, more deeply still at the reflection that this same road might possibly become the scene of another hideous tragedy, - herself the victim. And ever and anon through the deep darkness, shapes - darker than that darkness — appeared to flit, so that there were moments when she shrank within herself, when she trembled to the very confines of her being, while she felt as if awful horror would

turn her brain. Lavinia, thou wast already avenged somewhat, in the frightful sensations which this guilty creature experienced.

And now she knew by the turning in the road that she was drawing close toward the pond, and her limbs appeared to fail her. Her knees knocked together, her teeth chattered: wildly did she seek with straining eves to penetrate the darkness, and assure herself that there was no unearthly shape standing on that scene of murder. Vividly back to her mind came the incidents of her first night's walk to Oaklands. when twice she fancied she beheld a dark shape, - once disappearing from the midst of the road, and the second time on the opposite side of the hedge. Not for an instant could she now persuade herself that those were mere fancies, as she had hitherto succeeded in doing; they were in her brain with all the awful horror of realities. With a mighty effort she strove to gather up the remnants of her shattered, scattered courage, and she somewhat succeeded as she drew close to the pond. The feeblest possible glimmer rested upon its surface; shudderingly she looked that way to see if any shape of terror intervened to break this glimmering, but there was none. Her courage rose somewhat higher; the pond was passed, she began to breathe more freely, when she became aware that she was not alone, that there was some one by her side. A scream rang wildly forth from her lips, and she dropped as if a bullet had at the instant penetrated her heart.

As Lettice Rodney slowly came back to consciousness, she thought that she was awakening from a hideous, horrible dream, but a sense of awful numbing consternation came slowly and chillingly over her as she gradually became aware of her position. She was by the side of the pond, halfsupported in the arms of some one, and water had been sprinkled upon her countenance.

"You have nothing to fear," said the individual, whose voice sounded low and deep to the ears of the appalled Lettice.

"Who are you? For God's sake tell me who are you!" she cried, starting up in a species of frenzy.

"I am a human being, as you are," was the response, although a guilty conscience may smite you with the dreadful thought that I come from another world." "And what would you with me?" inquired Lettice, all her fears now suddenly flowing into another channel, and suggesting the horrible thought that she was in the hands of a robber and assassin.

"I tell you that you have nothing to fear in the form of violence," answered the individual, who, we may as well observe, was none other than Clement Redcliffe, " but it is necessary that we should have some little conversation together."

"Conversation?" said Lettice, wildly echoing the word, but so bewildered and lost in terror was she as to be at the moment unconscious of what she was saying. "Conversation — here?"

"Yes, here," replied Redcliffe, "for this is a spot where the guilty conscience becomes too deeply appalled not to make such atonement as may be in its power. Compose yourself. I need not apologize for constraining you to linger yet a little while in the bleak night air, — you who hesitate not to face it in order to pursue your path of mischief."

"What mean you?" asked Lettice, almost in a dying tone, for she at once comprehended that allusion was thus made to the nefarious transactions in which she had been engaged.

Her terror was, however, so far abated, that she no longer apprehended violence on the part of him who was thus addressing her, and she endeavoured, through the darkness, to obtain some idea of his features. Indeed, the suspicion had stolen into her mind that his voice was not altogether unfamiliar to her — at least in its accents, though its deep solemn tone was different enough from the hilarious one he had forced himself to assume on the occasion of his visit to Madame Angelique's abode. But the collar of his cloak was drawn so high up over his countenance, and his hat was pulled so much forward, that Lettice was totally unable to discern his features. She saw that he was tall, and upright as a dart as he then held himself, but these circumstances afforded no clue to the establishment of an identity.

"You ask what I mean, and in a few words I will explain myself," said Mr. Redcliffe, still purposely disguising his voice as much as possible, so as to pass undiscovered through the interview. "It has come to my knowledge — it matters not how — that you are engaged in the vilest and most abominable pursuit that a human being could possibly enter upon, short of such a deed as that which has rendered this very spot so awfully memorable. But it is a pursuit which becomes doubly atrocious when adopted by a female against another of her own sex. I am no stranger to the outlines of this most execrable conspiracy. At this very moment you wear beneath that cloak a dress which is the counterpart of one belonging to the Duchess of Marchmont. On Saturday night you paid your first visit to Oaklands. I watched you, I dogged your footsteps, as I have done this night again — "

"Ah!" ejaculated Lettice, as Redcliffe's words explained to her the mystery of that shape which she had seen, and which now after all proved to be a reality, though a reality devoid of the preternatural associations which at one time had seemed to belong thereto. "For Heaven's sake, sir, tell me who you are, and what you mean to do with me? Do not — do not give me up to justice. Do not ruin me. I have been led into it — I have been drawn on," and the wretched creature clasped her hands together in wild, frenzied, shivering anguish.

"To that extent do I believe you," answered Redcliffe, and if you do my bidding, you shall not be handed over to the grasp of justice."

"Oh, a thousand thanks for that assurance," exclaimed Lettice, infinitely relieved. "But your bidding, sir, what is it?"

"Tell me truthfully all that you have done within the walls of yon mansion," continued Redcliffe, "and beware how you attempt to deceive me. Indeed, the endeavour would be vain, for I know too much not to be enabled to discern in a moment whether the things you may relate correspond with and fit into the details wherewith I am already acquainted."

"Oh, believe me, sir, I will tell you truly," exclaimed Lettice. "But you promise — "

"I am not a man who will fly from his pledge," interrupted Redcliffe. "And now proceed."

Lettice Rodney, more and more relieved by Redeliffe's assurances, at once made a full and complete confession of all that she had done, and the details of which are known to the reader. She concluded by an earnest entreaty that Redcliffe would save her as much as possible from exposure, and that he would also shield her against the anger of the Duke of Marchmont.

"I will do you no harm," he responded, " and as for the anger of the Duke of Marchmont, you surely can defy it. We will now walk away from this fearful spot. I am about to accompany you to the door of the farmhouse where you are residing, and you will give me those dresses which were sent from London to serve the most diabolical of purposes. To-morrow, at an early hour, you would do well to leave the neighbourhood, and if the incidents of this night have produced any salutary effect upon your mind, I should counsel you to return not to that gilded den of infamy in London whence you came, but to study how to adopt a better course of life. There is one condition which I must impose, and this is that you mention not to the women at the farmhouse what has occurred between yourself and me, and that you give them no explanation in respect to your motive for surrendering up the dresses. I need scarcely add that you are equally forbidden to communicate with the Duke of Marchmont, because you will not be so mad as to place vourself within the sphere of his vindictive rage."

While he was thus speaking, Clement Redcliffe conducted Lettice away from the vicinage of the pond, and they pursued the remainder of the short distance to the farmhouse in silence. Having passed through the gate, Redcliffe broke that silence, saying, "Have the goodness to make a parcel of the dresses in as compact a form as possible; I do not wish to take them in the box. I shall remain outside. Use despatch, bring them to me yourself, and see that you keep back not an article which originally came in that box. Beware how you deceive me, for my pledge guaranteeing your impunity holds good only so far as you execute my bidding honestly and truthfully."

Lettice promised to act as Mr. Redcliffe enjoined her, and he remained at the gate while she entered the house. In about a quarter of an hour she came forth again, with a bundle which she consigned to him. Again too did she endeavour to catch a glimpse of his countenance, but he was upon his guard in this respect; he did not choose to be recognized, and he felt confident that he was not. Still, however, floated through the mind of Lettice Rodney the suspicion that the accents of his voice were not altogether unknown to her, but she could not for the life of her recollect where they had ever before sounded upon her ear.

"And now farewell," he said, " and may I hope that the incidents of to-night, together with the mercy which is shown you, will have the effect of leading you, Lettice Rodney, into other and better ways."

With these words, Clement Redcliffe hastened from the gate, and was immediately lost to the view of Lettice in the surrounding darkness. She reëntered the dwelling, half-bewildered by all that had occurred, and even doubtful whether she were not in the midst of a dream.

The carrier's van which passed along the road on the following morning at nine o'clock was stopped by Phœbe Norwood, and Lettice Rodney took her place therein, to be conveyed to the nearest town whence there was a coach for London. Whether she purposed to follow Mr. Redeliffe's advice and enter upon a new career, or whether she intended to return to Madame Angelique's, will transpire in a future chapter of this narrative.

CHAPTER III

THE EXPLOSION

At a still earlier hour than that on which the carrier's vap was thus stopped, a note was delivered on that same morning at Oaklands, addressed to Christian Ashton, and the messenger who bore it — a labouring man — immediately departed without waiting to see if there were any response; in doing which he only followed out the instructions he had received, and for the faithful performance of which he had been liberally remunerated. The note was from Mr. Redcliffe, desiring Christian to come to him with the least possible delay.

It was a little after ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day that the Honourable Wilson Stanhope suddenly ordered his valet to pack up his boxes and follow with them as speedily as he could by the first conveyance which could be obtained, and having issued these commands, Mr. Stanhope quitted the mansion on foot. He appeared to be much agitated, and the valet knew that the orders were given immediately after his master had been closeted for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont. The domestics, too, who were lounging in the hall, were struck by Mr. Stanhope's appearance as he rapidly passed out of the mansion, and as he flung a bank-note to the lackey who was nearest, bidding him divide the amount amongst the servants generally. Thus, in a very few minutes, it became known through the house that there was something wrong, though the only one of the domestics who had an insight into the matter was Amy Sutton. She of course comprehended that the crisis had come and that the storm was now on the point of bursting above the head of her mistress. Of Lavinia's guilt she entertained not the slightest doubt; how could she after all

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she had seen and heard? But still, with her habitual caution and cold reserve, she said nothing, — quietly awaiting the moment when she would be called upon to testify to all that had come to her knowledge, or until the tremendous truth (as she supposed it to be) should explode from another quarter.

At the time that the Honourable Wilson Stanhope was taking his departure in the manner just described, Lavinia was engaged in her own private sitting-room adjoining her bedchamber. She was reading a book, and dreaming of no evil. All of a sudden the duke entered the room, and she perceived in a moment that there was something wrong. He had tutored his looks to assume an air of ill-subdued rage, and walking straight up to her as she rose in affright from the sofa, he said, "Madam, you are faithless."

"Good heavens, Hugh! what fearful misconception is this?" cried the startled duchess, becoming pale as death.

"I repeat, madam," responded her husband, sternly and vehemently, "you have violated your duties as a wife, you have dishonoured me."

Now it was that the countenance of the duchess became crimson with indignation, while her whole form trembled violently, and she exclaimed, "No, my lord. Never was accusation more foul — more false."

"Every woman who is thus detected speaks in a similar strain," retorted the duke. "Here, madam, is one proof, and others have likewise come to my knowledge."

"Oh, this is going too far," cried Lavinia, the tears gushing forth from her beautiful blue eyes, and her bosom heaving with convulsive violence.

"The proof, madam, I say," thundered forth the Duke of Marchmont, and he produced a letter, which he hastily unfolded and displayed to her view.

"Whatever that letter may be, I know not," exclaimed the duchess, and raising her clasped hands, she cried, "Heaven is my witness that I am innocent."

"Innocent?" echoed Marchmont, forcing himself to look and to speak as if he were boiling with rage. "What! innocent in the face of such damning evidence as this? Besides, madam, your paramour has admitted his guilt. This letter, intended for your hands, but accidentally dropped by the villain who has dishonoured me — " "Hugh," cried the duchess, almost wild with mingled indignation, frenzy, and despair, "it is a horrible mistake — a frightful error. God is my witness that never by word or thought have I dishonoured you."

"Ah! you dare persist in this impudent denial?" exclaimed the duke. "Why, woman, here is the letter in which your paramour addresses you in the language of love, speaks of the favours you have bestowed upon him, and entreats their renewal."

"Hugh, this is dreadful," murmured the miserable duchess, sinking upon the sofa, covering her face with her hands, and bursting forth into an agony of weeping.

"Oh, there are other proofs yet to come," continued the duke. "Since Saturday night has your frailty been known to me, but I have dissimulated — I have endeavoured to blind myself against my own convictions. Too merciful, perhaps, and too confiding, — or, rather, too slow to be convinced, — I waited for other evidence — and it is here, unmistakable, irrefutable, damning."

As the duke held forth the letter with one hand, he dashed the other against it while he thus spoke with every appearance of infuriate passion. Indeed, though having not the slightest legitimate ground, as the reader well knows, for the present proceeding, he had nevertheless literally lashed himself up into a rage. But he was for a moment somewhat staggered when the duchess — suddenly becoming calm, and acquiring a degree of firmness at which even she herself was astonished — advanced up to him, and said, "I can look you in the face, Hugh, without blushing. This is a matter which cannot and must not be disposed of amidst a torrent of passion. I court and demand the completest investigation. There has been no circumstance in my life to justify so foul a calumny; there has never even been the faintest levity on my part to give colour to such an accusation."

"But this letter?" cried the duke, holding it up before her. "A letter might be found addressed to yourself," responded Lavinia, "and charging you with all conceivable iniquities, but it nevertheless would not prove your guilt."

"I tell you there are other proofs," vociferated Marchmont, and he rang the bell violently.

The duchess resumed her seat, and being now fortified with a calm dignity, as well as being upheld by the consciousness of her own innocence, she serenely awaited the next phase, whatsoever it might be, in this extraordinary drama. Not but that the whole proceeding was intensely painful for her; still she felt certain that the issue must be in her favour, as she was very far from suspecting the dark villainy plotted by her own husband.

As it was the bell of her Grace's private sitting-room which had been rung, it had to be answered by one of her female dependents, and it was Amy Sutton who in a few moments made her appearance. The first glance which the lady'smaid flung upon her mistress and the duke showed her that the explosion had taken place, but she was nevertheless somewhat amazed to perceive the comparatively calm and dignified look which Lavinia wore, and which bespoke outraged innocence far more than conscious guilt.

"Ah! it is you?" said the duke, as Amy entered the room; " and it is fortunate, for you are the very person I at the moment wanted."

Now indeed the duchess gave a half-start of surprise and curiosity, and then her regards settled upon Amy's countenance, to gather thence if possible what part she was about to play in the present proceedings. Pure-minded and kindhearted as the duchess herself was, she revolted against the idea which for an instant struck her that Amy could have been treacherously and wickedly calumniating her, but when she beheld a certain confusion almost amounting to distress in the young woman's look and manner, Lavinia was bewildered what to think.

"Amy Sutton," said the duke, who now thought fit to speak in a more solemn and subdued tone than he had hitherto adopted, "I am well aware that it is unpleasant, and indeed afflicting for you — "

"Amy," interrupted the duchess, advancing toward her maid, and looking her fixedly in the face, "if you have an accusation to make against me, it requires no preface. Speak out. Do you know aught to my disparagement? Have you ever — "

"I would much rather not have been called upon," said the young woman, who notwithstanding her constitutional coldness and indifference was really embarrassed, confused, and distressed, "to give utterance to a word — "

"Ah! then you do know what is going on," exclaimed the

duchess. "But speak. What have you to say? Hesitate not, fear not, but speak, I command you."

"Would it not be better," inquired Amy, turning her troubled looks from one to the other, " if your Grace were to throw yourself upon his lordship's mercy — "

"Amy, this is an insult," cried Lavinia, with all the dignity but distress of outraged innocence. "There is some horrible misconception. Proclaim it at once, that I may speedily refute it."

"Alas, madam," said the young woman, who was amazed at the confidence with which the duchess spoke, but yet could not do otherwise than attribute it to a bold hardihood, "appearances are indeed so much against your Grace — "

"And those appearances?" demanded Lavinia, with mingled imperiousness and vehemence, so that the usually mild, gentle, and soft-speaking duchess appeared quite another being in the eyes of her dependent.

"Speak out, Amy," cried the duke.

"If I must," resumed the lady's-maid, "it is my painful duty to declare that I saw your Grace issue from the chamber of Mr. Stanhope — "

"What?" cried the duchess, the burning blush of indignation and outraged modesty in a moment suffusing her countenance, and then her looks in the space of the next half-dozen seconds indicated all possible varieties and transitions of excited feeling, — astonishment and distress, anger and bewilderment, uncertainty and terror. "You dare say that, Amy? You to be guilty of such dreadful wickedness! It is false, — false as ever the vilest falsehood in this world could be."

"It is true," thundered the duke. "For I myself beheld you with mine own eyes, as Amy herself did."

"I repeat," cried the miserable duchess, now again completely overwhelmed by the astounding nature of the charge, — "I repeat, and I call Heaven to witness that it is false!"

"It is true — too true," vociferated the duke, stamping his foot violently upon the carpet.

"It is false," exclaimed another person, who at this moment threw open the door and appeared upon the scene. It was Christian Ashton.

The guilty Duke of Marchmont was for an instant stag-

gered by the presence of his secretary, and by the bold denial which had issued from his lips. He was seized with perplexity and bewilderment, but quickly recovering his self-possession, he cast a rapid mental glance over whatsoever circumstances he thought there might be that could have induced the young man to proclaim himself the champion of Lavinia's innocence. What was there but the affair of the box? and how could Christian possibly know what that box had contained?

"Begone, sir," cried the duke, fire flashing from his eyes. "How dare you intrude upon our privacy?"

"Because I have a duty to perform," responded our young hero, as he advanced into the room, and Marchmont was now struck by the fact that he carried a large parcel tied up in brown paper.

The reader may conceive the increased amazement of Amy Sutton at the new turn which the matter appeared to be taking, and he may likewise imagine the mingled hope and suspense which Lavinia felt from the same cause. Christian's mien and bearing were quite different from what they were wont to be. The natural gentleness of his looks had altered into a decisiveness which was almost stern; the retiring nature of the mild and unobtrusive youth had given place to the manly firmness of one who had a special part to perform and who was resolved to accomplish it. The duke grew more and more apprehensive; a thousand vague fears racked him; the basis upon which his whole iniquitous proceeding was founded seemed to be crumbling away, while he was still utterly at a loss to conceive from what particular point the disruption was arising.

"I repeat," said Christian, quailing not for a single instant in the presence of his ducal employer, "the words I ere now uttered, that the accusation against the duchess is false, yes, false as the heart of him who invented it."

" Oh, yes, it is false," cried Lavinia; "Heaven knows it is false. But accuse not my husband, Mr. Ashton. He himself must have been cruelly deceived by circumstances."

"I wish I was enabled to confirm your Grace's assurance," responded our young hero, "but it is not in my power to do so. My lord, everything is known, and shall be boldly proclaimed if you provoke such an exposure. Suffer me to whisper one word in your ear." "This is too impudent," ejaculated the duke, goaded almost to frenzy, and not knowing how to act.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, what have you said?" cried the duchess, all the sources of her affliction becoming turned into a new channel. "It is impossible his Grace could have done this wilfully. Oh, no! you wrong him; you wrong him, I can assure you."

"I see that it becomes necessary for me to speak out," said Christian, with the same firmness of look, tone, and manner as before. "My lord, Lettice Rodney has confessed everything, and here are proofs — "

"Enough," exclaimed the duke, bounding forward to seize upon the parcel whence our young hero had just torn off the wrapper.

"Good heavens!" cried the duchess. "My own dresses."

"Ah!" said Amy Sutton, astounded at what she also thus beheld.

"No," cried Christian, "they are not your Grace's dresses, but they are counterparts — duplicates — the use and purport of which his lordship can but too well explain."

Amy Sutton hurried from the room, forgetting to close the door behind her, and the duke, clutching Christian by the arm, whispered to him in a hoarse voice, "Not another word, I conjure you." Then he instantaneously added, aloud, "There is something extraordinary in all this, but it shall be investigated. Of course I at once admit — "

"What your Grace cannot deny, and never ought to have impugned," interrupted Christian boldly; "her Grace's innocence."

"For Heaven's sake," said the duchess, who had hastened to close the door, of which opportunity her husband had availed himself to whisper that urgent adjuration in Christian's ear, — "for Heaven's sake let this dreadful transaction be calmly and dispassionately explained!"

"Yes," cried Amy Sutton, who now burst back again into the room, with a degree of excitement she had never before in her life displayed, "your Grace's dresses are safe in your own toilet-chamber. But these — the very same, or at least the closest resemblance," and she hastily inspected the contents of the parcel which Christian had thrown upon the table.

"Now hear me," said the Duke of Marchmont, whose

countenance was deadly pale, and whose entire manner indicated the profoundest trouble of soul, notwithstanding the almost preterhuman efforts which he made to appear composed. "Solemnly in your presence, Christian Ashton, and in yours also, Amy Sutton, do I recognize and proclaim her Grace's innocence. Will this suffice? For a thousand reasons this affair must go no farther."

" It is for her Grace to decide," said our hero.

The unfortunate duchess could no longer blind her eyes to the fact that her own husband was at the bottom of a foul conspiracy of which she was to have been made the victim, but still she wished to spare him as much as possible, and she therefore unhesitatingly exclaimed, "Oh, no, let not the matter progress farther."

"But I also must be consulted in this," said Amy Sutton, with that firmness which was characteristic of her. "I am dependent on my character for my bread," she continued, fixing her eyes upon the duke, "and not for a moment must it be thought that I voluntarily or wilfully bore false evidence against her ladyship."

"I know enough of the circumstances," interposed Christian, "to be enabled to state that it is quite possible you have been grossly deceived, and that you fancied you beheld her Grace on particular occasions when it was in reality another. And now the uses to which these dresses have been put are perhaps fully understood — "

"Oh, enough! enough!" cried poor Lavinia, her looks recoiling from the haggard, ghastly, guilt-stricken countenance of her husband.

"Ah, I recollect," suddenly exclaimed Amy, as a thought struck her. "That veil which was worn over the head of her whom your Grace pointed out," and she addressed herself to the duke. "My lord, it was infamous of you."

"For my sake, let no exposure take place," murmured the duchess, with appealing looks directed alike toward Amy and our hero. "I thank you, Mr. Ashton, for your kindness; your noble conduct never can be forgotten by me. And you, Amy, oh, I do indeed acquit you of any evil intention. But I implore and beseech that nothing of all this shall be allowed to transpire. His Grace will treat me kindly in future. I forgive him, — from the bottom of my heart I forgive him. Tell me, Hugh, that henceforth — " And drawing her husband aside, she concluded in a whisper her hurried prayer that his behaviour would change toward her, and in the future compensate for the best.

"It will indeed be better that this should go no farther," said Christian, availing himself of the opportunity thus to speak aside to Amy Sutton. "It is for the sake of the duchess that I recommend secrecy. You stand acquitted of all wilful complicity in the odious affair. If there be exposure, a separation becomes inevitable between the duke and his wife, and under such circumstances it is always unfortunate woman who suffers most."

"For my part," responded Amy, "I have no wish to bring about such exposure, now that my own character is cleared."

Scarcely had the young woman thus spoken, when Marchmont, accosting Christian, said, in an abrupt manner, "Come with me."

"Yes, go with his Grace," exclaimed the duchess, "but again accept my most heartfelt gratitude," and she proffered the youth her hand, which he respectfully took.

He then followed Marchmont from the room, Amy Sutton remaining with her mistress. The duke led the way to another apartment, and the moment they entered it, he said to Christian, "You will keep silence in respect to this transaction?"

"It was not even my intention to proclaim so much," answered our here, "if your lordship had suffered me to breathe a few words in your ear, which would have convinced you that everything was discovered."

"And how was it discovered?" inquired the duke, quickly. "Did you go and seek Lettice Rodney? Did Madame Angelique betray anything when you called upon her to fetch the box?"

"My lord, it is useless thus to question me," answered Christian; "I am resolved to give no explanations. Suffice it for your Grace to have received unmistakable evidence that everything is completely known to me. And now — "

"But you must tell me," cried Marchimont, vehemently. "I cannot remain in this state of doubt and uncertainty; I must know where the treachery has been."

"Treachery, my lord," and Christian's tone expressed a

withering sarcasm. "But I repeat, it is useless for your Grace to question me; I will explain nothing."

"One word?" said the bewildered duke; "only one word, I beseech you? Was it Stanhope himself — "

"No, my lord. I will tell you this much, that the villain Mr. Stanhope went away in ignorance of all that was to take place. But beyond this I shall say nothing more. I am now about to take my departure, and I request from your Grace a certificate of good conduct."

But Marchmont heard not the youth's last words; he had begun to pace the apartment in an agitated manner. The mystery which enveloped Christian's proceedings troubled his guilty mind. From what source could the exposure of the plot have possibly come first of all? How was it that Lettice Rodney had been either persuaded or forced to surrender up the dresses? These were the questions which the duke asked himself, and the solution of which he burned to arrive at.

"My lord," said our hero, "under existing circumstances I cannot remain another hour in your Grace's employment. But inasmuch as I do not wish to stand the chance of your Grace subsequently speaking ill of me behind my back, I repeat my request for a certificate of good conduct."

"Ah, a certificate of good conduct?" and for a moment Marchmont was inclined to treat the demand with scornful contempt; but a second thought restrained him, for he felt that his character was so completely at the mercy of the young man, he dared not convert him into an open and avowed enemy.

Biting his lip, to keep down the feelings of rage and hate, and the threats of vengeance, which were seeking a vent, Marchmont placed himself at a table where there were writing materials, and penned a few lines favourable to the character and qualifications of Christian Ashton. It cost him a painful effort indeed to complete the task, brief though it were; and when he had finished it, he could not help tossing the paper across the table with an ungraciousness that was almost brutal. But Christian, with a becoming dignity, which on the part of the obscure and humble youth contrasted strongly with the mean, petty, and ill-concealed spite of the great and powerful nobleman, took up the document, read it, deliberately folded it, and placed it in his pocket. Then, with a slight and distant bow, he was on the point of quitting the room, when Marchmont exclaimed, " Ah, by the bye, there is a trifle of salary due to you for the short time you have been with me — "

But as he spoke in a supercilious tone which he could not possibly control, so strong were his infuriate feelings against the young man, the latter waited to hear no more, but left the apartment. Ascending to his chamber, he speedily packed up his trunk, and then hastened to take leave of the steward, whom he found in his own room.

"What, you are going, Mr. Ashton?" said Purvis, seized with astonishment at the intelligence. "I hope nothing unpleasant has occurred?"

"You can judge for yourself, my good friend," responded Christian, "whether I am discharged through any misconduct of my own," and he displayed the certificate.

Purvis read it, and as he gave it back with a brightening look, he said, "Well, Mr. Ashton, though I am sorry you are going to leave us, yet, on the other hand, I am glad it is under no circumstances which may prejudice your future prospects. Farewell, my best wishes attend you. I had hoped that we should have enjoyed many a pleasant ramble and chat together, but it seems otherwise destined. Farewell."

The old man shook Christian's hand warmly again and again ere he suffered him to depart. Our young hero was issuing from the mansion, when he was accosted by Amy, who drew him aside and said, "Are you going to leave?"

"Yes, immediately," was the reply.

"Ah! her Grace thought that it would be so," resumed Amy. "But is it of your own accord?"

"Entirely," answered Christian. "After everything that has occurred, I could not possibly remain in the duke's service. It is very different for you, inasmuch as you are attached to her Grace."

"The duchess desired me to present you with this," said Amy, "hoping that you will not refuse to accept it as a token of her gratitude," and she placed a heavy purse in our hero's hand.

"Oh, no! no!" exclaimed Christian. "Such a service as I was enabled to render her Grace is sufficiently repaid by the grateful feeling it engenders, and is not to be remunerated by gold. Convey my sincerest thanks to her Grace, and God grant that she may be happy. Farewell, Amy."

Thus speaking, Christian hurried away from the mansion, one of the inferior male domestics carrying his box for him as far as the porter's lodge, where he left it with the intimation that he would send some one in the course of the day to fetch it.

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CHAPTER IV

THE SCHOOLMASTER

CHRISTIAN proceeded straight to the lonely cottage where Mr. Redcliffe had taken up his temporary quarters, and where he found that gentleman awaiting his return. He communicated everything that had occurred at Oaklands, and Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention.

"You have acted precisely in accordance with my instructions," observed Redcliffe, when Christian had brought his narrative to a conclusion, " and your own conduct in the matter deserves the utmost praise. You have lost your situation, and another must be procured for you. Cheerfully would I have you henceforth to live altogether with me, my young friend, but there are several reasons which compel me to deny myself that pleasure, and in respect to them will I deal frankly with you. In the first place, I could give you no employment, and idleness for a youth of your age, even with your excellent principles and with your naturally good disposition, would be very disadvantageous - I might almost say pernicious. Besides, you yourself, with such principles and with such a disposition, would, I am sure, infinitely prefer to eat the bread of your own honest industry than to subsist upon the resources of another. In the second place, I myself, Christian, am no companion for one of your age. I am a lonely and unhappy man, my habits are peculiar; there are times when I smart under the sense of such wrongs - But I will not inflict aught of all this upon you. Suffice it to say that I have certain aims to work out, which do not altogether leave me the master of my own time nor of my own actions. And then, too, solitude is the necessary portion of such a one as I am, and I dare not have it broken by the companionship of another. Therefore, my young friend,

we must part again, and you must go forth into the world to pursue your own career. That certificate of character which you have obtained, together with your manners, your appearance, and your qualifications, will enable you speedily to procure another post similar to that which you have this day resigned. You will return to London without delay; I know that you are anxious to see your sister. Take a respectable lodging until you obtain fresh employment. Here are ample funds for your immediate wants. But do not think, Christian, that in thus parting from you, I cease to be your friend or your well-wisher. No, I shall ever be anxious concerning you. You must visit me occasionally, and whenever you need the assistance or the counsel of friendship, be sure to come to me. My purse shall always be open to you, for I am well aware that you will never abuse the license I thus give you. And fail not to acquaint me with the place of your abode at all times, so that if you come not to me as often as I could wish. I may know whither to send an invitation."

Mr. Redcliffe placed a purse containing fifty guineas in Christian's hand, and the old man of the cottage, who had been sent to the porter's lodge to fetch the trunk, having by this time returned, our hero took a grateful leave of Mr. Redcliffe and departed. He proceeded to a neighbouring village. the old man following with the trunk; and there he was presently taken up by a stage-coach proceeding to London. On arriving in the metropolis, Christian left his luggage at the coach-office and hastened away to see his sister. The meeting between the twins was of characteristic warmth and affection, although they had only been a week separated. Christian acquainted his sister with all that had occurred at Oaklands, and the pure, artless mind of the young girl was shocked at the infamous conduct of the Duke of Marchmont. Her brother, however, enjoined her not to repeat a syllable of the tale to Lady Octavian Meredith, and after an agreeable hour or two spent together, he took his departure.

It was now late in the evening, and Christian determined to pass the night at a hotel and look out the next morning for a lodging, his purpose being to reside in such temporary quarters until he could obtain another situation through the medium of advertisements inserted in the daily newspapers. Accordingly, after breakfast in the morning, our young hero issued forth, and after wandering some little while amongst the streets at the West End, he presently found himself threading that one in which dwelt Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk. Was it accident that brought Christian thither, or was it a scarcely comprehended and unacknowledged feeling of interest and of love on behalf of the young creature of ravishing beauty whom ten days back he had seen for a few minutes at that house? The reader's imagination can so easily solve the query which we have put, that it becomes unnecessary for us to explain it in set and formal terms. But on passing the house, and casting a look up at the windows, how sudden a thrill galvanized our hero when he perceived a card announcing apartments to let!

Christian stopped short, and looked at the card again. Yes, there were the words, in a bold, round, schoolmaster's hand, embellished with all manner of flourishes and calligraphic illustrations. Christian was more than halfinclined to knock at the door, but a sudden sensation of timidity restrained him, and he passed slowly along the street. But he did not leave the street; no, he turned, retraced his way toward the house, looked at the card again, and was again about to knock at the door, when the thought struck him that the apartments might be, if not exactly above his means, at least above the sum which he was justified in paying for a lodging, and that therefore if he did make an inquiry and then decline, it might be set down to impertinent curiosity or else as an excuse to obtain a glimpse of the lovely Miss Vincent. This latter reflection, as it swept through Christian's mind, sent all the blood up into his countenance, for he felt as bashful as the very young girl whose image was uppermost in his thoughts. So again he passed on, but this time to the other extremity of the street, and yet he could not tear himself, away from it.

"After all," he thought, "there is no harm in making the inquiry," and he retraced his way.

At the same moment that his vision was once more turned upon the card in the ground floor window, it encountered the vixenish eyes of Mrs. Chubb, who was looking over it. He bowed; she did not seem to recognize him, nor to comprehend whether the salutation were really meant for herself or not. But now, with a sudden access of intrepidity, Christian ascended the steps and knocked boldly at the front door. Mrs. Chubb's vixenish face disappeared from the window, and her lean, gawky form instantaneously appeared at the door. She was dressed in a faded and dirty cotton gown, with an old shawl thrown over her shoulders, and a rusty black crape cap, with dingy and crumpled red ribbons, upon her head. For a moment she surveyed our hero with the air of one who strives to bring forth a reminiscence from dimness and obscurity, and then suddenly recollecting him, she said, with a very sour look, "Oh, you are the young gentleman who brought my husband home t'other night when he was the wuss for liquor? I suppose you've come to call upon him, but he's engaged in school."

"No," responded Christian; "I took the liberty of knocking at your door in consequence of seeing that card in the window."

"Ah! that's different," said Mrs. Chubb, and her looks suddenly became different also. "If you're in want of decent and respectable lodgings, sir, you can have 'em here — leastways if we suit each other. It's on'y a small parlour and bedroom, which is fifteen shillings a week with attendance."

Christian had fifty pounds in his pocket, and he thought to himself that in a week, or a fortnight at the outside, he might obtain another situation, so that it would not be unreasonable on his part to take Mrs. Chubb's lodging. He walked in, and she showed him the parlour of which she had spoken, and which was indeed small enough, it being a third room on the ground floor, the one little window of which looked into the vard, commanding a view of the water-butt and the dust-hole, a pail and a mop, together with two specimens of animated nature, one being in the shape of a cat that was sitting blinking on the wall, and the other in the form of a slatternly servant-girl who was peeling potatoes, and whose wages might, at the first guess, be put down at eighteenpence a week. The bedchamber was above this little parlour, and of corresponding size. The rooms were however cleanly enough, and Christian speedily intimated his desire to become their occupant. He took out his purse to pay the rent in advance, but Mrs. Chubb, who was a woman that expressed her thoughts without the slightest circumlocution or disguise, declared "that she never took nobody without a reference; for though a lodger might be

able to pay money, it was not always a proof of respectability.

Thereupon our hero immediately mentioned the name of Mrs. Macaulay, upon hearing which Mrs. Chubb was reminded that Christian was a guest at that lady's house on the memorable night when he conducted her husband home, and this was a sufficient guarantee that he must be well known to Mrs. Macaulay aforesaid.

"Well," she observed, "the reference will do, sir; indeed, there is no call whatsomever to take it. You can pay the week in advance, and if you come this way, Mr. Chubb will give you a receipt."

Christian accordingly followed Mrs. Chubb across the yard, and she opened the door of the schoolroom, - the boys' entrance to which was in the next street. It was a small. ill-ventilated place, excessively dirty, and the atmosphere so close and unpleasantly hot that Christian stopped short on the threshold. There a most edifying sight burst upon his view. At a desk sat Mr. Chubb, in an old dressing-gown, the pattern of which, before it was faded and soiled, had been a blue ground with black stripes; his feet were thrust into slippers, down at the heels; and as he was in the middle of hearing a class, he held a swinging cane in his right hand. Suspended to a nail in the wall against which he sat, a huge birch had a most ominous appearance, - enough to provoke a tingling sensation on the part of the urchins who contemplated it. There might be altogether about forty scholars packed in this stifling place, and averaging from five to ten vears of age.

When the door opened, Mr. Chubb looked slowly and solemnly toward it, for he always maintained a very grave and dignified bearing in the presence of his scholars, never giving way to any excitement except when he used the cane or applied the birch, and these he inflicted in the manner in which rowers are sometimes urged by the steersmen to "give way"—" namely with a will." Mr. Chubb, therefore, preserving his wonted solemnity, merely bestowed a bow upon Christian, and went on hearing the class. Mrs. Chubb did not immediately interrupt him, for she was doubtless anxious to impress our young hero with the wonderful discipline which prevailed in the school, the admirable educational qualifications possessed by her husband, and the marvellous brilliancy of the intellects which were expanding under such luminous tuition.

"It's the third class he's a-hearin' of," whispered Mrs. Chubb to Christian, " and they're all little 'uns, you see."

Christian looked as if he thought the sight a very interesting one. Perhaps there was the dimly floating idea in his mind of conciliating Mrs. Chubb, so as to be invited into her own parlour, where he might expect to see the beautiful Miss Vincent.

"Now then, Bill Shadbolt," said Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell pig?"

" P - i - double g, please sir," was the response.

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, how do you describe it?"

"A hanimal, please sir."

"Very good. Next boy, Ben Tidleywink — what's a pig, biped or quadrooped?"

"Biped, please, sir."

"No, he ain't," said Mr. Chubb, with an awful frown and a sterner clutching of the cane, which perhaps he would have used but for Christian's presence. "Guess again."

" Oh, quadrooped, sir."

"To be sure. Very good, boy. Quadrooped, 'cause why he walks on four legs and has got a tail. Cut off his tail and he loses his dignity. It's just the same as taking a cocked hat and laced cloak away from a beadle; he sinks down into the commonest humanity. Now then, third boy, George Snuffkin. What have you got to tell me about a pig?"

"Hamphiberous, please sir."

"Very good. And why is he amphiberous?"

"'Cause why, sir, he lives on solids and fluids."

"To be sure, meal and water makes his wash. But what else is he?"

"Graminivorous, please sir," was George Snuffkin's intelligent answer.

"And so he is. But explain."

"'Cause why, sir, he don't mind having green stuff and wegetables in his wash."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, take a lesson, boys, from the pig, and tutor your appetites to eat whatsomever comes in your way. That's the example I like to set the young idear when I teach it how to shoot." Christian thought, as he recollected Mrs. Macaulay's party, that Mr. Chubb might have added, without the slightest exaggeration, that he could drink likewise anything that came in his way, but of course he gave not verbal utterance to the reflection.

"Now then, Joe Brinskby," continued Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell cat?"

"C-a - double t, please sir," was the boy's response.

" Of what genius is the cat?" inquired Mr. Chubb.

"The mouser genius, please sir."

"Very good. And what is there pecooliar about that beautiful domestic animal?"

"They can see in the dark, sir, — 'cause why, they are full of electricity, which runs up from the tip of the tail to the head and comes out at the eyes."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb, complacently. "Third class may stand down."

And as the boys went back to their seats, the schoolmaster rose from his own, and, gravely shaking hands with Christian, said, "So you have come to give me a call and have a look at the school? You see, Mr. Ashton, I teach these young members of the rising generation nat'ral history along with their spellin'. It kills two birds with one stone, and gives 'em a power of concentrating their idears. It's a good system, and is making its way as fast as steam-ingins and electric tilligrafs."

"I dare say Mr. Ashton is very glad to have an opportunity of seeing the school," said Mrs. Chubb, "but he didn't come for that, all the same. He's took our lodgings; so you just write him out a receipt for the fust week, which he has paid in adwance."

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb; and reseating himself at the desk, he nibbed a pen, held it up to the light to assure himself that it was properly mended, and in a true schoolmaster fashion wrote the receipt in round hand, covering all the spare part of the slip of paper with the most extraordinary flourishes, and winding up the achievement with some curious illustration under his own name, which said illustration might either be taken for the feather end of a quill, or else as an ingenious representation of that very cat's tail along which the electricity had been described as passing. Having leaned back in his seat for a few moments, to admire the general effect of the receipt, Mr. Chubb gravely dried it on his blotting-paper, and handed it to Christian.

"That's the way," he said, pointing with his pen to the writing, "that I teach the boys to make their up-strokes and their down-strokes. But you shall see." Then raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Now then, first class, with your copy-books!"

This command was followed by a bustling about on the part of some dozen of the scholars, and then ensued a rush of the same interesting youths, in cordurovs and pinafores, up to the desk. Mr. Chubb examined the copy-books one after another, passing them as he did so to Christian, and looking very hard in his face to observe the effect produced by these elegant specimens of juvenile calligraphy. Of course Christian admired everything thus submitted to him. and expressed himself so well pleased with Mr. Chubb's scholars that he begged to be allowed to place five shillings in the schoolmaster's hands, to be expended on whatsoever refreshments the juveniles might fancy and which the nearest pastry-cook could supply. It must be again confessed that there was a little artifice in all this, though venial and natural enough: for, as we have before said, the youth was desirous to obtain Mrs. Chubb's good opinion, in the hope that it would facilitate the realization of his desire to see Miss Vincent. Nor was he disappointed, for Mrs. Chubb requested the pleasure of his company to tea in the evening.

He was speedily installed in his lodgings, and having drawn up an advertisement for the situation of private secretary to a nobleman, member of Parliament, or any other person requiring such a functionary, he sallied forth to take it to the office of the *Times*. Returning home again, he dined; and with some books whiled away the hours until six in the evening, when, having studied his toilet with an unusual degree of nicety, he repaired to Mrs. Chubb's parlour. As Christian opened the door, he could scarcely conceal the joy which thrilled through him on beholding the lovely creature who had inspired him with so deep an interest.

Isabella Vincent was, as we have previously said, sixteen years of age, and it was no wonder that her exquisite beauty should have made an impression upon the heart of Christian Ashton. She was tall and slender, with a sylphid symmetry of shape that was at once gracile and elegant; for hers was that sweet age when, with perhaps a slight precocity, the delicate outlines of girlhood's form were softly rounding and gently developing into the more flowing ones of approaching womanhood. All these outlines indicated a justness of proportions which, while constituting her form the rarest model of expanding beauty, seemed to fulfil the idea which the sculptors of old sought to express and work out in their Parian effigies. Its willowy elasticity and youthful grace, its slenderness of waist and softly budding contours of bust, its sloping shoulders and gently arching neck, its rounded arms and its straightness of limbs, its exquisitely modelled hands and sculptured perfection of ankles and of feet, -all combined to render Isabella's form the very incarnation of those rules of art which swaved the chisel or the pencil of the greatest masters when seeking to portray woman, in her loveliest form, through the medium of the marble or of the canvas.

As for her countenance, to gaze thereon, it was not so much the perfect oval of that sweet face, nor the faultless regularity of the features, nor the deep blue eves, so large and clear, with their thickly fringed lids, nor the classically pencilled brows, set upon the opals of the stainless forehead, nor the well-cut lips of coral redness, nor the teeth of Orient pearls which shone between, nor the transparency of the complexion, with the softest tint of the rose upon the cheeks, nor the rich abundance of glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders, - it was not all this assemblage of charms which would most ravish and enchant the mind of the observer. For there was something in the sweet pensiveness, and the holy melancholy, so to speak, of Isabella's countenance which constituted the pure virginal charm that appealed to the sentiment and not to the sense. and which had to do with the soul as much as with the heart of the beholder, — a charm which no eye could fail to perceive, the influence of which no mind could help acknowledging, and yet which only the imagination could comprehend, inasmuch as no pen can describe it. Indeed, it was what the perfume is to the rose, an essence apart from the beauty which attracts the eye; it was what the halo is to the angel, a light distinct from the heavenly beauty of the form itself. It was the inexpressible charm which makes one think, while gazing on such a face, that the soul itself is unveiling its own loveliness and looking out in a soft, sweet pensiveness.

Christian Ashton, with his refined intelligence, and with his feelings of unwarped delicacy, was the very one to appreciate the beauty of such a being as Isabella Vincent. To mere physical charms he would perhaps have remained long insensible: but here was mental and moral beauty, the beauty of the soul, mingling with loveliness of form and features in a manner which he had never seen before, save in respect to his own sweet sister Christina. The love with which Isabella had already inspired him --- though Heaven knows how unconsciously on her part and how as yet incompletely comprehended on his own — was not the mere everyday passion to which the name is so erroneously applied, or which of its own accord usurps the denomination, but it was that love which has something so æsthetic in its nature, so ethereal in its essence, so sublimated in its contexture, that it can be explained in no terms falling short of those which would depict it as the lost Elysium of the soul, the veritable paradise of feeling whose sense died out of the hearts of our first parents at the same time that the spell of their immortality was broken.

Christian could not understand the footing on which Miss Vincent was dwelling beneath the Chubbs' roof. She was treated with more or less respect, especially by Mr. Chubb, who invariably called her "Miss" when he spoke to her; and it was only when Mrs. Chubb was in an ill-humour about anything that she addressed herself in rather irritable terms to the young lady, - as indeed she was wont to do toward any one else who came in her way. Christian did not therefore think that Isabella was living there in the light of a dependent; the only conjecture he could form was that she paid for her board and lodging, though not to an amount which rendered the Chubbs so extremely anxious to keep her that their civility became downright servile. In her manner she was diffident and retiring, but not actually reserved, much less awkward or embarrassed. She spoke but little, yet when she did speak, it was with a mild and ladylike affability. Her voice was singularly sweet and melodious, with a tinge of plaintiveness in its tones; her language was well chosen, her remarks were characterized by intelligence. That she had been well educated was evident, as likewise that she was well bred and well brought up; and all the usages of good society were familiar to her. How came she, then, in her present position? Had she no relatives to take charge of her, no friends of a better order than those in whose care Christian found her? All these were mysteries which he could not penetrate, and concerning which he dared scarcely ask on the next occasion that he found himself alone with either Mr. or Mrs. Chubb.

Four or five days passed, and Christian occasionally met the beautiful Isabella upon the stairs. She always responded to his passing remarks with that mild affability which we have just noticed, but he found no opportunity to lead her into a protracted conversation. She never stirred out of the house except when accompanied by Mrs. Chubb. For the greater part of the day she kept her own chamber. Sometimes she sat in the front parlour down-stairs, and was then, for the most part, occupied in reading or working. Christian felt assured that she was not happy, though she might endeavour to resign herself to her lot. He was also convinced that there must be some strange mystery with regard to this beautiful creature, and he longed to fathom it, - not through any impertinent curiosity, but because he had become so deeply interested in her, so profoundly enamoured of her. She was a lovely myth, and often and often did Christian catch himself sighing; occasionally, too, did a tear trickle down his cheeks as he said to himself, "She is not happy, and it is not given to me to ensure her felicity. Oh, to obtain her confidence, and to be permitted to breathe the language of solace and sympathy in her ears!"

The week was passing away, and Christian had received no answer to his advertisement. He endeavoured to make himself believe that he was sorry for this delay in obtaining another situation, but it was not so easy to arrive with conscientiousness at that belief. Indeed, if the truth be told, we think it must be admitted that Christian was rather glad than otherwise at having an excuse for prolonging his residence beneath the same roof which sheltered the object of his growing love. When he saw his sister he spoke to her about Isabella Vincent, and he asked Christina if she would come and call upon the young lady, provided the latter would consent to receive the visit. Christina, as the reader is aware, was always ready to do anything that lay in her power to serve her brother or to please him, and she cheerfully responded in the affirmative.

"Now," thought Christian to himself, "there will be an opportunity of cultivating a better acquaintance with the charming but mysterious Isabella."

Accordingly, in the afternoon of that very same day on which he had thus spoken to his sister, our young hero proceeded to the Chubbs' parlour at a moment when he knew that Miss Vincent was there alone. He knocked at the door; her sweet voice bade him enter, and it struck him that the soft tint of the rose deepened slightly upon her cheeks when her eyes encountered his own. The usual compliments were exchanged, and then Christian, mustering up all his courage, said to the young lady, "I hope you will not think I am taking a very great liberty — but — but — I have spoken of you to my sister, who lives with Lady Octavian Meredith, — Christina is a sweet, amiable girl, — and if you will grant your assent, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to introduce her to you."

The transitions of Isabella's beautiful countenance expressed a variety of feelings as our hero thus addressed her, and it was the fear of either giving offence, or of proposing something which was unwelcome, that made him hesitate as he had done. For an instant there was gratitude depicted in Isabella's look; then it changed into mournfulness; then she flung a quick glance toward the door, as if fearful that this conversation might be overheard; then she turned her eyes again on Christian with a saddening gaze; and then she bent them downward, and he thought that the faintest, gentlest sound of a subdued sigh was wafted to his ears.

"Christina," he said, hesitatingly and tremulously, "would be rejoiced to visit you and to form your acquaintance."

"I take it as very kindly meant, Mr. Ashton," answered Isabella, whose accents were likewise tremulous, notwithstanding her visible endeavours to speak firmly and to hide whatsoever emotions were struggling in her bosom. "Indeed, I feel grateful — but — but " — and here she again glanced toward the door — "I am not allowed to receive any visits, nor to form any friendships."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Christian, astonished and

indignant, "are you the victim of a tyranny so stern as this?"

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush!" said Isabella, glancing with renewed apprehension toward the door; and then, as if no longer able to restrain the emotions which were agitating within, she burst into tears.

"Good God, that I should have made you weep!" cried Christian; and in the excitement, the confusion, and the hurry of his own thoughts and feelings, he seized her small, fair hand.

It was, however, instantaneously withdrawn — but not in anger; for the beauteous Isabella flung upon him, through the dimness of her tears, a look which eloquently proclaimed that she comprehended all his generous sympathy and was grateful for it. Then hastily wiping away those tears, she hurried from the room. At the same moment there was a double knock at the door, and Christian retraced his way to his own room.

He was in the midst of painful and bewildering conjectures as to the nature of that mystery which enveloped the lovely Isabella, and which seemed to be associated with so much cruel coercion and unnatural tyranny, when the trull of a servant-girl knocked at his door, and throwing it open, said, "Here's a genelman which wants you, Mr. Ashton, and this is his card."

Our hero took the card, and found that it represented the aristocratic though perhaps not very euphonious name of the Chevalier Gumbinnen. The owner of this name had been left standing in the passage by the maid-of-all-work. and Christian, on hurrying forth, was horrified to perceive a mop on his visitor's right hand, and a pail of dirty water under his very nose. He flung a hasty reproach at the girl, and began confounding himself in excuses to the chevalier, who received them all with a sedate silence and a sort of inane mystification of look, - which indeed was by no means astonishing, when it comes to be considered that the Chevalier Gumbinnen understood not a syllable of English. Christian hastily led the way into his own sitting-room, handed the chevalier a chair, and awaited explanations, although he had no doubt in his own mind that the visit bore reference to the advertisement in the newspaper.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen was a little man, with a some-

what dirty look. He had very red hair, huge moustaches. and small eyes of pinkish blue. There certainly was nothing aristocratic in his appearance, whatever there might be in his name; neither was there any particular freshness in his costume. On the contrary, it seemed a little the worse for wear. It consisted of a blue dress coat with a stand-up collar: it was cut round in front, and thus sloped away into the tails: it had a great deal of black braiding about it. and was worn unbuttoned. The waistcoat was white, --or, rather, had been a week back when it first came home from the wash, but it was evident that this article, as well as the chevalier's shirt, had not been put on clean in the morning of that particular day. His pantaloons were black, with long stripes of braiding; his hat was of singular shape, and somewhat deficient in nap. He wore a profusion of jewelry, which looked very well at the first glance, but perhaps would not have borne the close inspection of a connoisseur in such articles. Indeed, we are very much afraid that if the Chevalier Gumbinnen had sought to raise a loan upon all the personal property which was included under this particular head, the pawnbroker would have pronounced the diamonds to be paste, and would have found that the gold chains passed not readily through the ordeal of the testing acid. In a word, this foreign gentleman's appearance was sufficient to mystify Christian considerably as to who or what he could possibly be.

Without speaking a word, the Chevalier Gumbinnen drew forth a somewhat soiled pocketbook, and producing thence a dirty scrap of paper, displayed it before Christian's eves, at the same time fixing upon him a look of knowingness rather than of well-bred inquiry. It was our hero's own advertisement, cut out of the Times: he therefore hastened to declare that it was so, and that he was the "C. A." therein specified. Still the chevalier maintained a profound silence, so that Christian was at a loss whether to conclude that his visitor was altogether dumb, or that he was merely unable to comprehend the English language. Again, however, was the chevalier's hand plunged into the pocketbook, and now he drew forth a larger card than his own, and which he presented to our hero. It was not the cleanest in the world, but, nevertheless, whatsoever it had on it was perfectly visible. On the upper part there was a sovereign

crown, and under it there was the name of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. The address in the right hand corner was Mivart's Hotel.

Here was grandeur! It was evidently a reigning duke who was sending for Christian, and doubtless the Chevalier Gumbinnen was some high dignitary attached to the person of his Royal Highness. Such was the conclusion to which our hero naturally came. He looked at the chevalier, and the chevalier looked at him. Did the chevalier mean to speak, — or, indeed, could he speak at all? Christian could not help thinking it was rather a strange proceeding to send this silent gentleman on such a business, and he began to feel somewhat awkward. The chevalier, however, condescended presently to relieve him from his embarrassment, for, taking out a somewhat cumbrous watch. - which would doubtless have been considered handsome in the time when pinchbecks were in fashion, - he displayed the dial before Christian's eyes, and pointing to the hour of four, gave a sort of significant grunt, and then stared for half a minute in the youth's countenance, to assure himself that the intimation was comprehended. Christian bowed: the chevalier made a very slight and condescendingly dignified inclination of the head, put on his napless hat, and took his departure.

The whole proceeding was singular enough, but Christian understood that he was to call at Mivart's Hotel to see his Royal Highness, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, at four o'clock. It was now a little past three, and therefore our hero had only just time to dress himself in his best apparel and set off to Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. While proceeding thither, his thoughts were divided between Isabella Vincent and the business on which he was now bent. He of course imagined that the duke required an English secretary; and hence the application to himself, made through that very interesting, intelligent, and enlightening person, the Chevalier Gumbinnen. Christian could have wished to remain a week or two longer at Mrs. Chubb's ere entering upon another situation, but he had his bread to get, and must not throw away a chance. Besides, it suddenly occurred to him that as the duke was residing at a hotel, and was not likely to remain very long absent from his own dominions, it was perhaps only a temporary occupation about to be offered him, and one which would still enable him to occupy his lodgings beneath the same roof with the lovely Isabella.

While making these reflections, Christian arrived at Mivart's Hotel, at the door of which a waiter was lounging with a white napkin in his hand, looking up the street as if in contemplation of some beautiful prospect, although there was in reality nothing to be seen except what must have been familiar enough to the man's view. But no one ever did observe a hotel waiter standing at the street door who was not thus staring fixedly in one particular direction.

" I have been directed," said Christian to the waiter, to attend at this hour upon the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Very good, sir," was the man's response, as he slowly desisted from gazing up the street. "Please to follow me, and I will take you to Baron Raggidbak."

Christian for a moment thought that the waiter was putting off upon him an insolent jest, but as the man spoke with an air of perfect seriousness, and at the same time began to lead the way up the staircase, our hero followed, though still marvelling at the extraordinary title of the nobleman to whom he was about to be presented. They ascended to the first landing, where the waiter, opening a door, ushered Christian into a sort of antechamber, in which a tall, thin, hungry-looking man, moustached and bearded, dressed very much in the style of the Chevalier Gumbinnen, and whose appearance combined an equal amount of tawdriness and shabbiness, was lounging in an armchair by the fire, reading a German newspaper, very dirty and very much crumpled.

"This is Baron Raggidbak, his Royal Highness's groom of the stole," said the waiter, in an undertone, to Christian, and then the man withdrew.

Our hero advanced with a respectful salutation toward the high functionary who was seated by the fire; and the high functionary, laying down the newspaper, surveyed Christian in a sort of supercilious manner, as if determined to see what he was made of ere introducing him to his ducal master. At length he condescended to speak, and in so doing displayed at least one advantage over the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "You sall be de yong mans what de lord chamberlain did come for to go after dis afternoon?" was the question which Baron Raggidbak put to Christian.

Our hero bowed, and said, "Yes, my lord."

"Vare goot," said the baron, complacently caressing his bearded chin, and now looking far more favourably upon our hero, as if that respectful appellation of "my lord" had considerably sweetened the temper of the groom of the stole. "You vare quick wid de pen? You vare clever wid de writin' and de spellin' in de Inglis langvidge, eh?"

"I have a testimonial to exhibit, my lord," answered Christian, "which I think will be satisfactory."

"Vare goot," said the baron, still caressing his chin with one hand, and playing with a copper-gilt watch-chain with the other; "den you sall succeed wit his Royal Highness. Ah, dis is de Chevalier Kadger! De chevalier is de — how you call him? — de querry to his Royal Highness, and de chevalier sall go for to introduce you."

The Chevalier Kadger, who entered the anteroom at the moment, wore a sort of military uniform, of dark green cloth, tolerably threadbare, with tarnished gold lace, and red stripes down the pantaloons. He was a heavy, sleepy, vulgar-looking man, with dark wiry hair brushed straight off from his forehead, and a very fierce moustache. He said something in German to the Baron Raggidbak, at which they both chuckled in what Christian fancied to be a somewhat vulgar manner.

The Chevalier Kadger then planted himself close in front of our hero, contemplating him slowly from head to foot. Christian underwent this inspection with exemplary patience. inasmuch as he thought it one of the necessary preliminaries to the successful attainment of his object. But as he stood with his eves modestly bent down, he became aware of a certain disagreeable odour floating around him, and which seemed to be compounded of stale tobacco-smoke, garlic, and At first he fancied he must certainly be mistaken, as rum. such an ignoble effluence could scarcely have its source in the person of so distinguished a character as the Chevalier Kadger, equerry-in-waiting to a reigning duke. But when there was no longer a possibility of resisting his own convictions, and when his olfactory organs proved beyond all mistake that it was veritably and truly the chevalier's person which was

thus redolent of garlic, rum, and bad cigars (the last-mentioned being evidently full-flavoured Cubas), Christian was certainly astonished. However, he was now on the point of being conducted into the presence of the duke, and he thought to himself that he should find in this distinguished prince a very great contrast with the appearance of those personages of his suite whom he had as yet seen.

The Chevalier Kadger preceded Christian with his person. and likewise with the odour that hung about him. He paused for a moment in an adjacent room to speak to a dirty. seedy-looking, unkempt man, who was taking out plate from a box, and who, as our hero subsequently learned, was Baron Farthenless, the privy purse. They passed on to another room, where Christian beheld a tall personage. somewhat stout, under forty years of age, coarse-featured, and vulgar-looking, dressed in some strange sort of military uniform, with a star upon his breast. The uniform had evidently seen good service, and if it had pertained to an English nobleman, would long since have found its way into the hands of his valet, and thence to some old clothes' shop in Holywell Street. As for the star, it was certainly an ingenious combination of pieces of different coloured glass set in plated metal, looking very much like a "theatrical property," and its value might have been about three and sixpence. This personage was lounging near a window, in conversation with the Chevalier Gumbinnen and three or four other worthies, whose appearance was of corresponding seediness and tawdriness. The effect produced by this group was perhaps more novel than satisfactory; and Christian thought to himself that if this were the duke, he was a strange-looking man for a reigning sovereign, and had a strange-looking retinue. But there was certainly one thing in his favour, -that he evidently strove not to throw his adherents into the shade by any superexcellence on the score of his own outfit.

The Chevalier Kadger beckoned Christian to advance, and the Chevalier Gumbinnen, acting the part of lord chamberlain and master of the ceremonies, presented the youth to the high and mighty Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha; but though the chevalier spoke in German, it was nevertheless a sort of satisfaction to our hero's mind to discover that he had the faculty of speech at all. The youth bowed low to his Royal Highness, who motioned him to draw still nearer, and then began to converse with him in tolerably good English.

"It is my purpose to remain about a month in this country," said the duke, "for which period I require the services of a young gentleman to write letters in English for me to those noble and illustrious personages with whom I may have to correspond. Does such a position suit you?"

Christian answered in the affirmative, and the duke continued speaking.

"I shall require your attendance every morning at ten o'clock, and you may consider the hours of occupation to be until five; because, in addition to the management of my English correspondence, you will have to make notes of certain statistical details which I am anxious to obtain, and the sources of which will be duly furnished to you. Have you testimonials?"

Christian produced the one which he had obtained from the Duke of Marchmont, and this of course proved eminently satisfactory. His Royal Highness, inquired the amount of salary which Christian expected. This little matter was soon arranged, and he was informed that Baron Farthenless, the privy purse, would settle with him weekly. The audience now terminated, and Christian was conducted from the august presence by the Chevalier Kadger, the odour emanating from whose breath and garments had not appeared to affect the olfactory nerves of his ducal master in the slightest degree, although it was particularly strong, and in its combinations none of the most fragrant. But then, Christian thought to himself, the duke had perhaps grown accustomed to inhale the atmosphere which his equerry carried about with him, and the old adage says that " use is second nature."

On gaining the antechamber, where Baron Raggidbak was again found seated in the armchair near the fire, the Chevalier Kadger laid his hand upon Christian's shoulder, and said, "Me and de baron sall drink your one goot health in one bottle of wine — or two bottles, begar! — and you sall stop some minutes for de same."

"Vare goot," exclaimed Baron Raggidbak, caressing his beard with one hand while he gave the bell-pull a violent tug with the other. Christian could not of course help tarrying in compliance with the wishes of his aristocratic friends; he accordingly sat down, and in a few moments the waiter made his appearance.

"Mine goot mans," said Baron Raggidbak, "you sall go for to bring up two bottles of de port and de sherry wines for de present gumpany."

"A bottle of each, my lord?" said the waiter, putting his hand up to his head with a half-hesitating, half-reflective air.

"Dat is it," responded the baron; but as the waiter still appeared undecided, and hung about the door as if wanting to say something but not exactly liking to do so, the groom of the stole placed his hand on Christian's shoulder, saying, with a certain emphasis, "Dis sall be de yong mans what sall pay for de treat for de present gumpany."

The waiter now suddenly became more cheerful in aspect, and quitted the room with a blithe alacrity. Christian could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. What, his lordship, Baron Raggidbak, groom of the stole to a reigning duke, and the scarcely less distinguished Chevalier Kadger, equerry to the same illustrious personage, condescending to drink at his expense, and, what was more, inviting themselves to do it! For the moment Christian felt as if he were in the midst of a dream, or else — what really did seem more probable — that he was in the midst of hungry adventurers. But he said not a word, and in a few moments the waiter reappeared with a decanter of port and another of sherry on a tray, which likewise bore the bill duly made out and receipted, the wine being charged six shillings a bottle.

"Now, my goot friend," said Baron Raggidbak, "out wid de monies. Dis am de German fashion of making what you sall call it? — oh, de acquaintance."

Christian produced a sovereign, and on receiving the change from the waiter, he left half a crown lying on the tray for that individual's own fee, — a liberality which procured for him a very low bow. The Chevalier Kadger proceeded to fill the glasses, which himself and Baron Raggidbak showed themselves very good hands at emptying also. Christian drank but little, and his abstemiousness was highly complimented by his two aristocratic friends, who had good reason to be rejoiced at it, inasmuch as there was all the more for themselves. The two decanters were emptied in an inconceivably short space of time, and Baron Raggidbak dropped a hint relative to a second supply; but Christian was anxious to run up to the Regent's Park and tell his sister that he had obtained another situation, so that he rose to take his departure, wondering infinitely not merely at the conduct of the groom of the stole and the equerry-in-waiting, but also at the entire appearance of the duke and his retinue.

As he was about to issue from the hotel, he was encountered by the same waiter who had brought up the wine, and who was now crossing the hall at the moment. The man paused, and looked at Christian as if he wished to speak to him, and as our young hero himself was anxious to hear something more relative to the personages amongst whom accident had thrown him, he paused likewise. The waiter thereupon said, "Just step into this room, sir."

Christian followed the man, who carefully closed the door, and then said, "I beg your pardon, sir, but as I see that you are a liberal young gentleman, I don't like you to stand the chance of being robbed."

"Robbed?" ejaculated our hero. "Why, is not that really a duke?"

"Oh, yes, sir, he is a duke fast enough: but such a duke!" exclaimed the waiter contemptuously. "I am sure my master would like to be well quit of him and all his beggarly crew of hungry Germans, with their hard names, their airs, their meanness, and their insolence. Perhaps you saw, sir, that I hesitated to bring up the wine when that fellow Raggidbak ordered it? The fact is the duke has given positive instructions that nothing is to be supplied except by command of Count Wronki, the lord steward."

"But this is most extraordinary!" cried young Ashton, lost in bewilderment.

"Oh, extraordinary indeed!" echoed the waiter. "I never saw such a wretched set of paupers in my life. They don't seem to have a farthing amongst them — I mean the duke's retinue; and between you and me, sir, I don't think the duke himself is overtroubled with cash. Of course you know that whenever he visits this country all his travel-ling expenses, both coming and going, are paid by the Eng-

lish government. These rooms too which they occupy are paid from a certain quarter."

"From whence?" inquired Christian.

"Why, from Buckingham Palace, to be sure," responded the waiter. "Ah, the people generally little think what a mean, beggarly horde these German fellows are, with all their titles of duke, count, baron, and chevalier. I tell you what, sir, there isn't as much linen amongst them all as any ordinary English gentleman possesses; and such linen as it is! Why, the washerwoman is afraid it will fall to pieces in the rubbing and wringing out. And then their clothes, too!" added the waiter, shrugging his shoulders with the supremest contempt. "But what I wanted to guard you against, sir, is this, that if you let those fellows get hold of you, they will sponge upon you, they will make you pay for wines, spirits, and cigars, they will pluck you like any pigeon. So pray take care; and don't say that I dropped you this hint, as it would only get me into trouble."

Christian reassured the man upon the point, thanked him for his well-meant information, and took his departure, wondering still more at the various details he had just received in respect to the German duke and his retainers.

Having paid a hasty visit to Christina, Christian returned to his lodgings at the parish clerk's house, and he sought in one of the books which he possessed some information relative to the duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. He found that it was of the meanest territorial extent, with a population of a few thousands of souls, with a beggarly revenue, and with an army enumerated only by hundreds. He had previously no very exalted idea of the German principalities, but he had not suspected that any one of them was so poor and paltry as this. However, he thought to himself that his own salary would be tolerably safe, and that it would at least enhance his interest to be enabled at the close of his engagement to obtain a testimonial from a reigning duke.

CHAPTER V

A PLOT

WE must now once more direct the reader's attention to the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment; and if we peep into the splendidly furnished apartment whence there was the mirror-contrived communication with the tailor's house next door, we shall find Lettice with the German and French girls, sitting together. Lettice Rodney therefore — disregarding Mr. Redcliffe's advice — had returned to that abode of splendid infamy.

It was noon on the day following that on which Christian called at Mivart's Hotel, and thus Lettice had been back exactly one week. She had told Madame Angelique everything that had occurred, but vainly had she endeavoured to recollect who the individual could be who had extorted from her the revelation of the whole proceedings. It will be remembered that she fancied his voice was not unfamiliar to her, but that she had totally failed to obtain a glimpse of his countenance in the darkness of the night, so that the scene with him had ended by leaving her still in complete ignorance of who he was. Madame Angelique was much troubled, for she could not help thinking that the same individual who had thus behaved toward Lettice Rodney had spirited away Eveleen O'Brien. Not for an instant, however, did her suspicions rest on Mr. Redcliffe, for he had paid her bounteously at the time, and the girls had assured her that he had entered with spirit into the festivities of that particular evening. As for the Duke of Marchmont, Madame Angelique did not dread his anger on Lettice's account, for, under all the circumstances, she did not consider that any blame could attach itself to the young woman who, when menaced with the law, and finding the plot more or less

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known to her mysterious midnight questioner, had naturally saved herself from ulterior consequences by adopting the course which is known to the reader. Indeed, Madame Angelique was herself somewhat irritated against the duke, that he should have so seriously compromised her own establishment in respect to the dresses, and likewise in respect to the purpose for which Lettice Rodney had been required in the neighbourhood of Oaklands. A hastily penned note from his Grace, written immediately after the explosion of the plot, had assured Madame Angelique that she had little to dread on the part of the duchess, as he (the duke) would guarantee this much; and though Madame Angelique might thenceforth lose the custom of the duchess, she should receive an ample indemnification from Marchmont's own purse.

Thus stood matters in respect to Madame Angelique and her establishment after the transaction at Oaklands; and now, having given these necessary explanations, we return to the luxuriously furnished apartment in which we find Lettice Rodney, Armantine, and Linda seated.

It was noon, and they were all three in a charming déshabillé. Lettice was reclining in a chair, reading a new novel aloud to her companions, both of whom, as the reader will recollect, understood English to perfection. The fine form of Lettice Rodney was stretched out in a voluptuous abandonment, which, though at the moment unstudied, gave a more luxurious effect to the rich contours of her shape. Linda, the German girl, was seated upon the sofa; Armantine, the French one, occupied a chair opposite to Lettice, and both were all attention to some very pathetic love passage which Lettice was at the time reading to them. Presently the door opened somewhat abruptly, and Madame Angelique made her appearance.

"What do you think, my dear girls?" she exclaimed, in considerable excitement; "that treacherous wretch, Eveleen O'Brien, has gone back to her parents."

Lettice started in astonishment, but both Linda and Armantine sighed audibly, as they inwardly wished that they possessed homes to which they dared return.

"Yes, it is true," cried Madame Angelique, who was too much excited to observe the half-subdued evidences of compunction and regret, as well as of wistful longing, which the two foreign girls had displayed. "And what is more, she has had the impudence to write to me."

"And what does she say?" asked Lettice, full of curiosity. "She says that through the generous intervention of a friend whom Heaven sent her, she has been snatched away from a life of infamy. Only think of this. She, who — as well as you, my dears — revelled in every luxury, eat and drank of the best, and wore the handsomest clothes — "

"But does she threaten you?" inquired Lettice.

"No, and that is the only consolation in the matter," responded Madame Angelique, somewhat softened as she thought of it. "She says that her parents received her with open arms, and that as they at once assured her an everlasting veil should be drawn over her past, they pressed her for no explanations in respect to her career since she had left them."

"And of course she does not want to make a noise about it?" observed Lettice. "But why did she write to you?"

"To state that as she is disposed to practise the utmost forbearance, and never allude to me or my proceedings, she stipulates that on my part I will refrain from ever mentioning Eveleen O'Brien as having been an inmate of this house."

"Ah! I suppose she means to become respectable now," interjected Lettice, with a contemptuous smile.

"And perhaps she hopes to marry," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But perchance things won't go on quite so pleasantly as she anticipates. Look here, my dear Lettice. It is of the utmost consequence we should discover who the man was that extorted those revelations from you the other day, down in the country. It is dangerous that there should be a person knowing so much about you as he evidently did, and therefore about this establishment, and we on the other hand not to have the slightest conjecture who he is."

"Perhaps he is the same kind friend," observed Lettice, sneeringly, "whom Heaven sent to restore Eveleen to her parents?"

"That's exactly what I think," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "because her flight and that affair down at Oaklands took place pretty nearly at the same time. Now, Eveleen knew certain things about the counterpart dresses, and she knew also that you were going off to the neighbourhood of Oaklands — "

"And therefore it is only reasonable to conclude," ex-

claimed Lettice, "that Eveleen, the traitress, gave that mysterious stranger certain information which put him on the watch and led him to intercept me."

"Should you like a trip to Ireland, my dear girl?" inquired Madame Angelique, patting Lettice caressingly on her bare shoulder.

"That I should," exclaimed the young woman.

"Then you shall go," responded Madame Angelique. "You can throw yourself in the way of Eveleen; you can affect to be very penitent, and to have left my establishment altogether — "

"Oh, leave me to manage it," cried Lettice, already exulting in the prospect of success. "I will worm myself into Eveleen's confidence — I will get everything out of her. When shall I depart?"

"To-day, if you will," rejoined Madame Angelique; "no time need be lost. And remember, if you can entice Eveleen back again, so much the better. She is much too beautiful to lose, and besides, it would be a glorious triumph for us to accomplish."

The preparations could not, however, be made for Lettice Rodney's departure on that same day, but at nine o'clock on the ensuing morning she took her place in a first-class carriage at Euston Square, her destination being Liverpool by way of Birmingham. There was only one other passenger in the same compartment, and this was a lady of nearly the same age as Lettice herself, as well as being by no means unlike her in personal appearance. She was almost of as tall a stature and of similarly well-developed contours of shape: she was decidedly handsome, too, though not of so remarkably striking a beauty as the other. She was well dressed; her appearance was genteel, and indicative of the well-bred lady. As the train started, Lettice surveyed her companion, and was surveyed by this companion in return. They were the only two occupants of the compartment, and being of the same sex, it was but natural that they should soon get into conversation. Lettice Rodney assumed, as a matter of course, as modest and retired an air as possible, in order to be consistent with the part of a respectable lady which she was playing, as well as to obviate any suspicion that might arise as to her true character, for there are thousands of people in this world — especially among the female sex — who, though displaying a bold hardihood and brazen effrontery when in the midst of scenes of vicious dissipation, are nevertheless anxious enough to cloak their true characters when beyond the sphere of their irregularities. In the same way that the poor often struggle and strive to put on the appearance of ease and competency, so do the immoral endeavour to apparel themselves with the raiment of morality, and the immodest to assume the air and complexion of modesty.

During the first half-hour the discourse was limited to the mere exchange of those casual observations and indifferent remarks which, with persons meeting for the first time, are the necessary preliminaries to a more familiar and continuous strain of conversation. Lettice found her travelling companion to be a young lady of unassuming manners, somewhat simple-minded, and disposed to enter with an ingenuous frankness upon the objects of the journey on which she was bent. Lettice chose likewise to be communicative. -not, however, to reveal the real truth in respect to the motives of her own journey, but to chatter away in her own style for the sake of appearing important in the estimation of her travelling companion. She accordingly stated that she was on her way to Ireland to pass a few weeks with some friends in the neighbourhood of Dublin, dropping a hint that these friends were of aristocratic rank, and availing herself of the opportunity to lead her fellow traveller to infer that she belonged to a wealthy and influential family. The reader knows how much of all this was true; it was, however, believed by Lettice Rodney's travelling companion, who was inspired by such confidences to become all the more communicative on her own part.

It now transpired that this lady was named Rayner, and that she was a widow. Presently it further appeared that her Christian name was Louisa, an intimation which elicited from Lettice Rodney's lips a remark on the singularity of the coincidence that their names should have the same initials. In short, as the journey progressed, the two ladies became more and more intimate and familiar, and inasmuch as no other passenger was introduced to their compartment of the carriage at any of the stations where the train stopped, the flow of their conversation proceeded uninterruptedly. We may now record those details which Lettice Rodney received from the lips of Mrs. Rayner, in respect to certain circumstances of her life, as well as the special motives which had led to the journey she was now undertaking.

It appeared that Louisa was left an orphan at the age of eleven, both her parents being carried off suddenly by some epidemic disease, and with only a short interval between their deaths. Louisa was then removed to the house of a certain Mr. Anthony Pollard, a lawyer at Liverpool, and who was left her guardian. He was no relation. but doubtless Louisa's father, when making his will, had his own good reasons for appointing this gentleman to act as trustee for whatsoever property he might leave his daughter. Mr. Pollard was an elderly man, a widower, of eccentric habits, loving money with a miserly devotion, and carrying his parsimony to almost every extreme which is usually associated with the greed of gain and the passion of mammon worship. Louisa remained but a few weeks at his house, and was then sent to a boarding-school at some town a considerable distance off. Here she was kept throughout the holidays, and though kindly treated by the mistress of the establishment, and adequately supplied with pocket-money, yet still she could not help feeling how bitter and poignant it was to know of no place in the wide world which she could look forward to visit or be enabled to speak of as her home. At this school she remained until she was seventeen, never once seeing Mr. Pollard, only occasionally hearing from him, when in a curtly written letter he remitted her money and expressed a hope that she was attentive and docile to her preceptress. But no hope that she was happy was ever hinted at in those letters. It appeared as if her guardian considered he was fulfilling the extent of his duty by acting as a mere man of business, and that he was by no means bound to demonstrate any of those kindnesses which her lost parents would have shown, or which she might have looked for on the part of relations, if she had possessed any.

The school mistress was occasionally visited by a nephew of her own, — a young gentleman of handsome person, agreeable manners, and pleasing address. He was four years older than Louisa, and consequently twenty-one at the period when she attained her seventeenth year. He had just inherited the little property bequeathed to him by his own parents, for he likewise was an orphan. To be brief,

a mutual affection sprang up on the part of the schoolgirl and the nephew of the schoolmistress: tender billets were exchanged, vows of eternal fidelity were pledged. The circumstance was discovered, and the young gentleman was ordered by his indignant aunt to absent himself altogether from the house so long as Louisa remained beneath the roof. The schoolmistress was a well-principled and conscientious woman; she communicated at once with Mr. Pollard at Liverpool, and this gentleman wrote to signify his intention of proceeding in the course of a day or two to fetch his ward away from the school. The romance had thus reached that point at which the various complications could not possibly lead to any other result than that which the reader doubtless anticipates. The nephew of the schoolmistress found means to communicate secretly with Louisa: she was almost broken-hearted at the thought of being eternally separated from her lover, and of being borne back again to her guardian's cheerless house at Liverpool, of which house her recollections of some six years back were by no means agreeable. She therefore yielded to the entreaties of her admirer; she fled with him, but he was an honourable young man, and the elopement was immediately crowned by marriage.

The newly wedded pair proceeded to France, whence Louisa - now Mrs. Rayner - wrote to Mr. Pollard, explaining to him that she had consulted her own happiness in the step which she had taken, and that if she had thereby proved undutiful and disobedient to the will of her guardian, she solicited his forgiveness. She did not, however, experience much, if any compunction at having thus flown, as it were, in Mr. Pollard's face, for his conduct toward her had never been calculated by any kindness to win her esteem. The letter he wrote back was pretty well that which might have been expected from the callous-minded man of business. It was to the effect, that as she had chosen to regulate her own destinies, and cater for her own happiness according to the dictates of her inclinations, he could acquit himself of any violation of the trust confided to him by her deceased parents; he informed her that she was entitled to three thousand pounds on attaining the age of twenty-one, and that in the meantime he would regularly remit her the interest. He offered no felicitations upon her marriage,

but on the other hand gave no direct expression to any displeasure on his own part. The letter contained not the remotest hint to the effect that he would be gratified to receive a visit from herself and her husband; it did not even so much as intimate that if circumstances should bring them near Liverpool, he hoped they would call upon him, but this formal and purely businesslike communication wound up by the announcement that when the young lady should reach the period of her majority, she must present herself to him in order to sign the necessary releases and receive the amount of her little fortune.

Happily enough passed away the two years of Louisa's wedded life, for to two years was it limited, and as is often the case in this world. the dream of felicity which is soonest to be dissipated is the brightest and most beautiful while it lasts. Mr. Ravner was drowned in a boating excursion. at some French seaport where they were staying at the time, and thus, with a cruel and terrible abruptness, the unfortunate Louisa found herself a widow. When the roseate atmosphere in which the soul has been for a period accustomed to exist is thus suddenly changed into a worse than Egyptian darkness, it appears to the sufferer as if this black obscurity would be eternal, and that the mind, paralyzed by dread consternation and crushed by overwhelming grief, could never by its own energies accomplish an issue thence. But there is no misfortune so terrible that the sense it produces will not gradually pass into a phase of resignation, and then from resignation there is a natural transition to that improved and healthier state of feeling in which the mind begins to discover that the world may yet have sources of happiness left for its experience.

Two years had elapsed since the death of Mr. Rayner, and Louisa had put off her widow's weeds about a fortnight before the date on which we find her travelling in the society of Lettice Rodney. By a somewhat singular coincidence, too, she attained her majority on the very day when the period of her mourning expired. The reader may now easily surmise for what purpose she was bound to Liverpool: it was to call upon her guardian Anthony Pollard, the miserly old lawyer, and receive from him the amount of her fortune. Such was the narrative which Lettice Rodney learned from Mrs. Rayner's lips, and the young woman could not help secretly wishing that she herself was on her way to receive three thousand pounds, instead of to carry out the deeply devised plot in respect to Eveleen O'Brien.

"Your tale, Mrs. Rayner, has deeply interested me," said Lettice. "But do you not tremble at the thought of appearing in the presence of such a hard, stern man as your guardian Mr. Pollard seems to be?"

"I can assure you, Miss Rodney," replied the handsome widow, "that I experience no such trepidation. It is true that full ten years have now elapsed since I last beheld him, but my memory has faithfully retained the impression which Mr. Pollard made upon me at the time, during the few weeks I was beneath his roof. He is a man of the fewest possible words, and I am confident that he will not seek to engage me in any unnecessary discourse. He will not speak of the past more than is absolutely requisite to the settlement of the business which is to bring us in contact. I therefore entertain no apprehension that he will in any way revive the poignancy of my feelings on account of the cruel and irreparable loss which I have sustained. Indeed, so far as I can exercise my judgment on the subject, I have every reason to believe that our interview will prove a brief one, and that within an hour from the moment of our meeting the business will be settled."

"I am truly glad," observed Lettice, "to receive the assurance that you anticipate no manifestation of ill-feeling on Mr. Pollard's part. Although we have known each other but a few short hours, I feel an interest in all that concerns you."

"And this interest, Miss Rodney, is reciprocated," rejoined Mrs. Rayner.

The discourse continued awhile in a similar strain, but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that while Lettice expressed a feeling of interest more for the sake of saying something than because she really experienced it, and also for the purpose of making her companion believe that she was a very right-minded young lady, Mrs. Rayner's assurances of kindly sympathies were, on the other hand, perfectly genuine and sincere. As the discourse continued, Mrs. Rayner was naturally led on to minuter details in respect to the past incidents of her life, and as Lettice could not bear to be silent or unoccupied, and, moreover, inasmuch as she was endowed with no small share of true feminine curiosity, she, by her interjected observations, as well as by her questions, encouraged her companion to as much communicativeness as she chose to demonstrate. Thus did the hours pass away, while the train was pursuing its course of almost marvellous rapidity, and the two ladies mutually congratulated themselves that they should thus have been thrown together.

It was at some point - no matter precisely which between Birmingham and Manchester, that the conversation was all in an instant cut short, as if a thunderbolt had come crashing through the roof of the carriage. As Lettice Rodnev subsequently described the occurrence, she was for a moment — and only for that single moment — sensitive to an abrupt shock; it was quick as the eye can wink, and the next instant consciousness abandoned her. As she slowly came back to her senses, she became aware that she was lying on the slope of an embankment, and that some gentleman, of middle-age, was bending over her, and ministering restoratives. It appeared to her like a dream; she closed her eves as if to shut out all external objects, the better to concentrate her mental vision inwardly, and thus arrive at some comprehending of what it was that she thought and felt. There was a dull heavy sounding in the brain, a sense of numbress over all the faculties, a blending of uncertainty and vague consternation in the mind. Again she opened her eves, but only to receive additional confirmation of the awful suspicion which, hitherto dim, indefinite, and clouded, had hung in her brain. The gentleman spoke a few kind words of mingled encouragement and inquiry, and these still further served to stamp the horrible conviction in the soul of Lettice that what she had fancied and apprehended was no dream, but all a too hideous reality. In a word, an accident had happened to the train; several of the carriages, being thrown off the line, were literally dashed to atoms, and numerous deaths, as well as frightful injuries, mutilations, and contusions were the consequence.

The gentleman whom Lettice found bending over her was a surgeon who happened to be in the ill-fated train, and as he was unhurt, he had rendered all possible assistance to those passengers who, though escaping death, were otherwise less fortunate than himself. Lettice had been merely stunned by the first shock of the accident; she was in all other respects completely uninjured, and in a few minutes after her return to consciousness, she was enabled to rise and move about. The scene which presented itself to her contemplation was a frightful and a sad one. The line was encumbered in one part with the overturned carriages, and in another strown with the fragments of the shattered ones. Boxes. trunks, and portmanteaux were heaped pell-mell together. some having been broken open by the fall, and the articles of apparel, both male and female, all cast out and mixed together. On the slope of the embankment several wounded persons lay here and there, and in another part there was a horrible array of mutilated and disfigured corpses. As the eves of Lettice wandered over this fearful grouping of the dead, her heart sickened within her, and she felt her brain reel, on catching sight of the apparel of her travelling companion, the unfortunate Mrs. Rayner. Yes, but it was only by the raiment that the deceased could be thus recognized. for her countenance was so horribly disfigured that scarcely a lineament, much less a trace of its former beauty, remained. Lettice — though, as the reader is aware, far from possessing any extreme sensibility --- was nevertheless shocked and horrified at this tragic occurrence which had thus cut off an amiable lady in the bloom of her youth as well as in the early summer of her beauty, and at the very time she was on her way to receive the inheritance bequeathed by her parents. Lettice staggered back as she averted her eyes from the shocking spectacle, and would have fallen if she had not been caught in the arms of the surgeon, who was still near her.

Those who have been unfortunate enough to witness a terrific railway accident are but too painfully aware of the dread confusion which is superadded to the horror of the scene, and those who have been happy enough to escape such a spectacle may nevertheless grasp with their imagination the full range of its supervening circumstances. The moant of the wounded sufferers mingling with the shrieks, the cries, and the lamentations of relatives who have survived the dead, the hurrying to and fro of half-dismayed officials, the process of disencumbering the line as speedily as possible, and the flocking of horrified persons to the spot, when the accident occurs in the close vicinage of a town, — these are the salient characteristics of the scene following upon the appalling drama. And so it all was on the present occasion. But it does not suit the purpose of our tale to dwell at any greater length thereon: suffice it to say that the surgeon who had hitherto shown so much attention to Lettice Rodney now advised her to enter one of the vehicles which were by this time near the spot, and proceed to the town which was at no great distance. He assured her that she must not think of continuing her journey until the morrow, for that at least a good night's rest was requisite after the shock which she had experienced, and which, unless she was careful, might be followed by concussion of the brain. She did indeed feel like one bewildered and whose thoughts were all in confusion. The medical man was kind and attentive; he gave her his arm, and conducted her toward the piles of luggage that she might select her own boxes. Here again was a fresh source of bewilderment for Lettice Rodney, for she beheld some of her own dresses and other articles of apparel scattered about. The surgeon assisted her to separate them from the rest with which they were mixed up, and on learning from her what her name was, he took the trouble to search for everything which was marked with the initials L. R. In short, after much trouble, perplexity, and confusion, the good-natured surgeon succeeded in filling a couple of boxes. the lids of which were broken off, with those effects which Lettice had either been enabled to point out, or which he himself conceived to belong to her from the indications already mentioned; then, having seen her safe into a vehicle. together with her baggage, he took his leave, hastening to render his assistance to the next sufferer who required it.

Lettice Rodney was borne to the principal hotel in the town near to the spot where the accident occurred, and feeling exceedingly unwell, she at once retired to bed. It was not until the third day after the accident that the effects of the shock began to wear off. It had been followed, as the medical man more than half-predicted, by slight concussion, evidenced in a certain ringing in the ears and a continuous droning sound in the brain, as well as by heaviness of the head and confusion of the thoughts. During these three days, therefore, Lettice kept her bed, and was attended upon by a surgeon living in the town. When, however, she began to get better, she felt anxious to learn some particulars as

to the results of the accident, and a local newspaper was accordingly furnished her. The particulars of the tragic occurrence itself, as well as of the proceedings before the coroner, were given with the wonted minuteness of detail. and in perusing the sad narrative, Lettice observed that the names of all the killed were given with the exception of one lady, who was represented as being altogether unknown. It appeared, indeed, that she had no card-case with her, nor about her person was there discovered any letter or other document affording the slightest clue to the establishment of her identity. Now, as the name of Mrs. Rayner was altogether omitted from the list of killed. Lettice Rodney at once comprehended that it was this very name which ought to fill up the blank left in the sad catalogue, and that the unknown lady thus described was none other than her travelling companion.

Lettice was making up her mind to give this information to the landlord of the hotel, or to the surgeon who was attending upon her, with a view to have it conveyed to the proper quarter, when she began the inspection of her trunks for the first time since she became an inmate of that hotel. She now discovered that there was a variety of articles of linen which did not belong to her, mixed up with those effects which were really her own, but when she perceived that the former were all marked with the initials L. R., she beheld the solution of the mystery. She now recollected the manner in which her things had been looked out from amidst the scattered effects on the scene of the accident, and as she was still further examining the boxes, to ascertain to what extent she had thus become the unintentional selfappropriatrix of the property of the deceased lady, she discovered a small writing-desk, with the initials L. R. on a brass plate upon the lid. The desk was open, — the violence with which it had been thrown out at the time from the box that contained it having no doubt caused the lock to yield, and Lettice Rodney, being hampered with no over-nice scruple, unhesitatingly proceeded to the examination of the contents of the desk. She found several documents closely relating to the deceased Mrs. Rayner's affairs, - the certificate of her birth, as well as that of her marriage, a French passport, describing her personally with as much accuracy as such official papers are enabled, in a limited number of details, to exhibit, and several letters from Mr. Pollard, the lawyer, written at different times and advising her of periodical remittances. There were likewise memoranda, evidently penned by the deceased lady herself, and indicating various Continental places which she had visited both previous and subsequent to her husband's death, — the whole affording a tolerably comprehensive clue to her movements since her elopement from the boarding-school. In a word, the several papers discovered in this desk, superadded to the oral explanations given by Mrs. Rayner in the railway carriage, served to render Lettice as intimately acquainted as it was possible for her to become, with the affairs of the deceased lady.

While Miss Rodney was thus engaged in the perusal of the contents of the desk, an idea gradually began to arise in her mind, — at first vague, indefinite, and impalpable, then acquiring shape and consistency, growing stronger, until at last it became an object perfectly fitted for serious and deliberate contemplation. Lettice sat down and pondered deeply thereon. She surveyed the matter from every distinct point of view, reckoned all the chances of success and the probabilities of failure, at the same time balancing the risk she might incur with the prize she might gain by playing the stroke boldly. Her mind was made up, and she now no longer considered it expedient to throw any light upon the name of the deceased lady who was represented as unknown in the catalogue of the killed.

CHAPTER VI

THE MISER

In by no means one of the best streets of Liverpool was situated the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard, attorney at law. He has already been described as a widower, and of grasping. miserly habits. Mrs. Ravner, when a child, - ten years previous to the time at which we have found her speaking on the subject to Lettice Rodney, - had observed his parsimonious character, and was disgusted by it, but during those ten years it had become still more inveterate in its greed for gold. — more intense in its eagerness for gain. He had thus acquired all the very worst attributes of the miser, sacrificing every personal comfort to the sole object which he had in view. And yet, not to his knowledge did he possess a single relation on the face of the earth: there was no one whom he loved for whose sake he hoarded up gold, no one whom he cared for, to inherit it. The thought troubled him not that when the cold hand of death should he laid heavily on his shoulder, sending through him that congealing chill which knows no thaw, his heaped-up riches would either devolve to the Crown, or be dissipated in the course of the law's disputes, or become the prey of any plunderers who might gather in his last moments at his bedside, as the ravens troop to where the corpse will anon be on the field destined for the battle. It was not the question of who should inherit all this wealth that occupied the mind of Anthony Pollard; it was sufficient for him that there was his golden image which he had set up for his own particular worship, no matter what worshipper might succeed him, nor whether the image itself might be shattered, at his death, by the hand of greedy litigants or of plunderers intent upon a division of the spoil. Most strange indeed is the money worship of the miser, whose idolatry is purely egotistical, and who ministers not as a high priest to lead others in the track of the same devotion, as well as toward the same object, and to cherish the hope of possessing the same idol.

Mr. Pollard was a man well stricken in years, tall, lean. and lank, with shrivelled limbs, a cadaverous skin, a sinister expression of countenance, and an eve ever restless in the suspicious glances it was continuously flinging roundabout. Though so greedy of gain, Pollard was a just man after his own fashion: that is to say, he would scruple not, by means of all the engines of usury, to grind his victims down to the very dust, ay, or even reduce them to beggary, so long as he obtained his own profit, but on the other hand he would religiously fulfil whatsoever obligation he undertook, and whatsoever trust was confided to him. Thus was it that throughout all his dealings in respect to Mrs. Ravnor, his conduct was marked by the strictest probity, and it is therefore to be presumed that her father, ere his death, had selected him as a trustee from a knowledge of the illimitable confidence that might be reposed in him. Of late years Mr. Pollard had grown so mistrustful of every one about him that he had almost completely given up his practice as a solicitor, so as to avoid the necessity of keeping clerks and of absenting himself for hours together from his home. Besides, he found money-lending a far more lucrative avocation, and one which he could manage entirely by himself. Thus, at the period when we now introduce him to the reader, he had no clerks in his employment, and his growing habits of parsimony had led him to diminish his domestic establishment, limiting it at length to a housekeeper and a drab of a servantgirl. The housekeeper who was now in his service had been with him barely three weeks, but on applying for the situation, she had produced such excellent testimonials, signed by ladies of rank with whom she represented herself to have lived, that Mr. Pollard had unhesitatingly engaged her. Besides, she came from London, and this was an additional recommendation in her favour, because the old man had found, or fancied that he had found the Liverpool servants so extravagant and dishonest, he had made a vow never to take another housekeeper from amongst them. Therefore, when Mrs. Webber - which was the name of the new superintendent of the miser's household - had presented

herself three weeks back as a candidate for the post that had fallen vacant, she was speedily accepted, and all the more readily, too, because she was so exceedingly moderate on the score of wages. We have spoken of a maid of all work who was kept in addition to Mrs. Webber, and it is requisite for the purposes of our tale that we should add that this girl did not sleep in the house, but came at an early hour in the morning and left at about eight or nine in the evening.

Mr. Pollard's house had never been handsomely furnished. and of late years the greater portion of it was shut up; it being entirely useless, as he never gave parties, never received guests, and his only visitors were those who came on business. He did not habitually sit in the only parlour that was kept for use, but there was a sort of storeroom at the back of the house, on the ground floor, where he principally sat. The reason can be explained in a few words: the apartment had certain defences which rendered it, so to speak, a stronghold of the miser's fortress. It had immense iron bars at its only window; it had a huge massive door that could not possibly be forced open without creating a considerable disturbance, and there was moreover an iron safe let into the thick wall, so that in every respect was this apartment the one best calculated for Mr. Pollard's use. Here, then, was he accustomed to sit during the day, proceeding only to the parlour to receive visitors on business: here, in this strong room likewise, did he keep his hoards in the iron safe, and here of late years had he thought fit to sleep at night. For the old miser had grown excessively deaf, and not for worlds would he have slept in any other part of the house, with the chance of an entry being effected by either window or door, and he too dull of hearing to catch the sounds. Every night, before seeking his bed, did he lock and barricade the massive door of the strong room, but it is even a question whether with such defences as were constituted by that wooden barrier and by the bars of the window. the miser slumbered in tranquillity.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening — a few days after the railway accident — that we shall find old Anthony Pollard taking his tea and supper (which two meals he, for economy's sake, blended in one) in the strong room just alluded to. A single tallow candle burned upon the table; the crockery was of the commonest description, and the bone — for it was a mere bone — upon a cracked dish was only fit to become a dog's portion, and not to furnish a meal for a hungry man. Unfortunately Mr. Pollard could not overrule nature's cravings, though he was always endeavouring to persuade himself that he could not afford to gratify them, and that he should be ruined if he did. Thus, though the wretched man really longed for a good substantial meal, and could have devoured it too at any other person's expense, if favoured with an invitation to supper, he nevertheless tried to pick a last morsel from that mutton bone which really had nought left upon it.

Presently the huge door of the room slowly opened, and Mrs. Webber made her appearance.

"Well, is Alice gone?" demanded Mr. Pollard, thus alluding to the maid of all work.

"Yes, sir, she has gone," was the housekeeper's response, delivered in a loud, shrill tone on account of her master's deafness. "And what's more, the slut grumbled because she said I did not give her enough bread and cheese to take home for her supper."

"Ah! you are a good woman, Mrs. Webber," exclaimed Pollard, — " a very good woman, — thrifty and economical. You are the only housekeeper who has ever yet shown a regard to my interests."

"I always mean to do so, sir," rejoined the woman, with an air of great obsequiousness, notwithstanding that she had to cry out in that shrill manner. "I have let the parlour fire go out, sir," she continued, "as I don't suppose the lady you have been expecting for the last few days will make her appearance this evening?"

"Dear me, how provoking that she does not come," ejaculated Pollard. "She wrote and said she should be with me in a few days back, and here, every day since, have I been having a fire kept in the parlour, and little extras in the larder, because, you see, as I have already told you, Mrs. Webber, I must ask her to stay a day or two with me."

"Well, sir, of course you know best," responded the housekeeper, "but I can't help thinking that you are putting yourself to a very unnecessary expense on account of this Mrs. Rayner."

"Ah! but she can't very well help making me a little present," ejaculated the lawyer, "when I pay her over her money and resign my guardianship. So this little extra civility, Mrs. Webber, will cost me nothing; or I should say, it is only a few shillings laid out at uncommon good interest," and the old miser rubbed his hands chuckingly as he thus spoke.

"And who knows, sir," inquired Mrs. Webber, "but what Mrs. Rayner was the lady who was killed the other day by the railway accident?"

"Not likely," answered the lawyer, "because Mrs. Rayner would have been sure to have papers about her to identify her; whereas it is very evident from the newspaper reports that the lady who was killed, and who was represented as unknown, had no such papers at all."

"And yet," remarked the housekeeper, "I saw in to-day's paper — which the pot-boy lent me when he brought the pint of beer for mine and Alice's dinner — that the lady has not been recognized or claimed by any one."

"Recognized indeed," echoed Pollard; "how can a person with her face smashed to pieces be possibly recognized? However, if Mrs. Rayner don't come in a day or two — and if I don't hear from her — I shall really begin to think you must be right, and that perhaps after all the unknown lady of the railway accident was my ward Louisa."

"And suppose she's dead, sir?" said the housekeeper, inquiringly.

"Ah! if she's dead," responded Pollard, "I must find out her deceased husband's relations, and hand them over the money, for she has got no relations of her own."

"Ah, sir, it's like your strict integrity," exclaimed Mrs. Webber. "I heard of your character in Liverpool the day I applied for the situation, and all that was told me made me indeed most anxious to get it."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Webber," resumed Pollard, "the money shall be righteously dealt with. There it is," he added, glancing toward the safe; then, instantaneously perceiving that he had inadvertently let drop an admission which he was never in the habit of making to a soul, — and into which he could only have been thus led by his confidence in his new housekeeper, — he hastened to say, "I mean the money is forthcoming, — not here, of course, — at the banker's."

"Oh, to be sure, sir," replied Mrs. Webber; "I know you keep very little ready money in the house, and for my part I

tell Alice and the tradespeople that you never have any at all."

"Ah, that's right, my dear good Mrs. Webber," exclaimed the old miser, his eyes glistening with satisfaction at the assurance she had just given him. "And it's quite true, too. I don't think I've got five shillings in the place. No, I'm sure I have not," and thus speaking, Mr. Pollard drew forth from his pocket three halfpence, a fourpenny-piece, a shillingand a sixpence, — all of which coins he displayed on the palm of his hand, as if the production thereof were irrefragable evidence of the truth of his statement.

"You haven't seen this Mrs. Rayner for many years, have you, sir?" inquired the housekeeper.

"It must be ten good years since I last saw her," answered Pollard. "She was then a bit of a girl, but I have heard that she grew up into a very fine, handsome woman. I don't suppose I could possibly recognize her, and for this very reason she is sure to bring the proper papers with her to prove her identity. And now you understand why it is that I don't believe the lady who was killed can be Louisa, on account of the absence of all such corroborative documents about her person, or in any box or trunk that might have been supposed to belong to her."

Mrs. Webber now withdrew from her master's presence, but instead of retiring to the kitchen, or to her own chamber, she issued forth from the back door of the house, and entered the yard. This was surrounded by walls, and in the one at the extremity there was a gate communicating with a narrow alley. The instant Mrs. Webber appeared upon the threshold of this back gate, she was joined by a man who had evidently been lurking in the lane. Not a syllable was spoken until the fellow entered the yard, and then, the gate being closed, he began conversing in an undertone with Mrs. Webber.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Good, Barney," was the woman's response. "I have just succeeded in discovering that the old chap has got a mint of money in the iron safe."

"Ah! you're a clever 'un," said the Burker, in a tone of admiring satisfaction; "you all along declared as how you wos conwinced the old fogey had his blunt in that there wery identical place. Then I s'pose you mean the tidy little job to be done to-night?" "Yes, to-night," answered Mrs. Webber.

" Is that lady come yet?"

"No, and that's why, after what I've learned, the business must be for to-night."

"Well, it's a reg'lar blessin'," interjected the Burker, "that you've made up your mind at last, arter all this here hesitating and dilly-dallying which has kept me and Bill Scott all on the tenting-'ooks of suspense."

"Why, you must understand, Barney," said the treacherous housekeeper, "that it was better to put off the business for a few days till I could obtain certain and positive information as to whether Pollard had got in the house the money he has to pay to Mrs. Rayner."

"Yes, and with the chance that Mrs. Rayner would suddenly turn up," growled the Burker, "receive her blunt, and walk off with it. It warn't good policy, marm; it warn't good policy."

"How absurdly you talk, Barney," said Mrs. Webber, angrily. "I tell you it was absolutely necessary to ascertain whether the old man really kept enough in his house to render it worth while — "

"Well, and now you've got at the rights of the matter," rejoined the delectable Mr. Barnes, "and the business is to be done right slick offhand, with no more humbugging delays. Well, that's your sort, marm, and so we won't have no more argyfication on the pint. I'm blest if this Liverpool business won't be the best dodge we was ever put up to. Wasn't it a lucky thing that Jack Smedley should have run down to Liverpool just arter that little bit of business with the lodger, and that he should have heerd tell of this old miser's wanting a housekeeper. I'm blowed if it isn't enough to make a cat or a helephant crack his precious tough sides to think how Pollard bit at them precious stiffikits which Jack drawd up hisself and put all them there fine names to."

"Well, well, Barney," interrupted Mrs. Webber, "don't stand wasting precious time here, but be off with you, and lay hold of Bill Scott, so as to be punctual."

"Bill's handy enow, and as ready to lend a hand as he is to swill his harf an' harf, or dewour his biled mutton for supper. And now tell us how it's all to be."

A few whispered arrangements were settled between the treacherous woman and her villainous accomplice, and then they separated. But it struck Barney the Burker that as he emerged from the back gate, his ear caught a sound as of some one darting away, and he further conjectured that this some one was a female by the rustling of the garments. His keen eves flung thin, piercing glances in the same direction, but the alley was involved in total darkness, and he could therefore distinguish nothing. He now rushed forward along the lane. but he overtook no one, and therefore endeavoured to persuade himself that he had either vielded to a false alarm, or else that it was some person belonging to an adjacent house speeding forth on a message, and that the incident had no particular significancy to warrant his transient apprehensions. Still there was a certain vague misgiving in the mind of Barney the Burker, and ere he returned to the publichouse where his worthy acolyte and pupil Bill Scott was awaiting his presence, he lurked about in the lane and its vicinage for upwards of a quarter of an hour. No further circumstance, however, transpired to renew or confirm his suspicions, and as he at length moved slowly away toward the low public-house or boozing-ken where he had established his headquarters, he said to himself, "No, it's nuffin to be scared at. As for ghostesses, blow me if I'm the chap which is likely to be surreptitious --- superstitious, I mean; and as for any von a-listenin' at the gate and then bowling off in such a manner as that. - no, it's all nonsense, 'Twas no doubt a servant-gal a-running for the beer, and some of them gals does flit along just for all the world as if they was wild."

While thus musing, Barney the Burker pursued his way toward the boozing-ken, and in the meantime we must see what had taken place within the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard.

Scarcely had Mrs. Webber issued forth from the house into the back yard, when there was a knock at the front door, and Mr. Pollard, not hearing his housekeeper answer the summons, imagined that she must be otherwise engaged; he accordingly proceeded himself to ascertain who it might be. Taking the candle in his hand, he repaired to the door, and on opening it, perceived a lady of tall stature, welldeveloped form, and good apparel. He at once conceived that this must be Mrs. Rayner, but with his habitual caution, he waited for her to announce herself. "Mr. Pollard," said Lettice Rodney, for she indeed the visitress was, "we meet again after a long interval."

"It is then you, Louisa," said the old miser, and he took Lettice's hand. "Walk in; I have been expecting you. How is it that you came not before? You must speak loud, for I am afflicted with deafness."

"I experienced an accident," answered Lettice, "which detained me for a few days."

"What! on the railway?" ejaculated Pollard.

"Yes; I was in the train which ran off the lines and upset, causing such dreadful injuries and loss of life."

"Indeed! It was suggested to me," continued Pollard, "that you might be a passenger by that ill-fated train, and I was not altogether without the apprehension that you yourself might have been the unfortunate lady who was not recognized. However, I am heartily glad that it is otherwise, and I give you such poor welcome as my house can afford. Step into the parlour;" then, as he led the way thither, he exclaimed, with an air of vexation, "Dear me, how provoking. That housekeeper of mine has let the fire go out," although he perfectly well knew that such was the case.

"Pray, my dear Mr. Pollard," said Lettice, assuming a tone and manner of the sweetest affability, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Indeed, I am well aware that it is an unseemly hour for me to call, but I considered it my duty to pay my respects the very first moment of my arrival in your town. I have only just stepped from the train — "

"And you will take refreshment?" said Mr. Pollard, advancing toward the bell-pull.

"No, I thank you," responded Lettice, "I am wearied, and still unwell from the effects of the recent accident. Now that I have paid my respects and satisfied myself that you are in good health, I will repair to some hotel, and tomorrow will wait upon you at any hour you may choose to appoint."

"I thought that perhaps you would make my house your home for a day or two," answered Pollard; "indeed, your bedchamber is in readiness. It is the very same you occupied ten years ago."

"You are exceedingly kind," answered Lettice, "and

it would be ungrateful indeed on my part not to do your bidding in all things. I have to thank you, Mr. Pollard, for the manner in which you have carried out the trust confided to you by my deceased father, the regularity with which you have made me my periodical remittances — "

"There is no need to thank me," answered Pollard, " and yet I am of course glad that you are satisfied with my guardianship. You will give me credit, Louisa, for having abstained from reproach when you took a certain step — "

"Do not allude to it, my dear sir," interrupted Lettice, carrying her kerchief to her eyes; "it reminds me but too painfully of my irreparable loss."

"Yes, yes, it must," said the old miser. "You will remain here, then, for a day or two? It will please me to have the society of one whom I knew as a child, but whom I have not seen until now since her girlhood. I learned that you had grown up into a fine, handsome woman, and I was not deceived. I should not have known you, — no. I should not have recognized you; you are different from what I expected you to be, and yet there is the same colour of the hair, — yes, and the eyes, too, but the profile has taken developments of which your girlhood gave but little promise."

While thus speaking, Anthony Pollard contemplated Lettice Rodney wth earnest attention, but yet without any suspicion in his looks or his manner. This was an ordeal that put all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation to the test; it was, however, one which she had naturally foreseen she would have to pass through, and for which she was consequently prepared. She bore that scrutiny well, affecting to smile and blush modestly at the compliment which was paid to her beauty; and that blush also served as a veil for any little trifling confusion which she could not altogether prevent. It was quite evident that the old man had not the remotest misgiving as to the identity of his visitress with Mrs. Rayner, and it was therefore only with a businesslike caution that he proceeded to give to the conversation that turn which it now took.

"We were speaking a few minutes back of the railway accident," he said, " and I may now observe that my apprehension as to your having lost your life on the occasion was but a feeble one, inasmuch as the unrecognized lady appeared not to have in her possession any papers calculated to show who she was."

"And of course you well knew," observed Lettice, with a smile, "that such would not be the case with me. I have in this packet," she continued, producing a small paper parcel, "a variety of documents, which perhaps you will look over at your leisure."

"And where have you left your luggage?" inquired the lawyer.

"At the railway station," answered Lettice. "It was my purpose to ask you to recommend me to a suitable hotel, but since you have been kind enough to insist that I shall take up my temporary abode beneath your roof, I will go and order my effects to be brought hither."

"I cannot think of allowing you to go out again at this late hour," said Mr. Pollard. "The very first thing in the morning I will procure some one to fetch your boxes from the termiuus. If you are not cold in this room without a fire, we will sit and chat a little longer, and there will be no harm in my looking at these papers at once; it will save some trouble for the morrow, and then there will be nothing for you to do but sign the releases and receive your money."

Thus speaking, the old man proceeded to open the packet, and putting on his spectacles, he commenced the examination of the documents, musing audibly as he proceeded.

"The certificate of your birth, — ay, to be sure. I remember it well. The certificate of your marriage, and also this French paper containing the proof of your poor husband's death. I am glad you brought it, as it is to a certain extent necessary. Ah! these, I see, are several letters of mine to you, merely on business matters. And here is your French passport; hair brown, eyes blue, stature tall, the least thing stout, and so on. Very good. We will now put up these papers again, and you can keep them. If I have looked over them, it was as a mere matter of form, and nothing else."

"Of course, my dear sir," answered Lettice, infinitely relieved when this new ordeal was over, "you are bound to conduct the affair in a businesslike way. And now, with your permission, I will retire to rest, for I feel much fatigued."

Mr. Pollard rang the bell, and the summons was immediately answered by Mrs. Webber, who had not long reëntered the house after her meeting with Barney the Burker. She was totally unaware that any one had been admitted during her temporary absence, and she was therefore smitten with astonishment on finding her master seated with a lady. As a matter of course she at once concluded that this must be Mrs. Rayner, and quickly recovering her self-possession, she assumed an air of placid benignity, as if pleased that the long-expected one should have come at last.

"This is Mrs. Rayner," said the old miser to his housekeeper, "and thus by her presence are all apprehensions for her safety set at rest. Have the goodness to conduct Mrs. Rayner to the chamber prepared for her reception. Good night, Louisa."

"Good night, my dear sir," answered Lettice, and she then followed Mrs. Webber from the room.

A few minutes afterward the housekeeper returned to the parlour, to make the usual inquiry as to whether her master needed anything more ere she retired for the night, and the response being in the negative, she withdrew.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRONG ROOM

IT was now close upon ten o'clock, and the old miser proceeded to the strong room, which, as the reader will recollect, also served him as a bedchamber. He had to part on the following day with the sum of three thousand pounds, and though it was not his own money, yet there was something gratifying in the possession of it. He loved to feast his eves on masses of shining gold, - that gold which was the idol of his egotistic worship. On the very first day that Mrs. Rayner attained her majority, he had drawn the sum of three thousand pounds from his banker, and had deposited it in his iron safe. A large portion was in the vellow specie: the remainder in bank-notes. The old man now sat down at the table to count over those notes and that gold from which he was to part on the morrow. He experienced a feeling very closely bordering upon affliction at the prospect of having to separate himself from so large a sum, but vet not for a moment did he entertain the thought of self-appropriating it, nor did he regret having honourably performed the duties of guardianship in respect to that money and its rightful owner, whom he now supposed to be beneath his roof. But he sat down to count it, not merely to convince himself, for the tenth time since he had it in his possession. that it was correct, but likewise to have the gratification of fingering and contemplating it for the last time but one. We say but one, because the old man naturally expected that on the morrow he would have to count the money again when handing it over to its claimant, and then indeed for the last time.

Meanwhile Mrs. Webber had ascended to her own chamber, making her footsteps sound with unusual heaviness upon the stairs, and slamming the door of the room with a certain degree of violence, and all for the purpose of making the supposed Mrs. Rayner hear that she had thus sought her own apartment. There the treacherous housekeeper sat down for about a quarter of an hour, retaining in her hand an old-fashioned silver watch which she possessed, and keeping her eyes fixed upon the dial. If we were to follow the train of her musings we should find that she was exceedingly well acquainted with the habits of her master, although she had been so short a time in his service; but then she had entered this service for a special object, and she had failed not to watch all his proceedings and acquire as deep an insight as possible into his habits and customs.

"He will sit down in his room for a good half-hour," she said to herself, "to look over his books, enter the transactions of the day, and sum up his profits before he barricades himself in for the night. At a quarter past ten precisely I am to give admission to Barney and Bill Scott; there will then be a good quarter of an hour to do the work. Yes, and it shall be done, too, no matter this Mrs. Rayner's presence; it shall be done at any risk."

While thus musing, Mrs. Webber continued to regard the minute hand of her watch, and just as it marked twelve minutes past ten, she took off her shoes, opened the door very gently, and noiselessly crept down the staircase. Not a board creaked under her footsteps, and she was careful to prevent the rustling of her dress as she passed by Lettice Rodney's door. She carried no light in her hand, and thus, silent as a ghost, stealthy and mysterious as an evil spirit, in the deep darkness did she continue her way. She gained the ground floor, she peeped through the keyhole of the strong room, and thence she proceeded to the kitchen. Cautiously opening the back door, she put on her shoes again and issued into the yard. The back gate was speedily unfastened, and two persons who were lurking in readiness there passed into the premises. These were Barnes and his delectable acolvte Bill Scott. Mrs. Webber led them into the kitchen, and there she struck a light, placing her finger upon her lips the moment the glare of the lucifer flashed upon the previous darkness.

"Hush!" she said, in the lowest whisper, "we must be cautious; the lady is come." "But has the old 'un paid her over the blunt?" inquired Barney, with a look of apprehension.

"No, I am certain he has not," responded Mrs. Webber; "there are deeds to sign first of all, or, rather, it was intended there should be," she added, with a glance of diabolical significancy.

"Ah! but they won't be, though," rejoined Barney the Burker, his own looks full of a still more hideous and terrible meaning. "I say, by the bye, when I think of it, did I understand you just now, marm, that you mean to cut away from the house directly the business is done?"

"To be sure," answered Mrs. Webber, "when the swag is properly divided. But of course we shall all three go different ways, and you may depend upon it that though an old woman I shall keep on the tramp the whole night, and then get up to London to-morrow in the best way that I can."

"But there'll be a terrible hue and cry," remarked the Burker, "and it won't do for you to think of laying concealed at Jack Smedley's house; you'll be sure to get nabbed."

"And I don't mean anything of the sort," answered the vile woman; "I shall get over to France, and never come back to England again. But we must not stand gossiping here; we must get to work."

"Here's the tools," said the Burker, with a grin, as he produced a long dagger from one pocket and a pistol from the other, while Bill Scott also displayed a couple of pistols. "But this is the thing that we must do the business with," added Barney, as he restored the pistol to his pocket, and felt the point of the dirk with his forefinger.

"Come," said Mrs. Webber, " and mind if Mrs. Rayner up-stairs happens to overhear a noise, if there is any struggling on the old man's part and she gets alarmed and comes down or cries out — "

"Then we must do her business also," interrupted the Burker, with a ferocious look.

Mrs. Webber nodded with approving significancy, and as a thought struck her, she said, "As I came down-stairs, I peeped through the keyhole and saw the old man sitting with his back to the door. If we should be lucky enough to find him in the same position now, the work will be easy enough, for he is too deaf to hear the door opening or to catch the sound of your footsteps. But you had better both of you take off your shoes."

This counsel was at once followed by the Burker and Bill Scott, and Mrs. Webber, with the light in her hand, now led the way from the kitchen. On reaching the passage where the door of the strong room was, she deposited the candle upon a step of the staircase, and then peeped through the keyhole. As her countenance was again turned toward her two villainous accomplices, its expression of fiendish satisfaction made them aware that circumstances continued favourable to their murderous project.

Mrs. Webber now proceeded to raise the latch of the door as noiselessly as she possibly could, and as she gently opened it, Barney and Bill Scott beheld the old man seated with his back toward them. He had on his dressing-gown, and was placed in an armchair at the head of the table. A single candle lighted the scene within the room; its beams were reflected by the yellow glow which the miser was counting. A couple of bags were likewise in front of him, as well as an open account-book, which showed the precise state of Mrs. Rayner's affairs, calculated and balanced to the minutest fraction. So absorbed was Anthony Pollard in his task that even if he had been less deaf than he was, he would perhaps have still failed to hear the opening door or the tread of the murderer's steps — shoeless and stealthy that were approaching from behind.

Barney the Burker advanced first, with his long, sharp dagger in his hand; Bill Scott was immediately behind him, grasping a pistol to be used in case of emergency. Mrs. Webber remained at the door, behind which she half-concealed herself, for though iniquitous enough to play her part in the cold-blooded deed, she nevertheless instinctively recoiled from its too near contemplation. Stealthily advanced the Burker toward the unsuspecting old miser, and when at the back of his chair, the villain's dagger was raised to deal the murderous blow. At that very instant Mrs. Webber gave a start, and the word "Hush!" being almost involuntarily uttered, sounded audibly from her lips. Bill Scott, instantaneously catching it, laid his hand upon the Burker's shoulder to make him aware that there was something wrong, at the same time that he glanced back toward Mrs. Webber. But it was too late. The diabolic force was already in the Burker's arm, the weapon was descending with terrific power, deep down did it plunge between the shoulders of the old man, a groan burst from his lips, and he fell forward a corpse, with his head upon the table.

"It was nothing, after all," said Mrs. Webber, the instant the blow was dealt. "I thought I heard some one moving about up-stairs."

But here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, to return to Lettice Rodney. It will be remembered that when Mrs. Webber was summoned to the parlour in order to conduct Lettice to her chamber, she was seized with astonishment on finding that her master was not alone. and that the lady whom she took to be Mrs. Ravner had been admitted during her temporary absence from the house. That look had troubled Lettice; her guilty conscience instantaneously suggested a cause of apprehension. Perhaps this old housekeeper had been for years in Mr. Pollard's service, perhaps she had known the veritable Louisa, and perhaps she was now stricken with astonishment on beholding in the supposed Mrs. Rayner a person so different from what she had expected to see, and from what the little Louisa was likely to have grown up into? Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through Lettice Rodney's mind, and a cold terror thrilled through her form. She had nevertheless a sufficiency of self-possession still remaining to avoid the betraval of what she felt, and she followed Mrs. Webber to the bedroom prepared for her reception. Mrs. Webber was considerably disconcerted by the arrival of the supposed Mrs. Rayner, and was apprehensive lest the murderous plot could not now be carried out. A portion of what she felt was reflected in her looks, and Lettice, being herself keenly and poignantly on the watch, saw that there was something strange and peculiar in the way that the housekeeper surveyed her. Still interpreting matters according to her own alarms, her former suspicion seemed to be strengthened: namely, that Mrs. Webber had a misgiving in respect to her identity with Mrs. Rayner. She longed to lead the old woman into conversation, to ascertain if her fears were really well founded, but the words she would have spoken appeared to stick in her throat, and she could not give utterance to a single syllable.

"Is there anything you require, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Webber, with a certain constraint, in consequence of what was passing in her own mind.

"Nothing," replied Lettice, her tongue now unloosening, and then she muttered a faint "Good night," which Mrs. Webber did not catch, and therefore did not respond to, but quitted the room with the impression that the lady was a proud, haughty, and reserved being who did not choose to enter into any discourse with her.

That constraint with which the housekeeper had spoken. and which, as the reader has seen, in reality arose from the state of her own guilty feelings, was, under a similar influence, interpreted by Lettice into a studied coolness on the old woman's part, so that when Mrs. Webber had retired. Lettice flung herself upon a chair in an awful dismay, murmuring, "I am suspected, I shall be discovered, this woman is evidently more than half-convinced that I am an impostress. At all events she will give some hint to her master to put him upon his guard; he will question me more closely than he otherwise would have done, he will purposely speak to me of things concerning which I cannot possibly give an answer. I shall be detected, exposed, sent to prison, tried. transported, or perhaps hanged," for the young woman knew not very well which offences were capital or which were not, and her own terrors naturally made her see everything in the worst light.

She wrung her hands in despair: she bitterly repented of the course into which temptation had led her, and whereas until the last few minutes she had conceived her position to be entirely safe, she now felt astounded at what she looked upon as her egregious folly in having embarked in such an enterprise. She would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to be safe out of the house. A mortal terror was upon her; at one moment she shivered with a cold sensation, the next instant she felt as if her veins were on fire. But still recurred the question — what was she to do? To carry on the imposture now appeared hopelessness itself utter madness. While she sat in these painful meditations, she heard Mrs. Webber come stamping up the stairs, and then loudly closing the door of her room. The reader knows very well for what purpose this noise was made, but Lettice interpreted it through the medium of her own fears.

"The woman has been down," she said to herself, with anguish at the heart, "to tell her master that he is deceived, and she cannot conceal her own rage at the idea that there is an impostress in the house. Hence this stamping of the feet, hence this slamming of her door. Oh, what will become of me?"

Again the miserable Lettice wrung her hands despairingly, — when all in a moment the thought struck her that she might escape out of the house. Yes, if this were practicable, she would accomplish it. But what if the street door were locked and the key taken out? Ah! then doubtless there would be some means of issue from the back part of the premises, or by the parlour-window — anything, so long as she could escape. And now how thankful she was that her effects had been left at the railway terminus, for perhaps there might be a very late train by which she could get off, or, at all events, there was sure to be a very early one in the morning, and she might be far away from Liverpool before her flight from the house should be discovered.

Having reflected upon all these things, Lettice Rodney determined to make her escape. She had not taken off her bonnet or shawl; she was therefore in readiness to depart without delay. But she thought to herself that it would be better to wait half an hour, and thus afford leisure to the other inmates of the dwelling (for she did not even know how many there might be, nor what number of servants the old miser kept) to sink into repose in their respective chambers.

She waited accordingly, and it was a half-hour of painful suspense for her, because she was not as yet certain that she would after all be enabled to find an issue from the dwelling. She did not hear Mrs. Webber descend the stairs, and as the house appeared to continue quiet, she at length resolved to put her project into execution. Opening the door of her chamber, she stole forth; but on reaching the head of the staircase she perceived a light glimmering below, and hastily retreating, closed the door again, more loudly than was consistent with caution. It was this sound which had reached Mrs. Webber's ears, and made her ejaculate "Hush!" just at the very instant that Barney the Burker was about to drive his dagger deep down between the shoulders of the victim. And it may be added that it was the candle which Mrs. Webber had placed upon the stairs that had so terrified Lettice Rodney.

The murder was accomplished, as we have already described, and scarcely was the blow dealt when the vile old housekeeper intimated to the two assassins that she had been disturbed by a false alarm.

"What was it you thought as how you heerd?" inquired the Burker.

"A door shutting up-stairs," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Then what if that lady as you spoke of has been a-listening and heerd summut; and perhaps she don't dare come down, but will open her winder and speak to any one as goes by, so that in a few minutes the place'll be surrounded, the whole neighbourhood alarmed, and we have no more chance of getting clear off than a cat without claws in a partickler place."

Mrs. Webber's countenance grew full of dismay as she listened to this rapidly uttered speech on the Burker's part, and the tenor of which appeared indeed but too reasonable.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Bill Scott.

"By jingo! we must do for her also," ejaculated Barney, with a look of fiercest resolve. "Come, lead the way, old dame, and we'll look to the swag arterwards. He won't run off with it," added the ruffian, with a look of horrible significancy toward the old miser's corpse, which was bending with its face down upon the table.

Meanwhile Lettice Rodney was a prey to the most terrible apprehensions, her guilty conscience suggesting all kinds of alarms. She thought that the reason why there was a light still burning below was because the officers of justice had been sent for and were waiting to take her into custody. There was madness in her brain. She flew to the window of her room with the idea of opening it and precipitating herself into the street; but no, she could not die thus horribly, - or, if she survived, find herself frightfully mutilated. Ah! all in a moment an idea struck her. What if she were to hasten down-stairs, throw herself at the miser's feet, confess the trick, but beseech him to pardon her, and in return for his forgiveness she would give him such information as would enable him to keep the three thousand pounds for himself. She could tell him that his ward, Mrs Rayner, was no more, and that she had perished in a manner which would prevent

her heirs — if she had any by her own or her husband's side — from becoming acquainted with her death.

Swift as lightning did these ideas sweep through the brain of Lettice Rodney, but ere she descended to put her project into execution, she opened the door and listened. Ah! she heard voices talking below; they were indeed those of the wretches who were at the instant deciding upon the murder of herself, but she could not catch what they said, and she fancied that the officers of justice were perhaps already in the house. Oh, then she must be seech and implore a private interview with Mr. Pollard; it seemed to her the only method to save herself from destruction. Goaded wellnigh to madness, the wretched young woman rushed down the stairs, and as, on reaching the lower flight, she beheld Mrs. Webber accompanied by two ill-looking fellows, her very worst fears seemed to be confirmed, and in her eves the Burker and Bill Scott instantaneously took the aspect of constables.

"Spare, oh, spare me!" she cried, frantically clasping her hands as she stopped short midway on the staircase. "I will confess everything. Oh, I know that I have been very guilty, but the temptation was so great. Let me see Mr. Pollard, and I will tell him something that shall induce him to forgive me."

The reader may imagine how great was the astonishment of Mrs. Webber and her iniquitous accomplices on hearing these passionately vehement ejaculations from Lettice Rodney's lips. While, on the one hand, utterly at a loss to comprehend her, they nevertheless, on the other hand, heard enough to make them aware that she was completely unsuspicious of the crime which they had committed, and that she believed Pollard to be still in the land of the living, inasmuch as she was beseeching an interview with him. The three wretches exchanged bewildered looks with each other, and Lettice fancied that they were uncertain whether to grant her own prayer or to carry her off to gaol at once.

"Spare me — for Heaven's sake spare me!" she exclaimed, descending the stairs, "and I will confess how I was led into this imposture."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, to whom these words were a revelation, "then, who are you?" "My name is Lettice Rodney," replied the young woman. I met Mrs. Rayner — "

"And you are not Mrs. Rayner?" said the housekeeper, in hurried inquiry.

"No, and you all along knew that I was not. Oh, there is Mr. Pollard — Gracious heavens!" screamed Lettice, as her eyes were riveted upon the dagger which still remained between his shoulders; and smitten with the horrible, the overwhelming conviction that murder had been done, she fell down senseless at the foot of the staircase.

"There let her be. We'll divide the swag and bolt," said the Burker. "It isn't worth while to do her a mischief anyhow."

"Stop!" said Mrs. Webber, as an idea of devilish ingenuity flashed in unto her mind. "We may save ourselves from all danger, and I need not scamper out of the country over to France."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Burker and Bill Scott, as if both speaking in the same breath.

"Never do you mind," responded Mrs. Webber. "Leave it all to me — I know what I am about. Take charge of the swag, Barney — I know I can trust you for my share. You'll get up to London as quick as you can, and you'll give it to my daughter Bab — but not to Jack, mind! not to Jack."

"All right, marm," responded the Burker. "Come along, Bill, and let's be off."

The three wretches, satisfied that Lettice Rodney was in a profound swoon, from which she would not very readily awaken, returned into the strong room; and the two men took possession of all the gold and bank-notes, with the exception of fifty sovereigns which Mrs. Webber desired them to leave as a means of enabling her to carry out the objects which she had in view. Barney and Bill Scott then took their departure by the same way in which they had entered, Mrs. Webber carefully closing and securing the yard gate as well as the back door when they were gone. On reëntering the house, she found Lettice still lying insensible at the foot of the stairs. She approached the corpse of her master, took his purse from his pocket, put into that, purse the fifty sovereigns which she had kept back, and then, while Lettice still continued in a state of unconsciousness, deposited the purse in the young woman's pocket.

This being done, Mrs. Webber opened the front door of the house and began screaming out, "Murder! help!" with all her might and main. The alarm spread like wild-fire along the street, several persons rushed in, and as Lettice Rodney was startled back to life by the woman's cries, she found herself the object of execration and abhorrence on the part of a dozen individuals surrounding her — she was accused of murder!

No pen can describe the confusion, the horror, and the dismay which now prevailed in the miser's house. The neighbours were flocking in, and the spectacle of the corpse, . bent motionless over the table, with the weapon sticking in the back, produced a fearful sensation.

"Murder!" cried Lettice, flinging around her wild and almost frenzied looks, "I commit murder! No, no, that abominable woman," — pointing to Mrs. Webber — " and the two villains who were with her — "

"Wretch!" exclaimed the housekeeper, "you know that you killed the poor old gentleman because he found out that you were a cheat, and you fell into a fit when, alarmed by the noise, I came down and discovered the dreadful deed."

Lettice was overwhelmed with the accusation. She strove to speak, but she could not. A faintness came over her, and she would have again fallen, had she not been supported by the arms of two police constables who now took her into custody. In this piteous condition, bordering upon unconsciousness, she was borne away to the station-house, followed by a concourse of persons, all under the influence of dread horror at the deed which had been committed, as well as of amazement that one so young, so beautiful, and so genteellooking should have committed such a stupendous crime.

On reaching the station-house, Mrs. Webber preferred the charge, but was continuously interrupted by the passionate, frenzied, and vehement ejaculations of Lettice Rodney. The latter was searched, and the purse, containing the fifty pounds, was found upon her. This was proclaimed to be the old miser's purse, not merely by Mrs. Webber, but by the butcher, the baker, the grocer, and other tradesmen, with whom the deceased had been accustomed to deal, and who were now present while the charge was being preferred. As a matter of course, no one believed the unfortunate Lettice Rodney's vehement averment of innocence and counteraccusation in respect to Mrs. Webber. She was consigned to a cell, where she passed the remainder of the night in a condition of mind bordering upon utter distraction.

In the morning Lettice Rodney was placed before the magistrate, charged with the murder of Anthony Pollard. Meanwhile her boxes had been taken possession of at the railway station by the police, and some letters were therein found proving that her name was Lettice Rodney. On her own person not merely the murdered man's purse was discovered, but also the packet of papers belonging to Mrs. Rayner. The evidence given by Mrs. Webber before the magistrate was to the following effect:

"The late Mr. Pollard was guardian to a lady named Louisa Ravner, whom he had not, however, seen for many years. This lady recently attained her majority, and was expected by Mr. Pollard to pay him a visit and receive the funds that were due to her. Last evening the prisoner came to the house, announcing herself to be Mrs. Rayner, and she was at first believed to be what she thus represented herself. She had a long interview with my poor master, and at about ten o'clock I went up to bed, leaving them together in the room where Mr. Pollard habitually sat. I did not immediately retire to rest, having needlework to do. Upwards of half an hour elapsed, when I heard the sounds of voices speaking very loud. I opened my door and listened. My ears distinctly caught my master's voice bitterly upbraiding the prisoner as an impostress, and insisting upon knowing how she came to personate Mrs. Rayner, and how she got possession of her papers. There was a great deal of this language on my master's side, and much intercession on that of the prisoner. I heard Mr. Pollard threaten to give her into custody, and then the door of the room, which was previously open, was closed. I presumed it was for fear of alarming me, and I thought to myself that Mr. Pollard meant to forgive her if she would confess everything. Presently it struck me that I heard a cry — or, rather, a deep moan; then the door was opened again, and feeling a certain degree of uneasiness, I hastened down-stairs. The prisoner was in the passage. She looked dreadfully confused on beholding me, and as I glanced in at the door, I was filled with horror and dismay on beholding a dagger sticking in my master's back. I seized

upon the prisoner, calling her a murderess, and she fainted. The dagger belonged to my master; he was afraid of thieves and kept it for his defence. When sitting in that room at night-time, he generally laid it on the table near him, so that I have no doubt the prisoner snatched it up and used it suddenly."

While Mrs. Webber was making this deposition, Lettice Rodney passed through all the extremes of feeling of which the human heart is susceptible, — at one time crushed down by the weight of fearful consternation, at another giving vent to the most passionate declarations of innocence, as well as of accusations against Mrs. Webber herself; now imploring Heaven to interfere in her behalf, then appealing to the justice of man; now confessing herself to be guilty of the intended cheat, but repudiating with abhorence the graver and blacker charge; then bursting forth into a paroxysm of the wildest anguish, and then sinking down into a numbed stupor, until suddenly starting up again in a fresh frenzy of words, looks, and gesticulations.

When asked, with the usual caution, whether Lettice had anything to say in her defence, she spoke with so much incoherence that it was scarcely possible to unravel her words and obtain therefrom a continuous narrative. The magistrate was, however, patient, and after much trouble her story was elicited. She told how she had fallen in with Mrs. Rayner, and explained the circumstances under which she was led to undertake the imposture. She told likewise how she had discovered the murder, and seen Mrs. Webber with the two men, but no one believed this portion of her tale. The purse had been found upon her, and then, too, she had her bonnet and shawl on when captured, which seemed to corroborate Mrs. Webber's account of a protracted interview with the old man; while the unfortunate young woman's own explanation of an intended flight from the house was regarded merely as an excuse to account for the circumstance of her being thus dressed in all the apparel in which she had first arrived at the dwelling.

The magistrate had but one duty to perform, one course to pursue, and this was to commit Lettice Rodney for trial at the next assizes, on the charge of murdering Anthony Pollard.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DUCAL SECRETARY

CHRISTIAN ASHTON entered upon his duties as private English secretary to the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and a week passed, during which he gave his Royal Highness the utmost satisfaction. In the meantime he had become acquainted with all the noblemen and gentlemen forming the suite of that most illustrious prince, and perhaps the reader may wish to know a little more of these same German worthies.

They were eight in number, delighting in names as euphonious to pronounce as they were easy to spell, and these shall be enumerated. Firstly, there was Count Wronki, who filled the office of lord steward, and whose chief avocation appeared to be in giving as few orders as possible and keeping down the hotel expenses to the utmost of his ability. The reader is already aware that the taciturn Chevalier Gumbinnen occupied the high post of lord chamberlain, with which was combined that of principal lord of the bedchamber; but if this latter office included the care of the duke's wardrobe, it was very nearly a sinecure, for a single portmanteau of small dimensions could without difficulty contain all the coats, waistcoats, and trousers which his Royal Highness possessed, and as for the linen, when there were a dozen shirts in use and half a dozen more at half the washerwoman's, - applying the same estimate also to false collars, handkerchiefs, and stockings, --- the amount this great prince's undergarments was not of of an extent to require a great deal of supervision. Baron Raggidbak was the groom of the stole, the precise duties of which office Christian Ashton was at a loss to comprehend, unless indeed they consisted in the eating and drinking of all that his lordship could by any means get hold of, lounging

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away his time, reading newspapers, or quarrelling with a comrade over a game of piquet for sixpenny stakes. The Chevalier Kadger was the equerry, and he was in almost constant attendance upon his Royal Highness; but his leisure time was expended in smoking full-flavoured Cubas. and in renewing the odour of garlic and rum which he seemed to make it a rule to carry about with him. Then there was General Himmelspinken, who filled the office of master of the horse: but this - at least in England, whatever it might have been in Germany — was an unmistakable sinecure, for the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had not brought over with him so much as a donkey, much less a horse, and one of the queen's carriages was every day sent from Buckingham Palace to convey his Royal Highness to court, or out for an airing, or to visit the public buildings, and so forth. Baron Farthenless held the office of privy purse, and Christian could not help thinking that the name of this functionary was most unfortunately ominous in respect to the state of the ducal exchequer. One thing he noticed, which was that Baron Farthenless took immense care of the duke's plate. only giving it out when his Royal Highness dined at the hotel, but never opening the chest for its display on the dinner-table of the ducal suite when his Royal Highness banqueted at the palace or elsewhere. Another high official was Herr Humbogh, --- whose name was pronounced just like that word which Englishmen are accustomed to ejaculate when expressing a derisive incredulity of anything which they hear, or when denouncing an imposture, a quackery, or a cheat. This gentleman was denominated the privy seal. His duties were light and pleasant, as well as easily performed, and with but little responsibility. - being limited indeed to the careful keeping of an old brass seal on which the ducal arms were emblazoned, and the value of which as a piece of metal might be about three halfpence. The mention of Count Frumpenhausen will complete this aristocratic category, his lordship hearing the title of Gold Stick, and his duty being to carry a brass-headed cane on those occasions when his ducal master was graciously pleased to grant an audience to English noblemen and gentlemen who called to pay their respects to the reigning sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha.

But though any one of such English noblemen and gen-

tlemen could, without much inconvenience to his own finances, have drawn a cheque upon his banker for an amount that would have purchased all the personal property possessed by the duke and his entire suite, yet such is the servile, grovelling, lickspittle character of the higher and middle orders of the English, that the profoundest respect was paid by all visitors to this trumpery duke and the beggarly, half-starved horde of rapacious Germans that he had brought over with him. It was, however, sufficient that he was nearly related to Prince Albert, that he bore a ducal title, and that he was an independent sovereign (in the pay of Russia and Austria), — it was sufficient, we say, that he was all this to ensure for him the reverential devotion of those scions of the British aristocracy and gentry who flocked to Mivart's to pay their court.

When the week had expired, and Christian was about to take his departure at five o'clock, — his usual hour, — he looked about for Baron Farthenless, to whom he was directed to apply for his salary. He could not, however, find the privy purse in any one of the suite of rooms occupied by his Royal Highness and his retinue, but in the antechamber he found all the other noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal household assembled together. It immediately struck Christian that these also were waiting for the privy purse, in order to receive such moneys as might be due to them; and vet, on a second thought, he repudiated the idea as something too preposterous, that such high and mighty functionaries could possibly receive weekly salaries. He did not want his own money, as he had plenty of funds at his disposal, but the warning given him by the friendly disposed waiter had rendered him determined to look after that which was his due; for he thought it by no means improbable that Baron Farthenless might endeavour to cheat him out of it, ---an opinion to which he was more or less justified in arriving inasmuch as during the week he had seen too many instances of the dirty meanness and paltry expedients to which the members of the ducal retinue had recourse for obtaining wines, cigars, spirits, and other things beyond the limit of their actual allowances.

"What for you sall be waiting, yong mans?" inquired Baron Raggidbak, taking our hero aside and speaking to him in a confidential whisper. "I am waiting to see Baron Farthenless," answered Christian. "Does your lordship shortly expect him?"

"Yes, I suspects him in one — two — tree minute. He am gone for to go to de palace to see de prince, and he come back vare soon wid de moneys."

"Gone to the palace to get money of the prince?" ejaculated Christian, thus giving involuntary utterance to his amazement.

"Yes, begar!" responded Raggidbak. "De vare goot Prince Albert sall act as — how you call it? — oh, de banker of de duke all de times we sall be in England. I waiting too for de moneys. I vare rich man in mine own country — vare rich, but me forgot to bring over wid me de tousand pounds which I was meant for to do. Have you got such a ting, yong mans, as six shilling in your pocket? and we sall drink one bottle of de wine till de baron sall come back."

Christian was determined not to he mulcted a second time by Baron Raggidbak, and so he gave an evasive response, whereat his lordship looked deeply indignant and turned haughtily away, playing with his gilt brass watchchain.

Almost immediately afterward Baron Farthenless made his appearance, and then Christian was surprised to see how the noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal retinue crowded around the privy purse, surveying him with looks of eager inquiry, and ready to stretch forth their dirty hands with hungry avidity to clutch whatsoever spoil he had to place at their disposal. And spoil it really was, — spoil wrung from the overtaxed industry of the working classes, and which, though by Act of Parliament passing through the hands of a naturalized foreign prince, was thus destined to find its way into the pockets of these German cormorants whom the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had brought over with him. Christian was infinitely disgusted, and as soon as he had received his own salary, he took his departure.

We must now observe that during the week which had thus elapsed since he entered into the service of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, he had every day seen the beautiful Isabella Vincent, but only for a few minutes at a time, and on no occasion to enter into discourse with her save in the presence of Mr. or Mrs. Chubb. His interest in the charming girl could scarcely be said to have increased, for it had already reached the point at which it had become the purest and sincerest love. But he saw that some mystery enveloped her, and he was curious to fathom it.

On returning to his lodging, between five and six o'clock in the evening, after receiving his salary from Baron Farthenless, he found a well-dressed but by no means agreeablelooking man knocking at the door of Mr. Chubb's house. The summons was not immediately answered, and Christian accordingly waited on the steps with this individual, who surveyed him, as he thought, in a rather suspicious manner. He was a person of about forty years of age, by no means good-looking, clothed in black, and exhibiting great neatness and carefulness of toilet. Presently the door opened, and the servant-girl, evidently recognizing the visitor, conducted him into the parlour, while Christian repaired to his own room.

About half an hour afterward, Mrs. Chubb made her appearance before her youthful lodger, and he at once saw by her countenance that something had troubled her. This countenance of hers was never the sweetest in its expression, and therefore when anything did transpire to put her out it was vixenish and disagreeable to a degree.

"I am come, Mr. Ashton," she said, "to beg that you will suit yourself with other apartments as soon as possible this very evening, if so be you can; and in course, if you insist upon it, I sha'n't claim the week's rent which is due, because I am not giving you a week's notice."

"But what is the meaning of this?" inquired Christian, perfectly astonished as well as hurt by the suddenness of the proceeding.

"Never mind, sir. I have got no explanations to give leastways there is no call to have any words about it; but as a gentleman I trust you will do me this faviour at once."

"Mrs. Chubb," answered Christian, half-indignant and half-remonstrating, "it is impossible you can treat me in such a manner without explaining your conduct. If my own behaviour has been improper or discourteous to yourself or any one beneath your roof — "

"Well, sir," interrupted Mrs. Chubb, softening somewhat, "there's no fault to find with your conduct: you're a gentleman, and you behaved as sich. But I do beg this faviour at your hands; and, in course, if in taking another lodging you refer to me I shall say all that's good and proper. Pray don't press me any further, there's a dear young gentleman, but see about moving at once."

"It is totally impossible that I can find another lodging this evening," answered Christian, cruelly annoyed and perplexed, "but, after the way in which you have just spoken to me, I certainly feel myself bound to leave to-morrow."

"Well, sir, I must make that do," responded Mrs. Chubb, and thank'ee kindly."

Thereupon she quitted the room, and Christian was left to deliberate upon all that had occurred. Was it on Isabella's account that he had received this notice? Was that man whom he had encountered at the street door in any way connected with her? He hoped not, for there was something in the look of that individual which he by no means liked, -a certain sinister expression which appeared to indicate hypocrisy, cunning, and other debasing sentiments. He now longed to obtain a few minutes' private discourse with Isabella. The thought of separating from her had led him to the sudden comprehension of the feeling which he entertained on her behalf. He saw that it was not a mere friendly interest; a secret voice, whispering in his soul, told him that it was love. But how obtain a private interview with Isabella? And even if he succeeded, what did he purpose to say? He knew not, and yet he felt how impossible it was for him to go elsewhere without exchanging another syllable with that beauteous creature. He sat with his door ajar, in the hope that he might hear her issue forth from the front parlour, in which case he would go and meet her in the passage at any risk. But no, the opportunity served not, the time passed, and at ten o'clock he heard Miss Vincent ascending to her own chamber, Mrs. Chubb closely following.

Christian passed an almost sleepless night. He rose early in the morning, and at nine o'clock was compelled to sally forth and search for another lodging before he proceeded to Mivart's Hotel to enter upon his day's duties. He was not long in finding suitable apartments; he gave a reference to Mrs. Chubb, and intimated that he should take possession of the rooms in the evening. Then, with a heavy heart, he repaired to the hotel; but during the hours that he was engaged in his avocations he was abstracted, and performed them only in a sort of mechanical manner.

At five he retraced his way to Mr. Chubb's, wondering whether he should be enabled to obtain a few minutes' interview with Isabella, in which case he was more than halfresolved to throw himself at her feet and avow his love: for it had now assumed all the pure passion and chaste fervour of romance. But as he entered the street, he beheld a carriage, with livery servants in attendance, standing at the door of the parish clerk's house. A man came out, leading Isabella by the hand, and that man was the same with the sinister countenance whom Christian had seen on the preceding day. He assisted Isabella to enter the carriage, he himself immediately afterward ascending to the box, and taking his seat as a menial or dependent by the side of the fat, gorgeously liveried, powdered coachman. The equipage drove away in the contrary direction from that whence Christian was advancing, and he stopped short, smitten with grief as well as with a bewilderment amounting almost to dismay. Isabella was gone; she had not observed him, or if she did notice his presence in the street, she had not dared bestow even a parting look upon him. She was gone, and she was borne away under circumstances which only added to the mystery already enveloping her. She had taken her departure in a splendid equipage, and the man who had come to fetch her was evidently a menial. If Christian's soul were susceptible of any consolation under this infliction, it was to be found in the fact that his mind was relieved from the apprehension that the sinister-looking individual was in any way connected by the bonds of kinship with the beautiful Isabella.

For nearly a minute did the youth stand in the street, a dozen yards distant from the spot where the carriage had just driven off. He felt as if a dreadful calamity had suddenly overtaken him, as if a gulf had abruptly opened, separating him from the object of his love. At length he moved slowly onward to the parish clerk's house. Mrs. Chubb herself answered his summons at the front door, and begged him to step into the parlour.

"Well, Mr. Ashton," she exclaimed, "here's a pretty business! I've lost the young lady and the guinea a week that was paid for her board and lodging, and all through you." "Through me?" ejaculated our young hero; but his cheeks became the colour of scarlet, for he felt as if the keen eyes of the landlady were penetrating to the inmost recesses of his heart.

"Yes, to be sure, through you, Mr. Ashton," she repeated, --" leastways, on your account. I hadn't ought to have took you unbeknown to that there Mr. Gibson."

"And who is Mr. Gibson?" inquired Christian, who now thought he might possibly hear something in respect to the mystery which had appeared to envelope the object of his love.

"Why, Mr. Gibson is the person who put Miss Vincent with me and paid for her board and lodging."

" And how long had Miss Vincent been with you?"

"Not more than three months or so," rejoined Mrs. Chubb; "and it is wery wexing that she should have gone like this. But who on earth she can be I haven't no more idea than the man in the moon."

"But it surely was not this Mr. Gibson's own carriage?"

"In course not, — or else he wouldn't have got upon the box. To think that Miss Vincent, who lived here for a guinea a week, should have had a carriage sent to fetch her away — "

"And where is she going to?" interrupted Christian, his heart palpitating with suspense as he awaited the reply.

"Ah! that's quite unbeknown to me," responded Mrs. Chubb. "Mr. Gibson was always precious close, and Miss Vincent herself never said a word about any relations or friends that she might have. But I always thought that there was some little mystery about the young lady. She lived for a long time with Mr. Hickman, our clergyman that was; and when he died it was through his widow's recommendation that Mr. Gibson put Miss Vincent with us — Chubb, you see, being parish clerk."

"And how long did Miss Vincent live in the clergyman's family?" asked Christian.

"Very nigh two year," rejoined Mrs. Chubb. "She was fourteen years old when she was fust put in Mr. Hickman's family. She was in deep mourning, for her mother had just died; and I did hear it whispered that she was a lady of title, but I don't know how true it may be, for Miss Vincent never spoke to me about her family. And to tell you the truth, when Mr. Gibson put her here, he hinted that she was somewhat peculiarly sitiwated, and that me and Chubb was never to bother her with no questions."

"Then it would appear that this Mr. Gibson was only the agent for some one else?" remarked Christian, "and this some one else is evidently the person, whether gentleman or lady, to whom the carriage itself belongs. But what did you mean," he hesitatingly inquired, "by saying that it was through me you have lost her?" and as Christian put the question, he felt a sad, sad tightening at the heart.

"Why, when Mr. Gibson came yesterday and saw you walk into the house, he asked me who you was, and I was obleeged to tell him that you was a lodger. He looked uncommon glum, and said that he thought as how he had put Miss Vincent into a house where there was no single men to talk nonsense to her, and so on. So I told him that you was a very respectable and well-behaved young gentleman, that you was out nearly the whole day, and never saw Miss Vincent unless it was when happening to pass her in the passage or on the stairs. But still he wasn't satisfied; so then I said as how I know'd you was an obleeging young gentleman, and would leave at the shortest possible notice. Mr. Gibson looked better pleased, and went away, and then I thought it was all right. But, lo and behold! just as the clock strikes five this evening, up dashes the carriage to the door, in comes Mr. Gibson, and says that Miss Vincent is to go away with him directly. Her things was soon packed up, and off she went, only just a minute or two before you knocked at the door. So you see that Miss Vincent has got some good friends, or else she has had a sudden windfall and turned out to be a fine lady, after all."

"And did she seem pleased," inquired Christian, "with the idea of going away?"

"Not a bit of it," ejaculated Mrs. Chubb. "When Mr. Gibson had her fetched down, — for she was up in her own room when he came, — and told her she was to go away with him at once, she seemed struck all of a heap."

"Ah! she seemed vexed?" ejaculated Christian, eagerly.

"That she did," exclaimed Mrs. Chubb, not observing his excitement. "And I know what it was: she was sad at the thought of parting from me. You see, I was always very kind and good to her, though it was but a guinea a week as was paid for her keep. And now, Mr. Ashton, there's no longer any call for you to shift your lodgings; and as it's through you I've lost Miss Vincent, I hope you won't think of leaving me."

But Christian made her no answer. — for the simple reason that he was not listening to the latter portion of her speech. His heart at the moment was a strange compound of joy and sorrow, — sorrow at the departure of the beauteous Isabella, and joy at the intelligence that she was sad when she left: for he knew full well that it could not be on account of separating from the parish clerk's wife, and a secret voice whispered in his soul that this sadness on Isabella's part was on account of himself. Youthful love is full of hope, and in imagination it triumphs over all obstacles; its fancy is so expansive that it even achieves impossibilities, levels the loftiest barriers and bridges the widest gulfs, until it beholds itself crowned with success. Such now was the case with Christian Ashton; and, feeling assured that he was not altogether indifferent to the lovely Isabella, he clung to the hope that the progress of time and the flow of circumstances might lead them together to the altar.

"Why, what are you thinking about, Mr. Ashton?" exclaimed Mrs. Chubb.

"Thinking about?" ejaculated our hero, thus rudely startled up from a dreamy reverie. "Oh, I was thinking of all you have been telling me about Miss Vincent."

Mrs. Chubb repeated her request with regard to the lodgings, and Christian readily promised to grant it on condition that she would go and make some befitting excuse for his not completing the bargain which he had half-settled in the morning with the other lodging-house keeper. This little matter was speedily arranged, and our young hero accordingly kept his quarters at the parish clerk's house. But why did he do this after the unceremonious way in which he had been treated when it was thought expedient to get rid of Simply because he wished to remain at the place him? where Isabella had lived, and where it was possible, he thought, she might happen to call. But which of our readers, whether gentleman or lady, who knows what love is, can fail to penetrate our young hero's motives for tarrying at his present lodgings?

Another week passed away; and Christian, on proceeding,

as usual, one morning at ten o'clock to Mivart's Hotel, found the utmost excitement prevailing amongst the ducal retinue. There was to be a grand review in Hyde Park that day. at which his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was to be present, and in honour of whom the military display was to take place. It was necessary that the duke should be accompanied by his entire retinue, and therefore great preparations were in progress for the occasion. In the various rooms the high functionaries were issuing orders to the servants of the hotel; some of them were inspecting their best apparel (and Heaven knows that bad was the best!), while others were burnishing up their trumpery jewelry with pieces of washleather. Christian passed on to the little room in which he was accustomed to sit, but on opening the door he stopped short in sudden dismay at the astounding spectacle which met his eves. For there sat Baron Raggidbak, the groom of the stole, in his coat, waistcoat, boots, and shirt — but without his breeches; for his lordship was busily engaged in the more notable than dignified task of mending a rent in the seat of those very pantaloons of which he had divested himself!

No wonder that Christian stopped short; but the baron started up, in a towering rage, exclaiming "Der deyvil! why for, yong mans, you go for to come in widout knocking at de door?"

Christian's only reply was a peal of laughter at the ludicrous figure presented to his view by his lordship Baron Raggidbak, groom of the stole to the high and mighty reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His lordship gnashed his teeth with rage, and endeavoured to slip on his pantaloons with all possible despatch, but in his confusion and haste he thrust his right boot through the half-mended rent, and losing his balance, sprawled upon the floor. Christian now felt concerned on the poor devil's behalf, and not wishing to add to his embarrassment, precipitately retreated, closing the door. He thought of repairing to the antechamber and waiting there until Baron Raggidbak should leave the secretary's room free for his use. Again he passed through the midst of the greater portion of the ducal retinue, and on entering the antechamber somewhat hastily, he surprised the Chevalier Kadger in the act of putting on his military frock coat, when. to his renewed amazement. Christian discovered that this high official, the principal equerry to the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wore no shirt! He had on a flannel jacket, which had certainly seen a couple of months' wear without being changed; and it was therefore pretty evident that either the Chevalier Kadger's wardrobe was singularly deficient, or else that he had entirely lost the confidence of his washerwoman.

The equerry, turning his back toward Christian, made all possible haste to hook his frogged and braided coat, which, as it fastened close up to the chin. effectually concealed that little triffing deficiency in the linen department which had betrayed itself to our young hero's knowledge. At this moment the Chevalier Gumbinnen, lord chamberlain and principal lord of the bedchamber, came rushing into the anteroom, where he pulled the bell violently. This exalted official in the service of an illustrious master seemed to be in as towering a rage as Baron Raggidbak was a few minutes before, when surprised in his airy condition and thrifty occupation; indeed, so much was the Chevalier Gumbinnen excited that he did not notice Christian's presence. The furious summons of the bell was almost instantaneously answered by a waiter, and the chevalier, grasping him by the arm, said, " De breeshes!"

The waiter shook his head in evident inability to comprehend the chevalier's meaning.

"De breeshes!" repeated this functionary, in the highest state of excitement; and no wonder, for he had just used all the English that he knew, and was totally unable to express himself by another syllable of our vernacular.

The Chevalier Kadger, who had by this time finished buttoning up his coat, came to his friend's assistance. A few words were rapidly exchanged in German, and then the Chevalier Kadger, addressing himself to the waiter, said, "Mine goot mans, de lord chamberlain sall come for to ask for de breeshes of his Royal Highness."

Then, as the waiter stared in astonishment, the Chevalier Kadger proceeded to explain, in the best English he could possibly muster to his aid, that the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha's best pantaloons had been sent on the previous day to the tailor to have stripes of gold-lace sewn upon the legs, that the pantaloons aforesaid had not come home, and that his Royal Highness was kept waiting in the cold, in his shirt, for these identical breeches, without which it would be exceedingly inconvenient, not to say impossible, for the illustrious sovereign to appear at the review. Such was the explanation of his Royal Highness's dilemma, and the waiter promised to send round at once to the tailor's for the missing pantaloons; but Christian observed that the man could scarcely repress a smile, while our hero himself had still more difficulty in keeping down an outburst of laughter.

Thinking that by this time Baron Raggidbak might have finished mending his own breeches, and that the secretary's room would be now disengaged, Christian was proceeding thither, when his attention was drawn to the explosion of a sudden altercation between General Himmelspinken and Count Frumpenhausen. The latter nobleman - who, be it remembered, was Gold Stick in Waiting - had fashioned for himself a very fine plumage with the feathers of a cock pheasant's tail; and he was just on the point of fastening his plume to the side of his hat with a brass brooch such as can be purchased in the Lowther Arcade for eighteenpence, when General Himmelspinken snatched the plume away. Doubtless, as a military officer of high rank, and holding the eminent position of master of the horse, his Excellency the General conceived that he himself was the most fitting and proper person to wear the plume. Count Frumpenhausen however thought otherwise, and a violent dispute arose. The general, with the characteristic bravery of a true warrior, proceeded to protect his plunder by force of arms, - or rather of fists, - and he made a desperate onslaught on Count Frumpenhausen. The combat raged between the two, and while they were thus fighting, Herr Humbogh, the privy seal, walked quietly off with the plume, and seating himself at the farther end of the apartment, began attaching it to his own beaver, in the very place where the said beaver (which was a shocking bad one) was most battered. Count Wronki's interference put an end to the quarrel between the valorous general and the titled Frumpenhausen, but nothing could induce Herr Humbogh to deliver up the plume: and sticking his hat, thus decorated, on the side of his head, he strutted to and fro with such an air of defiance that neither of the two discomfited disputants dared approach him in a menacing manner.

With mingled feelings of disgust and amazement, yet

entertwined with an almost irresistible sense of whatsoever was ludicrous in these proceedings. Christian repaired to the secretary's room: but he found the door locked, and therefore naturally concluded that his lordship Baron Raggidbak had thus shut himself in to finish his task in peace and quietness. Our young hero accordingly returned to the antechamber, which he reached just at the moment the waiter was reappearing to report progress to the two chevaliers in respect to the ducal inexpressibles. Christian therefore overheard the explanation. Gold-lace, it was represented, was exceedingly dear; and as the broadest stripes had been placed on his Royal Highness's pantaloons, besides the said pantaloons being reseated, the cost thereof amounted to three guineas, which the tailor, without meaning any disrespect toward the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, would rather see paid before he delivered up the unmentionables. Christian could not help thinking that this was a pretty pickle for a reigning duke to be placed in, and doubtless the two chevaliers thought so likewise. They hastily conferred together in German for a few moments: then the Chevalier Gumbinnen, putting his hand into his pocket, drew forth eighteenpence, while the Chevalier Kadger, imitating his example, displayed threepence three farthings; but as these united sums were very far from making up the requisite amount, the faces of the two chevaliers became exceedingly blank, and their manner singularly bewildered. At this crisis Baron Farthenless, the privy purse, appeared upon the scene, and Christian thought that no advent could possibly be more propitious than that of the high functionary who had charge of the ducal exchequer. But, alas! the baron's name proved to be typical of his condition - namely, farthingless; and no money was therefore forthcoming. Christian — in spite of his resolves not to be fleeced by his German friends - now stepped forward, and addressing himself to the Chevalier Kadger, said, in the most delicate manner, "I have some change at your disposal."

The amount was accordingly produced; the waiter sped off to procure the royal pantaloons, which now quickly made their appearance, after the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had been kept precisely half an hour shivering in the cold for the want of them. Things progressed somewhat more comfortably now; the various toilets were completed, and as noon approached, a sufficient number of horses arrived from Buckingham Palace for the accommodation of the duke and his suite. A crowd was collected in the street to feast their eyes with the grandeur of the imposing procession, and his Royal Highness marched forth in all the glory of the inexpressibles which Christian Ashton's money had redeemed from pawn at the hands of the mistrustful tailor. Herr Humbogh looked splendid indeed with the plume of pheasant's feathers, and Baron Raggidbak's breeches held firmly together as his lordship mounted the steed allotted to his use. The other nobles and gentlemen of the suite were equally well pleased with their own toilets: and as the sun was shining, its beams made all their worthless jewelry glitter like real gold. The ducal cortège passed away amidst the cheers of the multitudes, who little suspected what sort of persons they were on whom they thus bestowed their applause. And here we may add that the mistrustful tailor, who would not give the German sovereign credit for three guineas, forthwith ordered the arms of that selfsame sovereign to be fixed above his shop door; and on the strength of the three guineas' worth of work which he had done, he wrote himself up, "Tailor, by Appointment, to his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

Before concluding this chapter, we will take the liberty of drawing one moral from the incidents we have related, which is, that gathered crowds, instead of thoughtlessly and giddily bestowing their cheers upon royal and aristocratic personages simply because they bear royal and aristocratic titles, should pause to ask themselves whether these personages, by their own merits, deserve the homage thus shown them and the plaudits thus showered upon their heads.

CHAPTER IX

THE REVIEW

THE Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had signified to Christian through Count Wronki, who signified the same through the Chevalier Gumbinnen, who delivered the message through the Chevalier Kadger, that he might take a holiday on this grand occasion. Our hero accordingly resolved to see the review, and he bent his way toward Hyde Park for the purpose.

It is not our intention to enter into descriptive details with regard to the spectacle. Suffice it to say that the large enclosure of the Park was occupied by the troops as well as by a large crowd of spectators. Immense numbers of carriages thronged in the drive, some containing elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, but most of them being empty, their owners preferring to enter the enclosure upon foot, in order to obtain a nearer view of the military proceedings. Prince Albert and several English generals, attended by "a brilliant staff," - to use the invariable newspaper phrase, were present; but, as a matter of course, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was the lion of the occasion, and the public journals of the following day spoke of this illustrious prince as being attended by "a splendid retinue of all the great dignitaries of his household." It was, however, somewhat difficult to conceive by what possible means the reporters could have become so enamoured of Herr Humbogh's plume, Baron Raggidbak's pantaloons, or, in short, of any portion of the toilet of the ducal suite. But perhaps, like theatrical properties, it all looked very well at a distance; and we know that the gentlemen of the daily press do not choose to be hypercritical in any matter where royalty or royalty's adherents are concerned.

Christian mingled with the crowd, and looked about to see whether his sister, with Lady Octavian Meredith, was present. He however saw nothing of them, and at length getting wearied of the scene, began to think of departure. He had gained the outskirts of the crowd, when he beheld the Honourable Mr. Stanhope lounging along upon foot; and it was tolerably evident that this gentleman must have lunched well, for it was clear that he was labouring under the effect of copious potations. Not that he was so far intoxicated as to stagger about, but he was much excited, and with an impudent leer was regarding all the good-looking females who happened to come in his way. Christian felt an insuperable disgust for this man, with the villainy of whose character he was so well acquainted; and as he beheld him rivet his insolent libertine looks upon several females who did not happen to have any male companions, he could scarcely restrain his indignation. All of a sudden he perceived an elegantly dressed young lady hastening along, and looking with a sort of wildness all about, as if she had by accident been separated from the friends who brought her thither, or else as if she were in search of some particular equipage amongst the countless vehicles which were drawn up three deep in the road against the wooden barriers. But now, as she drew nigh and Christian caught a glimpse of her countenance, how great was his surprise and joy on recognizing the beautiful Isabella Vincent!

He was springing forward to greet her, and to ascertain wherefore she was thus looking confused and dismayed, when he beheld Wilson Stanhope accost her, and he evidently said something impudent, for Isabella flung upon him a look of dignified indignation, though at the same instant her countenance became crimson. This was sufficient, ay, and far more than sufficient, to excite Christian to the extreme of irritation against that treacherous accomplice in the Duke of Marchmont's foul iniquity. With one bound Christian was upon the spot, and quick as thought Stanhope was levelled with the earth, our young hero's hand dealing the blow which thus prostrated him.

"Heavens, Miss Vincent!" he ejaculated, instantaneously turning toward the young lady; "that ruffian dared insult you, as he once insulted my sister."

But Isabella could not speak a word, she was so over-

whelmed with confusion and affright. A crowd was gathering around the spot, and numerous voices ejaculated an approval of what our hero had done, for he was not the only one who had been observing Stanhope's insolent behaviour. As for this individual himself, he sprang to his feet and was about to give vent to bitter imprecations against the gallant one who had stricken him down, but recognizing our young hero, he became speechless, was cowed and dismaved, for he had heard from Marchmont the dénouement of the plot at Oaklands, and how it had been so completely frustrated and exposed through Christian's instrumentality. A policeman quickly made his way through the crowd, and while Christian led Miss Vincent off, the bystanders acquainted the constable with Mr. Stanhope's insolent conduct, and how deservedly it had been chastised. It was evident, too, that Stanhope had been drinking, and the police officer summarily ejected him from the park, threatening to take him into custody if he dared offer the slightest resistance.

Meanwhile Christian, as already said, had hurried Isabella away, and the beautiful girl of sixteen clung to his arm as to that of a protector, or as a sister might to that of a brother. She was still so much under the influence of her agitated feelings as to be for the first few moments totally unable to give utterance to a word, or to express her gratitude to Christian otherwise than by a look; and in this there was a certain tenderness which, though quite consistent with virginal modesty and maiden bashfulness, nevertheless seemed to confirm the youth's hope that he was not altogether indifferent to her. Nor did he immediately speak again when thus leading her away from the crowd that had gathered on the spot where he so chivalrously vindicated her insulted innocence. There was a paradise of feeling in the youth's soul, - a pure and holy ecstasy of the heart which those who have loved well and fondly cannot fail to comprehend, and which was too deep for utterance. At length he said, in that low voice which invariably belongs to emotions so profound, so ineffably blissful, "Were you separated from your friends, Miss Vincent? Were you looking for any one? "

"Yes, Mr. Ashton," she answered. "But permit me to express all the gratitude — Ah, here he is!" she abruptly ejaculated. At the same moment a tall, handsome, elegantly dressed young gentleman came hurrying toward them, and at the very first glimpse of that countenance of perfect manly beauty, Christian could not help experiencing a sudden pang which was very much like that of jealousy, — if not jealousy, at all events a feeling of annoyance that another should have a right to claim the privilege of escorting the lovely Isabella.

"Why, how was it that we missed you?" exclaimed the handsome individual, gazing with astonishment when he thus perceived Miss Vincent leaning upon the arm of our hero, who was younger than himself, and in every degree as handsome.

"It was that sudden movement of the crowd," answered Isabella, "which caused such confusion where we were standing. And, oh, I have been so insulted, — and this gentleman," she continued, looking gratefully toward Christian, "conducted himself with so much generosity — "

"I most sincerely thank you," said the handsome personage, taking Christian's hand and pressing it warmly. "Pardon me if I be somewhat abrupt, but there are others close by who are uneasy on Miss Vincent's behalf — "

Thus speaking, he proffered his arm to Isabella, by his manner and his unfinished speech showing that he was anxious to hurry her away. She shook hands with Christian, and with another look expressed her gratitude, - expressed it. too, with a slight tinge of tenderness, as much as a delicateminded young lady could possibly display. Her companion bowed courteously; they hurried on in the direction of a carriage in which a gentleman and lady were seated, but whose faces Christian could not obtain a glimpse of. Isabella and her companion at once entered this carriage, which immediately dashed away, and our hero saw that it was the same which had been sent a week back to convey Miss Vincent from Mrs. Chubb's house. He was half-inclined to inquire of one of the lackeys belonging to the other carriages whose equipage that particular one was, but they were all busy in leaping up to their places, for the throng of vehicles was being set in motion to take up their owners wheresoever they might be found, as the review was now over and the crowds were pouring out of the enclosure. Therefore Christian walked slowly away without putting the question, and in his heart there was a strange

commingling of pleasurable and disagreeable sensations. The look of virginal tenderness which Isabella had thrown upon him produced the former feeling; but, on the other hand, he could not think with any degree of satisfaction of the companionship in which he had left her. --- the companionship of that young, handsome, elegantly dressed, and aristocratic-looking personage. Besides, it was but too evident that she had found either wealthy relatives or friends; and though in one sense he rejoiced that her position should be so suddenly improved, yet on the other hand he could not help thinking that this very improvement in her circumstances had opened an immense gulf between herself and him. Yet again did hope steal into his soul with a soothing and solacing effect, - that youthful hope which in the flight of fancy surmounts all barriers and overleaps all chasms, however high the former and however profound the latter.

Retracing his way slowly from Hyde Park, Christian wandered through the streets, reflecting on all that had occurred, until he approached the tavern where he was accustomed to dine since he had lodged at Mrs. Chubb's, and for which an hour in the afternoon was allowed by his ducal employer. He entered the coffee-room of the tavern, seated himself at the table, and gave his orders to the waiter. The place was unusually crowded, and in the course of a few minutes another gentleman came and took a seat at the same table. He was a foreigner, bearded and moustached, well dressed, and of good manners. Making Christian a bow with true Continental politeness, he expressed a hope that he should not be inconveniencing him by sitting down at the same table. He spoke English with considerable fluency, though with a German accent. Christian at once set him at his ease in respect to the object of apology, and they soon got into a conversation together. After a few indifferent remarks, the German gentleman began to speak of the grand military spectacle in Hyde Park, and which it appeared he had witnessed.

"And I also saw it," responded our hero. "It was given in honour of one of your native princes, who was present with his retinue."

"Ah, his retinue," said the German, with a short, dry cough; and then he drank his wine, but with a peculiar look, as if he could say something if he chose, Christian perceived what was passing in his mind, and being curious to glean all he could in respect to his German friends, he thought it more prudent to abstain from intimating that he himself held a temporary post in his Royal Highness's service.

"If it be not impertinent," he said, " do you come from that part of Germany in which the duke's dominions are situated?"

"Ah bah! his dominions!" ejaculated the German, evidently no longer able to restrain himself. "Pretty dominions indeed, a few hundred acres! Why, you have plenty of noblemen and gentlemen in your country possessing estates any one of which is as large as the whole duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Do you disparage your own native institutions?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"I hate and detest the institutions," responded the foreigner, with strong emphasis, "which have parcelled out that fine country into all these wretched trumperv principalities, miserable in extent and of the meanest poverty. I am for German nationality, - Germany to be one and indivisible; and therefore you may readily conceive that I am no friend to its present partition. It is nothing but a nest of execrable despotisms - all the more execrable, too, because so thoroughly paltry and insignificant. A traveller may contemplate with a certain reverential awe, even if not with love, a mighty chain of mountains that bars his way, but if he find himself stopped by a wretched anthill, he would be overwhelmed with shame and disgust, he would be shocked at his own miserable self-abasement at not being able to clear such a barrier. In the same way would he contemplate with awe the spectacle of a broad and ample river impeding his course, but what would be his feelings if he found himself compelled to stop short on the edge of a dirty and insignificant puddle! Thus is it with these paltry German despotisms, in comparison with the huge ones of other nations that I might name, and vet they all alike serve as barriers to human progress."

"It is true," said Christian, at once appreciating the truth of his companion's reasoning.

"And you will be all the more struck by what I have said," continued the latter, "when I inform you that I myself am a native of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and consequently a subject — bah, a subject!" he repeated, with indescribable disgust, "of this very duke in whose honour the grand review has to-day been held."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Christian, whose curiosity was all the more vividly excited because he saw that his German acquaintance had something yet to reveal. "Your conversation interests me much — "

"And I could, if I chose, astonish you more than I have interested you," interrupted the German. Then, after a pause, he went on to say, in a confidential manner and in a whispering tone, "I saw this precious retinue to which you just now alluded, and I recognized all the knaves composing it as well as I should recognize my own brother if he came into the room at this moment. Ay, and my blood boils with shame and indignation at the bare idea of the astounding cheat which is being practised upon the English people. All Germany is degraded, humiliated, and dishonoured by this fellow of a duke who dresses up his lackeys and bestows upon them titles of nobility which they only bear while in England, and which they will have to put off when they get back to Germany and return to the pantry, the stable, and the kitchen."

"Surely you are using some hyperbolic figure of speech?" exclaimed Christian, perfectly astounded at what he had just heard.

"No figure of speech at all," responded the German, who spoke with the concentrated bitterness of supreme disgust, but with an air of the most genuine sincerity. "If you have patience to hear me run through the catalogue of names, with the real and the fictitious avocations of the individuals themselves, I will tell you something that cannot fail to strike you with amazement."

Christian leaned over the table with a look of profoundest interest, and the German gentleman proceeded as follows:

"In the first place, there is the fellow Wronki, who is in reality the duke's butler, but he is dubbed a count for the nonce and elevated to the dignity of lord steward. Then there is Gumbinnen, who when at home in Germany is the duke's valet, but in England he is a chevalier and lord chamberlain. Thirdly, there is the half-starved scamp Raggidbak, the duke's stable groom, but who is now called groom of the stole and dubbed a baron. When he gets back to Germany he will have to shovel up the dung again. Then comes Himmelspinken: he is another groom, but here called a general and master of the horse. Master of the horse indeed! he has rubbed one down pretty often. I can tell vou! Next comes Herr Humbogh — and a veritable humbug, too, as you would call him in your language. Here he is figuring away as the privy seal, whereas in Germany he is messenger at the duke's gate. The fellow Kadger is in reality a footman, but now a chevalier and equerry. Frumpenhausen, rejoicing in the title of count, and acting as Gold Stick, is a lackey who attends on the duke's carriage, and in that capacity carries the brass-headed cane which here is dignified as a gold stick. Ah! there is one more whom I had almost forgotten, and this is the man Farthenless, who must be very much astonished to find himself a baron, but perhaps still more so at being privy purse, seeing that the ducal purse is not so capacious as to render a custodian necessary. But now, what do you think Farthenless is? A pawnbroker's man! "

Christian could not speak for astonishment.

"Yes, such, I can assure you, is the fact," proceeded the German, "and I will tell you how it happens. You must know that all the duke's plate was unfortunately in pledge when he received the invitation to pay his present visit to England. What was to be done? He could not redeem it; the pawnbroker would not part with it out of his own keeping; and a reigning sovereign could not come to England to stay at a hotel without his own plate. The dilemma was serious, but a compromise was hit upon. It was agreed that the pawnbroker's assistant should bring over the plate, travelling in the ducal retinue, and with special injunctions to keep a sharp eve upon the property; for the duke is quite as capable of laying hands upon it as any of the starvelings that surround him. So I suppose it was deemed prudent to give the fellow Farthenless an official department; hence the dignity of baron and the post of privy purse, both of which he will have to renounce the instant he gets back to Germany."

Christian was amazed almost to stupefaction by what he had heard, and the especial care which he had seen Baron Farthenless bestow upon the ducal plate was now fully

accounted for. He remained a little longer in conversation with the intelligent German, and then took his departure from the tavern, more than half-inclined to send in his resignation to his Royal Highness. But when he reflected that the term for which he was engaged would elapse in another fortnight, he considered that it would be as well to remain for so short a space, and to this decision he accordingly came. We need hardly inform the reader that the principal subject which continued to occupy his mind - and to which all that related to the pauper duke and his frowzy horde was but of second-rate importance — was the new and indeed brilliant position in which he found Isabella placed: nor less did he ponder with some degree of uneasiness on her companionship with that handsome and elegant-looking young man. Still Christian flattered himself that he was not altogether indifferent to the young lady; and he entertained so high an opinion of her that he could not believe she would prove faithless to any such tender feeling entertained on his behalf — if it were really experienced. But, on the other hand, a fear would steal into his mind that the influence of the new friends, or of the relatives — whichever they were - whom Isabella had found, might possibly lead her to yield to their views, and form some brilliant alliance which it was natural enough they should seek for her. Still, as we have said on former occasions, there was hope in the vouth's heart: and in juxtaposition with his apprehensions did imagination conjure up a proportionate amount of cheering dreams.

Thus the fortnight passed away, during which Christian saw nothing more of the beautiful Isabella, and experienced no further adventure in respect to the Germans at all deserving of notice. At the end of that period he received his dismissal, together with a certificate of good conduct from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and he was once more out of employment. Again he inserted an advertisement in the newspapers and in the course of a few days he received a note from the Earl of Lascelles, desiring him to call at his mansion at Kensington.

It was a fine day in the month of March, and about the hour of noon, that Christian Ashton proceeded to Kensington, and was introduced into a large and handsomely furnished library, where he was desired to wait a few minutes and his

lordship would be with him. Christian examined the bookshelves, and found that they were crowded with splendidly bound volumes, belonging, as a matter of course, to all classes of literature, but it occurred to him that very few appeared to have been at all used. Indeed, the impression produced upon his mind was that the library was what it too often is in the mansions of the great, - intended more for show than for service. He wondered to himself what sort of a nobleman the Earl of Lascelles would prove to be, and in imagination he was depicting a tall, aristocratic-looking individual, when the door opened, and an old gentleman of sixty, of most ungainly figure, apparelled with a ludicrous admixture of old beau dandvism and of slovenliness, with large, prominent features, the expression of which almost provoked an inclination to laughter, made his appearance. Christian was marvelling who this could be, - whether the majordomo, the butler, the valet, or any other functionary of the nobleman's household, when the odd-looking individual, advancing straight up to him, said, with a patronizing smile, "So you are the young gentleman who advertised for the post of private secretary? Well, upon my word, your appearance is prepossessing enough. You say your testimonials are good, but I am terribly difficult to please, and I must examine vou critically."

Christian had now no longer any doubt as to whose presence it was in which he stood, but he could not help thinking that his lordship was more fitted by nature to play the part of buffoon upon the stage than to enact that of an hereditary legislator.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashton, and let us converse," resumed the Earl of Lascelles. "First of all, with regard to the testimonials?"

Christian produced them, and as the earl took the papers, he said, "You see I can read perfectly well without spectacles, and yet nowadays it seems to be the fashion for gentlemen to take to glasses at my age, which is five and forty."

Christian could scarcely help starting, for he would have wagered his existence that the earl was sixty, if he was a single day.

"Ah, an excellent testimonial from the Duke of Marchmont! I know his Grace well. Between you and me," continued the earl, "they say that his Grace and myself are the two stars of the House, — in respect to personal appearance, I mean."

Again Christian felt astonished, as well indeed he might, for the Duke of Marchmont was a tall, well-made personage, and he had once been handsome enough until dissipation and evil passions had begun to mar his good looks; whereas the Earl of Lascelles had never the slightest pretensions to any such good looks at all, and was now a living counterfeit, an animate artificiality, a peripatetic cheat, a breathing lie, made up of padded garments, false hair and false teeth, and even a false complexion.

"Yes, we are called the stars of the House," continued his lordship, with an air of bland and condescending communicativeness, at the same time grinning like an antiquated goat: "but as for eloquence, I don't say I flatter myself ----I only repeat what the public press says — when I add that his Grace cannot hold a candle to me. You shall come some evening to the House when I am going to make one of my grand displays of three or four hours. You will be astonished at the effect. Some of the noble lords rush out from the House the moment I rise, and never come back till I have done; they can't stand the excitement of such thrilling oratory. Others will listen all the time with their eyes shut, so that they may concentrate their attention inwardly, and not lose a single word of what falls from my lips. I am not vain, Mr. Ashton, - though vanity is, after all, the foible of young men like you and me: but I may say that those are the effects of a very peculiar power of oratory."

"Doubtless, my lord," answered Christian, and perhaps his response was susceptible of a double interpretation.

"Ah! this testimonial is from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. I knew his father well. I had a grand battle with him once."

"In the war-time, my lord?" asked Christian, fancying that he ought to say something.

"No, at the dinner-table," responded the earl. "The duke prided himself upon being a very great eater, and was honoured accordingly in his own capital and by all the German sovereigns. Well, during my travels, I arrived in the city of Quotha, and hearing of the duke's fame, was determined to put it to the test. I must tell you that his Serene Highness — for the German princes were only serene in those days, and not royal - his Serene Highness, as I was saving, was fond of challenges of that sort, and prided himself on having eaten three Englishmen into an apoplexy and four Scotchmen into an indigestion which turned to chronic dyspepsia; so that when I respectfully provoked him to a contest, he made sure of achieving an additional triumph. I laid his Serene Highness five thousand guineas against the Order of the Cormorant, instituted by his Serene Highness himself. Well, we sat down to table, surrounded by the whole court. His Serene Highness led the way with a dish of sourcrout, but I declared that I could not do things in such a peddling, triffing manner, and I requested to have a barrel brought in. You would scarcely believe it. Mr. Ashton, but I had got into the middle of the barrel before his Serene Highness had got half-way through his dish. Then he took the roast meat and poultry, but there I beat him by half a fowl and a pigeon. He insisted upon tackling a dish of hard eggs, thinking that they would stick in my throat, and so they did, too, with a vengeance, but I nevertheless beat him by a yelk. He was ill for six weeks afterward, and I was the hero of the entire court during my residence there."

Christian Ashton could not help thinking that his lordship had become a hero on very singular terms, and the earl proceeded to read the second certificate.

"Well, these are unexceptionable," he said, " and I think you will do."

Christian ventured to inquire what the nature of his duties would be, and the nobleman went on to explain them.

"The fact is, I have travelled a great deal, I have seen many strange things, I have been involved in some extraordinary adventures. I think of publishing my memoirs. I have already made many notes and memoranda, and there will be little trouble in arranging them properly. When I take a thing in hand, I am terribly energetic in carrying it out. My mind is bent upon this, and we shall work furiously. You must come and live in the neighbourhood, so that you may be always at hand when I want you; and as for salary, you may name your own terms."

Christian scarcely thought that the situation would suit him, inasmuch as he had already seen enough of his lordship

to form the very meanest idea of his general character. But while he was reflecting, and the earl was rattling away with some new anecdote, comprising a tissue of falsehoods, the youth, happening to glance from the window (the library being on the ground floor), perceived two ladies strolling with a gentleman in the grounds. He could not see their faces, but the figure of one of those ladies produced an immediate impression upon our young hero, filling his heart with mingled hope, astonishment, and suspense. His countenance did not, however, betray any of these emotions, and the earl, happening at the same time to glance through the window, exclaimed, "That lady on the right is the Countess of Lascelles. She is a wife every way worthy of such a husband, - young and beautiful, elegant and accomplished. And that is my son, Lord Osmond. Ah! I see you start with surprise, and well you may. You naturally wonder that I can have a son of his age? But between you and me, I was wonderfully precocious, and was a father at seventeen. That other young lady is my niece, Miss Vincent."

The reader cannot be at a loss to conjecture why Christian had started. It was not because he was in the least astonished at the vain and frivolous earl having a son of such an age, seeing that he had rightly guessed his lordship's own years to have reached sixty, so that he might very well have a son of twenty-three, but it was that at the moment the trio turned around at the end of the gravel walk, and Christian not only recognized in Lord Osmond the tall, handsome young man through whom he had already experienced some little degree of mental trouble, but the sight of Isabella's lovely countenance had sent a thrill of joy through his heart. He now no longer hesitated to accept the proffered situation. He paused not to reflect whether he should be allowed to retain it when it came to be discovered that he was acquainted with Miss Vincent. The bare thought of obtaining a post which might bring him for hours together within the same walls which she evidently inhabited was alone sufficient to make him hasten to conclude the bargain. The matter of salary was soon settled, and it was understood that he was to remove into the neighbourhood that very day, in order to be at hand to commence his duties on the ensuing one.

"I mean to treat you quite in a friendly and confidential

manner," proceeded the earl, " and therefore come with me and I will introduce you to the ladies and my son."

Thus speaking, the earl opened a casement reaching down to the ground, and which therefore served the purpose of a glass door, affording egress upon the grounds. Christian followed with a heart palpitating violently. A thousand hopes and fears swept in a few moments through his mind, for he knew that now was the crisis to decide whether he should retain the post so eagerly sought, or whether the earl should think fit to decline his services.

"My dear Ethel," exclaimed the old nobleman, hastening toward the countess, "I am going to do what I have said. I shall write my memoirs. I have engaged a secretary, he is fully competent, we begin work to-morrow morning, and as he is a very genteel youth, I want to introduce him."

Lord Osmond fancied at the first glance which he threw upon Christian that he had seen him somewhere before, but did not instantaneously recollect the how or the when. But Isabella's astonishment — and we may add her pleasure — were great indeed on perceiving Christian Ashton diffidently advancing behind her uncle, and on hearing the old nobleman proclaim that he had engaged him as a secretary.

"Why, Cousin Bella!" said Lord Osmond, suddenly remembering where he had seen Christian, and now turning to Miss Vincent, "this is the very young gentleman who acted so nobly three or four weeks back at the review."

"Hey! — what?" cried the earl, in astonishment, but by no means in dissatisfaction. "Mr. Ashton the one who chastised that impertinent coxcomb? How was it you did not mention his name, Bella?"

"I did mention his name, uncle," answered Miss Vincent, with a modest blush. "I told you it was Mr. Ashton, with whom I happened to be acquainted."

"Yes, I remember perfectly well," said the Countess of Lascelles, "that Isabella mentioned Mr. Ashton's name."

"Then I had forgotten it," exclaimed the nobleman. "But it is no matter."

"I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Ashton," said Lord Osmond, frankly proffering his hand to our young hero.

Isabella also gave him her hand, and again did the modest blush appear up on her countenance. Lord Osmond observed that tremulous confusion on her part, but affected not to

notice it. As for the earl, he saw it not, for he had turned to his wife, and was launching forth into a description of the marvellous adventures he intended to give in his book, and of the tremendous sensation it was certain to excite when published. Christian now thought it becoming to make his bow and depart, and the earl charged him to be punctual at the mansion at eleven o'clock on the following day. The youth was retiring through the grounds toward the entrance gates, when he beheld that same individual (mentioned to him as Mr. Gibson) who had fetched away Miss Vincent from Mr. Chubb's residence. The recognition was instantaneously mutual, and the man, with a sinister look, started visibly on thus beholding our hero. He however said nothing, and Christian took his departure with feelings of mingled joy and wonderment. The source of his joy needs no description, but we must say a word or two in respect to the other feeling which inspired him. Was he to conclude that it was not on his account, after all, that the beauteous Isabella had been removed from the parish clerk's house? But if not so, then what became of Mrs. Chubb's tale relative to Mr. Gibson's annovance at finding that he was lodging in the same house with Isabella? However, Christian had obtained the situation, the earl had confirmed him in it after discovering that he was previously acquainted with Miss Vincent, and therefore, though our hero wondered at some part of the whole proceeding, he had nothing to be troubled at; on the contrary, every reason to be rejoiced.

We have said that Lord Osmond noticed Isabella's tremulous confusion when she encountered Christian, but that he affected not to perceive it. This circumstance requires some little explanation. Lord Osmond, as the reader is aware, was profoundly enamoured of his mother-in-law, the beautiful Countess of Lascelles, and therefore he entertained not the slightest scintillation of jealousy in respect to his cousin Isabella and Christian Ashton. On the contrary, when he thought he had discovered that these two were not indifferent to each other, he was rather glad of it, for it immediately struck him that if Isabella and Christian could be more or less thrown together, it would afford him (Lord Osmond) all the better opportunities of being alone with Ethel.

About an hour after Christian's departure, the Earl of

Lascelles was seated in the library, arranging his memoranda in readiness for work on the following day, when the confidential valet Makepeace entered the room on some pretence or another.

"Well, Makepeace," said the nobleman, looking up from his papers with a self-satisfied air, "I mean to astonish the whole world."

"The world, my lord," responded the sycophantic valet, "can be astonished at no achievement on your lordship's part."

"I think there is some truth in that," said the earl, caressing his chin as he lounged back in the chair. "Nevertheless, my contemplated book will crown all my other triumphs, and I have engaged a secretary to assist in writing it."

"That young gentleman, my lord, whom I saw going out just now?" inquired Makepeace, deferentially.

"The same," rejoined the earl. "I am convinced he is a youth of great ability and lively intelligence, by the way he listened to that anecdote of mine about my German feat. I don't think I ever told it you — "

For the first time in his life Makepeace did not wait to hear the anecdote, but interrupting his noble master, said, significantly, "I presume your lordship cannot be aware that this is the very young gentleman — "

"Who lodged at the Rubbs' or the Dubbs' or whatever their name is?" exclaimed the earl. "In general I have an excellent memory for names, but I have lost sight of that one. Do you know, Makepeace, that when I was travelling in Russia I fell in with a young Englishman who had dislocated his jaw?"

"Indeed, my lord? Was it by a fall from his horse?"

"Oh, no. Merely by pronouncing the names of Russian noblemen, some of which would cover a sheet of paper to write them, and are all consonants. But I could pronounce them all with the greatest ease. Indeed, I was always a good hand at hard words. When I was seven years old I had all the classics at my fingers' ends, and made no difficulty of that name which was invented by Plautus — Thesaurochrysonichochrysides."

"I have often admired your lordship's extraordinary memory on such points," said Makepeace. "But about that young man — " "Well, I know all about him," exclaimed the earl. "He lodged at the parish clerk's. But don't you see that things are greatly altered now, and even if there was ever any danger of my niece falling in love with the youth, there cannot be under existing circumstances. Besides, the landlady herself assured you that the young people scarcely ever saw each other; and now that I have purposely had Isabella brought home to the mansion that she may captivate my son's heart, she will of course jump at so splendid an alliance. Ah, it was an admirable stroke of policy on my part! But I think you will admit, Makepeace, that I am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man?"

"Your lordship is aware I have always expressed my astonishment that your lordship has not accepted the post of prime minister, which I am aware has been declined by your lordship on more occasions than one."

"Well, Makepeace, perhaps I had my reasons," said the earl, complacently. "But about the matter of which you were speaking. You see that when Lord Osmond threw himself at my feet, a couple of months back, and implored my pardon for his previous misconduct in choosing to show his airs in respect to my second marriage, I could not very well help forgiving him. Besides, when I questioned her ladyship with regard to the motive of the visit he paid her at that time, she frankly informed me it was to convey through her the assurance of his contrition. What, then, was I to do? There was no alternative but to forgive Lord Osmond, and in forgiving him, to intimate that he might return and live at home.

"Then, don't you see, other reflections arose in my mind? Of course I am not jealous. I flatter myself that Lord Osmond, though younger than me, has not much the advantage in respect to good looks. In fact, between you and me, Makepeace, I don't think his hair curls so nicely, nor with such a natural effect, as this new peruke of mine. However, without being jealous, you know, it was only proper and becoming enough that I should give the countess a female companion, — you comprehend, — not only for her own sake, and to prevent her from being thrown too much into the society of one whom I know that in her heart she does not like, but also to prevent the scandal-loving, tittle-tattling, gossiping part of the world from having any ground for impertinent or malicious observations. You understand, Makepeace, eh?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded the valet, with his wonted obsequious bow. "The policy was admirable, my lord, admirable."

" I was sure you would say so," continued the earl. "Well, then, when you came and told me that, contrary to all previous understanding, there was a young gentleman lodging in the same house where Miss Vincent had been placed, it set me a thinking; and when I do think, Makepeace, it is no ordinary affair, I can tell you. In fact, I always reason with myself, - there is nothing like it; I find it so much easier to convince myself than any one else. So, while I was thinking on this subject. I came to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Miss Vincent from a house where she might run the chance of falling in love with somebody who would not be rich enough to make her his wife. One thought leads to another, Makepeace, and so it struck me that I might just as well have the girl home at once: for, after all, she had nothing to do with her deceased parents' offences against me. I reasoned that she would be an excellent companion for the countess, and that if my son chose to fall in love with her, I really need not have any objection to their marriage. He will have plenty of money of his own, and, after all, the sooner he does marry the better."

"To be sure, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"And since you told me that Isabella had grown up to be such a beautiful girl, I thought it highly probable that Lord Osmond would fall in love with her. You see, I am very shrewd, Makepeace, very shrewd indeed. Do you know that when I was quite a boy — it was one day at a race-course — I guessed under which thimble the little pea was, — a thing that nobody was ever known to do before or has ever done since. It was the very first time of guessing, and I won half a crown. I remember it perfectly well, because I played on and lost nine pounds afterward, which was all I had about me."

"Your lordship was always noted for intelligence," observed the sycophantic valet.

"Well, you see my calculations are becoming correct. I watch Lord Osmond pretty narrowly, and always in my presence he shows the greatest attention toward Miss Vincent and is exceedingly cool toward the countess. Perhaps I should be offended at this conduct on his part toward her ladyship were it not that lovers are always obliged to be cool to every lady except the object of their affection. Have not you noticed that my son is cool — almost pointedly so — in respect to her ladyship? "

"I have, my lord," answered Makepeace, who, as the reader has observed, invariably shaped his responses so as to suit the humour of his noble master.

"Well, then, all things considered, Makepeace," continued the earl, "there is no harm done in engaging this youth as my private secretary. You comprehend? Miss Vincent is sure to marry Lord Osmond, and there is not the slightest chance that she will bestow her affections on young Ashton. Besides, don't you see, the presence of this exceedingly good-looking youth in the house will put my son on his mettle, so to speak, and will make him ply his suit all the more arduously with Isabella. Ha, ha, Makepeace, another proof of shrewdness, eh? another admirable stroke of policy on my part?"

The valet of course assented, and here the discourse terminated, the foolish old nobleman chuckling over the various combinations which he was thus bringing about, and flattering himself that there was not in all the world such a cunning dog as he was.

CHAPTER X

THE TWO ACCIDENTS

BEFORE removing from Mrs. Chubb's to a new lodging at Kensington, Christian proceeded to pay two visits, one to his sister, and the other to Mr. Redcliffe. He communicated to Christina the intelligence that he had obtained a new situation, and the affectionate girl was delighted to find that her beloved brother so easily procured one employment after another. But on proceeding to Mrs. Macaulay's in Mortimer Street, Christian learned that Mr. Redcliffe had been out of town for some days, and that it was altogether uncertain when he would come back. Christian therefore left a note for him, making his kind friend acquainted with the change in his position, and expressing a hope to hear from him on his return to London. He then removed to Kensington, and entered upon the duties of his new situation.

Two or three weeks passed, and it was now the beginning of April. Three months had elapsed since Christina Ashton became the companion of Lady Octavian Meredith, and it becomes necessary for us to describe what had taken place during this interval. The reader will remember that Lord Octavian had persuaded Christina not to mention to Zoe the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, nor in any way to allude to the duel. It will likewise be borne in mind that it was with considerable reluctance the pure-minded Christina had assented to a course which she conceived to be fraught with a certain degree of duplicity toward her amiable friend and benefactress. Nevertheless, influenced by Lord Octavian's sophistical reasoning, the artless and inexperienced Christina was led to believe it was really for the sake of ensuring Zoe's happiness, and to avoid giving a shock to

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her confidence in her husband, that the secret of the duel was to be so religiously kept.

For the first few weeks after our young heroine was installed in her new home, Lord Octavian's conduct was of such a character as to give her not the slightest uneasiness. He never sought to be alone with her; he never regarded her in a way that might lead her to suspect that he cherished a passion for her: his demeanour was precisely what it ought to be, that of a friendly but respectful courtesy. Nevertheless, the young nobleman continued to love Christina passionately, devotedly, we might almost say madly; but he endeavoured to exercise the strongest control over his feelings, and if he could not subdue them, he at least did not betray them. The reader has seen that there were many good qualities about Lord Octavian Meredith, - that he was naturally generous-hearted, and that though he did not love Zoe in the true meaning of the term, he nevertheless cherished a profound gratitude toward the wife who had brought him a fortune, and therefore experienced a full sense of his duty toward that wife. Besides, he perceived that she was devotedly attached to him, and it frequently made his heart cry out, as it were, in anguish to think that he could not adequately return the abounding fulness of the affection which she bestowed upon him. For all these reasons he made the mightiest efforts to stifle the feelings which he experienced toward Christina, and to force himself to remain in deed faithful to his wife, even if he could not be so in thought.

Thus, as we have said, several weeks passed away, and Christina had not the slightest reason to suspect that he cherished so profound a passion for her. It will be remembered that on the first day of her arrival he had rapturously taken her hand, and had regarded her with a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which had made her withdraw that hand somewhat abruptly, as the colour mounted to her cheeks and as her eyes were cast down, but she was led to reflect at the time that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. Therefore this particular incident which we have just brought back to the reader's recollection, and which occurred on the first day of her arrival, had not since dwelt sufficiently in her mind to amount to a suspicion as to the real state of Lord Octavian's feelings toward her. But, at the expiration of a few weeks, a little incident occurred which began to produce a change in Christina's mind and make her think tremblingly on several subjects.

It was one day — while her brother was still in the employment of the German prince — that Christina, while descending with some degree of rapidity from her own chamber to the drawing-room, trod upon one of the brass rods of the stair-carpet which had got loose, and as it rolled beneath her foot, she fell heavily backward. Her head came with such sudden concussion against the stairs that she was so stupefied as to be unable to raise herself up. Some one was at the moment ascending the lower flight; it was Lord Octavian, and on perceiving what had happened, he sprang to our heroine's assistance. He raised her up in his arms, exclaiming, "Good God, are you hurt? Oh, speak to me! for Heaven's sake, speak to me! Sooner my own life, ten thousand times over, than yours."

These words startled Christina into fullest vitality again. Blushing, and full of confusion, she extricated herself from Lord Octavian's arms; bewildered by the effects of the blow and the impassioned ejaculations which had just burst from his lips, she could not murmur forth a single syllable of thanks for the succour he had rendered her; she staggered into the drawing-room, and sank upon a sofa with a returning sense of faintness. Octavian, who had now recovered his own self-possession, rang the bell violently, and ordered the maids to administer at once to Miss Ashton, describing the accident that had occurred. He then, with considerate delicacy, left the apartment, and in a short time Christina was so far recovered that she felt nothing beyond the pain arising from a severe contusion. We should observe that Lady Octavian Meredith was passing an hour with her father. Mr. Armytage, at the time that the accident occurred, and on her return, she was much distressed to hear of it.

But when Christina was alone, and enabled to deliberate without restraint upon the incident just described, what was the nature of her thoughts? Guileless and unsophisticated though she were, she could not possibly help feeling that there was in Octavian's ejaculations a certain enthusiasm and a wildness of fervour thoroughly disproportionate to

the occurrence itself, and which therefore raised up a vague and indistinct suspicion in the young damsel's mind. And now, too, as she pondered thereupon, back to her memory came the incident which marked the first day of her arrival, and which we ere now recalled to the remembrance of the reader. She began to see, too, that there was something more than she had previously fancied in Octavian's conduct in calling on her, after the duel, under a feigned name, and also in so urgently beseeching her not to mention their previous acquaintance to Zoe. All these reflections naturally engendered new ideas and troubling suspicions in the mind of Christina. Still the purity of her nature made her endeavour to throw off the influence of these suspicions, but she could not. And furthermore, in strictly and carefully analyzing her own feelings, the conviction gradually stole into her mind that it was more with surprise than displeasure. more with amazed confusion than with indignation or anger, that she had heard at the time those ejaculations sent forth from Octavian's lips. She shuddered with an unknown feeling. She felt as if she were doing something wrong; she thought that she should no longer remain beneath that roof. and indeed that she never ought to have tarried there at all when once she found that a secret subsisted between herself and Octavian and which was to be withheld from Zoe.

Yet what was she to do? To attach of her own accord importance to those ejaculations, — no, certainly not. To leave the house precipitately, and without being able to assign any specific cause, — equally impossible. She must remain therefore, — at least for the present; there was no other step to be taken. The reader will not be surprised that Christina mentioned not the incident at the time to her brother; it would have been to shock the delicacy of her own soul, to be outraging her own feelings, were she to attach importance to Octavian's ejaculations, or to take it upon herself to give them a specific significancy.

Weeks again passed away, but not in the same manner as before. If ever Octavian and Christina found themselves alone together — which, as they dwelt beneath the same roof, necessarily occurred now and then — there was a mutual constraint; it was a feeling of uneasiness, an awkwardness and embarrassment, reciprocally visible. It appeared as if Octavian had something to say, but dared not give utterance to it, and as if Christina longed to dart from the room, but dared not take a step which would be so significant. Nor, when conversing in Zoe's presence, did the young nobleman and Christina look each other in the face with the same frankness as before. Octavian dared not trust his own regards, and Christina dared not meet them.

Thus painfully progressed matters after the little accident on the staircase. Nor again need the reader marvel if Christina made not a confidant of her brother, for if she analyzed her own feelings, she could not comprehend them, much less could she have explained them. It was with an effort that she now maintained a degree of cheerfulness; whatsoever gaiety she exhibited was not natural as it was wont to be, but it was forced. At length another incident occurred which proved in its consequences more serious still.

It was the beginning of April; the genial breath of an early spring was wooing the trees and the hedges to put forth their verdure, and the early flowers to show signs of returning animation. One day Zoe expressed a desire to take a drive into the country in a new phaeton which her husband had just purchased. It happened, however, that the domestic who attended the equipages had that very morning received a slight injury from one of the horses, and was unable to do his usual duty. But Octavian - who now more than ever strove to maintain the kindest treatment toward his amiable and devoted wife — was determined that she should not be disappointed, and he suggested that as he himself would drive they could easily dispense with the livery servant. They accordingly set out in the new phaeton, drawn by a pair of handsome galloways, caparisoned in the most tasteful manner. Lord Octavian occupied the box; Lady Octavian and Christina were seated together. The drive took place through the northern suburbs of London, and into the country in the direction of Enfield. The horses were a new acquisition, as well as the vehicle itself; they proved to be spirited, and one of them gave some little indications of being vicious. Zoe questioned her husband upon the subject, but he assured her that there was no danger. The young lady was reassured, and the equipage rolled on to some considerable distance from London.

Presently, on the summit of a hill, the sudden opening of the gate of a stable-yard attached to an isolated dwelling caused the vicious-disposed galloway to shy; whereupon Meredith, in a somewhat intemperate manner, bestowed three or four good stripes upon the animal. They both set off at full speed, tearing down the hill as if they were mad; the phaeton flying along like a thing of no weight, or as if it were a feather borne on the wing of a hurricane.

"For Heaven's sake, sit fast!" exclaimed Meredith, who was doing all he could to hold in the apparently frenzied animals.

Zoe and Christina exchanged affrighted glances, each perceiving that the other was as pale as death. And no wonder, for there seemed to be every prospect that the equipage would be dashed to pieces, swerving as it did from one side of the road to the other, — now with the wheels on one side half up a bank, then the next moment a similar process taking place with the wheels on the other side, and the steeds still continuing to tear on in utter defiance of Meredith's endeavour to hold them in. Long as it has taken us to describe all this, it was nevertheless the work of but a very few minutes, and as the equipage dashed precipitately down to the bottom of the steep hill, it was suddenly upset by the side of the road.

The very instant Meredith found the phaeton overturning, he sprang out with a marvellous agility, and though he fell, yet, as it was upon some grass, he escaped comparatively unhurt, and was immediately upon his feet. Christina and Zoe were flung out violently, and they both lay senseless.

"My God, my God!" cried Octavian, in a voice of the wildest agony, "they are killed," and he bounded forward to raise one up in his arms, and that one was Christina; then from his lips came ejaculations similar to those which he had uttered on the previous occasion: "Oh, speak to me! speak to me! for Heaven's sake speak to me! Would that I had died instead of you."

And Christina slowly opened her soft dark eyes, and Octavian, as frenzied now with joy as he was a moment before with terrible affliction, exclaimed, "Thank God, she lives! she lives! O Christina!"

He was straining her in his arms, when she, awaking to full consciousness, extricated herself from his embrace with an abruptness that under any other circumstances would have been ungracious indeed, but which was now the result of the sudden conviction that swept in unto her soul that he was paying her an attention to which his own wife had the prior claim, though that wife was left neglected upon the ground. And there Zoe still lay, with her eyes closed, although at the first instant that Christina's glances were flung upon her, it struck her that those eyes were half-open. The next instant, however, she supposed it to be mere fancy on her part.

Octavian raised Zoe in his arms. He inquired kindly enough if she were injured; to do him justice, too, he also appeared much distressed; but there were none of those same wildly vehement and thrillingly impassioned ejaculations which had burst from his lips in respect to Christina. Zoe appeared to be entirely deprived of consciousness; she lay along, half-supported in her husband's arms, her head resting upon his shoulder, and he continuing to inquire whether she were hurt.

"Oh, for assistance," exclaimed Christina, wringing her hands in utter bewilderment; "what can I do? Whither can I go? My benefactress! my friend! Oh, dearest, dearest Zoe," and the young damsel, now throwing herself upon her knees, in a gush of uncontrollable emotion seized Lady Octavian's form from Meredith's arms, and locked it in her own fervid embrace.

She felt Zoe's bosom heaving against her own, as if with the prolonged sigh of returning life; then suddenly the tears deluged forth from the lady's eves, and flinging her arms around Christina's neck, she wept convulsively. Our young heroine breathed the most tender and soothing words in her ears, again addressing her as a benefactress and a friend, beseeching her to compose herself, and give not way to this outburst, which she naturally supposed to be purely hysterical. — the effects of the accident which had just occurred. But Zoe only appeared to cling all the more tenaciously to her affectionate friend's neck, until seeming suddenly to recollect that her husband was present, she started to her feet and flung herself into his arms. She now grew composed, and Octavian, hastily inquiring of them both whether they felt much injured, was assured that beyond a few bruises neither of the ladies had received any physical hurt.

But now what was to be done? The horses, as if satisfied with upsetting the chaise, had stood still, but the vehicle was much injured, and moreover it was impossible to think of trusting their lives again to the vicious runaways. Fortunately at this moment a carriage drove up to the spot; it contained only a gentleman, and he at once proffered any assistance that he might be enabled to afford. A footman in attendance upon his carriage was accordingly commissioned to take charge of the phaeton, and drive it back to the Regent's Park, while Lord Octavian, Zoe, and Christina took their seats inside the carriage. During the drive to London, Christina manifested the tenderest solicitude toward Zoe, who continued deadly pale, and appeared to have received a more powerful shock than she chose to confess. Her voice was low and plaintive, but marked by an ineffable sweetness, and from time to time she hurriedly raised her kerchief to her face as if wiping away tears. Christina and Octavian were therefore confirmed in the opinion which they had both alike formed: namely, that Zoe had experienced hysterical results from the accident.

The gentleman to whom the carriage belonged kindly took his companions to their residence in the Regent's Park, although his own destination was in the first instance quite at another point of the metropolis. When once more at home. Zoe sought her couch, by the side of which Christina declared her intention to remain. Lady Octavian besought her to retire to her own room and rest herself likewise, but our young heroine, experiencing now only very partial effects from the accident, would not listen to the entreaty. Octavian sent for a physician, who prescribed what he thought requisite for Zoe, and agreeing with the others that she was somewhat hysterical, he ordered her to be kept extremely quiet. The medicament he administered doubtless contained some opiate, for shortly after it was taken, Zoe sank into a profound slumber, and Christina remained watching by her side.

And now we have some leisure to speak of Christina's thoughts. A portion of the ejaculations which burst from Octavian's lips, as he held her in his arms on the scene of the accident, had fallen upon her ears. Besides, had she not the fact present and patent to her knowledge that Octavian had shown the first solicitude on her behalf, instead of flying to the succour of the one who had the prior claim? However uncertain she might before have been as to Lord Octavian's sentiments, she could doubt them no longer now. And, alas, too, she could not conceal from herself that she on her own side felt not as her sense of duty told her that she ought to feel. On the contrary, there was for an instant a soft thrill of pleasure in her soul as she recalled to mind that ejaculation, "O Christina!" There was a world of avowal in that ejaculation; it was unmistakable, it was more than the eloquence of ten thousand tongues, — it was the very heart itself laid bare.

Thus reflected Christina, but now her mind was made up how to act, and this resolve being taken, she felt more at ease. When it was announced to her that dinner was served up in the dining-room, she requested that a morsel of food might be brought to her in Lady Octavian's chamber, where she was resolved to remain. Zoe slept until the evening, and when she awoke and found Christina still seated by her side, and saw by the tray which by accident was not as yet removed that our heroine had dined there, she took her hand, drew her gently down toward her, and circling the young girl's neck with her arms, strained her to her bosom. She could not at first find words wherewith to express all her gratitude, but presently she burst into tears. These relieved her surcharged heart, and then she murmured forth in a broken voice her thanks for all Christina's kindness.

Lord Octavian now entered the room to make inquiries concerning his wife, and Zoe, smiling up at him with an amiable sweetness, assured him in a low, plaintive voice that she should be better soon. He bent down to kiss her, and she embraced him fervently. Octavian spoke of having a nurse to sit up with her ladyship, but Christina at once said in a voice, the firmness of which showed that she would take no refusal, "That is my duty, and I intend to discharge it."

Zoe remonstrated with all that sweetness which was natural to her, and which now seemed more than ever amiable, invested as it was with the serene but plaintive melancholy that was upon her, but Christina was not to be dissuaded. Octavian withdrew, and our young heroine remained to keep the vigil by Zoe's bedside.

On the following day the physician discovered symptoms of fever on the part of his patient; they progressed rapidly, and in a few hours Zoe was seriously ill. During the night she became delirious, giving utterance to incoherent things, none of which, however, had any particular significancy. Christina remained in faithful attendance upon her, never once closing her own eyes the entire night. For ten days did the dangerous period of Lady Octavian Meredith's illness last, and several times she appeared to be hovering upon the very verge of the grave. The physician, on the third evening, had insisted upon having a nurse; nevertheless Christina would not abandon her friend, but remained with her night and day, recruiting, however, her own strength by lying down for a few hours in a bed which she caused to be prepared in the same room for the purpose. With her own hand she administered all Zoe's medicine, but usurping this duty with such sweetness of manner and with so much amiability that the old nurse, though belonging to a class amazingly jealous of their prerogatives, could not find it in her heart to be offended. Nor throughout all this time did Christina once incur the chance of finding herself alone with Lord Octavian. Occasionally, when his visits were paid to his sick wife's chamber, the nurse was absent. Zoe was unconscious of what was passing around her, and thus it may be said that he and Christina were virtually alone. But then she would sit on the opposite side of the couch from that where he placed himself, and half-concealed by the curtain, she would not once meet his gaze. When he spoke to her — which was in the same manner of friendly courtesy as was formally wont to mark his bearing — she on her side responded with equal courtesy, but gave no encouragement for a protracted conversation.

Thus did the time pass, and on the twelfth day after the accident, the physician pronounced Lady Octavian Meredith to be out of danger. She now became conscious of what was passing around, and from the lips of both the physician and the nurse she learned how Christina had affectionately and tenderly ministered unto her during her severe illness. Indeed the medical man, who was generous-hearted and conscientious, hesitated not to give Zoe the assurance that she owed her life to Miss Ashton, observing that though the physician may prescribe, and though the pecuniary position of the patient may be such as to ensure every comfort, yet that there is something which surpasses all professional skill and which no wealth can purchase, — namely, the unwearied

and tender ministration of a devoted friend. In Christina had Zoe possessed such a friend, and as the sick lady wound her arms about our heroine's neck, she murmuringly said, "Christina, dearest Christina, you have been to me as a sister. Oh, you know not how I love you."

Let us suppose another fortnight passed. It was now verging toward the end of April, and on a bright, beautiful day, Zoe was reclining upon the sofa in the drawing-room, enveloped in a wrapper, still pale and feeble, but completely out of danger, and with every prospect, according to the physician's declaration, of a speedy convalescence. One of the casements was open, and the genial air, in which the freshness of spring mingled with the warmth of approaching summer, was wafted into the room. Christina sat near the invalid; her cheeks were also pale, for she had not once issued from the dwelling since the return after the accident. Octavian was out, and the two young ladies were alone together.

A newspaper lay upon the table, and during a pause in the conversation — for Zoe was prohibited from speaking too much — Christina took up the journal. It was more a mechanical action than a voluntary one, for her thoughts were preoccupied, and in that same listless, unintentional manner her eyes moved slowly over the columns of the front page. But all in a moment something appeared to rivet her gaze and concentrate her thoughts, for she gave a start like that of one who suddenly discovers an object which has been sought after. Then she appeared to be studying with profound attention the particular passage, paragraph, or whatever it might be, which had thus so abruptly claimed her interest. Zoe - who had her regards settled in plaintive and tender contemplation of Christina's beautiful countenance — noticed that start, and observed likewise the deep study which followed it. A minute or two elapsed in continued silence, and then Zoe said, in a soft, gentle voice, "What is it, dear Christina, that so interests you?"

Our heroine again started, as if aroused from a reverie, and she flung a half-timid, half-deprecating look upon Lady Octavian Meredith, as if she feared for a moment to give such explanation as the question required. But then suddenly recovering her self-possession, she answered with a sweetness singularly blended with firmness, "Here is an Eastern lady of rank who is advertising for a companion, who must possess certain qualifications, all of which are minutely specified."

"And wherefore, my dear Christina," inquired Zoe, a strange expression for a moment flitting over her countenance, "why does that advertisement interest you so much?"

"Because — because, my dear friend, my kind benefactress, my own sweet Zoe," was Christina's tremulously given response, "the advertisement appears to suit me."

Lady Octavian Meredith did not immediately make any answer; she, however, gazed earnestly upon Christina's countenance, as if seeking to read into the very depths of her soul, but the amiable lady's regards were notwithstanding fraught with an ineffable sweetness and a tenderness that was at the same time full of affection, surprise, and suspense.

"And you will leave me, Christina?" she at length said, but in a voice so low that it was only audible through its tremulous clearness.

"Yes, dearest Zoe," answered Christina, "I shall seek this situation," and then she averted her countenance to conceal the tears that were trickling down it.

She said not another word; she volunteered not another syllable of explanation. What more indeed could she say? To enter into particulars was impossible, and she would much rather lie under the imputation of deep ingratitude painful though such an imputation were — than be guilty of the far blacker and perhaps more hidden ingratitude of remaining beneath that roof to stand in the way of Zoe's claims to all her husband's devoted love.

There was a long silence, during which Christina dared not turn her eyes again upon Lady Octavian Meredith, for she naturally feared that this silence on her friend's part denoted astonishment and displeasure. At length feeling her position was awkward in the extreme, she slowly and timidly reverted her eyes upon Zoe, and then to her mingled amazement and relief, she perceived that Lady Octavian, having just wiped the tears from her cheeks, was surveying her with an expression of tenderness ineffably sweet, indescribably angelic. Christina threw herself upon her friend's bosom; they embraced with true sisterly warmth; they mingled their tears together. For some minutes did they thus remain clasped in each other's arms, and not a syllable was spoken. Zoe was the first to break that silence at length, and then it was not to give utterance to a word of remonstrance against Christina's resolve, — much less to breathe a syllable of reproach; it was merely to express the heartfelt prayer that her dear young friend would experience happiness wherever she might be.

Was it that Zoe penetrated Christina's motives, and that she esteemed them in the proper light, appreciating them too with thankfulness? Such was the question which Christina naturally asked herself, and she knew not how to answer it. Very certain it was, however, that for the remainder of the time she stayed beneath that roof — which was now very short — she experienced nothing but the most sisterly kindness on the part of Zoe, — a kindness which she was never wearied of displaying, and which though mild, soft, and gentle was all the more touching and profound. Our heroine applied to the Princess Indora, for she indeed was the Oriental lady advertising for a companion, and, furnished with a testimonial from Lady Octavian, she was readily accepted by the King of Inderabad's daughter.

It was on the third day after the scene above described between Christina and Zoe that the former took her departure to remove to her new home. But since the accident she had not been once altogether alone with Lord Octavian, and inasmuch as when in his presence under any circumstances, her conversation was most guarded, she had not alluded in his hearing to this purposed removal. Whether Zoe had informed her husband or not. Christina was unaware. The young girl chose for her departure a moment when Lord Octavian was absent from the house, and on Zoe proffering the use of the carriage to take her to her destination, she declined it, being determined that, unless from Zoe herself, the young nobleman should have no means of discovering whither she was gone. And something in her heart told her that Zoe had not spoken to her husband on the subject, and that she would not acquaint him with her new place of abode.

"Dearest Christina," said Lady Octavian, when the instant for parting arrived, "to you am I indebted for my life; my eternal gratitude and my heartfelt love are yours. Oh, believe me, dearest Christina, the feeling I cherish toward you, is — is — But I can say no more. God bless you, Christina! But we do not part for ever — No, no. I shall see you again, my sweetest, dearest friend; I shall visit you at the princess's, if her Highness will permit it. Farewell, Christina, farewell."

They embraced fervently; again and again did they embrace, the tears rained down their cheeks, one last kiss, one last farewell, and they separated.

CHAPTER XI

INCIDENTS AT THE EARL OF LASCELLES' MANSION

Now that the fine weather had set in, there was a particular room on the ground floor of the Earl of Lascelles' mansion which the Countess Ethel seemed particularly to like. It was not large, but elegantly furnished, and, as her ladyship said, it had the finest piano of any apartment in the house. Adjoining this room was a bedchamber, likewise so exquisitely appointed that it might serve as a lady's boudoir, and the windows of these apartments were on the side of the house looking upon a grass plat dotted with parterres of flowers, and beyond which stretched a noble extent of garden.

For the last week or two the Countess of Lascelles had complained of indisposition, representing that she was nervous, had sick headaches, and was affected by the slightest noise. She had therefore begged the earl to permit her to occupy these rooms for a brief space, adding that she only thought thus of separating herself from him in order that she might recover her health all the more speedily; and as at the same time she made this request, she cajolingly desired him to send her the first proof-sheets of his memoirs to peruse, assuring him that she burned with impatience to become acquainted with a work that would astonish the world, the vain, frivolous old man assented to the temporary separation of chambers.

Now it happened that one morning at about nine o'clock, the earl made his way to the apartments which we have just been describing, he having taken it into his head to relate to the countess an adventure which he had never yet told her, and for the simple reason that he had only concocted it since six o'clock on that same morning, at which hour he had risen to prepare notes and memoranda to serve as a guide for his literary occupations by the time his secretary should arrive. Full of his newly concocted anecdote — to which he mentally added a few embellishing exaggerations as he threaded the passages toward the apartments above alluded to — the earl reached the door, and without the ceremony of knocking, he walked in. Oh, incautious Ethel, to have left that door unlocked. It was a sad oversight, but if such oversights never took place the chapters of romance would lose half their charm, actions for crim. con. much of their piquancy, and the public curiosity no mean portion of the food which occasionally gratifies it. The door was left unlocked, then, and as the earl entered, he might have been knocked down with a straw - redoubtable, according to his own account, though he was - on beholding a female figure at the window half-clasped in the arms of a young gentleman on the opposite side, and who seemed as if having just leaped out, he was taking a farewell kiss of the beauteous frail one.

That this latter was his wife and the other his son Lord Osmond, the earl had not a doubt, though a sort of dimness immediately came over his vision. He stopped short; he tried to roar out something, but he could not; his powers of utterance seemed suffocated. All that he could do was to raise his clenched fist, and shake it in speechless, impotent rage; then in total bewilderment he turned from the room, not thinking of closing the door behind him, and scarcely knowing whether he was walking on his head or his feet.

At that same instant Lord Osmond was stricken with dismay on catching a glimpse of his father's form ere it disappeared by the doorway. The countess beheld the change which suddenly came over the young nobleman's countenance, and the abruptness too with which he retreated from her arms. She also was seized with consternation, and a few hurried words on Osmond's part confirmed all her worst and wildest fears. Good heavens! what was to be done? This was the question they both with simultaneous rapidityput mentally, and which the next moment they orally asked each other. Ethel was sinking with affright; visions of fearful exposure, of infamy and disgrace, were sweeping like vultures through her brain, when Osmond, suddenly smitten with an idea, showed by the quick brightening-up of his countenance that all was not quite lost.

"What is it — what is it that you think of?" demanded Ethel, with the feverish haste of suspense.

"My father will be straight off to Makepeace, and that fellow can alone save us. Fear not, dearest, dearest Ethel."

The lady staggered half-fainting away from the window, and sank upon an ottoman, while her paramour, darting from the casement in another direction, sped in quest of Makepeace. Fortunately he encountered the valet at an angle of the building, and laying his hand upon his shoulder, he said, in a quick, excited tone, "Five hundred guineas if you will serve me."

Now, as Makepeace was just the man to sell his soul to Satan for about half the sum, he was by no means the one likely to refuse such an offer as that which Lord Osmond thus made him. He accordingly returned an affirmative answer with the most zealous readiness, and Lord Osmond at once gave him the requisite explanations, vowing however that he was merely jestingly whispering something in the ear of his youthful mother-in-law, and that thus though his lips might seem suspiciously near to her countenance, it was only in the playful mood he had described, and not for the purpose of either receiving or bestowing an illicit caress. This was of course said to save Ethel's character in the estimation of the valet, though Osmond might have known that the attempted explanation was far too clumsy to impose upon so astute an individual as Makepeace. The most intelligent persons, however, often stultify themselves in such peculiar circumstances, and hug the belief that the most transparent gloss thrown over particular incidents serves as a successfully enshrouding veil. So was it with Lord Osmond on this occasion, and Makepeace affected to receive the young nobleman's explanations as the legitimate and veritable one. He bade Osmond be of good cheer, and hastened off to throw himself purposely in the earl's way.

He knew perfectly well that the old nobleman would on his own side at once seek an opportunity of unbosoming his wrongs to him (Makepeace), and therefore he hurried up into the earl's dressing-chamber, where indeed at that hour in the morning it was his duty to lock up in the drawers all the cosmetics and the artificialities which played so considerable a part in the nobleman's toilet. On entering the room, Makepeace found that the earl was not as yet there, but he knew that he would come, consequently he did not go to search for him in any other part of the mansion, but began putting away the divers articles above referred to. In a few minutes the door opened, and the earl entering, flung himself upon a chair with a countenance so truly comical in its misery that it was difficult for Makepeace to suppress a smile. But with the air of one who seemed to fancy that nothing unusual had taken place, the valet went on with his work, while the old earl sat literally gasping in continued bewilderment, as if still quite at a loss to persuade himself that what he had seen had positively and actually taken place.

"Makepeace," at length he said, "I do verily believe that I am -a - a - a"

"I know that your lordship is the most enlightened nobleman of the age," observed the valet, with an air of profound respect.

"Yes, yes, Makepeace, I am aware that the world does entertain such an opinion of me. But that does not prevent me, all the same, from being a - a -"

"The most modest and unassuming nobleman, my lord, that could possibly be," rejoined the valet.

"Well, yes, I think that in this respect," said the old earl, "I possess the qualities of all great minds. But still some of the greatest men that ever lived have been what I fear I am now. I mean a - a - "

"A little too diffident in respect to your lordship's own powers," interjected Makepeace, still with an air of respectful gravity the most complete and the most imperturbable. "For instance, your lordship might have been Prime Minister if your lordship had thought fit to take advantage of the occasion when you made that wonderful speech — "

"Well, I think I was rather forbearing at the time," said the earl, "but I did not like to be too hard upon the government, and oust them completely. But I feel very queer, Makepeace, very funny indeed. I could not have believed that such was the sensation when a man finds himself out to be a -a - "

"Popular author — as your lordship will assuredly become," said Makepeace. "It is already whispered abroad that your lordship has got a work in the press, and I know it is creating an immense sensation, for when I went to the circulating library yesterday to fetch your lordship Gulliver's and Baron Munchausen's Travels — "

"Yes, yes, I just wanted to look at the books you name, to see how the tremendous falsehoods those fellows have recorded stand in sad contrast with the adventures, so startling though so truthful, which I am chronicling. But I never thought, Makepeace, that I should have to wind up my book by writing myself down — not an ass, Makepeace, as Dogberry did, but a — a — "

"Traveller of the most unimpeachable veracity," rejoined the valet, and now there was really something so exceedingly ludicrous in his master's countenance, — his sense of degradation struggling with his pride, the conviction of a sustained wrong yearning to proclaim itself, but held back by the shame of declaring what he felt himself to be, — all these feelings finding such comical expression in features whose aspect was at the best of times most ludicrous that the valet never experienced such difficulty in keeping his countenance.

"It's all very well that I am everything you say," continued the earl, with unusual pettishness, for never was his idea of his own greatness so cruelly shocked, or brought down to a level so closely bordering on a sense of abject littleness, "but it does not prevent me from being, Makepeace — eh, Makepeace? — you know what I mean — a a — " and then with a desperate effort, and before the valet could interject another complimentary phrase, the earl blurted forth, " a cuckold."

Makepeace started with an astonishment so admirably feigned that his master believed it to be perfectly genuine, and for nearly a minute they gazed upon each other, — the valet as if in speechless amazement, the earl with a grin that was most ludicrously doleful.

"My lord," at length said the valet, "there must be some terrible mistake in all this. What! the countess forget her duty to her husband, and such a husband, — a husband who is in all respects one in ten thousand. Surely your lordship is labouring under a delusion?"

"Well, I don't know, Makepeace. It's true I've seen strange things in my time. There was the spectre of the Hartz mountain, - I nodded familiarly to him, but he took his hat right off to me."

"A homage to your lordship's rare qualities," said the valet.

"Well, and then there was the mirage, too," continued the nobleman. "I was once riding on an elephant in Africa. and in the horizon which bounded the desert, I beheld the reflection, but with this simple difference. that the elephant was riding on me."

"Emblematical of your-lordship's great bodily strength." interjected Makepeace.

"Well, they were optical delusions, after all," said the earl, "but really, when one sees a young gentleman kissing a young lady, it is difficult - eh, Makepeace? - to persuade oneself that that is an optical delusion."

"And yet, my lord, with due deference to your superior understanding," replied the valet, " there might be an optical delusion on such a point as even this. Indeed, when I bethink me, I just now saw something that might serve as an illustration, if I dare introduce such names in connection with such a matter --- "

"Speak out, Makepeace," said the earl, fidgeting about on his seat; "though I tell you it will be no easy thing to persuade me that I am not — you know what I mean. But about this illustration of yours?"

"It is simply this, my lord," resumed the valet. "Just now, when your lordship descended from the dressing-room, I went into the garden to pick a flower or two for my own chamber, - I am very fond of flowers, my lord, - when I beheld Lord Osmond -"

"Ah, Lord Osmond," muttered the earl, grinding his false teeth and clenching his fist. "My own son - the villain."

But Makepeace, as if not noticing the interruption, went on to say, "I beheld Lord Osmond laughing gaily with Miss Vincent, and she too was laughing heartily, evidently at something which he had just been saving to her. Well, my lord, just at that moment the countess appeared at the window of her own room, and her ladyship gaily exclaimed, 'What lovers' secret is this passing between you?'"

"She said that, did she?" cried the old nobleman, eagerly, and quivering with suspense.

"Yes, my lord, that is what the countess said, and she ap-

peared to enjoy amazingly the confusion into which her sudden appearance at the casement had thrown Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent. Then Miss Vincent, with many blushes, said to Lord Osmond, 'Do pray, my dear Adolphus, tell the countess what it is we were saying.' You will pardon me, my lord, for being so explicit — "

"Yes, yes, go on, go on," said the earl, catching eagerly at the hope of finding himself no cuckold after all.

"Well, my lord, the rest is soon told," continued Makepeace. "Lord Osmond rushed up to the window, while Miss Vincent stood blushingly aside, and he forthwith whispered the secret in the ears of the countess. Now, my lord, what I mean to infer from all this is, that suppose any one had been near enough at the time to see merely Lord Osmond and her ladyship under those circumstances, and yet too remote to have overheard what previously took place, the impression might have been very detrimental indeed — "

"By Heaven!" shouted the old earl, "I am no cuckold after all," and springing up from his chair, he began dancing and capering about the room, performing the most extraordinary antics and throwing his body into the most grotesque contortions. "Why, do you know, Makepeace," he ejaculated, when it at length pleased him to desist from those demonstrations which, however interesting as an expression of feeling, were certainly somewhat uncouth if regarded in the light of attempts to exhibit the twistings and twirlings which the human limbs can achieve, and to display how the human frame can become as circumvolved as a corkscrew, — "do you know, Makepeace, that it is the very incident you have been so innocently describing which put such a dreadful idea into my head? And yet I now see it all. It was an optical delusion, - yes, and an auricular delusion also, for would you believe it, Makepeace, that I could have not only sworn I saw the kisses but likewise heard them?"

"It shows, my lord, how even the most intelligent can deceive themselves," said the valet, gravely.

"It does indeed. But what a fortunate thing I did not give way to my rage. I would not for the world have exposed myself so foolishly."

"It would indeed, my lord, have been a very sad business," rejoined Makepeace.

"Yes, and what would the countess have thought of me?" exclaimed the old nobleman. "You see, Makepeace, what extraordinary command I have over my temper. There is not another man in England that could have so restrained himself. But I am exceedingly cool and collected in emergencies. I remember once when I was first in the commission of the peace — it was down in the country that the thing happened — I was called upon to stop a prize-fight that was taking place. I proceeded to the spot, and saw two great, hulking fellows — each at least six feet high, and with fists that could fell an ox — fighting in the midst of a ring. Well, Makepeace, I did not rush in to part them, I let them go on fighting — "

"Which proves, my lord," responded the valet, "that your lordship does indeed possess an extraordinary degree of coolness."

"And never did I display it more completely than just now. Of course, Makepeace, you will not mention to a soul that such a thing ever entered into my head? Ah! and Adolphus and Isabella have got on so well together that they are regular lovers, eh? Capital capital," and the old earl, chuckling at the idea, rubbed his hands gleefully, for though his suspicion was fully removed, yet somehow or another he was very anxious that Lord Osmond should wed with all possible despatch and bear his bride away to another home. " T tell you what, Makepeace, it is quite evident that my son and niece are immensely attached to each other, so we must marry them off as soon as possible. But young people are so diffident; they take months and months before they dare speak of settling the wedding-day. I know it was the case with me when I fell in love with my present countess. I was exceedingly diffident, and then, too, you know, I had that long attack of the gout which chained me to my room for three months. But about this young couple - I will do something to make Adolphus hurry matters on apace. Ah! the idea strikes me, and you will confess, Makepeace, when you hear it, that it is an admirable stroke of policy."

"I have no doubt of it, my lord," said the valet; "everything your lordship does is impressed with a high intelligence."

"Well, I think that you are about right there, Makepeace," said the old earl, complacently. "And now I will tell you

what I propose to do. That Christian Ashton is a very nice lad, and so genteel too in his manners, indeed quite the gentleman — "

"He could scarcely be otherwise," observed Makepeace, after being a month in your lordship's employment."

"Yes, gentility reflects itself. But about my plan. - I propose to throw him in Isabella's way; I will invite him to dinner. I will leave Adolphus to hand down the countess. from the drawing-room, so that young Ashton must give his arm to Miss Vincent, and then he will sit next to her at table. Perhaps I will drop him a hint that he is to pay her attention, — he is so docile and obliging, he does everything I tell him. For instance yesterday he wanted to spell shrubbery with two b's, but I bade him put only one, and he obeyed me immediately, with such a pleasant smile too, so that I am sure he will do what I tell him in the present case. His attentions will be flattering to Isabella, for all young girls are coquettishly inclined, just as young men like me are apt to be rakish. However, as I was saying, Isabella will be pleased, Adolphus will be jealous, and he will be urged on to ask his cousin to name the day. Now, what do you think of my scheme, Makepeace? "

"I think your lordship possesses the wisdom of Solomon," answered the valet.

"Well, I believe that you do not exactly stand alone in that opinion. But now I will just run and ask the countess how she is to-day, for I am prouder and fonder of her than ever, after having so shamefully suspected her."

Away sped the old earl to Ethel's apartments, and the moment he made his appearance, she saw that Lord Osmond's device, practised through the medium of Makepeace, had completely succeeded, and she was infinitely relieved by a result which she had scarcely dared hope would have been attained. Alas, we are bound to declare that Ethel was guilty! Those fine resolves which some months back she had adopted — and at first, too, with a prospect of really having strength of mind sufficient to carry them out — had gradually melted away beneath the influence of Lord Osmond's tender looks, of his impassioned language, and of his great personal beauty, since the young nobleman had contrived to obtain admission once more into the paternal mansion. Yes, Ethel had fallen, but we choose not to dwell at unnecessary length upon guilt which under all circumstances was so deep, so deadly.

The silly old earl lost no time in putting his precious scheme into execution. Christian came at the usual time that day, and having written to his noble employer's dictation for three or four hours, and an astounding admixture of mendacity, self-conceit, and nonsense it was that he had thus to write, he was about to depart, when the earl caught him by the arm, and addressed him as follows:

"You are a very good youth, and I am very much attached to you, but you must not put two b's in shrubbery for the future. You are to dine with me to-day. Make yourself look as spruce as possible, and come at six o'clock. There will only be ourselves, the countess, Lord Osmond, and my niece; make yourself quite at home, and don't hesitate to pay such little attentions to Miss Vincent as a young gentleman is bound to show toward a young lady. Why, God bless me, how crimson you turn! You blush just like a woman! Pooh! no diffidence. Mind you hand Isabella down to dinner, sit next to her, and talk without restraint. And now go, for I mean to sit down for an hour or two and invent — I mean make notes of some more adventures for our occupation to-morrow."

Christian went away astounded, as well indeed he might be. What could it possibly all mean? Had the old lord suspected his passion for the beautiful Isabella? Did he suspect likewise that his niece had not regarded the youth with indifference? Did he purpose to favour their loves? Or was he adopting some means to inflict a crushing punishment, and overwhelm our presumptuous hero with the most humiliating exposure? But no; Christian could not fancy that this latter conjecture was the solution of the mystery. He had seen quite enough of the earl's character to be aware that he was incapable of any proceeding that had aught grand or striking in it, and moreover, that if he meditated mischief, he was unable to conceal the pettiness of his mind beneath an air of frank cordiality and kindness.

"However," thought Christian to himself, "no matter what his lordship's motives are, let me think only of the joy afforded by this prospect of passing hours in the society of Isabella."

We must observe that Christian had no longer the slightest

jealousy in respect to Lord Osmond. He had often noticed the young nobleman, the countess, and Isabella walking together in the grounds, and had invariably seen that while Osmond and Ethel kept together, Isabella would either linger behind, or else walk by the side of the countess and not by that of her cousin Adolphus. Thus, although Christian felt tolerably well certain that Lord Osmond was not thinking of paying his addresses to Isabella, yet on the other hand his naturally pure mind suspected not for an instant the criminal intimacy which subsisted between that young nobleman and his beauteous mother-in-law. We may here observe too that Isabella — even more femininely chastesouled than one of the opposite sex could possibly be — was equally far from imagining that an unholy passion subsisted on the part of her uncle's wife and son.

Two or three weeks more passed away, and during this interval Christian frequently dined at the earl's table. Lord Osmond and the countess were perfectly well aware of the motive for which he was thus brought into their society, and treated as an equal in the little family circle, for Makepeace, whom the five hundred guineas had bought entirely over to Lord Osmond's interest, had failed not to inform the young nobleman of his father's delectable scheme. Isabella imagined that her uncle was merely displaying these civilities toward Christian in consequence of a disinterested esteem for the youth's merits, while Christian himself continued as much in the dark as ever in respect to the whole proceeding on the part of his noble employer.

CHAPTER XII

YOUTHFUL LOVE

IT was a serene but profound happiness which the youthful lovers now enjoyed, for lovers they assuredly were, although as yet no syllable from our young hero's lips had revealed the affection which he experienced. But the eves speak a language more eloquent than that of the tongue, and the sympathies of two hearts, pouring forth in reciprocal transfusion, gentle and unseen, make mutual revelations which are not to be mistaken. When hand touches hand and the pulses of the two beat quicker, when the gaze of the lover settles in respectful tenderness and bashful admiration upon the countenance of the adored one, as if his eves would penetrate through the mirror of her own orbs, deep down into her heart's tabernacle and feast their looks upon the hived sweetness of her own pure love, and when her eyes, modestly sinking beneath that gaze, veil themselves with the richly fringed lids, then is love's tale told on the one hand and understood on the other, - reciprocated too as well as understood, though not a syllable from the lips may pass between the enamoured pair. Thus was it with Christian Ashton and Isabella Vincent.

In the presence of the earl, Lord Osmond and the countess were exceedingly upon their guard, and as the young nobleman had every reason to be rejoiced that Christian was now so much brought within the sphere of the family circle, he had not the slightest notion of interfering in respect to the loves of the youth and Isabella. For that such an affection subsisted between them was visible enough to any eyes save those of the foolish old earl. Christian joined them in their rambles in the garden, and as he walked with Isabella, it necessarily threw the countess and Adolphus together without the risk of exciting any suspicion on the part of the younger pair as to the illicit intimacy existing between them. Thus was it that both Lord Osmond and the countess had every reason to be pleased that Christian was so much at the house, and for the same motive the young nobleman did not choose to pay any marked attention to Isabella, even though by so doing he might the more effectually have lulled the earl into complete security in respect to the countess.

One day Miss Vincent was to be presented at court at one of the royal drawing-rooms. The Countess of Lascelles, as a peeress, was to introduce the young lady, but when the appointed day came, she was really indisposed and unable to leave the house. Isabella's naturally retiring disposition would have shrunk from this ceremony which to her had the aspect of an unpleasant ordeal, but it was a whim of her uncle's, and therefore must be gratified. He was resolved that the presentation should take place, and therefore as the countess could not assist in it, the earl speedily enlisted the services of two titled ladies of his acquaintance. The fact is, the old nobleman was getting wearied of his son's delay as he thought it — in openly proposing for Isabella's hand, and therefore he was resolved to accomplish another of his fine strokes of policy. He fancied that if Isabella were seen apparelled with all the elegance, taste, and richness which were inseparable from court costume, her appearance would be so ravishing that Adolphus could not possibly for another moment resist beseeching her to name the nuptial day.

And truly beautiful indeed was Isabella Vincent on this occasion. Her glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, was decorated with a single white camellia, — a fitting emblem of her own immaculate purity. The dress that she wore — combining the necessary attributes above specified — set off her tall, slender, sylphid shape to the utmost advantage; while the fear that she might not acquit herself properly heightened the colour upon her cheeks, which made her seem the fairest image of modest loveliness that ever mortal eye rested upon. And to court Isabella went, but while proceeding thither in the carriage with her lady chaperons, while ascending the staircase at the palace, in the midst of a throng of all that was highest in rank, most brilliant in beauty, and most eminent in respect to state dignitaries, while passing through the splendid saloons, while kneeling to kiss the hand of royalty, and while returning again to the mansion at Kensington, there was one image which was never absent from the charming maiden's mind, and this was the image of Christian Ashton.

The Earl of Lascelles was again completely out in his reckoning. Lord Osmond was too deeply enamoured of the countess to be affected with the charms of any other being in feminine shape, no matter how transcendingly lovely were the aspect which this being wore. But how was it with Christian Ashton? He beheld Isabella pass out of the carriage when going, and alight from it on her return, and never in his eyes had she appeared so fascinating, so sweetly beautiful, so matchlessly charming. He knew that she loved him. but yet he felt that to complete his happiness, he must obtain the avowal from her lips. At once did he take the resolve to seize the first opportunity to confess his passion and elicit a reciprocal tale from her. But the next moment a feeling of sadness came over him; how dared he aspire to the hand of an earl's niece? And how could he ever hope to be in a position to make her his wife? This very circumstance of her presentation at court was a source of pleasure and pain to our young hero, - of pleasure inasmuch as it enabled him to behold Isabella apparelled in a way to set off her loveliness to its utmost advantage, and of pain because it forced upon him the conviction that situated as he was it seemed presumptuous to a degree, if not absolutely hopeless, for him to aspire to the hand of one who belonged to the circle of aristocracy and was enabled to enter within that of royalty.

And this strain of thought led him on to reflect for the hundredth, perhaps the thousandth time, on those mysterious circumstances which had recently enveloped Isabella as with a veil of mystery. From being ignored by her relatives, she was suddenly transferred into their very midst; from occupying a humble lodging in the house of coarse, vulgar people, she was all in a moment removed to a palatial mansion. What could be the signification of all this? Wherefore had Makepeace assumed the name of Gibson when calling at the Chubbs' to liquidate the stipend for Isabella's board? Christian was bewildered; he knew not what to conjecture, what to surmise. When walking with Isabella in the grounds, and when having the opportunity of private conversation, he had not ventured to touch upon those subjects, nor had she of her own accord ever in the slightest way alluded to them.

But from the contemplation of these mysteries, Christian's mind reverted to that of Isabella's loveliness, the amiability of her disposition, and the elegant sweetness of her manners. Despondency on account of the difference of their social positions was again succeeded by hope, and again too did the determination settle in his mind that he would seek an opportunity to avow his love and to elicit a reciprocal confession from her own lips.

That opportunity presented itself in the evening after Isabella's return from court. Christian was invited to dinner at the earl's mansion, and after the dessert, Lord Osmond proposed a stroll in the garden. The earl refused to be of the party, for he was inwardly chuckling at the idea that his last grand stroke of policy was producing its effect, and that Isabella's appearance of that day was now certain to elicit something decisive from his son's lips toward her: hence his refusal to join the party, for he concluded that Adolphus would take care to stray apart with Isabella, while Christian kept the countess company. So the earl sat over his wine, partly chuckling at what he fancied was going on, and partly sketching forth in his imagination some astounding adventure for the literary lucubrations of the morrow.

Little did he suspect that while Lord Osmond and the countess were seated together with hands fondly clasped, in an arbour situated in the most secluded part of the grounds, Christian and Isabella were walking in a shady avenue quite on the other side of the enclosure. And Christian told the tale which he had resolved to tell, and obtained the avowal which he had hoped to elicit. The hearts of that young pair were confessed the one to the other, and both were happy. Would the reader have us enter into the minutest details, and chronicle every word that passed between them? Would he have us extend our narrative into the fullest particulars descriptive of this love scene? And yet we might do so, for though the tale of love is the oldest known to human beings, and commenced in paradise itself before the fall, yet is it ever new, and therefore ever interesting. The forms of speech which convey it may be infinitely varied, yet are the end and purpose ever the same, and countless though the

world's languages be, different too in the richness or the poverty of idioms, figures, and phrases, yet have they each and all a sufficiency, — ay, even a copiousness of words wherewith to form that tale.

But it is not our purpose to record the conversation which then took place between Christian and Isabella. Suffice it to say that after hesitating and trembling and falling into confusion, the youth, in the very midst of his bewilderment, at length found himself breathing the avowal which he had so much longed to make, and in Isabella's blushing cheeks and downcast looks he read the response long ere it was softly murmured from her lips. Then they were happy both, oh, so happy, joy beating in their hearts, and their hands thrilling to each other's touch. The maiden spoke but little, the vouth not much more, when once the reciprocal avowals were made; and the little that they did say was connected only with their love; they spoke not of the future, they thought not of how the hope which was in their hearts was ever to be realized; it was sufficient for them that they loved each other, and that for the present they were together.

It was not until the following day that Christian ventured to speak to Isabella relative to those mysteries which had surrounded her at the time of their first acquaintance at the parish clerk's house, and now it was that our young hero received the following narrative from Miss Vincent's lips:

"My mother, Lady Isabella, was the sister of the Earl of Lascelles, and many years younger than himself. Were she alive now she would be scarcely forty. She was young therefore when she first learned to love my father, Mr. Vincent, who was only a poor lieutenant in the army. But though poor in respect to the world's goods, he was rich in every intellectual accomplishment and generous quality of the heart. Lady Isabella, who had long been an orphan, did not reside with her brother the earl, but with a maiden aunt in the country. This aunt was proud, harsh, and severe, and the moment she perceived that a feeling of affection was springing up between her niece and Lieutenant Vincent. she unceremoniously and rudely forbade the latter her house. At the same time she wrote to the Earl of Lascelles, who was in London, informing him that his sister had fallen in love with a penniless officer, and that he had better come and fetch her away at once. The earl did so, and when he had his sister with him in the metropolis, he insisted that she should receive the addresses of a particular friend of his own, - a nobleman of rank and wealth, but who was old enough to be Lady Isabella's father. Vainly did my poor mother beseech that her brother would not sacrifice her so cruelly: he was inexorable, and perhaps you have already seen enough of my uncle to be aware that whatever idea, whim, or caprice he takes into his head must be gratified. Perhaps he thought that he was only doing a brother's duty toward a young orphan sister; perhaps his motives were good, since his aim was to secure for her a prosperous position. At all events, as I have said, he remained deaf to her entreaties, and matters progressed so far that the day was fixed for her elderly suitor to conduct her to the altar. At that crisis Mr. Vincent arrived in London on a temporary leave of absence from his regiment in the provincial town; he and Lady Isabella met, and they resolved to part no more. She fled with him to the dwelling of a female relation of his own, and so soon as circumstances would permit their hands were united. Alas, my poor mother! she found herself discarded by all her relations, even by her own brother, but she had a consolation in my father's devoted love."

Here Isabella paused for a few minutes, during which she wiped away the tears which the recital of her parent's history drew from her eyes, and Christian, taking her hand, pressed it tenderly.

"I do not remember my father," continued the young maiden, in a soft, plaintive voice; "he died when I was only three years old. You may easily suppose that the widow of a lieutenant in the army did not find herself very happily placed in a pecuniary sense. It was for my sake — for the sake of her orphan child — that she wrote imploring letters to her aunt and her brother, beseeching their forgiveness and their succour. I regret to say that so far as forgiveness was concerned their hearts were closed against her, but her brother the earl consented to make her an allowance of three hundred pounds a year. This was at least some consolation to my poor mother, for she knew that her child whom she loved so tenderly would be beyond the reach of want, and that she would likewise be enabled to give me a good education. It was in Lincolnshire that my father died, and it was there that my mother continued to dwell. I was edu-

cated, until the age of fourteen, under her immediate supervision: she would not send me to a boarding-school: she could not consent to separate even for a single day from the only joy of her heart. It was when I had obtained that age of fourteen that this fond and affectionate parent of mine was seized with an illness which speedily threatened to prove fatal. Ah. Christian!" continued Isabella, in a voice so low and tremulous that it was scarcely audible, "never, never can I forget the scene at my mother's death-bed. It often steals upon me during the day, and comes back to me in dreams by night: methinks that I feel the last fond pressure of her arms now around my neck, the last kisses she imprinted upon my cheeks, and the tears too which bathed these cheeks of mine. Then it was that she told me her own past history, and amidst convulsing sobs informed me that I should be left in the world dependent upon an uncle whom I had never seen. But I must observe that when her indisposition had first threatened grave consequences, she had written to the Earl of Lascelles, imploring him to send her the assurance that her daughter - so soon to become an orphan — would not be neglected. The earl wrote back to say he would look after my welfare, and thus my poor mother's death-bed was not one of unmitigated affliction; she had still the hope that her brother's promise would be fulfilled on behalf of myself. And while breathing this hope, and invoking Heaven's choicest blessings upon my head. that dear mother of mine surrendered up her spirit into the hands of the Eternal."

Here Isabella again paused, and Christian gently said, "Do not continue your narrative now; it afflicts you too much."

"Yes, I will complete it, Christian," she answered, "for it is a tale which must be some day told to your ears. You may well conceive that the task is a painful one, but being entered upon, it is better to achieve it than to be compelled to renew it at a future period."

Christian recognized the truth of the sweet maiden's remarks, and she continued in the following manner:

"I wrote to my uncle the Earl of Lascelles, to inform him of my poor mother's death; he remitted me money, and bade me, when the funeral was over, come up to London, where he had secured me a home beneath the roof of a highly respectable family, whom he named. Conceive my distress when I thus learned that I was an object of no sympathy with my titled relative, but merely a being for whom he felt himself bound to make an eleemosynary provision so that I should not starve. Instead of hastening in person to bestow a paternal protection on the poor orphan of so tender an age, he bade me journey up to London by myself; I was not even to find a home beneath his own roof, but was to be consigned to the care of strangers. Ah, Christian, my first experience of the world was thus sad enough."

"Do not weep, sweetest Isabella," whispered our young hero, as he now pressed her hand to his lips. "Fortune's aspect has changed toward you, and you are differently situated now."

Isabella threw upon her lover a look of bashful tenderness, and she continued her narrative.

"I arrived in London, and proceeded at once to the house of the Reverend Mr. Hickman, by whom, as well as by the ladies of his family, I was kindly received. Mrs. Hickman took an early opportunity to make me understand that in conversation before strangers I was not to claim relationship with the Earl of Lascelles, nor on any account was I to speak of the circumstances of my mother's history."

"Doubtless the earl was somewhat ashamed of his conduct toward his deceased sister," remarked Christian, "and hence that injunction of secrecy and silence conveyed through the medium of those to whose care he had entrusted you."

"That was the conjecture which I also formed at the time," rejoined Isabella, "and I have no doubt it was the true one. I remained in the Reverend Mr. Hickman's family for nearly two years, during which I was well treated, and as Mr. Hickman had daughters of my own age, and a governess to instruct them, my education was completed under the same tutelage. But Mr. Hickman died suddenly, and as he left his family but indifferently provided for, they had to go abroad, to accept a home that was offered them at the house of Mrs. Hickman's brother, who was a merchant or banker, — I know not exactly which, — residing on the Continent. The departure took place hurriedly after the funeral, and as I could not of course accompany them under such circumstances, it became necessary to find me another home. That was the first occasion on which I ever beheld the person who then called himself Mr. Gibson. He informed me that he was the Earl of Lascelles' confidential agent, and that he was empowered to provide for me temporarily, until my uncle should make up his mind in respect to other arrangements. Everything was done in a hurry, and by Mrs. Hickman's recommendation, a lodging was procured for me in the house of her deceased husband's clerk, where, Christian," added Isabella, with a soft blush, "we first met."

There was another pressure of the hand on the part of the enamoured youth, and he observed, "But the change from a residence with a genteel family to the abode of those coarse, vulgar people — "

"I do not think it was altogether my uncle's fault," interrupted Isabella, " and I will presently explain wherefore. First of all I must tell you that the earl's valet — whom I then knew only by the name of Gibson - repeated the injunction which I had originally received from Mrs. Hickman, — to the effect that I was never in my new home to make the slightest allusion to the Earl of Lascelles, never to speak of him as my uncle, never to mention that my deceased mother had belonged to a noble and titled family. He also informed me that I must on no account form any new acquaintances. Indeed, Makepeace spoke far more plainly on these subjects, and therefore less delicately, than Mrs. Hickman had formerly done, for he gave me to understand that if I violated his injunction — if I spoke of my uncle either in language of boasting or complaint — his lordship would abandon me altogether, and withdraw whatsoever he purposed to allow for my support."

"Ah, this was most cruel," exclaimed Christian, his blood tingling with indignation, and he thought to himself that he should never again be able to endure the old earl's presence with even an ordinary degree of patience.

"Yes, it was cruel," said Isabella, "for if my poor mother had mortally offended her relatives, it was not well for them to visit their rancour upon the head of her orphan daughter. However, I accepted my destiny with resignation; I promised to obey the injunction so earnestly given, and now, Christian, you can comprehend wherefore it was that when you so kindly offered that your sister should pay me a visit, I was compelled to refuse, and yet I could give you no explanations. I need not speak of my experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Chubb; you know them, and you saw enough to be well aware that I could not possibly be happy beneath their roof. When Makepeace called — "

"And why, do you suppose, did he take an assumed name?" inquired Christian.

"Doubtless to render it all the more difficult - and indeed impossible — for the Chubbs to discover by whom he was employed. But as I was about to observe." continued the amiable Miss Vincent, "I occasionally asked him, when he called at the house, and I had an opportunity of speaking to him in private, whether my uncle intended me to live there altogether, and he invariably replied that when his lordship had time to give his attention to the matter, some other arrangements should be made and something fixed with regard to my future career. Indeed, Makepeace hinted that it was possible a situation as governess, or as companion to a lady, would be found for me, and that therefore it was not worth while to remove me to any other place at present. Then all of a sudden was I informed that my uncle had altered his mind entirely concerning me, that he meant to have me home, to acknowledge me as his niece, and to receive me with open arms. You know how abruptly I was borne away from beneath that roof where we first became acquainted. I must now add that on the morning after my arrival at this mansion, Makepeace — whose real name I had of course by that time discovered - sought an opportunity of speaking to me alone. He expressed a hope that I had always found his conduct perfectly respectful toward me. and he further hinted that it would be doing him a service if I did not mention to my uncle how meanly and humbly I was provided for at the parish clerk's house. I had no inclination to commence my new career beneath the earl's roof by making mischief, or vexing my uncle with complaints; and I therefore gave the assurance which set his mind at ease. But I suffered him to understand that I penetrated his motive in making the request, and that though I pardoned him. I did not the less despise him."

"Ah, I comprehend," exclaimed Christian, indignantly; "the unscrupulous man had paid but a mere pittance on your behalf to the Chubbs, and self-appropriated the remainder of the allowance furnished from the earl's purse." "There can be no doubt, Christian," answered Isabella, "that such was the conduct of Makepeace, and you understand wherefore I just now expressed my belief that the change from a comfortable home at the Hickmans' to a comparatively wretched one beneath the parish clerk's roof was not to be altogether ascribed to any unfeeling conduct on my uncle's part. And it is with pleasure I add that from the moment I set foot within these walls, I have received nothing but kindness at the hands of the amiable countess; my cousin Adolphus treats me, as you see, with an attention courteously respectful; the earl himself appears glad to have me with him, and in no sense have I been made to feel that I am in a state of dependence, — much less that I am an interloper."

Thus terminated the young maiden's narrative, and as the dusk was now closing in, the two youthful lovers sought Lord Osmond and the countess, that they might reënter the mansion together. Those whom they thus sought had likewise deemed it time to rejoin the earl, and the party accordingly repaired to the drawing-room.

Two or three days elapsed, and still the Earl of Lascelles heard nothing of the hoped-for intimation that his son Adolphus had proposed for the hand of Miss Vincent. His lordship began to fear that his fine stroke of policy in respect to Isabella's presentation at court had failed to produce the desired effect upon Adolphus, and he was determined to bring matters to a solution and pack off Lord Osmond and Isabella to the hymeneal altar with the least possible delay. He therefore reflected upon what new step he should now take in order to bring about this consummation. He still felt persuaded that it could be nothing but diffidence on his son's part, and the current of his thoughts flowed in the following channel:

"Perhaps, after all, the loves of my son and my niece have not made quite so much progress as I had anticipated. And really, considering that Adolphus is but a mere child," for the earl would not even admit to himself that his son was a grown-up young man of three and twenty, "he may be a mere puling schoolboy in the art of love. I will just satisfy myself on the point. I will ask that young Ashton to dine with us again to-day; they are all sure to walk out in the garden as usual in the evening. Ashton will of course bear the countess company, Adolphus will roam apart with his cousin Isabella, and I will conceal myself amongst the evergreens, and just listen to what takes place between the young couple. They will of course talk of love, and I shall be enabled to judge to what point matters have reached, whether there is any chance of Adolphus soon popping the question, or whether he is so timid and bashful that he wants me to give him a helping hand."

The old earl chuckled amazingly at this new scheme; he considered it to be another brilliant stroke of policy on his part, but for a wonder he did not communicate it to Makepeace. He invited Christian to dine at his table that day, and everything progressed as he could wish, for after the dessert, the usual walk in the garden was proposed, though at a somewhat later hour than heretofore. The earl excused himself, as was his wont, and for about half an hour he sat drinking his wine and pondering the various matters he had in hand, not forgetting his literary labours, which were progressing as rapidly as his own fertile imagination and Christian's fluent penmanship could possibly enable them to do.

The half-hour having elapsed, and the dusk coming on. the Earl of Lascelles issued from the mansion, struck into the shadiest avenue, and, proceeding stealthily, came near one of the arbours which were interspersed about the grounds. He thought he heard voices speaking in gentle tones; he stopped and listened, he recognized Isabella's voice, but could not catch what she was saving. Noiselessly as a serpent gliding amongst the trees and shrubs did the earl steal to the rear of that arbour, and there, inwardly chuckling at his astuteness and his cunning policy, he listened. The voices continued speaking in the same low tone as before, and love was assuredly the topic of their discourse. But gradually the suspicion stole into the earl's mind that it was not precisely the voice of his son Adolphus which he heard in conversation with his beautiful niece. His lordship continued to listen with suspended breath, until he could no longer conceal from himself the suspicion - almost amounting to a conviction — that it was none other than Christian Ashton whom he thus heard in tender discourse with Isabella. The earl was amazed, bewildered, petrified; he felt as if he were in a dream, and none of the fictitious adventures in his own

forthcoming volumes seemed half so marvellous as this reality. Whether he was standing on his head or his heels, the old nobleman had not a very clear conception. At length, as he began to awaken somewhat from his astoundment, he resolved to have ocular demonstration of the fact itself ere he proclaimed his presence, for the "optical delusion" in respect to his wife some weeks back had made him particularly cautious how he took any rash step for the future.

Therefore, still as noiselessly as a serpent, did the earl creep along around the arbour, until he was close by the entrance of that dense umbrageous bower. It was now almost completely dusk, and the earl, gently protruding his head, looked in. The lovers both at the same instant caught sight of a face thus peeping upon them through the obscurity, but they did not recognize it. Isabella gave a faint scream, and Christian — smitten with the conviction that it was a piece of impertinent curiosity on the part of the gardener whom he had a little while back seen in the grounds darted forward and dealt the countenance such a vigorous blow that he sent the unfortunate old earl sprawling back into the mic'st of a group of sweetbrier shrubs.

His lordship roared out with the pain; as well indeed he might, for the thorns had entered his person in all directions, and as he had a pair of light trousers on, it was particularly in the lower limbs that he suffered. Christian and Isabella at once comprehended that it was none other than the earl himself who was the victim of this catastrophe. The young maiden was overwhelmed with confusion and dismay; the youth sprang forward to drag his lordship forth from the briers, and Lord Osmond at that moment rushed up to the spot. Hearing his father's cries, Adolphus had fancied there was something wrong, and he had accordingly urged the countess to return to the mansion while he sped to see what was the matter.

"I am murdered, Adolphus," exclaimed the earl, in a towering rage; "this young rascal has vowed to have my life, and he has been making love to your cousin Bella."

"Most sincerely and humbly do I beseech your lordship's pardon," said Christian, "for the blow which I inflicted —"

"But my nose," cried the earl, rubbing his nasal promontory in a most ludicrous manner. "Be off with you, sir! Get out of my sight. Never cross my threshold again; and whatever is due to you shall be forwarded to your lodging in the morning."

"I hope, my dear father," interposed Lord Osmon!, "that you will deal leniently — "

"What! with this nose of mine all swollen and puffed up, my good looks spoilt," vociferated the earl. "Where is the countess?" he abruptly demanded.

"Oh, she has been indoors for some time," replied Adolphus. "She complains of headache — "

"Ah, well," interrupted the earl, satisfied that it was all right in that quarter, "the countess acted prudently to go indoors. Come, Bella, away with us at once. Take your cousin's arm — It is shocking of you to have listened to this jackanapes of a boy when you know that Adolphus —"

"Hush, my dear father," hastily whispered the young nobleman; "poor Bella is dreadfully agitated. And you, Mr. Ashton," he added, now turning quickly to our hero, and speaking in a low, hurried voice, "depart at once; your presence only irritates my father. Rest assured that I will do all I can to intercede in your behalf."

He wrung Christian's hand as he spoke, pushed the youth forward to hasten his departure, and then giving his arm to Isabella, whispered, "Cheer up, my dear cousin; we will see what can be done for the best."

But Isabella was weeping bitterly, and on regaining the house, she hurried up to her own chamber, where she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction. Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles repaired to his dressing-room, to detail his grievances to Makepeace, and to have a poultice applied to his nose, which was somewhat swollen from the effects of the blow so vigorously dealt by Christian.

On the following morning Lord Osmond called upon our hero at his lodgings, and with much real sorrow informed him that though both the countess and himself had pleaded their utmost with the earl on Christian's behalf, they had found him inexorable. Lord Osmond therefore counselled the youth to look out for another situation, and offered to render him any service that lay in his power. Christian bashfully expressed the hope that Miss Vincent would not suffer in her uncle's estimation; and it was a solace to him, in the midst of his affliction, to learn that his lordship had expressed no particular views with regard to his niece, but had merely hinted that he should keep a sharp eye upon her for the future.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISIT TO THE REGENT'S PARK

MEANWHILE Christina had been for a few weeks fulfilling the light and pleasing duties which she had to perform toward the Princess Indora. These consisted chiefly in reading to her Highness, in practising music with her, and assisting her researches into the historical records and the institutions of the British empire. The princess treated her precisely as Lady Octavian Meredith had done, namely, as a friend and as an equal, so that our youthful heroine experienced not the slightest sense of a dependent position. She took all her repasts with the princess, and rode out with her in the carriage. Now that the fine weather had returned, they walked in the garden of an evening; and the more Christina'saw of the King of Inderabad's daughter, the greater was the esteem she experienced toward her.

Christina had, on her first visit to the secluded villa residence, been astonished at the mingled sumptuousness and elegance of that abode, which appeared to realize all her dreamlike notions of Oriental splendour, or of those miniature palaces whereof we read in fairy-tales. But far more was she amazed by the magnificent beauty of the princess and the dark splendour of Sagoonah's charms. Indeed, everything connected with this retreat of the Oriental exotics was fraught with interest and novelty for the young maiden. Not the slightest idea had she of the motive which had brought the princess to England; nor had she the least suspicion that Mr. Redcliffe had ever crossed that threshold. On the day that she first applied for the situation, Indora had confidentially informed her that her real rank was that of a princess, but that, in order as much as possible to avert public curiosity, she concealed her high position and passed

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merely as an Oriental lady of fortune. Christina had mentioned Zoe's name as that of one to whom reference could be made if requisite; and Indora, perceiving from the way in which Christina spoke that she was on intimate terms with Zoe, gave her permission to mention confidentially the real rank of the lady into whose household she was about to enter. Thus there was no breach of trust on Christina's part in stating that much to Lady Octavian Meredith.

For an hour or two every day the Princess Indora shut herself up in that exquisitely appointed boudoir which we described on the first occasion that we introduced her to the reader; and there she employed herself in examining a portion of twenty enormous volumes which were piled up in the room, and which consisted of files of the *Times* for as many years as there were volumes. Once or twice during the first two or three weeks of her residence beneath that roof, Christina had occasion to enter the boudoir to speak to the princess, and she found her poring over the leaves of those files with a most earnest intentness. The young maiden however attached no importance to the circumstance, but simply ascribed it to that love of instruction which the princess displayed in all matters that concerned the affairs of Great Britain.

One day, as Christina entered the sumptuously furnished drawing-room, she perceived a note lying upon the carpet, and fancying that it was some stray piece of paper of no consequence, but that it ought not to be left to mar the exquisite neatness with which the apartment was kept, she picked it up. A glance, however, at the paper showed that it was a letter, and without reading even a single word of it, she placed it upon the table. At that very instant the Princess Indora entered, and Christina, presenting her the note, said, "I found this lying upon the carpet."

The Oriental lady's superb eyes appeared to recognize it at a glance, and for a moment there was a gentle flush sweeping over the delicate duskiness of her countenance. Christina beheld it, and mistaking its cause, said, somewhat proudly, "Your ladyship" (for the title of Highness was not used beneath that roof) " cannot possibly think that I would violate the sanctity of your letter."

"No, my dear Christina," exclaimed Indora, with the enthusiasm of generous frankness, " not for a single moment could I do you such injustice. Besides, after all," she added, as if she thought it necessary to account for whatsoever change of features might have inspired our heroine with that misapprehension, "there is nothing in this note that you may not see. I received it some months back, as you will observe by the date."

Thus speaking, the princess opened the letter, and handing it to Christina, bade her read it. Miss Ashton obeyed, and with considerable surprise read the following lines:

"MORTIMER STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE, "January 11, 1848.

"Mr. Redcliffe presents his most dutiful regards to her Highness the Princess of Inderabad, and begs to inform her it has come to his knowledge that some evil-disposed persons may probably seek to inveigle her Highness or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare, for purposes to which Mr. Redcliffe will not further allude. He however deems it his duty thus to put her Highness upon her guard, and if instructions be issued that no communication is to be held by her Highness's dependents with strangers, every needful precaution will have been adopted.

" Her Highness the Princess of Inderabad."

The moment she caught sight of the address from which the note was dated, and of the name of Redcliffe, an expression of surprise appeared upon Christina's countenance, but this deepened into alarm as she continued the perusal of the letter. The princess failed not to observe the effect which it produced upon her, and perceiving that the surprise was something apart from the announcement contained in the note itself, she said, "What thus strikes you, my young friend?"

"Simply," responded Christina, "that I have some little acquaintance with the gentleman who penned this billet, and my brother — who has occasionally visited me here, with your ladyship's kind permission — is far more intimate with him."

"Indeed, you know Mr. Redcliffe?" said Indora, subduing as well as she was able the thrilling trepidation which she ever felt on breathing that name.

Christina proceeded to explain how she herself had once

lodged in the same house where the note was dated, and how, on subsequently meeting Mr. Redcliffe, she had been enabled to interest him in the case of the poor seamstress, Mary Wright. She went on to expatiate on Mr. Redcliffe's bounty toward that unfortunate creature, showing how delicately yet unoscentatiously his ministrations were rendered until she sank into the eternal sleep of death. Indora listened with the deepest inward interest, but she had sufficient guard over herself to prevent her countenance from betraying all she felt.

"And that was not the only good deed on Mr. Redcliffe's part that has come to my knowledge," continued Christina. "Through him the dreadful purposes of a wicked husband toward an amiable and innocent wife were completely frustrated; and I am proud to reflect that my brother Christian played no insignificant part on the side of justice and virtue."

"Tell me this narrative," said the princess. "The little you have already spoken on the subject interests me."

Christina accordingly entered upon the recital of those incidents which are so well known to the reader, and the full particulars of which she had received from her brother's lips. In the course of her history it became necessary to speak of the pond by the side of the road, in the vicinage of Oaklands, where the murder had been committed nearly nineteen years back; and to the entire narrative did the princess listen with the utmost attention.

"No wonder that the young woman, Letitia Rodney," remarked Indora, "should have been so overwhelmed with horror when accosted by Mr. Redcliffe by the side of that pond in the deep darkness of the night."

" "The tragedy which took place there so many years ago," rejoined Christina, "was a very dreadful one. My brother Christian read the account in a piece of an old newspaper when he was first in the employment of the Duke of Marchmont."

"And did he recite to you all the particulars?" asked the princess.

"Briefly so," responded Christina. "Yes, it was a sad tale, full of a romantic and fearful interest; but it has left a dread stigma upon the names of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian." The Princess Indora rose from her seat and advanced toward the window, from which she gazed forth in silence for two or three minutes. At length again turning toward Christina, she said, "Our conversation has flowed into a channel which has interested me. I have a complete file of a London newspaper in the boudoir. You are far more expert than I am in everything which relates to the concerns of your own country. Will you endeavour to find for me the accounts of the particular tragedy of which you have been speaking?"

"With pleasure," answered our heroine, and away she tripped to the boudoir, the princess shortly afterward following. Christina referred to the volume which contained the set of newspapers for the year 1829, and she had little difficulty in discovering the accounts of the appalling tragedy at Oaklands. They ran through several numbers, and even for weeks and months after it occurred, there were occasional paragraphs referring to it, and chronicling the various surmises that were abroad at the time in respect to what had become of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian. All these did Christina mark with ink, so as to be more easy of reference for the Princess Indora, and having finished her task, she was about to retire, when Sagoonah entered, bearing a letter addressed to the young maiden. The volume of the Times which she had been searching lay open upon the table; the ayah's dark eyes glanced for an instant toward it, as if in wonder at the colossal subject of her royal mistress's and her youthful companion's studies. She presented the letter with that graceful inclination of the form which showed all its willowy and bayadere-like elasticity to such advantage, and then withdrew.

Christina instantaneously recognized the handwriting of Lady Octavian Meredith, and she passed into the drawingroom to peruse the letter. Therein Zoe informed her that though her health had improved since Christina left, it was not yet sufficiently reëstablished to enable her to fulfil her promise of calling upon her at the Princess Indora's residence; but she begged our heroine to come and pass a few hours with her on the following day, adding that she should be otherwise altogether alone, as Lord Octavian had promised to spend the whole of that day with his father the Marquis of Penshurst. Christina could not help thinking that there was a certain significancy in this latter notification, and that

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it was meant as an assurance that she might in all safety accept the invitation without the fear of encountering Meredith. The young girl caught a sigh rising up in her throat, but by a strong and hasty effort she subdued it; and though in the solitude of her own chamber she blushed at this half-betrayal of her own weakness unto herself. To divert her thoughts into a new channel, she sped back to the boudoir, where she found the princess deeply engaged in the perusal of the newspaper volume which Christina had marked for the purpose. The young maiden handed Zoe's letter to her Highness, and when the princess had read it, she said, with her wonted amiability, "I understand, my young friend, that you seek my permission to accept her ladyship's invitation. It is cheerfully accorded, and the carriage shall be at your disposal to-morrow."

Christina thanked the princess for her kindness, and returning to her own chamber, she penned a note to Lady Octavian Meredith, to the effect that she would be with her at noon on the following day. The approaching visit naturally brought recent incidents back to the young maiden's mind with some degree of vividness. She was almost certain that Zoe either suspected or else positively knew her husband's passion, for this alone could explain the tacit readiness with which Zoe consented to separate from our heroine, - or at least how it was that she did not offer any serious remonstrance. And now, perhaps, the reader may wonder whether Christina had acquainted her brother with the circumstances which had led to her change of situation. Yes, the young maiden had spoken frankly to Christian, and had described all that had occurred; but she did not even hint that her own feelings were not altogether so indifferent as she knew they ought to be with regard to Lord Octavian. Her virginal modesty would not permit her to avow even to the ear of an affectionate brother that which she would not admit unto herself; for though there was the suspicion - at times more distinct than at others - in her mind that Lord Octavian's love had not proved entirely displeasing to her, she endeavoured to banish that suspicion, she did all that she could to crush it, and whenever she found the handsome young nobleman's image stealing into her thoughts she at once strove to turn them completely into some other channel.

In the evening, when seated at the dinner-table with the Princess Indora, Christina observed, "The conversation with your ladyship this morning changed to a topic which so engrossed our attention that I had not the opportunity of expressing my hope that Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was never justified by any actual attempts of the nature to which he alluded."

"Immediately on the receipt of it," responded the princess, "I gave to the faithful Mark," — thus alluding to her steward and majordomo — "the instructions which Mr. Redcliffe had himself suggested. Two or three persons, male and female, had been noticed by Mark lurking about in the neighbourhood, and they endeavoured to enter into conversation with him; but he treated them with so chilling a reserve that they saw they had nothing to gain in that quarter. During the last two or three months I have heard no more of such attempts to pry into my proceedings."

"Is it possible that your Highness has enemies in this country?" asked Christina, with the most perfect ingenuousness; for her pure mind, as inexperienced as it was artless, entertained not the slightest notion as to what the snare could be into which it was sought to inveigle the princess and Sagoonah.

" No, thank Heaven, I fear not enemies," answered the princess. "But you, my sweet young friend, comprehend not az yet that there are persons wicked enough in this world to zpread nets for the feet of others," and having thus spoken, the Oriental lady gave the conversation an immediate turn, — not, however, with abruptness, but in a way that seemed perfectly natural.

Precisely at noon on the following day, Christina alighted from the carriage at the Merediths' habitation in the Regent's Park; and as it was already arranged that the equipage was to return to fetch her at four, she had no fresh orders to give, and the vehicle was at once borne away again by the handsomely caparisoned pair attached to it. In a few moments the young maiden found herself clasped in the arms of Zoe.

Lady Octavian received Christina in the drawing-room. She looked pale and languid, and our heroine was distressed to perceive that her beloved friend was yet some distance from complete restoration to Lealth. Zoe questioned her in the kindest manner as to her new position, and she expressed her delight to hear that Christina was so happy with the Princess of Inderabad. An hour thus passed while they were in conversation together, and during the whole time Lady Octavian never once mentioned the name of her husband. There was, however, nothing pointed in this avoidance of such mention; it might or it might not have been a mere accident arising from the circumstance that the conversation flowed in channels rendering any allusion to Lord Octavian perfectly unnecessary. Refreshments were served up, but scarcely was the luncheon-tray removed when his lordship's well-known knock was heard at the front door. Christina recognized it in a moment; she was thrown off her guard, she started, she blushed, she was filled with confusion.

"It is Lord Octavian," said Zoe, in a quiet tone; and yet it struck Christina, as she glanced toward her friend, that a slight tremulousness was visible in her frame. "He must either have changed his mind in respect to passing the day with his father, or else the marquis must have some other engagement which prevents him from entertaining his son."

While Zoe was thus speaking, Christina had leisure to recover somewhat from her confusion, and she felt the necessity of retaining all her self-possession. She was about to hint that she must now return to Bayswater, when she recollected that she had ordered the carriage to return not until four in the afternoon, and she therefore immediately perceived that were she now to depart abruptly it would be admitting to Zoe that she attached a significancy to the circumstance of Lord Octavian's unexpected presence. For though she had little doubt in her own mind that Zoe had more or less penetrated the circumstance which led to her removal to another home, yet it was one of those things concerning which the pure minds of two friends could not very readily show that they had any tacit but mutual understanding.

While all these thoughts were sweeping through Christina's mind, Lord Octavian's well-known footsteps were ascending the stairs; they approached the drawing-room door, and he entered. Fortunately he had heard from the footman who gave him admission that Miss Ashton was with her ladyship, and therefore he was not taken by surprise on finding Christina there. Ah, but he should not have entered the drawing-room at all, while thus knowing whom he was destined to meet! He had even said so to himself while ascending the stairs, yet an irresistible impulse urged him on; and though conscience told him that he was doing wrong, inclination was stronger than conscience.

Assuming an air of mere friendly courtesy, he advanced to Christina, proffering his hand. She hesitatingly gave him hers; he retained it for a single moment, and having exchanged with her the usual compliments of courtesy, sat down close by Zoe's easy chair.

"You did not expect my return so soon, dearest Zoe," he said, as if endeavouring to concentrate the greater part of his attention upon his wife, "nor did I, when leaving you in the morning, think that I should see you again until the evening. But my father was called into the country on unforeseen business scarcely an hour ere I arrived, and then I received a message requesting me to postpone my visit till the day after to-morrow."

"I hope it is nothing unpleasant," said Zoe, with that amiable placidity and soft mournfulness which had characterized her tone and manner ever since the accident that led to her illness.

"No, nothing of any great consequence," answered Octavian, — "merely a suddenly discovered defalcation in the accounts of his bailiff, but it is to no serious amount."

The young nobleman then proceeded, with well-bred facility, to glide into a conversation on general topics, and in which Zoe bore her part, if not with cheerfulness, at least with an apparent interest; though Christina could not help thinking it was really to prevent the discourse from flagging and thereby causing embarrassment to perhaps all three. The young maiden herself spoke but little; the mere necessity of keeping continuously on her guard, so as not to betray that sense of awkwardness that she inwardly and strongly felt, was at times hurrying her to the very brink of confusion. She sat with her eyes bent down, or else with her looks averted in another direction from the spot where Lord Octavian was seated. She did not choose to meet his regards. Not that she in this respect mistrusted herself. It was impossible for that pure-minded girl to display any significancy of look under such circumstances, but she knew not how Octavian might gaze upon her, or into what increased embarrassment and awkwardness he might plunge her.

Thus half an hour passed. Christina glanced at the timepiece, — still two more hours must elapse ere the carriage would come. Did Lord Octavian intend to remain in the drawing-room the whole time? It appeared so. All of a sudden Zoe directed Christina's attention to a portfolio of new and splendid prints which lay upon the table, and the young maiden, infinitely relieved, - and half-suspecting that Zoe meant purposely thus to relieve her. — hastened to look over them. In doing this she seated herself in such a way that without absolutely turning her back in rudeness toward Octavian, she nevertheless could without restraint avoid meeting his looks. By these means another hour was passed, and then Zoe requested Christina to favour her with an air upon the piano. The young maiden was compelled to advance toward the instrument, but she did so with a visible embarrassment, and Lady Octavian suddenly exclaimed, " No, my dear Christina; it is too bad that I should thus task you when you come to visit me out of friendship, and we have so short a time to be together."

"I see," said Lord Octavian, rising from his seat, and endeavouring to smile, though the attempt was but a sickly one, after all, "that I am one too many here, but I know that you ladies have your little secrets. I shall bid you farewell, Miss Ashton."

Again he presented his hand, again hers was given hesitatingly; he held it but for a moment, and then somewhat hurriedly quitted the room. Christina resumed her seat close by Zoe, and it struck her at the moment that the amiable lady was forcing herself to suppress a sigh. At that same instant, too, our heroine's gentle bosom was so full of emotion that she could have thrown herself into her friend's arms and given vent to her feelings with a gush of tears. But by a mighty effort she conquered this weakness. Zoe at once glided into conversation again, and her manner was, if possible, more kind and more sweetly affable than ever toward Christina. At length the carriage came, and when the two friends were about to part, Zoe said, "I am in hope, dearest Christina, to be enabled to return this visit in a very short time;" but she did not add that if this hope were disappointed she should expect our heroine to renew her own visit to the Regent's Park.

They embraced warmly and separated. Christina was halfafraid of finding Lord Octavian down-stairs in order to hand her to the carriage, but he was not there, and she took her way back toward Bayswater. While seated in the vehicle she reviewed every incident which had occurred within the last four hours. Scarcely a doubt remained in her mind as to the fact that Zoe had penetrated her husband's secret, and now a reminiscence suddenly flitted into Christina's brain. She wondered that she had not thought of it before. For, on that day when the accident with the phaeton occurred, it had struck her for an instant that she beheld Zoe's eyes suddenly close as she turned toward her immediately after those passionate exclamations had burst from Octavian's lips. Ah. doubtless Zoe's ear had caught them! They had revealed to her the secret of her husband's love for another: and if Zoe had really thus known it all along, it would account for the entire tenor of the admirable lady's conduct since that moment which struck a fatal blow to her happiness.

"Good heavens!" thought Christina to herself, shuddering and shivering at the bare idea that her surmise was correct, "what a sacrifice of feeling is the generous-hearted Zoe making in every way. She knows her husband's unlawful and disastrous love; she knows that I, though Heaven can tell how unwittingly, am its object, and yet she does not hate me. No, she is too magnanimous. And she will not make her husband blush in her presence by suffering him to perceive that she has penetrated his secret. Perhaps she pities him; perhaps she feels for him, making allowances for a heart that has no power over its own volition, and now she is cherishing this secret, she locks it up in her own bosom, she studies by every action, word, and look to excite the belief that she suspects it not. Admirable Zoe! Ah. no wonder that there is sadness in her tone, soft plaintiveness in her looks, for these it is impossible she can altogether control."

And then, while still seated in the carriage which was bearing her homewards, Christina wept scalding tears of anguish, — wept as if she herself were a wilfully guilty destructrix of the amiable Zoe's happiness.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MILLINER

Buy in the meanwhile, let us see what had taken place at the villa residence of the Princess Indora.

The carriage left that house at about three o'clock in order to reach the Regent's Park at the hour appointed to fetch Christina home: and Mark, the steward, went with it as far as Oxford Street, as he had several purchases to make on behalf of the household which he superintended. Sagoonah issued forth as if to walk in the garden, and her tall, lithe, supple form, arrayed in the white garments of an ayah, was lost amidst the avenues of embowering trees. There was a strange expression in Sagoonah's lustrous eves: they seemed to burn with an unearthly light, a mingled fierceness and satisfaction hovered in their luminous depths, defying all power of description. Her lips of vivid scarlet were at first compressed as if with the resoluteness of some settled purpose, but on reaching the extremity of the garden, where it was bounded by a close fence separating it from a field, the avah paused to listen, and then her thin, bright lips, parting with the hushed state of suspense, revealed her teeth of ivory whiteness and purity. The finely modelled bust, which the white garment only partially concealed, and which in its round and well-divided contours, unsupported by corset, resembled sculptured marble of a dusky hue, remained upheaved with that same suspense. Then she advanced through the shrubs, and looked over the fence. She perceived a female very handsomely dressed, and carrying a large brown paper parcel in her hands, loitering about in the field. Sagoonah, on catching that female's eye, made an imperious sign for her to advance; the woman hastened to obey it, and came close up under the fence.

"Why were you not here at the moment?" demanded the ayah, angrily, and though she spoke in broken English, yet her language was perfectly comprehensible.

"I was fearful of approaching too close up to the fence," was the well-dressed female's response, and she likewise spoke the English tongue in a manner which proved her to be a foreigner.

"And yet I sent word by your spy this forenoon." rejoined Sagoonah, "that you were to be here punctually at a quarter past three. However, it is of little consequence since you are here. Go around boldly to the front door — I will give you admittance. You are certain to obtain an interview with her ladyship, and you must then manage according to your own ingenuity."

As she uttered these last words, Sagoonah's eyes flashed again with a fierce, unnatural brilliancy, as if from the present proceeding she anticipated some grand triumph for herself.

" Is there nothing to be apprehended?" inquired the female with the parcel.

"Nothing," responded Sagoonah. "As I sent you word in the morning, the men servants were sure to be out with the carriage, and Mark had arranged to go up into London to make purchases."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah glided away from the vicinage of the fence, and reëntered the house, while the woman with whom she had been conversing passed around to the front door. Her summons thereat was promptly answered by Sagoonah, who admitted her into the hall, and pretended to remain conversing with her a few minutes, as if to learn what her business might be. Then the ayah proceeded to the drawing-room, where her mistress was reclining upon one of the luxuriant ottomans, and with the wonted graceful inclination of her form when addressing the princess, or any other person whom she had to regard as a superior, she said, " May it please your ladyship, the milliner has called."

"The milliner, Sagoonah?" exclaimed Indora. "I do not expect any such person. It must be a mistake."

"It does not appear to be a mistake, lady," rejoined the ayah, "for the woman speaks with the confidence of one who knows that she is right." "Then let her come hither," answered the princess, " and I will ascertain what her proceeding can mean."

Sagoonah bowed again, and issued from the apartment. Descending to the hall, she bent a significant look with the lustrous flashing of her eyes upon the woman who was waiting there, and whom we may as well at once announce to our reader to be none other than Madame Angelique herself.

This infamous creature followed Sagoonah to the drawingroom, and as she entered the avah closed the door behind her. Madame Angelique - who had now personally taken in hand a business for which none of her spies nor agents had hitherto appeared competent — had seen Indora when riding in her carriage or walking in her garden, and therefore knew that she was beautiful. But now that she beheld her close, she was perfectly amazed by the mingled grandeur and enchanting magnificence of those charms which she thus comtemplated. Nor less too was she astonished by the elegance. the richness, and the sumptuousness of the apartment itself. Self-possessed as the wily woman was, and generally having all her wits about her, Madame Angelique was for a few moments bewildered and astounded by the fairy scene which she beheld and the Oriental houri who was its presiding genius. Indora, with her accustomed affability, gave the woman an encouraging smile, for she perceived her astonishment, and she imagined her to be respectable. Indeed, it had not for a moment entered the mind of the princess that the visitress could be a female of infamous description, or that she was one of those very persons against whom Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was directed.

"I am told that you are a milliner," said Indora, "but I think that there must be some mistake, as I have not sent for any one of that description."

"Your ladyship will, I hope, pardon my intrusion," replied Madame Angelique. "I did not tell your domestic that I was sent for, but the young woman understands English so indifferently, and I myself speak it with such little accuracy, that the error arose from these circumstances."

"Ah, then," said Indora, with a glitter of suspicion for a moment appearing in her eyes, "you have called of your own accord?"

"I have taken that liberty, my lady," replied Madame

Angelique, assuming her blandest smile and her most coaxingly affable demeanour. "The truth is, I go my rounds amongst ladies of fashion and wealth — and beauty," she added, glancing with admiring significancy at Indora's splendid countenance; "I display pieces of the newest and most exquisite materials — "

"I am obliged to you for including me amongst the number," interrupted the princess, "but I require nothing of the sort at present, nor indeed at all."

Indora made a movement as if to indicate that the woman might withdraw, but Madame Angelique was not to be so easily disposed of.

"Pray bear with me for a few minutes, gracious lady," she said, "and I will show you so rare and choice a material that I am convinced your ladyship will be ravished with it. I work for some of the highest ladies in the land: for instance, the Marchioness of Trevelyan, the Countess of Mordaunt, the Countess of Lascelles, the Duchess of Marchmont — "

"Ah, you work for the Duchess of Marchmont?" said Indora.

"Yes, my lady," responded Madame Angelique, inwardly delighted to think that she should thus have succeeded in enlisting the interest of the princess. "I have been with the duchess this very day." It was, however, a monstrous falsehood which she uttered, inasmuch as Lavinia had not employed her since the discovery relative to the duplicate dresses, but if she had said she had seen the duke that day, it would have been perfectly correct.

"Are the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont in London now?" inquired the princess.

"They are at their mansion in Belgrave Square," rejoined Madame Angelique.

"I have heard of their splendid seat of Oaklands," resumed Indora, " and should like much to see it."

"Dear me, how extraordinary," ejaculated Madame Angelique, with well-feigned astonishment. "I can easily become the means of gratifying your ladyship's curiosity, and shall be proud and happy to do so."

"Indeed! How?" exclaimed the princess, with visible interest depicted on her magnificent countenance.

"His Grace the Duke of Marchmont is accustomed to treat me quite in a familiar manner," responded the wily Frenchwoman, who could scarcely conceal her mingled surprise and joy that matters should thus be taking a turn which seemed so favourable to her own atrocious designs. "You see, my lady, I have worked some years for the duchess, and the duke takes such pride in beholding his wife well dressed, that he seems to fancy he can never sufficiently display his gratitude toward the French artiste who furnishes her Grace's toilet, and that artiste is your ladyship's humble servant," added Madame Angelique, with a low curtsy.

"I understand," observed Indora; "the duke is kind to you, and if you ask him a favour would grant it?"

"Your ladyship has only anticipated what I was about to say," rejoined the infamous woman. "Ah, my lady, Oaklands is a most beautiful place. Such magnificent grounds, gardens so exquisitely laid out, superb aviaries, fountains, and statues, ponds with gold and silver fish, ornamental water, with stately swans floating on its surface, conservatories of the choicest fruits and flowers, — it is a perfect paradise. And then, too, the interior of the mansion itself, its sumptuous apartments, the delicious views it commands, and its splendid picture-gallery, —I am sure, my lady, that with your exquisite taste, and with your love of the beautiful," continued Madame Angelique, glancing around the drawing-room, "you would be delighted with a few days' residence in that charming place."

"Your description has indeed excited my curiosity," observed Indora, " and I should much like to pay a few hours' visit to Oaklands."

"A few hours, my lady," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "I am confident that if I said but a single word — and you would so far honour me as to bid me say that word on your behalf — I could obtain permission for your ladyship to make Oaklands your home for a week or a fortnight. The duke and duchess are not there, and you would be undisturbed mistress of the mansion."

"But it would be a most extraordinary request to make on the part of a perfect stranger," said the princess.

"Nothing extraordinary, when that stranger is an Oriental lady of rank and fortune. Besides," added Madame Angelique, "these things are frequently done in England, so that the duke and duchess would be delighted to place their mansion at your ladyship's disposal for a short period."

"I am exceedingly indebted to you for this assurance," answered Indora, "and I am almost inclined to accept your courteous offer. Open that parcel, and show me the contents."

Madame Angelique did as she was directed, and exhibited four or five superb pieces of dress material. - each piece containing the requisite quantity to be made up into costume.

"What are the prices of these?" asked Indora.

Madame Angelique named the specific sums, inwardly chuckling the while at the prospect of succeeding in the object of her mission, in comparison with which she cared little for the sale of her costly materials, which indeed, as the reader may suppose, she had only brought with her as a blind.

"I will purchase them all," said Indora, and drawing forth a purse from beneath the immense velvet cushion on which she was half-reclining, she counted forth the sum in Bank of England notes.

"Your ladyship will perhaps permit me to make up these materials after the European fashion?" said Madame Angelique. " Pardon me for the compliment, but your ladyship would look as well in such apparel as in that sweetly picturesque costume which your ladyship now wears."

"No, leave these pieces here," replied Indora. "But you may make me three or four dresses of a far more simple character, - such, for instance, as English ladies ordinarily wear. You may furnish me likewise with bonnets and shawls to match, for if I am really to pay this visit to Oaklands, I must appear there in a garb which will avert the gaze of disagreeable curiosity."

"I understand, my lady," answered Madame Angelique. I have your exquisite form so completely in my mind's eve that no measurement is necessary, and I am confident of being enabled to afford your ladyship the completest satisfaction. Indeed, such faultless contours as your ladyship's — "

"But look you," interrupted Indora, "I have my own reasons for desiring all this to be contrived with some little privacy. In short, when I return to my native land, I

would not have it known that I had even for a few days assumed the national garb of English ladies. Therefore come not yourself again to this house, but when the costumes are in readiness forward them to me, packed in boxes. Send me your account by the post, and I will remit you a draft for the payment. At the same time that you will have occasion thus to communicate with me, you can let me know whether you have been enabled — "

"To obtain the ducal permission for your ladyship to make a short sojourn at Oaklands?" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Oh, I can take it upon myself to give your ladyship a most positive assurance upon the point. And at the same time that I have the honour of communicating with your ladyship, I will furnish instructions relative to the route which is to be taken to Oaklands, should your ladyship proceed thither in a private manner by postchaise, which will be the better means of conveyance."

"I am really obliged to you," responded Indora, "for all the kind interest you are thus displaying toward the gratification of the whim which I have conceived. Probably in a week or ten days I shall hear from you?"

"Assuredly so, my lady," replied Madame Angelique.

Indora now, by a gesture, intimated that the audience was at an end, and the Frenchwoman carried herself by dint of a continuous series of curtsies toward the door. But perhaps, if she had observed as she closed that door behind herself the singular expression which swept over the superb countenance of the Oriental lady, she would have had some misgiving as to the real meaning of Indora's conduct throughout this proceeding, for it was an expression of such mingled scorn, contempt, triumphant satisfaction, all so strangely blended as scarcely to be definable in words.

Madame Angelique found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford her egress, and the rapid, significant look which the wily woman bent upon the ayah conveyed to the latter an intimation of complete success. Then Sagoonah's naturally lustrous eyes flashed still more brilliant fires, but assuredly not alone with a gratified greed experienced on account of the gold which Madame Angelique thrust into her hand. Indeed, the Frenchwoman herself could not comprehend the luminous strangeness of the ayah's looks, and for a moment they troubled her as if with a sort of vague and unknown terror. Yes, and even as she hurried away from the villa residence, and while chuckling too at the success of her scheme with regard to that Oriental lady of an almost fabulous beauty, she felt as if she were still followed by the wild influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XV

THE PRISONER

IT was now the beginning of June and three months had elapsed since the dreadful murder of Mr. Pollard at Liver-The spring assizes had passed without seeing Lettice pool. Rodney brought to trial, but as there was to be a summer assize held, it was expected she would on this occasion appear before the jury. The reason for the postponement of the trial at the first-mentioned assizes was the serious illness of the prisoner. It was, however, rumoured that she was not altogether without friends, that eminent counsel had been engaged in her behalf, and that Sir William Stanley, a wealthy baronet residing in the neighbourhood, and who was in the commission of the peace, had exhibited much interest in her behalf. Still the general impression appeared to be that she was guilty, --- the details of the circumstantial evidence telling so fearfully against her. Sir William Stanley, however, seemed to be an exception to the rule, and so far as his friends could judge from the few words he let drop on the subject, and the peculiarity of his look when it was broached in his presence, it was believed that he at least was not so strongly impressed by that evidence, even if he did not go so far as to imagine her completely innocent.

Lettice Rodney had indeed been seriously ill. The terrible accusation which pressed against her, the weight of the testimony upon which she was committed, had almost completely crushed her. If really guilty of the crime, she would have perhaps borne herself more courageously than she did when, being conscious of her innocence, she thus lay under an imputation of the blackest turpitude. After her committal for trial, she was for many weeks in a state bordering upon dissolution, sometimes raving in the delirium of fever, at others sinking into a torpor so profound that it appeared as if it were the highroad leading to the portals of death's mansion. She was lodged during this severe illness in the infirmary of the gaol, and every attention was shown her by the official authorities and the medical men. To a certain extent this humane treatment would have been displayed toward her without the prompting of any external influence, and notwithstanding the fearful crime with which she was charged, but those attentions had been perhaps all the more indulgent on account of the intervention of Sir William Stanley on the young woman's hehalf. The baronet nevertheless suffered it to be understood, for his own character's sake, that he had no previous acquaintance with Lettice Rodney, and that he was actuated by mere motives of humanity, — an averment which was fully supported by his reputation for the highest honour and integrity. We should observe that Sir William Stanley was a man of about sixty; all the early part of his life had peen passed in India, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and by the services rendered to the government in a variety of wavs had obtained the title of baronet. He was a widower, but had one son, -a young man of about four and twenty, and who was a captain in a cavalry regiment. We must further observe that circumstances had induced Sir William Stanley to revisit India some three years previous to the date of which we are now writing, and that he had only returned to England about a twelve-month back.

It was the first week in June, and in a chamber communicating with the female infirmary of the Liverpool gaol Lettice Rodney sat. How changed was her appearance from that glory and bloom of beauty which had invested her ere she found herself charged with the tremendous crime of murder. But terrible are the ravages which those joint scourges — care and illness — are enabled to effect upon the human form, and the most blighting influence of the former as well as the fiercest rage of the latter had wreaked themselves upon the unfortunate Lettice Rodney. Her shape, once so voluptuous in its superb proportions, had become emaciated; her cheeks, once so plump and with the roseate bloom of health upon them, had grown sunken and deadly pale; her eyes, deep in their cavernous orbits, had lost their fire, and the ashy lips received an added ghastliness from the fine white teeth. And her look too, oh, how profoundly sad it was! That countenance which had been wont to beam with sunny smiles, or to glow with the flush of sensuous passion, now seemed to be the tombstone of a perished heart, and on which was traced the epitaph of a happiness that was gone, never to come back.

It was about noon when she was thus seated in her chamber on the occasion that we now propose specially to direct the reader's attention thither. She was clad in the very plainest dress that she had brought with her from London at the time of her ill-fated journey; there was nothing coquettish about her now, no studied air of seductiveness in her toilet any more than there was in her looks. She seemed an altered creature, but one of those beings whom it is necessary for the hand of Providence to drag, for its own wise purposes, through the most terrible ordeals, and whose hearts must pass through fiery furnaces in order that they may be chastened. Books were before her upon the table at which she sat, and they were books which she read now, but which only a few months back, when in the luxurious saloons at Madame Angelique's house of gilded infamy, she would have tossed away from her with the light laugh of scorn.

Yes, and bitterly, bitterly did Lettice Rodney repent of her misdeeds. She thought of the Duchess of Marchmont, to accomplish whose ruin she had lent herself, and the conviction was strong in her mind that her own calamity was to a certain extent a judgment upon her head for her wickedness then. But she knew that she had many, many other sins to answer for: for instance, her personation of Mrs. Rayner in order to rob the lawyer of his money, and then too the very object of the journey which she had undertaken at the time, - namely, to try and wean away Eveleen O'Brien from that parental home to which the reformed young woman had gone back. For all these misdeeds, either accomplished or meditated, — and for the life of voluntary pollution and depravity which she had led, --did Lettice Rodney believe herself most righteously punished now.

And yet she was not altogether without the hope that her innocence would yet be made apparent, and entertaining this hope, her present contrition was all the more praiseworthy, for it would indeed have been comparatively little

worth if merely the result of that terrorism which belongs to the anticipation of an inevitably ignominious fate. But whence arose that hope? A few words will explain. When Lettice Rodney was beginning to recover from her dangerous illness — when she awoke from that long period of mingled delirium and torpor to a consciousness of her dread position - she was visited by Mr. Redcliffe. This gentleman questioned her minutely as to the whole incidents of the tragedy at Pollard's house: he likewise gave her certain instructions. and bidding her put faith in Providence, he declared that all that man could do should be done to make her innocence apparent, if innocent she really were. Then, too, did he inform her that he was the individual whom she had encountered on that memorable night by the side of the pond where he had extorted from her a full confession of her misdeeds toward the Duchess of Marchmont, and he likewise gave her to understand that when he visited Madame Angelique's den of infamy, it was in reality from no sensuous inclinations. but because he had special objects to serve. Nor less did he unfold to her that it was through his interposition the penitent Eveleen O'Brien was restored to her home and had received the parental forgiveness. From that visit on the part of Mr. Redcliffe was it that Lettice entertained the hope of her innocence being yet proclaimed to the world.

And now we return to the special occasion on which we have been speaking of her as being seated in her prisonchamber, and devoting her attention to the volumes which the chaplain and the governor had furnished. Presently the door opened, and as Lettice slowly turned her mournful look thither, expecting that it was merely the matron of the infirmary, she beheld Mr. Redcliffe. The door closed behind him, and taking a seat on the opposite side of the table, he bade Lettice resume her own, from which she had risen through respect toward the kind friend whom Heaven had sent her. He made inquiries concerning her health; he questioned her as to her present frame of mind, and he found that the soul was in a better condition than the body.

"Even if my innocence be made apparent, Mr. Redcliffe," said the prisoner, in a voice of profound melancholy, " and even if I go forth from this gaol into the great world again, I shall never recover from the blow which has so cruelly smitten me. But as for my penitence, — oh, believe me to be sincere! - I beseech you to believe that I am truly contrite."

"Six weeks have elapsed," said Mr. Redcliffe, "since I last beheld you. You had then only just awakened, as it were, from unconsciousness of alternating fever and torpor, and your mind was under influences but little calculated to render it calm and collected. Do you remember all that you told me then?"

"Every syllable, Mr. Redcliffe," answered Lettice, emphatically.

"And every syllable was consistent with truth?" said the philanthropist, inquiringly.

"As I have a soul to be saved," rejoined Lettice. "I have been very wicked, but never, never was I capable of such a crime as that, — no, never. My soul would have abhorred it."

"I believe you," answered Mr. Redcliffe, "for certain little incidents have come to my knowledge which tend more or less to corroborate some portions of your narrative. Describe to me once more, as accurately and minutely as you can, the appearances of the two men whom — as you allege — you saw on that fatal night in company with Mrs. Webber the housekeeper."

Lettice did so, and Mr. Redcliffe murmured to himself in a musing manner, "Yes, they are the very same."

"Do you — do you think that there is a prospect of my innocence being proved?" asked Lettice, with an almost anguished eagerness.

"I hope so," responded Redcliffe, "but I charge you not to indulge too much in a hope which might possibly be disappointed. Heaven is the disposer of all events, and it is only by Heaven's sufferance that man can be permitted to work them out to a particular end. I shall tell you nothing of the plans I am adopting on your behalf; suffice it for you to know that I am not idle."

"What can I say, Mr. Redcliffe," asked Lettice, profoundly moved, "to convince you of my gratitude?"

"I am certain that you are grateful," he answered, "but it is not gratitude that I require, — it is the assurance that you are truly penitent for those misdeeds that you have committed. And in this also I believe you. I learn from the governor sufficient to convince me that you fulfilled the injunctions which I gave you on the occasion of my former visit."

"Oh, not for the world, Mr. Redcliffe, would I have neglected them," exclaimed Lettice. "That infamous woman Madame Angelique came down from London to see me a few days after you were last here, but I refused to receive her. Then she sent an attorney residing at Liverpool, to offer to conduct my case, but I told the man of business that I was fortunately not without friends, and that even if I were, I would accept nothing at the hands of Madame Angelique."

"These particulars I have learned from the governor," remarked Mr. Redcliffe, "and I am pleased to find that you have thus fulfilled all my instructions. Your trial will come on shortly: able counsel has been retained for you. and as I have already hinted, I am not idle in other respects. I have entrusted your case to the most eminent solicitor in Liverpool, and this afternoon he will call upon you to ascertain whether he has correctly taken down every detail of the statement which I made him on your hehalf. T purpose to remain in this neighbourhood for a few days, and I shall see you again. But ere I leave you on the present occasion, let me repeat my warning, - that you indulge not too far in whatsoever hope I may have held out, but that you fix your thoughts upon that Heaven whose forgiveness you so much need."

Lettice made a suitable answer, and then, as Mr. Redcliffe was about to leave her, she said, "May I hope, sir, that Madame Angelique has not succeeded by other means in enticing away Eveleen from the home to which you restored her?"

"No," answered Mr. Redcliffe, "Eveleen is with her parents. She is fully upon her guard against the machinations of that vile woman, and I have no fear that she will either relapse into error, or become the victim of any new snare."

Mr. Redcliffe then took his departure, accompanied by the heartfelt gratitude of the penitent Lettice Rodney.

While this interview was taking place between the philanthropist and the prisoner, the following conversation was being held in the grounds of a handsome country-seat, about four miles from Liverpool. That country-seat was the abode of Sir William Stanley, and the discourse to which we have just alluded was progressing between this gentleman and his son. Captain Stanley had only arrived within the same hour at the paternal mansion, where he was to spend a few weeks, he having obtained leave of absence from his regiment. We have already said he was about twenty-four years of age; we may add that he was a handsome young man, of the middle height, well made, and of genteel figure. He was steady in his conduct, endowed with high notions of honour, of generous disposition, and of considerable intellectual acquirements. He had a good parent, but he himself was a son of whom any father might be proud.

"And who is this Mr. Redcliffe whom you are expecting to-day?" inquired Captain Stanley, as he sauntered with Sir William through the spacious and well laid-out grounds attached to the mansion, which we may as well observe bore the name of Stanley Hall.

"Do you not remember, my dear Robert, how I was indebted to a gallant Englishman for my life when traversing the Indian jungle — "

"Can I, my dear father, ever forget an occurrence which, when I read it, caused me for the moment as much cruel terror as if I had indeed lost you, but which the next instant was succeeded by as thrilling a joy at the certainty of your escape? You however omitted in your letter to specify the name of the valorous Englishman who rescued you from those bloodthirsty Thugs, and after your return to England you never happened to mention it."

"That gentleman, then," rejoined Sir William, "is the Mr. Redcliffe who will be with us presently."

"And most heartily shall I grasp the hand of my father's deliverer," exclaimed the captain. "Sincerely do I hope, too, that he will remain with us some while, for his is a friendship which I shall be proud to cultivate."

"You will have the opportunity," replied Sir William Stanley, "for according to the letter which I received from Mr. Redcliffe this morning, he purposes to remain with us a few days, and I know that he will be here again shortly, before your leave of absence expires, inasmuch as he takes considerable interest in a case which has caused great excitement in our neighbourhood, and which will be brought forward at the approaching assizes, - I mean that of the accused young woman, Lettice Rodney."

"Ah! that reminds me, my dear father," exclaimed the captain, "that when you wrote to me some time ago upon the subject, you hinted that you were not quite so convinced as other persons seemed to be of the prisoner's guilt."

"Nor am I, Robert," returned the baronet, " and I will explain to you wherefore. The crime - by whomsoever perpetrated - took place, as you recollect, about three months back, and it was only a few days after the occurrence that as I was walking in Liverpool I encountered Mr. Redcliffe. I instantaneously recognized the brave man to whom I owed my life, and we got into conversation. He then explained to me what had brought him to Liverpool. He had read in the newspapers the account of the murder, and the remarkable story which the accused Lettice Rodney told in her defence before the borough magistrates. He had known something of her previously, and though he was acquainted with nothing to her credit - but the very reverse — he nevertheless did not think, from his knowledge of human nature, that she was a young woman of so thoroughly black a heart as to prompt her to the commission of such a frightful deed. Besides - without entering into detailed explanations — he informed me that he had very recently encountered her under circumstances when she was so completely overawed by the idea of being upon a spot which was the scene of a fearful murder perpetrated some years back that he felt persuaded she had not the courage, even if she were sufficiently wicked, to accomplish such a crime. Her tale, too, - that tale which she related in her defence. — had struck him as being too extraordinary to be a mere concoction, and he spoke emphatically of the danger of trusting to circumstantial evidence, as well as of the deplorable errors into which mankind has at different times fallen when rushing precipitately to a belief of a fellow creature's guilt. Such was the tenor of Mr. Redcliffe's discourse when I encountered him nearly three months back in Liverpool, and he further informed me that he had been to the gaol to see Lettice Rodney, but that she was raving in the delirium of fever and unconscious of everything that was passing around. I invited him to the hall; he came and passed a few days with me, during which he instituted secret but minute inquiries into the character of the murdered lawyer's housekeeper, Mrs. Webber."

"And what was the result?" inquired Captain Stanley. "Nothing of importance," responded the baronet; "indeed, she appeared to be almost a complete stranger in Liverpool, and had only been a very short time in Mr. Pollard's service before he met his death in so terrible a manner. Mr. Redcliffe besought my good offices as a magistrate on behalf of Lettice Rodney, and ere he took his departure for London, he begged me to write to him so soon as the young woman should be in a condition to receive a . visit from him. Six weeks elapsed before I was enabled to make such a communication, but in the meantime I received two or three letters from Mr. Redcliffe, informing me that a few little incidents which had come to his knowledge, seemed to afford something like a corroboration of certain parts of the tale which Lettice Rodney had told in her defence. At the expiration of those six weeks. Mr. Redcliffe returned, in consequence of a communication which he received from me, and he then had an interview with Lettice Rodney in the gaol. The result was to establish the conviction in his mind that she is really innocent. But he prudently abstained from giving her too much hope, lest after all it should be doomed to disappointment. On that occasion he remained with me a few days, and now he is returning into our neighbourhood to assure himself that the lawyer to whom he has entrusted the case thoroughly understands it."

"All this is most extraordinary," exclaimed Captain Stanley; "the whole tale is a romance."

"From the positive manner in which Mr. Redeliffe has written and spoken to me," rejoined Sir William, "I am fully inclined to adopt his opinion. Besides, as a visiting magistrate I have seen this Lettice Rodney, I have conversed with her, I have questioned her upon various features of her tale, and I have found her consistent in all its parts. That she is penitent, too, I am well assured, and most sincerely do I hope that Mr. Redeliffe will succeed in his humane purpose."

"And I entertain a similar hope," cried Captain Stanley, with warmth. "If I can render Mr. Redcliffe the slightest assistance in prosecuting his inquiries or researches, I shall be only too happy." "He is a strange man, Robert," observed the baronet, "and chooses to do things in his own way. I heard it mentioned in Calcutta that he had been for many years resident — some said a prisoner — in the capital of Inderabad. It was moreover stated that he was possessed of considerable wealth. That he is the bravest of the brave, I had the best proof when he delivered me from the murderous villains in the jungle; that he is magnanimous and noble-hearted, his conduct in respect to Lettice Rodney fully certifies. It must not however be thought for a single moment that his acquaintance with this young woman originated in anything immoral. Far from it."

"I long to form the friendship of this admirable man," exclaimed the warm-hearted Captain Stanley.

At this moment a post-chaise was seen approaching through the grounds, and as it drew near, the baronet recognized Mr. Redcliffe as its occupant. He alighted to join the two gentlemen, and the chaise went on to the hall to deposit his portmanteau. The baronet grasped his guest warmly by the hand, and then introduced him to his son. Mr. Redcliffe stated that he had just come from seeing Lettice Rodney in the gaol, and he expressed his conviction of her full and complete innocence of the murder, whatever her other misdeeds might have been.

The baronet, the captain, and Mr. Redcliffe extended their ramble to where the grounds joined the road leading to Liverpool, and as they were about to turn back again, a strangelooking woman rose up from the other side of the fence. --she having been previously seated there. She was tall and thin, and if her complexion had been swarthy, she might have been taken for one of the gipsy race, but instead of being dark, it had evidently in her more youthful period been fair. and it was now partly sallow and partly sun-burnt. Her countenance was exceedingly emaciated and care-worn, and a certain wild, wandering expression in the eyes showed but too plainly that the unfortunate creature's intellects were unsettled. Her hair - once dark - was streaked with gray, and yet she did not appear to be old; indeed, if her age were two or three years past forty, it was the very outside. As for her apparel, it was this that at the first glance gave her a gipsy aspect. It consisted of an old cotton gown, with a dingy cloak over it, and instead of a bonnet or cap,

she wore a cotton handkerchief tied around her head. Blue woollen stockings and coarse shoes completed her garb. Her appearance was, however, cleanly, and notwithstanding the poverty of her attire, there was a certain neatness in it which impressed the beholder with the idea that she had seen better days.

"Ah! poor Crazy Jane," said the baronet, in a low tone and with a compassionating look, as he beheld the woman stand up from the opposite side of the fence.

"A penny for poor Crazy Jane?" she said, thrusting her skinny arm between the palings.

"You know, Jane," said Sir William Stanley, with a benevolent and pitying smile, "that I never give you a penny;" at the same time he drew forth his purse.

"No, true!" ejaculated the woman. "I remember now. Sir William Stanley is always charitable, and that is the reason I so seldom come near the hall. I don't like to intrude on good nature. Ah, dear me! I was not always a poor wandering outcast," and then drawing back her hand from betwixt the palings, she pressed it to her brow.

"Poor creature," said the baronet. "Here are five shillings for you."

She did not, however, seem to hear him, but with her hand still pressed to her forehead, she muttered incoherently, to herself; then at length speaking in a louder tone, she said, "Ah! I have got something more upon my mind; I wish I could explain it, but I cannot. It is not the same thing that has haunted me so long, — no, it is something new; but alas! I cannot — I cannot," and the poor creature shook her head despondingly, as if she deeply felt her inability to give lucid expression to some idea that was uppermost in her mind.

"Here are the five shillings, Jane," said the baronet, and he thrust them through the fence.

"Heaven's blessing upon you!" murmured the afflicted woman, and tears trickled down her wasted countenance; then, taking the money, she passed abruptly away and was soon out of sight.

"She is as mad as ever, poor creature," said the captain. I remember her from my boyhood."

"Yes, and I remember her for many, many years," added

the baronet. "Sadly is she changed, too, since first I knew her. She was then young and good-looking — "

"And who is this unfortunate woman?" asked Mr. Redeliffe.

"No one appears rightly able to give any explanation on the subject," returned Sir William Stanley. " She wanders about the country in all directions, and has been seen more than a hundred miles from here. Sometimes she disappears altogether for several months, and then suddenly turns up again. There is a half-ruined hut about four miles hence, which she inhabits when in the neighbourhood, and as you may suppose, she lives entirely upon charity. I have often endeavoured to lead her into conversation, and ascertain if possible what she originally was, and what calamity turned her brain, but I have never succeeded in eliciting more than that she had seen better days, and that she had stood in the presence of ladies of the highest rank, but whether as a companion or a menial does not very plainly appear, though I should rather suspect in the latter capacity."

The conversation presently turned into some other channel and the three gentlemen retraced their way to the mansion.

CHAPTER XVI

CRAZY JANE

Ir was in the forenoon — a couple of days after the arrival of Mr. Redeliffe at Stanley Hall, and while the gentleman himself had gone into Liverpool to see the solicitor employed on behalf of Lettice Rodney — that Captain Stanley was riding out on horseback, followed by one of his father's grooms. Diverging from the road, he took a smart gallop through the fields, and had arrived in the neighbourhood of a copse, which he was about to skirt, when Crazy Jane suddenly sprang up before him as if she were rising out of the earth. The captain drew in his steed, and spoke to her with compassionating kindness.

"You are Sir William Stanley's son," she said, gazing intently upon him, "and you are a good young man; you have all your father's benevolence. No, no, do not put your _ hand into your pocket — I want not money, now. Your father gave me enough to keep me for — I know not how long. Ah, I had something to say the moment I caught sight of you; I determined to say it, and now it is all slipping out of my head."

At first her utterance was rapid, accentuated, and jerking, but these last words were spoken with a profound mournfulness, and pressing her hand to her forehead, she evidently strove to steady her ideas.

"What is it, Jane?" asked the young gentleman, in a kind tone. "Think, reflect, take your time; I am in no hurry if you really wish to speak to me."

"I do, I do," ejaculated the mad woman. "It is something I have got here," and she touched her forehead. "No, it is here," she added, after a pause, and she laid her hand upon her heart. "It is something that oppresses me, — something that lies as heavy as lead on my bosom, and prevents me from sleeping at night. I wish I could tell it. I thought I could just now; I said it all over to myself, just as I used to say my prayers when I was a child, but it has all gone out of my head."

"What can it be?" asked Captain Stanley, much interested in the woman's words and manner, for he felt convinced that it was not a mere meaningless phase of her madness, but that it was this very madness itself which prevented her from giving lucid expression to something that she had really to reveal.

"What is it, you ask?" she said, with a sudden brightening up of her hitherto vacant desponding look. "Ah! now there is a gleam shooting into my mind — yes, yes, it is about that dreadful murder — "

"The murder?" ejaculated Stanley, all the interest he had previously felt being immensely enhanced in a moment.

"Ah, it is all gone out of my memory again," she said, shaking her head dolefully; "you made me start; you drove it away. It is of no use," and with these words she plunged abruptly into the copse, thus disappearing from the view of the amazed captain and his equally astonished groom.

"There is something extraordinary in this," said Stanley to the domestic; "that woman evidently knows something, but the impression of it is upon her mind like that of an unusual object upon the mind of a child, — too dim and uncertain to be properly explained. We will return at once to the hall and tell my father what has taken place. Mr. Redcliffe, too, said he should be back by luncheon-time, and this is intelligence which he will be deeply interested to receive."

Captain Stanley accordingly took the nearest route to the hall, which he reached just as Mr. Redcliffe was alighting from the baronet's carriage, which had taken him into Liverpool. Sir William Stanley, his son, and their guest were speedily closeted together, and the interview between the young gentleman and Crazy Jane was the subject of deliberation.

"This is indeed most important," observed Mr. Redcliffe, "for it is evidently the same subject to which the woman alluded when we met her at the fence, and when she said that she had something new upon her mind." "Let us go and see her," exclaimed the baronet, "without delay. But no! Redcliffe, you shall go alone. I have more faith in your power to lead her into lucid conversation than in my own. I have already so often failed. Besides, it is frequently to a stranger that these poor demented creaturcs will prove more rational than to those whom they have known for a long time, and who have always been accustomed to talk to them in a particular way."

"Yes," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I will lose no time in seeing her. I think you stated that her hut is about four miles distant? If you indicate the particular direction, I will set out and walk thither."

"Take the carriage, or go on horseback," exclaimed the baronet.

"No," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe, "I will walk, because in that case I may stand a better chance of falling in with her if she be rambling about. And I will go alone, too, as she may be the less embarrassed and bewildered in conversing with one than in talking in the presence of two or more."

Sir William Stanley gave Mr. Redcliffe sufficient explanations to guide him toward Crazy Jane's hut, and that gentleman accordingly set out. He had proceeded for a distance of about three miles across the fields, when on emerging into a lane bordered by high thick hedges he perceived Crazy Jane sitting on the green bank under one of these hedges, rocking herself to and fro and speaking aloud. An idea suddenly entered Mr. Redcliffe's mind. He remembered that Captain Stanley had stated how Crazy Jane had spoken of having " said it all to herself," and how by an incautious ejaculation he had driven the poor woman's thoughts out of her head. and it therefore occurred to Mr. Redcliffe that when she was alone she was better able to keep her ideas collected. She had not as yet seen him as he emerged into the lane; he got at the back of the hedge, and stealthily creeping along halted close behind the spot where Crazy Jane was still seated. She was continuing to muse in an audible tone, but in strangely disjointed and broken sentences, the tenor of which was, however, as follows:

"It must be many and many a year since then, but I cannot recollect how many. I was very different at that time — Ah, so different! People did not call me Crazy Jane. No, it was 'Jane my good girl, do this or do that.'

Ah, that was the way my poor dear mistress used to speak. Oh, how I loved her! Alas, alas, that it should have all ended as it did, — shocking, shocking! I know not why I should always and always be thinking of it. And yet I can't help it. Till that other thing came into my mind, I never could think of anything else. How piteously she wept! It really seems as if I saw her now standing before me. Yes, when the mist is deepest around me, I see that one image as plain as ever. She was not guilty; no, no, she was not. I am sure she was not. She was too good, — too kind for that. Oh, what became of you, my dear, dear mistress?"

Crazy Jane ceased, but her sobs were audible to Mr. Redcliffe as he listened behind the hedge.

"Who was more beautiful," at length continued the mad woman in her audible musings, " than the Duchess of Marchmont? They should have married her to Bertram Vivian, and not to his uncle. Alas, alas! to have thrown that divine creature away upon that old man, - it was shocking, shocking! Often and often have I thought of going to Oaklands to see the old place, and I have dragged myself for miles and miles - I wonder how many - along the roads and through the fields, until I had not the courage to go farther, and then I have come back to my hut. No. no. I could not look again upon that house where I last saw the good Duchess Eliza. I could not tread those gravelwalks where I once saw her move in all the glory of her beauty. Oh. it was a dreadful day. But those tears which she shed then seem to fall upon my heart even now like scalding drops. My poor dear mistress, I could have laid down my life for you."

Here there was another pause in the poor mad woman's musings, and again did her convulsive sobs reach the ears of Clement Redcliffe.

"What darkness and confusion have been in my brain ever since!" she once more mused audibly. "And yet there are times that I see it all before me, so plain — so plain — that I think it is taking place all over and over anew. But this other thing that is now in my mind. Let me reflect. When did it happen? Oh, poor creature that I am. I cannot remember anything about dates, and yet I am sure it was not near so far back as those dreadful scenes at Oaklands, — no, not near so far back. I was a young woman, and they used to say I was pretty at the time the dear duchess and Bertram Vivian — But what could have become of them both?" she ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting herself; "what could have become of them? I wander again. There is that other thing I wish to get back to my mind. Let me see? If I steady my head on both my hands, I can always reflect with more clearness; I will shut my eyes, so as to see nothing to take off my attention. There, like that."

Now the woman ceased speaking, and Redcliffe anxiously waited to hear what next might issue from her lips. But five minutes passed, and she said nothing; ten minutes, and still she continued silent. He held his breath suspended; he was motionless behind the hedge; he was so completely on his guard as not so much as to rustle a leaf for fear of interrupting her in the current of her thoughts.

"There now," she abruptly exclaimed, "I have got the whole of it as completely in my head as if this was the night when it happened, and as if I had not thought of anything since. Ah! if any one to whom I chose to reveal it should pass by at this moment."

Redcliffe glided noiselessly along the back of the hedge, reached the gate by which he had entered the field, and passing through it, once more emerged into the lane. Crazy Jane immediately recognized him as the gentleman whom she had seen two or three days back in company with Sir William and Captain Stanley, and by a certain association of ideas, she conceived that any friend of theirs must be a fit and proper person to receive the communications which she had to make. For the woman's intellects were not so completely disordered as to prevent her from having at times a certain amount of the reasoning faculty left, and moreover, as is the case with nearly all persons whose minds are unsettled, there were particular circumstances which would lead ideas into a connected flow and in continuous channels. This was the case now, and for nearly half an hour did Redcliffe remain in discourse with Crazy Jane. He was careful how he dealt with her; he humoured her, he did not interrupt her quickly nor suddenly, he exhibited all possible patience, suffering the woman to tell her tale in her own way; and thus from her jerking, disjointed sentences, he managed to elicit a narrative which in itself was complete as well as consistent in all its parts. What this was, we need not at present explain to the reader; suffice it to say that having obtained from the woman all he could elicit, he gave her some money and returned to Stanley Hall.

After a long conference with Sir William and Captain Stanley, it was decided that an attempt should be made to induce Crazy Jane to take up her abode at the hall, where it was proposed to place her under the care of the housekeeper, who was a kind-hearted and intelligent woman. We need not unnecessarily extend the details of our narrative by describing how this aim was accomplished; it is sufficient for our purpose to state that it was successfully carried out, and when the poor woman found herself apparelled in decent attire, seated in a comfortable room, supplied with good wholesome food, and treated with the most compassionating kindness, she so fully comprehended the change in her condition that she was melted to tears.

Mr. Redcliffe hastened up to London, to ascertain the progress of those measures which he had some months previously set a foot on Lettice Rodney's behalf, and to which he had distantly alluded in his conversation with her, but on this head it is likewise unnecessary for us to enter into particulars at the present moment, inasmuch as the whole will shortly transpire.

At the expiration of another week the trial of Lettice Rodney commenced at Liverpool. The court, opening with the usual solemnities, was crowded to excess, for all the excitement which the murder had created at the time was now revived. It had been rumoured, too—as we have already said, — that Lettice Rodney was not altogether without friends, and that there were certain quarters in which a belief of her innocence existed. Able counsel were engaged to prosecute, able counsel likewise appeared for the defence; and the countenances of the jury showed that they were fully aware of the deep and awful responsibility which attached itself to the duty they had to perform.

The entrance of Lettice Rodney into the court produced a strong impression upon all present. She was dressed in her plainest apparel; the bloom of her beauty was gone, but of that loveliness a sufficiency remained to show what it must have been before anguish and illness had worked such ravages upon her. Her demeanour was in one sense timid and retiring, yet blended therewith was the look which conscious innocence can alone assume, but which superficial or worldlyminded observers nevertheless too often fancy to be the evidence of a guilt that seeks to shield itself under a bold effrontery.

The case for the prosecution commenced, and the counsel on that side detailed in his opening speech all those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. stated how Lettice Rodney, assuming the name of Louisa Ravner, and personating that lady, had introduced herself to Mr. Pollard for the purpose of receiving the sum of three thousand pounds which that gentleman was prepared to pay to his ward. The counsel dwelt strongly upon the circumstance of the prisoner having self-appropriated the writingdesk containing the papers which were requisite accessories to the carrying-out of the fraud, and he more than inferred that a young woman who would go to such lengths for so vilely dishonest a purpose could not, to say the least of it, be surprised if she found herself in her present position, accused of a crime which somebody must have perpetrated, and of which all the evidence pointed to herself as the authoress. He then detailed the particulars of the murder, according to the deposition which Mrs. Webber had made before the police magistrate, and which she had subsequently repeated before the coroner.

The learned counsel added that Mrs. Webber herself would be almost immediately placed in the witness-box, to reiterate her testimony; and then he proceeded to observe that rumours had been floating abroad within the last few days to the effect that the case for the defence of the prisoner would be far stronger than the public had hitherto expected. but he said that for his own part he was at a loss to know what this defence could be, unless it were to revive the story which the prisoner had told before the magistrate. — a story which must indeed strike every rational person as a most ingenious concoction. But if this story were brought forward, it would be nothing more nor less than an endeavour to turn the tables against the principal witness for the prosecution, and unless there was something more substantial than the uncorroborated assertion of the prisoner in respect to Mrs. Webber and the two ill-looking men whom the prisoner's imagination had conjured up to serve her own purpose and exculpate herself, he (the learned counsel) hoped for the honour of the English bar that no member thereof would found a defence upon unsupported recrimination and unjustifiable calumny. But if, on the other hand, the defence — as he (the prosecuting counsel) hoped and expected — was to be conducted fairly, honestly, and frankly, he repeated his former assertion that he could not for the life of him surmise of what nature it could be. He was indeed utterly at a loss to conjecture how any evidence could be brought forward in antagonism with the testimony to be adduced for the prosecution, but he had all possible faith in the wisdom of the jury in arriving at a correct verdict in the end.

The learned counsel sat down, and the crowded auditory felt that the mass of evidence, circumstantial and direct, did indeed press with such fearful weight against the accused that not even by the wildest conjecture could it be surmised how such a case was to be met. For every one of course felt that if the story which Lettice Rodney had told before the borough magistrate was now to be repeated, it would require some very powerful evidence to outweigh that on the other side. Nor less was it comprehended that if this story should be proved true, it would have the effect of turning the whole weight of the dreadful accusation against Mrs. Webber, who was now summoned as the principal witness to prove Lettice Rodney's guilt.

Mrs. Webber entered the witness-box amidst a profound silence which prevailed in the court. It has already been observed that there was something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in this woman's looks, and now that she endeavoured to assume the air of one who had nothing upon her own conscience, but was intent only on serving the cause of truth and justice, there was in reality that hardihood about herself which many persons among the auditory had previously supposed to characterize Lettice Rodney. And Lettice Rodney was seen to shudder as that woman, whom for upwards of six months she had not seen, entered the witness-box, but on the other hand, Mrs. Webber flung a look of loathing and abhorrence upon Lettice, — a look in which all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation were concentrated. The result of these conflicting demonstrations on

the part of prisoner and witness was to cause the utmost suspense and uncertainty still to prevail on the part of the audience.

Mrs. Webber, in response to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, repeated the testimony she had already given before the committing magistrate and at the coroner's inquest. The barrister further questioned her as to her own respectability, on which point she stated that she had for many years been in the service of good families. but that for some time previous to the murder she had resided with her daughter in London, and with her son-in-law, who was a gold-beater in good circumstances; that she possessed some little means of her own. — but that not being altogether comfortable and happy beneath her son-in-law's roof, she had resolved to go out into service again, as a housekeeper: that her son-in-law, Mr. Smedley, having come down to Liverpool on business, had accidentally heard that there was such a place vacant at Mr. Pollard's; that she had accordingly applied for it, and on producing testimonials had received it.

Now commenced the cross-examination of Mrs. Webber, and this we must give somewhat in detail.

"Will you state who were, the ladies of rank with whom you formerly lived," inquired Lettice Rodney's counsel, "and who gave you the testimonials which you exhibited to Mr. Pollard? "

Mrs. Webber, being prepared for this question, had her answer ready, and she accordingly named two or three ladies of whose deaths she had made herself aware. On this response being returned, Captain Stanley, who was present in the court, quitted it for a few moments, but not in a way to attract any particular attention.

"Where are those testimonials?" asked the barrister, " and will you have any objection to produce them in court?"

"Not supposing that they would be required," answered the woman, "I left them behind me in London."

"And when did you come from London to attend this trial?" asked the barrister.

"The day before yesterday," was Mrs. Webber's response. "Did you come alone? Answer me that question."

"There was a person in the same carriage with me, certainly."

" And, on your oath, are you ignorant who that person was? "

"No, I knew him to be a detective officer."

"You had, then, seen him before?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Webber, and for a moment she looked confused, but quickly recovering her self-possession, she prepared to answer the next query.

"Be so kind as to tell the jury under what circumstances you had seen that detective before."

"A few days back," answered Mrs. Webber, "I was going on a little journey — "

"Stop a moment," exclaimed the cross-examining counsel. "Immediately after the inquest at Liverpool, you returned to London, I believe, where you again took up your abode with your son-in-law John Smedley?"

"Yes, but I had promised the authorities here to come forward when wanted, and give the requisite evidence — "

"Exactly so. You promised, but did you mean to perform? However," exclaimed the barrister, without awaiting an answer, " continue your statement to the jury in respect to the little journey you thought of undertaking a few days back. I believe that for this little journey your boxes were all packed, and a hackney-coach was at the door, when something happened? What was that something?"

"A person accosted me as I was stepping into the hackneycoach, and announced himself as a detective officer. He charged me with an intention to go abroad, but I denied it, as it was altogether untrue. Then he told me that if I went anywhere, — no matter how short or how long the distance, — he should follow me, and that if I attempted to leave England, he should take me into custody."

"To be sure," said the barrister, with a glance at the jury; "he would have taken you into custody as a witness flying from her recognizances. And what else did he tell you? What warning did he give you?"

"That there was a watch set upon my movements, and that it would be totally useless for me to think of getting out of the country. But I told him all along that I had no such intention, nor had I, and I think it is very unfair — "

"Never mind what you think," interrupted the crossexamining counsel; "it is for the jury to think in the present case. The detective officer who accompanied you in the train was the same who intercepted your departure from London and gave you the warnings of which you have spoken? "

"The same," answered Mrs. Webber, and her look was as much as to imply that it was all very easy for the barrister thus to cross-examine her, but that he could not shake her main testimony against the prisoner.

"How long were you in Mr. Pollard's service previous to the commission of the murder?"

"Three weeks," was the answer.

"And having been absent from your son-in-law's house barely a month, you returned thither notwithstanding the discomfort and unhappiness which had induced you to quit it?"

"Because my daughter naturally supposed I must be very much flurried and excited after the dreadful occurrence in Liverpool, and she wrote to me to come home at once, giving me the assurance that my son-in-law would change his demeanour toward me."

"And during these six months that you have been again living in London, what sort of visitors have you occasionally received?"

"What sort of visitors?" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, as if with a surprised and indignant air, but it was merely to shuffle with the question, which indeed had considerably alarmed her.

"Well, I need not press this point at present," said the cross-examining counsel, " and you may stand down."

A witness from London was now examined by the counsel for the prosecution, to prove that Lettice Rodney had been a gay lady, but the name of Madame Angelique's establishment did not transpire. Then followed the testimony of three or four of the first persons who had rushed into Mr. Pollard's house when Mrs. Webber had opened the front door and had alarmed the neighbourhood with her cries. It was proved that the prisoner was dressed as if to go out, but that she was in a state of unconsciousness when these witnesses appeared upon the scene. In cross-examination they admitted that when Lettice came back to her senses, she seemed horrified or frenzied at being accused of murder, and that she at once hurled the charge at Mrs. Webber and spoke of two villains who were with her. The police constables who had taken her into custody were next examined for the prosecution, and they deposed to the finding of Mr. Pollard's purse, containing fifty pounds, upon Lettice Rodney's person. Mrs. Rayner's documents were likewise produced, and evidence was given to show that in addition to the writing-desk which had contained these papers several articles of Mrs. Rayner's wearing apparel were discovered in Lettice Rodney's box; for the newspaper accounts of the murder had given publicity to the fact that Mrs. Rayner was the previously unidentified victim of the railway accident, and thus her friends had come forward on learning her sad fate.

The case for the prosecution was closed, and Lettice Rodney's counsel was expected to rise to make a speech in her defence. He did rise, and profound was the suspense which prevailed in the court. The silence was breathless, but when it was broken by the counsel for the defence, there was a sensation of disappointment on his at once declaring that instead of making a speech be should proceed without delay to summon witnesses.

The first witness whom he thus called was a middle-aged man, plainly attired, of sharp features and with a shrewd look. Mrs. Webber, who had been ordered to remain in the court, winced somewhat when she perceived this individual, whom she evidently recognized. Having been sworn, and having given his name, he stated that he was a detective attached to the metropolitan police. He then deposed to the following effect:

"A very short time after the murder of Mr. Pollard in this town, I received particular instructions from a gentleman in London. Those instructions were to the effect that I should make all possible inquiries into the character of Mrs. Webber, and that I should watch all her movements. I at once came down to Liverpool, and learned that immediately after the inquest she had returned to her friends in London. I had no difficulty in finding out who these friends were, — her daughter and son-in-law, bearing the name of Smedley. The Smedleys occupy a house of a somewhat respectable appearance, but situated in a low neighbourhood. They used to let lodgings, but have recently given up that avocation. Smedley himself carries on the business of a gold-beater. He seems, however, to have little work to do, for he is constantly sauntering about, sometimes in idleness. and at other times in distributing religious tracts. I hired a room in a house nearly fronting the Smedleys, and, aided by another detective, I watched them day and night. One evening, about a week after Mrs. Webber's return, a fellow of desperate character, well known to the police, and bearing the name of Barney the Burker, stealthily entered an alley communicating with the back part of the Smedleys' premises, but I cannot take it upon myself to say that he actually entered those premises. If I had followed to ascertain, I should have excited the suspicion that I was watching the house. and this was to be most carefully avoided, at least at the outset. A few nights afterward, a lad of about nineteen, whose name is Bill Scott, and who is believed to be an agent of the Burker, paid a similarly stealthy visit to the alley of which I have spoken, but for the same reason as in the other case. I could not ascertain whether he entered the Smedlevs' premises. A month passed, and they came not near the house again, but one night I followed Mrs. Webber at a distance, and I tracked her to the Burker's lodging in one of the lowest neighbourhoods of London.

"Some weeks later I again saw the Burker pay a visit to the narrow alley, and an hour elapsed before he came out again. Subsequently Bill Scott repeated the visit three or four times, and I have not the slightest doubt that these visits had reference to Mrs. Webber. I learned in the neighbourhood that she had lived for some years with her son-in-law and daughter, but so far from her having ever been on bad terms with them, or being rendered uncomfortable by Mr. Smedley, the contrary was supposed to be the case. A few days ago Barney the Burker paid another visit to the alley, and on this occasion he remained at least two hours. Early on the following morning a hackney-coach was fetched by Smedley, a number of boxes were brought out, and Mrs. Webber was just on the point of stepping into the vehicle, when I thought it at length time to interfere, in pursuance of a certain portion of my instructions from the gentleman employing me. I accordingly hastened to the spot, and asked Mrs. Webber where she was going. She looked confused and frightened, but almost immediately recovered herself, saying that she was only bent upon a little excursion for change of air. I glanced at the boxes, and saw that they

were labelled, 'Mrs. Smith, passenger, Dover.' I asked her why she took a false name? She gave some evasive reply. but again recovering her effrontery, demanded who I was. I told her that I was a detective officer, and gave her to understand that my mission was merely to prevent her from running away from her recognizances, and to enforce her attendance at this trial. She did not choose to pursue her journey after receiving this intelligence, because I further stated that if on arriving at Dover by the railway, she attempted to embark on board a vessel, I should at once take her into custody. She remained at home for the few days which intervened until it was necessary for her to set off to come to Liverpool. Myself and the other detective continued to watch the house unceasingly after the affair of that intended journey, and in order that Mrs. Webber might not give me the slip between London and Liverpool, I took my place in the same carriage with herself."

The detective, whose evidence had produced a considerable sensation in court, was now cross-examined by the counsel for the prosecution, and the following string of answers will show the nature of the questions put :

"I have been watching Mrs. Webber for six months. T decline to say what is the name of the gentleman who emploved me, but this I will of my own accord declare, - that my conviction is he never was the protector of the prisoner, nor was improperly familiar with her, but merely took up her case from motives of humanity. It is true that he has paid all my expenses and has rewarded me liberally. It is no unusual thing for the detectives to be employed by private individuals: nor is it unusual for them to be thus occupied so long a time. I know nothing, and did not mean to infer anything, against the character of the Smedley's. It is perfectly true that they pass in their own neighbourhood as respectable people, and that Smedley is an active member of a religious congregation. It is likewise true that Mrs. Webber is considered in the same neighbourhood a respectable woman."

Here ended the cross-examination on the part of the prosecuting counsel, and the barrister for Lettice Rodney's defence said to the detective, "You must now go out of court and out of hearing, but I shall require your attendance again presently." The officer accordingly issued from the tribunal, and the counsel for the defence then addressed the judge in the following manner:

"My lord, I am about to make an application of a somewhat extraordinary character. There is a witness whose evidence is of vital importance to the present case, but it is impossible she can give that testimony personally and orally before this solemn tribunal. Indeed, I will at once admit that her intellects are in so weak a state that she would become bewildered and would inevitably break down. But she has been examined by two justices of the peace: namely, Sir William Stanley and Mr. Simon Ellis, both gentlemen of the highest respectability, and this examination took place in the presence of two physicians well known for their skill and experience with respect to the insane and in all psvchological matters. The woman's deposition has been committed to paper; it is accompanied by attesting affidavits on the part of the two justices who received her evidence, and there are likewise affidavits from the medical gentlemen. to the effect that the woman's testimony is held by them to be perfectly credible. I now request permission to introduce that deposition as evidence. Its value can be tested by unmistakable means. If it should be found to constitute an indisputable link in the general chain of evidence it stamps itself with truth, but if, on the other hand, it should be found irrelevant and unsupported by collateral facts, it can easily be discarded, and your lordship will direct the jury, as well as their own discrimination will tell them. whether or not they are to attach any importance thereto."

The counsel for the prosecution objected to the production of such evidence, and the judge himself appeared to consider it inadmissible, but the foreman of the jury expressed a hope that in a matter where a fellow creature's life was concerned, no objection would be raised against the production of the evidence alluded to. The judge accordingly ruled in favour of its production, and the reader may conceive how breathless was the suspense which prevailed in the court, how deep was the anxiety of Lettice Rodney, who had remained in perfect ignorance of the nature of the defence to be set up on her behalf, and how serious were growing the guilty Mrs. Webber's apprehensions. The counsel for the defence unfolded a document which lay before him, and then spoke as follows:

"This deposition is to the effect that the female who made it was in the town of Liverpool on the same night that the murder was committed. She was wandering about. when her wayward steps led up a narrow lane into which open the vard gates belonging to that row of houses where Mr. Pollard dwelt. She heard one of these gates open and shut, and with some feeling of curiosity which she cannot define she remained at that gate. Voices were speaking immediately inside; they were conversing in an undertone, but she listened, and overheard every syllable that was spoken. One voice was that of a man. — the other that of a woman. The woman said she had just discovered that there was a mint of money in the iron safe; the man said he supposed therefore the job was for that night. The woman assented, and spoke of having waited for positive information whether Mr. Pollard had got the money in the house to pay to Mrs. Ravner. After some little more conversation, the witness overheard the man say something about the means that had been adopted to get the woman into her position as Pollard's housekeeper, but all that was said upon this point is not clearly remembered by the witness. The woman addressed the man as Barney, and the name of Bill Scott was two or three times mentioned. The witness tarried at the gate until it suddenly opened, and then she hurried away. But hearing the man follow her, she was apprehensive of mischief: she accordingly crouched down under the wall; he passed close by her side, but happened not to come in contact with her, and as the lane was involved in total darkness, he beheld her not. Such, my lord and gentlemen," concluded the counsel for the defence, "is the deposition of the witness who for the reasons stated cannot appear in your presence, and those same reasons will account for the fact of her having abstained from declaring to the authorities all she knew, until a few chance words which she the other day let drop caused an inquiry to be made, and led to the sifting of the matter."

It would be impossible to describe the sensation which prevailed in the court during and after the reading of this deposition. Lettice Rodney clasped her hands together. The tears ran down her cheeks; she was well-nigh overpowered by her emotions. Mrs. Webber grew pale as death, and her troubled looks were flung nervously around, to ascertain the impression made by this document. The counsel for the prosecution was astonished, — a feeling in which the judge and jury evidently participated, and the spectators showed by their countenances that their opinions were undergoing a rapid change, turning in Lettice Rodney's favour and therefore against Mrs. Webber.

"I will now read from my instructions," said the counsel for the defence, "the description which the prisoner has given her legal adviser of the two ill-looking persons whom she alleges to have seen with Mr. Pollard's housekeeper on the memorable night of the foul tragedy which has led to this judicial inquiry."

The barrister accordingly read the personal descriptions of the Burker and of Bill Scott, and when he had finished, he said, "At this stage of the proceedings I will call back the witness whom I just now sent out of court, — I mean the detective officer."

This witness was accordingly resummoned, and on again making his appearance, he was desired by the counsel for the defence to describe the persons of Barney the Burker and of Bill Scott, — the two individuals whom he had seen on several occasions enter the alley communicating with the Smedleys' abode. That description tallied to a nicety with the one given by Lettice Rodney, and ere now read from the barrister's instructions.

But there was still another witness forthcoming for the defence, and this was the landlord of the low public-house, or boozing-ken, at which Barney and Bill Scott had lodged when they were at Liverpool. The public-house itself was in the close vicinage of the late Mr. Pollard's abode, and the landlord proved that the time when the Burker and his acolyte lodged beneath his roof was precisely that when the murder was committed. He even recollected that they were out late on the particular night itself, and that they took their departure at a very early hour in the morning; but he had not then the faintest idea that they were the authors of the crime, inasmuch as it appeared to be so completely brought home to Lettice Rodney.

Scarcely was the landlord's evidence given, when a person entered the court and handed a paper to the counsel for the defence. It was now six o'clock in the evening, the trial had lasted the whole day, and several hours had elapsed since Mrs. Webber first appeared in the witness-box.

"I have yet something to submit to the court," said the counsel for the defence. "The detective officer who is in attendance here instructed his brother detective who was engaged with him in the metropolis in the same case to be at the London terminus of the railway this day, so that he might be in readiness to act according to any instructions telegraphed up to him. At the outset of her evidence in the morning, the woman Webber stated that she had some time back been in the service of certain deceased ladies, whom she named. Upon this answer being given, a gentleman in court — who from humane motives is interested in the case - sped to the electric telegraph office, and sent up certain instructions to the detective in London. These were promptly acted upon; the results of certain inquiries have been telegraphed down to Liverpool, and the paper containing them has just been placed in my hand. Though the ladies whom the woman Webber named have ceased to exist. vet their families still live, and still occupy the same dwellings. The answers they gave to the queries put to them by the detective officer in London furnish a complete refutation to the woman Webber's statements in respect to her ever having occupied situations in the service of the deceased ladies."

The counsel for the defence handed the telegraphic despatch to some one near, that it might be passed to the clerk of the court, and when it had been read, the barrister observed, "My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, without another syllable that is my case."

All eyes were now turned upon the counsel for the prosecution, and this gentleman, rising from his seat, simply remarked that he had done his duty in placing the charge before the court in the first instance according to the instructions he had received, but he significantly added that after the turn which matters had taken he should not for a moment think of exercising his right to reply to the case for the defence. This announcement was received with a certain sensation indicative of applause, which the ushers of the court did not attempt to suppress, for they themselves doubtless had their feelings enlisted in the same startling drama which thus for so many hours had been commanding so vivid an interest. The judge said but a few words in charge to the jury, merely remarking that he believed their course to be plain and simple enough. They were of the same opinion, for after only five minutes' consultation, and without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of "Not Guilty."

Although this decision was expected by Lettice Rodney, yet the instant it was delivered she was so overwhelmed by her feelings that she sank down in a swoon, and was thus borne out of court. At the same time Mrs. Webber was given into custody, charged with the crime for which Lettice Rodney had been tried, but it was understood that the infamous woman should not be placed upon her own trial until the autumn assizes. The reason was not specified in court, but every one comprehended that the delay was agreed upon in order that time might be allowed for the capture of her two accomplices, Barney the Burker and Bill Scott.

Before concluding this chapter, we may as well observe that Mr. Redcliffe was the unnamed gentleman who had employed the detectives to watch the proceedings and movements of Mrs. Webber. It was in consequence of the information from time to time received from those officers. about the visits of Barney and Bill Scott to the alley communicating with the Smedleys' house, that he had dropped certain hints to Sir William Stanley, both in his letters and his conversation, relative to circumstances corroborative of Lettice Rodney's innocence. It will be likewise understood wherefore in that interview with Lettice which we have described, Mr. Redcliffe questioned her so particularly with regard to the ill-looking men whom she had spoken of as Mrs. Webber's accomplices. We may likewise add that when Captain Stanley left the court at the earliest stage of Mrs. Webber's examination, it was for the purpose of transmitting to the metropolis the telegraphic message which brought back the information of that woman's mendacity in respect to the former situations she had filled.

CHAPTER XVII

LOW LIFE IN LONDON

IT will be remembered that Captain Stanley had expressed to his uncle, Sir William, his desire to be of service to Mr. Redcliffe in those proceedings which the latter gentleman had so secretly but so judiciously carried on. The captain's offer had been duly mentioned to Mr. Redcliffe, and it was in pursuance of a hint received from the generous philanthropist that Captain Stanley set off to London by the first train which started after the trial.

Mr. Redcliffe purposed to remain a few days longer with his friend Sir William Stanley, in order that he might adopt some measures for the future welfare of Lettice Rodney, and to place her in a position which would save her from the chance of being driven by poverty back again into the way of life which she had been leading at Madame Angelique's. As Mr. Redcliffe therefore could not immediately return to the metropolis, he had hurried off Captain Stanley in the manner described, in order that this gentleman might assist the detectives, and coöperate with them to the best of his ability, in ferreting out the Burker and Bill Scott.

Captain Stanley reached London early in the morning, and after a few hours' rest, he proceeded in the forenoon to call upon the lieutenant-colonel of his regiment, who was likewise then in the metropolis. This was none other than Lord Charles Meredith, the brother of Octavian. He was residing with his father the Marquis of Penshurst, and though he had reached so high a rank in the army, he was but twenty-seven years of age. Captain Stanley received a kind welcome from his superior officer, with whom indeed he was on most intimate terms, and he explained the business that had brought him to London. "But do you not think, my dear fellow," inquired Lord Charles, "that the detectives are a thousand times more likely to discover these miscreants than you are?"

"I am not so sure of that," responded Stanley. "These villains will be so completely on their guard that they may manage to elude the detectives for a long time to come."

"Then doubtless you have some plan in view?" said Lord Charles Meredith.

"I purpose to throw myself, as it were, every night into the lowest neighbourhoods, and to penetrate into the vilest dens, as if merely impelled by curiosity, or else under the pretence of discovering some one whose fictitious description I shall render as different as possible from that of either of the real objects of my search. By these means I may possibly light upon them, and if not, there will be no harm done."

"But you have never seen either of these ruffians?" said Lord Charles.

"No, it is true," rejoined Captain Stanley, "but I have received from the detective so minute and accurate a description of them that I am convinced I should recognize them in a moment."

"I have a very great mind to bear you company in your search, or at least for the coming night," said Lord Charles Meredith. "I have heard and read much of those loathsome neighbourhoods and hideous dens where poverty and crime herd together, and I should like to see them."

"It was in the hope you would be my companion that I have sought you now," replied Captain Stanley.

The two officers then settled their arrangements; it was agreed that they should dine together in the evening, and afterward set out upon their excursion.

A little after ten o'clock they might have been seen wending their way toward Westminster Bridge together. Although it was the middle of summer, the night was cold and inclement; a drizzling rain made the shop lights and the street lamps appear as if they were seen through a mist. The daughters of crime were standing under doorways, or huddling together at the entrances of courts, while the ragged and half-starved children of poverty were dragging themselves shiveringly along to the resorts and dens where they harboured at night, or else to such places as would afford them any kind of shelter against the chilling and damping atmosphere. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley, protected by their paletots, and smoking their cigars, boldly faced the inclement night. The lieutenant-colonel was not unlike his brother Octavian, being of the middle height and of slender figure; he likewise wore a moustache, but his hair was somewhat darker. He had a military look, and was altogether a personage of prepossessing appearance. Such was the companion whom Captain Stanley had found for his present excursion.

Having crossed Westminster Bridge and passed some little way down the Waterloo Road, they plunged into the maze of close streets, alleys, and courts which lie in that neighbourhood. Presently they encountered a police constable, and him they accosted. Captain Stanley acquainted the officer in a few words with the business which they had in hand, and desired his succour. The request was backed by a piece of gold, and an affirmative answer was at once returned.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the constable, " and I will soon show you a little of low life in London."

He led them along two or three narrow and obscure streets: then he turned into a court, which was but feebly lighted by the rays struggling through the dingy window-panes of the sombre-looking houses. Two or three of the front doors stood open, and women loosely apparelled, and with looks of brazen immodesty, stood upon the thresholds. They flung forth filthy gibes and obscene jests at the passers-by, and when the policeman roughly bade them hold their tongues. they vomited forth torrents of abuse, closing their doors at length, but only to open their windows and continue their hideous outpouring. The constable led the two officers to the extremity of the court, and knocked sharply at a door which was shut. It was speedily opened by a wretched-looking old man, and without the slightest ceremony the police officer entered, followed by Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley. Pushing open a side door, and abruptly drawing forth his bull's-eye, or lantern, the constable threw the light into the room, but there was no one there. An inner door however immediately opened, and it vomited forth so loathsome a flood of human nature that the two officers gazed with mingled horror and dismay on those hideous specimens of the lowest of both sexes.

The room into which they thus poured themselves was almost entirely denuded of furniture, but that from which they had emerged had the floor almost completely covered with filthy mattresses, and both had their walls and ceilings as grimy and blackened as if the whitewasher's brush had never touched them. Old men and boys, elderly women and young girls, formed this motley group, a glance over which sent a sickening sensation to the heart. Rags and filth, the stamp of poverty and the impress of crime, misfortune and vice, ugliness and deformity in all their most revolting shapes, together with the brazen hardihood of female depravity, were the jumbled characteristics of this loathsome scene.

"Now, gentlemen," said the police constable, "is the person you want amongst these?"

"No, he is a boy of about fourteen, with a sickly appearance, and very sharp features," answered Captain Stanley, who thus had his tale ready.

Significant looks were rapidly exchanged amidst the motley erew, — these looks being as much as to imply that the individual so described was not anywhere upon the premises, nor was he indeed known to them, which was not astonishing, inasmuch as the pretended object of the search was of Captain Stanley's own imaginative creation. But the visitors observed that a young woman, on hearing that description, disappeared from among the group, and returning into the inner room, she issued forth by a door opening into the passage. She hastened up-stairs, and a door was speedily heard to open and shut on the first landing.

"Well, gentlemen," said the police constable, "if the boy is not here, we must look into the rooms up-stairs."

"You won't find him," said the old man who had opened the front door, and who had lingered in the passage; he was the landlord of this loathsome lodging-house.

"We sha'n't take your word for it, Mr. Dyson," said the constable, purposely assuming a decided air. "I know you of old, and there is not a better keeper of a padding-ken in all London than you are for stalling off us policemen."

The old man grumbled something, and the constable led the way up the staircase. The other floors were visited, and they abounded in similar specimens of lost, degraded, and demoralized humanity as those which were seen below. That small house, which according to its size would have only just sufficed for the residence of a decent family of half a dozen in number, contained a swarm of at least fifty persons, huddling and heading together like so many swine, breathing an atmosphere which seemed fraught with pestilence, and rendering the entire place a hotbed for all the elements of plague, cholera, and the fearfullest epidemics.

The police constable and the two officers issued forth from the house, and were speedily outside the court.

"Did you observe, gentlemen," asked the constable, "that girl who suddenly disappeared from the ground-floor rooms and hurried up-stairs — "

"Yes. What was her object?"

"It was to tell those above that it was all right, — that they might make themselves easy, for it was none of them who were wanted. Suppose for argument's sake that you had given a true description, indvertently letting it slip out of your mouth, and suppose that the person who was really wanted had been all the time up-stairs, — the warning would have been quickly given, and an escape effected by a back window, or perhaps a trap-door on the top of the house. Ah! gentlemen, you don't know what dodges the keepers of these padding-kens are up to for the purpose of helping those who lodge with them."

The police officer now conducted Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley to another house in the same neighbourhood, and where suppers were going on in every room. It was the resort of beggars and tramps, and was seldom frequented by thieves, - the mendicants who patronized it endeavouring to keep it as "select" as possible. For there are aristocracies, grades, and distinctions even amongst the lowest strata of society, and amidst the whole range of demoralization's sphere. In every room throughout this lodging-house, the tables were covered with immense joints and dishes of vegetables; the knives and forks were all chained to the tables: the beer was drunk out of the commonest brown mugs, for no publican would trust his pewter pots within the walls of that place. The atmosphere was of the sickliest description, - hot, fetid, and nauseating, made up of the breaths of many persons, the odours of the damp rags which wrapped their forms, the steam of the greasy viands, and the strong smell of the vegetables. But what

hideous objects were the beings who were thus banqueting. The blind, the halt, and the maimed; the paralyzed and the consumptive, as well as the hale, lusty, and strong, the sturdy beggar who obtains charity by coercive insolence, and the whining one who elicits it by his piteous tale: the one who for twenty years has always had a wife and five small children perishing at home; the woman who every day for the last dozen years has had a husband lying dead and no money to bury him: the girl of sixteen who ever since she was ten has told the same tale of having only just come out of the hospital and got no home nor father or mother; that great hulking fellow in a ragged seaman's garb, whose daily narrative of shipwreck and loss of all he possessed has won for him five shillings in the course of a few hours' wandering, the sanctimonious-looking, calculating vagrant, whose diurnal reckoning is that from eleven to five he can traverse sixty streets and in every street pick up at least a penny, so that his daily income is likewise five shillings: the elderly woman dressed in widow's weeds, who every day for the last five and twenty years has just lost an excellent husband and been thrown out of a once happy home; the ingenious fellow who in the winter-time is a starved-out gardener, and in the summer-time a factory operative suffering from the badness of the times. - all these, and other varieties of imposture and mendicant roguery, were fully represented at this congress of joyously feasting beggars.

On quitting the scene which we have just described, the constable conducted the two officers to the large tap-room of a public-house situated in the neighbourhood of a saloon where theatrical representations, singing, and dancing take place. Previously to entering this tap-room, the policeman informed Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley that every individual whom they would see there was a noted thief, and that there would not be one present who had not figured in the police courts, - many at the sessions, some at the Old Bailey, and all more or less often upon the treadmill. With this information the place was entered: a few knowing winks were bestowed upon the police constable, but apart from these familiar signs of recognition, little attention was paid to the visitors. The frequenters of that place were accustomed to behold "swells," as they denominated them, drop in to see a little of London life, or, on the other hand.

to search after some thief who had exercised his manipulating skill upon them. All the varied and manifold impressions which villainy and crime, in their different grades and degrees, can stamp upon the human countenance might be discerned in that room; and, heavens! what a study for the phrenologist. Wherefore go to Newgate to inspect the plaster casts of the countenances of defunct criminals, when there are these haunts in London where the faces of shoals of living evil-doers can be studied; and with all the more fearful accuracy, with all the more frightfully real intensity, inasmuch as the worst and darkest passions which are known to the human soul can be then observed working upon animated features and in their most hideous vitality.

At the numerous tables in this room the company were seated, — all of them smoking, and all drinking too, but the liquors were varied according to tastes and pecuniary resources; so that passing through those grades which were represented by the daring burglar, the bold thief, the cunning larcenist, the pitiful area-sneak, or the miserable puddingstealer, a corresponding gamut might be specified in the form of steaming punch, tumblers of hot spirits and water, quarterns of gin, pots of ale, and pints of porter. In this delectable place Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley remained for about half an hour, - at the expiration of which they took their departure, still accompanied by the police officer. Three or four other dens of depravity were visited, and it was now past midnight, but as vet not the slightest sign was discerned of the objects of their search. They did not of course think it of the slightest use to visit the house in which the Burker and the Scotts had been wont to live, nor to take the slightest trouble in watching the premises of the Smedleys, for there could be little doubt that the Burker and Bill Scott had kept out of the way at the time they must have known the trial was coming on at Liverpool, so as to be on their guard in case of a result perilous to their own personal safety. And now, too, that the intelligence of this result had arrived in London, it was all the more certain that the ruffian and his guilty accomplice would have taken the best possible precautions to elude the search which was sure to be instituted after them.

Captain Stanley and Lord Charles now held a consultation

with the police constable, for a certain idea had struck the first-mentioned gentleman, and he thus expressed himself:

"Thanks to your assistance, constable, we have received the initiative into the various phases which the haunts of crime, vice, poverty, and debauchery exhibit. But it strikes me there must be places which such villains as those of whom we are in search would specially seek under existing circumstances, and whence the very first glimpse of a police officer's uniform would scare them away. Now, are not these likewise places into which it may be possibly sought to inveigle those well-dressed persons who might chance to be in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, there are such places," replied the constable, "but it would be next to madness for you to seek to penetrate into them. You would risk your life, but even if you escaped with that, you might reckon with certainty upon being robbed and ill-treated."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Captain Stanley, "only show me such a place as we have been speaking of, and I will risk everything."

"And I assuredly am not the man to flinch from such danger," said Lord Charles Meredith. "But there is one thing to be thought of. If it be possible for us to obtain admission to such a place, would not the detectives themselves assume a particular apparel and penetrate thither?"

"Bless you, sir," answered the constable, "those kind of villains would recognize the detectives in a moment, no matter how disguised. They are keen and cunning enough to distinguish between real gentlemen, such as you are, and other persons dressed up to play the part of gentlemen. That you can get into these haunts of which we are speaking, there is little doubt; indeed you are pretty sure to be invited there by those who would at once mark you as their prey. But I again warn you of the risk you will have to run, and unless you are well armed — "

"We took that precaution before we set out," interrupted Captain Stanley. "We have each a brace of double-barrelled pistols and a good clasp-knife upon our persons."

"And this stick of mine," added Lord Charles Meredith, "though it seems only a gentleman's walking-cane, is a lifepreserver and well loaded at the top."

"Then you are decided, gentlemen?" asked the constable,

still with a hesitating and dubious manner, "for recollect that I cannot accompany you."

"We are decided," said Captain Stanley. "Lead the way as far as you consider it prudent to conduct us, in order to show us the route."

The constable accordingly struck into another labyrinth of low streets, alleys, and courts, all of which he assured Lord Charles and Captain Stanley were swarming with loathsome life like a morass with reptiles, and the two gentlemen soon lost every idea of their whereabouts. At length the constable stopped short in the middle of a narrow street, feebly lighted with gas-lamps, and where the houses all had a dark and sinister appearance.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I must accompany you no farther, or my presence may frustrate the object you have in view. Proceed to the end of this street, take the turning to the right and the second to the left. If you could make a pretence of being in liquor, it will serve your purpose all the better. I need tell you no more, for if anything happens to forward your views, it will take place somewhere about the spot to which I am directing you, and you will be enabled to judge for yourselves."

Another liberal donation rewarded the police constable for his civility and his assistance, and he then parted company from Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley.

CHAPTER XVIII

MOTHER BAMBRIDGE'S ESTABLISHMENT

FOLLOWING the constable's directions, the two adventurous military officers took the turn to the right and then the second to the left, this latter bringing them into an alley which was very narrow at its entrance, but suddenly widened somewhat as they advanced into it, from the fact of the houses being built farther back on either side. These houses which thus stood back were higher than those at the entrance of the alley, and they had wooden fences in front, enclosing what were meant to be little bits of garden, about a couple of yards wide.

Midway down the alley stood two public-houses, nearly fronting each other; or to be more particular still, one was a public-house and the other a beer shop. Over the former was a flaring gaslight, over the latter a lamp of more modest pretensions, but the two together illumined all that part of the alley. Lights were still burning in several of the adjacent houses, and as the drizzling rain had by this time ceased. there was no misty veil to obscure the light thus thrown forth. From both public-house and beer shop the sounds of uproarious revelry pealed forth, and in such discordant strains as to leave a doubt in the minds of the two officers whether there was not as much wrangling as merriment in the din which thus smote their ears. In front, too, of both these houses of entertainment several loose women - some apparelled with flaunting pretension - were loitering in company with men who were dressed in what may be termed a "swellish style."

A little beyond the beer shop, a black doll with a piece of white calico wrapped around, doubtless to serve as a frock, swung over the door of a rag and bottle shop, — the

windows of which displayed pictures in rudely executed water colours, representing plum-puddings, as an intimation that housewives by means of thrift in disposing of their dripping, their rags, and their broken glass might at the end of the year save up sufficient to provide the Christmas comestible thus illustrated. Nearly opposite the shop just named was a marine-store dealer's, and both establishments were open, although it was now close upon one in the morning. The light of candles shone dimly forth from the doorways, and every now and then an individual — male or female might be seen coming from the opposite extremity of the allev and diving abruptly into one or the other of these shops, having, however, in the first instance cast a rapid glance of scrutiny around, to make sure that no police constable was nigh. It required no prompting beyond what their own common sense suggested to enable the two officers to judge that both the marine-store dealer's and the rag shop were in reality receptacles for stolen goods, and that it was for the accommodation of their patrons they thus kept open so late.

Mindful of the friendly constable's advice, Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith affected to be somewhat the worse for liquor as they advanced within the sphere of light.

"Where the deuce have our wandering steps brought us?" exclaimed Stanley, purposely speaking loud enough to be overheard by the loiterers in front of the two houses of entertainment.

"I have no more idea than the man in the moon," responded Lord Charles. "It was all owing to that last bottle of wine -"

"Well, never mind," cried Stanley, with a well-assumed manner of devil-me-care rakishness. "We must get somewhere at last, — that's very certain."

They were now both surrounded by the flauntingly dressed women whose bullies and flash men purposely hung back, thinking it better to keep aloof until the girls should have got the "swells" in regular tow.

"Treat us to a glass of wine," said one; "there's a dear fellow."

"Or what is better, come home with us," exclaimed another, " and we'll send out for the wine."

It naturally struck the two gentlemen that this was the sort of scene to which the constable had alluded when he had said that they would be enabled to judge for themselves whether their desired object would be forwarded in this alley to which he had directed them. They therefore made up their minds simultaneously, and as if by tacit understanding, to accompany the girls, but they pretended to hesitate in a tipsy manner for some little time before they gave a final assent. At length they moved slowly along in the direction whither two of the flauntingly apparelled creatures led them. and a glance over their shoulders showed that there was a move amongst the flashily dressed men in front of the publichouses. The girls conducted them to the farther extremity of the alley, where they stopped at the door of a house of considerable size in comparison with the others in the same neighbourhood. One of the girls knocked at the door in a manner that was evidently peculiar, and therefore intended to serve as a signal, but which would not have been noticed if the two officers were really in their cups, as they pretended to be. The summons was answered by a tawdrily dressed elderly woman, in a gown of rusty black silk, a cap flaunting with pink ribbons, and with a gold chain - or at least a very good imitation of one — hanging over her enormously protuberant bust. Her naturally rubicund countenance had upon it a still deeper flush, produced by recent potations, and she simpered and smiled with an air of half-tipsy vacancy. She bade the gentlemen walk in, whisperingly asking whether they chose to be accommodated with separate chambers at once.

"We are going to drink a bottle of wine first," answered Captain Stanley, who did not consider it expedient to be parted from his companion.

"By all means," said the mistress of the establishment, and she led the way into a back parlour of some dimensions and tolerably well furnished.

The two girls who had accompanied the officers flung off their bonnets and shawls, and Captain Stanley, still preserving his tipsy air, tossed a couple of sovereigns upon the table, desiring that wine might be fetched. An elderly servant-woman entered the room to receive the order from the mistress of the establishment, who had likewise seated herself there, and after a few minutes' absence she returned with a couple of bottles of wine. She handed all the balance of the money to Mother Bambridge, as the mistress was called, and which sum of thirty shillings Mother Bambridge coolly consigned to her own pocket. Glasses were placed upon the table, but both Stanley and Meredith were careful not to touch a drop of the wine until they had first seen Mother Bambridge and the girls empty their own glasses. Being thus satisfied that the liquor was not previously drugged, the two officers began to drink in order to keep up appearances, and they likewise chatted away as if in a reckless strain of dissipated hilarity.

Half an hour passed, and the gentlemen began to think that they had got into the midst of some adventure that was quite different from what the advising constable had anticipated, and that it was by no means of a nature to throw them in the way of the attainment of their object. But all of a sudden something was said by one of the girls, which turned all their thoughts into a new channel.

"This sherry is capital," were the words thus spoken. "Wouldn't poor Barney like a glass?"

Rapid was the deprecating glance which Mother Bambridge flung upon the girl, as much as to give her to understand that she should not have mentioned a name which might possibly be recognized by the two gentlemen in connection with the newspaper report of the previous day's trial at Liverpool, and then, with a simpering air, she said to Meredith and Stanley, "It's a poor dear invalid brother of mine that the kind-hearted young lady is alluding to, and with your permission I will just step up-stairs to him with a glass of this wine, which is sure to do him good."

"By all means," exclaimed Lord Charles, now looking more tipsy than ever, "and send out to get us a fresh supply."

Thus speaking, he in his turn tossed from a well-filled purse a couple of sovereigns upon the table, and Mother Bambridge, having given a suitable order to the servant, poured out a glass of wine, and therewith quitted the room. The reader will comprehend the significancy conveyed by the words of the girl who had recommended the wine to be carried up to the man whom she had named. It was to afford Mrs. Bambridge a feasible pretext for leaving the room in order to make whatsoever arrangements she might deem necessary for the plunder of her guests, and all this without the risk, as it was hoped, of exciting their suspicions. Mere-

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dith and Stanley penetrated the manœuvre promptly and clearly enough, but affecting to become more and more influenced by the effects of liquor, they played their game so admirably as to prevent the slightest misgiving from entering the minds of the two girls. The name of Barney had been unmistakably pronounced, and as it was not altogether a common one, and was precisely the familiar appellation by which the principal object of their search was known. moreover, as it was in some such low neighbourhood as this that they had hoped and expected to fall in with him, and likewise as Mother Bambridge's look of warning significancy must be taken into account, - they were morally certain that the individual alluded to was he whom they sought. But there were evidently a number of desperate characters about, succour would be promptly at hand, the utmost caution must be used, and thus they could not instantaneously adopt any measure toward accomplishing his capture. Sudden violence on their part might fail, and therefore they must wait yet a little while and trust to circumstances. But we must observe that all the time Mother Bambridge was absent. Stanley listened attentively to catch the sounds of her footsters, though he appeared to drink as if being intent on nothing of the sort.

The girls dropped several hints about retiring, but it by no means suited the two gentlemen's views to be separated, and moreover they had an excellent excuse for remaining where they were, at least for the present, by reminding their frail companions that a fresh supply of wine had been sent for. In a few moments Mrs. Bambridge reappeared, and almost immediately afterward the woman servant entered with two fresh bottles of wine. These were opened, and one of the girls officiously filled the two gentlemen's glasses; but the latter perceived that it was from the first supply, which was not completely exhausted, that the other glasses were replenished. They therefore at once comprehended that the wine last brought in was drugged.

"You do not drink?" said one of the girls, in a cajoling manner to Stanley.

"I am already tipsy enough," was the response, given in a hiccupping manner.

"Oh, no! do try one more glass."

Stanley reached forth his hand, and with every appearance of drunken awkwardness he upset the glass.

"I'm sure you're not so clumsy," said the other girl to Lord Charles.

"Let's try," answered the nobleman, and lifting the glass, he spilt all its contents down his paletot.

Both the girls affected to laugh, but at the same time they darted suspicious looks toward Mrs. Bambridge.

"Who can sing a good song?" asked Stanley, with the hope of giving a turn to the proceedings and averting the suspicions which he saw were awakened.

"It just happens," replied Mother Bambridge, with her simpering air, "that there are three or four gentlemen real gentlemen, like yourselves — in the front parlour, and they seem as much inclined as you to make a night of it. They sing capital songs, and with your leave I'll go and fetch them."

She quitted the room accordingly, and during her absence, which lasted two or three minutes, the girls again endeavoured to cajole the officers into retiring, but they were resolved not to be separated, and they vowed, with tipsy declamation, that they would not go to bed till daylight.

Mother Bambridge reappeared, with the four "gentlemen" of whom she had spoken, and the two officers at once recognized some of the flashily dressed fellows whom they had seen hanging aloof behind the girls in front of the public-houses. The four bullies — for such indeed the newcomers were — themselves affected to be drunk, and sitting down, they began singing a bacchanalian song. The girls endeavoured to persuade Lord Charles and Stanley to drink of the last supply of wine, but as a matter of course, without effect. The looks which the women rapidly exchanged grew more and more suspicious, as the excuses of the officers for refusing to drink became proportionately more and more transparent, — their conduct now being so little consistent with that of tipsy men, and yet they had no alternative but to persist in the refusal, even at the risk of having their aim altogether frustrated.

"Come now," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Bambridge, rising up from her seat, "I must have the house quiet, or else I shall stand the chance of being indicted. You must all be off to bed without any more delay." A crisis was now reached; Lord Charles and Stanley knew full well that if they separated from each other, they were almost certain to become the prey of superior numbers, for they had no doubt that there were even more bullies at hand than those who were present, and their only chance of a successful resistance, in case of violence, was to keep together. But a thought suddenly flashed to Stanley's mind, and affecting to drop his pocket-handkerchief close to where Lord Charles sat, he pretended to fall completely upon him as he stooped to pick it up. This manœuvre afforded him the opportunity of rapidly whispering, "Let us suffer ourselves to be robbed without the slightest resistance."

"Come, do you hear?" cried Mrs. Bambridge; "off with you to bed."

"If you won't let us sit up any longer," said Stanley, hiccuping at every word, "I shall go and finish the night at the public-house."

"Bravo!" cried one of the four bullies, "and we'll go with you."

The door of the room was now opened; Stanley and Lord Charles rose staggeringly from their chairs, and with uneven steps walked into the passage, a girl clinging to the arm of each. In the darkness of that passage, they each felt that their purses and watches were dexterously filched from them; they pretended not to notice it, the front door was opened, and as they passed out, it was slammed behind them, neither bullies nor girls being now any longer in their company.

They walked away from the immediate vicinage of the place, and observed that both public-house and beer shop were now shut up. This was of no consequence to them, for, as the reader may suppose, Stanley had all along no intention of adjourning to either of those places. The dawn of morning was now glimmering, and as they looked back, they perceived the head of one of the girls thrust out of an upper window. They made her an apparently friendly sign, and still staggering along, stopped short, as if in astonishment, before the shut-up public-house. Then, with the air of men who determined to carry their tipsy frolics to some place which was yet open, they passed out of the alley, another glance thrown backwards showing that the girl was still watching their movements. "Now, my dear fellow," said Lord Charles Meredith, when they were out of the alley, and therefore out of view of the house which they had recently left, " pray explain yourself, for to tell you the truth, I cannot for the life of me understand this last proceeding on your part."

"It is easily explained," responded Stanley, "but we have yet much to do, and the most difficult as well as the most perilous part of our enterprise is still to be performed."

"Proceed; I am all attention," rejoined the nobleman. "But unless we get back our purses and our watches, it will be rather an expensive night's entertainment," he added, with a laugh.

"Those we may give up for lost," answered Stanley, "but I think we may hold that loss cheap enough, if we succeed in surrendering a murderer into the hands of justice."

"But your project?" said Lord Charles, inquiringly. "Do you mean to go and fetch the police?"

"No. As we have commenced the business by ourselves," answered Stanley, "we will have the satisfaction of carrying it out. Listen, Meredith. We have excellent reason to believe that the villain Barney is in that house, and what is more, that he is in the room precisely above that where we were seated, for I was attentive to the sounds of Mother Bambridge's footsteps when she went up with the wine. These are great points gained, and far more than we could have expected as the result of the first night's search. But the first night's search shall be the last, or I am very much mistaken. I see that you do not understand me. Let us turn into this street; it is the one behind the alley from which we have emerged."

"And your reason for letting us be robbed so quietly?" inquired Lord Charles.

^{*a*} Those bullies were evidently brought in to pounce upon us suddenly when Mother Bambridge hoped to persuade us to go up-stairs to bed. If, an attack being made, we had resisted them, we should have shown ourselves to be sober, and whether conquerors or conquered, the suspicion which our behaviour had already excited would have been confirmed. The wretches would have felt convinced that we had an ulterior object; perhaps they would have supposed that we were looking for Barney, but at all events for security's sake they would quickly have got him off to some other lurking hole. As it is, all suspicion is completely set at rest; they flatter themselves they had to do with a couple of gentlemen who were really tipsy, and rest assured that having watched us out of the alley, they are lulled into the completest security. Such is the result of our having suffered ourselves to be robbed so quietly, as you express it."

"And what do you think Mother Bambridge went upstairs for to the villain's room? Or how can you tell that it was his room at all?" asked the nobleman.

"Of course I can but surmise," responded Stanley, " and upon this surmise we must act. She doubtless went up to him to bid him be in readiness in case his services should be required to help in dealing with us. When she went out the second time to fetch in the bullies, it was really to the front parlour she proceeded, for I listened to the course that her footsteps took."

"Now, what is your plan?" inquired Lord Charles Meredith.

Captain Stanley rapidly explained it, and his noble friend unhesitatingly agreed to succour him in carrying it out.

The little colloquy that we have described brought them to the extremity of the narrow street which they had entered, and which ran parallel to the alley. A very few minutes' observation showed them that the house which was immediately behind Mother Bambridge's establishment was a small chandlery shop, and Stanley observed to his noble friend, "This is all the better for our purpose, because a money-making tradesman of a mean and peddling description will forgive us for awakening him if we slip a five-pound note into his hand."

"I do verily believe, my dear fellow," answered Lord Charles, "that you have forgotten the little circumstance of our purses being left behind in the adjacent alley."

"No, I have not forgotten it," responded Stanley, and drawing forth his pocketbook from the breast of his under coat, he displayed a roll of bank-notes.

They now knocked at the door of the chandlery shop, and in a few minutes a head with a cotton nightcap on was thrust from an upper window. The owner of the head and the nightcap was about to give vent to his indignation at being knocked up by a couple of rakes, as he thought, out upon their nocturnal frolics, but a few quickly uttered words from Captain Stanley's lips, and the display of a bank-note, made a prompt change in the man's temper. He drew in his head, shut down the window, and in a couple of minutes appeared at his shop door, having just huddled on a sufficiency of clothing for decency's sake. He admitted the two officers, and then inquired their business.

Captain Stanley, closing the door of the shop, put the fivepound note into the man's hand, and said to him, "Don't be alarmed, and don't ask any unnecessary questions, but we want, in the first place, to peep through one of the back windows of your dwelling."

The chandler, who was an active, bustling, eccentric little man, stared in amazement at this request, and recurring to his former opinion that the whole proceeding was an impudent frolic, he examined the note, expecting to find that it issued from the Bank of Elegance instead of the Bank of England. On discovering, however, that it was really genuine, he became perfectly civil once more, and thinking he had better humour his two customers, whatever their object might be, - if indeed they had any at all, - he conducted them into his little parlour, which was behind the shop. There was an outside shutter to the window, and the prismatic rays of the morning light — for it was the middle of the month of June - penetrated through a heart-shaped hole in that shutter. By means of this hole Stanley was enabled to take his survey of the rear of the chandler's dwelling. There was a little vard separated by a low wall from a larger vard which belonged to Mother Bambridge's establishment: at every one of the back windows of that establishment the blinds were drawn down, and therefore it was reasonable to suppose that the inmates had retired to rest, well contented with their spoil in the shape of handsome watches, massive chains, and well-filled purses.

"Have you got a ladder?" inquired Stanley of the chandler.

The volatile little man made one bound of astonishment at this question so abruptly put, and then he looked dismayed as the idea flashed to his mind that he had to do with two lunatics just escaped from an asylum. The two supposed lunatics could not help smiling at these variations of expression on the chandler's countenance, and Stanley, perceiving the necessity of giving some sort of explanation, addressed him as follows: "My good fellow, I need not tell you that the place which we see opposite is a den of infamy. I and my companion have just been robbed there, and we mean to get in by some means or another, to compel the wretches to disgorge their plunder. Now will you assist us, or will you not?"

"Ah, that I cheerfully will," exclaimed the little man, "for that Mother Bambridge is the scandal of the neighbourhood, and never spends a single penny at my shop."

The ludicrous connection of indignant morality and mortified selfishness which characterized the chandler's observation provoked another smile on the part of the two officers, but he was now ready to render them his assistance, and that was the essential. He led them forth into his little yard, and showed them a ladder, which Stanley at a glance saw was just high enough for his purpose. The wall separating the two yards was quickly scaled by the captain and Lord Charles, — the chandler not offering to accompany them out of his own premises, for he was not endowed with a large amount of courage. The chief danger to be now apprehended was that their proceedings might be observed from the infamous house, should any of the inmates be still up. Not a single blind, however, was seen to move; no sign was there of aught threatening to disturb them.

The ladder was placed against the window of the room over the parlour to which the two officers had been conducted when in the house, and Captain Stanley, with his right hand in his coat pocket ready to draw forth a pistol, began to ascend the ladder, - Lord Charles Meredith remaining at the foot. On reaching the window, which had a dingy calico blind drawn down inside, the captain immediately perceived that the sashes were not fastened, and this was an immense advantage in favour of the success of the enterprise. As noiselessly as possible did he begin raising the lower sash, and when he had thus lifted it about a foot, he raised the blind in order to peep in. A bed was near the window; a man lay upon it, with his clothes on, and on a chair by the side of that bed was a brace of pistols. The man was sleeping heavily, but a curtain concealed the upper part of his body, so that Captain Stanley could not discern his countenance, and the curtain was beyond the reach of his outstretched arm from the position where he now stood.

He thrust up the sash a little higher, and was now enabled to reach the back of the chair on which the pistols lay. Lifting the chair completely up, he set it gently down again close within the window, and removing the pistols thence consigned them to the pocket of his paletot. Then he beckoned Lord Charles Meredith, who attentively and anxiously watched his proceedings, to ascend the ladder.

The sash was raised yet a little higher, and still the man slept on as if he were under the influence of liquor. Stanley passed into the room, but the cord of the blind getting entangled around his foot made him stumble against the chair. The man sprang up from the bed like a wild beast suddenly awakened from its lair, and the first glimpse of his countenance convinced Stanley that he was now confronted by none other than the terrible Burker himself.

The ruffian glanced toward the chair with the evident intention of snatching up his pistols, and perceiving they were gone, a cry of savage rage, like that of a hyena, burst from his lips. Captain Stanley drew forth a pistol, presented it at the Burker's head, and bade him surrender or he was a dead man. But with the sudden fury of the wild beast unto whose howling cry we just now likened that of the ruffian, he sprang upon Stanley, hurled him upon the floor, seized the pistol from his grasp, and was on the very point of discharging its contents at his head, when his arm was caught in a powerful grasp, the weapon was wrested from him, and he himself in his turn was hurled upon the floor. All this was the work of a few seconds, and we need hardly inform the reader that it was Lord Charles Meredith who, springing into the room, thus saved the life of his adventurous friend.

The very instant that the Burker was thus levelled, Lord Charles Meredith's knee was upon his chest, and the threat was repeated that he must surrender or have his brains blown out. But the two officers had to deal with a man of the most desperate and determined character, — a man, too, who possessed the brute strength and courage of a lion. Hurling Meredith off him, he rose as far as his knees, when he was assailed by Stanley, whom he likewise dashed away, and then snatching up a chair, he hurled it with all his force at the head of Meredith, who was returning to the assault. The nobleman, however, darted sufficiently aside to save his head, and received the blow upon his shoulder, but it made him stagger, and for an instant he was smitten with the idea that his arm was broken. All this, too, was but the work of a few instants, during which, however, either one of the officers might have shot the ruffian dead; but it was by no means their purpose to save the hangman his duty, unless at the last extremity in defence of their own lives. As for Barney the Burker, he dared not roar out for assistance, for fear of arousing the whole neighbourhood; but by hurling the chair at Meredith, he gained a moment's time to do that which seemed to answer his own purpose equally well, for he seized hold of a cord, which passing through a hole in the ceiling hung against the wall, and a bell sent its clanging sound through the house.

"It is useless for you to resist," exclaimed Stanley, again rushing upon the villain just as he was about to tear open the door, and at the same instant Meredith seized upon him by the other arm, both now clinging to him with a desperate tenacity.

And desperate too were the struggles of the ruffian, diabolically savage was the expression of his features, as he endeavoured to bite his assailants; and were it not that his great clumsy shoes were off, he would undoubtedly have broken their legs with the tremendous kicks that he dealt. And now there were the sounds of numerous persons rushing about the house; the door was burst open, and the four bullies whom the two adventurous officers had already seen beneath that roof rushed in. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley were in a moment overpowered by numbers, they were made prisoners, and now, as the only chance left of ensuring the capture of the Burker, they both shouted with all their might for assistance. Vainly did they endeavour to release their arms from the grasp of the bullies that they might get at their pistols; they could not.

The instant the Burker was freed, he rushed to the window, but beholding the chandler in the adjoining yard, he fancied that a trap was set for him in that direction, and he resolved to escape by the front door, for he felt assured that the whole neighbourhood would be quickly aroused. Snatching up his shoes, his cap, and his club, he darted from the room, rushed with the reckless brutal violence of a mad bull through the bevy of half-naked girls who were gathered in a fright on the landing, knocked down Mother Bambridge as

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she suddenly emerged from a ground-floor room in which she slept, and, tearing open the front door, darted forth. He ran along the alley with all his might, but just as he reached the front of the public-house, a couple of policemen emerged from a little court that led out from that part of the alley. Their strong arms clutched hold of the Burker, and as he offered a terrible resistance, the bludgeon of one of the officers dealt him a blow which rendered him powerless.

At the same moment Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith, having managed to escape from the bullies with whom we left them in conflict, and at whose hands they had received no small amount of ill-treatment, though fortunately no serious injury, arrived upon the spot where the Burker was thus captured, and they had the gratification of finding that he was safe in the hands of the law's myrmidons after all.

CHAPTER XIX

THE INTERVIEW

CHRISTIAN ASHTON, on being dismissed from the employment which the literary mania of the Earl of Lascelles had furnished him, would have consulted Mr. Redcliffe as to the course which he should now adopt with a view to obtain another situation, but that gentleman was absent from London, relative to the trial of Lettice Rodney. Our young hero visited his sister Christina, and acquainted her with everything that had occurred. He displayed so much grief at this sudden and cruel separation from Isabella Vincent, he spoke so fervidly of the love which he cherished toward her. and declared with such passionate vehemence that his happiness was entirely centred in that beauteous and charming creature, that Christina from her brother's words and manner acquired a somewhat deeper reading into the mysteries of her own heart, and she could now less than ever mistake the feeling which she herself entertained toward Lord Octavian Meredith. But she did her best to console and encourage her brother, and perhaps with this amiable purpose in view, she spoke more cheerfully of the hope which a faithful love might entertain than was perfectly consistent with the misgivings she secretly experienced on behalf of Christian's passion. For she could not help seeing that it was indeed most unlikely the Earl of Lascelles would ever consent to bestow his niece upon an obscure young man totally dependent on his own industry for his bread.

Nevertheless, as we have just observed, Christina — with the kindest of motives — spoke cheeringly to her brother, and he went away from that interview comforted, and with a sense of reviving hope. As he wended his way back toward his lodgings in Kensington, he felt himself gradually falling into those day-dreams in which youthful lovers are wont to indulge, and his thoughts flowed in something like the following channel:

"Who can tell what the future may have in store for me? Heaven has often blessed the loves of those whose prospects at the outset were even darker than mine. Ah! if I could but obtain one more interview with Isabella, if we could once more exchange vows and protestations of eternal fidelity, I should feel happier; my mind would become more settled. and I should have a better heart to search after fresh employment. But as it is, I feel at a loss how to act: I can fix my thoughts upon nothing decisive. Oh, yes, to see her once more, to receive from her sweet lips the assurance that under no circumstances of persuasion or coercion will she ever become another's. — this indeed were happiness. Then. inspired with fondest and brightest hope, I could battle with the world, and if industry and integrity ever throve by their own unassisted resources, I would assuredly carve out a position for myself. And who can tell but that the day will come when I may secure a competency, and thus feel myself justified in conducting Isabella to the altar? Our wants would be limited: a neat little rural habitation would suffice. and however humble its aspect, yet the light of love would gild the interior as if it were a splendid saloon, and impart a richer bloom to the flowers festooning outside. And we should be so happy, oh, so happy! and Isabella would never regret her uncle's palatial mansion."

Such reflections as these — which, as the reader may perceive, were borrowed from the fanciful realms of dreamland — wrapped the soul of the enthusiastic Christian in a species of ecstasy, but the pivot, be it observed, on which the whole vision turned, was the idea of first of all obtaining a parting interview with Isabella. He did not therefore immediately take any step to procure a new situation; nor did he for the present think of leaving his lodging in the vicinage of the earl's mansion. He had plenty of ready money, and as his habits were frugal and inexpensive — his only extravagance consisting in the nicety and almost elegance of his apparel — he could subsist for some time on the resources which he had in hand. But how to obtain the interview with Isabella? This was the difficulty. For several days after he left the earl's employment, he vainly busied himself in meditations upon the best means to carry out his view. More than once he thought of beseeching Lord Osmond's good offices, for it was evident to Christian that the young nobleman was far from unfavourable to the love-suit which had brought about so disastrous a catastrophe in the summerhouse. But yet he applied not to Adolphus.

In the meanwhile the Countess of Lascelles and Lord Osmond had been particularly on their guard, for fear lest the old nobleman's suspicions should be revived. Nevertheless, Ethel continued to occupy those separate apartments which we have on a former occasion described, and on a variety of pretexts she avoided a return to the matrimonial couch.

Lord Osmond deeply deplored Christian's departure from the mansion, as his presence there had caused a diversion in respect to Isabella which had thrown the young nobleman and Ethel constantly together. Now, since that catastrophe in the summer-house, Isabella had been almost constantly with the countess, and Osmond began to despair of again enjoying Ethel's society alone.

As for the earl himself, he had been so bewildered by the incidents which led to Christian's summary dismissal that for several days he knew not how to act or what to think. That his son and his niece were not lovers, as he had all along flattered himself, had suddenly been made apparent; that Christian and Isabella must have been far more together than he had supposed was likewise evident, and that therefore, Osmond must have been the companion of the countess in the evening walks in the garden was a natural deduction from those premises. Thus the old earl was agitated with renewed suspicion, but a feeling of mingled pride and shame prevented him from again touching on the subject with his valet Makepeace, and likewise from taking any decisive step, — such, for instance, as to insist that his son should again become an exile from the house.

At length Lord Osmond was determined to do something to bring about a change in affairs. His mad infatuation toward his youthful and lovely mother-in-law would not permit him to remain any longer so completely on his guard, nor to tolerate the almost complete severance from her which Isabella's presence in her ladyship's apartments necessitated. He spoke to Makepeace, but the valet could say nothing more than that the earl maintained a strict silence with regard to recent events.

One morning — about ten days after Christian's abrupt dismissal from the house — Lord Osmond paid him a second visit at his lodgings. We have already said that our hero had more than once bethought himself of seeking the young nobleman's good offices toward obtaining an interview with Isabella, but he hesitated, — fearful that he might be taking too great a liberty and trusting too far to the favourable feeling of the earl's son. But now, when Lord Osmond entered his little sitting-room, Christian's countenance suddenly lighted up with mingled hope and joy.

"Still in the same place, and still without employment, my young friend?" said Adolphus, shaking Christian warmly by the hand.

"I cannot tear myself away from this neighbourhood," replied the youth, his cheeks glowing with blushes, "and now the truth is frankly told."

"You entertain some hope?" said Lord Osmond. "Perhaps you wish to see Isabella — But of course you do. It is natural enough."

"Oh, for one parting interview!" exclaimed Christian, enthusiastically, "and you know not, my lord, how deep would be my gratitude."

"Well, we must manage it by some means or another," responded Adolphus. "Have you the courage to enter the grounds stealthily this evening, or to-morrow evening, on receipt of a note or message from me?"

Christian hesitated for a moment; the natural rectitude of his principles recoiled from the idea of thus violating the sanctity of premises whence he had been so pointedly dismissed. But a second thought told him that there was no more harm in entering the earl's grounds against his consent than in seeking an interview with his niece likewise in opposition to his will. Love therefore triumphed over all scruples, and he exclaimed, "Tell me how I can see Miss Vincent, if only for a few minutes, and I will risk everything. But think you, my lord, that she herself will be agreeable —"

"She loves you, Christian, and that assurance ought to be a sufficient answer. Hold yourself in readiness for a communication from me, and trust to my ingenuity to manage the matter. And now one word more ere I take my departure. You must look upon me as a friend, and regard me as such, even to the extent of making me your banker, for that is the proposal I have to offer without offending your delicacy."

Christian expressed his warmest gratitude for the young nobleman's kind consideration, but assured him that he possessed ample resources for the present. Adolphus then took his departure, leaving the youth full of hope and joy at the prospect of so speedily obtaining the object of his enthusiastic wishes.

In the evening the Earl and Countess of Lascelles, Osmond, and Isabella were seated in the drawing-room between eight and nine o'clock partaking of coffee. Isabella was sad and dispirited, though she did her best to conceal what she felt; she was so afraid of angering her uncle. The countess displayed the most amiable demeanour toward her husband, and was completely on her guard not to exchange so much as the most rapidly furtive glance with Adolphus. Lord Osmond chatted with every appearance of ease and gaiety, and as the earl had drunk a few extra glasses of wine, he was in a much better humour than he had been since the adventure of the summer-house.

"Ah! now that I think of it, my dear father," said Lord Osmond, thus abruptly giving a turn to the previous conversation, "when are your memoirs to appear?"

"Why, the fact is, Adolphus," answered the earl, "I have come well-nigh to a full stop for the present, and without any disagreeable allusion," — and he glanced somewhat spitefully at his niece, — "I have lost my right hand, as it were. Dictation was easy enough, but when I sit down to write for myself, I find my ideas rushing on — like what shall I say? — like a troop of wild elephants, but my penmanship can no more keep pace with them than — than hem! — a lame donkey at a short trot."

"It is a great pity, my dear father," rejoined Adolphus, in an undertone, so that Isabella could not overhear him, "that you have got rid of that very useful young man merely on account of a passing folly — "

"Don't mention it, Adolphus," interrupted the earl sharply; "he shall never enter my house again."

"Oh, no, of course not," responded Lord Osmond, finding that the little feeler he had thrown out experienced such a rebuff. "But really it is cruel of you to keep the public on the tenter-hooks of suspense awaiting that work of yours. which has already been so extensively advertised. You must permit me to look out for another secretary, or else," added Lord Osmond, in the hope of putting his father into the most amiable of humours, "I must act as your amanuensis for an hour or two every day."

"No! would you, Adolphus?" exclaimed the old earl, catching eagerly at the proposition.

"With the utmost pleasure," was Lord Osmond's ready response. "We will commence to-morrow morning, if you will."

"That we will," exclaimed the earl, forgetting everything else in his joy at the sort of compliment conveyed by his son's supposed anxiety in respect to the forthcoming work. "I will go this minute to the library, and sit down for an hour or two to rack my imagination and invent — I mean arrange the papers in readiness for to-morrow."

"Pray do," said Lord Osmond, " for I am now all eagerness to begin. And perhaps, as it is so sultry indoors and the evening is so beautiful, the ladies would accept my escort for a ramble in the garden?"

The earl made a passing grimace at the proposition, for he retrospected not lovingly upon those evening rambles, but as the thought flashed to his mind that his niece must remain the whole time in companionship with Adolphus and Ethel, he uttered not a syllable of objection, and hastened away to the library, intent upon the concoction of some startling incident for the morrow's lucubrations. The countess and Isabella rang for their shawls, and Lord Osmond, hurrying down-stairs for a moment, sought Makepeace, to whom he made a significant sign, which that individual at once comprehended. The young nobleman then rejoined his mother-in-law and cousin, and they walked forth into the garden together.

As this was the first occasion since the disastrous incident of the summer-house that an evening ramble had been taken, or that the system of guarded conduct had been in the slightest degree deviated from, the countess could not help thinking that Adolphus had some particular project in view, for he had found no opportunity during the day to communicate his intention to her ladyship. Isabella, on the other hand, was too artless and innocent to entertain the idea of any ulterior purpose, and leaning upon her cousin's arm, she walked by his side in silence, occupied with her 'own melancholy reflections. To his other arm the countess clung, and as the night was clear and beautiful, she and her lover were now enabled to exchange glances of deep and earnest tenderness.

It becomes necessary to explain that in one of the angles of the walls enclosing the spacious garden grounds, there was a small, private door, but which was seldom or never used. An avenue of evergreens led from this door toward the conservatories at the farther extremity of the garden, and it was in this avenue that Osmond was now walking with the two ladies. At first there was little conversation, for Isabella was altogether silent, while Adolphus and Ethel were too much gratified with the opportunity of thus stealthily bestowing a tender pressure of the hand, or of exchanging a fond look when the starlight penetrated amidst the trees and flooded their path with its argentine lustre, to give utterance to remarks on purely indifferent subjects, for on such subjects alone could they converse in the presence of Isabella, who was altogether unsuspicious of their guilty love.

"You are pensive, my sweet cousin?" said Adolphus, at length breaking a long silence, and now addressing himself to Isabella. "The countess and I are not so dull," he continued, in a good-humoured strain, "as to be unable to comprehend what occupies your thoughts. We both feel for you, my dear cousin — "

"Isabella has already more than once received the assurance of my sympathy," remarked the countess.

"But we should offer her more than sympathy," quickly exclaimed Lord Osmond. "There could be no harm in assisting the progress of this little love-affair, which experiences disfavour only on the part of one, for really Christian Ashton is an admirable young man — You are weeping, dear Isabella."

"The conversation gives her pain," said the countess, in a tone of tenderest sympathy.

"Not for worlds would I wilfully give you pain, my dear cousin," resumed Adolphus. "On the contrary, you shall see whether I have not studied to do something to afford you pleasure." "What mean you?" inquired the agitated, the astonished, and the bewildered girl, her heart fluttering with suspense.

"I mean, my dear cousin, that here is some one whom you may perhaps be glad to meet."

These last words were spoken just as the little party reached the end of the avenue where the private door stood, and at the same moment a key was heard to turn in the lock of that door. It opened, and a faint cry of mingled surprise and delight burst from Isabella's lips, as she beheld Christian Ashton.

"We will leave you together for half an hour," said Lord Osmond, and he hurried the countess away from the spot.

Isabella, well-nigh overcome by her feelings, sank halffainting into Christian's arms; he strained her to his breast, breathing the tenderest and most endearing words in her ear. He explained to her how he had earnestly longed for one parting interview, how Lord Osmond had kindly volunteered to procure it, and how a note enclosing a key of the gate, and instructing him in what manner to proceed, had been left a few minutes back at his lodgings. Who the person was that left it, Christian did not know, but we need hardly inform the reader it was the valet Makepeace.

And were not the lovers happy? And did they not feel themselves supremely blest? Was it likely that they should yield to timid apprehensions, and on that account cut short the pure pleasure, the chaste luxury, of this interview? Or need we say that the vows of eternal love which the enraptured youth sought from the lips of the tender maiden were murmuringly whispered, that those vows were reciprocated, and that they were ratified with the purest and holiest kisses?

They walked together in that shady avenue for nearly an hour, Adolphus and Ethel having thus well-nigh doubled the interval to which the young nobleman had in the first instance limited the meeting, and during this space everything was forgotten by the youthful pair except the happiness of being thus together. So rapidly slipped away the time that when Adolphus and Ethel again joined them, it seemed as if the interview had lasted but for five minutes instead of fifty. It was at the extremity of the avenue which was nearest to the conservatories that the youthful lovers were thus rejoined by Lord Osmond and the Countess of Lascelles, and it was here that they now separated. Isabella, again taking her cousin's arm, accompanied him and the countess back to the mansion in one direction, while our young hero, hastily threading his way along the shady avenue, regained the garden gate, whence he issued, locking it again and taking the key with him. Had not his thoughts been entirely wrapped up in the ecstatic luxury of feeling which this interview had left behind it, he would most probably have been struck by a certain strange rustling amidst the adjacent evergreens, but as it happened, he heard it not.

Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles had retired to the library to make notes of whatsoever perilous escapes or marvellous adventures he could possibly concoct, and which were worthy of incorporation in those celebrated memoirs that were to throw Baron Munchausen into the shade. He, however, found his imagination more cloudy than he had expected; he rang for wine, but fresh potations appeared only to increase his dulness, instead of giving a spur to his inventive ingenuity. Thus an hour elapsed, and he had only got so far as to place himself between the fore paws of a huge African lion, without being enabled to resolve upon the special means of his own extrication and his formidable adversary's defeat. He sat back in his chair, thinking, but gradually with his meditations there became mingled an undercurrent of thoughts which presently absorbed the others. This ramble in the garden assumed a suspicious aspect to his mind. He did not know what it could possibly mean, and yet he could not help thinking it meant something more than a mere stroll for the purpose of courting the evening breeze. Without entering into details in respect to the old nobleman's ideas, we may as well at once state that his misgivings reached such a pitch he tossed down the pen. left himself, so far as his memoirs were concerned, in the grasp of the lion, with a boa-constrictor picturesquely thrown in, and represented as looking down from a tree ready to spring upon them both, and issuing from the library, he stole into the garden, treading noiselessly amongst the evergreens. He drew near that very identical arbour where he had surprised Christian and Isabella, and where he had received so smart a blow upon the nose, but all was silent there. He diverged elsewhere, and now his wandering steps brought him in the immediate vicinage of the private door. Footsteps rapidly

approaching along the avenue fell upon his ear, and just at that spot close by the door, there were no high trees to intercept the starlight. All therefore was clear, and the ancient earl popped down behind a shrub to see who the individual was that now approached the gate. It was Christian Ashton, and in the sudden surprise with which the nobleman was thus smitten, he gave such a start as to rustle the shrub, but Christian heard it not. The earl tarried where he was, crouching down like a frog; he perceived our hero insert the key in the lock, open the gate, pass forth, shut it again, and then the relocking thereof fell on his lordship's ear.

"Well, am I really awake?" asked the earl of himself; "or is this a dream? I have either discovered something extraordinary to a degree, or else I am the silliest young dotard that ever existed."

Bewildered and confused, the earl wended his way back to the library, filled a bumper, tossed it off, and threw himself back in his chair to meditate. Sleep stole upon him, and he was presently awakened by the entrance of Makepeace. His first impulse was to tell the valet everything that had happened: his second thought was to hold his tongue, for the idea slipped into his head that he had drunk too much wine and had been dreaming. He inquired what o'clock it was, and was told it was past eleven. Lord Osmond and the ladies had already retired to their respective chambers, and the earl accordingly went up to his own. On entering his dressing-room, the first thing he did was to glance at a particular nail to which the key of the private garden door was wont to be hung, and there, sure enough, it was. Nor need this be at all astonishing to the reader, inasmuch as Makepeace had during the day procured a counterpart key, in accordance with instructions given by Lord Osmond, who remunerated him liberally for everything he did.

But when the earl thus caught sight of that key, his suspicion was strengthened to the effect that he had dreamed this new incident of the garden, and as nothing would have been more galling to his mean petty vanity than to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his servant, he breathed not a syllable relative to his supposed dream. Yet when Makepeace had retired, the Earl of Lascelles reflected more and more on the occurrence, and he was haunted by the apprehension that there might be something more in it than a mere dream, especially as it had occurred on the very evening that the garden ramble was renewed.

"The key is certainly here," he said to himself, " and not for a moment would Makepeace remove it from its nail. I know the fellow is fidelity itself: I am too keen and shrewd to be deceived by any man's countenance. No one could have purloined the key, because Makepeace always keeps my dressing-room locked. But it is quite possible for that young scoundrel Ashton to have had a false key made. Perhaps he came of his own accord, hoping to see Isabella. Yes, it must have been so, for Adolphus could not possibly so far forget himself as to connive at such a proceeding. Very good. Master Ashton. So you will persist in looking after my niece, will you? We'll see if we can't put a stop to it. I'm almost sorry I didn't pounce upon him, but perhaps it is all for the best. I'll go to the magistrate in the morning, or I'll set a detective to watch. But no! there's something better than that, and, by Jove! I'll do it."

Whatever this last idea might have been, it certainly seemed to tickle the silly old nobleman's fancy very much, for he rubbed his hands and chuckled, grinning most ludicrously at the same time, and putting on his nightcap with the fringe of false hair, he sought his couch.

On the following day Lord Osmond, emboldened by the success of the previous evening's adventure, called upon Christian to inform him that he might, if he thought fit, have another interview with Isabella, and our hero, who was enthusiastically devoted to the charming girl, was only too willing to accept an offer which he believed to arise from the kindest and most disinterested feeling. During this same day, too, the Earl of Lascelles had a little private conversation with the under-gardener, giving him certain instructions. and charging him to observe the strictest secrecy. This the man faithfully promised, — all the more readily, too, as the earl slipped a couple of guineas into his hand. The old nobleman, when in the presence of the family, suffered not his countenance to betray that there was any secret scheme which he was hatching, but nevertheless he was too full of it to be enabled to settle his mind to dictate to his son, and thus the proffered services of Adolphus were dispensed with. Indeed, so far as the memoirs were concerned, the earl continued in the grasp of the lion, and the huge boa-constrictor was still coiled around the branch of the tree, waiting to spring.

When the evening came, the earl and countess, Lord Osmond and Isabella, were assembled as usual in the drawing-room to take coffee, and at about half-past eight o'clock, the earl, rising from his seat, said that he should go to the library and prepare for the next day's work, as he was positively determined to proceed with his book on the morrow.

"And as the heat has prevented you from going out all day," said Adolphus to the ladies, "I offer, like a gay gallant, to escort you for a stroll in the grounds."

The proposal was accepted; the bell was rung for the shawls, and the earl, chuckling with inward satisfaction, exclaimed, "Well, the evening is really beautiful, and instead of shutting myself up in the library, I will take a lounge with you."

Adolphus and Ethel were enabled, from a course of dissimulation, to maintain the strictest guard over their looks at this most unexpected and ominous proposal, but Isabella turned pale and trembled. Fortunately, however, her countenance was not at the instant toward her uncle, and he perceived not her emotion. But the countess did notice it, and hastening to assist Isabella with her shawl, she whispered, rapidly, "Fear nothing. Adolphus will make everything right."

The earl gave his arm to the countess, while Lord Osmond escorted his cousin Isabella. They descended the stairs and reached the hall, — Adolphus the while racking his brain for some pretext to speak aside to Makepeace. As fortune would have it, Makepeace himself was at the instant crossing the hall, with a chamber candle in his hand.

"With your permission, Bella," said Lord Osmond, "I will smoke a cigar in the garden. Here, Makepeace, give me a light."

The valet stopped short accordingly; Adolphus approached him, and while stooping toward the candle, he said in a low, rapid whisper, "Hasten around and prevent young Ashton from entering by the gate this evening."

The cigar was lighted, Adolphus gave Isabella his arm again, and the party issued forth. The earl was determined

that Adolphus and Isabella should not wander away from himself and the countess, and therefore, on entering the garden, he kept his son in continued conversation. But Lord Osmond had really no intention of straving: he had provided against the entrance of Christian Ashton, and that was the only thing he cared for. He fancied that there must be some suspicion in his father's mind, but what it's precise nature was, he could not conjecture. As for the earl, he was naturally led to imagine that this repetition of the evening walk might be in connection with an expected visit from Christian; and that, after all, Adolphus was really favouring the discarded secretary's suit toward Miss Vincent. The earl, however, chatted gaily, as if there were nothing to disturb his humour, and all the more gaily, too, because he inwardly chuckled at the hope of wreaking a speedy vengeance on the presumptuous youth who dared aspire to the hand of his niece and stealthily intrude upon his grounds.

Meantime Makepeace, in pursuance of Lord Osmond's hint, had issued from the principal entrance of the grounds, and rapidly skirting the wall he reached the private door, against which he planted himself to await the coming of Christian Ashton. While standing there, he caught the sounds of heavy footsteps moving about just inside the garden door; then he heard a strange grating noise, as of some iron mechanism being acted upon, and this was followed by a sharp click, while a voice just audible to the valet's ears muttered, "Botheration take this cursed thing. Ah, that's right at last."

This latter ejaculation was accompanied by another grating metallic noise, and then the footsteps moved away from the neighbourhood of the door. The words were spoken in so low a tone — being merely in a musing strain to the man's own self — that Makepeace could not recognize who he was, and he was totally at a loss to comprehend what the proceeding meant. He had not, however, much time for reflection ere our young hero made his appearance, and on beholding Makepeace planted against the door, he instantaneously fancied there was something wrong.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Ashton," said the valet; "I am here to befriend you. You must not enter the garden this evening; Lord Osmond bade me come hither to warn you against it." "For Heaven's sake tell me," exclaimed Christian, "whether anything — " and then he abruptly stopped short, fearing lest the valet was acting as the earl's spy.

"Do not be afraid of me, Mr. Ashton," continued Makepeace; "I am secretly disposed in your favour. The best proof is that it was I who procured the duplicate key for you, and left it with Lord Osmond's note at your lodgings yesterday. I can full well understand the reason you are not to enter the grounds this evening: it is simply because the earl has taken it into his head to join the party in their walk."

"Thank you for this assurance," replied Christian, his mind now infinitely relieved, for his first and very natural misgiving was that Isabella might have become involved in fresh trouble on his account.

He then bade Makepeace "good night," and returned to his lodging, much disappointed, however, at not being enabled to meet Isabella. Makepeace hastily reëntered the grounds, and at once proceeded to the spot just inside the garden gate where he had heard the footsteps, the muttered ejaculations, and the grating metallic sounds, which had so much perplexed him. At first, he could see nothing, but a closer scrutiny showed him a man-trap, with its teethed jaws wide apart, ready to receive and to close upon any unfortunate leg that might step between. Indeed the valet's own leg experienced but a narrow escape from being caught therein, as he was searching about upon the spot.

"This is extraordinary," thought Makepeace to himself, but his knowledge of the earl's character speedily made him aware that it was a device of that nobleman's fertile brain. "It is pretty clear that the old man suspects or knows something, but how the deuce could it have come to his knowledge? At all events I am not suspected, for his lordship was as kind to me to-day as ever, and I know the old bird too well to be deceived by such kindness if it were not perfectly natural. The cunning dog! He thought he would keep this entirely to himself. He expects to catch young Ashton, and he will come here presently to see whether his victim is fast in the trap."

Makepeace was strolling away from the gate, when a mischievous idea struck him.

"Wouldn't he be astonished," thought the valet to him-

self, "if he came and found no trap at all? He would fancy that Christian had been caught, and had climbed over the wall, dragging the trap with him. Capital! I'll hide it."

So Makepeace, carefully lifting the machine in such a way as to avoid getting his arms between its gaping jaws, carried the trap to some little distance, and deposited it amongst a group of shrubs, having done which he reëntered the mansion.

In the meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles and his wife, Adolphus and Isabella, had been rambling about the gardens, but the earl took good care to keep them at a tolerable distance from the private door. Thus an hour passed, and then he proposed to return into the house. But on passing indoors, the old nobleman made some excuse to leave them, and he hastened back into the garden.

"Ah, my young friend," he said within himself, thus apostrophizing Christian Ashton, "I shall find you caught in the trap as sure as a gun, but like a true lover of romance, you have too much pluck to roar out and thus betray everything. Or perhaps you have managed to extricate yourself, — in which case the teeth will show whether they bit home. But I am inclined to think I shall find you pinned fast there, enjoying a miserable martyrdom."

In his haste to ascertain the result of an idea which he conceived to be one of the most brilliant that had ever entered his fertile brain, the Earl of Lascelles did not pursue the tedious meanderings of the gravel-walk which led toward the private door, but he cut across the grass-plat, reached the evergreens, and began working his way manfully amongst them. But all of a sudden a terrific yell rang through the grounds, for, lo and behold! the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles was caught in his own trap.

Nothing could exceed the horrible cries and the piteous lamentations which kept coming from the lips of the wretched old man. Lord Adolphus and some of the men servants rushed forth from the mansion; others followed with lights, and guided by the earl's yells, they speedily reached the spot where he was pinned fast. Lord Adolphus was most painfully afflicted on beholding his father in a plight so unaccountable, but which for any one except a son would have had something so exceedingly ludicrous in it. Indeed, several of the servants turned aside to laugh outright, and Makepeace could scarcely keep his countenance. The old lord was extricated from the trap and borne into the house, but on arriving there, he would not suffer any one to attend him in his dressing-room except Makepeace. The countess and Isabella, having retired to their own apartments to put off their shawls, had not heard the cries, and when they were informed of what had happened, they sped to the door of the earl's suite of rooms to make inquiries and render any needful assistance. But Makepeace, opening the door a few inches, assured them that his lordship was by no means seriously hurt, that he desired to be left alone, and that they were on no account to send for medical assistance.

It was quite true that the old nobleman was not much injured, for the simple reason that the calf of his leg had been protected by a pretty considerable piece of padding, which was artistically fixed inside his stocking so as to give that appearance of modelled robustness which nature had denied to those spindle shanks. And it was likewise on account of this succedaneous arrangement that the earl would not suffer any one to enter his dressing-room except Makepeace.

CHAPTER XX

A REVELATION

THE incident of the man-trap remained enveloped in a considerable degree of mystery with the generality of the earl's household. His lordship said, as if in a cursory manner, that he supposed one of the gardeners must have set it under the impression that there were nocturnal intruders upon the grounds, and he forbade any inquiries to be instituted. Makepeace of course took very good care not to confess how far he had been instrumental in producing the ignoble catastrophe, nor did he think fit to mention the circumstance even to Lord Osmond. The under-gardener likewise maintained the secret, in pursuance of the instructions he had received from the earl, but the man could not for the life of him conceive how the trap had become moved from its original position.

When, at the expiration of a day or two, the nobleman was enabled to leave his room again, he took an opportunity of questioning the under-gardener, and though the fellow swore lustily he had planted the trap against the private door, the earl could not help thinking the fellow had got drunk and had placed it amongst the shrubs. However, he was content to leave the matter as it stood, for he had no inclination to make a disturbance relative to an incident that was so painfully humiliating for himself. Yet bitter was his lordship's vexation that Christian Ashton should have escaped him, for it was his intention, if the youth had been caught in the trap, to summon the whole household to witness him in that position. The tables had however been turned; it was the earl himself who was caught, - the earl himself likewise whom that household, with but three or four exceptions, had poured forth to see.

The incident produced the most painful impression upon the minds of the countess, Adolphus, and Isabella. Without being at all enabled to account for it, they were nevertheless deeply saddened by the thought that the poor old nobleman had been placed in that cruel predicament. Such a state of feeling brings vividly up into people's minds the wrongs of which they have been guilty, or the duties which they have violated, in respect to the individual who is the object of their compassion. The countess, who had many generous qualities notwithstanding the deep depravity into which an irresistible temptation had led her, was more than ever aroused to the blackness of her turpitude; while Lord Osmond, despite his unabating infatuation for his young and beautiful mother-in-law, could no longer look in his father's face without feeling that his guilt toward that parent was of the darkest and deepest dve. As for Isabella, she, with her feelings far more keenly sensitive, and with her notions of propriety still more exquisitely delicate, was led painfully to reflect that as her uncle stood in the light of a parent, she had proved grievously disobedient to his wishes in stealthily meeting Christian Ashton.

The result of all these remorseful feelings was that the Countess of Lascelles penned a note to Adolphus, beseeching and imploring that on some pretext he would withdraw from the mansion, and that by means of a long separation they might better endeavour to conquer their unhappy passion. She appeared to recover much if not all of that firmness of purpose which had at first stood her in such good stead, and enabled her to struggle for a time against the wiles of temptation. Adolphus - though feeling it was despair, if not death, to sever himself from the adored and worshipped Ethel — was nevertheless led by a sense of duty to make this atonement for his sin, however tardy, and however slight in comparison with the sin itself; and in a note penned in response to that of the countess, he assured her that he would lose no time in stating to his father that he intended to travel upon the Continent.

As for Isabella, she likewise penned a note, and it was to Christian Ashton. In terms of suitable maiden modesty but still properly tender and affectionate after all that had passed between them — she besought him not to make any further attempts to see her until she could receive his visits with her uncle's full concurrence. She assured him that never should she prove faithless to the troth that she had pledged, and that if it were written in the book of destiny that they were not born for each other, yet that never would she bestow her hand where her heart was not likewise given. Thus the letter — though containing a fiat of complete severance for the present, and Heaven alone could tell for how long a period — was nevertheless precisely such a one as became a young lady of the strictest purity of principle, and which a right-minded youth such as Christian Ashton could not possibly regard without feeling that it raised her more highly than ever in his estimation.

In pursuance of the solemn promise given to the Countess of Lascelles, and of that sense of duty to which he was awakened, Lord Osmond sought an opportunity of conversing alone with the earl. This was a few days after the incidents related in the previous chapter, and the interview took place in the library.

"My dear father," began Adolphus, "I come to request your permission for my temporary absence from home."

"Well, it's very proper in you to request my permission," responded the earl; "there is nothing like obedience. I think I have often told you that I was a very obedient son. Indeed, it was one of my virtues. I recollect that I never ventured on the ice after my dear father, the late earl, ordered me to keep off it, which, by the bye, was on the occasion when I fell through and was so nearly drowned that I was six hours in a state of suspended animation. But about this absence of yours, — where are you going to?"

"I purpose, my dear father, to travel on the Continent for a year or two — "

"There is certainly nothing like travelling," remarked the earl, "as indeed my book will show when it is published. I question, however, if you will pick up enough in Europe to fill two large volumes, for travels are nothing at all without lions and bears and crocodiles and snakes. Why, would you believe it, the moment Mr. Bentley, the publisher, — he is publisher in ordinary to her Majesty, you know, although I certainly never had the honour of meeting with any book bearing her Majesty's name on the title page — However, as I was about to state, the moment Mr. Bentley advertised 'a forthcoming work of travels by the Right Honourable the Earl of Lascelles,' — although, by the bye, there was not a line written at the time, — I was waited upon by an old gentleman who offered me his literary assistance. I asked him for his qualifications, and I think he said he had written three voyages to the North Pole, eleven around the world, six travels in China, three into the heart of Africa, four to the Rocky Mountains, and about fifty others to different parts of the earth, including six or seven ascents up Mont Blanc, and about seventeen shipwrecks."

"But my dear father," exclaimed Adolphus, "this man was an impostor. A little calculation would show that a dozen lives would not suffice for so much travelling and voyaging."

"God bless your soul!" cried the earl, "the worthy gentleman had never been out of England in his life, or else how could he possibly have found time to write the books at all? They were all composed at the British Museum, and published under an infinite variety of names and titles. Why. this good gentleman who came to me, as I am telling you, was a colonial bishop, an officer in the East India Company's service, a subaltern unattached, an old naval officer, a Lady of Rank, an Oxonian, an Etonian, a missionary to the South Sea Islands, a trader to Hudson's Bay, and Heaven only knows what! But you will fancy the answer I gave him. Of course I told him that the Earl of Lascelles did not want a hodgepodge dished up for him, but that they were my own personal experiences, adventures, and impressions that I was about to give to the world. I only mention all this to let you see that if you do travel, you could easily have a book confectioned for you on your return."

"But, my dear father, I do not want to write a book," replied Lord Osmond, — "much less to have one written for me."

"Well, well, every one to his taste," said the earl, complacently stroking his wrinkled chin, as much as to imply that it was his taste, and his pride, too, to become an illustrious ornament of the literary world. "However," he continued, "I have not the slightest objection that you should take a tour on the Continent during your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon?" ejaculated Adolphus, in a sort of dismayed amazement, but rather at the unexpected mention of such words than because he was at a loss to comprehend them, for, on the contrary, he could not help at once suspecting at what the earl was driving.

"To be sure, the honeymoon," repeated his lordship, staring fixedly in the young nobleman's countenance. "And it is a very odd thing that at the moment you entered the library I was about to send for you. But there are strange coincidences at times. I remember once when I was at Eton, I was just going to take up a big stone to shy at a boy's head, when he picked up one and suddenly threw it at me with such force he nearly knocked my eye out. But as I was about to say, I was just on the point of sending for you, Adolphus, to have a very serious conversation with you. In a word, you must marry Isabella offhand, and we'll fix this day week for the nuptials."

"But, my dear father," cried Lord Osmond, "this is impossible."

"Impossible! What — to marry a pretty girl? Egad! I never found it impossible."

"But there is no love subsisting between us," responded Lord Osmond.

"Love will come of its own accord. It's a deuce of a thing for springing up spontaneously."

"But I feel that I shall never entertain any other sentiment than that of friendship for my cousin. Besides," added Adolphus, hesitatingly, "her own affections are already disposed of — "

"What! to that whipper-snapper who had the impertinence to bruise the nose of a peer of England?" exclaimed the earl, rubbing the proboscis thus alluded to, as if it still smarted with the pain; "the impertinent scoundrel on whose account I was caught —" the earl was just on the point of adding " in a trap," but quickly amending the idea, he said, "so nicely at the entry of that summer-house."

"It is perfectly true, my dear father," replied Adolphus, who was too much abstracted to notice the peculiarity with which the earl's last words were uttered, — "it is perfectly true that Christian Ashton is the object of Isabella's affections, and really, with all due deference, you can only blame yourself for having introduced him to your table and thus thrown them so much together. There is no denying that he is a very prepossessing, intellectual, and agreeable young man, and it was not therefore astonishing — " "Nevertheless," interrupted the earl, somewhat severely, for he by no means liked to be reminded of the unexpected and unintended turn which his previous stratagem had taken when he introduced Christian into the bosom of his family, — "nevertheless, you shall marry Isabella. I have made up my mind upon the point, and when once I am resolved upon a thing, it is as good as done."

"My dear father," answered Lord Osmond, very seriously, "it is impossible I can take as a wife a young lady whose affections are engaged to another. It would be indelicate cruel — "

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the earl, vehemently. I tell you it is already as good as settled."

"Not exactly so," rejoined Adolphus, with a firmness that was almost indignant, " for you have yet to obtain the consent of the two principal persons."

"Isabella will yield to my wishes," said the earl; "indeed she must; she is dependent upon me, — that is to say, she believes herself so — "

"And is she not?" inquired Adolphus, with astonishment.

"Never mind," rejoined the earl, tartly. "I tell you she will assent, and I reckon upon your compliance likewise."

"Deceive yourself not for a moment, my dear father," said Adolphus. "I cannot — I will not marry my cousin Isabella."

"And I say you can and you shall," rejoined the earl, and he spoke with a decisiveness that appeared to have something more in it than a mere whim or caprice.

"I see that this interview had better terminate at once," said Adolphus, coldly, and he was rising from his seat, when he was struck by the imperious gesture with which the earl bade him retain it.

"Now, understand me well, Adolphus," continued the old nobleman, "I have set my mind on this match for more reasons than one, and I intend it to take place. You had better yield with a good countenance, or you will compel me to make revelations which will perhaps somewhat startle you."

These ambiguous words instantaneously associated themselves in Lord Osmond's mind with those former ones in reference to Isabella which had struck him as peculiar, and knowing how for some years — ever since the death of her mother — the earl had kept her in such privacy that neither he nor the countess had the slightest idea where she was until she was suddenly brought home in the manner already described, a painful suspicion in respect to his father's integrity arose in the young nobleman's mind.

"Is it possible," he asked in a low and trembling voice, "that you have acted wrongfully toward that orphan daughter of your deceased sister?"

"What! do you think I have robbed her out of a fortune," ejaculated the earl, sneeringly, "when she never had a pennypiece of her own? Not I indeed. I never robbed anybody in my life, not so much as an umbrella from a friend, and umbrellas, you know, have ever been considered legitimate plunder."

"Then what revelations are these to which you so ambiguously refer?" inquired Adolphus, bewildered what to think.

"You had better not ask me," responded the earl, "but like a good fellow marry Isabella offhand. We'll have a sumptuous wedding, and I tell you what, — yes, I positively will, — I'll have it down at the Bloomfield estate; all the tenantry shall be invited. We'll have jumping in sacks, climbing up greasy poles, eating treacle-biscuits, and catching pigs with soapy tails. Useless indeed you prefer to have the wedding here — "

"My dear father," interrupted Adolphus, "once for all do let me beseech you to explain the grave and important reasons which you seem to have for wishing these nuptials to take place."

"Well, if you are obstinate," said the earl, "the truth must be told," but he screwed up his face with the air of a man who had the prospect of no very agreeable task to perform.

"What on earth can it be?" demanded Adolphus, full of suspense, and yet this suspense was far from being so poignant as it would have been if he had a less frivolous and more stable-minded person to deal with.

"Look you, Adolphus," resumed the earl; "suppose that by any accident all my estates at my death should pass away to your cousin Isabella?"

"But, father, this is supposing an impossibility, unless I

myself were also dead, for of course I am aware that the entail descends upon the females as well as upon the males of the family."

"And why is it supposing an impossibility?" demanded the old earl. "There is nothing impossible, as I fully proved when I rode the wild elephant in Africa."

Adolphus gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience.

"You wilful dog," growled the old earl; "you persevere in forcing me to tell you everything. Suppose, then, only suppose, I say, that some sudden exposure took place, and it became proved that you — But come! marry the girl and have done with it."

"Father, you must speak out," exclaimed Lord Osmond, now much excited, and with a suspense that was really poignant. "For Heaven's sake tell me what you mean!"

"I mean, Adolphus," replied the earl, himself considerably excited and painfully bewildered, "that though I have no doubt you are the son of your father and mother, nevertheless your father isn't your father and your mother wasn't your mother."

Adolphus gazed upon the earl as if he thought he was going mad, and yet even from that strange conglomeration of absurd contradictions and ridiculous paradoxes, there seemed to be a certain idea to be eliminated, — a startling deduction to be made. Adolphus was frightened; a cold shiver, like a presentiment of evil, ran through him; he essayed to speak, but vainly gasped for utterance.

"There is no harm in it if you marry the girl," continued the old nobleman, " and the world need never be the wiser, at least I hope not. For even if the truth did some day transpire, you could but lose the title; you would have all the estates by right of your wife, to whom they would devolve by entail."

Adolphus sat upon his chair as if he were in the midst of a dream. All the words which the earl had just uttered appeared to confirm the wild, the startling, the almost impossible idea which his former incoherent speech had conjured up. The colour forsook the young man's countenance; he felt as if he were about to faint. There was fortunately a decanter of water upon the table; he filled a glass and drank a long draught.

"You are saying all this to coerce me into a marriage

with my cousin," he exclaimed, clutching with avidity at the thought.

"Isabella is no more your cousin, Adolphus," responded the old nobleman, "than I am your father, and I am not," he added, emphatically.

Adolphus raised his hands to his throbbing brows as if to steady his wildly agitated thoughts; his brain seemed to whirl in confusion. Could it possibly be true? Was he an unwilling impostor? Had he lived thus long an animated lie without knowing it? Had he for twenty-four years passed in the world as a breathing falsehood, though utterly guiltless of wanton deceit? Oh, if it were so, he felt as if he could not survive it, — 'twere a blow too terrible to bear.

The old earl had no such depth of feeling, and though he was to a certain degree excited and distressed, yet it was only to a degree, and not nearly to the same extent as the unhappy, the miserable, the soul-crushed Adolphus. Yet all in a moment there sprang up in the young man's heart a sense of consolation, — yes, consolation in the midst of such overwhelming revelations as these. If he were not the earl's son, his crime in respect to her whom he had hitherto looked upon as his mother-in-law became in a moment many, many shades lighter to contemplate, dark though its hue still remained.

"Tell me how all this happened; explain it," he said, with quick and excited utterance, "for Heaven's sake keep me not another moment in suspense!"

"Listen then," said the earl, speaking with less silliness and flippancy than was his wont. "It was at Bloomfield that I was residing with my first wife when a son and heir was born twenty-four years and a half ago. A few days after that birth, important business hurried me away to the Continent, and the serious embarrassments in which a near relation, who is long since dead, had involved himself at Vienna, detained me there for a period of four months. When I returned to England my wife was in a northern county, on a visit to some relations there, and indeed, as letters had previously informed me, I was assured that it was for the sake of her health that she had removed thither. I rejoined her; the child whom she represented to me as my son was healthy and thriving. Years passed on, and you know with what kindness you were treated by her who passed as your mother, and indeed from whose bosom you were nourished in your infancy. You are aware likewise that she was of the Catholic persuasion and that she was attended by a priest in her last hours, when a mortal illness overtook her beneath this roof. To that priest she confessed everything, but he dared not give her absolution unless she revealed to me the fraud which had been perpetrated—"

"Go on," groaned Adolphus, in a half-stiffing voice.

"The revelation was made accordingly," continued the earl, "but I swore to the countess — your mother of adoption — that I would continue to treat you as my son and never expose the fraud to the world. She died with a conscience much relieved; she died blessing me," added the old nobleman, now displaying deeper feeling than Adolphus had ever before seen him exhibit.

"And why that fraud?" asked the young man, still profoundly agitated.

"I have already told you that I was abruptly called away from England when my child was three days old. A month afterward that child died. There were circumstances attending its birth, - circumstances so painful to its mother, as to preclude the idea that she could ever again hope to become a parent. She dreaded lest the severance of the tie which that child's existence constituted betwixt herself and me should alienate my heart from her, and make me look upon her even with aversion as a wife who could give no heir to the haughty name of Lascelles. She knew, moreover, that if anything happened to me, the estates would devolve upon my sister, - Isabella's mother, - and that she herself (my wife, I mean) would have to retire upon a small jointure, almost excluded as it were from that family of which it was her pride to be one of the heads. All these reasons induced her to practise the cheat which I have described. Opportunities were favourable; I was absent, with a certainty of remaining away for yet some months. She had a surgeon and a nurse accessible to bribery, female dependents who were devoted to her, and I had left her with the illimitable command of funds. You understand the rest, - I need say no more."

"Yes, there is something more for you to tell me," answered Adolphus; then, after a pause, he said, and the words appeared to half choke him, "Whose son am I?" "A poor family's who resided in some midland county which my wife traversed on her way to her friends in the north. This family, being heavily bribed, departed at once for America, — such immediate removal to a foreign clime being the paramount condition of the compact. They have never since been heard of, but still, as I just now said, there is always the possibility, if not the probability, of some of them turning up —"

"And the name of this family?" said Adolphus, quickly. "I do not know it," replied the earl, "and I can give the most satisfactory reason in the world, — which is, that I never knew it. Even if the late countess intended to mention it, she did not, which is just the same thing as if she had never meant to tell me at all."

The old nobleman, having spoken in a serious and deliberate manner for some time, was now relapsing into his wonted frivolity, which only served to aggravate the bitterness of feelings experienced by the wretched Adolphus. The latter began to pace the library in an agitated manner, and vainly did he essay to collect his thoughts sufficiently for calm deliberation. It was a fearful blow which had struck him. and though the truth had been revealed slowly by his putative father, the effect was nevertheless as if it had smitten him with a most cruel abruptness. As we have already said. the only glimmer of light which penetrated into the darkness of his mind arose from the fact that his amour with Ethel had ceased to wear an incestuous aspect. But on the other hand, in what a position stood he? At any moment an accident might unmask him; some unforeseen circumstance might suddenly transpire to prove to the whole world that instead of being the rightful heir to the earldom and estates of Lascelles, he was in reality an interloper in the family.

"Now I suppose, Adolphus," said the earl, accosting him, "you will consent to marry your cousin Isabel, and I will ring the bell at once to let her know she is to send for the milliner and order the wedding-dress."

"No, no, for Heaven's sake act not thus precipitately!" exclaimed Adolphus. "At least give me four and twenty hours to reflect."

"Four and twenty hours to reflect," ejaculated the old nobleman. "Why, I never reflected for four and twenty hours running in all my life." "It is impossible to come to an immediate decision," rejoined Adolphus, impatiently. "My feelings are so disturbed, my mind is so cruelly agitated — I beseech you, press me not now, but at this hour to-morrow — "

"Well, well, I see that I must humour you," said the old nobleman, "and it is natural enough you should be annoyed and excited to learn that you are not your father's son. But mind! to-morrow we shall set to work in good earnest to hurry on this bridal."

Adolphus made no response, but hastened from the room. He retired to his own chamber, and there gave way to his reflections. An hour did he thus remain in the companionship of those thoughts, and at the expiration of that interval, his mind appeared to made up to some particular course. Descending to the drawing-room, he found the countess and Isabella seated together, and the former was at once struck by the strangeness of his looks. He inquired where the earl was, and learned that he had gone out in the carriage for an hour or two. Adolphus then made a sign for the countess to escape from Isabella's society, or get rid of her for a little while, on some pretext, and Ethel was therefore still further convinced that there was something exceedingly wrong. It was by no means difficult for Lady Lascelles to quit the apartment without exciting a suspicion on the part of the unsophisticated Isabella, and Adolphus speedily followed her.

They were now alone together in another sitting-room, and Ethel immediately said, "For Heaven's sake, Adolphus, relieve me from suspense! What has happened? Has the earl discovered everything? Is my deep, deep guilt known to him?"

"No, Ethel," was the young man's response; "and you are not so deeply guilty as you have hitherto believed yourself. A strange and terrible revelation has been made to me — In a word, I am not the earl's son."

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment experienced by Ethel on receiving this announcement, but the first thought that struck her as that feeling of amazement subsided was that the brain of Adolphus had become unsettled. When, however, he circumstantially detailed to her all that had passed between himself and the Earl of Lascelles, she perceived that it was indeed the truth which

he was telling her, and that he spoke rationally and sensibly. She then recollected that the old earl — when, in an exceeding uxorious mood, instituting comparisons to her face between herself and his former countess, especially too when he was under the influence of wine - had more than once dropped a hint of some strange deception which that deceased wife of his had practised toward him, but from motives of delicacy Ethel had never pressed any inquiry on the point, and the earl himself had never gone beyond the vague hints just alluded to. Now, however, everything was explained, and in those very hints themselves the countess beheld a confirmation of the startling and wonderous tale which Adolphus had just related. She sat gazing upon him with illimitable love and compassion in her looks; the better feelings which had prompted her to write him the note so strenuously urging separation were all absorbed in the profound pity she experienced for him, and the excitement of so much sympathy could not do otherwise than resuscitate all the ardour of her passion. Perhaps, too, the knowledge that this passion had suddenly ceased to wear the doubly dark aspect it had previously borne to her contemplation was another strong reason wherefore her deep and devoted love should thus revive. Yes, she sat gazing upon him with looks of fondness and sympathy, but she spoke not; she knew not what words to say.

"Ethel," at length said Adolphus, breaking this long silence, "after everything that has taken place between us. I could not settle my mind to any specific course without first consulting you."

"I know not how to advise you, Adolphus," answered the countess. "I am as much bewildered as. Heaven knows. vou vourself must be!"

"To-morrow at midday," said the young man, with a species of desperation in his looks, "I must notify my decision to the earl."

"And that decision," said Ethel, in a low, soft voice, but

with the glitter of anxiety in her eyes, — " what will it be?" "I see that you yourself feel," responded Adolphus, "that I have but one course to adopt, - that there is no alternative but to yield to the earl's wishes."

A low shriek, or, rather, half-stifled scream burst from the lips of Ethel at these words evidently so altogether unexpected by her, and Adolphus, with a sudden start, contemplated her in mingled surprise and terror.

"No, never, never, Adolphus," she exclaimed, springing up from her chair, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing with an almost frenzied excitement. "What! you marry Isabella? No, no! I could not live to behold you another's. But perhaps you have never loved me?" and as the thought smote her with a sudden anguish, she sank down again upon the chair weeping bitterly.

"Ethel, dearest Ethel," exclaimed the young man, throwing himself at her feet, seizing both her hands, and pressing them in fervour to his lips, "you know that I love you, — dearly, devotedly, madly love you. Wherefore, then, this cruel suspicion? Ah, think you that if I loved you not as much as my lips proclaim, I should have been enabled to stifle all good feelings in my heart at the time when I believed it was my own father's wife —"

"Enough, enough," cried Ethel, hysterically, and then with a sudden solemnity of look and manner, she added, in a low tone, "At all events we are rescued from that deep sense of stupendous guilt."

"Tell me what you would have me do, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus, "and your slightest word shall become the strongest law for me. But remember, dear Ethel, my position is not merely a painful one, — it is absolutely frightful."

"I know — I know it," exclaimed the countess, again speaking with a kind of hysterical frenzy, " and therefore it is impossible for me to advise you. Do what you will, but if your position be frightful, mine is almost desperate, and sooner than behold you compelled to lead another to the altar —"

She stopped short, and Adolphus was terrified by the strange, wild look of mingled frenzy and despair which for a few moments seemed stamped upon her countenance.

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" he exclaimed, starting up from his kneeling position at her feet, and beginning to pace the room with agitated and uneven steps. "I feel as if I were going mad."

"And I," cried the countess, in a thrilling voice, "feel as if I were mad already. Oh, why did I ever love you as I have done? Wherefore do I love you so passionately still?" "Ethel, let us endeavour to be composed and reasonable," said Adolphus, at length resuming his seat by her side, and taking her hand as he looked with fond earnestness and imploring entreaty in her face. "I tell you that I neither will nor can take any step without your consent, but will you calmly envisage all the difficulties of the position in which I know we are placed?"

"Yes, yes, proceed," said the countess. "I am calm — I am reasonable," and yet she shivered visibly as if with a cold inward desperation.

"Would you, Ethel, that we should fly away together?" asked Adolphus. "No, I am sure you would not, for it would be ruin for us both. The earl in his rage would proclaim everything in respect to myself; I should become an outcast — penniless; and though God knows I shrink not from the idea of poverty on my own account, yet for your sake, Ethel, — oh, I could not endure to behold you, my beloved one, pining away in want."

"Think not of me," answered the countess, "for I could dare everything. But not for worlds would I have your true position proclaimed; not for worlds would I have you stripped of your rank,—scorned and spurned by those who have hitherto been your equals— No, no, I could not; it would kill me."

"You see, Ethel," continued Adolphus, "that what I said is right, and we cannot flee away together. But on the other hand I cannot remain here in the same position as before; the earl insists that I should marry Isabella. Neither can I carry out our original view and go abroad upon the Continent, because there again arises the consideration that the earl insists that I shall espouse Isabella."

"In a word, then," rejoined the countess, speaking in a voice of cold and unnatural calmness, "your position is reduced to these alternatives, — that you must either fly away with me, or remain to espouse Isabella. We have both agreed that the first of these alternatives is impossible, and I see therefore that you are endeavouring to make up your mind to the latter. Is it not so?"

"In the name of Heaven, Ethel, what else can I do?" asked Adolphus, with passionate vehemence.

"And Isabella, who loves Christian Ashton?" said the countess, still in the same voice as before.

"Did you ever for a moment fancy that this childish passion of theirs," exclaimed Adolphus, "would eventually come to anything? It was all very well that you and I availed ourselves of it for our own purposes, but could we in sober seriousness conceive that an earl's niece would be allowed to throw herself away upon this penniless youth?"

"And you could level your mind to the acceptance of a bride whose love you know to be bestowed upon another, and which very love you yourself have helped to fan?"

"Ethel, you are cruel — too cruel. You are goading me to desperation," and again Adolphus started up from his seat in a wild and excited manner. "Will you tell me," he demanded, after two or three rapid pacings to and fro, — "will you tell me, Ethel, what course I am to pursue? for as there is a heaven above me, I see but one."

"Pursue it, then," said the countess; "pursue it, Adolphus, and may you be happy. But I — but I —"

"Oh, now you fill me with wretchedness again," and the young man literally wrung his hands in anguish.

"No, no, be not unhappy," responded the countess, and there was still an unnatural coldness in her look. "It is useless, Adolphus, to continue this scene; it is most painful for us both."

"Then, by Heaven," ejaculated the young man, vehemently, "I will not marry Isabella. I will take some step, — indeed I will do the very worst, rather than seal the unhappiness of your life."

"And I, Adolphus, would do the very worst also," rejoined the countess, "rather than live to behold you the husband of another."

Having thus spoken, Ethel abruptly quitted the room, and Adolphus continued to walk to and fro, but no longer in an agitated manner; it was with slow pace, sombre countenance, and downcast looks.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEED OF A NIGHT

ADOLPHUS and Ethel did not meet again until the evening, and this was at the dinner-table, where the earl and Isabella were present. But it would almost seem as if they had by tacit consent composed their looks in such a manner that not even to each other should there linger the slightest trace to remind them of the painful scene which had occurred a few hours back. The earl, as a matter of course, suspected not for an instant that Adolphus had acquainted Ethel with the astounding revelation in respect to his birth, and it was naturally Ethel's policy and purpose to prevent her husband from surmising that any such revelation had been made to her. It is therefore easy to understand why she compelled herself to converse and smile as gaily as heretofore, and to wear a look as if she were labouring under no restraint. In the same way it was the policy as well as purpose of Adolphus to maintain his usual demeanour, so that the earl might believe him anxious to avoid the risk of showing the ladies by his looks that anything extraordinary had taken place.

As for Isabella, she was inwardly sad at having been compelled by a sense of duty to pen that note to Christian Ashton to which we have already alluded, and not being versed in the arts of dissimulation, she could not outwardly conceal this mournful pensiveness.

The dinner passed away, and when the ladies retired to the drawing-room, the earl accompanied them, — not from any particular motive, but merely because on this occasion he had no inclination to sit over his wine. Adolphus went out to take a short ramble by himself, for he again felt the necessity of giving way to his reflections. Thus the evening passed without Adolphus and Ethel being left alone together even for a single instant.

We must observe, for the better comprehension of what is to follow, that the Countess of Lascelles still slept apart from her husband, and though the earl was becoming impatient of this separation of chambers, he had not as yet insisted that it should cease.

Night came; silence prevailed throughout the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. Were all sleeping there? Who can sav? When the world retire to rest in the evening they know not what may transpire during the many hours of darkness ere they awaken to the light again. And during those hours what deeds of mystery and horror are often perpetrated. Wherefore to the timid-minded is night more or less terrible, even though their own consciences be without reproach? It is because they know that crime chooses the hour of darkness wherein to achieve its purpose; they know that guilt shrouds itself beneath that sombre veil when creeping stealthily along its path of iniquity. They know that if their intelligence can divest night of its superstitious terrors, yet that nevertheless real objects of horror are stalking abroad, and that the votaries of crime constitute frightful shapes. They know that murder and burglary and violence of every description are fearfully personified during the hours of darkness, and that the breeze which sighs or that the wind which howls around their dwellings may be wafting the last low moan or else the loud cry of the murdered victim's agony. Yes, night has its terrors; it is peopled with fearful shapes, and the dark passions of man accomplish all this.

The night passed, and morning dawned upon the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. It was a beautiful day to which that night had thus given birth; the beams of the Orient sun shone upon the emerald verdure of the gardens, and made the fruitage glow as if gems were appended to every bough. The birds were carolling in the trees; window after window on the domestics' story was opened to admit the breeze of morn, as the occupants of those rooms rose from their couches to apparel themselves for the work of another day. And now a little later, as eight o'clock approached, the casements of other chambers were opened, — Isabella's here, that of Adolphus there and Ethel's on the ground floor. The draperies fluttered gently to that softly breathing zephyr, which carried the blithe song of birds upon its wing, and, penetrating to every ear, might have infused serene happiness into every heart.

But, ah! what horrible rumour is this which toward nine o'clock begins to circulate like wildfire throughout the palatial mansion? Has murder been doing its dread work during the darkness of the past night? Or is it some frightful error? No; it is all but too true, and the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles has been made the victim of a foul and mysterious assassination.

It appeared, from the statement of Makepeace, that he went as usual to his master's suite of rooms a little before nine o'clock, and that on entering the bedchamber, he was horrified on beholding the sheet deluged with blood. He approached, and found the earl lying on his back, with his throat literally cut from ear to ear. Seized with a mortal terror, he rushed forth on the landing, and raised that cry of murder, which awaking such terrible echoes, speedily reverberated throughout the mansion. Then the other servants began flocking thither, with ghastly horror depicted on their countenances; Adolphus, the countess, and Isabella, from their own respective chambers, sped with wild distracted looks in the same direction, and that morning of such serene blissfulness out of doors was one fraught with dread confusion, trouble, mystery, and affright within those walls.

Who could have done the deed? Where was the weapon with which it was accomplished? This was not to be found. The nearest surgeon of the neighbourhood, who was quickly sent for, and who was speedily on the spot, declared that the earl must have been dead some hours, and that it was consequently in the depth of the night when the red right arm of Murder bared itself for this tremendous deed. Furthermore, the medical authority affirmed that the fatal wound was inflicted by some very sharp instrument, but that from certain appearances, he was convinced it was not with a razor, — his opinion being that it was a large knife. Whatever the instrument were, death must have been instantaneous; the unfortunate old nobleman must have died almost without a groan. But that instrument, as we have already said, was not to be found, and when the police arrived upon the spot, nothing was discovered to attach suspicion to any particular individual. Every room throughout the

mansion was strictly searched; Adolphus, the countess, and Isabella desiring that theirs might form no exception, as they did not choose to draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the domestics under such circumstances. But in none of the many apartments of that house was there discovered the slightest scintillation of a clue to the assassin. Yet the conviction was strong that the perpetrator of the deed must be an inmate of the mansion. No burglarious entry had been effected; no door had been forced, no window had been found open, when the servants first descended from their own chambers. If therefore the assassin was not a dweller within those walls, could he have been secreted for hours beneath the earl's bed awaiting his opportunity to commit the dreadful crime? But in that case, how did he escape after the deed was done? Certainly not during the night. for, as already stated, no door nor window was found open in the morning, and such assassin could not have slipped forth from the premises after the servants had risen without being perceived by those who were moving about within the walls, or by the gardeners in the grounds. No, it appeared incontestable that the murderer was an inmate of the mansion, but on whom could suspicion alight? There seemed to be no reason to imagine that any one had a motive for such a crime; or at least such was the opinion formed by the police after carefully and minutely inquiring into the case.

But if the author of the deed were thus involved in an obscurity which seemed impenetrable, not less mysterious was the motive itself. Could it have been plunder? There was no evidence in the earl's suite of apartments that a single thing of any value had been removed. His purse, containing some thirty or forty pounds in notes and gold. was on the toilet-table, as were his superb watch and massive chain, his diamond rings, and several other articles of jewelry. A box containing other jewels stood on a chest of drawers, and though unlocked, it had not been rifled. Plunder therefore was assuredly not the assassin's object. Then, what could have been his motive? Private vengeance? No. this idea seemed altogether incompatible with the harmless, frivolous, inoffensive character of the murdered nobleman. The mystery was great; it seemed as if it would remain impenetrable. In ninety-nine cases out of every hundred where a foul crime has been committed, suspicion at once

attaches itself to some individual; the circumstances of the deed present a clue, or there is a known motive which might have influenced the suspected person. But in the present case there was nothing of all this, — no clue left behind by any want of caution on the assassin's part, no visible object which any one had to gain by such a deed, no known motive that might have served as an impulse to any particular individual.

After the discovery of the terrific crime, the Countess of Lascelles was borne in a swoon back to her own chamber, whence she had hurried to the tragic scene, as above described. Isabella, on learning that it was all too true, likewise fell into unconsciousness, and was conveyed to her apartment, — a serious indisposition supervening. Adolphus appeared most profoundly horrified and shocked, and for some hours he was quite incapable of issuing any instructions. Makepeace bewailed the loss of the master who had always been so kind and indulgent to him, and all the other servants of that extensive establishment seemed to be stricken with consternation and grief. Indeed these feelings appeared to be universal within those walls, and yet many doubtless said to themselves, "There must be one accomplished dissembler amongst us, — one being whose hypocrisy is as perfect as his crime is tremendous."

It was therefore a fearful thing for those who were innocent, to be compelled thus to reason within themselves. As one looked upon another, he said to himself, "At this moment I may be gazing on the assassin," and that other was with equal probability saying the same thing within his own heart as he looked in the face of the former. Such a state of things aggravated the horror, the dismay, and the consternation which prevailed throughout the house; yet no one offered to leave it, for such a proceeding, by itself alone, might have at once drawn down suspicion on the head of such person.

There was a coroner's inquest, but nothing transpired to throw the faintest light on this appalling mystery. The proceedings terminated without affixing the remotest suspicion upon any individual. Not a garment had been found bearing a blood-stain in any room, save that where the tragedy itself occurred; no knife, nor weapon of any other description, had been specially pointed at as the one which had been used by the murderer's hand. The tragedy created an immense sensation out-of-doors; the mystery in which it was enveloped struck with awe the myriad readers of newspapers. Everything appeared to be out of the ordinary course in reference to this foul crime, for not even did the whisper of scandal suggest a single name as that of the probable author of the deed. Conjecture itself was stupefied, surmise was prostrate. It appeared to be one of those deeds which, terrible in their mystery and inscrutable in their motive, now and then occur upon the theatre of the world as if to prove that things may take place on earth defying the power of man to fathom, and which are to remain entombed in darkness until the finger of Heaven for its own wise purposes shall draw aside the veil and bring all to light.

Throughout the day when the murder was discovered and the two following ones, the Countess of Lascelles kept her chamber, — a physician being in almost constant attendance upon her, as she was in a state of fever, and frequently hysterical. The Earl of Lascelles — as we must now denominate Adolphus, for he refused not to adopt the rank to which the world believed him entitled, and which there seemed nobody to dispute - kept his own room for the greater portion of the first day, but on the second he attended at the inquest, and afterward he assumed the position of head of the establishment. But he appeared deeply to feel the terrific tragedy which had taken place; his countenance bore every indication of profound sorrow, his step was languid and slow, his voice was mournful and subdued; he appeared as if he were merely exerting a little energy for duty's sake, but that it cost him the most painful efforts to do so. As for poor Isabella, she continued seriously indisposed, and we may as well here remark at once that it was not until after the funeral of her deceased uncle that she crossed the threshold of her own apartment.

But it was before that funeral took place — and on the fourth day following the night of the mysterious murder that Adolphus and Ethel met for the first time since the moment when, on the morning of the foul deed's discovery, they had rushed from their respective chambers to the scene of the crime to ascertain whether the frightful intelligence which had reached them was indeed true. It was in the drawing-room that they now met on this fourth day, as above stated, and they were alone there together. Ethel had so far recovered that she was enabled to ascend without assistance to that apartment, but she was much changed, the colour had totally forsaken her cheeks, which were haggard and sunken, and the sable garments which she wore, together with the snowy white cap of widowhood, made her look more ghostlike still. We have already said that Adolphus was changed likewise, and his mourning garb threw out in ghastlier relief the pallor of his own countenance.

Ethel was in that drawing-room first, and she was halfreclining on the sofa when Adolphus — now Earl of Lascelles — slowly opened the door and made his appearance. Strange indeed was the look which these two beings threw upon each other, and these looks were precisely similar in their expression. It was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Ethel looked upon Adolphus; it was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Adolphus looked upon Ethel. But the next instant the aspect of each countenance changed; Ethel looked with surprise upon Adolphus, as if she had expected another species of gaze on his part, and Adolphus looked with surprise on Ethel, as if her own gaze had equally astonished him.

He walked slowly up to her, and fixing his eyes upon her, said, in a low deep voice, "Ethel, you have sold your soul to Satan on my account."

"What, Adolphus," she exclaimed, " is it possible that you dare hurl the terrific weight of your own crime upon me?"

"Ethel," quickly rejoined Adolphus, "this is outrageous — this is horrible."

"Adolphus," retorted the countess, "this is playing the part of unheard-of villainy, to impute your crime to me."

"Good God!" murmured the Earl of Lascelles, staggering back as he pressed his hand to his brow, "do I hear aright? Or am I dreaming?"

"Adolphus," said Ethel, " of what use is this shocking hypocrisy on your part? Methought when you first entered the room that your looks would quail in my presence —"

"Woman, this is intolerable," interrupted Adolphus, fiercely grasping Ethel's arm. "It was I who thought that you would not dare look me in the face." "Unhand me, murderer," cried the countess, recoiling as if with a strong shudder from his touch.

"Murderess," literally growled Adolphus, with savage ferocity. "Beautiful as you once were, you are now loathsome to my eyes."

"Monster," retorted Ethel, with keenest bitterness, you are horrible as a fiend in my sight."

There was nearly a minute's silence, during which those two beings gazed upon each other, with the strongest feelings of horror, aversion, and loathing expressed in their countenances. Their eyes appeared to burn; yet they did not shoot forth fitful glances; it was with a steady fire shining from the eyes of one toward the eyes of the other, transfusing mutual abhorence. Yet neither seemed to dare avert those eyes from the other, lest it should be thought there was quailing and cowardice, for whatever the truth might be, very certain it was that Adolphus chose to affix the crime upon Ethel, while Ethel seemed equally resolute in affixing it upon Adolphus.

"You dare stand before me thus?" said the countess, at length breaking silence; "you dare meet my regards thus steadily, when your own heart tells you that you are a murderer?"

"And you, Ethel," retorted the Earl of Lascelles, "exhibit such a spectacle of brazen female hardihood that fills me with even more astonishment than your capability of committing the crime itself, for your conscience all the while is whispering that you are a murderess."

"Oh," exclaimed Ethel, quivering visibly from head to foot, "that there should be such a power of hypocrisy in man. What earthly purpose does it serve you to deny your crime in my presence, when you know that, considering all the past, I dare not betray you?"

"Come, Ethel," responded Adolphus, "at least let this scene of hideous mockery terminate. Confess your guilt, for you likewise know that I dare not betray you."

"Wretch! coward — thus to treat a woman," cried Ethel.

"Ah! but if that woman, being a murderess," retorted Adolphus, "brings it all upon herself."

"You are driving me to madness," exclaimed the countess, stamping her foot upon the floor. "Does not all evidence brand you with the guilt of this stupendous crime? We e not your parting words to me, on the day preceding the night of that crime, that sooner than marry Isabella you would do the very worst? "

"Ah! but you, Ethel, echoed those words," retorted Adolphus; "and you declared that sooner than see me lead Isabella to the altar, you would do the very worst. Methought at the time you alluded to suicide —"

"And I did," ejaculated Ethel, vehemently. "But I, on my part, thought at the time that you meant to dare my husband's anger and vengeance even to the uttermost —"

"And I did mean all that," exclaimed Adolphus. "I meant that sooner than wed Isabella after all you had said, I would flee away to the Continent and let the earl expose, repudiate, discard me if he thought fit. Yes, that was my meaning. But yours, Ethel, was very, very different."

"No, Adolphus, as God is my judge," cried the countess, passionately, "I swear —"

"For Heaven's sake add not perjury and blasphemy," interrupted Adolphus, with an air of horror and affright, "to the other stupendous crime! For it is I who swear — I who take God to witness —"

"No, no," almost shrieked forth Ethel, "become not a perjurer; become not a blasphemer."

It was now the Earl of Lascelles who stamped his foot with rage, and he began pacing the room like a lion chafing in his den, while Ethel took shorter but not less agitated walks to and fro on the hearth-rug.

"Adolphus," she at length said, abruptly stopping him, and looking fixedly upon his countenance, "you seem to have forgotten that you told me the tale of that interview with the earl, when he revealed to you that you were not his son. Oh, be not thus obstinate. Remain silent, if you will, but do not — do not persevere in a course as dreadful as it is dastard. Do not, by attributing the crime to me, for an instant entertain the hope that you can make me think it was not your hand which really perpetrated it. Had you not every motive? Were you not trembling at the idea of losing rank, position, fortune? Did you not therefore say to yourself that you would for ever silence the lips that alone could tell the tale, for you knew that mine were already sealed by that guilty love which had subsisted between us."

"If I have listened to you in silence," responded Adolphus,

"it is not that my blood has ceased to boil with indignant impatience. Ethel, Ethel, it is you who thus with a detestable dissimulation persevere in attributing the crime to me, — it is you, I say, who hope to make me fancy that you really did not perpetrate that crime. You speak of motives: you had every motive. Think you that I comprehend not the terrific jealousy which swayed your heart when I spoke of wedding Isabella? Ah, confess that it was through love of me you did this deed, — confess it, Ethel, and I will pardon you, but for Heaven's sake persevere not in ascribing it unto me!"

"I also, Adolphus, have curbed my impatience," answered the countess, "that I might give you a fair chance for retractation, confession, and atonement, but you are obstinate. Now listen. We will not blind our eyes to the fact that the crime rests between us two, for no other living being had a motive in perpetrating it. It was therefore I or you who committed it, and you know, Adolphus, that it was yourself."

"Ah, Ethel, you have indeed said truly," he exclaimed, "that it lies between us two, but you will not look me much longer in the face and with such astounding dissimulation deny that all the guilt was wholly and solely yours!"

The countess literally ground her teeth with rage, and then she muttered, in a voice that was hoarse with the same feeling, "Miscreant, you know that you are a murderer."

"No, fiend in female shape! it is you who are a murderess," and having spoken, the Earl of Lascelles walked abruptly forth from the room.

The countess flung herself upon the sofa, and gave way to bitterest weeping and most convulsing sobs.

CHAPTER XXII

CHRISTINA AND THE AYAH

THREE weeks had elapsed since the visit which Madame Angelique paid to the Princess Indora, and the Oriental lady had not as yet carried her project into execution with regard to Oaklands. The Duke of Marchmont had been suddenly called out of town on some particular business, and thus Madame Angelique had found no opportunity of communicating with him. She had written a note to this effect to the Princess Indora, at the same time that she sent home the European costumes which her Highness had ordered.

Three weeks, too, had elapsed since that visit which Christina paid to Zoe, and when she had every reason to believe that this amiable lady suspected the passion which her husband cherished for our heroine. Christina had been very unhappy since that date, but she had endeavoured to conceal her feelings as much as possible from the princess, though the latter on three or four occasions kindly questioned her whether she had not something which troubled her mind? Christina gave evasive responses, and these tended to confirm Indora's suspicion that her young friend was not altogether happy.

Accordingly, one day when they were seated together in the elegantly furnished drawing-room, the princess said, in a gentle voice, and with a look of the most benevolent sympathy, "I am afraid, my dear Christina, that you have something which is preying upon your mind? If it be so, tell me; hesitate not to make a confidante of me. I am your friend, I love you, and I wish you well."

"I am deeply grateful to your ladyship," answered Christina, "for the many, many kindnesses which I experience at your hands; I have every reason to be happy beneath your roof — "

"Perhaps you miss the society in which you were wont to mingle when at Lady Octavian Meredith's? Here it must be dull for you —"

"Oh, no, far from it," exclaimed Christina, hoping to divert the conversation into some other channel. "I love the life which I am leading here —"

"I know that you always speak with sincerity," observed the princess, "and therefore my mind is at ease on that point. Indeed," she added, with a smile, "your time is well occupied, for you make occupation for yourself. It is exceedingly kind of you to take so much pains in teaching Sagoonah to read English accurately, but are you sure that she does not take advantage of your kindness?"

"Oh, no, my lady," exclaimed the amiable Christina. "Sagoonah is so willing a pupil that I experience the utmost delight in instructing her. I had not been many days in your ladyship's house, before I saw that Sagoonah was most anxious to make herself thoroughly acquainted with the English language. She had already a very tolerable idea of my native tongue, but she wished to be able to read it, and your ladyship would be surprised, if you now heard her at the progress she has made."

"I have no doubt of it," observed Indora, "for she is a young woman of remarkable intelligence."

At this moment the object of the conversation entered the room to make some announcement to her mistress, and those three females constituted a group which the eye of even an anchorite could not have surveyed with indifference. The Princess Indora, in her superbly picturesque garb, and with her magnificent charms, half-reclining upon the velvet cushions of the sofa, the ayah, with her darker style of loveliness, standing before her in that attitude of respectful attention which she was wont to adopt, and the youthful Christina, invested with that exquisite virginal beauty which rendered her a being so well calculated to excite the tenderest interest, — these three, we repeat, being thus grouped, would have formed an admirable subject for the pencil of the artist.

An hour after that conversation between the princess and Christina, we shall find the latter seated in another room, in company with Sagoonah, who was engaged in the practice of her English reading. Here was another interesting spectacle, — that Hindu woman, evidently exerting all her powers to render herself proficient in the task which that beauteous English maiden was so willingly superintending. And when Christina bestowed well-deserved praises upon her pupil, the superb dark eyes of the latter lighted up to an almost preternatural lustre, flashing with joy and triumph at the progress which she thus made.

A few hours later the night has come, and Christina is alone in her own chamber at the princess's villa. It was half-past ten o'clock, and the maiden had not long retired thither. She sat down at the toilet-table, while combing out the masses of her raven hair, but gradually she fell into a profound reverie, her hands sank upon her knees, the comb dropped without her perceiving it, and her hair remained floating all dishevelled upon her shoulders and down her back, lower than her waist. There were several topics which thus engaged Christina's profound meditation. She thought of Zoe, - the amiable, the interesting, the kindhearted lady, who she feared had been making the most dreadful sacrifice of her own feelings rather than suffer her husband to perceive that she had fathomed the secret of the love which he entertained for another. Then Christina thought of this love which Lord Octavian cherished toward herself; she strove to conjure up a feeling which might satisfy her that she was annoved and indignant at being the object of this love, but she could not thus far do violence to the tender sentiment which existed with a certain degree of reciprocity in her own heart. Then she thought of her brother who a little while previously had lost his situation with the Earl of Lascelles, and had not as vet obtained another, and then her reflections turned, with mingled awe and horror, upon the mysterious death of that unfortunate nobleman.

Christina's reverie thus lasted for a long time, and when she gradually aroused herself from it, and consulted her watch, — which was a gift from the Princess Indora, — she perceived that it was past eleven o'clock. She was hastening to continue her night-toilet, and in another quarter of an hour was ready to retire to rest. But just as she was about to extinguish her candle, she thought she heard the sounds of footsteps descending the stairs from the floor above that on which her own chamber was situated. They were steps so light and airy that only the keenest sense of hearing could have caught them, and Christina felt convinced that the tread was the stealthy one of a person not wishing to be overheard. A vague terror seized upon her, for she all in a moment remembered that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the princess, and which her Highness had shown her about three weeks back. That letter, as the reader will remember, was to the effect that some evil-disposed persons might probably seek to inveigle Indora or the avah Sagoonah into a snare, and as the pure-minded Christina was too unsophisticated and inexperienced to be enabled to fathom the real significancy of Mr. Redcliffe's allusion, her imagination naturally excited this vague terror which now seized upon She drew close toward the door, and listened with her. suspended breath. Again she caught the sounds of footsteps: they were now descending the lower flight, and in a few moments they ceased. She endeavoured to calm herself with the idea that it might be Sagoonah, or one of the other female servants, descending for some purpose, but if so, wherefore that evidently studied stealthiness of tread? as it was not so very late that the fear of awakening the household need be entertained. Perhaps Christina was rendered somewhat nervous and apprehensive by having reflected on the mysterious murder of the Earl of Lascelles, and this impression being strong on her mind - together with the recollection, so vividly conjured up, of Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter — naturally filled her with vague misgivings and with a dread of some unknown danger.

She opened the door gently, and again listened. All was now still. She thought of retiring to rest, but scarcely had she closed the door again when that mysterious terror came back with renewed force, and she felt that she could not possibly sleep, nor even lie tranquilly in her couch, unless she were reassured in respect to the safety of the premises. She remained at the door to listen if the footsteps would return, but a quarter of an hour passed, and all continued quiet. She thought of going to the princess's chamber and telling her what she had heard, but then she reflected that if her apprehensions should prove groundless, she would feel humiliated and look foolish at having given way to such

terror. But she thought she might at all events ascend to the female servants' chambers to see if they were there, for the conviction was strong in her mind that she had heard footsteps descending, and that they had not ascended again. Enveloping herself in a muslin wrapper, and taking the candle in her hand, she proceeded up-stairs with a tread as light as if she were a spirit gliding. On reaching the landing above, she saw that Sagoonah's chamber door stood open, and on entering, she found that Sagoonah herself was not there. They were therefore the avah's footsteps that she had heard, but why was she thus long absent? The thought now struck Christina that Sagoonah must be ill, and she went down-stairs, still with the same noiseless tread as before, in order not to disturb the princess. A light was issuing from the boudoir, the door of which stood open. Christina advanced, and looking in, beheld Sagoonah bending over one of the huge volumes of the Times newspaper, which were kept in that room. The Hindu woman had her back toward the door; the volume was spread open upon the table, and she was evidently so absorbed in its contents that she did not catch the rustling of Christina's dress.

The first thought which struck our artless young heroine was that the avah experienced such an ardent longing to render herself proficient in the English tongue that she was even inclined to sacrifice a portion of her night's rest to the prosecution of her studies, but all of a sudden she was. startled by the vehement manner in which Sagoonah gave utterance to something in her own native tongue, and which was therefore incomprehensible to the maiden. At the same time Sagoonah stood up from her previously leaning posture. and glancing around, so strange a light flashed from her eves on beholding Christina that the latter was absolutely terrified. There was an expression of rage too on the avah's countenance, where the rich red blood mantled through the duskiness of her complexion, but instantaneously composing herself, she placed her finger to her lips of vivid vermilion, to enjoin silence. Then beckoning Christina to enter the boudoir, she gently closed the door.

"What made you seek me, Miss Ashton?" asked the ayah, in a voice which though perfectly respectful, nevertheless displayed a firm resolution to have her query satisfied; then, suddenly recollecting something, she hastened to close the volume, as if to prevent Christina from seeing what particular part of the huge file she had been reading.

"I heard footsteps descending the stairs," answered Christina; "they did not reascend; I was alarmed. I went up to your room. Not finding you there, I thought you were ill, and with this apprehension I came to see if I could be of any service to you."

While the maiden was thus speaking, Sagoonah's luminous dark eyes were riveted upon her, as if to read into the very depths of her soul, and thus glean whether she were truly explaining her motives. But it was impossible to doubt Christina's sincerity; her looks were artlessness itself, and Sagoonah was satisfied.

"You must do me a favour, Miss Ashton," she said, "and that is, not to mention to the princess that you found me reading one of these great books. Her Highness would be very angry with me, and I am sure you would not wish to draw down her displeasure upon my head."

"I certainly should be sorry to do anything of the kind," answered the maiden, "but I think you must be in error to suppose that your good-hearted mistress would be offended —"

"She would," Sagoonah emphatically responded, as she thus interrupted our heroine.

"Then if you are conscious of an indiscretion," said Christina, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "wherefore did you commit it?"

"Do not ask me, Miss Ashton!" rejoined the Hindu woman, and again there was a sinister flashing in her burning, haunting eyes. "Promise me the favour which I have requested, and you know not with what deep gratitude I shall regard you."

"Rest assured, Sagoonah," replied our heroine, "I shall not travel out of my way to do you an injury. But my pledge is given with the understanding that you do not repeat that which, according to your own words, you know to be an indiscretion."

"I will not repeat it," answered Sagoonah, " and I thank you, Miss Ashton, for your kindness."

They then issued together from the boudoir, and cautiously ascending the stairs, separated to their respective chambers. But Christina could not help thinking it strange that the Princess Indora was likely to be offended if it came to her knowledge that her Hindu attendant made use of her progress in her English studies to peep into those files of the *Times*.

On the following morning Christina received a note from Zoe, requesting her if possible to call upon her in the course of that day. It was most affectionately worded, but made not the slightest allusion to Lord Octavian. It informed Christina that the health of the writer continued to be very bad, and that the physician had ordered her to go abroad for change of air.

"If Zoe be really acquainted with her husband's unfortunate love for me," said our heroine to herself, "I can scarcely think that she would invite me to the house, unless perfectly confident that Lord Octavian will not be present. Therefore I will go."

In order to do Christina full justice, we must observe that if she had for a moment fancied she would meet Lord Octavian at the house in the Regent's Park, she would not have gone; she would have even preferred the alternative of appearing ungrateful and unkind to Zoe. She showed the letter to the princess, who at once gave her assent, and placed the carriage at Christina's disposal. On reaching her destination, she found Zoe alone in the drawing-room, and the amiable girl was shocked by her friend's appearance. Pale, ill, and languid as she was on the former occasion, she looked infinitely more sickly now. She was reclining upon a sofa, and it was with a visible effort she raised herself up to a sitting posture to greet our heroine.

"My dear Zoe, you are indeed very ill," said Christina, the tears starting from her eyes as she embraced her friend.

"Yes, I suffer much — from indisposition," responded Zoe, in the mild voice of completest resignation, " and as I told you in my letter, I am going abroad. Those whose assent it was necessary to obtain have given it, and I shall depart with as little delay as possible."

Zoe evidently alluded to her father and her husband, but Christina was struck by the manner in which she thus spoke of them, as if she studiously yet delicately avoided the mention of Lord Octavian's name.

"I think I shall go to the south of France or to Italy," continued Zoe, " and perhaps a more genial climate may restore me, or perhaps," she added, with a mild sadness, "I may find a tomb beneath the sunny sky of the South."

"Good Heaven, Zoe! talk not thus despondingly," exclaimed Christina, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes. "You will recover, — rest assured that you will recover. It is all the effect of that accident. But now you are weeping."

"And are not you weeping, my sweet friend?" asked Zoe, smiling with a soft sadness through her tears. "Come, let us endeavour to cheer each other. I do not think that I shall see you again before I leave England, and it was to bid you farewell that I asked you to visit me to-day. I am rejoiced you have come. I have a little token of my regard for you. Remain here while I go and fetch it."

With these words, Lady Octavian Meredith rose from the sofa, and slowly quitted the room, her every movement indicating languor and lassitude of the frame. Christina was deeply affected by Zoe's appearance, and she had indeed a misgiving lest her health had received a shock which it would never recover. She had remained barely a couple of minutes alone, when the door opened, and Lord Octavian Meredith made his appearance. There was hurry and trouble and wildness in his whole manner, and hastily accosting our heroine, he abruptly exclaimed, "Christina, I am half-mad. That angel wife of mine has no doubt penetrated the secret of the love with which you have inspired me, that love is consuming me — "

At first Christina was filled with confusion and trepidation at the sudden appearance of Octavian, the next moment she was terrified by his manner; but now she said, in an agitated voice, "My lord, I beseech you not to address me in these terms. It is an insult to that wife of yours who is indeed the angel you declare her to be."

"But you must hear me, Christina," replied Octavian, who was labouring under the most powerful excitement. "To whom else can I address myself on such a subject, if not to you, — you whom she loves, you who are her friend—"

"My lord, for the very reason that your amiable wife regards me as a friend —"

"Christina, it is useless for you to treat me thus. Good heavens, your coldness kills me. Those who love can recognize love in others, and I know that I am not altogether indifferent to you."

"My lord, I can hear no more," exclaimed our heroine, with burning blushes upon her cheeks, and she moved toward the door.

"Recollect," he said, hastening to intercept her passage, "if you leave the room thus abruptly Zoe will inquire the reason, and you will have to inform her that I have insulted you, that I have outraged your delicacy, and what a dagger will this be to drive deep down into her heart."

"Good heavens, in what a position are you placing me!" murmured Christina, so painfully affected, so bewildered, perplexed, and even anguished, that she knew not what to do.

"Christina. I tell you that I am half-mad," hastily rejoined Lord Octavian Meredith. "That angel in human shape is making every sacrifice of feeling for my sake. She knows that I love another, but she does all she can to prevent me from suspecting that she has that knowledge which is preying upon her very vitals. And now she is going abroad, and she will not allow me to accompany her."

"My lord," interrupted Christina, vehemently, and even with passion, "it would be infamous, it would be abominable on your part, to allow your wife to go alone in search of that health which you yourself have destroyed, and which, alas! alas! she may perhaps never regain."

"I take God to witness," cried Meredith, still labouring under the strongest excitement, "that I have implored and entreated, I have prayed and besought Zoe to permit me to go with her, but she will not. Mild, submissive, and meek in all other respects as she is, she shows herself firm and decided upon this one point. But, oh, the pretexts and excuses which in her magnanimity of soul she invents. She declares that to drag me after her, weak and languid as she is, to have the continued consciousness that I am enchained to an invalid wife, would only render her Continental travel a punishment to herself rather than a means of working a benefit. No, she will not allow me, and she has even succeeded in persuading her father that to regain her health she must go alone."

"My lord," cried Christina, again speaking vehemently

and passionately, "if you do not accompany her ladyship you will be guilty of a cruelty so abhorrent —"

"That it will even make you hate me?" he said, in a voice which was hoarse with the excitement of his harrowed feelings. "By Heaven, it will only require that to impel me to suicide at once."

" My lord!" half-shrieked Christina.

"Oh, yes, I tell you that I am well-nigh mad," ejaculated the young nobleman, and he passionately tossed the rich clusters of his hair away from his throbbing brows. "You know not how much I have suffered since you were here last, — three mortal weeks of one long agony. Heaven can attest that I have striven, oh, I have striven to do my duty toward Zoe, and to banish you from my memory —"

"My lord," cried Christina, "your language as a married man is an offence and an insult to my ears. You know that I dare not leave the room for fear that your angel wife should suspect how you are treating me, and therefore your conduct is cruel, most ungenerous. It amounts to a persecution, and I entreat — no, I command you to be silent."

"Oh, give me your hatred, Christina, if you will," exclaimed the young nobleman, who did indeed appear as if he were going mad, "rather than your cold indifference. Am I to blame because I have no control over my own feelings? No, no, it were monstrous to judge me thus harshly. Christina," he continued, in a milder manner, "I tell you again and again that I have striven to do my duty toward Zoe. I have forced myself to dwell upon all her goodness, her amiability, and, what is more, upon the sublime generosity of her disposition; I have endeavoured to catch the transfusion of that love which she cherishes for me — but in all these have I failed. Now, am I to be blamed for this? No, no, I am to be pitied, and you see before you the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth."

It were impossible to describe the feelings which agitated the young maiden as she listened to Octavian's speech. It affected her almost to tears, and yet her virgin modesty was offended that he should suffer her, however distantly, to understand that it was his love for her which prevented him from performing his duty to his wife. She could not help pitying him from the very bottom of her soul, at the same time that she felt she ought not to listen to the language he was uttering. She would have flown from the room, but the strong reason already specified compelled her to remain there. Never was her situation so painful, and she could have thrown herself upon the seat to give vent to her feelings in tears, only that she dreaded lest Zoe should suddenly make her appearance. Ah! but a thought struck her.

"My lord," she hastily said, "Zoe was to be absent but for a minute, and twenty have elapsed since she left the room. She may be ill, and I go to succour her."

"Stay!" cried Octavian, "stay!" and he seized her hand.

"Not another second! Unhand me, my lord!" cried Christina, proudly.

The next instant the door closed behind the agitated girl; but scarcely had she thus passed out upon the landing, when she caught the sounds of rapid footsteps ascending the flight leading to the upper story, — footsteps so light that they were only just audible. A sickening sensation seized upon Christina. What if Zoe had been listening? Rapid as the lightning casts its blaze upon the entire canopy of heaven did the damsel review her own conduct during the wildly agitating scene with Octavian Meredith, and she saw that she had not given utterance to a single word that she could now wish unspoken. On the contrary, every syllable that had issued from her own lips was precisely such as she would have uttered if able at the time deliberately to ponder what she was about to say. With this consciousness of perfect recitude of behaviour, her presence of mind was completely regained, her strength of purpose was recovered, and she ascended to Zoe's chamber.

She found Lady Octavian Meredith seated in an easy chair, with a languid and enfeebled appearance, but otherwise with an air of serene composure.

"It must have been a servant whose footsteps I heard," was the thought which rapidly traversed Christina's brain, "for if Zoe had been listening, she could not possibly thus dissemble."

"Pardon me, my dearest friend," said Lady Octavian, in that sweetly soft plaintive voice which for some time past had been habitual to her, "pardon me for having thus long left you to yourself, but I was seized with such a sense of exhaustion that I was compelled to sit down and rest. Here, Christina, accept this trifle from one who loves you," and she presented our heroine with a locket of choicest workmanship, and containing some of her own hair.

Christina pressed it to her lips, and then, obeying some strong impulse, she sank upon her knees, took Zoe's hand, and covered it with her kisses and her tears. She sobbed audibly, but spoke not, and yet there was a world of eloquence in the whole proceeding on her part, for not more plainly could the meaning of her almost involuntary conduct have been expressed if she had exclaimed, "Pardon me, dearest Zoe! I know that I am the cause — though Heaven can attest how innocently — of all you suffer."

Yet those words were not spoken, and whether Zoe comprehended the silent eloquence of the weeping and kneeling maiden's proceeding must be left for the reader to conjecture. Certain it is that Lady Octavian wound her arms around Christina's neck, strained her to her bosom, sobbed and wept likewise, and thus were their farewells expressed.

When Christina again found herself in the carriage, as it bore her homeward, she could scarcely recollect how she had reached it after that parting scene with the amiable lady whom she feared that she should never behold again. Profound was the affliction which Christina experienced, and on regaining the villa she hastened up to her own chamber, where she once more gave way to the wild outpouring of her anguish.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EXPLANATION OF A PLOT

IT was evening, and Madame Angelique was seated in her elegantly furnished room, the table well spread with dessert and wine. It was evident she expected somebody, for she frequently consulted her watch, murmuring to herself, "This note specified nine punctually, and it is considerably past."

At length the door opened and a domestic announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"I know it is shameful to keep a lady waiting," said his Grace, with a sort of forced good-humoured jocularity, "but I was detained at the club where I dined."

"Better late than never, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "and now if your Grace would honour me by taking a glass of wine, I will explain how I have progressed in a certain matter in which your Grace is interested."

"Is it that of the Indian lady?" inquired the duke, as he helped himself to some wine. "By Heaven, I hope your answer will be in the affirmative, though I care not even if it should be to tell me that the hope points toward that ayah of hers, for the magnificent beauty of the one is equalled by the darker glory of the other's."

"Ah, then you have seen them, my lord?" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with a smile of satisfaction.

"You had so piqued my curiosity a few weeks ago, when you renewed the subject one night that I was here —"

"That your Grace went and laid wait at Bayswater to catch a glimpse of them in their carriage, eh, my lord?" said the milliner, with an arch smile.

"Precisely so," responded Marchmont, "and I was so interested that I went a second time. On the first occasion I beheld the lady and her ayah, and, good heavens, what wondrous beauty on the part of each! The second time I saw the lady with a_young English girl, whom, to my astonishment, I at once recognized. She is Miss Ashton, the sister of that very identical young dog who spoilt my game in respect to Stanhope and my wife. She was at first with the Merediths, and, to tell you the truth, I had marked her out as my prey."

"And why, my lord, should you not honour her with your favour in her turn?" inquired Madame Angelique. "I have never seen her — at least, not to my knowledge, but if she be worth any trouble — "

"Worth any trouble?" exclaimed Marchmont, "she is worth as much trouble as either the Eastern lady or the ayah. She is of a ravishing beauty, and those three together must form a group such as you, Madame Angelique, never had in the saloon adjoining, beautiful as I admit your houris are. But come, tell me what is this satisfactory intelligence which you have to impart?"

"The Eastern lady, my lord, will be in your power," replied the infamous woman, "whenever you think fit to say the word. I took the business in hand myself, and fortune favoured me. I found the ayah accessible to bribery on the very first occasion when I dropped her a hint that a great nobleman had fallen in love with both herself and her mistress; but she is a strange creature in her way, for she at once declared that her mistress should have the honour of your Grace's preference, and that she herself would be content to assist in the enterprise."

"Is her mistress at all gay?" inquired Marchmont. "Has she been brought over to this country by some wealthy nabob, who by dying or on leaving her has enriched her?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," cried Madame Angelique. "She is a paragon of virtue and propriety. This much the ayah assured me, giving me to understand that the astutest artifice and the most unscrupulous force must be employed for the vanquishing of that stubborn virtue of hers."

"Then methinks it is a somewhat difficult task?" said the duke, helping himself to another glass of wine.

"By no means, my lord," rejoined Madame Angelique. "The train for the artifice is laid; it will be for you to use the violence. I have managed admirably, and success is certain."

"But what, in the name of Heaven," cried the duke, " is the lady doing in this country? Surely you must have learned some particulars."

"The ayah is a woman of few words, speaks only to the point, and is by no means disposed to waste her breath in unnecessary communications. I could obtain nothing more from her," continued Madame Angelique, "than what was absolutely necessary for the carrying out of our aims. Listen, my lord. I ere now informed your Grace that fortune favoured me, and it was so. Assisted by the ayab, I obtained admission to the lady, and the conversation took such a turn — no matter how — that I came away with the thorough understanding that she is to visit Oaklands for a few days —"

"What, have you made her believe she is to be the guest of the duchess and myself?" exclaimed Marchmont, evidently at a loss to comprehend the milliner's proceeding.

"Quite the contrary, my lord. The lady supposes that you and the duchess will not be there at all, but that out of kindness she is to be permitted to make your country-seat her home for a few days; and in her ingenuousness," added Madame Angelique, with a mocking air, "she has been led to fancy that it is quite customary in this country for a nobleman thus to place his mansion at the disposal of a foreigner of distinction, no matter whether male or female."

"Well, but what plan do you suggest?" asked the duke, for I cannot for the life of me — "

"Listen, my lord. The lady will go alone to Oaklands, of that I am confident; and, what is more, she has provided herself with a quantity of European dresses, so that she may not have an extraordinary appearance. Of course her Grace the Duchess will remain ignorant that the lady is at Oaklands, but what is to prevent your lordship from finding your way there late some evening, and entering stealthily? You find the bird in your own cage, and, what is more, she has flown voluntarily thither. She must succumb, and then it will be for your Grace to convince her of the impossibility of her invoking the law to punish you. For how will the matter stand? Here is a lady, who has lived long enough in England and speaks the language well enough to comprehend

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all its customs, proceeding of her own accord to your countryseat, leaving her servants behind her, discarding for the time being her own habitual costume, having English dresses made 'expressly for the purpose, — why, who on earth would believe her tale if she were to proclaim that she had been inveigled into a snare? Shall not I be ready to stand forward to give my own version of the manner in which the arrangement was effected between herself and me? Shall I not at once boldly affirm that I was a messenger of love from your Grace to her, and that she accepted the overture and went to the appointment? Make her understand all this, my lord, and rest assured that she will rather seek to veil her shame as closely as possible than to expose it uselessly."

"Yes, the plot is admirable," exclaimed the duke, " and you are the most accomplished of useful women. But when is the affair to come off?"

"I will write to the lady to-morrow," responded Madame Angelique, "and I have no doubt that on the day after she will repair to Oaklands. It is for your Grace to despatch a messenger with suitable instructions, so that she may be received by the servants in the light of an honoured guest at whose disposal the entire establishment is to be placed so long as it may suit her to sojourn there."

"I will send off the necessary instructions the very first thing in the morning," responded the duke. "And now, to discourse upon another subject, what about Lettice Rodney?"

"Ah, the ungrateful wretch!" cried Madame Angelique, with an indignation that could not possibly have been greater if it were based on the most honest grounds, "to serve me in such a way, after all I had done for her!"

"Well, but what has become of her?" inquired the duke.

"That is exactly what I should like to ascertain, but she has been spirited away, no one knows where. They say she is penitent. Penitence indeed!" and with as much disgust as if it were a heinous crime the bare idea of which thus excited her, Madame Angelique screwed up her countenance into a strange contortion.

"Well, relieve your feelings with a glass of wine," said the duke.

Madame Angelique followed his Grace's counsel, and went on to exclaim, "Who would have believed it? Most people, when their girls get into trouble, leave them to get out again as best they may. But here was I, — with a sense of humanity which no doubt was carried to an extreme, here was I, my lord, rushing off to Liverpool to see the wretch, and to offer to find her lawyers, and counsel, and all that sort of thing, on condition that she kept my name out of the question; but the prison door was banged in my face, and I was told that Lettice Rodney did not want to see me. Not want to see me, —me, her very best friend! And now I hate her so that I could scratch her eyes out if she came across me."

"But have you no idea," inquired Marchmont, "who was at the bottom of all those proceedings on her behalf? The newspapers spoke of influential friends —"

"Yes, and they specially mentioned the name of the Stanleys," responded Madame Angelique. "Ah, I recollect! I saw something hinted about another person being behind the scenes, but I can't fancy who it could be."

"I don't know why," said Marchmont, "but it has occurred to me that the same individual who extorted the confession from Lettice of all that business down at Oaklands in the winter — whose voice she thought familiar, if you recollect, but whose face she could not catch a glimpse of — may have been her secret friend throughout this last affair."

"But now that it is all over," cried Madame Angelique, "it is scarcely worth while to bewilder oneself with conjecture. Fortunately my name did not transpire at the trial."

"No, it was fortunate," observed the duke. "By the bye, have you heard anything about Eveleen O'Brien?"

"Ah! there's another ungrateful wretch," exclaimed Madame Angelique, again getting excited over her wrongs. "She too has turned penitent, and I'm sure that if penitence becomes an epidemic, like the cholera or anything of that sort, I shall have to shut up shop. No, not while I have such patrons as your Grace," cried the infamous woman, thinking it necessary to pay the duke this compliment.

Marchmont rose to take his departure, — previous to doing which, however, he placed a roll of bank-notes in Madame Angelique's hand, as an earnest of his liberality in respect to her precious machinations with regard to the Princess Indora.

Early on the following morning the duke sent off a message to Oaklands with a letter containing suitable instructions to Purvis, the steward, with regard to the reception that was to be given to the Oriental lady; and so little care had he for the feelings of the duchess that he did not even think it worth while to add a hint to the effect that the circumstance of this visit to be paid to Oaklands by the lady in question was to be for ever withheld from her Grace's knowledge. At the same time that the messenger set off for Oaklands, the infamous Madame Angelique forwarded a letter to the post, addressed to the Lady Indora, acquainting her that their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont had the pleasure of placing their country-seat in Hampshire at her ladyship's disposal for so long a time as it might be agreeable to her to sojourn on that domain. Madame Angelique was careful to assure Indora in this letter that the duke and duchess were occupying their town mansion, and had no thought of going into the country for the present, that therefore the Lady Indora would be perfect mistress of Oaklands, and she (Madame Angelique) wished her ladyship all possible health to enjoy her rambles about the beautiful scenery of the domain.

We ought perhaps to observe that Sagoonah had remained altogether in ignorance of that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the princess, for Indora had not chosen to terrify her ayah by making her aware that she was the object of any evil design. She had therefore contented herself at the time with issuing precautionary instructions of a general character, the faithful Mark, the major-domo, being the only one of the servants to whom she confided the nature of that letter. Thus it happened that the name of Mr. Redcliffe was never mentioned by Sagoonah to Madame Angelique.

The Princess Indora duly received Madame Angelique's note, and without communicating its contents to a soul, commenced her preparations for departure. She informed Christina that particular business would take her away for a few days, during which interval she hoped the young maiden would not feel dull nor lonely, and she gave her permission to invite her brother Christian to pass those few days with her at the villa if she thought fit. Her Highness ordered a post-chaise to be in attendance for the ensuing day, and as she perceived that the faithful Mark — the comptroller of her little household — wore a somewhat anxious countenance as these preparations were going on, she summoned him into her presence, availing herself of an opportunity when she was alone.

"I am well aware, Mark," she said, "that you entertain a deep interest in my behalf, and you are probably afraid that I am about to fall into some snare which is being set for me. But you need have no such apprehension. The business which takes me hence for a few days is connected with a matter vitally concerning my own interests. I see my way clearly, but I have thought it necessary to tell you this much, in order to relieve your mind from any misgiving."

"I am truly rejoiced to hear your ladyship speak thus confidently," answered the steward, " and my mind is indeed more at ease."

He then bowed and withdrew, the princess not volunteering another syllable of explanation, and Mark had no undue curiosity. It was sufficient for him that Indora seemed to know perfectly well what she was about.

On the following morning the princess apparelled herself, with Christina's assistance, in one of the European costumes which Madame Angelique had sent home. This was the first time that the King of Inderabad's daughter found herself thus dressed, and it would have been difficult for even the most scrupulous critic in respect to female loveliness to decide whether she looked handsomer in the picturesque garb which she was wont to wear, or in this apparel made after the most recent Parisian fashion. The superb figure of Indora, with all its richness of contour and the admirable modelling of its limbs, gave its own shape, as it were, to whatsoever costume she chose to adopt, and hers was a beauty so far transcending all the advantages which feminine charms are wont to derive from the toilet that it indeed mattered but little what fashion or style she followed. The corsage of an English dress could not set off the grandeur of the bust more completely than the Oriental caftan, nor the Parisian bonnet impart additional splendour to the dark glory of her hair.

In her new costume, unattended and alone, the Princess Indora entered the post-chaise; and on leaving the villa, all the instructions she gave to the postilions were that she was going into Hampshire. Thus no one at that villa, except Sagoonah herself, was aware of the princess's destination; and the princess suspected not that her ayah knew it.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that the post-chaise entered upon the broad domain of Oaklands. and it presently dashed up to the front of the mansion. Purvis and the other domestics, in obedience to the instructions received from the Duke of Marchmont, were in readiness to afford the princess a suitable welcome, and as she alighted from the post-chaise they were astonished at her extraordinary beauty. They had been told that an Oriental lady of rank, but preserving a strict incognita, would arrive at Oaklands: and they had pictured to themselves a darkskinned female, apparelled in some extraordinary fashion. But when they beheld Indora, whose complexion was only of the most delicate duskiness, not exceeding that of a brunette, and with a fine-grained skin of transparent clearness. apparelled too in a plain but tasteful travelling-costume, such as an English lady might wear, they were all taken by surprise. Yet in this amazement - an amazement which was produced far more by her extraordinary beauty than by any other circumstances — the respectfulness of their demeanour was not for an instant lost, and she was at once conducted by the old steward to the state drawing-room. There she was waited upon by females of the household, who escorted her to the bedchamber prepared for her reception; and now she put off her travelling costume to apparel herself in a richer and more elegant garb. On descending again to the drawing-room, she intimated a wish to be conducted over the mansion, and Purvis was accordingly promptly in attendance. He led her through the various sumptuously furnished apartments, and in due course they reached the picture-gallery. There Indora appeared particularly interested by contemplating the portraits of the Duke of Marchmont's ancestors, and throughout this inspection she conversed with the old steward in the most affable manner.

"I have been made acquainted," she said, still lingering in the gallery, "with that terrible tragedy which is so fearfully connected with the name of Oaklands. Were you here when it occurred?"

Purvis responded in the affirmative, and Indora proceeded

to question the old man on various points connected with that deplorable history. Purvis, who was delighted with the frank amiability of the princess, and also astonished at the fluency with which she spoke in his native tongue, as well as at the superior intelligence which many of her observations indicated, cheerfully satisfied her curiosity, and the tale of the Duchess Eliza and Bertram Vivian was told all over again. Indora listened with a deep and awe-felt interest, and in the course of some remarks which Purvis made at the conclusion, he said, "The very dagger, my lady, with which the dreadful deed was accomplished exists still beneath this roof."

"Is it not strange," said Indora, with a visible shudder, "that the present Duke of Marchmont should have preserved a weapon which every time he beholds it must so frightfully remind him of the foul deed of assassination whereby he lost his uncle?"

"To tell your ladyship the truth," answered Purvis, " his Grace knows not that the weapon is still retained within these walls. It is I who have kept it, and if you were to ask me wherefore, I could not say. Heaven knows that it is through no morbid feeling of curiosity, for seldom indeed do I venture to cast a look upon that terrible weapon. But after the coroner's inquest. I found it lying in the room where that inquiry took place. No orders were issued as to its disposal, and I thrust it away in a lumber-closet. There it remained forgotten for a year or two, until the closet itself was to be pulled down in the course of certain alterations which were made within these walls. Then the dagger again fell into my hand; it was covered with rust, and a cold feeling of horror shot through me at the thought that it was my deceased master's blood which was encrusted there. Your ladyship may think it a strange fancy on my part, but I took that weapon, and with my own hand scoured the blade so that the blood-rust should disappear; and this being done, I thought of burying it in the ground, in order to put it for ever out of human sight. But another strange whim seized upon me, and I thought I would preserve it as a relic of the past, - just as in former times the armour of those who perished in battle was preserved by the families to which they belonged. To be brief, the fatal weapon has been thus preserved; and there are times when I think that in

retaining possession of it I have been actuated by some higher impulse which I cannot rightly understand."

"It is singular — most singular," said Indora, in a musing tone, "for it was not, as you have declared, through mere morbid curiosity." Then after a few minutes' pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she added, "The horrible has its own mysterious fascinations as well as the pleasing and the beautiful, for the human heart is so constituted as to be susceptible of them. Yes, I will see that dagger. You have already told me, when reciting the narrative of the tragedy, that it came from North America and is of peculiar workmanship."

"It was brought from North America, together with other curiosities," responded Purvis, "by Bertram Vivian. If your ladyship will come this way, I will show it to you."

The old steward conducted the Princess Indora to a superbly furnished saloon, where marble pillars and splendid draperies gave a grandeur to the scene, and where, too, there were some beautiful specimens of sculpture. At the extremity of this saloon there was a small cabinet, containing a variety of curiosities, amongst which were those that Bertram Vivian had brought over with him from the United The old steward touched a secret spring in a rose-States. wood cupboard of curious workmanship: a door flew open. revealing a single drawer, and thence he took forth the fatal dagger of which so much had just been said. With a visible tremor shooting through her entire form, the Princess Indora took it in her hand, and examined it attentively for upwards of a minute, at the expiration of which she returned it to Purvis, who consigned it back again to the place whence he had taken it. Shutting the drawer, he closed the little door of the closet; and Indora said, "In the country to which I belong, we have articles of furniture with secret springs, but I do not understand the working of this one."

The old steward at once gave her the explanation she seemed to desire, and they then issued forth from the cabinet. It was now announced to her that dinner was served up, and she was conducted to the dining-room, where an elegant repast appeared upon the table. The liveried lackeys were in attendance just as if it were the duchess herself who was thus being waited upon and indeed all possible respect was shown toward the princess.

The repast being over, and there being still two more hours of daylight, Indora resumed her wanderings through the mansion, but on this occasion dispensing with the attendance of Purvis. She revisited the picture-gallery, and thence proceeded to the chamber where, as she had been told, the Duchess Eliza took leave of her weeping servants when about to go forth alone from that mansion. where so much misery had overtaken her. In this chamber the princess sat down and gave way to a train of most mournful reflections, tears even trickling down her cheeks. Then she repaired to the room which was occupied by Bertram Vivian when he was staving at Oaklands, and there again did the princess linger in profound and painful meditation. Wherefore was she thus deeply interested in every circumstance and every scene at all associated with that tragedy of nearly nineteen years back?

From that apartment the Princess Indora roamed to the magnificent saloon where the marble columns and the rich draperies imparted an air of truly ducal grandeur, and where there were such exquisite specimens of the sculptor's art to be contemplated. But all these Indora appeared not now to notice; she seemed bent upon some purpose which absorbed every other thought and feeling. A strange light was burning in the luminous depths of her magnificent dark eyes, her lips were compressed with the decisiveness of that profound purpose of her soul, and her feet bore her straight toward the cabinet whither Purvis had previously conducted her. And now she looked around as if to assure herself that no one was by to observe her movements or watch her proceedings, and, satisfied on this point, she entered the cabinet. Unhesitatingly was her taper finger pressed upon the secret spring, the little door flew open, and the next moment the dagger was in her hand. Wherefore did the Indian princess thus again grasp that weapon with which so frightful a deed was associated? What strange feeling thus impelled her to gaze once more on the dagger that had drunk so deep of human blood?

But now a strange scene ensued. Closing the little door with its secret spring, and still retaining possession of the dagger, Indora came forth from the cabinet. Intently were her luminous dark eyes fixed upon the blade which the whimsical or else more deeply mysterious care of Purvis had kept brightly polished, and all of a sudden the princess raised those eyes upwards, exclaiming, "It is for thee, O Lord, in thine own good time, to show whose hand did really wield this weapon to perpetrate the tragedy of that foul night!"

And it was the eye of that Deity alone to whom the Eastern lady thus solemnly appealed that beheld her as she stood there, in the midst of that sumptuously furnished saloon, with the air of a pythoness, one arm stretched forth, and the hand grasping the handle of the dagger, and her countenance wearing an expression of awe-felt solemnity and adjuring entreaty that was in unison with her words. How strikingly grand she looked, her hair, dark as night, floating in luxuriant masses down her back, her superb bosom upheaved, her posture replete with tragic majesty, and her red lips apart, displaying two rows of pearls within. Wherefore did Indora send up that adjuring prayer to Heaven? Why did she seem to think that there was any doubt in respect to the author of a crime which all the world had so unhesitatingly affixed to the hand of Bertram Vivian?

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DAGGER

On the following day, soon after breakfast, the Princess Indora issued forth to ramble over the domain and its neighbourhood. She had desired Purvis to accompany her. and the old man pointed out all the various features of interest; but somehow or another he found himself led on to speak again of the tragedy so intimately connected with Oaklands. The Princess Indora made him describe to her the exact personal appearance of the Duchess Eliza, that of the old duke her husband, and that of Bertram Vivian. Purvis, naturally garrulous, was never wearied of conversing on a topic which constituted the main incident in his own experiences of life; and thus, if the Eastern lady had any secret purpose of her own, or if she were merely impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to seek information on these points, she could not possibly have addressed herself to a person more competent or more willing to afford it.

Her wanderings with Purvis brought her toward the pond by the side of which the corpse of the murdered duke was discovered, and there for a few minutes she lingered, gazing upon the very spot where, as Purvis informed her, he and Leachley, the late duke's valet, had found their lifeless, murdered master.

While retracing their way toward the mansion, the discourse still continued on the same topic; and Indora seemed as willing to hear as the old steward was to impart all details, even the very minutest, in connection with the topic which appeared to have so profound an interest for them both. Yet the princess so shaped her questions and so phrased her remarks that Purvis entertained not the remotest suspicion that she might possibly be impelled by some feeling stronger than mere curiosity. It was about two o'clock when they reached the mansion, and Indora, having partaken of refreshment, walked forth again into the grounds, but this time unattended by the old steward, who was wearied with his ramble of the forenoon. The princess walked as far as the village, and passed the little inn where Bertram Vivian had his last interview with his brother, — then Lord Clandon. The very room had been notified by Purvis, in the minuteness of the details which he had given the princess, and her eyes were riveted for a minute upon the window of that room. When she pursued her way, tears were trickling from those eyes. Perchance, in the natural generosity and kindness of her disposition, she was melted by the thought that within that very room a fellow creature had endured the most excruciating anguish which the human mind could know.

In the evening the Princess Indora again had an opportunity of conversing with the old steward, and she inquired relative to the other servants who were at Oaklands at the time the tragedy took place. He gave her the same information which he had given to Christian Ashton at the time the youth was at the mansion, namely, that Leachley, the late duke's valet, was thriving as a farmer about a dozen miles off; that Jane, the Duchess Eliza's favourite maid, had gone mad after the tragic occurrence, and that he alone, of all the domestics who were at Oaklands on the occasion of the duke's murder, now remained there. After he had given some other particulars respecting a few of those servants who had risen in the world, he said, "And there is the present duke's valet, too, he likewise has risen, and in order to conceal his humble origin he has taken another name."

" Under what circumstances?" asked Indora.

"He has grown rich, my lady," responded Purvis. "His proper name is Travers, his assumed one is Armytage, and his daughter has married a nobleman, Lord Octavian Meredith."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Indora, "the names of Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith are not unfamiliar to me. And that Mr. Armytage, you tell me, was originally the present duke's valet?"

"Certainly he was, my lady. When the present duke succeeded to the title after his uncle's death, he appointed Travers to the post of bailiff; and a little time after that,

Travers, it was said, inherited a considerable sum of money. So, in due course, he left Oaklands, and it was many a long year before I heard anything of him again. At length Farmer Leachley went up to London on some business, and on his return into Hampshire, he came across to see me. He told me that when in London he went to pay his respects to his Grace in Belgrave Square, and that as he was issuing forth from the mansion again he saw a splendid equipage stop at the door, and a well-dressed gentleman alight. He thought that the face was not unfamiliar to him, and though fourteen or fifteen years had elapsed since he last saw Travers, and of course his appearance was altered by time, vet Leachley speedily remembered where he had seen that countenance before, for the well-dressed gentleman descending from his chariot was none other than Travers. The recognition was mutual, but Travers, evidently much confused, attempted to pass hastily by Leachley. Leachley, however, was not the man to be cut in this style. He grasped the other's arm, addressing him by the name of Travers. 'Hush, my good friend!' was the response, 'that is no longer my name. I have risen in the world, as you perceive, and vou must call me Mr. Armytage. There is no harm, I fancy, in a man choosing to conceal his plebeian origin when he moves in the highest society and is the companion of the best of the aristocracy. I shall take it as a kindness, for old friendship's sake, if you will keep the little matter as secret as possible.' Leachley assured him that he had no wish to injure or annoy him any in way, but that, on the contrary, he was glad to find he had such good reason for a change of name. This made Mr. Armytage, as he chooses to call himself, very civil indeed, and he invited Leachley to his house in the Regent's Park; but as Leachley was coming back into Hampshire that very day, he could not avail himself of Mr. Armytage's kindness."

"But it appears that this Mr. Leachley, of whom you are speaking," said the princess, "failed not to communicate the secret to you?"

"Oh, there was no harm in his telling me, my lady," replied Purvis, "as I never go up to London, and therefore have no opportunity of betraying him, even if I had the inclination, — which of course I have not; for there is no harm in his having changed his name, but, on the contrary, everything to his credit that he should have got on so well as to have such good ground for doing it."

By the time this conversation was ended the princess and the old steward had completed their ramble, and the mansion was reached. As Indora entered the hall, she perceived a certain bustle amongst the domestics, who were hurrying to and fro, and one of them, stepping up to Purvis, hastily whispered something in his ear. Indora took no visible notice of it, but ascending to her chamber, put off her walking attire, and then repaired to the drawing-room. As she entered, a tall, aristocratic-looking individual rose from a sofa on which he was seated, and advancing toward her, bowed with courteous respect. For a moment — and only for a moment — there was a strange and ominous glitter in the dark eyes of Indora, but the duke perceived it not, for it was gone by the time he raised his looks to her countenance again.

"Permit me to announce myself as the Duke of Marchmont," he said. "The duchess and I, after mature reflection, came to the conclusion that it would be discourteous if we presented not ourselves here during at least a portion of the period of your ladyship's sojourn, to do the hospitalities of Oaklands."

"I am exceedingly flattered by this kindness on the part of your lordship and her Grace," responded Indora, and then she looked around as if in search of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Her Grace has charged me to offer your ladyship a thousand apologies," the duke hastened to say, "that she is not enabled to present herself this evening. Her Grace is in very delicate health. The journey from London in such sultry weather has indisposed her, and on the very moment of our arrival, a quarter of an hour back, she was forced to retire to her apartment."

"And it is on my account," exclaimed Indora, with an air of vexation, "that her Grace undertook a journey which has thus indisposed her!"

"Her Grace will be completely recovered by the morning," replied Marchmont. Then thinking that he might now venture upon a little compliment, in the hope of breaking the ceremonious formality of the discourse, he added, "And the pleasure which her Grace cannot fail to share with me in being honoured by your ladyship's presence here will amply compensate for her indisposition of this evening."

Indora turned aside for a moment to take a seat, and again did that glitter, so strange and so ominous, appear in her eyes, but again, too, did Marchmont fail to observe it.

"I hope," he said, "that during the short time your ladyship has already sojourned beneath this roof you have experienced every attention —"

"I ought, perhaps," interrupted Indora, "at the very first moment when your Grace announced yourself, to have expressed my gratitude for your kindness and that of the duchess in placing Oaklands at my disposal. I can assure your lordship I have been much interested."

"I am truly charmed to hear your ladyship thus speak," exclaimed the duke. "Perhaps you will forgive me for saying that in addition to the desire to render the hospitalities of Oaklands as acceptable to your ladyship as possible, I was anxious to hasten hither, — and of course the duchess likewise, — to form the acquaintance of a lady of whom Madame Angelique spoke in such rapturous terms."

"I cannot feel otherwise than flattered," answered Indora, with every appearance of the most courteous affability, "by the kind mention which Madame Angelique must evidently have made of me."

, "As Madame Angelique is a truth-speaking woman," rejoined the duke, "she could not do otherwise than mention your ladyship in the terms which alone are appropriate. Might I be excused for expressing my surprise that a lady who is a native of a far distant clime should be so conversant with the English tongue? Perhaps your ladyship has seen much of the English in India. But if so, how was it," he asked, with a smile, "that none was fortunate enough to win a hand which a monarch might rejoice to possess?"

"I saw very little of the English in India," answered Indora, not choosing to have even the appearance of noticing the compliment with which the duke's speech wound up.

"Perhaps, then," he continued, as if with the goodhumoured familiarity which a host felt himself justified in using toward his guest, "your ladyship has visited England with a determination of subduing all hearts, and eventually bestowing the prize on the one that may seem most devoted?"

"Indeed your lordship is uselessly bewildering yourself

with conjectures which are remote enough from the actual fact," and though Indora spoke somewhat gravely, yet her manner continued perfectly courteous. "And now," she added, "as I am exceedingly fatigued with my day's rambles, I must beg your Grace to forgive me if I retire to rest."

She rose from her seat, and Marchmont, first flying to ring the bell, next hastened to open the door. As the princess passed, he proffered his hand, but she either did not really see it, or else affected not to perceive it, and with a courteous inclination of the head she quitted the room. On reaching her own chamber she was attended upon by two of the female servants of the establishment, and she remarked as if quite in a casual way, "So you have the duchess here now?"

"Yes, my lady," replied one of the women, at the same time exchanging a rapidly significant look with her fellow servant.

"I hope that her Grace's indisposition is only slight?" resumed the princess.

"There is little doubt," was the answer, "that her Grace will be quite well in the morning."

"It is to be sincerely hoped so," said Indora, " and the more so by me inasmuch as I am assured by the duke it was entirely on my account her Grace undertook a journey which has thus rendered her indisposed."

Again did the two servants exchange quick looks of meaning, but Indora appeared to notice them not. They assisted her throughout her night toilet, and when she was prepared for rest, they withdrew.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that the Duchess of Marchmont was not at Oaklands at all. This portion of the duke's stratagem was an afterthought, and an improvement (as he considered' it) upon the plan of proceedings originally laid down by Madame Angelique. He had reasoned to himself that as he was perfectly unacquainted with Indora, except by sight, it would be expedient for him to have at least an hour's interview with her ere he carried his plot into execution, so that he might be enabled to form a better estimate of her disposition and character than he could do from Madame Angelique's description. He was, moreover, impatient to find himself in the presence of that Eastern lady whose superb charms had made such an impression upon him on the two occasions that he had caught a glimpse of her at a distance. Thus he had come down to Oaklands for the purpose of introducing himself to Indora; and immediately on his arrival he had issued positive instructions to the domestics to the effect that they were to support his tale of the duchess being likewise beneath that roof. This was the hint that was whispered to Purvis by one of the footmen, as the old steward entered the hall after attending Indora in her evening ramble.

And what were the Duke of Marchmont's feelings when he did find himself in the presence of the princess? If he had admired her from a distance, how infinite became that admiration on beholding her close! The grandeur of her beauty exceeded even what he had expected to find it; the glory of her charms excited all his most fervid passions. It was indeed with difficulty that he could conceal the joy of anticipated triumph when conversing with her in the drawingroom. In all respects she seemed faultless in his eves. — a being whom he would give half his fortune to possess. Marriage had consigned a charming creature to his arms; the gold of that luxurious patrician had purchased the rarest beauties of every clime, until he had grown sated with pleasure, and, like the Persian monarch, craved for a new one. In the Princess Indora he beheld everything calculated to ravish, to dazzle, to excite, and to fascinate: he thought there would be a world of frenzied bliss in achieving this conquest, even though it were by force. He had devoured her with his eves even while rendering the expression of his looks most courteously respectful; and when, on her retiring, he was left alone in the drawing-room, he sat feasting his imagination with the pleasure that he conceived to be in store for himself.

But let us return to Indora. When the two female servants had retired, and even while the door was yet closing behind them, that strange glitter appeared in her eyes, and her rich red lips were wreathed with an expression of ineffable scorn. She turned toward one of the boxes she had brought with her, unlocked it, and took thence something, which she thrust under the pillow of the couch. Then she was on the point of enveloping herself in an elegant muslin wrapper, when her ear caught a gentle tap at the door, and as her glances were flung in that direction, she beheld a piece of paper thrust underneath. She hastened to pick it up, and read therein these lines:

"Lady, beware! A foul treachery is intended. The duchess is not here; the duke came alone. Burn this. You can guess from whom it comes, and be upon your guard."

Indora comprehended that this was an instance of the generous kindness and the honourable feeling of the old steward. She hastened to apply the paper to the wax light, and when it had caught the flame, she tossed it into the fireplace. Then, just as she was again about to put on the wrapper, — evidently with the air of one who knew what was about to happen, and meant to be in all modest decency prepared to meet the emergency, — the door opened, and the duke hastily entered.

"Ah!" ejaculated Indora, and springing to the head of the couch, she snatched from beneath the pillow the dagger which she had placed there; then, as she raised it in her right hand, her left lifting the night drapery over her bosom, she said, in a voice of resolute sternness, "You know this weapon well; it shall drink your heart's blood if you dare approach me."

Language has no power to convey an idea of the ghastly horror which seized upon the Duke of Marchmont as he caught sight of that dagger; his countenance became livid, he started back and then staggered as if smitten a sudden blow.

"Begone!" exclaimed Indora; and whatever were the power which she wielded at the moment, — whether it were by the mingled scorn, indignation, and defiance of her looks, whether it were by the menacing air she had assumed, or by the terrible recollections which the sight of the dagger vividly conjured up in the mind of the duke, — certain it is that he at once obeyed her, and still pale as death, trembling in every limb, and like a conscience-stricken being, he dragged himself from the room.

Immediately afterward the Princess Indora rang her bell violently, and then hastened to lock up the dagger again in the box where she had previously secured it. The summons was speedily answered by one of the maids who had previously attended upon her, and Indora said, in a calm, firm voice, "I choose not to sleep here alone; you must remain with me for the rest of the night." Having thus spoken, she locked the door of the chamber, and placing the key under the pillow, lay down on the couch, bidding the maid undress herself and share it with her. The young woman ventured not a single question, nor even a word of comment. She comprehended full well that the duke had experienced an indignant repulse, and in her heart she was far from sorry, for even in the short time that Indora had been beneath that roof her amiable manners had made a certain impression on all the domestics who had happened to come in contact with her.

Thus the night was passed by the virtuous and wellprincipled Indora in fullest security, but it was not as a guarantee for such security that she had insisted upon the companionship of the servant-woman. She had no fear that the duke would renew his infamous attempt; it was in order that not the slightest breath of suspicion might tarnish her fair fame, that no whisper of scandal might have even the faintest ground to asperse her honour, that she had rung thus violently for the dependent, and commanded that dependent to remain with her throughout the night.

But how was this night passed by the Duke of Marchmont? We cannot tell. The eye of Heaven alone beheld him in the solitude of his own chamber, to which — baffled, defeated, ghastly, and trembling — he retired. But to judge by his appearance when he issued from that chamber at an early hour in the morning, the night must have been a terrible one for him. He looked as if his limbs had not been once stretched upon his couch, as if his eyelids had not for a single moment closed in slumber; so haggard and careworn was he that he appeared as if a preternatural hand had seized upon him and hurled him in a moment a dozen years onward along the pathway of time.

On issuing from that chamber between six and seven in the morning, be bore a letter in his hand; and summoning a female domestic, bade her take the letter to the Eastern lady's apartment, and bring him back the response. Its contents were limited to a few lines, declaring that dazzled by her beauty, and infatuated to a degree that overpowered his reason, he had obeyed an impulse which was irresistible, that in the humblest terms he craved her forgiveness, and that he besought her to grant him a five minutes' interview before he took his departure, which he would do the moment that interview was over. The response which the servant brought back was a verbal one, to the effect that the Eastern lady would grant the duke a five minutes' interview, for the purpose of receiving the renewed expression of his contrition, in the drawing-room, and in about half an hour.

And during that half-hour the wretched Marchmont paced to and fro in the drawing-room, the most restless anxiety gleaming in his eyes, and displaying itself in the quivering of his ashy lips. At length the door opened, and the princess made her appearance. She was apparelled in a plain but neat travelling-costume, the dress reaching up to her throat, but fitting tightly to the form, and thus displaying the superb contours of that grandly symmetrical shape. There was a certain coldness in her looks, which covered any other deeper feeling; and as she advanced into the room she said, in a voice that was as glacially emotionless as her aspect, "You wish to speak to me, my lord?"

"For Heaven's sake, lady," exclaimed the miserable duke, "tell me what I am to expect at your hands? I know the outrage was abominable — "

"But the Duke of Marchmont is capable of anything," interrupted the princess, "where his evil passions are concerned."

"But that scene last night," ejaculated the duke, "appeared to have — Perdition!" he vehemently cried. "I know not what to say. I mean that it had a significancy."

"Assuredly so," answered Indora. "It had the significancy belonging to the fixed determination of a virtuous woman to defend her honour, even though she stretched its assailant dead at her feet."

"But wherefore, lady, wherefore," asked the duke, trembling nervously from head to foot, "did you arm yourself with that — that dagger?"

"It is the custom of my country," was Indora's cold response, "for a woman when in a strange place to surround herself with all suitable defences."

"Then you picked up that weapon somewhere by accident — only by accident?" cried the duke.

"Yes — by accident," was Indora's answer, still glacially given.

"But where? where?" demanded the duke, and his scrutinizing regards were fixed keenly upon the lady's countenance, as if to penetrate whether any ulterior thought or feeling, motive or significancy, lay hidden beneath that icily dignified aspect.

"Where did I find the dagger?" she said. "It was in one of the rooms of the mansion. But why question me thus? Methought, my lord, that I was to hear the humblest apology— Yet no!" she indignantly exclaimed, and now her eyes flashed fire. "No language in the world has power to convey an excuse for such villainy as yours. I will tell you frankly, my lord, that I read your purpose. I was not deceived by the miserably shallow artifice so flimsily wrapped up in the tale of your wife's arrival and indisposition. Consequently I was prepared, and you know how well."

"But will you not pardon me? Will you not pronounce the word forgiveness?" cried the duke, who was evidently bewildered, indeed half-frenzied by the thoughts that were agitating in his whirling brain.

"Forgiveness? No!" and Indora at once turned to leave the drawing-room.

"For Heaven's sake, stop!" cried the duke, hastening toward her in a supplicating manner. "If you will not grant me your pardon, at all events give me the assurance that you will do me no injury."

"I have triumphed so effectually in the circumstances to which you allude," replied Indora, "that I need scarcely hesitate to promise that it is my purpose to keep silent in respect to your infamy. But understand me well, - that if you dare breathe a single syllable prejudicial to my honour, if it come to my knowledge that when heated with wine, and in that boasting mood which at times takes possession of all libertines, you have proclaimed the fact that I was a visitress here, in a word, my lord, if you have the hardihood to make an allusion to me in the least way disrespectful. that moment shall I be absolved from my pledge, I will go before a magistrate, I will acquaint him with all that occurred, not even omitting," - and Indora's dark eyes were fixed penetratingly upon the duke, -- " not even omitting, I say, the circumstance how I defended myself with that selfsame dagger which dealt death to the uncle whose title and fortune you inherited."

Having thus spoken, the Princess Indora issued from the drawing-room; and the duke, closing the door behind her,

threw himself upon a sofa and gave way to his agitated reflections. In a few minutes a domestic entered, saying, "The Lady Indora has ordered your Grace's plain carriage to be immediately gotten in readiness, to take her to the nearest post-town, and she will leave Oaklands in less than half an hour."

The duke gave no answer, and the domestic withdrew. Marchmont comprehended wherefore the message had been sent: it was to give him to understand that as Indora was on the point of taking her departure, it was not necessary for him to fulfil the pledge given her in his hastily written note that he would quit the mansion immediately after the interview which he had besought her to grant.

The carriage was soon in readiness and the princess departed from Oaklands, having left in the hands of Purvis a liberal sum of money to be divided amongst the domestics, although the generality of them little deserved this bounty at her hands, inasmuch as they had been prepared to follow their master's instructions in respect to supporting the tale of the duchess being beneath that roof. We may observe that munificent indeed was the present which Indora made to the steward for his own special behoof, and she had found an opportunity of expressing her thanks for the well-meant note which he had thrust under her door. But she said nothing to him in respect to the dagger.

The Duke of Marchmont beheld Indora's departure from the drawing-room window, and the instant the carriage drove away, he sped up-stairs to the room which she had occupied. He searched everywhere for that dagger, but he discovered it not; it was nowhere in the chamber. Returning to the drawing-room, he was on the point of ringing the bell with a view of putting certain questions to Purvis, but he thought better of it, and repaired to the breakfastparlour. He had no appetite, but he was sore athirst; his throat felt as if he had been swallowing ashes. He ordered wine, - some choice specimen of the light and cooling vintage of the Rhine; and when he had partaken copiously thereof he proceeded to his dressing-room to make some improvement in his toilet. Afterward he wandered out upon his domain, and for hours he reflected upon all that had occurred, --- or we should rather say that he continued to be harassed and agitated by a variety of the most painful thoughts. On returning to the mansion as the dinner-hour approached, he again felt an inclination to put certain inquiries to Purvis, and again was he by a second thought prevented. The dinner passed, — that dinner to which he sat down all alone; and when it was over he again went wandering about like an unsettled spirit. When the dusk was closing in, he reëntered the mansion, and as he repaired to the drawing-room, one of the domestics preceded him with wax lights. Then, as if his mind was suddenly made up in respect to a point on which he had so often hesitated throughout this agitated day, the duke said, "Bid Purvis come hither."

In a few minutes the old steward entered the apartment, but even still the duke felt disinclined to approach the particular topic. At length, however, he said, "Purvis, something so strange occurred last night that I have made up my mind to speak to you on the subject — and yet it is so painful a one that you will not wonder I have throughout this day dreaded to approach it."

The old steward was utterly at a loss to conjecture what could have thus occurred, though, on the other hand, he was scarcely at a loss to comprehend what the painful topic must be; for whenever such an allusion was made beneath that roof, it was always at once taken for granted that it referred to the tragedy of nineteen years back.

"The fact is, Purvis," continued the duke, "I had some little design in respect to that lady; but of course that's my own affair, and nothing to do with any of my servants. I was misled as to her character. I thought she was inclined to be gay, whereas I found the very reverse to be the case. However, the point on which I desired to speak with you may be explained in a few words. Last night, Purvis, I found that lady armed with a weapon of defence, and the weapon was — you know what I mean. It was the same identical one which my wretched brother used —"

"That dagger, my lord?" cried the old steward, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes, and I see that you know something about it." exclaimed the duke. "Come, tell me. Think you that it is a pleasant thing for me to have paraded before my eyes that memorial of the terrible past?"

"My lord, I am deeply sorry," said Purvis, "but I begin to understand —" "Explain yourself. Hasten to explain yourself. Tell me the whole truth, whatever it may be," and Marchmont was labouring under the violent excitement of suspense.

"My lord," rejoined Purvis, "I have done nothing that I can hesitate to explain. I conducted the lady over the mansion, and amongst other places I showed her the cabinet in which divers family relics and various curiosities are kept — "

"Yes, yes, the one opening from the grand saloon," ejaculated the duke. "But about that dagger?"

"It has been kept in that cabinet, my lord, for many, many years past —"

"And wherefore was it kept? Who gave you such an order?"

"No one, my lord," answered the steward, " and I cannot define the feeling which has thus prompted me to keep it. It was always secured and placed out of sight in a secret drawer. I showed it to the lady for curiosity's sake, and I remember perfectly well that she questioned me as to the mode of opening that secret drawer. I saw no harm in giving her the explanation she sought —"

"Well, well," cried the duke, stamping his foot impatiently, "it was through your folly that the weapon thus fell into her hands. But come, let us see whether she has restored it to its place, or whether she has taken it away with her."

"Taken it away, my lord?" cried Purvis, "she would not do such a thing as that. Indeed, I wonder that one so well-behaved —"

"Cease your prating, and come," ejaculated the duke. Then snatching up one of the wax candles, he hurried from the room.

Purvis followed him close, and they proceeded toward the saloon with the marble pillars, the costly draperies, and the exquisite specimens of sculpture. At the very moment the Duke of Marchmont burst in with the feverish haste which inspired him, he stopped short, and something like an ejaculation of terror burst from his lips, while his eyes were riveted in a particular direction.

"What is it, my lord?" inquired Purvis, catching the infection of the duke's terror, but yet not comprehending the cause.

"Did you not perceive how the drapery at that end - I

mean close by the door of the cabinet — was suddenly and strongly agitated? " and the duke's countenance was very pale as he spoke.

" No, my lord," answered Purvis, "I did not notice it. It must either have been your Grace's fancy, or else it was the wind."

"Yes, it was doubtless a draught caused by the sudden opening of this door," and the duke advanced into the saloon, still carrying the wax light in his hand.

As they drew near the cabinet, Marchmont's looks were thrown upon the drapery which he had either seen or fancied to have seen for an instant swaying to and fro, but it was now completely still. Still there was a certain vague terror in Marchmont's soul, and he would have looked behind those hangings were it not that he was ashamed to display his fears in the presence of the steward.

"Open the cabinet, Purvis," he said, and the order was at once obeyed. "Now let us see whether the dagger be here."

Marchmont remained standing upon the threshold in such a way that the door, as it now stood open, was between himself and the drapery which a few moments back had excited his apprehension. Purvis touched the secret spring, opened the drawer, and said, "Yes, look, my lord, the weapon is there."

At that very instant the wax light was dashed from Marchmont's hand, and the saloon was enveloped in total darkness. The duke, with a loud moan, fell heavily upon the carpet, and Purvis was seized with so awful a terror that he felt as if his senses were abandoning him.

"My lord, my lord!" he at length murmured, and in the utter darkness of the place he felt his way to the duke, who lay stretched upon the floor. Still under the influence of the direst, most awful terror, the old steward entertained the horrible apprehension that some assassin blow had been dealt at his master. He swept his hands over the prostrate form, inanimate too as well as prostrate, but they encountered no weapon or oozing blood. Then Purvis ran out into the corridor, but with his hair almost standing on end as he traversed the spacious saloon, for the frightful thought was racking his mind that amidst the total darkness which prevailed a mischief might be done by unseen hands upon himself. However, he passed without molestation into the corridor, and thence he took a lamp which was burning there. As he reëntered the saloon with the light, his glances were flung in quick, nervous anxiety around, but he beheld no one except the prostrate form of his ducal master stretched near the threshold of the cabinet. On approaching nearer, he perceived that Marchmont was now recovering, and that there was no appearance about his person of any injury sustained. A long, gasping moan came slowly from his lips, and raising himself partially up, he looked with wild, haggard eyes around him; then as his regards settled upon the steward, he said, "Good heavens, Purvis! what could that have been? What followed when I sank down in unconsciousness?"

"Get up, my lord," cried the old steward, in a state of feverish excitement. "Let us alarm the household; there must be robbers in the place."

"No, no, be quiet!" said the duke, now rising up to his feet, and Purvis recoiled in actual dismay from the ghastly horror which was depicted on Marchmont's countenance. "Tell me," continued the duke, speaking in a deep, hollow voice, "what did you hear? What sound did you catch? Were any words spoken?"

"I know not, my lord — I cannot recollect. My ideas are still all in confusion," and Purvis looked around him in a species of bewildered consternation.

"But you must recollect," exclaimed the duke, impatiently; "you did not lose your consciousness."

"But I well-nigh lost my senses, my lord," was the steward's remark, which under less grave and fearful circumstances would have appeared ludicrous enough. "I tell your Grace there must be robbers in the mansion. Let us raise an alarm."

"No, I command you to remain here, and to be quiet," said the duke, sternly, and he appeared now to have almost regained his wonted self-possession. "Here, give me that lamp."

"The dagger is safe," ejaculated Purvis, as his eyes, plunging into the cabinet, fell upon the weapon which lay in the drawer that was open, and its bright blade reflected the beams of the lamp.

"Why did you say that?" demanded the duke, turning so sharply around upon the old man that he shrank back in affright. "I merely thought, my lord, that some evil-disposed person might possibly have clutched at the weapon —"

"Silence," exclaimed the duke sternly, and with the lamp in his hand, he proceeded to examine behind all the flowing draperies which hung between the marble pillars on one side of the saloon.

But no one was to be seen, and Marchmont, again accosting Purvis, said to him, "Recollect, gather your ideas together, reflect well. Did you hear no footsteps? Was there no sound of any one beating a retreat immediately after that candle was dashed from my hand? Or did you catch a glimpse of any one, for you were looking toward me at the moment? Did you behold no person suddenly emerge from behind the door the instant previous to this strange occurrence?"

The steward raised his hand to his forehead, as if to steady the thoughts that were still agitating with some degree of confusion in his brain, and at the expiration of a minute, he said, "Yes, my lord; it does seem to me that I caught a glimpse of something —"

"And that something?" demanded the duke, quickly.

"Stop, my lord! If your Grace hurries me, I shall lose the ideas which now seem to be coming back into my mind," and Purvis still kept his hand up to his forehead, as he slowly and deliberately gave utterance to those words. "Yes, I certainly did see something, now that I recollect. It was like a tall dark form, but I saw no face — "

"Are you sure, Purvis, that you saw anything at all?" inquired the duke, with a strange expression of countenance, "or are these mere imaginings, — the result of consternation and terror?"

"No, my lord," replied the old steward, in a tone of confidence; "now that I can collect my thoughts, I seem to have a perfect recollection that I did behold a tall, dark form suddenly appear behind your Grace, as you stood in the doorway with your back toward the saloon and your face toward the cabinet; then the next instant the candle was dashed from your hand, and all was utter darkness. I think I heard footsteps, but of that I am not so sure, for it was then that I was seized with such a fearful terror —"

"Let us examine the carpet," suddenly ejaculated the duke.

With these words, he held the lamp low down, and carefully scrutinized the carpet behind the door and likewise behind the drapery, but there were no marks of footsteps, and the steward said, "Your Grace will perceive that the pile of the carpet, although so thick, rises up again into an even surface wherever it has been trodden upon. Our own steps leave no marks."

"True," cried the duke, and desisting from the examination, he said, in a solemn voice, "Reflect well, Purvis; examine well your recollections. Can you speak confidently as to the sounds of footsteps?"

Again the old steward raised his hand to his forehead, and after a minute's deep reflection, he said, "No, my lord, I cannot for the life of me speak with any degree of certainty upon this point. But what does it matter? Does your Grace think," asked the old man, ingenuously, yet with a half-appalled air of consternation, "that if there were no sounds of footsteps, it must have been an apparition?"

"Lock up that drawer and follow me," said the duke, in a low, deep voice, and again did Purvis shrink back in dismay from the ghastly pallor of his countenance.

The old steward closed the drawer containing the dagger, shut the door with the secret spring, and closing the cabinet door likewise, he followed the duke, who paced slowly and thoughtfully toward the farther extremity of the saloon.

"Purvis," he said, stopping short as he reached the door leading into the passage with which the saloon communicated, "this strange and incomprehensible occurrence ----No, not incomprehensible," he abruptly ejaculated, "for, as you yourself have suggested, it must have been some evildisposed person who was concealed there, and who adopted that stratagem to make his escape in the darkness — But as I was about to say, we must keep this incident a secret. We should only be laughed at if we were to relate what has occurred. Do you understand me? I will not have all the gossips of the neighbourhood telling their idle tales about Oaklands, — the result of which would be that we should not get a servant to live with us, and as for visitors coming here again, it would be out of the question. So, mark me well! It is my will that what has occurred be kept secret. Compose your looks before you go amongst the servants again this evening."

"I will attend to all your Grace's instructions," replied Purvis, who was in most instances accustomed to pay implicit obedience to the mandates of his master.

The duke then returned to the drawing-room, while the steward repaired to his own apartment, for he felt that his countenance still wore a sufficient degree of trouble to excite the suspicions of his fellow servants if he went amongst them at once.

By eleven o'clock the entire household had withdrawn to their respective apartments, and silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

CHAPTER XXV

A NIGHT AT OAKLANDS

IT was past midnight, and the old steward was just sinking into that state of dreamy repose which precedes a deeper slumber, - for he had been lying awake, thinking of the incidents in the saloon, - when all of a sudden he was startled by his door opening, and a cry of terror was nearly bursting from his lips as his looks fell upon what appeared to be the countenance of a corpse. But in an instant he recognized the Duke of Marchmont, the ghastly pallor of whose face looked ghastlier still as the light of the candle which he carried streamed upon it. He had thrown his dressing-gown over his shoulders, — thus having evidently quitted his chamber in a haste too precipitate to enable him to put it on properly. The wildest horror was in his looks, and with staggering steps he advanced into the room. Closing the door behind him, he placed the candlestick on the chest of drawers, and threw himself on a seat, his whole manner and appearance giving him the aspect of one who had just seen some hideous spectacle or passed through a phase of appalling terror.

"Good heavens, my lord, what is the matter?" asked Purvis, all at once smitten with the conviction that something fresh and of a very dreadful character had occurred; "what is the matter, my lord? for Heaven's sake, speak!"

But the duke could not give utterance to a syllable, and still he continued to stare in wildest, ghastliest horror upon the old steward, who himself was quivering throughout every nerve and fibre.

"My lord, for Heaven's sake, speak! What is it? What is it? What is it? he again shudderingly asked.

"I know not, it must have been a dream," replied March-

mont, but in a voice so deep and hollow that as it smote upon the ears of Purvis it sent forth dismay to the innermost recesses of his soul.

"A dream, my lord," he said; "what dream could have possibly produced this astounding effect? Perhaps, after all, it was the result—"

"Yes, it must have been," rejoined Marchmont, but evidently with the air of one who sought to force upon himself a belief that was in antagonism with his own deeply settled conviction.

Purvis continued to regard his ducal master, whose countenance still denoted the unutterable horror and consternation which he had been experiencing. His eyes sank beneath the looks of the old steward; a profound sigh, or perhaps more correctly speaking, a low, long moan expressive of deepest inward agony issued from his lips.

"But what was this dream, my lord?" asked Purvis.

The duke did not immediately answer; he was evidently uncertain whether to give an explanation or not, until at length yielding to some irresistible impulse, he said, "Listen, and I will tell you."

"Shall I procure your Grace some wine? Or will your lordship take a glass of water?" inquired the old steward, for Marchmont appeared as if he were about to suffocate.

"I will help myself," was his response, and rising from his seat, he moved to where there was a decanter of water.

Filling a tumbler with hands which trembled so that the decanter and the glass jarred against each other, he raised the refreshing beverage to his lips, and it is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the water went hissing down his parched throat as if it were pouring over hot iron. Then he resumed the chair whence he had risen, but Purvis noticed that his countenance was almost as ghastly pale, though perhaps less convulsed than at first.

"Sleep was stealing upon me," he thus commenced his explanation in the same low deep voice as before, "when I felt as if gradually awakening for some reason that I could not comprehend. I cannot remember now, — indeed I knew not at the time whether it was a sound in the room, or whether a hand touched me, or whether a voice addressed me, but certain it is that I was thus unaccountably awakened from my slumber — And yet," ejaculated the duke, suddenly interrupting himself, at the same time that he started up from the chair, "it could only have been mere fancy, and nothing else. It is useless thus to enter upon the explanation of an idle dream."

"Yes, useless, my lord," remarked Purvis, " if the subject be painful."

"Why did you say that?" demanded the duke, turning abruptly toward the old man as he sat up in his bed.

"My lord — my lord," stammered Purvis, who really had meant nothing more than his words had conveyed, "I - I beg your Grace's pardon, but — but — I really — "

"Well, well," interrupted the duke, "you see that all these things naturally render me nervous and excited, — I mean that those mysterious incidents which occurred ere we went to bed — "

"They naturally made a certain impression, my lord," replied the steward. "For myself, I candidly confess that I was thinking of them until the very moment that sleep came upon my eyes."

"You said nothing about it to the servants, Purvis?" asked the duke, quickly.

"Certainly not, my lord; it was your Grace's order to the contrary."

"To be sure. It were needless to frighten them," and the duke lingered in the steward's chamber with every appearance of one who was afraid to return to his own. "About this dream of mine," he continued, after a pause, during which he first sat down, then rose up, and then sat down again, in a nervous, restless manner; "about this dream of mine, Purvis. I have a great mind to go on telling you what it was."

But Marchmont once more stopped short, he evidently did not want to continue on the same topic, and yet his mind was irresistibly led by some strong influence to hover around it, painful though it were.

"I was telling you that I had fallen asleep, when something awoke me. The night-lamp was burning as usual in the room, and I looked about me, but I saw nothing. The lamp was visibly growing fainter and fainter; there was a wax candle on the night-table upon one side of the bed, and I lighted it, but as I turned around I beheld on the other side what seemed to me to be the tall form of a man enveloped in a cloak, and holding the cloak in such a way up to his countenance as to veil it completely from my view."

Here the duke again stopped short, leaving Purvis in a species of awful suspense.

"And what did your Grace do?" he at length asked as the duke continued silent.

"To confess the truth, Purvis," was the response, "I was seized — or rather fancied I was, — for of course it was all a dream, — but it appeared to me in this dream that I was seized with so sudden a terror I lay like one paralyzed. It was that sort of petrifaction of the frame, though the senses were all keenly alive, which takes possession of one when under the influence of a nightmare. Then that dark shape seemed to bend down over me. Is it not extraordinary, Purvis? But if I were to tell you all, you would agree with me that it cannot be anything else than mere fancy?"

But the Duke of Marchmont was still in such a state of trembling nervousness that his condition, both physical and mental, proved how impossible it was to beguile himself into the belief that it was a dream, for again he rose from his seat, again he paced to and fro in an agitated manner, and then he sat down once more.

"A form bent, I say," he continued, still irresistibly impelled to hover around the subject, like a moth fluttering about a candle, — "it bent over me, — of course in my dream, you understand? — and it spoke a few words in such a deep, unearthly voice that the blood ran cold in my veins. No matter what it said; I forget—I did not hear—I could not for worlds repeat it. Perdition seize upon me! I am losing my senses."

The duke stamped his foot violently upon the floor as he gave vent to that imprecation, and again springing up from the chair, he paced nervously to and fro. The old steward was seriously alarmed, for he began to suspect that his master's intellects had received a shock and were somewhat deranged. He had not failed to notice the extraordinary and incongruous expressions which had fallen from his lips in regard to the words breathed in his ear by the tall cloaked form that either in imagination or in reality had bent over him. And now too Marchmont's face was ghastly pale and as convulsed as it was when he first entered the chamber, and the old steward tremblingly asked whether he should arouse the household and send off for medical assistance.

"Not for worlds," ejaculated the duke, with strange vehemence; then he immediately added, "You would not have me render myself ridiculous in the presence of all the servants? It is enough that I have thus found my way to your chamber. But you will not breathe a syllable of all this? You will keep it inviolably secret? Tell me, Purvis, tell me — "

"Yes, my lord; rest assured that I will do what you command. But about the dream?" added Purvis, hesi-tatingly, and his curiosity was poignantly excited.

"Ah! about the dream?" repeated the duke; "you wish to know the rest?" and in a sort of half-bewildered manner he sank down upon the chair again. "I tell you, Purvis, that the form bent over me, — I mean, you understand that it appeared to do so, — and it said some words, and it breathed a name, and that name was its own, for thus did it announce itself — And the name — "

"And the name, my lord?" repeated the steward, in the low, half-hushed tone of an awe-felt suspense, as if he expected to hear that it was the name of one from the grave which had thus been spoken.

"The name?" said the duke, gazing in a species of vacant horror and dismay upon the old man; "that name was — Bertram Vivian."

The steward started in such a way that the whole bed shook under him, and Marchmont likewise started as if that sound itself had galvanized him with a new terror.

"Yes, it was my brother's name," he continued, in a low, hollow voice, "and therefore it must have been a dream. For if it were not, then was it a shape from the other world—"

"Yes, my lord," rejoined the steward, in solemn tones, for if your brother were alive, he would not revisit the seat of his crime."

Marchmont looked in an appalled vacant horror around, and for upwards of a minute there was a profound silence in that room.

"And what followed, my lord?" at length asked the steward, who was evidently under the influence of an aweinspiring, superstitious terror.

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"I hardly know," responded Marchmont, wildly, "whether I fainted, whether I lay petrified and bathed in a cold perspiration, whether the object vanished suddenly, or whether I saw that dark shape issue from the chamber, opening and closing the door just as the living man would do, — I cannot tell. All my thoughts are in confusion when I endeavour to concentrate them on that point. In a word, I cannot rightly remember anything more until the instant that I found myself here, in your room."

"All this is most extraordinary," said Purvis, who was wrapped in a kind of solemnly superstitious bewilderment. "If your Grace's brother be no more, wherefore should his spirit come to haunt your Grace's slumbers? But if he be alive — "

"No, no, Purvis; it was all a dream. Tell me you were sure it was nought but a dream?" and it was in a paroxysm of indescribable anguish and horror, with a countenance ghastly pale, that the duke, hastily approaching the bed, clutched the old steward forcibly by the wrist.

"Yes, it must have been a dream, my lord," responded Purvis.

" I shall go up to London at once," said Marchmont, with strange abruptness.

"What, my lord? Leave in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, to be sure. And why not?" cried the duke, almost fiercely. "Do I not pay hosts of servants to do my bidding? Let some of the lazy dogs rise and get the carriage in readiness."

"But, my lord," Purvis ventured to suggest, "possibly strange things may be said, if your Grace does this. I should be questioned, and what could I say?"

"True," ejaculated Marchmont, who was evidently bewildered how to act.

"I know, my lord," continued the well-meaning old man, "that it must be a very painful thing for your Grace to have the recollection of long-past occurrences so cruelly revived, for I have not forgotten how dear your brother was to your lordship, and how you loved your poor uncle also — "

"Enough, Purvis," interrupted the duke, quickly. "I will not leave to-night. But I charge you, my faithful friend — I charge you, Purvis, not to breathe a single syllable — " "Oh, no, my lord, not for worlds. Does your Grace feel better now?"

"Yes, yes; the effect is passing off. I am almost sorry — But tell me, Purvis, do you not think I am very foolish very weak-minded to have yielded — "

"No, my lord, not at all," answered the steward; "it was natural enough — "

The Duke of Marchmont drank another tumbler of water, and, taking up the wax candle, bade the steward good night. But as his fingers rested upon the handle of the door, he again turned toward the old man, and enjoined him to the strictest secrecy. — an injunction which Purvis for the fifth or sixth time promised to obey. Then the duke went forth, and if any one had seen him as he moved along the passages and descended the stairs leading to his own apartment, there would have been no cause to envy the lordly owner of the proud domain of Oaklands. His looks were thrown nervously about: the sounds of his own footsteps, his own shadow upon the wall, appeared to smite his very soul with a mortal terror. At length he regained his chamber, and then locking the door, he looked under the bed, behind the curtains, behind the window draperies also; he passed into his dressing-room, — into every nook and corner did he tremblingly and nervously peer, as if afraid to trust himself again to his couch unless previously assured that there was no one in his suite of apartments.

And thus, let the reader rest assured, it often and often is with the patrician dwellers in splendid mansions and in marble palaces. Their lordly titles constitute no patent to guarantee them against the same feelings, the same sensations, to which all the rest of the world are liable. Rank and riches may elevate them to the loftiest pedestals, but their souls move in the same sphere as those of the commonest herd of human beings. They belong to the same earth; they breathe the same atmosphere. Strip them of their robes, and who shall be enabled to single them out as the members of a privileged order? All these circumstances prove the hideous mockery of raising one set of persons high above their fellows. In the aristocratic heaven they may blaze like meteors, but if they fall down upon the earth they prove to be merely stones. In the eyes of man only does the distinction exist: in the eyes of Heaven all are equal.

The same atmosphere which is breathed by the most wretched mendicant passes through the nostrils of a king; the same breeze which ruffles the rags of the crawling beggar pours its tide into the saloon of beauty and fashion, and the same air also which wafts the plaintive cry of poverty bears upon its wing the dulcet tones of melody in the drawing-rooms of the high-born and the opulent.

But to continue our tale. When the old steward was once more alone, — his chamber being left in total darkness, he pondered on all that he had heard with a kind of superstitious awe. He could scarcely think that it was all a dream on his ducal master's part. He had said that such was his impression, because he would have said almost anything to allay Marchmont's terrors, and to prevent himself from catching their infection. But he knew the duke well enough to be certain that he was not thus to be moved by ordinary and fanciful incidents. The conviction was strong within him that he had seen a tall, dark shape in the saloon whence the cabinet opened, and that this was no effect of the imagination. Might it not be the same shape which the duke had likewise seen? But if so, was this shape a real living being? Or was it one from another world? If it were the broad davlight. Purvis would no doubt have concluded in favour of the first alternative, but as it was night, he was enveloped in darkness, and still under the influence of that spectacle of horror and dismay which his master had presented to his view, he was far more prone to decide on behalf of the latter.

An hour passed, and slumber was again coming gradually over the eyes of the steward, when he was startled by hearing the handle of the door turn. It opened, and some one entered.

"Hush," said the individual, in a low, deep voice. "Fear not; it is no enemy who seeks you."

The hair of Purvis had at first stood on end, and now, though his consternation was somewhat mitigated, he was nevertheless unable to give utterance to a word. Through the darkness of the room he beheld a form, darker than that darkness, move toward the side of his couch, and the perspiration stood cold upon his brow.

"You are Purvis?" said that same low, deep voice, speaking in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes, I am he," answered the steward, shudderingly. "But in the name of Heaven, who are you?"

"Your master who has been hither has doubtless told you," was the slowly given and solemn response.

"Good God, is it possible?" exclaimed the steward, starting up in his couch. "Mr. Bertram Vivian, or, rather, Lord Clandon, I should say?"

"Yes, I am that unhappy being," was the rejoinder. "But compose yourself —"

"Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do?" murmured the bewildered steward, for he knew not whether to bid the long lost one avaunt as a blood-stained murderer, or whether to speak to him kindly as one who had perhaps bitterly explated the past, for that he was innocent the old man dared not think, or else wherefore should he come thus stealthily like a robber in the dead of the night?

"Purvis," said Lord Clandon, for such was the denomination to which Bertram Vivian was entitled, "I can judge what is passing in your mind. But if I were guilty, it would be useless to declare that long years of penitence have gone far to atone for my crime, because this much you would doubtless comprehend. On the other hand, if I be innocent, the time is not yet come when I can stand in that light before the world. Is it possible, Purvis, that you can so far forget the past — or else suspend your judgment altogether — as to bear with me a few minutes for the present?"

"Yes, yes, my lord," answered the old steward, both bewildered and affected. "What would you with me? Why come so stealthily hither? Why terrify your brother as you have done? Oh, my lord, speak, speak!"

"You must not question me, Purvis," answered Bertram, still speaking in that same low, deep tone as before; while in respect to his form, it was scarcely perceptible amidst the obscurity that prevailed, and as for his countenance, no glimpse of it could the old man catch.

"Yes, my lord, there is one question that I must put," cried Purvis, vehemently, and he quivered with suspense. "That unhappy lady — the Duchess Eliza — "

"Purvis, not a syllable in respect to the past," interrupted Lord Clandon, almost sternly. "Suffer me to question you, and answer me as if you were testifying your compassion toward a man who for many long years has drunk so deeply of the cup of bitterness — "

"My lord," sobbed the old steward, "I am moved as if I were a child," — for his generous heart was touched by the ineffable mournfulness of the long lost one's tone. "Question me as you choose, and I will answer. But, oh, if you could only breathe a single word to make me fancy — "

"Purvis, I always knew that you possessed a good heart," interrupted Lord Clandon, "and by everything sacred I adjure you to suspend your judgment concerning me. When to-morrow comes, look upon this visit which I have paid to your chamber, as if it were a dream. But if the conviction rest in your mind that it was a reality, then with equal solemnity do I adjure you to keep upon your lips the seal of an inviolable silence. The time may come — it must come, and shortly too — when that seal shall be lifted, and perhaps, Purvis, you may then rejoice that you have borne patiently and kindly with one who has known unhappiness as dire and bitter as mine."

"Ah, my lord," sobbed the old steward, "when I look back over a number of years and think of what you were when last I saw you, — young, handsome, and elegant — "

"Enough, Purvis," again interrupted Bertram, and now his hand, seeking that of the old steward, pressed it warmly for an instant, and Purvis himself did not shudderingly withdraw that hand of his as if from the grasp of a murderer.

There was a pause of a few moments, and then Bertram said, "You will be surprised at the subject on which I am about to question you. But it is needful; it is of importance — "

"Proceed, my lord, proceed," cried the old man, who was under an influence which strangely attracted him toward the long lost one.

"There was a lady staying beneath this roof," continued Bertram, "and though unseen myself, I beheld you walking with her."

"Yes, my lord, it was an Eastern lady," answered Purvis, and I regret to add that it was for no honourable motive she was somehow or another led to come hither."

"But she experienced no outrage at my brother's hands?" said Bertram, quickly.

The old steward hesitated for a few moments, and then

he answered, " I warned her, my lord, — yes, I warned her; I considered it to be my duty. She defended herself, and it was — "

But he stopped short, for he was just upon the point of adding something the bare idea of which struck him as fearful to a degree, considering the person to whom he was thus speaking.

"Finish your sentence, and deal with me frankly," said Bertram. "I have particular reasons for the questions which I am now putting, and for those which I may yet have to put."

"No, my lord, I cannot, I cannot," murmured the old man.

"Purvis, I beseech you, — nay, I implore and entreat, by all the misery I have endured — "

"Well, my lord, it was with a certain weapon — Ah! for Heaven's sake do tell me — do, for God's sake justify the wild hope which thrills in my heart. Say the one word which shall make me believe that it was not your hand — "

"Purvis, give not thus way to your feelings," interrupted Lord Clandon, "but for Heaven's sake be calm and collected. I understand you. That Eastern lady defended herself with a certain weapon. But how came it in her hand? Tell me, Purvis, I conjure you, tell me everything."

Purvis proceeded to explain, but with many self-interruptions and impassioned ejaculations, as various thoughts were excited in his mind in rapid succession, - how Indora had arrived at Oaklands, how he had escorted her over the mansion and through the grounds, how she had questioned him much in respect to the long-past tragedy, how he had shown her the fatal weapon, which he had preserved, how she had so mysteriously and stealthily possessed herself of it, how ere her departure she had restored it to the place where it was kept, how the Duke of Marchmont had questioned him on the subject, and how they had gone together to the cabinet to ascertain whether it was there, when the wax light was so suddenly dashed from his Grace's hand. During this recital, Bertram was frequently compelled to encourage the old man to proceed, to soothe his excited feelings, to check him when he sought to become the questioner, and to induce him to extend his explanations to those details of Indora's ramble to particular spots which

specially related to the tragedy of a bygone year. For upwards of an hour did Lord Clandon and the steward thus remain in conversation in the deep darkness of that chamber, until at length the mysterious visitor was about to take his departure.

"Purvis," he said, "you have rendered me a service the extent of which you may some day comprehend. But by everything sacred do I again conjure you to treat this visit of mine as if it had never taken place. Not a syllable to your master, not a word to your fellow servants. Remember, Purvis," continued Bertram, in a tone of the deepest solemnity, "for the present I am under the ban of the law, and I need but hint at what would be my fate if through any indiscretion on your part — "

"My lord," interrupted the old man, sobbing violently, I would not do such a thing. No I could not, even if I did not entertain that wild hope — "

"Enough," ejaculated Bertram, and again the steward's hand was for an instant pressed in his own.

The next moment there was the sound of a door cautiously opening and shutting; all was then silent in the chamber. Sleep presently fell upon the steward's eyes, and when he awoke in the morning, he was at a loss to conjecture whether the main incidents of the past night were a reality, or whether it were all a wild and fanciful dream.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DUKE

It was evening, — the evening of the day which followed the incidents of the memorable night depicted in the previous chapter, and Madame Angelique was seated as usual in her elegantly furnished apartment, when the Duke of Marchmont was announced. She had little expected to see him so soon, but she rose from her seat with the conviction that she might congratulate him on his success with the Oriental lady, when she stopped short on beholding the extraordinary expression of his countenance. It was pale and careworn; there was a restless trouble in the eyes, and it was also evident that he had been drinking.

"What in Heaven's name is the matter, my lord?" she asked, seized with consternation lest she herself should become involved in some dilemma with respect to the machinations which she had now no doubt had resulted in failure.

"Perdition take me, and everybody as well as everything else," said the duke, flinging himself upon a seat. "Give me a glass of wine. No, a tumbler. Fill it up to the brim; spare not your champagne."

"But, my lord, do tell me," said Madame Angelique, her countenance turning so deadly pale that the rouge sat like plastered patches upon it, "do tell me — "

"The wine, I say," ejaculated Marchmont, fiercely.

With trembling hands Madame Angelique filled a tumbler with champagne, and the duke tossed it off at a draught.

"There," he said, endeavouring to force himself to laugh with an air of gaiety, "now I am cheered. It is astonishing what admirable effects are produced by wine — delicious wine." "Pray tell me, my lord, what has occurred?" and the infamous woman was still quivering with suspense.

"All your precious schemes resulted in nothing," responded Marchmont, "or in something much worse than nothing, for my discomfiture was complete, my failure signal, — perdition take it!"

"And will there be any evil consequences? Does she threaten law?" demanded Madame Angelique, quickly.

"No, no; we are safe enough upon that score," rejoined the duke.

"Then wherefore look so wild? Why appear thus troubled? Your Grace has frightened me so — "

"I scarcely know what is the matter with me," answered the duke. "I too have been frightened — But no, no, that is all nonsense on my part. In a word, I don't know what I am saying. Give me more wine."

"Pardon me, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "but I really think you have taken enough."

"Why, you old wretch," he exclaimed angrily; "it is wine bought with my money, I'll be bound."

"Well, well, my lord, pray do not get out of temper," and she filled him a tumbler accordingly.

"This is the elixir that makes man forget his cares and drowns thought," cried the duke, affecting a hilarious mood, but it was a feeble and sickly endeavour. "There," he added, "that cheers me, — that inspires me," and yet an almost ghastly expression of care and anguish swept over his features.

Madame Angelique gazed upon him with mingled terror and astonishment. She knew not what to think. In spite of the assurance he had given her, she still laboured under the apprehension that some trouble would arise from their defeated projects in respect to Indora.

"What ails your Grace?" she asked, in an agony of suspense; "there is something unnatural in all this."

"If you said that there was something extraordinary and incomprehensible in the Eastern lady's conduct, you would be right enough," responded Marchmont. "Instead of finding one who was to be easily vanquished — "

"I never told your Grace that the conquest would be an easy one," interrupted Madame Angelique. "I warned you that she was a paragon of virtue — " "A dragon you might have said," replied Marchmont, bitterly, "for when I found my way to her chamber, she brandished a dagger in my face," and again did an expression of ghastly horror sweep over his countenance.

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, almost contemptuously, "and were you not prepared for resistance? What! you, a man, to be frightened at a dagger in the hands of a woman?"

"Perdition take you, old beldame," vociferated the duke, fiercely; "how dare you make your insolent remarks upon my conduct?"

"I crave your Grace's pardon," cried Madame Angelique, with an air of frightened humility. "I only fancied that I had prepared your Grace sufficiently to expect some degree of resistance — "

"Silence, and listen," interrupted the duke, sharply; then with another attempt to affect a gay and hilarious mood, he burst out into a laugh, saying, "Come, my dear madam, I was only jesting. I did not mean to offend you, but your good wine has put me into such spirits, ha, ha!" and there was sickliness and feebleness in his forced merriment.

"Well, my lord, the scheme failed, no matter how. But why — why," asked Madame Angelique, urgently, "has it affected you thus?"

"There is a mystery which must be cleared up," was the duke's response, "and you alone can undertake the task. Indora had some ulterior motive which you never penetrated. She is not the credulous, inexperienced creature you take her for. She had some design in going to Oaklands, and what that design was you must discover. A thousand guineas if you succeed, but if you fail, you shall never again see me cross your threshold. This is plain English; do you comprehend it? "

"I do, my lord, but I am perplexed and bewildered," and the woman's looks justified her words. "What earthly motive could the lady have had — "

"That, I tell you," exclaimed the duke, passionately, "is what you must find out. While this lady was at Oaklands, she was asking a thousand questions, prying into all sorts of things, troubling herself with matters which one would have fancied to be scarcely known to her at all, — in short, Madame Angelique, she had some deep design, of that I am convinced."

The infamous woman reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, and then she said, "The only way in which I can possibly learn anything is through the ayah Sagoonah, but as I have previously informed your Grace, she is a woman of a few words — "

"Lavish gold upon her, and it will loosen her tongue," ejaculated Marchmont. "You have brought me into all these perplexities, and it is for you to extricate me, — perdition take them!"

"I really am at a loss to comprehend your Grace," said Madame Angelique, with an air of the most unfeigned surprise. "So long as this Eastern lady does not threaten us with law proceedings, or seek to punish us for anything that has taken place, what earthly reason has your lordship to apprehend that her visit to Oaklands can involve you in any peril?"

"No matter," exclaimed the duke; "there is something sinister in that lady's proceedings, and I cannot get it out of my mind that so far from being your dupe, she made a tool of you. Pray try and recollect the precise terms in which the subject of that visit to Oaklands was first introduced."

Madame Angelique again reflected for a brief space, and then she said, "Well, I do remember that it was of her own accord she remarked that she had heard of your beautiful seat at Oaklands and should like much to see it. I had just mentioned your Grace's name as if quite accidentally, when she made that observation — "

"It is as clear as daylight," exclaimed the duke, angrily; you have been outwitted, and I am the victim!"

"The victim, my lord. But how? Your Grace really makes me half-inclined to think that there is something more than you suffer me to know, and unless you give me the fullest explanation, it is impossible for me to fathom this mystery."

"You have got nothing to do," returned Marchmont, "but to learn that lady's motive for wishing to pay a visit to Oaklands. It was not through mere curiosity, — of that I am well convinced. There are hundreds of beautiful country-seats, and wherefore should she thus have pitched upon mine? Besides, I tell you that I saw enough of her to convince me that so far from being inexperienced in our habits, manners, and customs, she is in every way as civilized and accomplished a woman as any English lady in the land."

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "I will lose no time in seeing what Sagoonah the ayah can do for me."

"Be it so," responded the duke, and having quaffed another tumbler of wine, he took his departure.

On returning to his mansion in Belgrave Square, the Duke of Marchmont learned that Mr. Armytage was waiting to see him. An expression of annoyance passed over his countenance, but he repaired to the room where Zoe's father was seated. Composing his looks in as amiable a manner as he possibly could, he gave Armytage his hand, saying, "Well, what brings you hither at half-past ten o'clock at night? "

"I regret to say," replied Armytage, "that I am compelled to beg a boon — "

"What! another?" ejaculated the duke, utterly unable to repress his anger and annoyance. "But of course," he added, hastily, "it is not of a pecuniary character?"

"Indeed, my lord," responded Mr. Armytage, "I am sorry to say — "

"But what the deuce is coming over you, my good fellow?" exclaimed Marchmont. "You who for years were so prosperous have of late appeared to be going altogether in the contrary direction."

"I hope and trust, my lord," responded Armytage, "that it is merely a temporary inconvenience which I am suffering. I shall put myself right shortly."

"Ah! so you told me six or seven months ago, when I lent you fifty thousand pounds, which, I need not remind you, have never been repaid."

"It is perfectly true, my lord," answered Zoe's father, growing more and more doggedly decisive in his tone, "but it is not the less certain that if I do not have twenty-five thousand pounds to-morrow by midday, I shall be a ruined man."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds, Travers," ejaculated the duke.

"Hush, my lord! that name!" said Armytage, hastily.

"Perdition take the name," cried Marchmont, as if driven almost to desperation.

"And yet methinks," said Armytage, coldly, "it was

not altogether without your Grace's concurrence — and in some sense by your counsel — that I abandoned it."

"Well, well, but about this money which you require?" rejoined the duke, petulantly. "It is altogether out of the question — I cannot afford it — I — "

"And I, my lord," answered the other decisively, "cannot afford to be ruined."

"But how is all this?" demanded the duke.

"When I applied to your Grace for the fifty thousand pounds," responded Armytage, "I informed you that I had suffered materially by that scoundrel Preston, who committed forgeries to such a large amount. During the past six months I have been endeavouring to retrieve my losses, but somehow or another fortune has set in steadily against me, and I have only incurred fresh ones."

"And what chance have you of improving your position?" demanded the duke. "I thought you told me when I lent you the former amount that you had numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of a short time?"

"And so I had, my lord," replied Mr Armytage, "but — " "But what? Has that money all gone likewise?"

"There is no use denying the truth," rejoined Armytage; "the fact is, I have been exceedingly unlucky, and if I do not pay this sum of twenty-five thousand into my banker's hand to-morrow to meet certain bills that will be due, I shall be a ruined man. On the other hand, if your Grace will assist me, I can immediately procure fresh pecuniary accommodation — "

"Then you will have to borrow in order to be enabled to go on?" exclaimed the duke.

"Yes, but fortune is sure to take a turn. In a word, my lord, I am deeply interested in a splendid speculation which only requires money to float it on to complete success."

"Then you, a money-lender," cried the duke, " are now in the hands of money-lenders?"

"It is a highly respectable solicitor who is assisting me," rejoined Armytage, — "a Mr. Coleman, of Bedford Row, Holborn. The fact is, he has advanced me this twenty-five thousand pounds which I have got to pay to-morrow, and if my bills be all taken up, I can go to him with the certainty of obtaining fifty thousand." "But out of that fifty thousand," said the duke, "would you pay me back the twenty-five you wish me to advance?"

Armytage hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Yes, my lord, I will," but it was in a way as if he thought to himself that if he did repay the sum he could speedily have it back again in case of need.

"I do not think, Travers, that you would deceive me --- "

"Pray, my lord, be careful about that name. I don't know how it is, but of late your Grace has frequently dropped it inadvertently."

"Yes, I am afraid I have," answered the duke, in an abstracted manner. "Well, come to me at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and you shall have the amount. But remember, it is to be repaid in the course of a few days, for if not, it would put me to a serious inconvenience. And pray, Armytage, mind what you are about, or you will ruin yourself. Do your daughter and her husband know of these difficulties?"

"Heaven forbid, my lord!" replied Armytage. "Zoe has gone abroad."

"Gone abroad?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Of course her husband has accompanied her — "

"No, she has gone alone, — that is to say, with only two female servants."

"And what is the meaning of this?" cried the duke; "you don't intend me to understand that she is separated from her husband?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," returned Armytage. "Meredith was most anxious to accompany her, but she begged and implored that she might go alone. Her health has been failing for some little time past, and the physicians ordered her to visit a more genial clime. Meredith and I were compelled to let her have her own way, for if we had refused it would only have agitated her and rendered her worse. I think that she is the least thing inclined to be fanciful, — not exactly hypochondriacal, — but she has got it into her head that a few months' complete seclusion in the south of France or in Italy will put her completely to rights."

"Then, in that case," observed the duke, "it was much better to let her have her own way."

"This is what I represented to Meredith," said Mr. Armytage, "but I had a great deal of trouble in persuading him to consent. He is dotingly fond of Zoe; she assures me that nothing can exceed his love for her, and she would be completely happy were it not for this nervous illness of hers."

After a little more conversation, Mr. Armytage took his leave, and when he was gone, the duke, on examining his banker's book, experienced the most bitter vexation on finding that the cheque which he had promised to give on the morrow would considerably overdraw his account. The duke's credit was however good, and consequently there was no difficulty in the way of his compliance with Mr. Armytage's exorbitant demand.

On the following day, at about eleven in the forenoon, Madame Angelique, apparelled in her plainest garb, proceeded to Bayswater, and walked about in the neighbourhood of the princess's villa. She presently saw Mark, the faithful intendant or majordomo of the household, issue from the dwelling; she pretended to be walking toward the main road, with the air of a person who had a settled and legitimate object in view, and thus she watched him until he entered an omnibus. When the vehicle was out of sight, she retraced her steps toward the neighbourhood of the villa, and in a few minutes she beheld Sagoonah in the garden. Approaching the fence, she gave a peculiar cough, which at once reached the ayah's keen ear, and the latter proceeded toward a spot where, shrouded from the view of the windows of the dwelling, she could converse with Madame Angelique.

"Your mistress has returned," she said to the ayah, " has she not?"

"Yes, she came back the day before yesterday," replied Sagoonah. "What was done?"

"Not that which we anticipated," rejoined Madame Angelique. "Your mistress possessed herself of a dagger, and so terrified the duke that he fled away from her presence."

"Then your duke," answered Sagoonah, her superb eyes flashing fire and her vermilion lips wreathing with ineffable scorn, "was a poor, paltry coward. Why do you seek me again?" she demanded, almost fiercely.

"Has the Lady Indora said nothing to you in order to account for her absence?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Nothing," replied the ayah. "It is not probable that a great lady such as she is would enter into familiar discourse with her slave on a subject she would of course rather avoid." "And is it impossible for you to draw her into conversation?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Impossible on that point, I feel convinced," answered Sagoonah. "But can you think I shall attempt to serve you further when you throw away such golden opportunities?" and there was so sinister a light shining in the depths of her lustrous eyes that the wily Frenchwoman was strangely struck thereby.

"Sagoonah," she said, as a suspicion arose in her mind, "I think that it was not for the sake of the gold alone you undertook to serve my purpose?"

"And wherefore do you think that?" asked the ayah, coldly.

"Because there is a visible feeling of annoyance on your part at the failure of the enterprise. You wished your mistress to succumb to the Duke of Marchmont?" and Madame Angelique fixed her eyes keenly upon the countenance of the ayah.

"Explain yourself more fully," said Sagoonah, still with a cold and unruffled demeanour.

"Perhaps you have reason to dislike your mistress?" suggested Madame Angelique, "and you therefore aided in a scheme which was to effect her ruin. In a word, you were inspired by a hope of vengeance?"

"No, not vengeance," murmured the ayah, now all in an instant becoming profoundly agitated. "My mistress has ever been kind to me, but there is something here" — and she laid her hand upon her heart — "which seems to be an evil spirit prompting me to dreadful things."

"It is as I have said," resumed Madame Angelique: "you have some bitter feeling in respect to your mistress, and therefore you aided in the hope of working her ruin?"

"Woman," replied Sagoonah, fiercely, "the evil spirit has thrown you as a temptress in my way. Would that I had never seen you, or else that your plans had been effectually carried out. For now I have all the remorse of an evil deed, without the satisfaction of knowing that it was accomplished."

"Do not reproach me," said Madame Angelique, in that voice of cajolery which she knew so well how to assume, "but let us converse reasonably together. Ah!" she ejaculated, as another suspicion struck her, "perhaps you wish to be introduced to one of those fine gentlemen of whom I have spoken to you, but you are afraid to fall unless your mistress has first set you the example? "

"Dare you think," asked Sagoonah, her eyes again flashing fire, "that impure thoughts harbour in this bosom of mine?" and with a mechanical gesture she partially drew aside the snow-white drapery from her swelling bust. "No, no; and if for a single instant I suffered you to imagine that I was merely yielding a preference to my mistress in respect to your vile purposes, it was simply because I did not then choose to enter into the slightest explanation with you. But rest assured that if I were brought into the presence of any one of the fine gentlemen to whom you have alluded and if it were for an improper purpose — I would not be content with the mere brandishing of a dagger, as you say my mistress was, but I would plunge it deep down into the villain's heart."

As the ayah thus spoke, her eyes kept flashing continuous fires, her nostrils dilated, her bosom swelled, and she drew that bayadere form of hers up with so queenlike an air that her whole demeanour astonished and terrified Madame Angelique.

"There is some strange mystery in all this," thought the infamous woman to herself, and she was bewildered how to act. At length she said, "My dear Sagoonah, you treat me most singularly — most unkindly. Are we not to act together?"

"In what way?" demanded the ayah, who had all in a moment become calm and collected again. "If I still sought the ruin of my mistress, there is no means of effecting it, for the chance to which I helped you has been flung away in the most dastard manner."

"Can you not possibly ascertain the real motive which induced the Lady Indora to visit Oaklands? That is all I now require," continued Madame Angelique, "and I will lavish gold upon you if you succour me in my aim."

"Do you fancy, then," asked Sagoonah, fixing her dark eyes penetratingly upon Madame Angelique, "that the Lady Indora made use of you as an instrument to further her own views, instead of herself becoming your dupe and your victim?"

"Yes," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "that is the very

opinion which the Duke of Marchmont himself expressed, and which I now hold."

Sagoonah reflected profoundly for several minutes, during which so fixed was her gaze downward — so grave and unruffled was her countenance — that Madame Angelique could not form the slightest conjecture as to what things she was revolving in her mind. At length the ayah slowly raised her head, and again fixing her looks with an earnest but unfathomable expression upon the Frenchwoman, she said, "Then the Duke of Marchmont is afraid?"

"The conduct of the Lady Indora," replied Madame Angelique, "was of a character to engender vague and mysterious apprehensions — "

" Of what?" asked Sagoonah, quickly.

"I know not," responded Madame Angelique, really bewildered by the question. "Perhaps the duke imagines that a lady visiting his country-seat under such extraordinary circumstances, and conducting herself so singularly as she did, must have some hidden motive which is full of vague and ominous portent."

"And it is," rejoined Sagoonah: then again fixing her luminous dark eyes with a strange significancy on Madame Angelique, she added, "Rest assured that if the Duke of Marchmont do not most effectually ruin the Lady Indora, she will prove the ruin of him. Let this warning suffice, and now I charge you that you come hither to seek me no more."

"One word, Sagoonah, and only one word," exclaimed Madame Angelique, terrified by the ayah's solemnly given warning, for at the moment she could think of no ruin which might overtake the duke without involving herself at the same time, because she could not fancy that whatsoever mischief which Indora had it in her power to achieve was in any way apart from an invocation of the law's vengeance on those who had endeavoured to beguile her to her destruction.

Sagoonah was hastily turning away when she had given utterance to her words of warning, but at that entreaty of Madame Angelique's she stopped short, saying, "What would you yet with me?"

"You have told me," responded the Frenchwoman, "that ruin will overtake the duke if Indora herself be not ruined. In case of need, may I again rely upon your services?" Sagoonah reflected deeply for a few instants, and then said, "To-morrow, at this same hour, I will be here."

Having thus spoken, she passed hastily away, and her white raiment was lost to Madame Angelique's view amongst the dense foliage of the garden.

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. SHADBOLT

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock in the evening, we shall again find the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique closeted together in the luxuriously furnished sitting-room which the latter was wont to occupy. The infamous woman had explained to the duke all which passed between herself and Sagoonah, and Marchmont was deeply agitated thereby. Madame Angelique had not as yet questioned him as to the particular cause of this trouble, for she thought that she more or less knew it, and that it concerned herself as much as him, but she presently said, "How was it that your Grace assured me last evening that we had nothing to apprehend in the shape of exposure or law proceedings?"

"I scarcely know what I said," he answered. "You saw that I was excited and bewildered — "

"But what can she do?" demanded Madame Angelique, nervously.

"If she were to lay an information before a magistrate," returned the duke, "you would at once be arrested, and though the privilege of the peerage would save me from the same extent of ignominy that would overtake you, yet the exposure would be terrific for me likewise."

"And yet," cried Madame Angelique, as a remembrance smote her, "the ayah never told me that the princess meditated my ruin. And then, too, I cannot understand why Indora should have gone prying and peering into the affairs at Oaklands, as your Grace last night informed me she had done. After all, my lord," added the woman, clinging to the hope which had thus sprung up within her, "I think that it is your Grace who somehow or another has alone cause for apprehension." "You think so?" said the duke, and a strange expression passed over his countenance. "Listen, Madame Angelique," he continued to observe, "you do not know these Eastern women, — it is impossible to fathom their designs. They are stealthy and treacherous as the serpents which belong to their native clime. Sagoonah's warning is not to be neglected. Rest assured that the Princess Indora is terribly vindictive — "

At this moment a domestic entered, and whispered something in the ear of Madame Angelique.

"Very good," said the woman; "I will come in a moment."

"What is it," asked the duke, when the servant had withdrawn.

"A gentleman who has just entered the saloon from Monsieur Bertin's house," was the response.

"Then pray get rid of your patron, whoever he is, as soon as possible," said Marchmont, in a tone of visible ill-humour, "for our conversation is of much greater moment just at present than any visits in the way of business."

"I will not be many minutes absent," responded the Frenchwoman. "It is doubtless a stranger — one of neighbour Bertin's recommendation — and I am bound to be courteous and civil toward him."

Having thus spoken. Madame Angelique issued from her private apartment, leaving the duke by himself there, and she proceeded to that saloon which on former occasions we have described. None of the young ladies were there at the moment, but she saw that the individual who had just been introduced thither was carefully examining the mirrorcontrived door. He was handsomely dressed, but the keen, experienced eye of Madame Angelique at once detected that he was not a gentleman, in the common acceptance of the term. Indeed, there was something vulgar in his appearance. and he did not seem accustomed to the elegant apparel which he had on. A suspicion of evil flashed to the mind of the infamous proprietress of the establishment, but putting on a smiling countenance, she accosted the visitor, who had been so absorbed in examining the mirror-contrived door that he had not in the first instance noticed her entrange from the opposite side of the room.

"You are Madame Angelique?" he said.

"I am," was the response, and she affected to smile with the utmost affability.

"Well, ma'am," rejoined the man, " and I am a detective officer."

A faint scream burst from the guilty woman's lips, and she felt as if she were about to faint, for in that announcement there was something terrible to her ears and fraught with direst apprehension to her soul.

"But do not alarm yourself," he almost immediately resumed, "for I come in quite a friendly manner."

Infinite was the relief produced by this second announcement, and Madame Angelique instantaneously began to overwhelm her visitor with attentions. She made him sit down at the table, she produced wine and other refreshments from the amply supplied sideboard, and her visitor appeared well inclined to do justice to them.

"You are an amiable woman, Madame Angelique," he said, having tossed off his second bumper, " and I could not find it in my heart to hurt you. My name, ma'am, is Shadbolt. Perhaps you may have heard it before?"

"I cannot say I recollect it," answered Madame Angelique. "But do explain what brought you hither, — for I am still so agitated and excited — "

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt; "you have no reason to be afraid. The truth is," he continued, making an inroad into a sponge cake by means of a silver knife, and then immediately applying the same instrument to a melon, out of which he cut a huge slice, — "the truth is, ma'am, certain information has been given to the police — "

"By whom?" asked Madame Angelique, eagerly, and she was trembling from head to foot.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell," replied Shadbolt. "All I know is that by some means or another an intimation was conveyed to the commissioners of police this very day that your establishment was of such and such a description, — of course, ma'am, I don't like to make indelicate allusions. By goles, this sherry's first-rate, and the port's stunning!"

"The commissioners of police," murmured the wretched Madame Angelique; "what will become of me?"

"Nothing unpleasant, if you only listen to me," answered Mr. Shadbolt. "It was lucky for you, ma'am, that I was appointed to look into the little matter, for if it had been any other of the detectives, you would have found yourself in Queer Street, and no mistake. But, I, my dear madam, am an exception to the rule; I know what gentility is, and I wouldn't think of acting harsh toward a lady of your — " he was about to say "respectability," but he thought he had better use the word "generosity," and he substituted it accordingly.

"I cannot be too grateful to you," exclaimed Madame Angelique, to whose mind an immense relief was imparted by the praises which Mr. Shadbolt sang of himself.

"You see, ma'am," continued this individual, who was most impartially dispensing his attention to all the wines, fruits, and cakes upon the table, "the information which was sent to the commissioners described how your neighbour, the French tailor, has a pleasant little understanding with you, and how a well-dressed person, by whispering a word in Monsieur Bertin's ear, to the effect that he has got an appointment with a lady in your house, could at once obtain admission, and I must do you the justice, ma'am, to observe that of all the neat, compact, and useful contrivances I ever saw, that looking-glass door beats them all into fits."

"Good Heaven, then, the secret is known to the commissioners?" gasped Madame Angelique.

"You ought to console yourself," replied Mr. Shadbolt, by the reflection that it is a wonder it should have been kept a secret so long."

"And what will you do to help me? How will you serve me as a friend?" asked the Frenchwoman, eagerly.

"It all depends, ma'am," was the response. "Everything has its price. No reflections, ma'am, but you have your price for the pleasant little accommodation you furnish here, and without being more personal than is absolutely necessary, I may add that I, Isaac Shadbolt, — or honest Ike, as I am generally called, — have my price also."

"Anything, everything, if you will only shield me," said Madame Angelique, in a flutter of mingled hope and suspense.

"Come, ma'am, fifty guineas won't hurt you?"

"A hundred," exclaimed Madame Angelique, her generosity becoming lavish in proportion to the amount of peril that was to be averted. "I think I said a hundred," observed Shadbolt, coolly, "but at all events we'll make it so."

Out came Madame Angelique's purse; with a nervous hand she counted down what she conceived to be five banknotes for twenty pounds each, but one happened to be for fifty, though when Mr. Shadbolt reckoned them over with an air of easy indifference, he did not consider it necessary to draw her attention to the little oversight.

"And now, ma'am," he said, "I tell you what must be done. I shall make my report to-morrow, and it will be to the effect that though there certainly is that looking-glass door of communication, yet that you have given up the business, and you are now devoting yourself altogether to the millinery line. I shall add too that I contrived to learn that the looking-glass door is to be walled up — "

"And so it shall be," cried Madame Angelique. "Anything — anything — "

"Don't be foolish, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt, having tossed off his ninth or tenth bumper; "you needn't do anything of the sort. Only be more careful in future; don't let that French tailor suffer a soul to pass through his house unless he knows he is all right, pay me a cool hundred every year, and you may go on driving as roaring a trade as ever."

"Then you do really think that for the present there is no danger?" said Madame Angelique.

"Not an atom of it, if you follow my advice. Honest Ike Shadbolt is not the man to deceive a lady of your respect generosity, I mean. And now, ma'am, I'll be wishing you good night."

Mr. Shadbolt, having consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, lingered to drink one more glass of wine to the lady's health, then just one more to his own, then a last one to the highly philanthropic sentiment of "Here's better luck!" He was then advancing toward the mirror-contrived door with a somewhat unsteady pace, when Madame Angelique said, "Have you really no idea who gave the information to the police? Do you think it was a lady?"

Mr. Shadbolt had in reality no more idea than the man in the moon, but under the influence of the wine and the circumstances, he thought it necessary to appear knowing, and he therefore said, "Well, ma'am, betwixt you and me and the post, you are not very far wrong." "Ah, I see you know more than you have chosen to tell me." exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Pray be candid —"

"Well, you see, ma'am, it would not exactly do for us secret officers to tell everything we do know."

"It was a lady, then," cried Madame Angelique. "Was it — was it a lady at — at — Bayswater?"

"Well, if you push me into a corner," answered Shadbolt, with a look of tipsy knowingness, "it was," — but let the reader understand well that the fellow was in reality in entire ignorance respecting the source of that information which had been sent to the commissioners of police.

He took his departure, and Madame Angelique hastened back to the room where she had left the Duke of Marchmont. Although the matter had ended satisfactorily to a certain extent, and even more so than she had at first dared hope when the terrible term "detective officer" smote upon her ears, yet she was still labouring under a considerable degree of agitation, and the Duke of Marchmont was instantaneously struck by her appearance.

"Something new?" he exclaimed, petulantly. "Misfortunes never come alone; they strike us blow upon blow. But what is it?"

Madame Angelique explained everything that had taken place, not forgetting to add how she had wormed out (as she really believed she had done) the admission from Isaac Shadbolt that it was a lady at Bayswater who had given the information to the police commissioners. This piece of intelligence astonished Marchmont. Indora had given him to understand, when at Oaklands, that there would be no exposure, and this assurance he had considered to include an equal exception of Madame Angelique from the wreaking of vengeance. In fact, he had not really dreaded law proceedings or any such signs of Indora's wrath at all, though on this evening of which we are writing, he had suffered Madame Angelique to believe the contrary, simply because he sought to work upon her fears, bend her to his purpose, and induce her to combine with him in some plot against the Eastern lady. But from the intelligence he had just received, it appeared to be unquestionable that Indora was positively setting herself to work to inflict chastisement upon Madame Angelique.

"But how on earth," he exclaimed, "could Indora have

obtained an insight into the mysteries of your establishment? "

"That is what puzzles and bewilders me," responded the infamous woman. "Oh, I wish — I wish I had never had anything to do with those Orientals!"

"You see, my worthy friend," answered the duke, bitterly, "that we are both of us involved in the most alarming perplexities. Just now you were flattering yourself that Indora did not mean to include you in her vengeance — "

"She has already begun," said Madame Angelique, " and I tremble lest it should not end there."

"End there?" exclaimed Marchmont; "it would be preposterous to indulge in such a hope. I tell you that these Eastern women are as vindictive as tigresses and as cunning as serpents. We have become the objects of this vengeance and this subtlety — "

"What is to be done?" cried Madame Angelique, literally shaking herself in her mingled spite and despair.

The duke looked her hard in the face, and said, "Did you not ask Sagoonah whether she would again serve you? Did she not confess that she has some feeling, no matter what, that prompts her to yearn for the ruin of her mistress? And has she not consented to meet you in the forenoon of tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes; this is true enough," replied Madame Angelique. "But what can we do?"

"What idea had you in your head," inquired Marchmont, "when you asked if she would again assist you?"

"I had no fixed idea. I had not thought of anything; I was perplexed and bewildered at the time, — frightened too — "

"And yet," rejoined Marchmont, still eying the Frenchwoman significantly, "you did think of making some use of Sagoonah?"

"I see that your lordship has an idea in your head," said Madame Angelique, hastily. "Tell me, what is it? I would do anything, — yes, anything, anything, to rid ourselves of that enemy."

"Anything, did you say?" asked the duke, and he drew his chair more closely to that which the woman occupied.

"Good heavens, how strange your Grace is looking at me!" she cried, and then in a faltering voice she added, "What — what do you mean, my lord? What would you have done? What — what would you do?"

"Indora," answered Marchmont, hovering as it were around the point to which he longed to come, but on which he dared not too abruptly seek to settle the Frenchwoman's mind, — "Indora is an obstacle or an eyesore, for some reason or another, in Sagoonah's path?"

"Yes, my lord. Well?" and Madame Angelique held her breath half-hushed.

"Well," continued the duke, and he drew his chair closer still toward the milliner, who sat just opposite to him, "if Sagoonah were to remove that obstacle or eyesore, it were all the better for us?"

"Yes, my lord, if Sagoonah would," said Madame Angelique, in a low, deep voice. "But — "

"But what?" asked the duke; then after a pause, during which he gazed significantly upon the milliner, he added, "Sagoonah is to meet you to-morrow, and the slightest hint, if backed by gold — "

"Yes, a hint, my lord," whispered Madame Angelique, at the same time that she glanced furtively to the right and left as if to assure herself that there was no listener.

"And it is for you to give this hint," replied Marchmont, slowly and deliberately accentuating his words.

Then those two — that unscrupulous aristocrat and that infamous woman — exchanged prolonged looks of intelligence; their meaning was now beyond disguise, and if it were not, these looks would have transfused it. There was a pause of several minutes, and at length Marchmont, laying his hand upon the milliner's arm, said, "Is it to be done?"

"Yes, it is to be done," she responded, and a long-drawn breath followed that answer.

Marchmont rose from his seat, filled two glasses with wine, handed one to Madame Angelique, and tossed the contents of the other down his throat. It was as if these two unprincipled creatures were ratifying in blood-red wine the compact of blood which was settled between them.

There was a little more conversation, and then the Luke of Marchmont took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SAGOONAH

On the following day, punctual to the hour of appointment, Madame Angelique was at the spot where she was to meet Sagoonah. She was not kept many moments waiting before the ayah made her appearance, and the latter at once said, "Whatsoever you may have to tell me, be brief, for Mark is about the premises."

"Sagoonah," replied Madame Angelique, at once coming to the point, for the interview of the previous day had given her a deeper insight into the Hindu woman's character than she had ever obtained before, — "Sagoonah, have you a particular feeling to appease or gratify, and yet dare not follow its bent? "

"What would you have me do?" asked the ayah, her dark, lustrous eyes fixed searchingly upon the milliner's countenance.

"I know not what feeling inspires you toward your mistress," was Madame Angelique's quick rejoinder, "but this I do know, that if I entertained hate or jealousy in respect to another, I would not scruple to obey the impulse."

"I told you that you were a temptress in my path," replied Sagoonah, "and it is so," but she lingered at the fence, and her eyes wandered slowly over the Frenchwoman's countenance, while the white drapery rose and sank with the heavings of her bosom.

"I have been told," continued the milliner, "that the Hindu women are armed with a terrible fortitude, that they are courageous under all circumstances, that they are strong and firm, resolute and decided, in avenging the wrongs they have sustained, in appeasing the hatred excited within them, and in removing the objects of their jealousy from their path. Again I say that I know not which of all these feelings animates you, but very certain am I that you have all that courage, all that resolution, all that strength of purpose — "

"What words are these," said Sagoonah, in a deep voice, "which you are breathing in my ear? And wherefore do they thus sink down into those recesses of my heart where the evil spirit lurks?"

She pressed both her hands upon her left bosom as if to subdue the heavings which sprang from the agitation of the heart beneath; she moaned in spirit; she seemed to shudder with the thought that was thrilling through her brain.

"There is a way," continued Madame Angelique, protruding her head over the fence in such a manner that she could speak in a whisper almost close to Sagoonah's ear, — "there is a way by which vengeance, jealousy, or hatred may be gratified, and yet no risk run. What, for instance, if a dagger were planted in the heart of an enemy, and the right hand of that enemy were so placed as to seem as if it had just fallen from the hilt after dealing the blow? Or it might be the same with a knife — "

Indescribable was the fiendlike look which Sagoonah slowly bent upon the execrable woman who was thus tempting her, — a look in which malicious satisfaction, fierce resolution, burning hope, and other strong feelings as well as dark passions concentrated all their power.

"Here is a heavy purse, full of golden guineas," said Madame Angelique, and she passed the purse over the fence.

If the look which Sagoonah had just bent upon her was indescribable, equally impossible of description was the air of blended hauteur, disgust, and indignation with which Sagoonah took that purse and tossed it into the field where Madame Angelique was standing. At the same time her eyes sent forth vivid fires, and her ivory teeth glistened between the thin scarlet lips.

"No, not for a bribe," said Sagoonah, in a voice expressive of scorn and loathing, "but for that other reason, — yes, yes."

Madame Angelique gazed upon her with a sensation of terror, — a sort of feeling as if she shuddered lest the Hindu woman was not what she seemed, but that all in an instant she might burst forth into another form, and perhaps with a savage yell spring upon her in the shape of a tigress, or in the twinkling of an eye twist the huge coils of a snake around her, — so dread was the fascination, so wildly strange yet likewise awe-inspiring the expression of Sagoonah's eyes.

"Go," said the ayah. "I do not ask why you have prompted me to this deed, nor who first of all urged you on to prompt me. Go; it shall be done, and perhaps to-morrow the intelligence will reach your ears that this house" — and she pointed toward it — " has become the scene of a fearful deed."

With these words the ayah turned abruptly away from the fence, and Madame Angelique, picking up the indignantly discarded purse, betook herself across the field toward the main road.

It was night, and Christina Ashton could not sleep. The weather was exceedingly sultry, indeed most oppressively so; she had been slightly indisposed the whole day; she was restless, uneasy, and feverish. It was twelve o'clock, and she vainly endeavoured to close her eves. It may be easily supposed that her thoughts were actively engaged, for when are the thoughts ever more active than while the head is pressing a sleepless pillow? She knew that Zoe had taken her departure from London; a paragraph amongst the fashionable intelligence in a morning newspaper had told her this much. Too well, too well could poor Christina conjecture the cause of her amiable friend's prolonged indisposition, and bitterly, bitterly at times did she blame herself for having been more or less mixed up with that cause. And yet, as the reader knows full well, she was innocent; the snows on the highest peaks of the Alpine mountains were not purer than Christina's thoughts.

She could not sleep, and it was twelve o'clock. Silence prevailed throughout the habitation; silence was outside too, for the air was stagnant in its heaviness, and not a single leaf in the garden was ruffled. But presently that silence which reigned inside the dwelling was broken — no, not broken — gently and slightly and almost imperceptibly intruded upon by the softest sound of a step upon the stair. Yet Christina heard it, and with suspended breath she listened. Again she heard it, and the thought flashed to her mind that Sagoonah was violating the pledge she had given not to descend again at night to study the huge files of the *Times*.

"This is wrong of Sagoonah," said Christina to herself; "it is doubly wrong, — in the first place because no one ought to be moving about the house with a candle at this time of night, and secondly because she herself admitted that for some particular reason the princess would be angry with her if she looked into those files."

Having thus mused to herself, Christina sat up in bed and again listened. All was profoundly silent, and with suspended breath did our young heroine continue to await the slightest, faintest sound that might next fall upon her ear. And it came; it was another footstep, so light, so airy, indeed so barely perceptible that a doubt even lingered in Christina's mind whether she had caught it. Still she was resolved to assure herself on the point, but yet to do so in such a way that in case of being mistaken, she herself might not incur the risk of disturbing any other sleeper. It was therefore with the utmost caution she rose and opened the door, — a caution so great that neither the turning of the handle nor the moving of the door upon its hinges raised a sound half so audible as the footstep she had heard.

But, ah! as she looked forth upon the landing, she beheld a light glimmering from the princess's chamber, the door of which evidently stood open. Now the first thought that struck her was that Indora had been seized with indisposition, and yet she heard no sounds of voices, no one moving in the chamber of her Highness. She hastened along the passage, — her naked feet raising not the slightest sound, but yet her night-dress swept for an instant against the wall, and the next moment Sagoonah issued forth from the chamber of the princess. She had a light in one hand, and she appeared as if she had just thrust something with the other amidst the folds of her dress, for she was apparelled in her day costume. An ejaculation was about to issue from Christina's lips, an anxious inquiry whether the princess was indisposed, when Sagoonah made her a vehement sign to hold her peace: and Christina was now struck by the strange expression of the avah's countenance and the fearful light that was burning in her eyes. An unknown terror for an instant seized upon the young maiden, transfixing, petrifying her. During this momentary interval Sagoonah noiselessly closed the door of the princess's chamber, and then making a sign for Christina to retreat into her own, she followed her thither.

Closing the door with an unabated caution, Sagoonah placed her candle upon the drawers, and taking Christina's hand, made her sit down by her side upon an ottoman which was at the foot of the bed, for the chamber which our heroine occupied was as elegantly and as sumptuously furnished as all the rest.

"You are surprised, Miss Ashton," said Sagoonah, in a low, whispering voice, but with an air of perfect calmness, contrasting strangely with the sinister expression her countenance had worn a few moments back, — " you are surprised, Miss Ashton, to have thus found me in the chamber of my mistress."

"I cannot say that I am still surprised," responded Christina, "because I have no doubt you will give a satisfactory explanation. I feared that the Lady Indora was ill, but this, thank Heaven, does not seem to be the case, or you would not have left her, and moreover you would have permitted me to render my assistance."

"Listen to me, Miss Ashton," continued Sagoonah. "You know that I am devoted to my beloved mistress — "

"I know that you have indeed every reason to love her," said our amiable heroine, "for I, who have only known her for a few short weeks, love her much, and you have known her from your infancy. But tell me, Sagoonah, why did you look so strange when issuing from the chamber? You terrified me."

"Listen, Miss Ashton," continued the ayah, with the calmest self-possession. "I have no doubt that with your English notions — and you call them the effects of your high civilization — you will be startled and astonished, perhaps you will even survey me with pity and contempt, when I tell you of the belief which I entertain. The conviction is firm in my mind that evil spirits walk abroad at night, and that they have not merely the power to haunt and scare those whose bedsides they visit, but likewise to wreak upon them a physical mischief. Do you comprehend me, Miss Ashton?"

We should here observe that we are not recording the precise language of which Sagoonah made use, nor do we ever when describing her discourse. She was not quite so proficient in the English tongue as to speak it with that degree of accuracy which our mode of shaping her language would appear to represent. Therefore it was not astonishing that she should ask Christina if she succeeded in making herself understood.

"Yes, I comprehend you perfectly," replied our heroine, but I deeply regret, Sagoonah, to learn that you abandon yourself to these superstitions."

"Bear with me, my dear Miss Ashton," returned the ayah, gravely; "remember that from my very infancy I was brought up in this faith."

"And yet the Lady Indora has not the same superstitions," observed Christina, mildly.

"True, Miss Ashton," rejoined Sagoonah, "but the Lady Indora may be as wrong in rejecting them as I may be in clinging to them."

"We will not discuss the argument itself," replied Christina, "but you have yet to inform me — "

"Why I entered the bedchamber of my mistress," added the ayah. "Can you not conjecture after all I have said?" she continued, fixing her dark eyes upon our heroine; "can you not comprehend how, loving her as I do, I often and often feel anxious on her account? To-night I could not rest — "

"You had not sought your couch, Sagoonah," interrupted Miss Ashton, glancing at the ayah's attire.

"No, because I knew full well that I could not sleep," was the Hindu woman's response; "I had that feeling which told me how useless it would be to seek a bed on which I should only be tossing restlessly. I was full of vague terrors -I can scarcely explain them -I cannot account for them. But certain it is that under their influence I sought the chamber of my mistress to assure myself that she was safe, that no evil spirits were haunting her couch nor working her a mischief -"

"Sagoonah, Sagoonah," exclaimed Miss Ashton, surveying the ayah with a painful suspicion, "I know not what to think of this explanation of yours. It is hard to doubt you if the truth be issuing from your lips, and yet — and yet — "

"You do not believe me?" said the ayah, in a tone of plaintive distress. "Ah! this is indeed a source of sorrow and regret for me, because I love you, Miss Ashton, and to lose your confidence — "

Here the wily Sagoonah stopped short, and the tears trickled slowly from her lustrous eyes, glistening like diamonds upon her dark but smooth and polished cheeks. And then to the long ebon fringes of each upper lid did other tears hang quivering and sparkling, and her bosom seemed convulsed with stifling sobs, and her looks were bent so plaintively, so appealingly upon Christina, that the generous heart of the young maiden was profoundly touched.

"If for a moment I have wronged you, Sagoonah," she said, taking the ayah's hand, — " if with my English notions I have too harshly and suspiciously estimated your conduct, or, rather, if I have not known how to interpret it at all, but yet have fancied that you were not truthfully nor frankly explaining it, I beseech you to pardon me."

"Oh, now your kindness touches me even more than that transient suspicion on your part wounded me," and as Sagoonah thus spoke, she took Christina's hand, pressed it first to her bosom, and then carried it to her lips. "Yes, my dear Miss Ashton," she continued, "it was nought but the truth, — the sincere, the honest, the genuine truth that I was telling you. I am superstitious; can I be blamed for this weakness, if a weakness it be?"

"No, no, not blamed. But I must enlighten you, my poor Sagoonah," said the amiable heroine of our tale. "You need not apprehend that evil spirits will haunt one so good as your noble-hearted mistress. If there be evil spirits, the wicked alone have cause to tremble at them. It is not well, Sagoonah, to wander about in the dead of night as you are doing; others who know less of you than I—or, rather, who understand your disposition less — would conceive that you were troubled with a guilty conscience. Night is the time when the good sleep, or at least, when they remain in their beds, and it is the season when guilt walks abroad. The fancy is irresistibly led to associate frightful and hideous deeds with midnight wanderings — "

"Miss Ashton, Miss Ashton, you terrify me," murmured the ayah, who was indeed conscience-stricken by the words which our heroine was thus addressing to her in a tone of mild and gentle solemnity.

"There is nought to terrify you in what I say," answered

Christina, "and very far from my object is it to make such an impression upon your mind. I merely wish you to comprehend that these midnight wanderings are not suitable nor becoming, and that henceforth you must exercise more strength of mind than to yield to superstitious fears. Have you not read, Sagoonah," continued Christina, " that night is the season for the wanderings of those who are guilty in deed or those who are equally sinful in purpose, — the season too, Sagoonah," added Christina, with a deepening impressiveness, " when Murder stalks abroad — "

"Hush, Miss Ashton, hush," said Sagoonah, with a visible terror depicted upon her countenance. "You frighten me; you strike terror into the depths of my soul. Rest assured that I will wander about the house no more. Believe me," continued the ayah, in a tone of mingled entreaty and persuasion, — "believe me that you have made a deep impression upon me. I see that you are right. I will henceforth follow your advice in all things, but may I hope that you will keep silent as to this occurrence of to-night?"

Christian reflected for a few moments, and then she said, "It will be the second time, Sagoonah, that I shall have consented to shield you from the displeasure of your mistress, but remember that it is the last. You have solemnly pledged yourself that you will not repeat these nocturnal wanderings, and I believe you. But if in this or any other way you transgress for the future, I shall feel it my duty to speak with frankness to the Lady Indora. Recollect that I eat her bread as well as you do, and I am bound to care for her interests."

"My sweet Miss Ashton," said the ayah, taking Christina's small white hand and pressing it to her lips, "you shall never again have cause to be angry with me. And now good night."

Sagoonah glided noiselessly from Christina's chamber, and ascended to her own. When there — and when she had closed the door behind her — she took from beneath the folds of her garment a long dagger with a ghastly gleaming blade and a handle of curious Oriental workmanship, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. As she consigned it to her trunk, her eyes flashed sinister fires, and she murmured to herself in her own native tongue, "Fool that I was to yield even for a moment to the influence of that English girl's language. But when she spoke of Murder stalking abroad, it did indeed send a thrill through me like that of a remorse."

The ayah sat down and reflected deeply for some minutes. There was evidently a struggle within her bosom; those better feelings which Christina's language had partially excited were in conflict with others of a dark and deadly nature, and, alas! the latter prevailed, for at the end of her meditation, Sagoonah's splendidly handsome countenance assumed an expression of the firmest decision, and with another sinister flashing of her luminous dark eyes, she ejaculated, "Yes, it shall be done."

Throughout the following day Madame Angelique was kept in trembling nervous suspense, - every moment expecting to hear the intelligence, from some source or another. that a frightful deed of suicide had been perpetrated during the past night in the district of Bayswater. But hour after hour passed and no such tidings came. In the afternoon the vile woman proceeded into the neighbourhood of Bayswater, and entered a shop with the air of one whose sole and legitimate object was to make some little purchase, for she thought to herself that if the deed had been really accomplished, she should be certain to hear of it there. No, not a syllable, and the shopwoman who served her merely remarked on the fineness of the weather, but alluded not to any incident of horrible interest. Madame Angelique returned to her house in London, and sent out for the evening papers, but still without having her frightful curiosity gratified. It was evident therefore that the deed had not been done. Marchmont called in the evening, and it was determined that if on the morrow the intelligence so anxiously awaited did not reach the vile woman's ears, she should repair to Bayswater and obtain another interview with Sagoonah.

It was an almost sleepless night which Madame Angelique passed, for she felt assured, considering all circumstances, that the Lady Indora was bent upon her ruin, and in order therefore that her own safety might be secured (as she fancied) it was necessary that the Eastern lady should perish. She rose in the morning ill with feverish anxiety, but all the forenoon passed without the wished-for intelligence reaching her. Again, in the afternoon, she repaired to Bayswater; she entered another shop, but no unusual excitement marked

SAGOONAH

the looks or the discourse of serving-men or customers: it was only too clear that the deed still remained undone.

Madame Angelique proceeded into the neighbourhood of the Princess Indora's villa, and she watched until she saw Mark, the faithful majordomo, issue forth from the premises. Then, so soon as he was out of sight, she hastened toward the fence, and in a few minutes Sagoonah made her appearance.

"I thought you would have come yesterday," said the ayah, immediately upon reaching the fence. "I fancied that you would be only too anxious to learn whether it was done, and if not, why it was left undone."

"My dear Sagoonah," answered Madame Angelique, quivering with suspense, "I felt so certain that your courage would not fail you — I was so convinced that you were endowed with such an indomitable fortitude — "

"Cease these idle flatteries," interrupted the ayah with impatience. "I have but a minute to tarry here. Listen! There is an English girl beneath this roof — "

"I know it," said Madame Angelique: "Christina Ashton."

"And so long as that girl is here," continued Sagoonah, with rapid utterance, "my arm is paralyzed. I need say no more. It is not in my power to devise or execute any scheme to get rid of her; this must be a task for you to undertake and to accomplish."

"But how?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, stricken aghast by the announcement. "It may take days and days to put some stratagem into execution — "

"If you, then, are so deficient in means for a small undertaking," interrupted Sagoonah, coldly, "how can you pessibly fancy that I shall incur every risk and make every sacrifice for a great undertaking? Understand me well. Rid me of that girl, and the deed shall be done, but so long as she remains there, I will not make another effort toward its accomplishment."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah turned abruptly away. Madame Angelique called after her, but she would not stop, neither did she even look back. She seemed as if she heard not the vile woman's words, and her tall bayadere form, clothed in its white drapery, was speedily lost amidst the trees to the view of Madame Angelique.

CHAPTER XXIX

MR. SYCAMORE

WHILE this scene was passing between three or four o'clock in the afternoon at Bayswater, Christian Ashton was pursuing his way along Piccadilly. In a few minutes he entered a fashionable hotel, and inquired of the waiter if the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was within. The response was in the affirmative, and our young hero was conducted upstairs to an apartment where the object of his visit lay stretched upon the sofa smoking a cigar.

Nothing could exceed the freedom and ease or the luxurious languor of that state of abandonment which characterized Mr. Talbot Sycamore's posture. His head reposed upon the cushion at one end of the sofa, his feet reclined upon the high part of the sofa at the other extremity; one morocco-slipper had fallen off, the other just hung on to the tips of his toes. His elegant flowered silk dressing-gown was all flowing open, and he inhaled the fragrance of his cigar with the comfort of one who appeared not to have a single care in the whole world.

The Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was a little past thirty years of age. He had auburn hair, which he wore very long, and which seemed to curl naturally, large whiskers of a somewhat redder tint, blue eyes, and a tolerable goodlooking countenance. He was tall, slender, and well made, but had a rakish, dissipated, devil-may-care appearance, which was visible enough even beneath that easy fashionable languor that now as it were invested him. The waiter withdrew, and Christian remained alone with this gentleman.

Mr. Sycamore, taking his cigar from his mouth, waved it with a sort of graceful negligence in the direction of a chair, —

at the same time suffering a long whiff of smoke to exhale slowly from his lips. Our hero took the chair, and said, "I have called, sir, in consequence of the letter which I received from you by this morning's post."

"Ah, I see," observed Mr. Sycamore, speaking with that sort of drawing-room drawl which impresses one with the idea that it requires a very great effort indeed to make use of that faculty of speech which is one of the main distinctions between its possessor and the lower animals. "You are the young man who advertised for the post of private secretary, with all sorts of qualifications?"

"And you, sir, I presume," answered Christian, " are the gentleman who wrote to inform me that you required precisely such an assistant as I announced myself to be."

Mr. Sycamore slowly turned himself half-around upon the sofa, and gave a good long stare at our young hero, whose speech he evidently fancied had a sort of covert irony or rebuke in it. And such was indeed the case, for Christian, though perfectly free from undue pride, was somewhat incensed at being called "a young man," and the term "all sorts of qualifications" had struck him as being more or less supercilious. He, however, endured the staring process with a becoming composure, firmly without hardihood, and with a suitable dignity that was devoid of disrespect as it was totally apart from insolence.

"Well, it is perfectly true," resumed the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore, "that I am in want of a private secretary. You see, I am a man of large acquaintance, but select, Mr. Ashton — all select. Damme, nothing vulgar! Dukes, marquises, earls, and those sort of people, — these are my friends. Now, this acquaintance — so extensive and yet so choice — involves me in a devil's own mass of correspondence, and it's more than I can manage for myself. That's why I require a secretary," he lazily added.

Christian remarked that he considered that there was nothing very onerous or difficult in the duties which he would have to fulfil, and we may observe that he was too anxious to obtain another situation to suffer himself to Le disheartened or disgusted by any peculiarities in Mr. Sycamore's conversation or manners.

"You have no objection to travel?" resumed this gentleman; "I don't mean travelling all over the world, Lut simply on a trip to Brighton, or Cheltenham, or Ramsgate, or Dover, just as the fancy takes me. You see, I am a bachelor, and have to kill time to the best of my ability."

Christian assured Mr. Sycamore that he had no objection to accompany him on such little journeys as those to which he had alluded.

"You will see the world and amuse yourself," continued Mr. Sycamore, " and I have no doubt your place will be an easy and agreeable one. At all events I can tell you this, you will never see any low people visiting me. I never in my life spoke to a person that did not keep his carriage. If any friend of mine puts down his carriage for the sake of economy, damme, I cut him instantly. So now you see what sort of a person I am."

Christian did see it, and with infinite disgust too, but he was careful not to betray what he felt, for it was not his business to quarrel with Mr. Sycamore's peculiar fastidiousness, nor was it his interest to throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation simply because he had to do with a coxcomb or a boaster. Mr. Sycamore continued to talk in the same style for another quarter of an hour, and then he asked for testimonials. Christian produced those which he had received from the Duke of Marchmont and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wherewith Mr. Sycamore was pleased to express his satisfaction, observing that they were at least not "low people," and that he had no doubt Christian would suit him very well.

"I am going out of town the first thing to-morrow morning," said Mr. Sycamore, "and you must accompany me. You had therefore better be here as soon after breakfast as you can."

"I will be here, sir," answered Christian, with ingenuous readiness, "at nine o'clock, or earlier if you wish it."

Mr. Sycamore gave a sort of despairing groan, and then surveyed our hero with wonderment and dismay. Christian saw that he had said or done something that was most outrageous, but for the life of him he could not conjecture what it was.

"At nine o'clock in the morning?" at length said Mr. Sycamore, in a faint voice, as if his nerves had been dreadfully shocked. "What I call the first thing in the morning, is about half an hour past noon. Pray don't entertain such low ideas as to confound night with morning. It's all very well for people who have to get up to black boots, or take down shutters, or open their shops, but a gentleman's morning," continued Mr. Sycamore, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "begins a little after noonday, and it is just allowable for him to begin his breakfast at one o'clock. So if you are here at half-past two to-morrow, it will be a very convenient hour in the morning indeed. You will of course come with your luggage, as we shall start off at once for Ramsgate, which I am told is getting rather a fashionable place since I began to patronize it last year."

Christian promised to be punctual at half-past two on the following day, and he issued forth from Mr. Sycamore's presence. Descending the stairs, he was passing through the hall of the hotel, when he perceived a very handsomely dressed groom — who was a nice-looking dapper little man about five and twenty, but bow-legged, as indeed all approved and veritable grooms ought to be — engaged in some little altercation with another man who had the air as well as the odour of a hostler from a livery-stable.

"Now, look you, Jeames," said the hostler to the dapper groom, "it's no use talking. My guvner says as how the cab sha'n't be sent never no more unless the bill's paid, or a good reference gived. You and me, Jeames, know what's what, and it is rayther hard that your guvner should run up a tick of forty-five pound for the hire of a cab and never so much as pay a scurrick on account. It isn't the cheese, Jeames, no, blow me tight if it is."

"Nonsense, Tom, it's all right," answered the dapper groom, whose Christian name appeared to be James. "My master's a gentleman of fortune, which has his own peculiar ways — "

Christian heard no more; indeed he had not purposely lingered to catch any of the conversation at all, but he could not help overhearing the little which we have recorded, as he passed through the hall. He thought nothing of it at the time, and it speedily slipped out of his memory. He was glad that he had obtained a new situation, and he at once set off to Bayswater, to communicate the circumstance to his sister, who he well knew would be delighted with the intelligence. He found Christina at home, and when it was announced to the princess that he was to leave London on the morrow, she bade him remain and pass the evening with Christina.

At half-past two o'clock on the following day, Christian alighted from a cab at the door of the hotel in Piccadilly, and his boxes were deposited in the hall. He inquired of the waiter for Mr. Sycamore, and at the same instant the dapper-looking groom stepped forward, inquiring, "Are you Mr. Ashton?"

"Yes," answered Christian, and an unpleasant suspicion at once smote him.

"Master will be ready in half an hour," rejoined James; "he was up rather late this morning. If you will step into the coffee-room, Mr. Ashton, you can sit there till we are ready to start."

Our hero followed this recommendation, and as there happened to be no one else in the coffee-room at the time, he thought he should like to have a few minutes' conversation with one of the waiters. He did not exactly admire the discovery he had just made. — that his new employer was the master of the dapper groom, and consequently the object of the somewhat peculiar discourse he had overheard on the previous day between the dapper groom aforesaid and the hostler from the livery-stable. If there were anything at all suspicious in respect to Mr. Sycamore's character, it was not too late for our hero to resign the situation he had accepted, for he assuredly had no inclination to go travelling about in the service of one who contracted debts without the means of paying them. He accordingly rang the bell, so that under the pretext of ordering some little refreshment, he might draw the waiter into discourse.

"Ah, sir, I see, sir," said this individual, when a few remarks had been exchanged, "you are the young gentleman who has taken the situation of private secretary to Mr. Sycamore?" and then with a great show of tidiness, he briskly wiped away some imaginary crumbs from an adjacent table.

"I suppose Mr. Sycamore is highly respectable and very well off?" observed Christian, inquiringly.

"He has paid all his bills, sir, this morning," responded the waiter, "and so there is no complaint to make. All gentlemen as pays their bills is respectable, sir," and the waiter affected to be exceedingly busy in conveying the supplement of the *Times* from one table to another, and then bringing it back to the place whence he had removed it.

Christian saw by these little manœuvres that the waiter purposely lingered with a view of being drawn into conversation, but that he did not like to speak too fast, nor too confidentially in the first instance.

"What have I to pay?" asked our hero, taking out his purse.

"Pay, sir? Tell you directly, sir. Sandwiches, one and six, half-pint of sherry, one and three; two and nine, if you please, sir."

Christian handed the waiter five shillings, whereupon 'hat functionary instantaneously began to fumble in his breeches pocket, holding himself much on one side as he did so, and delaying as long as he could to produce the change, because he more than half-suspected that he was to keep the balance for himself. And this was what Christian did mean, for he saw plainly enough that the waiter required to be lured rather than drawn into confidential discourse.

"Keep that for yourself," said Christian.

"Very much obliged to you, sir," answered the waiter with a bow, and having with his napkin brushed away a few more imaginary crumbs from the corner of the table, and moved the mustard-pot to the other side of the saltcellar, he said, "I think you may find Mr. Sycamore an agreeable gentleman enough, but he is very fast and very rackety."

"He has a great many visitors, has he not?" inquired Christian.

"Yes, sir, a great many," answered the waiter; then after a pause, he added, "But he is always denied to them, sir, always."

"Denied to them?" ejaculated our hero, in amazement. "Oh, yes, sir! Tailors, bootmakers, jewelers, liverystable-keepers, — in fact, sir," added the waiter, with a significant look, "Mr. Sycamore is very high and mighty indeed, and does not like low people," having said which, the waiter again stared in a meaning manner upon Christian's countenance.

"Do you intend me to understand," demanded our hero, "that Mr. Sycamore is not a respectable person? You can speak frankly. I do not ask through impertinent curiosity, and I shall not repeat anything you may tell me." "Well, sir," said the waiter, "I'll tell you exactly all I know of Mr. Sycamore. He has been three months at the hotel, and he never paid his bill till to-day. He gets up at about noon, and comes home to bed at three or four in the morning. He hired a cabriolet from the livery-stables, and never paid for that till this morning. But all his bills he has settled, and now you know as much of him as I do."

"He keeps one servant, I suppose?" said Christian.

"Yes, the groom that you have seen, sir," and then, after glancing toward the door and looking out of the window, the waiter added, "And that groom, sir, is as downy a little fellow as ever you could wish to see in a day's walk."

"I do not precisely comprehend you," remarked Christian.

"Why, sir, I mean that he is up to all sorts of snuffs, and down to all kinds of dodges. He knows a thing or two; he is as artful a cove as here and there one. He gets up uncommon early in the morning; no one gets up earlier. He is wide-awake, and can't be done."

At this moment a couple of gentlemen entered the coffeeroom to take some refreshments, and Christian's discourse with the waiter ended abruptly. Our young hero did not altogether like the character he had heard of Mr. Sycamore, but as for that of the groom James. it had been explained to him in so figurative a manner, with so many rhetorical flourishes and allegorical illustrations, that he knew not precisely how to estimate it.

"After all," said Christian to himself, "I have heard nothing actually or substantially prejudicial to Mr. Sycamore. He has paid his debts at last, and will leave the hotel in an honourable manner. Perhaps it is one of his peculiarities to keep his creditors waiting and pay them in a mass. It may be that he considers them a set of 'low people,' and likes to show his contempt for them. At all events, I had better keep to my engagement; it will be easy for me to throw it up if it does not please me.''

Scarcely had our young hero arrived at this conclusion, when James entered to inform him that Mr. Sycamore was ready to start. A couple of cabs were at the door, as Christian's new employer travelled with a considerable quantity of luggage. That gentleman entered one of the vehicles, to the box of which James ascended, and Christian followed in the other. They proceeded to the railway-station at London Bridge, where the Honourable Talbot Sycamore took a first-class ticket for himself, a second-class one for Christian, and a third-class ticket for James. The train was just ready to start, and they proceeded to occupy their seats according to the classification just described.

In the compartment to which Christian Ashton was assigned, there were only two passengers in addition to himself. One was an elderly man, who settled himself in the corner to take a nap, — most probably for the purpose of sleeping off the liquor of which he had evidently been partaking rather freely, and the fumes of which hovered around him, giving to the compartment the savour of a wine-vault. The other passenger was a female very neatly dressed, and with a veil drawn over her countenance. Opposite to this female did Christian happen to place himself, and it occurred to him that she gave a slight start, and even uttered a low ejaculation, as he entered the carriage. He could not very easily distinguish her countenance through the veil, but yet he saw enough of it to convince him that it was not altogether He did not, however, like to regard her too unfamiliar. earnestly, especially as she seemed to hang down her head as if in annovance or confusion that he had even looked at her as attentively as he had done.

The train rolled out of the station; the intoxicated gentleman in the corner soon began to convince his fellow passengers, by certain nasal sounds, that he was wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, and then the female, slowly leaning forward, said, "How do you do, Mr. Ashton?"

At the same time she raised her veil, and our hero at once recognized Amy Sutton, who, as the reader will recollect, was one of the Duchess of Marchmont's lady's-maids. We may also, perhaps, remind the reader that it was she of whom the unprincipled duke to a certain extent made use when engaged in his vile plot against his wife. She was now in her twenty-fifth year; we have already described her as tall and handsome, but with a look displaying a resolute decisiveness of character, and which could at times merge into a savage fierceness. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and avaricious. At the time when Christian knew her, her character was unimpeachable, for her pride rather than her principle had prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment the sum of her hoarded gold. It was this same Amy Sutton who now made herself known to Christian in the railway train, as above described.

After the exchange of a few observations, he inquired whether she was still in the Duchess of Marchmont's service.

"No," she answered, and her look became all in an instant strangely gloomy.

Christian now observed that she was altered since he had last seen her many months back; she was pale, and her countenance was somewhat thin and careworn. He did not like to continue questioning her, for he found that his first query had somehow or another given her pain. There was a silence of a few minutes, during which he felt awkward, and she looked down in sinister, moody pensiveness. At length that silence was broken by herself, for suddenly raising her eyes, and glancing toward the tipsy individual to assure herself that he was still slumbering, she leaned forward, and said, in a deep voice, "The Duke of Marchmont is the greatest villain upon earth."

"You and I saw enough of him, Amy," responded Christian, "to be enabled to arrive at no very favourable conclusion with respect to his character."

"You know full well, Mr. Ashton," she rejoined, "that I was completely innocent of any wilful complicity in that scandalous plot — "

"I know it, Amy," answered our hero. "You were deceived by appearances; those dresses which were worn by another — "

"Yes, I was indeed deceived," resumed Amy Sutton. "Never was deception more gross, more abominable."

"I hope that the duchess did not believe you guilty, and visit you with her displeasure?" said Christian.

"Oh, no, the Duchess of Marchmont treated me most kindly. Indeed, I have remained in her service until about a fortnight ago." Then, after another brief pause, she added, in a low, deep voice, "That miscreant Marchmont has been my — my — ruin."

Christian gazed upon her in astonishment. Such words coming from female lips naturally conveyed the impression of seduction's triumph, and our hero was surprised for more reasons than one. He had always heard Amy Sutton spoken of as a young woman of unimpeachable virtue, and who indeed would fiercely resent the slightest liberty that was taken with her. Moreover, he had believed that she had detested the duke on account of that iniquitous affair of which they had been speaking. How, then, was it that her virtue had succumbed? How had her aversion been changed into love?

"Do not think, Mr. Ashton," she presently resumed, "that I have been wilfully and wantonly frail. If that were the case, I should not be addressing you in such a manner. No, with shame should I do my best to conceal my fault. Can you not understand me? I was the victim of the most diabolical atrocity, and I will be signally revenged."

Christian was more and more astonished at what he heard, but it was a point on which he would not ask questions; he could only listen to just so much as Amy Sutton might choose to reveal to him.

"Perhaps you consider it indelicate," she went on to say, " that I should make such a revelation to one of the opposite sex. But it is because you already know so much of the villainy of Marchmont's character, and because we were both as it were mixed up in a transaction which so signally exposed his baseness and his turpitude, and perhaps, too, it is a relief to my goaded feelings to be enabled to speak of my wrongs to one who knows their author so well, and knows likewise how fully capable he is of inflicting any wrong, even the worst and most flagrant that one fellow creature can sustain at the hands of another. It was shortly after the return of the family from Oaklands to Belgrave Square. He made an overture to me ; I rejected it with scorn and indignation. He repeated it, he displayed gold before my eyes, and still I rejected his advances with abhorrence. I threatened to leave my situation the very next day, and to explain to the duchess wherefore I left --- "

Amy Sutton paused for a minute; her countenance was perfectly livid with the workings of her feelings and the deep sense of her wrongs.

"That same night," she continued, in a voice so low that it was barely audible, and after having flung another glance toward the slumberer in the corner, — " that very night I was awakened from my sleep by the sensation of something poured between my lips, but between that awakening and a sinking into a state of perfect unconsciousness there was only a moment's interval, so that it appears like a dream when I think of it. When I awoke in the morning,"—and here Amy Sutton lowered the veil over her countenance,—" when I awoke in the morning, the duke was with me—my ruin—"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a low, deep, stifling sob. Christian sat aghast at this narrative of diabolic villainy. Bad as he knew the Duke of Marchmont to be, yet he could scarcely have fancied that he was capable of such hideous turpitude as this. Amy Sutton sat back in the railway carriage with her veil over her countenance, and in this posture she remained, completely immovable, for nearly ten minutes, — all her senses and faculties being absorbed in the contemplation of the tremendous wrong which she had sustained and of the vengeance that she purposed to wreak whenever the opportunity should serve.

"Perhaps you will ask me," she at length resumed, "or at all events you will wonder, why I did not drag the Duke of Marchmont before the tribunals and punish him for his flagrant iniquity? But if I had adopted that course, it would have been likewise to expose my own disgrace, to parade my own dishonour, and I am dependent on my character for my bread. The world might have sympathized with me perhaps, but amongst all those sympathizers, who would give me another situation? Who would have received me into his home to attend upon his virtuous wife or his chaste daughters? And then, too, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy, "there was another consideration, - a consideration suggested by the language which the duke himself held to me when I reproached and threatened him for the atrocity of his conduct. It was that against my accusation he would reply that he had been invited to my bed, or at least that I had willingly received him there, and that I subsequently proclaimed a foul charge against him because he would not vield to the exorbitance of my demands for pecuniary reparation."

"And after that, Amy," said Christian, "you remained for several months in the service of the duchess?"

"Yes," she replied, and then remained silent, offering no explanation of this portion of her conduct, nor did Christian like to ask for any.

There was a further pause, which was broken by our hero inquiring whether Amy Sutton was going all the way to Ramsgate. "I am not," she answered. "My destination is a small village a little way on this side of Ashford."

She said no more, and there was another long pause. The tipsy individual in the corner now woke up, and having slept off the fumes of his former potations, he appeared to think it was necessary to renew them. He accordingly drew forth a case-bottle from his pocket, and taking out the cork, applied it first to his nose to inhale the smell, and next to his lips to imbibe the liquor. Having taken a deep draught, he wiped the mouth of the bottle with his sleeve, and proffered it to Amy, who declined it with disgust; then to Christian, who refused it with cold civility.

"Well, then," said the drunken gentleman, "there is all the more for me," and he forthwith proceeded to empty the bottle.

He then observed, for the behoof of his listeners, that he could replenish it at Ashford, but that he wished he had done so at Reigate, where the brandy was better, and then it occurred to him that there was very good rum to be got at the Ashford station, and he thought it might agree with him best. He next noticed that the crops looked very fine, though how he could manage to see them at all was a perfect miracle, inasmuch as he had one eye closed and the other blinking like an owl's. So, having delivered himself of the sage observations just recorded, he fell into the corner and into a sound sleep simultaneously.

In about half an hour the train stopped at Headcorn, and there Amy Sutton took leave of Christian Ashton, for she had reached her destination. At Ashford the intoxicated gentleman woke up, and contrived to alight for the purpose of replenishing his flask. When he had returned to his seat, he applied himself with much industry to the said flask, -the effects of which, instead of making him sleepy, rendered him quarrelsome: so that, to Christian's surprise and astonishment, he began to pull off his coat. hiccupping out an expression of his deep regret at the necessity under which he laboured of polishing our hero off. For this polishing purpose he rose up from his seat, but Christian, in order to put an end to these pugnacious displays, forced him back into it again, with the assurance that if they did come to a fight it would be much the worse for him who provoked it. Fortunately the city of Canterbury was soon reached, and there

the drunken gentleman was claimed by his wife and three grown-up daughters, who were waiting to receive him, and who assailed him in no measured terms on beholding the condition in which he had brought himself back to the bosom of his family.

Ramsgate was reached in due time, and the Honourable Talbot Sycamore took up his quarters at the Royal Hotel.

CHAPTER XXX

CHRISTIAN'S NEW EMPLOYER

WHETHER it were under the bracing influence of the sea air, or whether it were because even the most fashionable people keep more natural hours when at watering-places, we cannot take it upon ourselves to decide, but certain it was that the Honourable Talbot Sycamore did actually and positively leave his couch at nine in the morning after his arrival, and did with an equal degree of certitude sit down to breakfast at half-past nine when he had taken a short lounge upon the sands in his flowered silk dressing-gown, his morocco slippers, and a red cap with a gold tassel very much resembling a Turkish fez.

While still at breakfast, he somewhat sententiously inquired of the waiter whether his private secretary had partaken of his breakfast, and on receiving an answer in the affirmative, he desired that Mr. Christian Ashton might be requested to walk up. Our hero accordingly repaired to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, and that gentleman said, "If you place yourself at the side table near the window, you can write a few letters to my dictation, and during the intervals when I am wearied of talking, you can gaze out upon the harbour and the sea."

This last recommendation might have been very considerate indeed if it were not somewhat puerile, and while Mr. Sycamore went on discussing his muffin, his egg, and his ham, Christian arranged the writing materials at the side table. The waiter entered the room with a hot muffin, and Mr. Sycamore said, with an air of easy indifference, "The first letter, Mr. Ashton, is to my London bankers. Just put the address and date; don't write the word 'Gentlemen,' but put 'My dear sirs,' as I am devilish intimate with them. Waiter, some more cream." While the waiter was absent, Mr. Sycamore remained silent, and Christian certainly thought it was rather a singular coincidence that he should only begin dictating again when the waiter reappeared. Yet such was the fact.

"Write thus," said Mr. Sycamore: "'I will thank you to remit to the Ramsgate banker five thousand pounds to my account. With regard to that sum of twenty thousand which Lord Toddington paid into your hands on my behalf the other day —'"

But here Mr. Sycamore stopped short as the door had just closed behind the waiter. It might have been that he had dictated enough at a stretch for one of his languid temperament, but it certainly appeared to Christian very much as if he desisted then and there simply because the individual for whose behoof he was thus parading his financial concerns was no longer present. However, after a little while the letter was concluded with some special instructions as to the laying-out of the twenty thousand pounds paid in by Lord Toddington, and by the time it was finished, the waiter entered to clear away the breakfast things.

"Now, Mr. Ashton," said the Honourable Talbot Sycamore, "we must write a letter to my friend, the Duke of Arlington. Put the place and date, and then begin 'My dear Arlington.' Now go on to say, 'Here I am installed in devilish comfortable quarters at Ramsgate. Do you mean, my dear fellow, to fulfil your promise of joining me here for six weeks? If so, let me know by return of post, as the place is most disgustingly crowded, and I must be peak rooms for you at the hotel three or four days beforehand. Tell Lord Toddington that I find I have lost my wager of five thousand guineas, and shall send him up a cheque by this same post. He paid me twenty thousand the other day, so it is a devilish good sweep for him to get back a quarter of it in so short a time. By the bye, tell Toddington likewise that I will give him eight hundred for that black mare of his --- ' "

Here there was another stopping short, and Mr. Sycamore, throwing himself back in his chair, yawned considerably, but Christian could not help noticing that the waiter had left the room a few instants before the task of dictation was thus suspended. He shortly returned to finish clearing away the table, and the instant his steps were heard upon the landing outside, the dictation was renewed. We will not, however, inflict any more of it upon our readers; suffice it to say that the remainder of the letter to the Duke of Arlington was in the same familiar style as its commencement, so that to disbelieve the fact that the Honourable Talbot Sycamore was the very dear and intimate friend of his Grace of Arlington would have been tantamount to the guilt of a supposition that the said Honourable Talbot Sycamore was dictating a tissue of falsehoods either for purposes of vainglory, or for others still less innocent.

Several more letters were dictated to noblemen and baronets, and thence it was to be inferred that Mr. Sycamore did indeed enjoy a very select and honourable acquaintance amidst the titled aristocracy of the three kingdoms. When the letters were all finished, Mr. Sycamore affixed his signature thereto; they were duly folded, placed in envelopes, addressed, and sealed with the Honourable Talbot Sycamore's armorial bearings, which consisted of a griffin with three heads and such other curious conceptions as the wisdom of the Heralds' College or the genius of some imaginative seal engraver had succeeded in producing.

"Shall I take these letters to the post?" inquired Christian, when the morning's task was over.

"Yes, you may," replied Mr. Sycamore, in his wonted languid, indifferent manner, but just as Christian was about to leave the room, he said, "No, on second thoughts I'll take them myself. I shall be passing that way in my rambles, and I have got an inquiry to make about a letter which ought to have reached me here."

Christian issued from the hotel to take a walk, and he naturally reflected on all that had been done in reference to the letter-writing. He had certain misgivings in his mind, but yet he dared not allow them to obtain an immediate ascendency over him. It looked very much as if the Honourable Mr. Sycamore had dictated in a particular sense, in order to impress the hotel waiter with a grand idea of his finances, his acquaintances, and his general respectability, so that the hotel functionary might go and report everything to the landlord, but, on the other hand, it might all be correct, legitimate, and straightforward enough, and nothing more reprehensible in the gentleman's mode of procedure than a love of ostentation and prideful display. At all events, Christian was resolved not to be too ready to jump at a conclusion, nor stand the chance of doing his employer an injustice by a rash and precipitate formation of opinion.

He repaired to the sands where the visitors were bathing. and at first he stood looking on, amidst other spectators, with a feeling of cheerfulness and a sense of exhilarating amusement. But by degrees our hero began to conceive strange notions respecting the delicacy of all that he saw before him. There were male bathers in a condition of perfect nudity within five or six vards of female bathers. who certainly were enveloped in long gowns, but they were so loose that they came open at the breast with every ripple of the sea and with every movement of the form. Then, too, the gentlemen were swimming about in all directions, performing a thousand evolutions on the water as well as in it, --- floating on their stomachs and their backs, leaping high to dive down head foremost, or ascending the steps at the back of the machines in order to plunge off into the sea again. Then on the shore, too, Christian could not help observing that the ladies rambled or stood nearest to those points where the gentlemen were bathing. Some sat upon the sands pretending to be deeply absorbed in the novels which they held in their hands, but the pages were only turned at very long intervals, and the eyes which should have been bent upon them were peering over at the flandering, swimming, leaping, diving, antic-playing gentlemen bathers.

But if the ladies thus congregated near the places where those of the opposite sex were frolicking in the water, the gentlemen spectators on the other hand seemed as if by accident — oh, yes, quite by accident — to be lounging individually or collectively in little groups nearest to where the fair sex, like so many draped nereids, were disporting in the sun-lit sea. Many a fair bosom thus unveiled its beauties to the libertine regards devouringly fixed upon them: glimpses of white glancing limbs were likewise caught as the fair bathers practised swimming by the aid of the guides, or as they ascended the steps of the machines on emerging from the water. Hoary old men riveted their gloating looks upon those charming bathers, and some even went so far or were so carried away by their libidinous feelings as to raise their eve-glasses all the better to catch and devour the glimpses of those charms which were being continuously revealed to them. And the ladies knew full well

that they were thus the objects of such earnest contemplation on the part of the gentlemen spectators, but they exhibited no indignation, no blush of shame rose to their cheeks, no voice of offended modesty appealed to the guides to request that the insolent beholders might be desired to stand back.

As the consciousness that all these disgusting and scandalous indelicacies were being enacted before him gradually dawned into the mind of Christian Ashton, he at first felt astonished; he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. Yet it was indeed but too true, - for there in the broad daylight, with the sun's refulgence blazing upon the entire scene, was all this going on. Very fortunate was it for the proprietors of the machines that their bathers belonged to the well-to-do orders, numbering amongst them persons of rank, standing, and wealth. Oh, if those bathers had only belonged to the poorer classes, how the saints would have held up their hands and turned up the whites of their eyes! What tirades would have been heard from the pulpits of churches and from within the walls of the House of Parliament. What fulminations and lamentations would there have been in respect to the immorality and profligacy of the working classes! Magistrates would have come down armed with all the powers of the law to prevent bathing altogether, and to plunge into ruin the owners of the machines: bishops and other legislators would have clamoured for additional legal enactments, and Exeter Hall would have echoed to the snivellings, the whinings, and the lugubrious lamentations of the "godly." Such would have been the case if those bathers belonged to the working class: but they formed a portion of the higher orders, - those orders who are not merely privileged in respect to all political rights, but likewise privileged to enjoy all immoralities with the fullest impunity.

That feeling on Christian's part which had commenced with amazement and had progressed into incredulity as to the evidence of his own senses terminated in disgust. He retired from the scene, and rambled through the town, marvelling that ladies and gentlemen of education, and who arrogate to themselves the credit of being the depositaries of all that is best in refinement, delicacy, and virtuous principle in this country, should thus scandalously forget themselves, or, rather, wilfully act in a manner that gave the lie to all their presumptuous boastings.

Several days passed, and every morning Christian was employed for about an hour and a half in writing letters to Mr. Sycamore's dictation. These were to a variety of noblemen and gentlemen of position and wealth, and were couched in different degrees of intimacy and familiarity. Mr. Sycamore generally took them for the purpose of posting them himself, or else he gave them to his man James with the command to do so. Letters arrived from London in response to these, and Christian could not help thinking that Mr. Sycamore was very negligent in allowing his correspondence to lie about on the table in his sitting-room.

Mr. Sycamore hired horses and equipages, and lived altogether in the style of a man of fortune. He picked up acquaintances — if he had not previously formed them — at Ramsgate; a lord or two dined with him, two or three baronets joined him at champagne breakfasts, he received invitations to parties, and by the time ten days had expired, he was the perfect star of the place. He seemed determined likewise that the tradespeople of Ramsgate should benefit by his presence, for, as he observed to Christian, "What was the use of having money unless to diffuse it fairly and do good with it?"

Acting upon this admirable principle, the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was lavish in his orders. The jewellers, the tailors, the boot-makers, the perfumers, and the liverystable-keepers were speedily honoured with his patronage. But so far as the liberality of his custom went, the landlord of the Royal Hotel had no reason to complain, for the handsomest suite of apartments was retained by Mr. Sycamore, the costliest wines were daily put in ice for his table, the markets of Ramsgate did not furnish suitable dainties for his repast, and therefore the landlord was compelled to send large orders to London, and get down the choicest products of Billingsgate and Covent Garden for his customer's use. Christian's misgivings had almost entirely disappeared, and he honestly thought that he must have wronged his employer by them. For if Mr. Sycamore were not everything he seemed and represented, would he not be at once detected? Would he be allowed to lead such a life as this without molestation?

One day, at the expiration of about a fortnight, the landlord of the Royal Hotel requested Christian to step into his private parlour, and begging him with the utmost civility take a seat, he said, "I entreat your pardon, Mr. Ashton, for the course I am adopting, but from what I have seen of you, I have formed an opinion that leads me to it. Might I ask how long you have known Mr. Sycamore?"

"I was only introduced to him the very day before we came down to Ramsgate. I advertised in the *Times* for a situation as private secretary to a nobleman or gentleman; Mr. Sycamore answered the advertisement, letters were exchanged between us, I called upon him, and received the appointment."

"And where was he staying, sir, at the time?" inquired the landlord.

Christian mentioned the hotel in Piccadilly, and he thought it right to add that Mr. Sycamore had lived there upwards of three months, that he had spent a vast amount of money, and that he had paid all his bills with the utmost liberality ere leaving the metropolis.

The landlord's countenance brightened up, and after a little reflection, he said, "I am sure you will pardon me, Mr. Ashton, for thus boldly questioning you, but the truth is, we do get bitten sometimes by gentlemen who cut a dash and live extravagantly. Mr. Sycamore however does seem a regular gentleman, but there are one or two little circumstances which did cause me some uneasiness. The first is that in my waiter's hearing, and on the very first morning after his arrival, he dictated a letter to his London bankers, ordering them to remit him a considerable sum, and I happened to learn by inquiry at our Ramsgate bankers that they have as yet received no advices to any such effect. Another circumstance is that none of the friends who visit him here were ever acquainted with him before. I ventured to ask Sir William Gregory this morning who Mr. Sycamore is. Because of course as he is an honourable, he must be a peer's son, but Sir William himself seemed struck by the question, declaring that he had never thought of the matter before. Perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Ashton, who Mr. Sycamore's father is, or to what noble family he belongs? "

"Really," replied Christian, "I can only say as Sir William

Gregory appears to have answered you, that I never thought of the matter before."

"You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the landlord, "there are two noblemen and three or four baronets who visit Mr. Sycamore, but between you and me, they are not at all likely to trouble themselves as to who or what he is, so long as he gives splendid champagne breakfasts and dinners."

"I can assure you," responed Christian, in some degree of affright, "that if there be anything wrong I am totally innocent — "

"I know you are," interrupted the landlord, " and that is the reason I took the liberty of questioning you. I saw at once that you were a well-conducted young gentleman; you live so quietly, you never take any wine, you do not avail yourself of your employer's permission that you are to have whatever you choose. Mind, I don't say there is anything wrong, and all you have told me about Mr. Sycamore's mode of life in London at the Piccadilly Hotel has eased me considerably. Prudence, however, suggests that I should make a little further inquiry. By the bye," exclaimed the landlord, "what if I were to write up to those London bankers of his? At all events, Mr. Ashton, you will not tell him that I have been questioning you."

"Not for the world," responded our young hero.

At this moment the parlour door opened, and Mr. Sycamore lounged in with his wonted fashionable ease, and perceiving Christian there, he said, "Ah! Mr. Ashton, having a little chat with the landlord, eh?"

"Yes, sir," stammered Christian, and he rose to leave the room.

"Don't go — don't go," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore; "it's no secret. You are acquainted with all my affairs," he added, with a laugh, "in your capacity of my private secretary."

Still Christian was moving toward the door, as he thought that the business might not concern him, but Mr. Sycamore, with an appearance of kind playfulness and urbane familiarity, said, "Really, you need not go, for I repeat, I have no secrets that you are not acquainted with."

Christian was therefore compelled to remain, and Mr. Sycamore, depositing himself with easy indolence upon a chair, said, "Landlord, this is an admirable hotel of yours, and I have been doing my best to recommend it, but all to tiptop people, mind; no low persons will ever seek your establishment through any hint or suggestion from me. Ashton can tell you that I am very particular on that score, — devilish particular."

"Of course, sir," observed the hotel proprietor, "every gentleman is."

"I should think so indeed," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore, " or else what would become of us? Damme, what would become of us?"

The landlord shook his head solemnly, as if inwardly repeating the question which had been put in so earnest a manner, and then he appeared lost in the wide field of speculation which it had opened to his mental view.

"By the bye," resumed Mr. Sycamore, after a pause, "you will have to keep a suite of rooms from Monday next for six weeks. They are for my friend Lord Toddington, from whom I have this morning received a letter to tell me that he is coming. You remember, Ashton, I told you his lordship was certain to come? Ah, here is his letter," and Mr. Sycamore tossed it to the landlord as he spoke.

The hotel proprietor took and read it, and his countenance exhibited a brightening satisfaction at what he evidently regarded as a proof of Mr. Sycamore's sincerity.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the apartments shall be kept, and I thank you for the recommendation. His lordship, I perceive, is coming with his cousin the Honourable Captain Highflyer and his nephew Mr. Skelter; they will all be attended with their valets, and there are likewise three grooms to provide for."

"That's just it," said Mr. Sycamore, "and you perceive that his lordship requires breakfast, dining, and drawing rooms. Damme, we shall have a fine time of it. Toddington is a devil of a fellow to drink champagne, and so is Highflyer, but Skelter will punish the burgundy. Ah, by the bye, that reminds me of something I had to suggest. You must be very careful about your burgundy; Skelter is an excellent judge, and if he does take a fancy to it, he'll drink three or four bottles a day."

"I think, sir," remarked the hotel proprietor, deferentially, that you are enabled to pass an opinion upon my burgundy?" "Yes, I think I may venture to say that it is excellent," responded Mr. Sycamore. "Well, then, Ashton, we must write to his lordship presently, and tell him that the rooms are engaged. Ah, by the bye, landlord, you will have to find stabling accommodation for four horses, as you see by that letter."

"It shall be done, sir," was the hotel proprietor's answer, and he proceeded to make certain memoranda in his books.

The Honourable Talbot Sycamore rose from his seat, and was lounging toward the door, when, apparently stricken with a sudden thought, he exclaimed, "Ah, by the bye, Ashton, just run up to the bank and inquire whether they have received a letter of advice about my remittances. I can't make out how the delay has been; it's too bad of those fellows in London, and all the worse because I am their private friend as well as their customer. They are no doubt overwhelmed with business, but if they don't pay more attention they will very soon lose it, and I for one don't mean to stand any nonsense. I'll close my account and cut them dead, if the money has not been sent by this last post."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sycamore looked uncommonly fierce, as if he had just come to a resolve which was perfectly inexorable, and from which he would not suffer himself to be moved even if all the partners in the London banking firm went down upon their knees at his feet.

Christian Ashton hastened off to make the inquiry at the Ramsgate banker's, and the Honourable Talbot Sycamore loungingly resumed his chair, saying, "I'll just wait here till my private secretary returns, and you shall give me a glass of that famous liqueur of yours that you sent up to us last evening."

The hotel proprietor — who had much approved of the firm and manly conduct of Mr. Sycamore in respect to the mode of dealing with his negligent London bankers — displayed considerable alacrity in ringing the bell and ordering in the choice liqueur of which Mr. Sycamore had spoken. This gentleman quaffed a glass with the air of a connoisseur, and as he began to sip a second, he said, "I tell you what it is, landlord; there is not finer liqueur in all England than this. Toddington will like it," — another sip, — "Highflyer will like it," — another sip, — " and damme, Skelter will like it!" and the last sip drained the glass. In a few minutes Christian Ashton returned, with a visible expression of disappointment upon his features.

"Well, what news?" inquired Mr. Sycamore. "Am I to use harsh measures with those careless London bankers of mine? Or am I to give them back all my confidence?"

"I am very much afraid, sir," responded our young hero, that you will have to adopt the former course."

"Then, damme, I'll rush up to London at once!" exclaimed the Honourable Talbot Sycamore, starting from his chair with indignation depicted on his countenance. "I'll take the next train, I'll go to the bank, I'll order all my funds to be paid over to their great rivals, Pump, Aldgate, and Company, I'll close my account, and, damme, I'll horsewhip the head of the firm and blacken the eyes of the chief cashier."

While giving vent to these dreadful threats, Mr. Sycamore appeared to be worked up into a towering passion, and the hotel proprietor, being convinced of the genuine sincerity of all his customer's proceedings since he had seen Lord Toddington's letter, ventured to intercede on behalf of the London bankers, adding that perhaps another letter, written in very strong terms, might bring them to their senses, or that perhaps it would answer the same purpose if Mr. Ashton were sent up to London.

"To be sure," cried Mr. Sycamore, suffering himself to be appeased to a certain extent. "I don't see why I should put myself out of the way for these careless, negligent fellows. We'll just write them another letter, Ashton, and if that don't answer the purpose, you shall cut off to London the day after to-morrow, with full powers from me to close my account, thrash the principal, and pummel the cashier."

Our young here expressed his readiness to undertake the journey to the metropolis whenever called upon, but he thought it as well to abstain from pledging himself with regard to the thrashing and pummelling process.

"Come, Ashton," said his employer, "we will go and write this letter to the bankers, and also the one to my friend Toddington about the apartments. Oh, by the bye," added Mr. Sycamore, turning back from the door as he was about to open it, "just cash my cheque, landlord, for a couple of hundred. I shall date it the day after to-morrow, by which time my funds are certain to be here, or if you have a payment to make in the metropolis, I can of course draw it at sight on my London bankers."

The hotel proprietor looked somewhat blank at the Honourable Talbot Sycamore's proposition, but that gloominess passed away in an instant, as divers considerations swept through his mind. There was Lord Toddington's letter promising a rich harvest for six weeks; the recommendations of Mr. Sycamore were very certain not to end there, but if he were offended he would leave the hotel himself, and prevent all his aristocratic acquaintances from taking up their quarters there in future.

"He must be all right," said the landlord to himself, as a sequel to those rapid musings, but still he thought that in respect to the required amount he might accomplish a prudential compromise. "It would really give me infinite pleasure, Mr. Sycamore," he observed, now speaking aloud, "to comply with your request — "

"Oh, it don't matter in the least," exclaimed the gentleman, with an air of the most perfect indifference. "Ashton can run up to London by the next train; he will be down early to-morrow forenoon, and then all will be right. But I do know that at the hotel over the way they never refuse to cash a gentleman's cheque — damme, never!"

"Beg your pardon, sir; really did not mean to offend did not for a moment think of refusing," said the frightened landlord, "but was only about to hint that my own account happens to be very low at my banker's, and if a hundred pounds would suffice — "

"No, it don't matter," said Mr. Sycamore, and he was again lounging toward the door, when he turned back, observing, "Well, I'll draw the cheque; I want some loose gold for to-day."

The hotel proprietor hastened to furnish writing materials, and while Christian drew a cheque to Mr. Sycamore's dictation, the landlord drew another at his own desk. Mr. Sycamore appended his signature to the first-named draft, and receiving the landlord's cheque, he despatched Ashton to the Ramsgate bank for the cash. As our young hero was proceeding along the street, he observed that James the groom was following him, but he thought it was merely accidental, and that the man was going in the same direction, either for a walk or on some business of his **own**. But on issuing forth from the bank, Christian found James lurking about at the door, and now looking as if he were anxious to speak to him. Our young hero accordingly stopped; the groom accosted him, and with a touch of the hat, observed, "Beg pardon, Mr. Ashton, but I s'pose you've been to the bank to get money?"

"Yes," replied Christian, though in a cold and distant manner, for he thought the question impertinent. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for nothink partickler, sir," responded James. "It's all right," and he turned to hasten away.

"Stop a moment," exclaimed Christian. "You must have some reason for making such an inquiry. I suppose your master does not owe you any wages?"

"Not he, indeed, sir," cried the groom; "he is always in adwance rayther than t'otherwise. Only I knowed there was some little delay about master's money, and I was glad to think the matter was put right. You see, Mr. Ashton," added James, with a look and a tone of mysterious confidence, "master is so negligent about his money affairs, and it all comes of being too rich. Them London bankers of his'n takes the adwantage of him, and if I was him I'd cut 'em dead — that I would."

Having thus spoken with a very determined air, James pressed down his hat fiercely upon his head, and looked very much as if he wished he had the chief of the London banking firm then and there in his presence, that he might inflict summary chastisement upon him. He walked slowly away, and Christian returned to the hotel. There he handed the money to his employer, who proceeded to dictate a very angry letter indeed to his London bankers, and then a very familiar one to his intimate friend Lord Toddington.

"Shall I take them to the post?" asked Christian, which was the question he invariably put, but to which he had hitherto as invariably received a negative response.

On the present occasion, however, the Honourable Talbot Sycamore said that he might take them to the post, and thither he proceeded accordingly. He had forgotten to ask whether his services would be required any more for that day, and, having posted the letters, he hastened back to put the inquiry. On ascending toward Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, he was just about to enter, when his ear caught so strange an observation from within that he stopped short. The door happened to be ajar, and it was the dapper groom's voice that was making the observation.

"Come, none of this nonsense. I know you have got plenty of blunt, — young Ashton told me so, — and you must fork over twenty at least."

"I tell you, James," replied Mr. Sycamore, "that I could only manage to get a hundred pounds, and you must satisfy yourself with ten."

"Well, I s'pose I must, then," said the groom, in a sulky tone, and Christian heard the chinking of gold. "But I say, how long's the game to last now?" inquired James.

"Hush, damn you! the door's open," rejoined Sycamore, in a low, savage voice.

Christian glided away with a sensation as if he were walking in a dream. He was in a complete state of consternation and dismay, and he mechanically issued forth from the hotel. He was, as it were, an automaton moved only by an influence which was independent at the time or his own volition. When he gradually began to collect himself, he found that he was walking on the pier, and he felt as if he had been taken up from the hotel and set down there by some invisible hand, for he had not the slightest recollection of why or how he had come thither at all. In a word, it was as if he were awaking out of a dream in which he had been walking.

He proceeded to reflect upon what he had so recently heard, and it was with a species of bewildering terror that he thus meditated. That his employer was a rank swindler, there could be no doubt, and that James was in league with him was equally certain. Christian recollected that the dapper groom had on more occasions than one sought to enter into discourse with him, and had invariably expatiated upon his master's wealth, standing, and aristocratic acquaintances.

"And all this was done," thought Christian to himself, with mingled indignation and bitterness, "that I might in my turn puff off my employer whenever questioned with regard to him. But what am I to do? Shall I at once unmask him?"

Our young hero felt that this was his duty, and yet there was the lingering apprehension in his mind that he himself might be suddenly turned around upon and accused as an accomplice. "But no," he said within himself, after further reflection, "it is impossible that I can become thus compromised. The landlord of the hotel told me that he felt persuaded I am an honourable young man. Good heavens! to think that I should have thus become the tool and instrument of a vile adventurer."

Our hero's mind was made up, and he retraced his way to the hotel, with the determination of speaking to the landlord. But on inquiring for him, Christian was informed that he had gone up to London by the train half an hour previously.

"Then," thought Christian to himself, "he has doubtless set off to make his own inquiries; he will be back either late to-night or early to-morrow, and a few hours' delay will make no great difference."

Christian again issued from the hotel, and wandered forth, painfully reflecting on the discovery he had made with regard to his employer. As the hour approached at which he was wont to dine, he was resolved not to increase on his own account that hotel bill which he felt assured would never be paid by Mr. Sycamore, and he repaired to a tavern, where he ordered some refreshments. It was a third-rate hostelry, and the coffee-room was fitted with boxes in the old-fashioned style. At the moment Christian entered, only one of these boxes was occupied, and this was by two men, somewhat plainly though not shabbily dressed, and who were discussing cold beef and porter. Christian sat down in the next box, and took up a newspaper until his dinner was brought in.

"So they say he dines at half-past six and won't be in till then, is that it?" observed one of the men to his companion, and though they spoke in a low voice, yet Christian could not possibly help overhearing what was said.

"I have already told you so once," was the response given in a sulky, growling tone, "but you are such a chap for making a feller repeat the same thing over and over again."

"Every one who knows honest Ike Shadbolt," remarked the first speaker, when he had refreshed himself with a deep draught out of the pewter pot, "gives him credit for prudence and circumspection. I tell you what it is, friend Withers, when two gentlemen like you and me have got a delicate business of this here nature in hand, we must put our heads together to conduct it in the nicest, pleasantest, comfortablest way." Then, after a pause, he asked, "Does nothing strike you?"

"What the deuce should strike me," growled the individual whose name appeared to be Withers, "except that we've got to do a certain job at half-past six?"

"But look you, friend Withers," resumed Mr. Shadbolt, "there are two ways of doing a thing, — one with a rumpus, and one without it. This customer of ours that we've come down after has no doubt got plenty of ready tin, and why not so conduct ourselves that a little of it shall find its way into our pockets?"

"How so?" asked Mr. Withers, who seemed to be speaking with a mouth very full of bread and beef.

"How so!" echoed Mr. Shadbolt contemptuously; "was there ever such a feller — "

"Well, then, why don't you speak out plain?" growlingly demanded Mr. Withers, who might possibly have been a very excellent member of society, but who certainly appeared to be afflicted with a most unamiable temper.

"Five words will explain," was Mr. Shadbolt's response. "If we make a public affair of it, announce ourselves at the hotel, put on handcuffs, and drag our customer up to the railway station like a felon, he won't thank us, will he? And not thanking us, he won't give us each five guineas as a reward for our civility? Answer me that."

"What the devil answer does it require?" sulkily demanded Mr. Withers; "the thing speaks for itself."

"To be sure it does," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "and so does the next proposition I am going to submit to your consideration. What if we do the thing quite genteel, — just introduce ourselves as Mr.Smith and Mr. Noakes, two gentlemen come down on very particular business indeed to see the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore, — I say, did that young chap start there in the next box?"

"Not he," growled Mr. Withers; "he is reading the paper, and can't hear what we are saying. But you'd better make an end of this long talk of yours."

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, "I was saying if we do the thing quite genteel, see our customer alone, whisper in his ear a pressing invitation to accompany us to London, let him pay for the three first-class places, and put him quite at his ease the whole way, don't you think he's very likely to make us a compliment? Just leave it to me, and I'll give him such a hint that we'll get our tip beforehand."

"Well, do as you like," answered Mr. Withers, unbending somewhat from the sullen dignity in which he was previously wrapped up close. "You're a cunning fellow, Ike, and as you say, I don't see why we shouldn't blend profit with business."

"That's so sensible a remark," observed Mr. Shadbolt, "that we'll have another pot on the strength of it," and he rang the bell accordingly.

The waiter appeared at the instant, bringing in Christian's dinner, but when it was placed before our young hero, he could not eat a morsel. He saw that the crisis was at hand; his employer was evidently about to be arrested on some serious charge of felony, and these were London police officers who had come down for the purpose. As for giving Mr. Sycamore a warning instruction, such an idea did not for a moment enter young Ashton's head; so far from defeating justice under such circumstances, he felt himself bound to do all he could to further its aims.

Christian looked up at the clock in the coffee-room; it was just five, and therefore in another hour and a half Mr. Sycamore would be in custody. The conversation in the adjoining box had been temporarily suspended, from the fact that, the second pot of porter having been discussed, Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers had just begun to regale themselves with glasses of hot rum and water, and it apparently took them some little time to arrive, by dint of divers sippings and tastings, at a conclusion as to whether the compound was to their liking or not.

"What a rum feller that chap Sycamore appears to be by all accounts!" said Mr. Shadbolt, at length breaking that interval of silence. "What a game he was carrying on at the hotel in Piccadilly — what is its name again? — before he got that forged bill cashed."

"A game indeed," growled Mr. Withers. "But how do you account for this, that when he did get it cashed, he took and paid all his debts and came off like a gentleman when he might have bolted away with all the blunt?"

"Why, don't you see," responded Shadbolt, "it was a three months' bill, and he never thought the forgery would be detected till it came due. So no doubt his plan was to enjoy life in the meantime. But if he had left London without paying his debts, he would have been blown upon. I dare say he meant to pay the watering-places a visit one after the other, and at each he would of course refer to the Piccadilly Hotel — what's its name again? — as a proof of his respectability."

Christian felt so sick and dizzy at all he had heard, and likewise in consequence of the excitement through which he had for the few previous hours been passing, that he could not remain in the hot, stifling coffee-room any longer. He accordingly paid his bill, and departed. He walked out upon the pier to reflect upon the course he ought to adopt, -whether he should at once proceed to the Royal Hotel, pack up his box, and depart, or whether he should await the expected catastrophe. He was apprehensive that if he adopted the former course, it might be subsequently imagined he had been all along Sycamore's accomplice, and that he fled from the presence of impending danger the moment he heard of it. But while he was yet deliberating within himself, he suddenly perceived Mr. Sycamore advancing along the pier, in company with a couple of the fashionable acquaintances whom he had formed at Ramsgate. A sudden thought flashed to Christian's mind, and he resolved to act upon it.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIR JOSEPH STEWARD

APPROACHING the group, who had stopped to gaze upon a vessel in the distance, our hero said, in a cold, firm voice, "Mr. Sycamore, I wish to have a few moments' conversation with you."

"With me! What about?" exclaimed that individual. "Don't you see I am engaged with friends for the present? Damme, man, I'm engaged!"

"Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, "that which I have to say to you will admit of no delay."

"Oh, ah, I see!" ejaculated our hero's employer, and turning to his friends, he said, in an easy, offhand manner, "It is about some little business that I entrusted to my private secretary. Excuse me for a few minutes; I will speedily rejoin you."

Christian allowed the falsehood about the "little private business " to pass unnoticed, and he moved away from the spot. Sycamore was almost immediately by his side, and he said, in a hurried, anxious voice, "What is it, Ashton? Why the deuce do you look so serious?"

"I cannot speak to you here," responded Christian. "I will thank you to accompany me to the hotel."

"But what is it?" demanded Sycamore, who did not dare be angry, for he saw that there was indeed something ominously wrong.

Christian made no answer, but led the way straight to the hotel, — Sycamore walking by his side, and continuing to ask what it all meant, but without receiving a single syllable in reply. In a very few minutes the hotel was reached; Christian proceeded straight up to his employer's sittingroom, and when they were both there alone together, Mr. Sycamore said, "Now will you tell me what the deuce you mean by this strange conduct on your part?"

"Simply this," answered Ashton, " that it does not suit me to remain any longer in your employment, and I require a written acknowledgment to the effect that our acquaintance has only lasted a fortnight, that it commenced under certain circumstances, and that it is of my own accord I at this particular hour insist on severing our connection."

Sycamore's countenance grew more and more blank, and his manner more and more nervous, as our hero went on speaking. He nevertheless exerted every effort to veil his confusion and his misgivings, which indeed amounted to terror, but he could not succeed, and in a trembling voice he said, "But my dear Ashton — "

"Address me not, sir, in so familiar a manner," exclaimed our young hero, indignantly; "do not ask me another question, but sit down at once and pen such a document as I have suggested."

"One word, and only one word," cried the trembling villain. "Something must have been said — you must have heard something — "

"At all events I have seen enough," interrupted Christian, to be only too anxious that our connection should be severed."

"The people of the hotel — have they said anything to you?" asked Sycamore.

"Nothing more has been said to me since I left your presence in the forenoon," and then it struck Christian that if he left Mr. Sycamore in a state of fearful uncertainty, he might suddenly abscond, in which case justice would be cheated of its due, and he himself would have given that very warning intimation which he had resolved not to afford. He accordingly went on to say, "I see through you, Mr. Sycamore, and that is the reason I choose to leave you. But for my own character's sake I am determined to have such a certificate or acknowledgment as that which I have described."

"You see through me?" Sycamore repeated involuntarily, for he was trembling and quivering, and his senses were almost lost under the influence of terror. "But the people of the hotel — "

"They doubtless continue in the same happy state of

credulity," answered Christian, "as that into which you have succeeded in lulling them. Now, sir, without further delay, give me the document."

"But what use will you make of it?" asked Sycamore, who for an instant thought of bullying and blustering, but the next moment he felt that he had better not, for Christian's demeanour was firm and resolute.

"The only use I shall make of it," replied the young man, " is that if ever a word be uttered aspersing my character in connection with your name, I shall at once produce that document."

Mr. Sycamore appeared to be relieved somewhat by this assurance; yet still he required another one, and he said, in a voice of abject entreaty, "You will not, Mr. Ashton, you will not breathe a disparaging word — "

"I promise you that I shall not meddle unnecessarily in your affairs," interrupted Christian. "The first thing tomorrow morning I shall leave Ramsgate."

"Oh, of course I shall pay you the money that is due to you," cried Mr. Sycamore, who began to breathe more freely, and he even resumed somewhat of his jaunty air of indifference.

"Not a shilling," ejaculated Christian. "I would not touch a single farthing of the money which you have in your possession, and I will thank you to add to the document that I thus positively renounce every fraction in the shape of salary or remuneration."

"Well, just as you like," observed Mr. Sycamore, halfsullenly, half-flippantly, and then, as he sat down at the writing-table, he added, with an ironical smile, "It is now for you to dictate and for me to wield the pen."

Christian took no notice of this species of sarcastic jest, but he began to dictate a document in the sense which he had already sketched forth, rendering the terms altogether exculpatory of himself with regard to complicity in whatsoever misdeeds might subsequently transpire in respect to his employer. Sycamore winced considerably beneath this infliction, for such to all intents and purposes it was. Once or twice he looked up into Christian's countenance, but he beheld firm resoluteness there, and he was compelled to write unto the end. When he had finished and signed the document, Christian read it carefully over, folded it up, and placed it in his pocket. "You really don't mean me any mischief?" said Mr. Sycamore, again adopting a tone of entreaty.

"Whatever promises I have made you," answered our hero, "shall be faithfully fulfilled."

He then issued from the room, and descending to the bar of the hotel, said to the young female who kept the accounts in the landlord's absence, "Can you make me out a bill altogether separate from that of Mr. Sycamore?"

"Certainly I can, sir," she replied, with a look of amazement. "But why do you ask the question?"

"Because I have resigned my situation with Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, " and as I intend to leave the hotel to-morrow morning, it suits my arrangements with Mr. Sycamore to settle my own account offhand."

"In that case, sir," answered the barmaid, "your bill shall be made out. But I hope that there has been no sudden disagreement, — nothing unpleasant — "

"Do not say another word now," interrupted Christian, and I will take an opportunity of letting you know all about it a little later."

He then repaired to his own room, where he began to pack up his things in preparation for departure in the morning.

Meanwhile Mr. Sycamore had been left in no very enviable state of feeling, for he could not rightly conjecture the cause of Christian's conduct. Indeed he knew not whether it were better to decamp at once, or whether he might venture to remain at the hotel until the first thing in the morning, — at which time he had already come to the determination of departing likewise. After having taken two or three agitated and uneasy turns to and fro in the room, he rang the bell and desired that his man James might be ordered to step up to him.

"Well, James," said Mr. Sycamore, as soon as his accomplice made his appearance, "things seem to be taking an awkward aspect — But are you sure you have shut the door?"

"Yes, yes; the door's shut fast enow," answered James. "But how do you mean that things is looking orkard? Where's the orkardness?"

"I mean that young Ashton has suddenly left me," responded Sycamore, "and he said as plainly as he could speak that he has seen through me." "How could he have found out anythink?" asked James. "Did he suspect that you yourself answered them letters which was written to dukes, marquises, and earls, bankers and baronets, and that I sent up them answers of your'n in a parcel to my brother in London to be posted there?"

"I don't know how he came to suspect," replied Sycamore, impatiently, "but I do know that the case is getting devilish serious."

"But you meant to leave to-morrow morning," said James; "it was agreed upon 'twixt you and me that our quarters was to be shifted."

"Yes," exclaimed Sycamore; "because I reckoned upon what this evening's business might produce. Here have I got hold of two young chaps with plenty of money; I have already ascertained that they are ready to take a hand at cards or rattle the dice. A splendid little dinner is ordered, I should ply them with champagne, I should get them into a nice train, and I know deuced well it would be worth a couple of thousand, perhaps more. Then away to Dover to-morrow, and off to Boulogne. That was the plan, but how the deuce I'm to act now, I can't for the life of me decide."

"You must risk it," answered James. "Everything seems right enough amongst the hotel people, — though, by the bye, I did hear that the landlord is gone up to London, but he can't very well get back again till to-morrow, and by the time he comes we may be far away."

"Ah! but there is such a thing as sending down a telegraphic message," ejaculated Mr. Sycamore, with a sudden consternation upon his features.

"By jingo, ay," cried James, looking equally discomfited. "I never thought of them galvanic wires which talks eighty or a hundred mile at a stretch."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Sycamore, pacing the room in agitation and bewilderment. "To have to bolt with a beggarly hundred guineas in one's pocket would be a wretched affair indeed."

"Why didn't you follow my advice," asked James, sullenly, "and bolt from the hotel in Piccadilly when you got the five hundred pounds? What the devil was the use of paying all them debts — "

"You know what my calculations were," answered Syca-

more, impatiently. "I thought that we should come down here with such a good name that by this time I might have hooked thousands out of the young fellows at play, and now, just as the opportunity is serving, the storm begins to gather as dark as possible."

"Well, but does young Ashton mean to peach?" inquired the dapper groom; "that's the pint."

"No, I don't think he does, and yet there is something strange and mysterious in his conduct which I cannot altogether understand."

"Never mind the strangeness," responded the groom; "you must run the risk. Let the dinner go on, let the young chaps come, do you feather your nest, and we'll make a bolt of it precious early in the morning. You've got loads of jewelry and different things that you can carry away easy enough, and as for the clothes, they must of course be left behind."

[•] Mr. Sycamore reflected for a few minutes, and then said, "Well, James, it must be as you have suggested: the dinner shall go on, and we will risk it."

In the meanwhile Christian Ashton, having given his instructions to the barmaid in respect to his bill, issued from the hotel to ramble about and commune with himself. He bitterly regretted that he had ever entered the employment of such a person as Mr. Sycamore; he blamed himself for want of prudence and caution in having adhered to his engagement after his suspicions were first awakened at the hotel in Piccadilly. But it was unfortunately too late thus to remonstrate with himself, and his repinings were useless. He had made up his mind, as the reader has seen, to discharge his own account at the hotel, and thus prove that his principles were upright: and we must observe that he had an ample supply of ready money, inasmuch as a comparatively small inroad had been made upon the fifty guineas presented to him by Mr. Redcliffe after the affair at Oaklands several months back. He resolved to remain absent from the hotel until after Mr. Sycamore's arrest, as he did not wish to be present to have the appearance of triumphing in the downfall of that individual.

He roamed beyond the precincts of Ramsgate, out into the country, but so absorbed was he in his reflections that his walk was prolonged to even a greater distance than he had

first intended. The fields through which he had been proceeding brought him toward the highroad, and he sat upon a stile to rest himself ere he began to retrace his way. About a hundred yards off stood a house of handsome appearance, having a flower-garden enclosed with iron railings in front. and with a kitchen-garden, shrubbery, paddock, and other grounds in the rear. The habitation stood all alone. and Christian was just wondering to himself in a sort of abstracted manner who dwelt there, when his ear suddenly caught the sounds of an equipage advancing along the road at a rapid rate. It was a travelling carriage with four horses, and as it whirled by the spot where Christian was resting himself, he caught a transient glimpse of two ladies seated inside. One of them appeared to be of exceeding beauty, so far as he could judge by that passing look, but he had no opportunity of particularly noticing the features of the other. Scarcely however had the equipage thus dashed by, when there was a sudden crash, the postilions shouted out, and the horses began to plunge. The hinder axle of the carriage had broken, and the vehicle itself had only been saved from completely upsetting by falling against the high bank which bordered the road on the opposite side to that where Christian was placed. Screams thrilled from within the carriage, and in a moment our young hero was flying toward the spot to render his assistance.

The postilions were so busily occupied in restraining their frightened horses that they could not at once help in extricating the ladies from the interior of the carriage, and therefore Christian's prompt appearance on the scene of the accident was most opportune. He hastened to open the door which was uppermost, and to his hastily put inquiry, he received the assurance that the two ladies had experienced no more serious inconvenience than the sudden shock and the accompanying alarm had occasioned. He aided them to descend; his idea of the beauty of one was immediately confirmed, and he now perceived that the other was as handsome and as commanding in appearance as the former was more delicately and youthfully charming. But he had not many moments to contemplate the ladies, nor to reiterate the expression of his hope that they had sustained no injury, ere another individual appeared upon the scene. This was an elderly gentleman, who with half-shuffling, half-hobbling gait

had issued forth from the house which Christian was a few minutes back so much admiring. He was one of the oddest looking beings that our hero had ever beheld, with the single exception perhaps of the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles. He was enveloped in a flowered silk dressing-gown of the gayest pattern; a cap of the same material contrasted strangely with his gray hair and his coarse, sensual, forbidding features. His feet, which had a gouty appearance, were thrust into loose slippers; and though it was now past six o'clock in the evening, yet it seemed — to judge by his apparel — as if this singular old man had only just got out of bed.

The lady, to whom we have alluded as being of a fine and commanding beauty, was about thirty years of age, and her handsome countenance had a bold and resolute expression. Her companion, whom we have described as beautiful, was at least ten years younger. The former had dark hair and eyes, the latter brown hair and blue eyes. Immediately upon the old man approaching this group, exclamations of recognition were exchanged by himself and the elder lady, at the same time that they shook hands.

"My dear Mrs. Oxenden, what an accident! What a way to arrive at your old friend's house!" ejaculated the elderly gentleman, with an air of the deepest concern.

"It is fortunate that the accident should have occurred close by your door, Sir Joseph," answered Mrs. Oxenden, "or else we might have had a long and tedious walk."

Christian observed that while these observations were being exchanged the young and beautiful lady appeared to be suddenly stricken with a sort of dismay. She started, she looked in wild bewilderment upon the shuffling, shambling old man, and then she stood transfixed with consternation and painful wonderment. Christian was himself astonished at the effect thus produced upon her, and in the confusion of his own thoughts he was about to ask if anything had distressed or frightened her, when the old man, having first bent a devouring regard upon the young lady, fixed his looks suspiciously upon our hero.

"This young gentleman," Mrs. Oxenden hastened to observe, "is not one of our party; he is a stranger, and he came forward most kindly to render us his assistance."

"Oh, very good," said the old man, with an air of relief; and then he again turned his eyes upon the young lady, who became pale as death and seemed as if she were about to faint.

"We thank you most sincerely, sir," said Mrs. Oxenden, turning toward our hero, but with a certain impatience in her air, as if she felt him to be one too many upon the spot and wished him to be gone.

He dared not remain any longer, — he had no excuse. He accordingly raised his hat, and was turning away when he perceived that the young lady gave a half-start, as if she would have flown toward him for protection.

"Laura, do not be foolish," said Mrs. Oxenden, in an undertone, but with rapid and peremptory utterance; and she caught the young lady by the arm, at the same time bending upon her a look of almost menacing significancy with her imperious dark eyes. "This is Sir Joseph Steward."

A low, faint shriek, coming from the lips of the beautiful but afflicted Laura, caught Christian's ear as he was again turning from the spot; and again, under an irresistible influence of pity and compassion for that young lady, did he stop short. Mrs. Oxenden now darted upon him a look full of anger, and she said, "Your presence, sir, becomes an intrusion effacing the sense of gratitude for the assistance you rendered."

Christian's countenance grew crimson at this rebuke so pointed and almost insolent, and he hastened away from the spot. But on reaching the stile, he glanced back, and at that instant Sir Joseph Steward was addressing something to the young lady. He had laid one hand familiarly upon her shoulder, and with the pointed forefinger of the other hand he was gesticulating as if to convey impressiveness to the words he was uttering. Laura was shrinking in visible terror and dismay, while Mrs. Oxenden, who stood behind the old man, was bending upon her a look of mingled reproach and command. This was the spectacle which met our hero's eyes, filling him with renewed wonderment and compassion, and for a few moments riveting him to the spot whence he contemplated what was thus passing. But again did he catch the dark eyes of Mrs. Oxenden flashing an angry glance toward him, and struck with the impropriety of thus obtrusively seeming to meddle with other persons' business, he began to take his hurried way back across the fields.

While retracing his steps to Ramsgate, which was about

three miles distant. — for, as we have already said, he had wandered much farther than he intended when first setting out for his walk, — he naturally pondered all that had just taken place. Profound was his pity on behalf of that young and beautiful lady who had evidently been introduced to Sir Joseph Steward for the first time, and who had shrunk with so much surprise, aversion, and dismay at his presence. What could it all mean? Was some compulsory marriage in contemplation, or was anything worse intended? Christian half-regretted that he had not lingered upon the spot to ascertain whether he could really render any assistance to a young lady against whom he feared an outrage of some kind or another was being contemplated. While thus reflecting, he beheld a milk-woman advancing across the field, and he resolved to question her. As an introduction to the wishedfor discourse he asked for a draught of milk, for which he paid her liberally, and he inquired, "Does not that house belong to Sir Joseph Steward? "

"Yes, sir," was the reply, "and a strange old gentleman he is."

" In what way?" asked Christian.

"Oh, he lives such a queer sort of life when he is at home," responded the milk-woman, "and dresses in such an odd fashion that the little boys in the neighbourhood all laugh at him; and then he tries to run after them to beat them with his cane, but he never can catch them because of the gout in his feet."

" Is he married?" inquired Christian.

"No, sir," answered the woman; and then, with a meaning look, she added, "But I'm sure he ought to be, for there isn't a decent girl in all these parts will go into his service."

"You mean to say," observed Christian, trembling on the beautiful Laura's behalf at what he thus heard, "that Sir Joseph Steward is not very correct in his conduct?"

"Correct? No, sir," exclaimed the woman. "My sister was fool enough to let her daughter take a situation at Verner House, — that's the name of his place, — but she was a good girl, and so no harm came of it; but it was for no want of trying on Sir Joseph's part if she didn't meet her ruin there. He is very rich, but does no good with his money; he is a bad landlord and a bad master, and I shouldn't mind telling him so to his face. Ah, sir, old as he is, and with one foot in the grave, I can tell you that he has brought sorrow into many a humble home in these parts, for if he don't use his riches to do good, he is lavish enough of his gold when it is to do harm. You understand me, sir? "

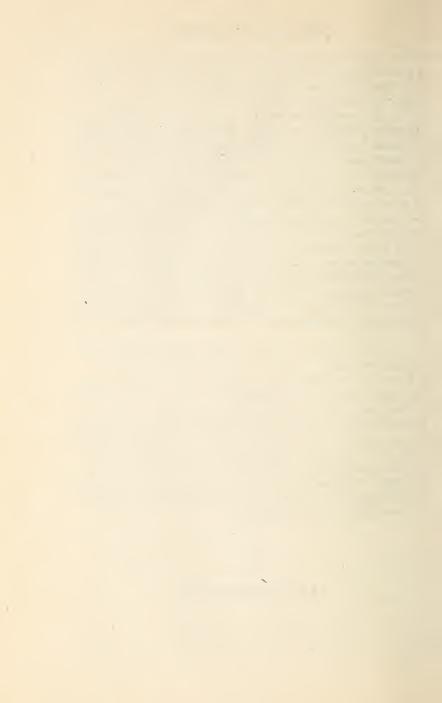
"I do — unfortunately I do," rejoined Christian, his thoughts painfully associating themselves with the beautiful Laura; and when he remembered that she had an air of artless innocence strongly contrasting with the fierce, commanding, and imperious demeanour of Mrs. Oxenden, he felt his blood boiling with indignation at the bare suspicion of what might be in store for that defenceless being.

"Yes, sir," continued the milk-woman, "there are many people about here who could tell a tale but little creditable to Sir Joseph Steward, and my only surprise is that he hasn't had his brains beat out long ago by some indignant husband, father, or brother. But money is such a power! — and if it does much mischief, it can also help to hush it up. Would you believe it, Sir Joseph is a magistrate, and that gives him an opportunity of terrifying the poor wretches whom he has first injured."

"Do you happen to know the name of Oxenden?" inquired our hero.

"No, sir," answered the woman. "But I must be going, for I am already later than usual."

Christian could not detain her any longer, and he had heard enough to deepen all the compassion he had previously felt on behalf of the beautiful Laura, as well as to fill him with the most serious apprehensions that some dark plot was in contemplation against that defenceless being's peace of mind. But how could he assist her? And this was the question which he kept asking himself during the remainder of his walk back into Ramsgate.





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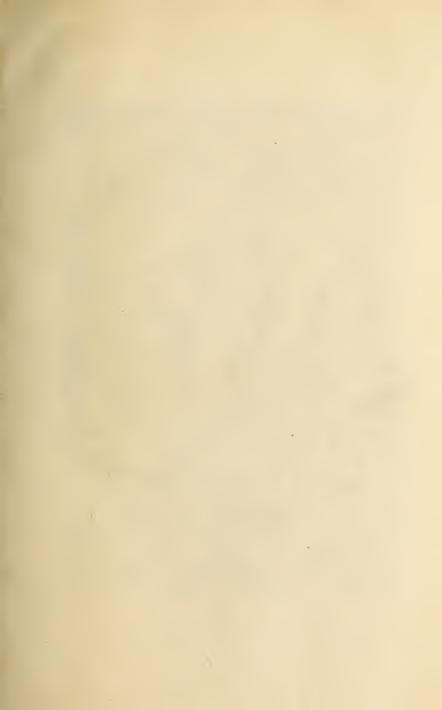
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THE FORTUNES OF THE ASHTONS VOLUME XVIII





"SHE BOXED HIS EARS IN RETURN" Page 363



The Works of

George W. M. Reynolds

The Fortunes of the Ashtons

Volume III

The Mysteries of the Court of London



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REYNOLDS' WORKS

CHAPTER I

THE FINALE OF THE SYCAMORE EPISODE

In the meantime what had been passing at the Roval Hotel in that town? At about a guarter 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 All this elevated the two shallow-brained young them. 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 triffing 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

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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 natur' is susceptible in this sublunary spear."

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.

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"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 account; 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 beauteous 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 That she was exceedingly handsome we Mrs. Oxenden. 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 This, however, might merely be on account of the a walk. 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-plat 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 eves 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 saving 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

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last, when a man was of course glad to put his hand anywheres 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 coffeeroom 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

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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 vet 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

eves 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

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morning, before Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were up, Louisa, with tears in her eves, 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 eves 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 brotherin-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 drawingroom, 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 obtaining 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 assurance, 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 familar 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 Angelique 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 beauteous 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 selfpossession, "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 Angelique, 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.

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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 Himmelspinken, 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 guarrel 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 publichouse 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 lounger 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 boaconstrictor, 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 sayoured 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 eves 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 halfhushed 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 avah 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

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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 horsecloths, 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 shelllike appearance and whiteness. It was upon this object that Sagoonah's eves 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 snakeroom, 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 eves 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 eve 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 underkeeper, 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 avah 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 ioined 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

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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 coldblooded, 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 dressingroom 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 eves 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 eves 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 eves 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 eves 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 vielded 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 eves 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 Mark. as the reader will remember, had himself been villa. 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 avah 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 outskirt 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 snakecharmer 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 outskirt 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 vounger 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 vet 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 vet 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

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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 dis-To this village it suits our purpose to give a fictitious tance. 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 cvnical 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 apparelled, 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 churchvard. 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 summut 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 adwantages, 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 churchvard, 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 churchvard, 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 churchvard, 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 brandyflask, 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-

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 brandyflask 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 tomorrow, — 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 perform, 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 desceration, 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 bothought 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 prigging, 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 lodginghouse 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 eves, 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 spindleshanks, 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 sourcrout 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 crout and beer which vied

with each other in sourcess, 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 performers 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 eve 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 beauteous 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 vell 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 tomorrow, 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 vear 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 wishedfor 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 sav? 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 duteousness 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 herself 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 tomorrow?" 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 vourself, 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 vielding. 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 attitude, 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 davtime — 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 prospective 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 halfpast 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 mountebank, 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-chaiseand-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 shrick 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 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 leaguing and conniving 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 railwaystation was at once dismissed. Having been introduced to Mrs. Oxenden, the lawyer was conducted to the drawingroom, 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 paramount 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 Steward, 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

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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. Ycs, 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 eves 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 inkstand, 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 eves 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 drawingroom.

"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 "Begone," 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 unuttered, 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 vet 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

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 eves 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 selfsame 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 Egdar 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; vet 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 triffing 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 moonlight; 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 triffe 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

"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 whatsoever 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 cov red 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 himas 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 eves 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 generoushearted 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 redhot 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,' rejoined 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 redhot 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 housekeeper. 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 daughterin-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 annoved 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 drawingroom, — 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 ghastlier 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 daytime, 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 sleepingchambers 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 antechamber, 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

"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 \hat{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 beauteous 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 lastmentioned 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; herextended 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 antechamber 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-

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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 unsuspicious 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 purpose 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 tomorrow."

"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 tomorrow 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 imcortant 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 counters 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-plat 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 parternes 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 dressingroom — 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!" should 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 sonin-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 unaverged. 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 sepulchrally 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 At that very instant Satan whispered in my ear, the bed. 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 vourself 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 carvingknife, 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 downstairs 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 eves 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 nightlight 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 eves, 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 selfdestruction 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, Nevertheless, very different indeed was uneven steps. 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

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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 discovered! 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.

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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'smaid 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 fied 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 proclaimed. 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 significancy of her words.

"Adolphus, you do understand me," she answered, at once fathoming all he thought and felt, " and it is most ungenerous 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 vet 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.

¹o" 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. vet, 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 defving 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 annovance, 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

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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

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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

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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 continued, — 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 stationhouse 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. 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 attention 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

"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, halfreclining 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 ramblers 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 legendteller," 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 vonder, 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 betraved 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 voung 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 saving 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, ves, 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 handrail.

"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 halfpence 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 publichouse 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 unsuspicious 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 popular gen'leman as myself, and I must take my precious carcase 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 shedevil 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 churchvard 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 She had approached noiselessly and unperceived, was. 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

WOODBRIDGE

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 nevertheless 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 Redeliffe, 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. Redeliffe, 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 encountered 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 hangdog 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

"There's a message just come down from the willage," responded the Burker, "and the boy which brought it is avaiting 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 vet 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 restwas an expression of listless, placid contentment. She had light hair and blue eves: 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 triffe 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 libration 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 houris.

"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 halfminute 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 intimated." 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 considerately 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, —

"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

"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 betraved 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

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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 Angelique, 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."

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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-ornothing, riches once more or utter ruin."

"And when will the result be known?" inquired the duke. "Exactly one month hence," replied Armytage.

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, — tomorrow their aspect may be as favourable as to-day it is gloomy. But, oh, what a life to lead, my lord, — at oné 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 eves 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 vears.

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

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she gave up business altogether, she had written him the note which now brought him into her presence.

"Why, my dear Madame Angelique," 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 be it 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 Angelique, 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 Angelique, "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 Angelique. "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 triffe 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, vou 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 doting 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 eves 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 Stop, you can throw a kerchief over your neck, so to him. 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 dinnertime. 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 blacklegs 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, plaving 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 militarylooking 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

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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 beauteous 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 be it 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 "I will tell you a brief narrative. We two sisters Amv. 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'smaid. 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 dressmaker 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 morinng; 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 revenge, 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 Ah! I recollect, in reference to that outrage vourself. 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 Then Mr. Redcliffe drew forth from the casket fondness. 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 goldbeater, 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 prigging 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

Smedlev.

"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 out 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 laving 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 motherin-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 goldbeater, 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 leavetakings — 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

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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 hangdog 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 werv 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 indiwidual."

"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 motherin-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 eve Bab Smedley restored the little place to its former appearance; she put three or four saucepans 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

"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 eve 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 betraval 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 eat, 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 Barnev'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 unsuspicious 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 firearms, 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

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 champagnesupper 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 triffe past it, and had grav 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 wellnigh 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 bloodthirsty 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." Thengliding 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 eves 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 laving 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 yow 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 respect 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 pinktinted 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

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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 swarthiness, 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 eve 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 eves 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 longattached 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 lovalty on their part, for the different regiments, on learning what the object was, marched to the great square proclaiming Indora's name. The dving 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. Α 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 dependent. 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 Redeliffe. "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 vou 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 eves 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 eves 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 eves 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 countryseat. 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 diningroom 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 diningroom. 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 eves 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 villainv 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 onc."

"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 gurantee 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 writingcase 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 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 writingcase, 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 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 discomposed — "

"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 evildesigning 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 occurred 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 strangerwoman 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 wornout 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 tippling 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 pistolcase 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 be 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

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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 billiardroom 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

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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 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 intruded 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 'tisn'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,

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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 poppilarity 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 Cannibalreclaiming, 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 broadbrimmed 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 selfpreservation 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 straved 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 breather 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, then 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 triffing," 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 Downv."

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 eves 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."

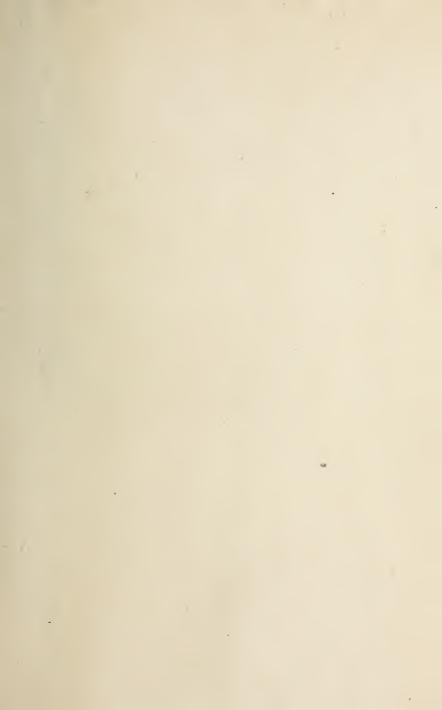
The captain and his acolyte passed out of the room, closing the door behind them. For a few instants Mr. White Choker sat bewildered. A suspicion had flashed to his mind; its growth was marvellously rapid; it amounted to a certainty, - he saw that he was done. He started up to his feet: he stood for 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.

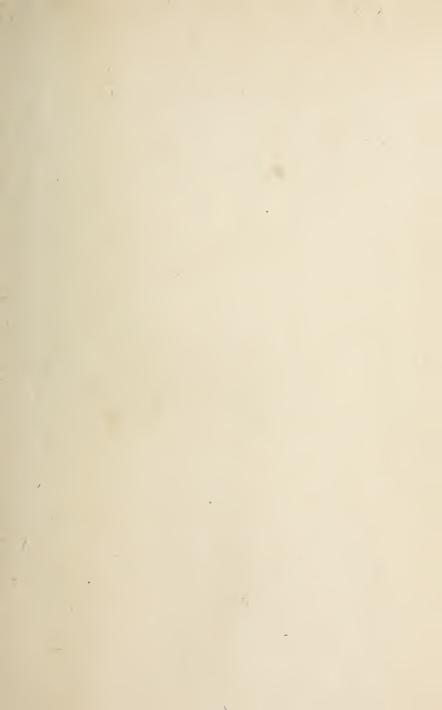
But the cup of his humiliations and miseries, though full enough, Heaven knows! was yet to be made to overflow. The servants, consisting of a footman and three females, had got something more than an inkling of what had passed, for they had been carefully listening on the stairs. Accordingly, these amiable 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.









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