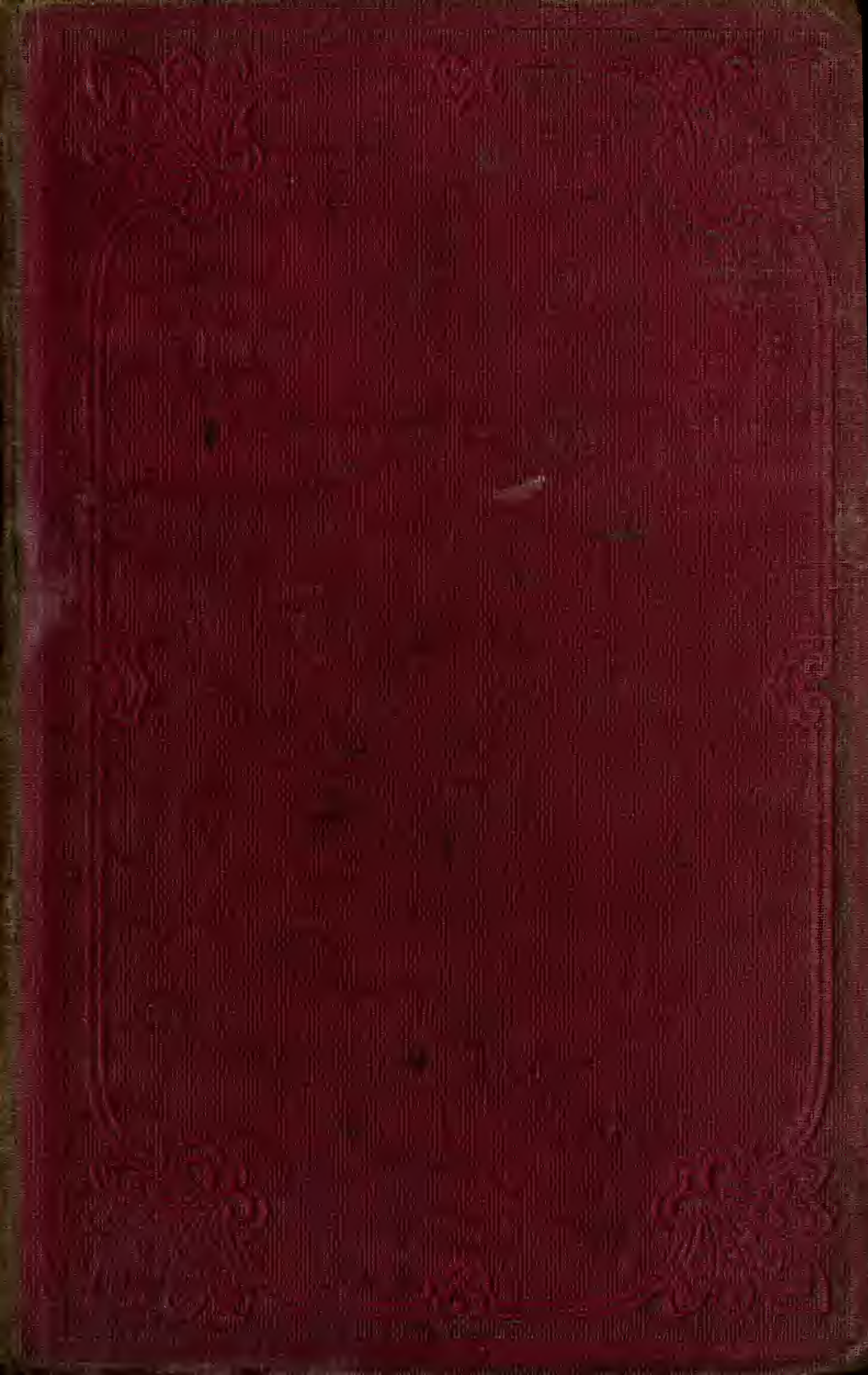

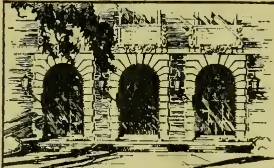

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SWEET ANNE PAGE.

BY

MORTIMER COLLINS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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SWEET ANNE PAGE.

Morning Chronicle, Thursday, 5th August, 18—.

"SUICIDE OF A BARONET.—Yesterday morning great excitement was caused in fashionable circles by the rumour that Sir Arthur Willesden, Bart., had committed suicide. The report was found to be only too true. The sad event must have occurred many hours before the deceased gentleman was discovered. He was found yesterday morning in his drawing-room, at No.— Jermyn-street, having run himself through with a foil, from which he had taken the button. A short note was found in his handwriting, stating that the dreadful act had resulted from pecuniary difficulty. His valet gave evidence that the deceased gentleman had ordered a postchaise-and-four to be ready for him at a late hour on Tuesday evening, so that it is supposed he had at one time thoughts of evading his numerous creditors by going abroad. We," &c. . . . .

[It is observable that the penny-a-liner of the period was very inferior in sublimity of style to his successor of the present date.]

Globe and Traveller, Wednesday, 4th August, 18—.

"SINGULAR DISAPPEARANCE OF A MARRIED LADY.—A gentleman whose name it would be unfair to mention, being chosen by the Right Honourable Secretary of State for the Foreign Department to conduct a difficult negotiation in the East, was about to start at an early hour this morning, when he was suddenly delayed by the mysterious disappearance of his wife, a peculiarly charming young lady, to whom he had not long been united. Although the agonised husband has caused every conceivable means to be taken to discover what has become of her, we sincerely regret to say that up to the present moment this remarkable occurrence is veiled in the deepest mystery. We," &c. . . . .

Sun, Friday, 6th August, 18—.

"We are informed that the mysterious disappearance of a married lady, already alluded to in our columns, gave rise this morning to a duel between the learned gentleman whom she has so unexpectedly deserted, and her cousin, the well-known Mr. Raphael Branscombe, who was rashly accused of being privy to her abduction. Mr. Morfill, the lady's husband, received a wound in his shoulder, and immediately expressed his regret that he should have made so unfounded a charge. It is very discreditable to the New Police that a lady of position can," &c. &c. . . . .

CHAPTER I.

THE LANGTONS, TANNERS.

"STEPHEN!" exclaimed a shrill-voiced young lady of thirty-five, "what are you doing now?"

This was Stephen Langton's aunt, Harriet, his bitterest foe, his perpetual persecutor. She was a lanky personage, with reddish hair, bluish eyes, no eyelashes to speak of, and a figure whose waist might be anywhere. Her utterance was always a whining scold. Every incident of life was to her a subject of complaint. She was the terror of the whole family, except her father; and, as old Stephen Langton, the tanner, had never been known to fear anything, he was not likely to begin with his own daughter. She was quiet enough in his presence, awed by his

stormy voice and ready hand. Ten years before, for some slight opposition to his will, he had boxed her ears in the presence of a gathering of his neighbours, among whom was the only young man who had seemed to take a fancy to her; and she was well aware that he was just as impetuous as ever.

Little Stephen, a bright-haired blue-eyed boy of eleven, was coiled in a window-seat of the old wainscoted room. A book was in his hand, Bunyan's "Holy War;" he was reading for the twentieth time of the siege of Mansoul, that city whose besiegers never relax their efforts; but ever and anon he looked across the street to the windows of a large quiet house just opposite.

The house in which the Langtons lived had instead of a front door a wide archway, through which waggons laden with oak-bark and raw hides entered, and waggons laden with leather came out. To the right, as you passed under this archway, was the dwelling-house; to the left, a shop fronting the street, and spacious warehouses; behind, a court-yard, stables, gardens, orchards, and farthest of all the tanyard, which

was bounded at the foot of the hill by a stream, which it greatly defiled. The house was old and large, with lofty rooms and closets innumerable; the front parlour was the principal living room of the family. It had two windows: little Stephen was in the window-seat to the left, while at the other sat his grandmother, bolt upright, knitting stockings. She sat there from morning till night, never rising to join in any of the meals, which were served on a small table at her side She occasionally uttered some brief oracular sentence, of which no one took the slightest notice. She had been stupefied years before by her husband's brutality.

Her grandson Stephen was an orphan. His mother died at his birth; his father when he was five years old. Stephen did not realise his father's death. He often loitered through the Cathedral Close and under the school cloisters, and along the meadowy margin of the river Idle, in the hope of meeting him. He was a strange dreamy boy, whom his uncles and aunts despised, because they could not understand him. Nor did he get on at all with his cousins, of whom there

were several of both sexes; for, Miss Harriet excepted, all the Langtons were married and prolific.

Miss Harriet officiated as school-mistress to all but Stephen. He was rather older than any of his cousins, but his aunt's reason for giving him up was his pertinacity in asking questions which she was unable to answer. So he was sent just now to an old-fashioned day-school in which boys and girls were mixed, and where he had positively managed to fall in love already. There is nothing strange in that; but it so happened that Stephen's little love-fancy was destined to colour his whole life.

"What a lazy boy you are!" went on Aunt Harriet. "Have you no lessons to learn? You learn nothing at Miss Martin's."

"Not very much, aunt," said Stephen. "She never will answer my questions. I asked her to-day whether she didn't think Christian in the 'Pilgrim's Progress' a very bad man for running away from his wife, and she called me a wicked boy, and made me stand on the form."

"She ought to have given you a good whip-

ping, sir," said his aunt. "What had that to do with your lessons? Go and learn your spelling, directly."

"He's a very tiresome boy," said his grandmother, in her oracular way.

Stephen got up, took Carpenter's Spelling Book in his hand, and retreated. It was a soft summer evening, and the boy wandered down through garden and orchard into the tan-yard beyond. Thence he found his way to the brook, and strolled along its margin through the meadows, which were rimmed with the fainting flush of sunset. He loitered and dreamed. With this child the difference between reality and dream was indistinctly marked. His waking fancies, his dreams of the early morning, were often more real to him than his grandfather's stern presence or his maiden aunt's endless scold. He read over and over again all the books that he found readable among the scanty supply which the house afforded. In a healthy household he would have had "Robinson Crusoe" and the "Arabian Nights"—would have voyaged with Sindbad, and gone underground

with Aladdin. But the only books he could find were Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the works of John Bunyan, and these he almost knew by heart. He loved to identify himself with the characters. He had, it must be confessed, great sympathy with Satan in the epic, and liked to fancy himself the exploring arch-fiend, winging his way through chaos. But often he was Abdiel the faithful, or Ithuriel, with the keen spear of truth; and this very evening, as the sun sank to the verge, he had imagined himself Uriel whom John beheld from Patmos. He revelled also in Ezekiel's visions, and in the Apocalypse. Often his imagination upbuilt that glorious city of gold, with its twelve gates, each one pearl, and its clear river flowing from the great white throne, and its mystic atmosphere of peace and joy.

As to-night he mooned along, dreaming of anything but words of three syllables, a shout aroused him to reality. It was the voice of his cousin Charles, a youngster about a year his junior.

"Hulloh, Steve! Where are you going?

Supper's ready. Aunt Harriet's been looking for you everywhere."

"All right," said Stephen, wearily. "I'm coming."

"She isn't in a temper, I don't think. You'll catch it. Grandfather isn't at home."

Mr. Langton would not tolerate his daughter's scolding, so his presence was always a relief to the children.

"Where is he?" asked Stephen.

"Gone down to the Half-Moon to smoke. Aunt asked him if he'd be late, and he told her to mind her own business."

Stephen heartily wished she would.

The boys entered the parlour together. Bread and cheese and cider made up the supper, and Uncle Tom and Uncle Charles, both of whom were their father's partners, and lived on the premises, were pegging away at it. So were their wives and children. So was Aunt Harriet, looking very unamiable.

"Stephen," she said, "you *are* the most tiresome child. Why can't you come in at the right time? I've a great mind to send you to bed without supper."

"Oh, let him have something to eat and drink," said Uncle Tom, who was the genial uncle.

"Better give him a good horse-whipping," said Uncle Charles, who was the fierce uncle, and flogged his own children unmercifully.

"He's a dreadfully troublesome boy," said the oracular voice from the side-table.

"Come and sit by me, Steve," said his black-eyed and black-haired cousin Mary, a pretty little girl of eight.

Stephen accepted the invitation, and was suffered to eat his supper in peace.

By nine o'clock the children had gone to bed, and their mothers to look after them; the old grandmother had also retired. The two uncles and the maiden aunt were holding half-whispered converse, the men being supplied with long pipes and hot brandy and water.

"That boy, Stephen, must be sent to boarding-school," said Aunt Harriet. "He's very much in the way at home, and he ought to be learning something."

"So he ought," said Uncle Tom; "but then it'll cost so much."

"Not above twenty pounds a year," said Aunt Harriet. "And he must be brought up to be a clerk or something. He'll never make a tanner."

"I don't mean that he shall," said Uncle Charles.

"Why not?" asked his brother.

"Why not? As if there weren't enough besides him to make tanners of! D'ye think that tanyard 'ill keep a regiment of Langtons!"

"That's true," said Tom, whose intellect moved more slowly than his brother's. "Well, where had he better go?"

"I've thought about that," said the aunt. "You know Parson Sadbrooke, that was drowned bathing. Well, his school at Kingsleat is going on. I saw Amelia Sadbrooke at market to-day, and she said her mamma, as she calls her, the affected thing, had hired another young parson to teach the school."

"But why should we, who are dissenters, send the boy to a Church school?" asked Uncle Tom.

"Oh, he's very young yet," said Miss Langton. "It can't matter much for the present, and

Amelia says they're going to be very cheap."

"What's the parson's name?" asked Uncle Charles.

"She did tell me, but I forget—something like Verily; for I thought of 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee.' But he's a very clever young man."

"Is he?" said Charles Langton. "Well, I hope he'll make the young scamp some use. I suppose father won't object."

"Not he," said Harriet. "I'll ask him about it to-night, if he's not very late."

Presently the men also went off to bed, and Miss Harriet sat alone, reading a battered copy of Baxter's "Saint's Rest." The Langtons of this generation were very religious. The family had a curious habit of being very wild in one generation, and very tame in the next. Its present head bore the reputation of being the most thorough reprobate the Langtons had ever had amongst them; women and wine, horse-racing and cock-fighting, had impoverished, without taming him; at sixty-five he was just as reckless as ever, and his mad orgies and des-

perate deeds were proverbial. So his sons and daughters had all shown exemplary piety, externally at least: he being a regular church-goer, they had unanimously deserted to a peculiarly rabid conventicle, and their Calvinism was of the most rigorous type, and their idea of the future world for all who differed from them the hottest possible. It might be predicted that their children would relapse into the old gentleman's ways.

Aunt Harriet waited about an hour for her father. He came at last, earlier than usual, bringing in with him a strong smell of tan and tobacco. He was about five feet nine inches high, very broad in the shoulders, very deep in the chest, with arms and thighs and calves of muscular proportions. He wore an old-fashioned deep-pocketed blue coat with brass buttons, but almost all the rest of his costume was leather. The long waistcoat was leather, tanned with the hair on it; he wore leather breeches and top boots. He came in, riding-whip in hand, flung himself heavily into a great leather chair which he always occupied, and exclaimed—

"You up, Harry? Then get me some hot brandy and water, and be quick about it."

"The kitchen fire is out, I expect, father."

"The kitchen fire be d——d. Light it again, if that's all. What good are you?"

Mr. Langton's frequent oaths may as well be imagined in his future conversations. There is this to be said for him, that he always apologized if he happened to swear in the presence of a clergyman.

His daughter soon returned with the brandy and water.

"A nice Christian young woman you are for an excuse," said old Langton, to whom his children's devotion to Dissent was supremely ridiculous. "Does your snivelling parson teach you to tell lies to your father? It used to be 'honour your father and mother' when I was a boy."

"I was afraid the fire would be out, really father."

"Were you? More likely afraid I should drink too much brandy. Children would like to keep their fathers in order now-a-days. Can't

do it with *me* though, can you, Miss Harriet? And, now I think of it, what are you stopping up so late for to-night? Little girls like you ought to be in bed. Come, what is it?"

"Nothing, father, nothing at all. I was reading."

The truth is that, finding her father unusually cantankerous, she was afraid to enter on the question of Stephen's going to school, lest he should decide against it from sheer caprice. But she could not quiet the old gentleman.

"Reading, miss; eh? No, no, that won't do. You haven't been seeing a sweetheart, have you? No, you're too old for that, I'm afraid. Perhaps there is one too—men are such asses: come, where is he? In the clock?"

"Well, father, if you must know," she said, "I wanted to have a word with you about Stephen's going to school."

"Upon my life!" exclaimed Mr. Langton, bursting into a roar of laughter, "this *is* good. Oh, I like you canting people. Why, that's the second lie you've told me within ten minutes, and all for no purpose in the world. I've a

great mind to send for that parson of yours to-morrow, and tell him the whole story, and give you a precious good tanning before his face. I WILL, BY JINGO!"

He slapped his mighty fist upon the oak table, and lay back in his great black chair laughing a Titanic laugh. But it was no joke to Aunt Harriet. If little Stephen had seen her, he would have felt that he was avenged.

"Don't, father, don't!" she cried, bursting into tears, and throwing herself at his feet in an agony of terror; for the vehement old man's caprices were uncontrollable by public opinion, and he was quite capable of castigating his daughter as if she had been a quarter of a century younger than she was. So she was in mortal fear, and could say nothing but "Don't, father, don't: I'll never do it again"—just as if she had changed places with her little niece Mary.

But the old man had laughed himself into a better temper.

"Never mind, Harry, I'll let you off this time. And now hold your blubbering and tell me what's all this about Steve."

"We all think he ought to go to a good school, father. He's getting a big boy, and he's learning nothing."

"Well, isn't Charley getting a big boy, too?"

"Charles isn't as quick as Stephen," she said.

"That's true," he said, emphatically. "Charley 'll be just such another fool as his father. Well, where d'ye mean to send the lad?"

"To Mrs. Sadbrooke's, at Kingsleat. She's going to keep on the school."

"Oh, you've had sense enough to choose a Church school, have you? Well, he may go, as soon as you like. When does the school open?"

"This day week, father."

"Very well: Tom can drive him over. He needn't go to Miss Martin's again. Now get me some more brandy and water and be off to bed."

Aunt Harriet obeyed orders this time with exemplary promptitude. When she got up to her room she almost fainted; she had obtained what she wanted, but she had been thoroughly frightened. And, with strange mental obli-

quity, she blamed her poor little nephew for her sufferings.

"He'll have a week's holiday, the little brat," she thought to herself; "and I can't have him to lessons, he's so terribly troublesome and fidgety. Well, I'll write and ask Mrs. Sadbrooke to call, and I'll tell her he must be kept strict and well punished when he does anything wrong. The way that boy comes into the parlour without wiping his shoes shows he's got an unregenerate heart. I hope that young parson—Verily, or what his name is—will give it him well."

Thus amiably meditated Miss Harriet while she unlaced her stays; and when she got to bed she found sleep impossible; and, if she fell into a half doze, had horrid dreams of the minister and deacons of Bethesda Chapel in full assembly, and her father, horsewhip in hand, ready to give her the threatened "tanning."

Meanwhile Stephen, sound asleep by his cousin Charles, was in Fairy Land; and the Queen of the Fairies had a pretty infantile face, with tender brown eyes, and a little pouting rosebud

of a mouth, and glossy curls of chestnut hair—a face of which he dreamed by day and night. And in the morning Stephen had his pleasantest time: for a clangorous bell always awoke him at six, when it called the men to work in the tan-yard; and he had a delightful hour of morning dreams, in which will and fancy united to produce visions most exquisite; and when dressed, if he went to the great window on the staircase, he could see at a window the very face of his dreams, fresh and rosy from its morning bath, and a plump dimpled hand was kissed to him. All this took place in its usual order on the following morning; and Stephen came down to breakfast as joyous as a young lark, eager for *Gesang und Luft.* Even his aunt's acidulated countenance did not make him uncomfortable.

Old Mr. Langton seldom breakfasted with his family. He had a large back parlour, looking out upon the courtyard, whence he could watch the traffic to and from the tanyard. On a sideboard in this room he always kept a round of salt beef, and immediately below a barrel of homebrewed ale; and at about six o'clock, after

two or three slices of the beef and about a quart of the beer, the old tanner went forth to his day's work. He thoroughly knew his business. He was the best tanner in the county, and the Langton butts were famous in those days when leather lasted longer than most things. He kept everybody hard at work, his two sons not excepted. The worst of it was that he spent his money faster than he made it.

In the midst of breakfast on the present occasion, however, the old gentleman strode in, sat down in his great chair, and said to Mary Langton, Uncle Tom's daughter—

"Polly, draw me a mug of ale."

Mary was his favourite child; a sweet little creature, whose perfect temper and wondrous docility made sage gossips remark that she was too good to live. She went for the ale, while Aunt Harriet looked on in some anxiety, remembering the scene of the previous evening. The thirsty old tanner poured the contents of the tankard down his throat, and then said,

"What day is Steve to go to school, Harry?"

"Next Thursday, father."

Stephen's blue wondering eyes were very wide open.

"All right: I'll drive him over; I want to go to Kingsleat. What do you think I heard last night at the Half-Moon, Tom?"

"Good news, I hope," said his son.

"Not particularly good, nor yet bad, either. Devil Branscombe's back at Kingsleat."

"Not living at the house?" said Tom.

"Nothing could live there but a rat," said his father. "No, he's taken the old place at the top of the street."

"What can he want down here?" asked Charles.

"I don't think he's likely to tell you, or me either," said his father. "But I shall like to see the Squire; so I mean to drive Steve over to Widow Sadbrooke's, where he's going to school. I suppose *you*'ve no objection, Harriet?"

Stephen seldom listened to anything anybody said, being occupied with his own dreams: but now he had been wide awake, drinking in the amazing news. He wasn't at all sorry to go to school, but for two things. He couldn't expect

to meet his father at Kingsleat, and he should never see—*her*. Like most precocious boys, he felt indistinctly conscious that his intellect required guidance which it did not receive. And the atmosphere of his grandfather's house oppressed him, and Aunt Harriet tortured him. Still, to his temperament, in every day there were long hours of happiness. And he was haunted by one vision from which he must be entirely severed.

Breakfast over, Aunt Harriet summoned all the children to a room upstairs, where she acted as schoolmistress. She called Stephen to come also, but her father said,

"Let the boy run about these few days. He don't want *your* lessons now."

So she gathered her little tribe, who sat upright and unhappy round a long table, at the head of which Miss Harriet herself took up an imposing position. A portentous pile of books was before her, and close to her hand lay a rod ravished from the branches of that most beautiful silver-rinded tree, whose pendulous boughs the poet loves to see kissing the stream. It

had been well used, that rod; and found farther use this morning. Poor little Mary, whom no human being had ever equitably accused of doing wrong, was the chief victim; what schoolmaster or mistress ever found any difficulty in discovering faults worthy of punishment in children whom they wished to punish? Now Mary Langton was the only one her grandfather ever petted; whence Miss Harriet's plagose propensity. The boys whispered to each other that Aunt was as cross as two sticks, and had got out on the wrong side of the bed: we, who know what that charming person had endured, have no need to form theories about the matter. 'Twas a happy moment for those young folks when, red-eyed, red-eared, hot, and stupid, and sore on various parts of their bodies, they escaped at twelve o'clock. I should like to know what will happen in the next world to those who tyrannize over children in this.

Meanwhile Stephen was having a delightful dreamy morning. Finding himself free, he went down to the cathedral, and sat in the nave, listening to the music of the choir. Then he went

away across green meadows to a weir on the Idle, where he stripped, and got under the swift fresh tumbling water, and had a most delicious douche-bath. Then he lay in the shadow of a great lime-tree on the bank, drinking in the beauty of the sunny morning, and the music of the gushing water, and dreaming of his fairy sweetheart.

Only a few months earlier, a pretty little girl, about six years old, had come to Miss Martin's academy. She was the daintiest little thing, daintily dressed. Stephen thought he had never beheld such a gem of beauty. A footman was wont to bring her in the morning and take her home when school was over; but one day the footman did not come. It was a frosty morning, and the poor fellow had slipped on a slide and sprained his ankle. The little girl set off alone; Stephen followed her a few paces off. The ground was dumb with snow: and, in a wide open space which she had to cross, the grammar school boys were making huge snowballs, and occasionally pelting the passengers. Those grammar school boys were the dread of

all other young folk in Idlechester; they were athletic, audacious, heroic; they had distinguished themselves that morning by attacking the young ladies of Miss Christy's seminary, who were walking decorously three and three, and putting the governesses to flight with well-aimed snowballs, and actually kissing one or two of the prettiest girls. Stephen Langton was too sensitive and imaginative a boy to have much physical courage. His delicate nerves shrank from a black eye or a demolished nose. He was not uncommonly called a coward. Now, when the schoolboy rioters saw a pretty little girl coming, they surrounded her in an instant, and sat her upon the top of a monster snowball, about six feet high. It was a damp and chilly elevation, and she began to cry. Stephen rushed forward to interfere, and was greeted with a sharp smack in the face, and cries of "Young snob."

"If I'm a snob," he exclaimed to the boy who had struck him, "you're no gentleman, or you wouldn't behave so to a young lady."

The argument, strange to say, found a hear-

ing; the child was liberated, and Stephen had the pleasure of bringing her safely to her father's house. It was the large house exactly opposite his grandfather's; but a house of quite a different character. No business ever intruded there. A small lawn divided it from the street. Stephen would have left his charge at the front door, but the young lady would not let him. "Come in and see papa," she said; and in a few moments he was sitting in a superb library by a noble fire, with a slice of marvellous cake in his hand, and a glass of some strange nectar by his side. And the young lady of six, who melted off the snow from her silk frock, and watched him eat, was no other than our heroine—

"Sweet Anne Page."

CHAPTER II.

MR. PAGE THE BOTANIST.

ANNE'S father sat by the fire also. A slender man, of middle height, a thoroughbred gentleman, with abundance of crisp curly hair, as white as the snow which lay in the streets. His countenance was mild and calm, his profile pure Greek, his hands were transparently white, with long slender filbert-nailed fingers, which seemed intended to do some work of extreme delicacy and difficulty; and indeed such was their occupation. Mr. Page, a man of large fortune, devoted himself entirely to the study of botany, and was one of the greatest authorities in the science. He did not, however, adhere entirely to the *hortus siccus* department; he had in his beautiful gardens—the wonder of

Idlechester—a unique collection of foreign and unusual plants, and his conservatories were unequalled by any private gentleman in England. A pleasant odour of exotic flowers strove for the mastery with the fragrance of Russia bindings in this library.

The signs of opulence and taste in the room struck Stephen's sensitive fancy with delight. The boy had never seen so many books, such beautiful pictures, such graceful plants, and gorgeous blossoms. The silver salvers and richly-cut decanters amazed him; so did the luscious cakes and rare wines. To Stephen this was Fairy-Land, and sweet Anne Page its proper queen. From that time he dreamt of her night and day. She was the lady of his visions.

Mr. Page was very kind to him, and thanked him for taking care of Anne, and told him that he had known his mother very well (which he had to his cost), and asked him to come and see him when he pleased. And Stephen and the little girl struck up an immediate friendship. She showed him all her dearest toys.

So, in the course of time, it became an understood thing that the footman need not fetch Anne from Miss Martin's—Stephen would take care of her. And he used to bring her home regularly, and often go in with her, and on half-holidays loiter with her through the paths of Mr. Page's gardens, wondering always at the strange beauty of the tropical plants in his conservatories, of the foreign birds in his aviaries.

Stephen left the banks of the Idle that morning in good time to fetch his young mistress at twelve from Miss Martin's; and as they came homewards he told her the news.

"Oh, Stephen," she said, "you mustn't go. What can I do without you?"

"I am afraid I must," he said, sadly.

"Well, I shall ask papa," she answered, being at the age when childhood believes in papa's omnipotence.

Mr. Page, of course, told his young friend that going to school was the very best thing for him, and then sent him over to ask his Aunt Harriet to let him stay and dine. That amiable lady snarled something about Anne Page

being "a pert little hussy," but gave permission. And for the brief, the too brief week which intervened, Stephen and Anne had plenty of pleasant play in Mr. Page's glorious gardens. It was an Elysian period to the visionary boy.

Years before Mr. Page had very deeply loved a little blue-eyed fair-haired flirt called Amy Wexford. Keen-sighted in most matters, he did not perceive how foolish a creature he had taken to his heart. He told his love, and she accepted him; she was not the girl to refuse some thousands a year, though she privately remarked to her gossiping acquaintance that he was old enough to be her father—he was about ten years her senior. Though engaged to him, she reserved the right of flirtation, and was abetted therein by young Langton, who didn't mean marriage, but who liked flirting with a pretty girl when it was not very dangerous. Now the contrast between Mr. Page and young Langton was a very strong one. First of all, Langton was about Amy's own age. And then Mr. Page was a courteous and cere-

monious wooer; his love was mixed with reverence; he treated this commonplace little biped in petticoats as if she were Spenser's Una or Shakespeare's Miranda; he kissed her hand much oftener than her lips. Langton was of quite another sort. He pulled her about and romped with her to her heart's content. He met her by moonlight alone, and walked with his arm round her waist, and lifted her over stiles like a baby, and kissed her at every pause in the conversation. So, fully intending to marry Mr. Page, Amy Wexford took every opportunity of flirting with Langton.

Now it chanced that there was a Christmas party at Mrs. Wexford's, and of course there was abundant mistletoe. The scene was rather trying to Mr. Page's sensitive delicacy. Girl after girl was seized and kissed so thoroughly that he felt disgusted; especially disgusted when Amy, whose pretty lips he touched as if he feared to take away their bloom, submitted to as much osculation as anybody would give her.

"Now, another kiss, Miss Amy," said Lang-

ton, with a hoarse laugh. "Here's a sly bit of mistletoe."

And he caught the unreluctant maiden in his arms, and operated as if he were washing her face.

"You take great liberties, Mr. Langton," said Mr. Page, sternly.

"Do I? That's Miss Amy's affair. Isn't it, Amy?"

"Of course," she said. "Why, it would be ridiculous not to have some fun at Christmas time."

"I think you have had too much of that sort of fun," said Mr. Page.

"Law, do you?" said Langton. "Why, Amy would give me a kiss any time without your leave, I know. Wouldn't you, Amy?"

"Of course I would," she said, and turned up her mouth for a kiss with perfect readiness.

Mr. Page's eyes were opened. Love had blinded him, but now he saw clearly.

"That is quite enough," he said. "I wish you good-bye, Miss Wexford."

He had loved her a myriad times better than

she deserved, and it was well for him that he discovered her character in time. She, disappointed at the loss of fortune and position, took possession of the tanner's son, whom she did not suffer to escape from her entanglements. She was dead now; and Mr. Page thought with some slight tenderness of her blue eyes and bright hair, which were reproduced in her son. And thus it was that he took a fancy to Stephen Langton.

The children had a happy week. They played at wooing very prettily.

"I like you, Stephen," dainty little Anne would say.

"And I love you, Anne—oh! *so* much."

"Well, if you love me, tell me a story."

Stephen was great at telling stories. They were a queer mixture of Milton and Bunyan, the tanyard and the cathedral. The children were sitting on a grassy mound, under a great acacia, whose pendent masses of bloom were musical with bees. Opposite was an oval grass-plot, as smooth as a billiard-table, with a fountain in the centre playing upon a graceful fern-

ery. In the clear basin shoals of gold fish darted to and fro, while some white doves drank at its marble verge, looking as if they too were marble, and cooed melodiously.

"If you love me, tell me a story, Stephen."

Was ever such request, so made, refused? Ah! me, to have the gift of poetry, and sit in summer with the girl you love, and murmur some sweet passionate tale, and see its sadness moisten her delicious eyes! What can be pleasanter—except perhaps an anchovy toast, and a bottle of good port, and a gossip with an old crony over your cavendish?

"Once upon a time," said Stephen, "there was a fallen angel who got tired of the place where he was."

"But what's a fallen angel, Stephen? And where was he?"

"You mustn't interrupt," said he, gravely; whereon the little maiden pressed her lips very close together, and looked demure.

"So," he continued, "he got a suit of clothes made that would hide his wings, and came and opened a large shop in High Street."

"Oh! dear," exclaimed Anne, "how strange!"

"And the shop," proceeded the young dissour, "was full of the most delightful things, different from anything that anybody else sold. And the bishop came, and he sold him a strong scent that kept him from falling asleep in service. And the bishop's wife came, and he sold her a fan all diamonds, and the feathers of beautiful birds, that fanned her without her moving it. And the dean came, and he sold him a machine that made the most beautiful sermons you ever heard, and he had nothing to do but read them. And the precentor came, and he sold him a most beautiful voice that sang in the psalms like an angel. And an ugly cross woman came, and he sold her something to wash her face with every morning, and it made her quite pretty, and young, and good-tempered, and she got a husband. And a gentleman fond of hunting came, and he sold him a horse that would jump over every wall, or hedge, or river, and never got tired. And the prettiest little girl in Idlechester came, and he sold her a doll that hugged her round the neck, and kissed her, and called her

mamma, and spoke nicely when it was spoken to."

"Oh! Stephen," said the little listener, "how very, very charming!"

"And a little boy who was going to school came, and he sold him a looking-glass in which he could see what his sweetheart was doing whenever he looked at it."

"Oh! what a nice story!" exclaimed Anne. "Is it *all* true?"

"Wait," said Stephen, "there's a great deal more. By-and-by the people who bought all these nice things got so pleased with them that they forgot everything else, and didn't attend to their business, and didn't even go to church regularly."

Stephen, it may be observed, was a Churchman by instinct, and never went near Bethesda, except when compelled by Aunt Harriet. He used to walk off to church close after his grandfather, so that his persecutor did not dare to speak. And he spent many a dreamy hour in the cathedral.

"So," he continued, "the city got to be very

wicked. And late on Christmas Eve, when the angels that watch over cities come down to see that there is nothing wicked about on Christmas Day, two of them were going down High Street."

"Oh! Stephen, are there angels to look after all cities?"

"Yes," said the boy, "and people too. You've got one to take care of you, I'm sure, Anne."

"Have you ever seen any of them?" she asked, with curious awe.

"I think I have," said the boy, slowly. "I am almost sure I have."

"Oh! Stephen, I should be so frightened." And the child hid her face on his breast.

"They wouldn't hurt you, dear. But let me go on. Two angels were walking down High Street, and through the shutters of the bad angel's shop they saw a light. And they peeped in, and there he was, making more things to sell. So they knocked at the door, and he came out with a candle in his hand, and one of them, called Ithuriel, just touched him with a long sharp spear he carried, and he turned

black and ugly all over, and he and his shop went off with a tremendous bang that woke all the people. And in the morning they found that all the things he had sold them had disappeared."

"What a dreadful story, Stephen! I don't like the end. I liked the first part. Why don't the good angels come and set up shops?"

Holiday prattle of childhood, so silly and so sweet! Oh! that the Chronicler of Clovernook had dreamt the truth, and that we could walk back through the weary paths of the years into the charmed region of infancy!

Stephen's happy week came to an end too soon. On Sunday he was allowed to go to church with Mr. Page and his little daughter, and to dine with them afterwards. By the time the last day had arrived, he had almost forgotten Aunt Harriet, whom he saw only at breakfast, and in the evening. But the last day *did* come, and at night he took leave of his friends. Little Anne had a prayer-book to give him.

"I asked papa," she said, "to buy me a magic looking-glass, but he couldn't get one."

Although Stephen had forgotten Aunt Harriet, the lapse of memory had not been reciprocal. She did not like to offend Mr. Page, for she knew her father wished to be on good terms with an influential neighbour; but she sorely grudged her nephew his holiday. And she did not forget to invite Mrs. Sadbrooke and her daughter Amelia to tea, at which meal the iniquities of the younger generation were solemnly discussed. Aunt Harriet was charmed to find that Mr. Vellelly (verily that was his name) was highly recommended as a "good disciplinarian" —dreadful words!—and that she and her three daughters intended to maintain strict supervision over the morals, and clothing, and cleanliness of the "young gentlemen," and that there would be very few holidays, and not too much to eat. Aunt Harriet thought she had found a model school. Then Mrs. Sadbrooke communicated her delight that Mr. Vellelly was much pitted with the small-pox, and squinted abominably, so that there was little fear of either of her daughters falling in love with him; and whispered her dread that her youngest girl,

Matilda Jane, a gay young thing of twenty-five, was flirting with John Daw, the junior usher, who was about eighteen, and came without any salary; and muttered under her breath a threat of awful punishments she would inflict upon Matilda Jane if there was any truth in it. She was a vixenish little woman; and she and Aunt Harriet got on as pleasantly together as a ghoul and a vampire.

"Law, mamma," said Amelia, "there's nothing in it. Matilda Jane's steady enough. She thinks Mr. Daw a mere boy."

"Boy or not, she'd better mind what she's about. I'll have no nonsense."

"I certainly wouldn't," said Aunt Harriet, with her usual amiability.

"Well, you know, mamma," said Amelia, who possibly had some slight sympathy with her sister, "Matilda Jane's of age. She can do as she likes. She's her own mistress."

"Is she, indeed?" almost screamed Mrs. Sadbrooke. "Not while she's in *my* house, I'll let her know. She may go away if she likes, the hussy; but if she stays in my house, and talks

to that John Daw, I'll—well, you'll see what I'll do. You'd better tell her so; it'll be a warning to her. And don't *you* be impertinent to me. Miss Amelia, or you'll find out you're not your own missus, though you *are* thirty years old."

"I am very sorry, mamma, really," said Miss Sadbrooke.

"Oh! yes. That's the way with girls now-a-days. They say something impudent to their betters, and then say they're sorry, and expect everything to be forgiven and forgotten. Why, when I was your age, I durstn't have opened my lips in such a way."

"Well, mamma, I've apologized; what more can I do? You needn't go on all the afternoon."

"You hear that, Miss Langton. She's apologized, and I needn't go on. No, Miss Amelia, you needn't trouble yourself to apologize, as you call it, any more. I'll not forgive you, depend upon it. You and I will have a word or two together when we get home. I don't allow myself to be insulted, I assure you, Miss Harriet."

"I think you are quite right," said Miss Langton, while Amelia Sadbrooke, who had risen from her chair, had turned to the window. Few people would have cared to hear the squabble between mother and daughter, but Aunt Harriet thoroughly enjoyed it, and mischievously speculated on the pains and penalties awaiting the delinquent. It was not with any special anxiety for mitigation that, as the ladies went to dress, she whispered to Mrs. Sadbrooke—

"Don't be too hard on poor Amelia."

"Oh, no," replied that lady, in a tone and with a compression of the lips that spoke volumes.

"*She'll* keep Master Stephen in order," said Aunt Harriet to herself when they were gone.

Meanwhile he, anticipating no ill, was in the Elysium of a tranquil summer garden, telling dreamy stories to Sweet Anne Page.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRANSCOMBES AT BREAKFAST.

OLD Mr. Langton drove a fast-trotting mare, which did the eight miles from Idlechester to Kingsleat in fewer minutes than any other horse in the county could have done it. But Mrs. Sadbrooke's establishment was on a by-road, about a mile and a half out of the way. The tanner decided to go to Kingsleat first, wishing to catch the Squire before he left home.

It was a divine summer morning, and the freshening mist had not yet been blown from the wide meadows. Stephen, as he mounted into his grandfather's high-wheeled gig, was conscious of two faces watching him. At the parlour window of his home was Aunt Harriet, looking at him with malignant delight; while in the

balcony of the first floor opposite stood his fairy princess, her curly head scarce so high as the railing, and kissed her hand to him between the bars. As the mare trotted swiftly along the beautiful road from the city to Kingsleat, it seemed to Stephen as if on his left hand a row of fiends peered at him above the hedges, while on his right a line of lovely cherubim smiled upon him with tender brown eyes.

Kingsleat, at that time a borough town returning two members to Parliament, had one long steep street, crossed about halfway down by a quaint old archway. At the bottom of the street was the sea; at its very top a large house of red brick, which Mr. Ralph Branscombe had just taken furnished. High above lay, amid the hills, the vast ruined manor-house of Branscombe, where the family had dwelt from time immemorial. Once lords of the manor, holders of all Kingsleat, and no small segment of the cathedral city, they were now comparatively poor. A good old house, the De Branscombes —a house that had given England warriors and Idlechester prelates—but too wild of blood, too

fierce and restless, to succeed in quiet times. The present head of the family, who was commonly known as "Devil" Branscombe, had outdone all his predecessors. He had run away with women, and fought fatal duels, and acquired as thoroughly bad a reputation as any gentleman of good blood could desire. Commonly he lived in London, or rather in its suburbs, at a pleasant villa on the Thames, which he had craftily fortified against bailiffs; but he had just reappeared at Kingsleat, after an absence of about twenty years, bringing with him his son and his daughter, Raphael and Claudia.

Langton the tanner was one of the few tenants he had left; he had mortgaged the tanyard, but not sold it; and in his riotous youth, when Kingsleat and Idlechester had rung with his wild exploits, Langton, though a good many years older, had been his constant associate. So, when he heard that the Squire was at Kingsleat, the tanner decided to pay him an early visit; and his mare brought him and his grandson to the house just as the Branscombes were sitting down to breakfast.

They were a remarkable group. Ralph Branscombe was more than six feet high, with abundance of crisp iron-grey hair, and a flowing beard and mighty moustache of the same colour. His eyes were dark and deep-set, his nose like a hawk's beak, his complexion bronzed by years of outdoor exercise. He looked just what he was, an awkward customer, a man who knew a thing or two.

Raphael Branscombe, a young man of about three and twenty, was a marvellous contrast to his father. Guido could scarcely have done justice to his angelic beauty. His long fair hair was parted in the middle; his languid dreamy gaze seemed to betoken a poetic nature;

"As smooth as Hebe's his unrazored lips."

He was below the middle height, and his figure was exquisitely graceful. Yet this youth was an unequalled proficient at athletic sports. That he could dance delightfully anyone could see; many a girl had thought it the most delicious moment of her life when he whirled her wildly in a waltz. Angelo had among his pupils no eye so

quick, no wrist so lithe with the rapier. He was a dead shot with the pistol, a daring rider across country, a magnificent billiard and card player. Somebody had called Raphael Branscombe "the Seraph," and the name stuck to him.

He was a thorough Sybarite. His attendant, Louis, who accompanied him everywhere, had surrounded him with materials for breakfast. Claret jug and coffee pot were close at hand; a chicken capitally grilled had been set before him; sardines, eggs, *pâté de foie gras*, were picturesquely grouped around him. As he lounged lazily in his gorgeous dressing-gown, you would not have suspected the latent energy of his character.

What a delicious accompaniment to the breakfast table is a pretty girl, fresh and fragrant from her matutine bath, dressed in some cool pure print or muslin! Claudia Branscombe was far more than a pretty girl, she was a vision of wondrous beauty. Not quite eighteen, she had yet developed the full ripeness of womanhood. Her abundant black hair—as she looked at herself in her morning mirror—fell upon shoulders

of marble whiteness, yet with a rosy flush, of form most perfect. Idalian Aphrodite had not a fairer bosom, nor did her cestus encircle a sweeter waist. Claudia's was that rare complexion which lets one see the life through the flesh. Her black eyes fringed by long dense lashes, varied endlessly; they could be sad, or fierce, or joyous, or filled with an ineffable longing for love. Her bewitching little mouth could be imperious, or persuasive, or a thousand other things; in repose it looked simply kissable. She had not yet acquired the sobriquet of "the Panther," by which she was afterwards known.

Though Ralph Branscombe of that ilk was a poor man, he always lived like a prince. A groom sprang to the head of Langton's mare; a footman in livery gave him admission.

"Show him in here," said Ralph, hearing who it was; so the tanner and his grandson entered the breakfast room.

"Ha, Langton," said Ralph, "I'm glad you've not forgotten me. These are my son and daughter, babies when you and I met last. And that's a son of yours, I suppose."

"A grandson, Squire," said the tanner. "I'm taking him to school."

"Let me give you some breakfast, Mr. Langton," said Claudia.

"I don't fancy you'll persuade my old friend to eat our sort of breakfast," said Ralph. "John, bring a tankard of ale."

The tanner might have echoed the song of the thirsty member of Parliamemt.

> "You may talk about measures of every sort:
> The best measure of all is a silver quart."

The foaming fluid descended into his chasm-like throat with marvellous speed.

"I only just dropped in to pay my respects, Squire," he said. "If I can do anything for you I shall be very glad,"

"I know you will," said Ralph, "for the sake of old times. And if I want anything I'll ride over and see you. We shall be here till August, when my son and I are going to the moors, but I think my daughter will stay on."

"Won't the young lady find it dull, all alone?" asked Langton—"Kingsleat's a slow place."

"It is not lively," said the Squire. "But she'll get some society at her uncle's."

"Well, his reverence isn't very gay; and as for Miss Winifred, folks say she's a regular saint."

"And you don't think saints amusing, eh?" laughed the Squire. "Well, no more do I. What do you think of the prospect, Claudia?"

"I shall manage, papa. Where does this nice little boy go to school, Mr. Langton? At the Grammar School?"

"No, Miss, to a parson's widow's, Mrs. Sadbrooke's, a mile and a half out of town."

"How charming! I shall drive over and see him. May I have him here for a holiday, Mr. Langton?"

"Oh, yes, Miss, whenever you like. I'll tell Mrs. Sadbrooke."

Langton, who had years before followed his young landlord as faithfully as a feudal retainer, did not dream of refusing anything to a daughter of the house. It may be imagined that Aunt Harriet's temper was not improved when she heard of the arrangement.

Claudia had taken quite a fancy to the boy. She made him sit on a stool by her side, and gave him a hot-house peach, and smoothed his fair hair gently with her soft white hand. And when he went away with his grandfather, she gave him a kiss, and slipped a half-sovereign into his waistcoat pocket, and told him she would be sure to come and see him. Here was something fresh for Stephen to dream of.

Again the mare started at her long easy trot for Mrs. Sadbrooke's. As he drove along, old Langton was muttering to himself. "Well," he thought, "the Squire hasn't changed much. He looks as well as ever, and he's as wild as ever, I bet. And that daughter of his, isn't she a beauty? What a flash in her eye, too! It'll take a *man*, and no mistake, to tame *her*. And as sweet a temper, to look at, as you'd wish: not like Harriet, now, as cross as two sticks, and as cowardly as a cur. I wonder what that Miss Branscombe would say to anybody who told her he'd give her a tanning!" Here the old man broke into a loud laugh, rather astonishing both the mare and his grandson. "As for that boy, or

young man, I can't make him out. He don't look like a Branscombe. He's as handsome as a girl. By Jingo!" he exclaimed aloud, "I believe I've guessed it. He *is* a girl in man's clothes, and the Squire's up to some devilry." And struck by the magnitude of his supposed discovery, the old man relapsed into silent thought.

Soon the gig entered the gates of Mrs. Sadbrooke's establishment. It was a long low house, pleasantly situate among meadows. Three or four boys, early comers, were lounging about the playground, not having as yet summoned energy enough to find themselves any occupation. Mr. Langton and his grandson were shown into a stiff parlour, thoroughly scholastic in its arrangements, where the widow and her three daughters sat in silk dresses and with smiling faces to receive them. Little Stephen, if he had ever read of an ogre's den, would have recognised the ogresses at once. But who, under that lavish amiability of exterior, would have guessed at the widow's threats to her eldest offspring? Who would have

thought that Amelia, and Arabella, and Matilda Jane were all in mortal terror of their mother? The three sisters were very much alike; but Arabella, the middle one, was the roundest. She had a round head, set upon a round bust, which again surmounted a round mass of petticoat. How much of this sphericity was natural, and how much artificial, none but her own family knew.

The greetings over, and the fortunate pupil introduced, cake and wine were brought in and Mr. Vellelly sent for. Seed-cake and a whitey-brown fluid representing sherry were hardly to Mr. Langton's taste, so he remarked that he generally drank ale.

"Oh, we have some excellent ale," said Matilda Jane, the liveliest of the family, and forthwith jumped up to fetch it herself.

The unlucky tanner took a good draught of it without much consideration, and then made a face which plainly expressed his feelings.

"Good day, Mrs. Sadbrooke," he said, rising from his chair at once. "I'm very busy, and can't stay to see Mr. What d'ye call him. Oh,

by the way, if Miss Branscombe of Kingsleat wants Steve for a holiday she's to have him whenever she likes—mind that."

He was gone before the ladies could remonstrate against a request so subversive of discipline. He drove his mare at her fastest trot straight to the Half Moon at Idlechester, where he drank three or four tumblers of hot brandy and water at a rapid rate, "to save myself from being poisoned," as he told the landlord, Winslow.

"I thought that wash had given me the cholera; I did, indeed."

When Mr. Vellelly arrived, too late to see the impetuous old tanner, Mrs. Sadbrooke was down upon him pretty sharply.

"Really, Mr. Vellelly, I think you might be ready to see the parents of pupils when they call. It is a part of the duty that I pay you for."

"Perhaps he stopped to titivate himself," giggled Matilda Jane.

"That will do, miss," said her mother sternly. "Now, Mr. Vellelly, take this young gentleman

to the school-room, and please to keep ready in future to come when you're sent for."

Whereupon *exeunt* master and pupil.

"That young man isn't active enough for the place," said the widow. "I can see I shall have a deal of trouble with him. He wants waking up."

"He's a great stupid," said Matilda Jane.

"Perhaps you'll not be quite so quick in making remarks," said the widow to her youngest daughter. "I don't allow interference, you know."

Soon after the ladies dispersed.

"There won't be any more boys to-day," said Mrs. Sadbrooke, "so I may as well look after their linen. You come and help me, Arabella. And you two girls know what you've got to do."

Matilda Jane did at any rate. Watching an opportunity, she slipped away from her elder sister to an orchard at one side of the house, on which no windows looked out. Here she found, quite by accident, Mr. John Daw, who, strange to say, embraced her, and called her his darling.

"Hush, John," she said; "don't talk loud. If mamma should find it out I don't know what would happen."

Miss Matilda Jane, in her eagerness to meet Mr. John Daw, had forgotten a certain aperture in the house. It was not a window, but a square wired opening into a pantry, half underground. Amelia, suspicious of her sister, had concealed herself in this pantry, and could see and hear the lovers with facility. Having satisfied herself, she quietly slipped round into the orchard, and caught them in a tender moment. Mr. Daw, I regret to say, ran away instantly.

"Well, upon my word, miss, this is nice behaviour. And after I told ma there was nothing in it; and ma slapped me for taking your part. Well, I shall go and tell her at once."

Amelia didn't mean it, but the instinct of tyranny was strong in her, and she wanted to get her sister under her thumb.

"Oh, don't, Meely," was the reply. "I'd do as much for you any day. Now, don't be cruel."

"Well, I think you're a stupid thing to care

about that Daw. But you go and mend all the stockings directly, and if you do plenty of work I mayn't tell ma at present. You know what you'll get if I do."

"I'll run away from home, I declare I will," sobbed the unhappy Matilda Jane. "I won't stay at home and do all your work because of being afraid you'll tell."

"Run away, you great goose, without a sixpence, I suppose! You go and do what I tell you, or else I declare I'll call ma at once."

Whereupon the luckless young lady wiped her eyes and betook herself to a long day's stocking mending.

When the tanner and his grandson had left the Branscombes' breakfast room, the Seraph gave a sigh of relief, and said—

"Upon my life, that old gentleman's loud voice is fatiguing. Louis, bring me some hock and seltzer, and mind it's iced."

"He's a fine old boy," said the squire. "I've found his strong arms useful before now."

"Yes," said Raphael, "he'd make his way in a row. But, Claudia, what do you mean by

getting up a flirtation with that blue-eyed child? He's much too young for you."

"I like that boy's face," she said. "He's a dreamy poetic child. I shall pet him, when I find it dull here. And now, Raphael, go on with your breakfast; you seem too lazy to eat."

"I am. I shall smoke. Leave me alone, Claudia, that's a good girl. I can't stand your oppressive endearments."

For she was standing behind his chair, and passing through his hair her fair white hands. But she lighted a cigar for him, giving it a whiff herself by way of introduction, and said—

"There. That's a beauty, Raphael."

At this point there entered two other members of the family, the Rev. Walter Branscombe, Rector of Kingsleat and Canon of Idlechester Cathedral, and his daughter Winifred.

The advowson of the living of Kingsleat, about eleven hundred a year, was still Ralph Branscombe's property. He wanted Raphael to take orders, and in time succeed his uncle, but the Seraph declined.

"No, sir," he said," "Uncle Walter's example

suffices for me. I'm not a saint, and I couldn't be a hypocrite—and I'm sure I don't know which he is. I can't give up billiards and *écarté*, and one or two other things you know of. And I hate work, and talking, and poor people, and sick people, and old women. Couldn't do it, sir, for an archbishopric."

But the Rev. Walter Branscombe did it well. His prebend brought him a couple of thousand a year besides the living, and he had a fair fortune with his wife, so he was in capital condition. He lived as well as a canon and rector ought; he gave liberally to the poor; and he always had money to spare when his brother wanted a hundred or two. The head of the Branscombes gave him the living, and it was his duty to help the head of the Branscombes. He was a most eloquent, but entirely unaffected preacher; had a noble voice, and read the liturgy like a Kemble; was High Church, but not ridiculously high. He was a tall, dark, slender, thoughtful-looking man, with very black hair and inscrutable eyes. And being a widower of quite a remarriageable age, he was

naturally in favour with the ladies of Kingsleat and Idlechester.

The Seraph had nicknamed his cousin Winifred "the Saint." She was a very pretty girl indeed, looking a great deal more like Raphael's sister than Claudia did. She had been in a High Church nunnery, and liked it; had lived on bread and water, and scrubbed stone floors, and got up to sing anthems at unearthly hours, and worn sackcloth next her delicate white skin, and licked the dust at the lady superior's feet, and made liberal use of a discipline. She had dreams, by-and-by, of establishing a sisterhood much more rigorous than any existing—with staler bread and flatter water for food, and more floors to scrub with older brushes, and anthem-singing at unearthlier hours, and rougher sackcloth for chemises, and dirtier dust to lick, and scourges with more knots in the whipcord. Meanwhile, as the rector wanted her in his parish, she stayed at home; and very useful she was in the parish. Nobody ever district-visited, or Dorcas-meetinged, or Sunday-schooled with such enduring, never-flinching energy. She

always dressed a little like a nun, but the style suited her, so Raphael declared she did it on purpose to be admired.

Father and daughter now entered together. They were warmly received. The Branscombes were one of those fine old families that always stuck together. Between Devil Branscombe and the saintly rector there might seem few points of contact; but theirs was real brotherhood nevertheless. And Raphael, under his languid *insouciance*, Claudia, amid her capricious coquetries, Winifred, with all her parochial and ecclesiastical cares, had all one first thought—the well-being of the Branscombes.

"Ah, Winifred, you little nun, have you got any tracts for me?" said the Seraph. "Come, give me a cousinly kiss; I know you think it wicked, but you'll like it all the better. What a pity you've got High Church notions about cousins not marrying! Providence evidently intended you and me for one another."

"Don't tease so, Raphael," said his sister.

"Oh, the child likes to be teased, don't you, Winny?" And he drew her on his knee, and

began untying her bonnet strings. "Only she always thinks it necessary to go home and do a lot of penance after. Do you wear a hair shirt now, you silly little saint?"

By this time he had removed her bonnet and demure cloak, and placed on the table a basket she carried.

"I've a great mind to box your ears, you tiresome boy," she said.

"Try, my child," said the Seraph. He held her two wrists easily in his left hand, and with his right bent down her pretty head until her lips met his. It was a charming picture, and Ralph Branscombe said—

"What a pity you can't afford to marry your cousin, Raphael!"

"She wouldn't have me, sir," he said.

Retaining his pretty prisoner, he began to ransack her basket, turning out upon the table a host of trifles, which Claudia examined and laughed at. At last they came to a stratum of letters.

"Now, Winny, I shall read your love-letters," laughed Claudia.

"No, no, no, I won't have that," she cried, vainly struggling to escape.

"Oh, but saints don't have secrets, do they, uncle?" asked Claudia.

"Certainly not," said the Seraph. "Now, Winny, I shall let Claudia read all your letters unless you give me another kiss."

Of course he received his bribe, and thus the cousins laughed and chatted, while their fathers talked seriously enough on the subject of ways and means. With their converse we have nothing to do at present. Devil Branscombe kept his head above water for a good many years to come, as readers of this novel will find.

"You're a heavy child," said the Seraph, at last, springing up suddenly, and placing her on a couch.

Then he snatched up her letters from the table, and put them in his dressing-gown pocket.

"How you do worry Winifred!" said Claudia. "I wonder she ever lets you touch her."

"She can't help it," said the Seraph. "She's madly in love with me. She wouldn't be happy if I didn't touch her."

And he caught his cousin by the waist, and forced her into a wild waltz round the room.

"Do give me my letters, Raphael," she said, when it was over.

"Did you receive them all this morning, young lady?"

"Yes, I did."

"Why, there are seven of them. What a correspondence for a little girl like you! Do you tell your father confessor who writes to you, and what about?"

"Now, Raphael, don't be wicked."

"Come, confess to me. I'll give you absolution, and the penance shan't be too severe."

And he forced her to kneel to him, but did not get much confession from her. And at last she got her letters back.

When they were gone, and Ralph had left for a ride, Raphael came over to his sister's chair and looked into her beautiful black eyes.

"You've got very nice eyes, Claudia," he said, "but you don't see well."

"What don't I see?"

"That sly little saint has got a sweetheart.

Didn't you notice what a state she was in about her letters? And my uncle, wise old gentleman, doesn't know it. What fools men are when girls choose to deceive them!"

"You seem to think you see pretty clearly," said Claudia.

"I mean to look after you, my pet," he replied.

CHAPTER IV.

STEPHEN AT SCHOOL.

FROM what we have the pleasure of knowing of Mrs. Sadbrooke, it may be supposed that she kept her departed husband in excellent order. Now that he *was* departed, however, he formed a fine imaginary court of appeal; his opinion was quoted on subjects on which in his lifetime it certainly wouldn't have been asked; and when Amelia or Arabella or Matilda Jane was particularly "aggravating," and the widow had not sufficient energy to take more violent measures, she always told the delinquent to remember "her poor dear father."

That reverend gentleman had been a very obedient husband and a very bad schoolmaster. He had quaint old-fangled notions. He read

long Latin prayers morning and evening, and made the boys repeat in turn long Latin graces before and after meals. He knew nothing, and taught nothing. Mr. Vellelly, having less authority, was of course rather worse. The boys' food was of good quality, but scanty. One thick round of bread and butter, and one cup of milk and water for breakfast and tea; dinner of meat and pudding, with the understanding that there was no pudding for the boy who had two plates of meat; a little bit of bread and cheese for supper. On Saturdays bread and cheese instead of meat for dinner. The boys were not starved, but certainly under-fed; and I fancy this is the case with a very large number of middle class schools. Our middle class education is in a semi-barbarous state, even now.

Stephen, notwithstanding his Aunt Harriet's kind intentions towards him, did not get into trouble. He had a good memory, and learned his lessons easily. He was popular among the boys, for they soon discovered his tale-telling faculty, and he spun them interminable yarns in the bed-room. He was averse from athletic

sports, and used to wander about the country in dreary loneliness. The boys were not kept within bounds, but might wander where they pleased, if they were punctual at school and meals. Some of the elder ones, strong bucolic lads of sixteen or seventeen, used to follow the Duke's hounds in the hunting season, carrying poles to leap the hedges and brooks. But Stephen lived apart from all their robust fun, and dreamed his dreams, and saw weird phantoms, and told strange tales when the moonlight poured through the casements upon their little beds.

One reason why he escaped Mrs. Sadbrooke's notice was, perhaps, that she was dreadfully worried about Matilda Jane and John Daw. For that young lady had been caught, more than once, and had been subjected to such indignities as her mamma could invent and apply, but all to no purpose. The widow thought of sending her usher away; but then he was very cheap; besides, he was the son of her butcher, who was very amiable in matters of credit, and whom she did not wish to offend. So an impartial historian must record that Matilda Jane's delinquen-

cies interfered with Mrs. Sadbrooke's duty to the rest of her establishment, and that several young gentlemen escaped floggings which they would inevitably have had if her mind had been at peace. It was a remarkably mild half year.

Our poor little friend's turn came at last, and I must say he deserved it. Mr. John Daw was not popular with the boys; an usher just out of boyhood never is. Now Mr. Daw, being enamoured of Matilda Jane, gave up much time to his toilet, and used immense quantities of pomatum. Stephen's class were reading Phædrus, and they came upon the fable of "Graculus Superbus"—"The Vain Jackdaw." The pun was irresistible; Stephen wrote "Graculus Superbus" on a piece of paper, and affixed it to Mr. Daw's coat. Of course the awkward boy was caught, and the angry usher boxed his ears with fury. This, however, did not satisfy him; but he did not venture to excite general laughter by a complaint to Mr. Vellelly; so, when Stephen was writing a copy that morning, he passed behind him and jogged his elbow. A

huge blot was the result. Stephen was sent up to Mr. Vellelly, and came back to his place with the dreadful words in his ears,

"You will stay down this evening."

Now flogging, as public schoolboys know, is a mere nothing, whatever it once might have been; and the pleasant author of *Etoniana* tells his stories about it as if it were quite agreeable —as a reminiscence. But middle class schoolmasters have been in the habit of using the rod with extreme ferocity. Vellelly, however, was not one of the severer operators. Notwithstanding, little Stephen Langton, sensitive and timorous, fancied something far more dreadful than the castigations of Aunt Harriet, though that lady was in my belief worse than the schoolmaster. Moreover, there was an air of awe about it. The victims—and there were about half a dozen most days—remained below after prayers when the rest went to bed. The punishment was administered with pomp and ceremony in the presence of the whole household, a man-servant taking the part which at Eton is performed by two collegers. Stephen had heard his school-

fellows, after the infliction, creep up in the dark and go sobbing to their beds. The anticipation was too much for the imaginative child. He determined to *run away*.

It was a half holiday. All the boys would be rambling far and wide, and his absence would be unnoticed till tea was served at six o'clock. What he should gain—or lose—by running away Stephen did not consider. Distance lent enchantment even to his Aunt Harriet at the end of the walk. So, when dinner was over, he started.

As he passed out of the playground, Hugh Thurston noticed the trouble on his countenance. Hugh was the leader of the school in everything athletic; a fine handsome boy, always ready to jump, or fight, or swim, or run, but quite devoid of scholastic tendencies. He had often protected Stephen from the bullies of the school; and, as is natural, liked him because he protected. Off on some wild holiday expedition with three or four harum-scarum followers, the fine young fellow paused at Stephen's tragic look.

"Why, Langton, what's the matter?"

"Oh," said Stephen, "I've got to be flogged this evening, and I'm afraid."

"Bah, you little blockhead, what is there to be afraid of? It's rather nice, when you're used to it. By Jove, I'd forgotten all about it, but I believe I've got to be flogged this evening, and you see how much I care. Old Vellelly can't hit hard."

And away went young Thurston with a flying leap over the nearest hedge, doubling his legs well under him, as is the wont of a born leaper. But Stephen, unconsoled, pursued his way along the lane, and emerged into the high road, and made for Idlechester at his fastest walk. He had traversed about four miles, and was walking along with eyes blind to all outward sights, and ears deaf to all outward noises, when he was suddenly arrested by a hand on his shoulder. It was Mr. Page's. That gentleman was taking a quiet stroll, with a keen eye for anything that grew wild in the hedgerows, when he saw his young acquaintance coming headlong towards Idlechester.

"Why, Stephen, where now?" he said.

"Oh, Mr. Page."

"Come, my little friend, tell me where you are going."

"Oh, Mr. Page, I've *run away*."

"Have you indeed?" he said, taking the excited child's hand. "And why have you run away?"

"Because I'm to be flogged to-night," said Stephen, "and I don't like it."

Mr. Page took the boy into a wayside inn which they had just reached, called for a glass of water, and poured into it a few drops from a stoppered phial which he took from his pocket.

"Drink that, Stephen," he said.

Stephen drank it, and was refreshed. Mr. Page then sent him away, in the care of a buxom maiden who had brought the water, to wash his face. When he returned, cool and fresh, his benefactor said—

"Well, Stephen, you don't want to be flogged, it seems."

"No, sir, not at all."

"Most little boys have to endure it," said Mr. Page. "It isn't very unpleasant, so far as I can

remember. But did you ever hear of the fish that didn't like being fried, and jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire?"

"I think I have," said Stephen.

"Well, my boy, it appears to me that's *your* case. Don't you think that if you go home to your aunt you will very likely get two whippings instead of one?"

Poor little Stephen was appalled at this view of the subject. He had not for a moment considered the kind of reception with which he was likely to meet. He remembered the hard and stinging qualities of the palm of Aunt Harriet's hand, and wondered whether the birchen rod could be more painful. And then, to endure *both!*

"You must go quietly back again," continued Mr. Page, with an amused smile. "And you must bear your punishment like a little hero. And I'll walk part of the way with you."

So, with infinite kindness, he led the young runaway back again, and took leave of him at the turning towards the school.

"You won't tell Anne about it, sir, will you?" said poor Stephen.

"I shall tell her I met you, and we had a pleasant walk together; but I shall not tell her you ran away for fear of being flogged, or else she might think you a coward. And you won't be a coward, will you, my boy?"

"No, sir," said the youngster bravely, and walked towards the school, where he arrived in good time for his bread and butter and milk and water, and ate with excellent appetite. And by-and-by came eventide, with its calm promise of refreshing rest; and the bread and cheese for supper; and the long unintelligible Latin prayers in the dimly-lighted schoolroom. And then the boys who had no punishment to endure went off to bed; and Stephen was left behind, one of four, to meet his fate. The scene would have been worthy of Rembrandt's pencil, for its effect of light and shade. The school-room, a later addition to the house, had many windows on three sides; and the bright moon-light so resolutely forced its entrance, that the few tallow-candles were almost useless; and the forms of the schoolmaster and usher, the schoolmistress and her daughters and servants,

were dim, shapeless, indistinct. Boy after boy came up for punishment; Hugh Thurston first, taking it as a matter of course, and gathering himself up with an easy buoyancy of manner when it was over. Last of all came Stephen, who walked in a dream to the place of sacrifice. He felt himself placed in position, kneeling on a form, and leaning over a desk towards the window at the head of the schoolroom. He felt Tom, the man who blacked the boots and cleaned the knives, divest him of that portion of his apparel which interfered with the operation. He *felt*—though he could not see—Mr. Vellelly's arm rising through the air to descend upon him. But at that instant he *saw*—saw through that moonlit window on which his eyes were fixed—a dreadful apparition of a drowned man, naked, covered with river slime. And he shrieked, in a strange wild voice—

"*I see Mr. Sadbrooke's ghost!*"

The effect was terrible. The widow and her daughters screamed and fainted. Mr. Vellelly's birch did not descend according to his intention. Stephen got to bed uncastigated, and Hugh

Thurston, incredulous of spectres, patted him on the back, and exclaimed,

"That *was* a clever dodge."

But Stephen, with his mind's eye, had seen that ghastly spectre, as his flushed face and straining gaze bore witness; and when, in the long narrow moonlit chamber, he told what he had seen, even brave Hugh Thurston shuddered on his bed.

The widow did not get over her shock until a hearty supper of cold roast pork had been followed by some gin and water, hot, sweet, and strong. The three young ladies looked with longing eyes on this potent and enticing but forbidden mixture: a glass of it was offered to Mr. Vellelly, but that excellent young person declined it. And there was much discussion about Stephen between them. Mrs. Sadbrooke was of opinion that the boy had seen something. Amelia reminded her mother that Miss Langton had warned them of Stephen's awful wickedness. Arabella, fat and frightened, agreed with the widow. Matilda Jane thought Stephen had done it to escape punishment, and declared

he was a dear clever boy to think of such a thing. Mr. Vellelly agreed with Matilda Jane on the first point, and advised that Stephen should be well flogged the first thing the next morning, when he could not very well pretend to see any ghosts. Finally, the matter was left unsettled.

And the next morning brought another element into the discussion, in the shape of a letter from Aunt Harriet, to say that she should come over that day to see Mrs. Sadbrooke, and inquire concerning her nephew's progress. She would be at the school at about four in the afternoon.

"How very lucky!" said the widow. "She will be just in time for tea, and we can decide what shall be done with this naughty boy."

"This naughty boy" had been remembered by one other lady. Claudia Branscombe, deserted by her father and brother, had managed to exist at Kingsleat. Not a day passed without her being seen, on horseback or in her pony carriage, moving in some direction or other. She was pretty often at Idlechester, shopping

and paying visits. She had picked up a most sympathising crony there in Mrs. Bythesea, the Bishop's lady, who was only a few years her senior. She was an earl's niece, and the Bishop had married her for her beauty and her connexion, when he was rector of a London parish. He was forty-two and she was seventeen at that period; they had been married seven years, but were childless; and she was a latitudinarian in her habits as he in his theology. She was a pretty vivacious little thing, with abundant auburn tresses, which escaped in picturesque profusion from beneath her jaunty straw hat; and she contrasted well with the darker, deeper-bosomed, more passionate beauty of Claudia Branscombe, as the latter young lady drove a pair of frisky chestnut ponies through the streets of Idlechester.

Claudia, eager for a new sensation, had set up a tandem cart fit for Lilliput, and had gradually got the frisky chestnuts into the way of it. And on the very morning after Stephen's spectral adventure, she had for the first time ventured to take it over to Idlechester. She drove

down first to the Rectory, and tried to induce Winifred to go with her, but that saintly little personage was far too timorous. So away she tooled by herself, with only a Lilliputian groom behind; and took the chestnuts through the High Street in gallant style: and drove on to where the Bishop's Palace stands greenly niched in a silvan bend of the river Idle. Old Langton, the tanner, standing on the steps of the Half-Moon, said to the landlord,

"There, you'd know that was a Branscombe."

She pulled up at the palace portico. Her boy-groom went to the leader's head, and she sprang to the gravel. The Bishop's wife came flying out to see the new equipage, of which there had been much talk already.

"Now, Cecilia," said Miss Branscombe, "I am going to take you back to dine with me. It's no good to refuse: run and get ready."

"What *will* the Bishop say?"

"Never mind the Bishop. We'll take him by storm." And she hurried Mrs. Bythesea upstairs to dress—which done, they both descended to the *sancti sanctum episcopi*.

The Bishop, a thorough ladies' prelate, delightedly welcomed his wife and her beautiful companion. He paternally patted Cecilia's cheek, and pressed a paternal kiss (he was obliged to stand on tiptoe to do it) on Claudia's calm white forehead. He had just been horribly pestered by a Low Church vicar who wanted him to prosecute Archdeacon Coningsby for heresy. The contrast was a prodigious relief. The Bishop positively purred.

"I am going to take Cecilia home to dinner," said Claudia; "very likely she'll stay the night. May she go? Be quick and say yes, my dear Bishop, my ponies are getting restless."

"You are spoilt children," said the Bishop. "I've been telling Cissy I shall send her to school again: she can't keep her accounts, and is really good for nothing but to be looked at; and you are always leading her into mischief, Miss Branscombe."

"I'll take the greatest care of her this time, and bring her home to-morrow in capital condition."

"Well, take her away. I'm the most power-

less of prelates: I can never say no to a lady. Good-bye, Cissy; be a good child—I wish I could go with you."

"Come, my lord, incog.," said the daring Claudia, "disguise yourself in crinoline, you've got an apron already."

The good-humoured Bishop dismissed them, and away they drove through Idlechester. Langton still stood on the Half-Moon steps, and Claudia thought rather remorsefully of little Stephen.

"He shall come and dine with us," she said to herself.

"What a good boy the bishop is," she said aloud to her companion. "He's just the sort of husband I should like."

"He's much too good for me," said Cissy, with a half sigh, "I *am* so silly; and he never scolds, though sometimes I feel that it's his positive duty to box my ears, or something of the kind. You know, Claudia, I have always been such a child. Perhaps if I had children of my own, I shouldn't be quite such a baby."

"Don't be melancholy, Cis. Everybody likes

you as you are. I'm going to take you to the very queerest place—a school, where there's a nice little boy that I'm going to take home to dinner."

A little before four o'clock Aunt Harriet drove into Mrs. Sadbrooke's gates in a high gig, drawn by an animal of the cart-horse character. The old tanner trusted nobody else with his fast-trotting mare. She was cordially welcomed; the four ladies, all in rustling black silk, were ready to receive her; and over many cups of tea they talked about Stephen.

Aunt Harriet was shocked at his wickedness. Of course seeing a ghost was all nonsense, and the little rascal was sly—wickedly sly. She had brought him a nice cake, but he certainly shouldn't have it. And she proposed that, as soon as tea was over, he should be sent for, and should then and there receive at her hands a much severer castigation than he had escaped. The proposition gave general satisfaction—especially to Matilda Jane, to whom John Daw had confided the insult he had received.

Thus it happened that at six o'clock, just as

Stephen was, with the rest, going to listen to a long Latin grace, precursory to his bread and butter, the amiable Matilda Jane came as a messenger to the schoolroom, and hissed in his ear,

"Come along, you brat; you're wanted directly.

He followed her obediently, and was ushered into the parlour, where his redoubtable Aunt Harriet was added to the scolding and torturing power of the establishment. She glared at him with a kind of fiendish glee, and welcomed him with the exclamation—

"Oh! you naughty wicked boy!"

Stephen stood silent.

"So you tried, you story-telling little thing, to escape punishment by saying you saw poor dear Mr. Sadbrooke. Oh! I'm ashamed of you! I don't believe you *can* be a nephew of mine; but you won't get off so easily, I can tell you. Come here this minute."

Stephen approached, reluctantly enough, and was relentlessly clutched by Aunt Harriet's bony fingers, all knobs at the knuckles; and dire

events would assuredly have happened but for the fact that Miss Branscombe's chestnut ponies at that very moment turned in through the gates, and that the widow and her three daughters all ran to the window to watch the arrival. Two singularly handsome women in a singularly stylish equipage had never been seen in that locality before; our black-haired Claudia, brilliant and imperious, dressed in a navy-blue paletot that showed the voluptuous curve of her delicious bust, and holding a parasol-whip in her amber-gauntleted right-hand, was an apparition almost as startling to the Sadbrooke family as the Sadbrooke spectre to poor little Stephen. The groom was at the leader's head; our little friend Hugh Thurston had gone to the wheelers; and Claudia, stepping out just opposite the window, revealed to the watching eyes of the Sadbrooke family, as well-built, well-stockinged, and well-booted a feminine leg as you'll see anywhere. When on the ground, she held up both her hands to the Bishop's lady, who took them in her own, and sprang easily from the dog-cart.

"It's *that* Miss Branscombe," said Aunt Harriet, who had just reached the window. And then she half regretted the ejaculation, knowing that her father held by the Branscombes.

"Well, I do declare," said the widow, "if it isn't the Bishop's wife. What can they want here?"

As to Stephen, released from Aunt Harriet's bony grip, he opened his eyes widely in wonder.

The ladies were shown in, and everybody stood up to receive them. The widow's three daughters were perfectly appalled at finding themselves in close contact with these two wonderful strangers. Their own dreadful dowdiness became apparent to them; and there was humiliation even for Matilda Jane, who firmly believed herself pretty. But oh! the light of Claudia Branscombe's eyes, the glory of her hair, the delicate whiteness of her diamonded right hand, from which she had taken the glove!

"Mrs. Sadbrooke, I believe?" said Claudia. "I need not detain you a moment. I called to take little Stephen Langton home with me; his grandfather said he might come."

Mrs. Sadbrooke looked meaningly at Aunt Harriet, who, however, required no hint from her.

"I am very sorry," said the maiden aunt, "but Stephen has been naughty, and I don't think he ought to have a holiday."

Claudia looked at her with that haughty impertinent stare of inquiry which is so delightfully natural to some ladies; then turned to Mrs. Sadbrooke, and said—

"This person is one of your governesses, I suppose?"

"Oh! no—I beg pardon—Miss Harriet Langton—*Miss* Langton," said the widow, in a great hurry.

"Ah! some relation of my little friend Stephen's. And so you have been naughty, have you?" she said, addressing the boy. "Well, run and put your cap on; my ponies won't stand. Be quick. We have all of us been naughty in our time, I suppose, eh, Ciss?" This was addressed to the Bishop's wife, and as if the Sadbrookes and Aunt Harriet had ceased to exist.

The latter lady was about to remonstrate once more—but then she was afraid of her father. She didn't like it at all. Here was Stephen snatched from her castigating hands, and taken away for a holiday without even the form of asking leave, by this proud girl, who did not seem to recognize her existence. As for Mrs. Sadbrooke, she wisely thought if Aunt Harriet did not interfere, she need not. In a minute Stephen was back again, ready to start. Claudia drew on her glove, said, with a slight bow, "Good morning, Mrs. Sadbrooke," and was helping Mrs. Bythesea into the tandem cart cart before Aunt Harriet had time to recover herself.

"Jump up behind, Stephen," she said, "and mind you hold on. Who's that handsome boy that held Flora's head? Master Thurston? Here, Master Thurston, you won't object to a tip from a friend of Stephen's, will you?"

Away went the chestnuts, Stephen clinging on by the side of the groom, while all Mrs. Sadbrooke's pupils looked after them delightedly.

"She's a brick," exclaimed Hugh Thurston,

"and no mistake." Claudia, extravagant minx, had given him a sovereign. "And ain't she a pretty girl? Why, Polly Simcox is nothing to her!"

Now Polly Simcox was a red-faced lass who came round twice a week with a basket of tarts, and whose ruddy rotundity the boys greatly admired. So Claudia ought to have been flattered.

"*Well*," said Aunt Harriet, when they were gone, "I think that young woman's impertinence is perfectly abominable. I never was so treated in my life."

"I should complain about it to Mr. Langton, if I were you, dear," suggested Amelia.

But this was just what Aunt Harriet didn't quite see, for she felt sure that her father would say Miss Branscombe was right. At the same time, she was not disposed to confess her position to the Sadbrooke family. She was happily relieved from her difficulty by the volatile Matilda Jane.

"Do you think that Miss Branscombe pretty?"

"*Pretty!*" exclaimed Arabella, as if there

could not be the slightest doubt that Claudia was intensely hideous.

"She's extremely forward," said Mrs. Sadbrooke. "If we'd been a set of gipsies, she couldn't have treated us worse."

"She'll come to no good," said Aunt Harriet.

"As for the Bishop's wife, I wonder she can go about with such a flighty piece," said Amelia.

"What carroty hair that Bishop's wife has got!" said Matilda Jane, in contemptuous criticism of tresses whose profuse beauty would have maddened a pre-Raffaellite painter.

But, unhindered by criticism, tbe chestnuts brought Claudia and her companions to Kingsleat in good time for dinner. And then, for the first time in his life, Stephen dined. At the Branscombes there was never any deficiency in supply or in style. The soup, the turbot, and lobster sauce, the roast saddle, the birds, the Amontillado and iced Clicquot, were all as good and as well served as if Devil Branscombe had been there himself. I will not say, as if the Seraph had been there, for the Seraph's critical power was known and dreaded, at home as well

as abroad. His audacity and accuracy were beyond his years; he would have shut up Tod Heatly on a question of claret, or Colenso on a question of heresy.

Stephen, who possessed the apprehensive forgetive faculty—and the faculty must be apprehensive before it is forgetive—profited by what he saw and heard. Though brought up among people innately vulgar, the child had a natural refinement. All the influences which at this moment surrounded him were of service to him. He was very silent, very observant. He listened to the sparkling converse of the two ladies, and tried hard to understand it. He asked no questions, but formed his own conclusions quietly. He sipped his icy effervescent wine from its shallow glass as if both wine and glass were quite customary things to him.

By-and-by they went to the drawing-room, and coffee was served, and Claudia, an exquisite musician, sat down to the piano, and played and sang rather for herself than her hearers. Oh! how the royal music sobbed through that sweet white throat of hers, while her fragrant

bosom swelled to its flood of passion, and her great black fathomless eyes flashed marvellously! At such a moment, had Phœbus Apollo beheld her, would he not have caught her suddenly around her lissom waist, and showered upon her eyes and cheeks and lips the kisses of the god?

She ceased. After a while a clock on the marble mantelpiece struck ten with silver strokes. She came and sat by Stephen on his sofa, and passed her fingers through his hair.

"Now, Cis," she said, "you give us some music."

"I'm too tired, child," said the Bishop's wife; "and it's no good playing or singing after you. Don't you think it's nearly time our little friend went to bed?"

"Oh, no; he need not get up early, and I want to talk to him. Who was that wonderful old lady, Stephen, who looked so cross to-day at Mrs. Sadbrooke's?"

"That was Aunt Harriet."

"Indeed! Why, she looked as if she had come over on purpose to torment you."

"I think she had," said Stephen, gravely.

"What a funny little fellow he is, Cis!" she said. "What are you going to be when you are a man, Stephen? A tanner, like your grandfather?"

"No," he said, decisively. "A poet."

Both ladies laughed.

"A poet!" said Mrs. Bythesea. "Do you know what a poet is?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "Milton was a poet. He saw what other people could not see."

"And can *you* do that?" asked Claudia.

"Yes," he said. "I saw Mr. Sadbrooke's ghost the other night."

"What an odd child!" exclaimed the Bishop's wife. "I hope he won't be waking us up in the night with his ghosts."

"I am not at all afraid of ghosts," said Stephen, in a matter of fact way. "I am used to them. They don't do any harm."

The ladies were rather puzzled how to deal with this young præter-naturalist, so they proposed to go to bed.

"We must find a bed for this child somewhere," remarked Claudia.

It was a quaint spacious house, with rooms opening into each other, and Stephen was snugly ensconced in a small room between two larger ones, in which slept Miss Branscombe and her friend. And, being undressed, he had to put on a wondrously frilled night-gown of Claudia's, which went down far below his feet. Thus robed, he sank into the softest of beds, and lay dreamily awake. And Cis and Claudia chatted a little; and then they began to disrobe; and

> "By degrees
> Their rich attire crept rustling to their knees,"

as Mr. Keats has it; and then Claudia felt disposed for a romp, and began to tickle her fair friend, who screamed, and giggled, and at last ran away to her own room; and then Cis came back again for another chat, and whispered to Claudia, "I do believe that child isn't asleep;" and then they talked for half an hour or so about the Idlechester people, and Kingsleat people, and who was going to marry whom; and then the Bishop's wife grew mischievously inclined, and gave Claudia a sharp pinch, and

ran away to her own room, and tried to fasten the door; but Claudia was too quick for her, and pushed the door open, and, being a good deal stronger than the Bishop's wife, threw her on the bed, and tickled her warm plump ribs until the suppressed laughter could be controlled no longer, but burst into a shriek; and then, giving her a farewell slap, she wished her good night; and then passing through Stephen's room, she said, "I do declare that child isn't asleep yet, and it's just twelve," and stooping over him, gave him a kiss; and finally, she sank into her own soft nest, and was soon tranquilly asleep.

But the little boy lay long awake, happily awake, thinking of all he had seen that day—contrasting the sordid school, and its scolding women, and its eternal punishments, with this large beautiful house and the two lovely creatures with whom his afternoon had been passed—vainly struggling with the insoluble problem, why he was obliged to live amid ugliness and hatred while there seemed to be so much beauty and so much love in the world—taking quiet

notice of everything in his pleasant lofty chamber, for night-lamps were burning in the rooms diffusing a mellow light—and wishing it were possible that he could forget the existence of Aunt Harriet, and Mrs. Sadbrooke, and Mr. Vellelly, and live always with people like Miss Branscombe, and Mrs. Bythesea, and kind Mr. Page, and, above all, with sweet Anne Page. And as he thought of his fairy princess, he fell asleep.

And very late was it when he awoke; and to his sensitive nature and thirst for enjoyment there was delight in the fair water of the ample sponge-bath, in the well-supplied breakfast-table, in all the little details of unaccustomed luxury which at every moment he encountered. But all pleasure must have an end; and so poor Stephen in the afternoon found himself once more dropped in the hateful playground, while the chestnuts carried rapidly away their mistress and her friend. Very disconsolate he looked at this moment; and merry Hugh Thurston, coming up to him, exclaimed—

"Why, Langton, you look as if you couldn't

help it. How have you enjoyed your holiday?"

"Oh, delightfully," sighed Stephen.

"We've had a great lark since you went," said Hugh. "Graculus and Matilda Jane ran away to get married, and old Daw heard of it, and went after them in his butcher's cart, and caught them out at the cross-roads, just beyond Idlechester, and brought them back in the cart just like a couple of sheep, tied with the same ropes and all. Oh, didn't they look nice just when he handed them out—and didn't we hooray, rather? And he told Mother Sadbrooke that if she wanted to keep a school, she'd better send her girls out to service. Criky, wasn't she wild?"

The story thus emphatically narrated was quite true, and the incident was an unlucky one for Mrs. Sadbrooke. Not only did the most obliging of butchers quarrel with her, but so did the parents and guardians of too many of her pupils. She did all she could, poor woman. She sent away all three of her daughters; she engaged a remarkably correct young man in the place of Graculus Superbus. But she never

flourished afterwards; the school gradually dwindled away, and she and her daughters sent somewhere unnoticed in the great ocean of life. The only one Stephen ever saw again was Matilda Jane, who had become under-chambermaid at the Half-Moon at Idlechester.

CHAPTER V.

A LUSTRUM.

FIVE years make a considerable difference in a man after a certain age. Well can I remember when a lustrum seemed a trifle, when being seventeen or so, I longed to be twenty-two or three; but not such is the feeling of the man

> "Cujus octavum trepidavit ætas,
> Claudere lustrum."

No, every hour of this divine September, amid whose purple sunsets and calm glories of harvest moonlight I am writing, is worth its weight in diamonds of the brightest water, ruddy rubies, sapphires of the Orient. A lustrum *now* is worth more than all the wealth of all the Hebrew race, from Solomon down to the Rothschilds.

The moments flash by like bubbles on a mill-race; the very delight of life makes us mourn life's fleetness. Ah, that we could have learnt the value of time when we had more of it to spend!

Five years passed, and Stephen was sixteen. He had spent most of his school-days at the establishment of a certain Dr. Wood, who got his degree at Erlangen. Wood was a tall man, with a black mane, that caused him to look alarmingly lion-like. He was unrivalled as an advertiser and a castigator, and had by those two arts contrived to get together about a hundred and twenty pupils. As he was a perfectly uneducated man, and not given to expend money lavishly in tutorial salaries, it is not to be supposed that his alumni were over well taught. But Summer Vale flourished, and the boys were compelled to use their memories, if none of their higher faculties, and Stephen learnt the Church Catechism, the Eton Latin Grammar, and the first six books of Euclid, so thoroughly by rote, without understanding a word of either, that he never forgot them again.

In course of years the meaning of certain parts of them gradually discovered itself to him, and he always associated his duty towards his neighbour with a severe flogging he got on Monday morning for not being able to remember the catechetic details of the said duty on Sunday evening.

Wood, being a big man, was of course married to a sharp little vixen of a wife. Mrs. Wood altogether transcended both Aunt Harriet and Mrs. Sadbrooke: hers was no whining scold, but a short, sharp objurgation of far more terrifying moment, frequently followed by the rapid application of a very vigorous hand. The way in which she would collar a refractory youngster, reverse him over anything handy, and snatching off his slipper, apply it violently to the tenderest part of him, was really marvellous. Quick in sight, in speech, in motion, Mrs. Wood was the ruling genius of the school; she pervaded it; she kept everybody in order, not forgetting her husband. He, in fact, was merely a negative man, big, stupid, strong, and wisely obedient to his wife.

Stephen, beyond the elements of learning we have mentioned, picked up nothing at Wood's. But to know Euclid, and the Catechism, and the Eton Grammar by heart is something, at any rate. The favourite game at Wood's was football, played on a wide common about a mile from the school: Stephen, who was growing ridiculously fast, had not wind enough for this glorious exercise. But the boy, though quiet, was not unpopular. His ancient story-telling talent was not lost; it was his wont to begin a tale on the first night of the half year, and to continue it right away to the end. Schoolboys love these interminable stories, with episode within episode, like Chinese balls within one another. Moreover, our young hero had taken to rhyming, and wrote love-letters, acrostic and elegant, for his school-fellows, and once or twice obtained half-holidays for a cleverish copy of verses. So he got on among the boys comfortably enough, and rather enjoyed his school days. It was customary to end each term at Summer Vale with public recitations; and when Stephen was deemed old enough to play *Mark*

Antony in "Julius Cæsar," and actually had the delight of addressing his "Friends, Romans, countrymen," to Mr. Page and his dear little daughter, among other auditors, he was a happy boy.

For Mr. Page did not forget him. In the vacations, Stephen was more at Mr. Page's house than at his grandfather's. Anne was still his little sweetheart; her lustrum had not brought her beyond childhood's delicious days of love and truth; and her governess, Miss Marsden, had not been able to spoil her. For though that excellent young person, like most governesses, had faith in learning facts by heart, and believed that music and dancing, drawing and French, were far more important than the classical literature of England, she was fortunately prevented from having her own way. Mr. Page superintended his little girl's education, and would make her read an essay of Elia's, or learn a lyric of Herrick's or Shelley's, when Miss Marsden would have been dosing her with French verbs, or setting her to learn by rote the names of all the rivers in Europe. And when Stephen

had his holidays, lessons were suspended, and the two young people renewed their garden rambles, or strolled through the cathedral close, and by the river marge, while Stephen told his stories as fluently as ever.

But there were others to whom this lustrum had brought a change. Old Langton was a trifle heavier than before, and sat longer and drank more after dinner. His sons were slightly altered; his grandsons were learning to be tanners, Stephen of course excepted; his wife still sat by the parlour-window and uttered oracular sentences; and his daughter Harriet was perhaps rather more mistress than ever, in consequence of his growing indolence. Little Mary Langton was still the sweetest-tempered and most obedient of girls, and still Aunt Harriet's patient victim. Her father and mother seemed to have given her up to the strong-willed virgin, who was too crafty to tyrannize over Mary in the old man's presence.

Of the Branscombes, Idlechester and Kingsleat knew little. Claudia had long rejoined her father and brother in London. She was

the queen of that fast world in which Devil Branscombe lived. Her rare beauty and wild wit brought crowds of adorers to her feet. Willing to flirt to the utmost, she never went beyond flirtation. Many a foolish boy lost his heart to the Panther—as some coiner of nick-names had called her—and his money to her father at the various games which occupied the nights at his villa. Claudia was the gayest creature in town, apparently: nobody dressed so superbly, or rode so daringly, or drove such ponies as the Panther. Nobody had such a wild, witching, reckless way. Her career was all triumph. But there were moments, I know, when Claudia's dark eyes filled with tears as she thought of what might have been—as she looked back upon wasted years, all gaiety and frivolity, without one touch of love.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe was as placid and popular as ever—a model Rector of Kingsleat, and a model Canon of the Cathedral. And Winifred grew more and more saintly. People fancied a halo or rainbow around that pretty head of hers. She was still a little too

extreme in her high-churchism for the Rector. There was a young clergyman, good-looking and fluent, and possessed of a little money, who had started drowsy Idlechester by attempting to establish monasteries and nunneries, and by walking the streets in a costume between that of a ballet-girl and a blue-coat boy. He called himself Father Remigius, and to him Saint Winifred was wont to confess. Almost simultaneously, a new dissenting sect had arisen in the city: a little vivacious garrulous man dropped suddenly from some unknown part of America, and called himself "The Angel of the Church in Idlechester," and established his *cultus* in an unoccupied loft. His energy soon brought him feminine followers, and among them was Aunt Harriet.

Such was the position of some of our acquaintances when Stephen, a lanky lad of sixteen, came home for his midsummer holidays. Aunt Harriet didn't like his arrival at all. He had got beyond her, unpleasantly. He had grown so tall that she could not reach to box his ears, and she had grave doubts whether he

would quietly submit to corporal punishment. So, perforce, she left him alone; and he did not trouble her much, for he spent most of his time, happily and not uselessly, at Mr. Page's. But on one occasion he contrived to get in her way. It was a sultry, drowsy forenoon, and Stephen was for some reason spending it at home. He sat in the parlour window-seat, with his long legs in a chair, reading Chapman's Homer, a loan from his benefactor on the other side of the street. His grandfather came in hurriedly and said,

"Steve, run up stairs and tell your aunt I want her."

Stephen obliged; and found Aunt Harriet in the well-known schoolroom, but with only one pupil, his quiet little Cousin Mary, who was about two years younger than himself. Mary's eyes were red with weeping, and she looked altogether so miserable that when her persecutor had gone down stairs, Stephen tried to console her.

"What has she been doing to you, Polly?" he asked.

"Oh, it's always the same," sobbed the poor child. "She gives me such long lessons I can't learn them, and such a lot of sewing to do I can't possibly get through it, and then she beats me for not doing it."

"Why, she doesn't *always* beat you," said Stephen; "does she?"

"Very nearly," said Mary. "I've got all these tasks to learn by twelve o'clock, and she says she'll whip me if I make a mistake, and——"

But Mary did not proceed, for Aunt Herriot had entered the room, and was regarding her with a terrible look.

"So, Miss," she exclaimed, "you dare tell such dreadful stories—you dare——"

And she rushed towards her poor unresisting victim, to inflict condign punishment. But Stephen intercepted her raised right arm, catching it by the wrist; and not being ready with a speech appropriate to the great occasion, exclaimed—

"Why don't you hit one of your own size?"

Never before had Aunt Harriet suffered such

an indignity. She was speechless with rage. The sudden shock of open rebellion made her hysterical, and she at length gave utterance to a shrill shriek that was heard throughout the house. Old Mr. Langton, who was just coming out of the parlour, walked heavily upstairs to see what was the matter. Entering the room, he looked with considerable astonishment at his hysterical daughter, his sobbing granddaughter, and especially at his grandson, who, commonly the quietest of boys, seemed now daring and defiant.

"Now then," he said, "what's up?"

"It's Aunt Harriet," said Stephen, promptly. "She's always pitching into poor little Polly, and I went and stopped her."

The tanner swore a sonorous oath, after his manner when annoyed.

"You ever lay your finger on little Polly again," he said to his daughter, "and I'll break every bone in your skin. Stephen, you're a good lad; here's half-a-crown for you. Cheer up, Polly, come along with me: I'm going down to the farm, and you shall ride with me."

Luckless Aunt Harriet was left solitary in the schoolroom, thoroughly defeated.

Of course this incident in nowise sweetened her temper towards Stephen. So one evening, not very dissimilar in its events from that in which the boy's fate had, five years before, been decided, she called again her two brothers into council. What was to be done with him? Neither of them had any suggestion to make.

"He's been at school quite long enough," she said. "It's time he was earning something."

"He's a likely lad," said Uncle Tom; "but we've got boys enough about the place. Better apprentice him to some trade. There's Stokes the druggist wants a 'prentice."

"That costs money," said Uncle Charles. "*I* haven't got any to spare; I don't know if *you* have."

"I wonder if he'd do for teacher in a school," said Aunt Harriet.

And she produced a copy of a certain monthly periodical called the *Evangelical Magazine*, wherein she had noticed an advertisement to the effect that the Rev. Edward Hooper wanted a

junior assistant—"salary moderate." There should be moderation in all things; why not in salaries?

"He's too young for that work, I should think," said Uncle Tom. "Why, he's only a boy himself; how's he to keep other boys in order?"

"Well, there's no harm in trying," said Aunt Harriet. "He'll be off our hands, you know, and I should think the wages would pay for his clothes."

"I'll write to this Mr. Hooper," said Uncle Charles, who rejoiced in a fine flowing manuscript, and was the chief correspondent of the establishment.

He wrote accordingly, and received an early reply.

Mr. Hooper was a congregational minister in the large village of Eastford, about twenty miles from Idlechester. He received six pupils, and wanted a tutor to look after them out of school hours, and to teach the younger ones. The salary he offered was ten pounds a year to begin with. He should be in Idlechester on

Saturday, and would call on Mr. Charles Langton.

He kept his appointment. He was one of the kindest and simplest of men, this dissenting minister. He was not clever, and he knew it; but he was thoroughly good, and he did not know it. He received half a dozen pupils—all he had room for; and though they did not learn very much, they led a very happy life, having plenty to eat, and not being perpetually subjected to physical torture. He saw Stephen and thought him young, certainly—but that was a fault that would mend every day.

"I wish I was as young," he said, in a pleasant tone that was not intelligible to sour Uncle Charles and acrid Aunt Harriet.

"He is tall for his age," said Mr. Hooper. "There is only one of the boys as old, and he will go away at Christmas. My young friend need not tell anybody how old he is."

So Stephen was engaged for the end of the holidays; and Aunt Harriet, after seeing the minister's good-tempered face, felt doubtful whether she had obtained her end. She wanted

her objectionable nephew to be uncomfortable, and had pictured to herself a sordid establishment like Mrs. Sadbrooke's.

Stephen himself, not knowing precisely what he ought to think of his destiny, consulted Mr. Page. That gentleman gave him kind encouragement.

"I have heard of this Mr. Hooper," he said. "Indeed Lumley the bookseller, whom I deal with, has a boy at his school. You'll be very comfortable there. Your great difficulty, young as you are, will be to maintain authority; and that difficulty you can only conquer by experience. And as you will have plenty of time and of books be sure that you study; work at Latin, and Greek, and Mathematics; try to educate yourself: self-education is difficult, but it is the best sort of education."

So when August came Stephen got upon the box of the Eastford coach at the Half-Moon Hotel in excellent spirits. Little Lumley, the bookseller's son, went down with him. Old Burroughs, the coachman, was a character; he told the most incredible stories about the places

through which they passed, with an air of grave truthfulness; he was a skilful birdcatcher; and as they drove through miles of woodland, he kept up a perpetual conversation with the feathered dwellers in the trees. No man could wile a nightingale so well as Burroughs; so he always had two or three of those delicious birds at his house at Eastford, and a whole college of canaries hard at work learning to mock their music. The trade in these canaries, bought at about a shilling each and sold at half a guinea, was quite a profitable affair for old Burroughs. Need I say that one of his best performers was very soon singing away for the benefit of sweet Anne Page?

Mr. Hooper's family consisted of his wife, two boys, and two girls. The boys were lazy good tempered little rascals; the elder girl, about Stephen's own age, was at school at Idlechester. Stephen, who now found himself promoted to Mr. Langton, was soon very much at home; his natural quickness of intellect caused his pupils to forget his youth; and, having considerable talent for mathematics, wherein the worthy min-

ister was rather slow, his utility was quickly recognized. He had plenty of time for reading, and followed Mr. Page's advice, giving himself an education which was of necessity irregular and desultory, but which perhaps suited his temperament better than a more rigorous training. And then, by way of recreation, there were long walks through a fine country, on one side densely wooded, on the other rising into bold chalk downs that stretched leagues away through half a dozen shires. On those free hills Stephen, who had been growing too fast, found health and strength; and the delicate child whom Claudia Branscombe had petted rapidly developed into an active athletic specimen of the human race.

By-and-by Miss Hooper, having finished her education, came home permanently. What else she may have learnt I know not, but of flirtation she had become an absolute mistress. No sooner did she see Stephen than she determined to victimize that young gentleman. Now Stephen, though at eleven he had felt a kind of poetic love for sweet Anne Page, and though that

pretty child was always his visionary princess, causing him to write many puerile verses, some of which found their way to the *Idlechester Chronicle*, was tardy in his development. Like Philip Hewson, in Clough's poem, he took a long time to understand the relation of man to woman. Miss Mary Ann Hooper found him quite a clod. He could not make out what she wanted. It was excessively provoking. There he was, a fine-looking young fellow, living in the same house with her, and she could not make the least impression on him. She did not believe he knew the colour of her eyes. She contrived innumerable opportunities for flirtation—got him to help her in her studies, to mend her pens, to listen to her singing—all to no purpose. If Stephen had been a statue he could not have been less impressible.

At last a wonderful opportunity arrived. The village of Eastford had not many amusements, so any that offered were seized with avidity. It was announced by placards and the sonorous utterance of the bellman—that a Mr. Villiers, with no end of letters after his name, would

give, at the Mechanics' Institute, a series of lectures on mesmerism. Mr. Hooper went and all his establishment. The audience were delighted. Mr. Villiers was marvellously fluent, and if he dropped a good many h's, what matter? He brought with him a couple of subjects—a big man to do the enduring part of the business, a small boy to do the intelligent parts. The big man had pins stuck into him, and sniffed strong *liquor ammoniæ*, and kept his legs outstretched while two or three heavy people sat upon them; the small boy read with the back of his head and the soles of his feet, and told young ladies their Christian names, and described the interiors of people's houses. Then Mr. Villiers went in for phrenology, and gravely advocated the importance of ascertaining what children's heads contained before educating them. The Rev. Edward Hooper was delighted, and brought the lecturer home to supper.

After supper the man of science became most agreeable, and fairly earned his hot gin and water. He mesmerised one or two of the boys, who had been allowed to sit up on this great

occasion, and performed remarkable tricks with them. He mesmerised Mary Ann Hooper, and that young lady made two or three creditable attempts at clairvoyance while in the trance. He tried to mesmerise Stephen, but gave him up with the remark that his was the mesmerising temperament, and that he would make a good operator. And so fluently did he talk about the value of phrenology as a guide to educators, and of mesmerism as a remedy for disease, that the worthy minister bought a manual, and a mapped out head, and resolved to analyse his boys' intellects, and to mesmerise all the sick people of his congregation.

So mesmerism and phrenology became the fashion; and Stephen, himself unsusceptible of the mesmeric influence, found that he could mesmerise almost anybody. The thing puzzled him a good deal. He could not get it out of his head that all these people who went into trances, and did astonishing things while entranced, were in reality shamming. But why should such a number of people join in the imposture? And some of them were highly re-

spectable, and indeed notorious for their extreme gravity. It was not likely to occur to him that a young lady of a somewhat rigorous dissenting sect, and educated in the strictest propriety, might perhaps like to pretend to be mesmerised in order to have a little fun without being scolded for it. Besides, there was the fact that good Mr. Hooper contrived to effect several cures. One paralytic old woman actually walked to chapel after his manipulations, not having walked previously for years. It was very odd. Stephen bought treatises on mesmerism and neurhypnotism, and studied the *Zoïst*, and the *Critic*—a journal which at that time went in for mesmerism. I believe it went in for everything imaginable by turns, till at last it went out altogether.

Sitting in the schoolroom one summer afternoon, Stephen was solving equations. He had a knack at such numerical conundrums, and so liked them. The schoolroom was at the back of the house, on the first floor; there was a door down a flight of steps to a courtyard, and from the windows were seen Mr. Hooper's chapel, a

rectangular building of red brick, and its rather picturesque grave-yards—a capital prospect for a professed ghost-seer like Stephen; but his developing animalism had tended to lessen his connexion with the preternatural world, and he had not seen a ghost for a long time. There came a tap at the inner door of the schoolroom, and Miss Hooper entered.

"Oh! Mr. Langton," she said, speaking in italics, "I *hope* I don't disturb your studies, but I've got *such* a bad headache, and I want you to mesmerise me, and see if you can cure it."

Stephen professed strong doubts as to his ability to operate, but Miss Hooper was quite sure that he would succeed. So she placed herself in a chair, and he stood over her and manipulated.

Always provided that a man is not weak in the back or in the eyes, mesmerising a nice girl is rather a pleasant amusement. Bending over her, holding her hands in yours, you gaze into her eyes, and her fragrant breath ascends towards you. Stephen *was* rather weak in the back, thanks to his quick growth; but his eyes

were all right, whence doubtless his mesmeric success. And so, after he had looked into Mary Ann Hooper's eyes for a minute or two, those orbs filled with tears, and the lids gradually closed over them, and the young lady was mesmerised.

When Stephen saw her lying back in her chair, satisfactorily entranced, it occurred to him that he should like very much to know whether she was really mesmerised or only shamming. How should he ascertain? He began by putting her through her facings, according to Mr. Villier's formula. He touched her organ of combativeness, and she tried to box his ears; of tune, and she sang; of philoprogenitiveness, and she hugged an imaginary baby; of veneration, and she dropped upon her knees and said her prayers; of amativeness, and I am sorry to say she embraced him. He comatized her arm, and then pinched it rather sharply, and she didn't scream. She was the most docile of subjects. But was she really in the mystical trance of Mesmer?

This was what perplexed Stephen, and he could not hit upon any way of testing her sincerity. He

walked up and down the room, trying to invent a decisive experiment. At last, though a bashful youngster naturally, he thought of something which it seemed to him must surely solve the problem. It took him some time to make up his mind to do so daring a deed. However, remembering that it was all in the cause of science, and summoning to his side that royal aphorism, *Honi soit qui mal y pense*—he positively took off one of Miss Mary Ann's garters! She did not flinch, and the truth of mesmerism was established.

It, shall I say?—ought to have been. Stephen, having begun to be sceptical, found it difficult to conquer his doubts. And he argued thus: Miss Hooper pretends to be mesmerised. If she is shamming, she would not like to be convicted of shamming. Now, when I took off her garter, if she had allowed her modesty to terminate the imposture, her character for truthfulness would have been lost. But now, when she wakes, or pretends to wake, she may of course wonder what has become of the article in question.

And then Stephen had to decide whether he had better put the garter on again, or not. At last he resolved to retain it; so he locked it up in a ricketty quadrupedal desk which was his post of authority. And the next thing that he did was to start for a walk, without awakening his patient. He was determined to see whether, if left alone, she would wake of herself, a thing which, according to the mesmeric theory, he had learnt could never happen. So away he strode down the long zigzag street of Eastford, leaving Miss Hooper alone.

Now, to reveal a humiliating truth, Mary Ann *was* shamming. And, when she heard Stephen's departing step upon the paved courtyard below, she arose from the chair in which she had acted her part so well, and stretched herself, feeling rather cramped, and reflected bitterly on Stephen's stolidity.

"Well," she said to herself, "he shan't mesmerise me again in a hurry. I never saw such a stupid fellow. The idea of his leaving me here asleep! Well, I'm not going to stay till the boys come in, or perhaps papa."

So off the young lady went; and when Stephen saw her in the evening, he merely hoped that her headache was better. There was no flirtation to be got out of him, evidently, even with the potent aid of mesmerism.

No: Stephen, even when the lustrum had twice passed over his head, was a mere boy still. His growth was slow, both physical and mental. In due time he came of age legally; but of age individually he was not, until events suddenly brought out his latent powers, and aroused his dormant energies.

CHAPTER VI.

OF AGE.

BY a garden fount which we have seen before, on a turfen mound beneath an acacia, are two whom we know. Sweet Anne Page leaned idly against the tree, her broad straw hat in her hand, her beautiful hair touched by the tints of sunlight that dropped through the long light leaves. Stephen looked down into her calm brown eyes—tranquil eyes, beneath eyebrows of a perfect arch, and a fair smooth forehead—and said :—

"Do you love me, Anne?"

It was a grave question to ask this charming child at the threshold of her seventeenth year; but no blush tinged her fair cheek, nor did the lids drop over those tender eyes, as she replied,

"You know I love you, Stephen."

Then he stooped, and pressed his lips to hers. He had never asked her this question before, but, as she said, he knew she loved him. And her father also knew it, and was satisfied. He had faith in Stephen Langton, as well as liking for him. So, in these halcyon days, the boy and girl enjoyed their love-dream. It was the honeymoon of the heart; Stephen was trustful, and ineffably content. Anne was sweet, sweet, sweet. No coquetry about her, no teasing tendency, no desire to quarrel with her lover for the delightful pleasure of making it up again. No, Anne Page realized the delicious old word, *sweetheart*. She was all love, to the very core.

Yet, do you know? I doubt whether either she or Stephen had yet learnt what love meant.

As they strolled in the shade from one garden pleasaunce to another, they were joined by Mr. Page.

"Stephen," he said, "I want you to drive over to the Kingsleat Library, and ask Mr. Lonsdale if he has a work whose name I have written down. It is very rare, but I think it

may be there. I would not interrupt your pleasant conversation, but I don't feel quite well enough to go myself. Anne should go with you, but we are expecting Miss Branscombe, and she must be at home to receive her."

"I will go with pleasure, sir," said Stephen; and just raised Anne's slender white fingers to his lips, and then went off to order out the phaeton.

Miss Branscombe—Claudia Branscombe, unmarried still, though now advanced in her third decade—was coming to stay with her young cousin. It has not yet been mentioned that the late Mrs. Page was a half-sister of Devil Branscombe's and the Rector's, a good many years younger than they. And Stephen had not long been gone when Claudia arrived. Time had rather ripened her beauty; and, though a keen eye might have perceived that the freshness was gone which lay upon her cheeks like the dewy bloom on a peach in those days when she romped with the Bishop's wife, yet there was beauty enough left for a multitude of ordinary women. And verily the Panther's was

such a lithe lissom leaping beauty, such a perilous charm, such a magic of delicious daring, of defiant tamelessness.

Devil Branscombe was in difficulties, nobody knew exactly where, and he didn't mean that anybody should. The Seraph was at Bagnères de Luchon, making love to a princess, or something of the sort. He had a *penchant* for princesses. So Claudia had invited herself to Idlechester—and here she was.

"Oh, you quiet little darling!" she exclaimed to Anne Page, as that young lady showed her the arrangements made for her comfort. "Why, you have grown quite a pretty girl! And you are so delightfully young—you've all the fun to come. Now, you sly puss, tell me, has anybody ventured to fall in love with you yet?"

It did not take Claudia long to find out her cousin's love-secret.

"Stephen Langton," she said, reflectively, when she had elicited the name. "Why, that's the nice little boy I took a fancy to when he was at school somewhere near Kingsleat. A blue-eyed, light-haired little fellow, who used

to see ghosts. Is *he* old enough to fall in love? Dear me, why, he was a mere baby."

"He is ever so much older than I am," said Anne, rather indignant at her lover's being talked of as a child.

"Is he really? Then how old must *I* be, Cousin Anne? Tell me that. Old enough to be your mamma nearly, little one. And where is Mr. Stephen Langton now?"

"He's gone to Kingsleat for papa. You'll see him at dinner."

"And does he see ghosts still? But there, I won't tease you, Anne," she said, kissing her. "He only sees babies in your eyes, I suppose, as some old poet says."

"What do you mean?" asked Anne.

"Why, don't you know? Look into my eyes, dear. There, don't you see a pretty little girl in each?"

"I see my own reflexion."

"Well, that's what I mean. But you'll see it a great deal better in Mr. Stephen Langton's bright blue eyes than in those black ones of mine. Be sure you try when he comes back."

The Kingsleat library, to which Stephen was gone, was an ancient institution. Its Librarian, Mr. Lonsdale, received two hundred a year and a residence—a very quaint residence indeed, the principal sitting-room being over an archway which crossed the steep street of the little town. By the founder's will, the Librarian was of necessity a graduate of Oxford ; and the appointment was vested in three persons, the Rector of Kingsleat, the Mayor of Kingsleat, and the Head Master of Kingsleat Grammar School. After the Librarian's salary was paid, all the surplus funds went to the purchase of books, of which the choice lay with the Librarian alone, the statutes directing him to make a complete collection of the best English literature. The library was a remarkably good one, but very little used ; only a few of the more thoughtful inhabitants of Kingsleat ever sat in its quiet rooms, whose wide windows opened on a pleasant garden. Not long before there had been an attempt to turn Mr. Lonsdale out of his situation as Librarian, and made by no less a personage than the Duke of Axminster. Kings-

leat was a pocket borough of that haughty Duke's; but of late years the electors had once or twice ventured to dispute his will, and had succeeded in returning one member of their own choice. It looked very much as if his grace would have to content himself with selecting only one of the two members. This sorely annoyed the proudest of the ducal rank. He turned out with slight ceremony a good many luckless shopkeepers who had dared to vote against his nominee, and he was anxious to revenge his defeat on several others, among whom was Mr. Lonsdale. Now the three trustees, the Mayor and Rector and Head Master, *if unanimous*, could dismiss the Librarian. So the Duke sent Mr. Drax, the great Mr. Drax, to those three gentlemen.

The Mayor, a respectable tea-dealer, would do anything to oblige his grace and Mr. Drax. Mr. Drax might consider it settled, so far as he was concerned.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe dined pretty often with the Duke, when that nobleman was at Beau Sejour—a little gem of a place near

Kingsleat, which the Duke much affected. And a haunch, than which

> "Finer or fatter
> Never ranged in a forest, or smoked on a platter,"

came not seldom from the Duke's deer-park to the Rectory. So the Reverend Walter was not slow to choose between the great potentate and the Librarian, and assured his grace's agent of his willingness to punish Mr. Lonsdale for venturing to have political opinions contrary to those of the Duke.

Mr. Drax had knowingly left the hardest part of the negotiation till the last. Dr. Winter—the "severe Winter," as his pupils called him—was a man who chose to think for himself. He was a St. John's College man, third wrangler of his year, and a most elegant writer of Greek iambics. Under his resolute and brilliant rule Kingsleat Grammar School had beaten in university honours the larger establishment in the cathedral city. He was a determined opponent of the modern sloppy system which teaches a little of everything; he held by his classics and mathematics with an obstinacy which lacerated

the hearts of the trustees, who were terribly afraid of him. When he preached before the university he chose as a topic, "the Irregular Element in the Church," and horrified the orthodox by maintaining that the Apostle Paul was the first of the dissenters. He had written a book whose theologic teaching was popularly believed to be abominably heretical; but luckily it was in classical Latin, and so the erudite editors of the *Record* and *Morning Advertiser* could not criticise it. He had published a pamphlet, subjecting to merciless analysis one of Bishop Bythesea's charges; and had produced a dreadful Greek epigram on the Dean's marriage. His keen logic, dry humour, and sound scholarship made him more than a match for any opponent he was likely to encounter in the narrow arena of the diocese of Idlechester.

The great lawyer was tall, big-headed, white-waistcoated, corpulent. The doctor was a middle-sized man, nervous and active, always in capital condition, from being a lover of long walks. Mr. Drax called at the grammar-school just as the morning walk was over. In came

Winter in cap and gown, the former battered, the latter a mere fragment of its integral form. The solicitor opened the case very cautiously.

"Pardon me, Mr. Drax," said the doctor, when he had uttered a few sentences, "but this is a serious matter. If I understand aright, the Duke of Axminster has some complaint to make against Mr. Lonsdale's conduct as Librarian. Any such complaint must come to me directly from the Duke himself. I cannot listen to lawyers or agents in such a matter."

Mr. Drax was baffled, and the Duke was extremely angry. But he did not give it up. There happened a few weeks later to be some ecclesiastic festival at Idlechester. The Duke attended, contrary to his custom, and much to the delight of the Bishop, his sole object being to meet the doctor. He thought that the immense honour of being courteously addressed by so great a prince as himself, would completely subjugate this schoolmaster. There was a cold collation at the Palace. As the great man sat, with rubicund expressionless face and glassy uninterested eyes, at the right hand of the

Bishop's lady, he asked our little friend Ciss to point out Dr. Winter. She indicated the doctor's keen and thoughtful face half-way down the table. The Duke sent a footman to ask the doctor to take wine with him. The doctor assented, of course. His grace fancied that, when luncheon was over, Dr. Winter would be drawn towards him by some social magnetism, but nothing of the kind took place. At last, by a series of skilful evolutions, the Duke and the doctor were somehow brought together; and after a few common-place observations, his grace began to talk of the luckless Librarian. Dr. Winter cut him short at once.

"It is not a matter to be discussed here, your Grace must admit. I will make an appointment to hear what you have to say, if that seems desirable."

The Duke of Axminster was filled with silent rage. This contumacious pedagogue was the first man who had ever thwarted him. Still he persisted in his project, and invited Dr. Winter to lunch at Beau Sejour. The Duchess and the Lady Gwendoline Araminta were all smiles

and sweetness. You might almost have thought the younger lady in love with the middle-aged schoolmaster. Dr. Winter liked claret, and the Duke gave him a bottle whose bouquet was like a lyric of Anacreon's. The doctor enjoyed his wine, and was much amused, for he knew well what was coming.

It came. Of course, the Duke of Axminster, a cabinet minister, accustomed to perorate in stately periods in the House of Lords, put the question with lofty plausibility. But Dr. Winter was too keen for him. He soon brought him to admit that Mr. Lonsdale's sole crime was voting against the Duke's nominee.

"If Mr. Lonsdale had not done his duty," said the doctor, "I hope that I, in common with the other trustees, should have discovered it without your Grace's kind interference. But I really think it would be hard to find so able and conscientious a Librarian."

So the Duke was foiled utterly. As Dr. Winter was taking his leave he said,

"Your Grace was at Eton under Keate, I think?"

The Duke replied affirmatively, little thinking that he was furnishing material for a biting epigram, which should describe him as too great a bully for even Keate's untiring birch to cure. Such was his fate, however; and Winter did not conceal the cajoleries to which he had been subjected in order to induce him to persecute Mr. Lonsdale; and the affair did a good deal of harm to the ducal influence. Mighty magnates like the Duke of Axminster ought not to run the risk of being laughed at.

At the Kingsleat Library, whither he often went for Mr. Page, Stephen had made acquaintance with a youth nearly his own age, Humphrey Morfill, a nephew of Dr. Winter's. The doctor, who had no children of his own, had made a scholar and mathematician of this young man, who was now at Cambridge, at his uncle's college. Morfill was born full of talent and ambition, and had already made up his mind to go to the bar, and to enter Parliament, and to occupy a high position. He was full of faith in himself, of disbelief in failure. He and Stephen took to one another, naturally, but Stephen

could not help envying those trained and practised faculties which enabled his friend to do exactly what he wanted to do. Lord Stanley once talked of men who are described as having great command of language, when probably it would be more true to say that language had a great command of them—because they have about as much command over it as a man has over a runaway horse. Now there are men (Lord Stanley is one) who have perfect command of their own faculties: while there are others whose faculties are sometimes too strong for them, and who, purposing to do a certain thing, are constrained to do something else, which may perhaps be a better thing. Mr. Robert Lytton, better known as Owen Meredith, put this fairly in the line—"Genius does what it *must*, but talent does what it *can*." As, however, he seems to have borrowed everything he ever said, I suppose the remark really belongs to somebody else. Well, Humphrey Morfill knew his own powers accurately, and always did what he attempted to do, while Stephen Langton, making vain endeavours in every di-

rection, seemed always stretching towards the unattainable. He was too apt to ascribe to his defective and desultory education what really belonged to his idiosyncrasy.

Stephen and Humphrey met to-day at the Library, and the latter asked his friend to drive him to Idlechester, where he had some business. So they started together, and talked as they went, and Stephen told Humphrey of Miss Branscombe's advent.

"Ah!" said Morfill, "I recollect those Branscombes. A queer lot, rather. But this Miss Branscombe must be getting quite an old woman."

"Well, yes. I remember her ten years ago or more, when she came and took me away from school—she and the Bishop's wife. She used to drive two ponies tandem. I suppose she must be very much altered."

And Stephen fell to considering whether the beautiful Claudia of his vague reminiscence was likely to have developed into a creature like Aunt Harriet.

"Are you going back to that dissenting

parson's at Eastford?" asked Humphrey.

"Yes: there's nothing else for me to do. I suppose you'll write to me from Cambridge now and then?"

"I believe you—and send you all manner of university news, from St. John's College problems downwards. By the way, here's a quadratic my beloved uncle gave me this morning. I know you like those things."

And he handed to Stephen a scrap of paper whereon was written, in Dr. Winter's quaint MS.—

$$x^2 - 25 + \sqrt{\left(36 - \frac{324}{x^2}\right)} = \frac{24}{x}.$$

"I suppose it's only a catch," said Stephen. "They are just like conundrums or rebuses, these things."

"True, but they're amusing, and rather puzzling."

"For girls," said Stephen, contemptuously. "I don't care to see mathematics playing tricks. However, I'll solve the equation, to please you."

"I bet you a tankard of bitter, you don't,"

laughed Humphrey. "And we'll stop now at the Half Moon, and you shall pay for the ale in anticipation."

In the cool bar parlour of the old Half Moon, they were served with their *amari aliquid* by "Jack" Winslow. Jack's real name was Emily; and she was the only daughter and spoilt child of the rotund old landlord; and she was a fine flirting brunette, given to wildish tricks, but without a morsel of harm in her. Her father was the principal owner of the mail coaches on the Eastford road, and she used occasionally to drive the first stage down, and come back with the up coach, very much to the disgust of sober and timid passengers. But old Winslow couldn't be persuaded to interfere.

"I've given her her head," he used to say, "and I ain't strong enough in the arm to pull her in."

"Well, Jack," said Humphrey, "how jolly you look! it cools one to come in here and see you this broiling weather."

"You're always cool enough, Mr. Morfill," she said.

"Well, and what's the news, Jack? Have you upset the coach yet?"

"I'm not quite such a duffer as you are to drive," she said. "Why, I thought you were going to let the Doctor's old pony run away with you the other day. I hope you do your Latin and Greek better than you handle the ribbons, or you'll be plucked, safe as eggs."

"Come, Humphrey, it's no good," said Stephen, "Jack carries too many guns for you. What *is* the news, Miss Winslow, if you happen to know any?"

For Jack was Idlechester's chief gossip, and picked up all the fragments of intelligence.

"The only thing I know isn't news to you, I expect, Master Stephen. Miss Claudia's come to town, and gone to Mr. Page's. I saw her come in by the coach."

"How was she looking?" asked Humphrey. "Very old?"

"Old! No, prettier than ever she did. I never saw such eyes or such hair—or such a figure, for that matter. She *is* a beauty, if you like."

"Why Stephen and I were just saying how old she must be getting. How old is she, Jack?"

"I don't know. Five-and-twenty, perhaps—though she don't look it. Father, how old is Miss Claudia?"

For the burly landlord had just come in from the bar, with a tumbler in his hand, and something in the tumbler.

"How old? Well, there's Master Raphael, he was born just afore I married, that's over thirty years ago. And then there was another boy, as died—Claude, they called him. And when the gal was born, they called her Claudia, after him like. Oh, she's about eight-and-twenty, I should think. Time she married, if she's ever going to."

"Perhaps her father's like you," said Jack, "and don't want to part with her."

The old gentleman laughed uproariously.

"Why, you hussy," he said, "anybody might have you for a screw of baccy and a light.'

"Come," said Stephen, "we must be off. I'm rather curious to see Miss Branscombe."

So the young men departed, and Stephen, depositing his friend at the door of the bookseller's in High Street, went on to Mr. Page's. It was approaching the dinner hour. The ladies were lounging in the garden, where an occasional breeze freshened the drowsy sultry atmosphere. Stephen delivered his message to Mr. Page, and went in search of them.

He found them in the very nook where he and his sweetheart had talked of love that morning. Claudia, leaning back against the acacia, caught in the placid darkness of her eyes a light from the unclouded heaven. Sweet Anne Page was gazing at her, as if in marvel at such surpassing beauty. So silent were they, that Stephen, who came towards them across the turf, heard not a sound save the plash of the fountain, and the low coo of a brown ringdove on an acacia bough.

Claudia greeted him pleasantly, though it was hard for her to recognize in this tall youth the little boy whom she had petted years before, and for whom her night-dress had been a world too long. Both remembered the incident dis-

tinctly enough: to Stephen indeed that snatch of holiday came like an oasis in the desert of long unhappy schooldays. After a while, the conversation grew freer and more fluent; and Claudia began to talk in that sparkling style which only women who have seen society can command. It was amazing to Stephen, just of an age to court that difficult learning which is called knowledge of the world: while to the innocent babyhood of sweet Anne Page it was all very wonderful but very unintelligible.

To a youth of the poetic temperament, who has once or twice plunged in the ocean of thought, but who stands shivering on the verge of the ocean of life, there is no developing power like that of a beautiful and brilliant woman, older than himself, learned in the world's ways. The bright-winged butterfly, which one well might deem a mere caprice of beauty amid summer's pageant, has its uses in the world, and bears fertility to many an unnoticed flower which otherwise would never grow to fruit. Even so, the butterfly fancies of Claudia fertilized the restless imagination of Stephen Langton. He

learnt from her something of the brilliant life of the supreme society in a great capital. He heard from her piquant lips sketches of men and women of renown, men and women whose fame was unknown in stagnant Idlechester. She knew the great poet, had chatted with the great statesman, had flirted with the famous philosopher, had been the daring heresiarch's partner in the Lancers. To Stephen all this was an apocalypse. To our sweet Anne Page it was an enigma as unsolvable as the epitaph on Ælia Lælia Crispis.

And just at this time it happened that Anne had scanty time to try and understand, for Mr. Page had another visitor—his mother. The old lady resided in the North, and was averse from travel, but she had taken a sudden fancy to see her grandchild, and arrived at Idlechester within a very few days of Claudia Branscombe. Anne's grandmamma monopolized her; whence it happened that Miss Branscombe and Stephen were thrown very much together. Both enjoyed it. Claudia liked the innocent, unspoilt freshness of the boy's poetic mind; while Ste-

phen derived a startling stimulus from Claudia's suggestive conversation. He hardly knew himself; he felt like the aloe, whose century's sleep is succeeded by a sudden floral development, consummate and colossal. He found himself forming opinions where heretofore he had doubted, and measuring his own capacities with the capacities of men whose greatness he had deemed vaguely gigantic, and panting to join the hot conflict from which hitherto he had shrunk in dismay. As yet his fair ideal had been a calm life in this sleepy old cathedral city, with sweet Anne Page to lay her loving cheek by his, and dwell with him peacefully.

He had felt, with Tennyson's eaters of the lotos—

> "There is no joy but calm!"

But now there came upon him, sudden, strong, irresistible, the wandering spirit of Odysseus; he longed to see many cities of men, and to know their manners; the charmed song of the Sirens breathed itself upon the wind which reached him from those shores remote; he pined

for the perilous fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

I am afraid he almost forgot sweet Anne Page—pretty little plump innocent ignorant Anne, in dutiful and affectionate attendance on her doting old grandmamma. He and Claudia were inseparable. It had long been his wont to spend almost his whole day at Mr. Page's during the vacation. So he used to come across to breakfast, and after breakfast to stroll with Claudia in the beautiful gardens or beneath the great cathedral's icy shadow; and after lunch to drive her on some pleasant road in Mr. Page's quiet phaeton, very different vehicle from that fast tandem-cart to which he had clung in his boyhood; and after dinner again to loiter with her through the dim garden alleys, odorous and cool. Of course there were days when this delicious monotony was interrupted. Claudia had to go to dinners and evening parties, and to keep up her acquaintance with Mrs. Bythesea and other fair friends; but Stephen had, on the whole, a very joyous tranquil time during those sultry summer days, and its result

upon him was wonderful. Morally and intellectually *he came of age.*

Years after the remembrance of that halcyon time was dear to him, and he celebrated it in sonorous Spenserian stanzas, whereof I quote the last only:—

> "Could I arrest swift Time upon his flight,
> And from his seat drag down the Charioteer
> Never yet weary, this same golden light
> Should always brood on woodland, wold and mere—
> Always this perfect climax of the year
> Should fill poetic breasts with endless mirth—
> Always the white sky should be tempest-clear—
> And, like a sea on which no storms have birth,
> Summer should always sleep upon the shores of earth."

Now, although all Idlechester was of opinion that Stephen Langton was a mere boy, and a very silly insignificant boy, it could not pass by without remarking his intimacy with Miss Branscombe. Claudia herself, having dined one day at the palace, when the bishop was in London attending the House, received a slight lecture from Mrs. Bythesea on the subject. Bishops' wives of necessity grow grave and decorous more rapidly than other women; and I verily

believe, with all Claudia's daring, she would not now have ventured to throw her friend upon a bed and tickle her. But she wasn't going to stand lecturing, at any rate.

"Look here, Cis," she said in reply, "flirtation is my profession. When I come down to this dull place I just flirt with a good-looking boy to keep my hand in; it doesn't hurt him, and it pleases me. What do I, who have lived in London, care for the empty scandal of a wretched little country place like Idlechester?"

"But really, my dear——"

"But really, my dear," interrupted Claudia with impetuous mockery, "you have grown into quite a lecturing old woman. You ain't half such fun as you were ten years ago. I shall do just as I like, Cis, and if you don't bother I won't quarrel with you; and if you do, I declare I'll make love to the Bishop when he comes back, and you know he couldn't resist me, and you'd cry your eyes out with jealousy."

Mrs. Bythesea was the only person who dared say a word to Claudia, but Stephen got chaffed

by several members of his family. His cousin Charles had grown up a provincial dandy, awkward and smart; his cousin Henry, Uncle Tom's eldest son, had developed into vulgarity and dissipation. Each of these young gentlemen had his jest about Stephen's being sweet upon Miss Branscombe; but Stephen (who, you see, was improving) declared he would horsewhip the next who said a word to him on the subject, and they were silent. He could not, however, horsewhip Aunt Harriet, who one day denounced Claudia's conduct as shockingly improper. Stephen, cunning rascal, promptly replied—

"I wonder you don't tell my grandfather what you think of her, Aunt Harriet."

That amiable lady knew better.

Walking down the High-street in search of amusement that afternoon—for it was one of those on which Claudia had an engagement—he loitered into a bookseller's shop. There he met Humphrey Morfill, looking at the London papers. They left arm-in-arm, and Humphrey said—

"You look savage, Stephen. What's the matter?"

"Oh! I don't know—people are such fools. That absurd aunt of mine has just been abusing Claudia—Miss Branscombe, I mean—just because she doesn't find my company very stupid."

"Well," said Morfill, "from all I hear you and she are pretty thick. I don't suppose you'll fall in love with a woman old enough to be—I won't say your mother, but your aunt—though she is deucedly pretty; still when two people are inseparable there's sure to be gossip. And, if I may ask, do you call her Claudia when you're talking to her?"

"I believe I do," said Stephen with some hesitation. "But there are such a lot of consonants in Miss Branscombe."

"Egad! that's good. Come, let's have a drop of seltzer and brandy at Winslow's. It's atrociously thirsty weather."

I don't think Stephen had been at the Half Moon since the day on which Claudia arrived. Jack Winslow received him with a very low

curtsey indeed, and asked him when the marriage was to come off.

"There, you see, Humphrey," he said, savagely.

"Take care, Jack, or you'll get into difficulties with this young gentleman; he's fierce this morning."

"Well, but," said she, "I'm not to blame if people talk when they see a fine couple preparing for the parson. I must listen, you know."

"Go and get the seltzer, Jack," said Morfill, "or there'll be mischief done. Oh! here's Winslow. I say, landlord, that daughter of yours is getting saucy; you don't keep the whip hand of her."

The Hebe of the Half Moon re-entered with the icy nectar.

"I don't mean any harm, Mr. Stephen, you know," said she, good-naturedly.

"Oh! yes, I know that; but I'm tired of such foolish gossip."

"There's plenty of it going," said Humphrey; "why, Jack, I heard that you were sweet on little Tranter, the druggist's apprentice."

As Stephen, having parted from his friend, strolled homeward alone, he bitterly reflected on the immense mass of vulgarity and stupidity in the world. Sensitive and dreamy natures, easily excited, are easily depressed. In Mr. Page's Elysian gardens, with Claudia's low voice in his ears, or Anne's brown eyes fixed upon his own, Stephen experienced delight ineffable; but the empty folly of this afternoon's gossip proportionately tortured him. He loved Anne Page, he said to himself—yes, certainly he loved Anne Page; and he was charmed by the wisdom and wit of Claudia Branscombe; but what was either the one or the other to his stupid cousins, to Aunt Harriet, to that impudent Jack Winslow?

And then he thought, how soon it must end? To go back in a week or ten days to Mr. Hooper's, at Eastford, and his old monotonous grind. Was he to do this, after Claudia's stimulant converse? Was he to turn away from the great movement of the world, of which she had given him brilliant glimpses, and subside into teaching a little obscure dissenting school?

What else could he do? There was literature—but all his literary efforts failed. Humphrey Morfill could sit down and write exactly the sort of magazine article that an editor wanted; he couldn't. He felt helpless, powerless, in the hands of the Parcæ. Those grim old ladies who rule the destinies of men held him as firmly in their grip as Aunt Harriet used to in those days when his greatest dread was her avenging rod. Surely the Moiræ were the maiden aunts of mythology.

> "We look before and after,
> And pine for what is not,"

sings the divine lyrist. The ever-forgotten and ever-recurring lesson of time is that what we dread seldom happens, but that evils unforeseen take its place. And yet men will persist in torturing themselves about an uncertain future; in adding imaginary vexations to the real annoyances of the world. Here was Stephen worrying himself about silly rumours—about Eastford, whither (though he little imagined it) he was never to go again—and the real calamity at that moment impending, with all its train of

misfortunes, was wholly undreamt of. But the next morning brought the news—

Mr. Page was dead.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. PAGE'S WILL.

ALGERNON PAGE died of disease of the heart, a malady for whose fatal ending he had long been prepared. His loss was felt at Idlechester. Of immense advantage to country towns is the residence of men of culture, who stand aside from the main grooves of ambitious life, and steadfastly and silently follow their favourite pursuits. Time was, within the remembrance of many of us, that certain cities—notably York and Bath—had certain famous names connected with them. As a consequence, such cities had a society devoid of that *provincialism* which Mr. Mathew Arnold denounces; and those whom necessity compelled to reside there, were greatly benefited by the refined and classical atmosphere of the upper social stratum.

But now, scarcely a great writer or artist can be named who is not a Londoner, or a dweller in a home county, so that London may be accessible to him; whence the society in country towns sinks to the level of those residents whom occupation keeps there. Even Edinburgh feels the centralizing power, the centripetal force—and Messrs. Blackwood have settled quietly down next door to Messrs. Longman, and the chief Scottish periodicals, from the *Edinburgh Review* to *Chambers's Journal*, are published in London.

In this way, Mr. Page's loss was felt in Idlechester. Of good birth and easy fortune, with high scientific rank, his social reserve had not prevented him from exercising much quiet influence. Great men in his own special line were his frequent visitors. His incomparable gardens attracted others, who knew nothing of scientific botany, but could appreciate floral beauty. Perfectly independent, above ducal insult or episcopal patronage or decano-capital intrigue, he set a rare and profitable example of an unostentatious yet liberal and thoughtful life.

How can any pen describe the terrible grief which his death caused sweet Anne Page to suffer? It was perhaps the worst time for this child, already motherless, to lose her father. Just on the verge of womanhood, she had especial need of the guidance which he alone could have given. Hers was sorrow beyond words. Claudia found herself powerless to console her poor little cousin.

Mr. Page, knowing his precarious tenure of life, had made his will years before, and left it in Mr. Drax's custody. That gentleman, and Ralph and Walter Branscombe, were named Anne's trustees. She was directed to reside in the house at Idlechester until she came of age, unless her marriage occurred before that time, and a thousand a year was set aside for her maintenance during her minority. A sealed document accompanied the will, and was not to be opened until her coming of age, unless she should marry before that time, when it was to be read immediately after the ceremony. Funded property producing five hundred a year was left to Stephen Langton. Legacies of a thou-

sand pounds each went to the three trustees; and if Anne died unmarried before the age of twenty-one, two-thirds of the property went to Ralph Branscombe, of Branscombe, esquire, and the remainder to the Reverend Walter Branscombe. The whole amount disposed of by the will was about four thousand a year.

I suppose Stephen Langton was more surprised than anybody else at his good fortune. He knew that his benefactor was willing to give him his daughter, but he did not know that in his thoughtful kindness he would also give him independence. It was the very gift he needed. It saved him from the necessity of sordid toil, and strengthened him to act with courage when courage was requisite. It is very contemptible, doubtless, but poverty too often makes social cowards of the best of us. Stephen could now isolate himself from the weary vulgarities of his relations. There are always quaint corners of a Cathedral town where the peaceful and picturesque mingle. Stephen found old-fangled apartments in a dark polygonal old honse in a queer trapezium called Little

College Green. There he took up his abode in a suite of three rooms, all on the ground floor. The front room looked on the green, and was long and narrow; the two back rooms occupied the same space, in length, as the front, and gave on a garden such as one sees in ecclesiastical towns, and nowhere else. A garden where the scandent plants have stems as thick as a man's leg, and the ivy is a monster of vegetation; and there are two or three apple-trees, mossy, gnarled, decrepit, bearing few fruit, but of such quality as Covent Garden never knows, notwithstanding its monastic name. Stephen had besides a dark deep fish-pond, with two or three enormous carp in it that came to him for bread crumbs. He used one of these back rooms as a bed-room; the other, accessible only through the bed-room, was devoted to his books and his cigars. For these bachelor quarters he paid half a guinea a week: which was thought rather a high price in Idlechester, in those days before railways. He could not at this time see much of Anne Page, who had naturally fallen into the hands

of her relations, Claudia, and Winifred, and Winifred's father. So he wrote a little, and studied a little, and dreamt much of that distant wondrous world whose existence Claudia Branscombe had revealed to him.

Meanwhile Mr. Drax had made a communication to the Rev. Walter Branscombe, and that excellent clergyman desired to pass it on to his brother. But how? Claudia had no idea where her father was. Devil Branscombe did not believe that girls could keep secrets, so he kept his own. Raphael might know; but where was Raphael? But her father had told her that, if she wanted to communicate with him on anything important, she was to send to the *Times* this advertisement—

"*Good morning, Papa!*"

It was some time before she recollected this direction; when she thought of it she did it at once, and a day or two brought her a letter from her father, telling her to address him, "L. M. N., Post Office, Guernsey." So she wrote, enclosing a note from her uncle; and the consequence was that the brothers arranged a

meeting at the Dolphin Hotel, Southampton.

In a bow-windowed room on the first floor of that fine old hostelry, from which you could look up and down Southampton's long, busy, picturesque High-street, Devil Branscombe met his clerical brother. You can always get a good bottle of wine at the Dolphin, and there stood between them a claret-jug, holding excellent Chateau-Lafitte. And thus they conversed:

"I told Drax not to pay over that thousand pounds to your account at Coutts's, not knowing how you might stand there," said Walter.

"I don't think you often make a mistake. My account must be a good deal overdrawn. The thousand will be useful for immediate expenses."

"So I thought, and brought it with me in notes. Claudia doesn't want any money just now. She's been living for nothing at poor Page's, and her own little income is quite enough for her."

"What in the world made Page leave young Langton anything?"

"Langton is engaged to his daughter—a mere baby—only sixteen; we can do anything with her."

"What do you propose to do?"

"Listen a moment. Drax——" Here the Rector dropped his voice involuntarily——"Drax has told me the contents of that sealed codicil. It leaves the whole property in this way: If Langton and the little girl are married, half of it is settled on each of them. The same thing is to take place if she declines to marry him. But, if he declines to marry her, she gets the whole property."

"Is the codicil valid, do you think?"

"Well, if not, it is no good for us to upset it. as of course the child would then get everything unconditionally."

"I don't see anything to be done," said Ralph Branscombe, meditatively.

"I do," said the Rector. "That boy showed symptoms of being taken with Claudia. What if she were to marry him?"

"What good would that be? It would leave the little girl independent."

"But suppose Raphael were to marry *her*? I should think he would have no difficulty."

"By Jove! I shouldn't have thought of that arrangement. Well, what do you want *me* to do?"

"Write to Claudia; or, better still, see her, and tell her to marry young Langton. She has fascinated him already, I fancy."

"My Claudia's too good for the young lout," said Devil Branscombe. "But it seems a fine combination. I ought to see her to explain it to her. I tell you what—leave it to me—I'll come to Idlechester."

"Is it safe?" asked the Rector.

"No; that's the fun of it. If it was, I wouldn't come. I'll manage the affair."

A few days later than this, as old Langton the tanner, in the dusk of evening, was looking round the tanyard, he became aware of a tall man on the other side of the brook. Rather to his surprise, the stranger splashed across the shallow stream, and coming up to him, said,

"Well, Langton, how are you?"

"Why, it's the Squire!" exclaimed the old tanner in astonishment.

"Ay, my old friend, here I am," said Devil Branscombe. "And now, will you do me a good turn? Get me quietly into your house, and let me sleep there a couple of nights, without a word said to anybody. Will you?"

"I shall have to tell one of the woman folk, Squire—my daughter Harriet. She's so cursed sharp, she'd be sure to find it out; but she won't split. And there's the spare bed-room looking out on the street; you might be there a twelvemonth and nobody know. None of the maids go there; only Harriet."

"That will do capitally," said Ralph. "I'll trust any daughter of yours, my old friend. But how shall I get in?"

"That's just what I must get Harriet to manage," said the tanner.

And Harriet managed it extremely well.

The "best bedroom," an immense chamber on the first floor, occupying half the width of the house, had not been tenanted within the memory of this generation. But to have used it for any other purpose would have been sacrilege. It was the pride of Aunt Harriet's heart.

She gave it periodical dustings, and kept it always in as good order as if she expected a visit from the Queen. And as she never, except at lustrations, allowed anyone but herself to enter it, it was a perfect place of concealment for Devil Branscombe. Here he found himself that evening, with wax candles burning, and the best bed—a great bed of Ware, almost—prepared for his reception. And, when everybody else was in bed, Aunt Harriet brought up for him a copious supper—an uncut ham and an enormous home-made loaf, and a mighty tankard of her father's ale. He rather enjoyed his position. It was a curious change after rusticating in Guernsey, an island more picturesque than social, where he smoked on the pier all day and played loo or billiards at the club all night. Here, snugly hidden, he looked down upon the familiar High-street of Idlechester, and upon the house in which his brother-in-law died. He saw Stephen Langton call to inquire for his sweetheart in the early forenoon, and turn sadly away when told that she did not feel well enough to see him. He saw the Re-

verend Walter and his pious daughter, Winifred, enter the house; and by-and-by he saw the Rector go away again, Winifred remaining. He saw Claudia come out for a stroll, beautiful as ever in her sable attire, and little dreaming that her father's eyes were upon her. He saw scores of faces that he knew, and criticised the changes time had brought them. And, so amused was he at his whimsical position, that he wrote a long letter to Raphael (who was at Venice) describing all that he saw, and fully explaining the Rector's subtle schemes.

Not till the second day did he decide to act. Then he requested Aunt Harriet to communicate cautiously to Miss Branscombe that she wanted to speak to her.

"Don't say a word to her about me. Bring her up here at once. Won't she be astonished! But if she screams, by the Lord Harry, I'll forfeit a ten pound note."

Miss Harriet Langton acted on her instructions, and Claudia, considerably surprised, walked across the street, and was shown into the parlour—a room little altered since we first

knew it, except that there was no bright-eyed boy dreaming at one window, no oracular old lady knitting at the other. Old Mrs. Langton was dead. Being asked to walk up stairs, Claudia could scarcely do less than comply; and she certainly was rather amazed to find her father comfortably sitting in one of those vast bed-room easy-chairs which arrided our ancestors. Aunt Harriet left them alone.

"Lock the doors, Claudia," said Ralph Branscombe. "You look surprised to see me. I came over from Guernsey on purpose to have a talk to you."

"I'm very glad to see you, papa," she said, seating herself opposite to him. "You are looking uncommonly well."

"Yes, I don't wear badly, and I've been very quiet lately. But we must talk of business, child: I think you can do a good thing for us all."

"I am ready to try," she said; "but I hope it doesn't involve playing écarté, for that's a thing I never could do properly."

"I want you to marry that young Langton."

"*What!*" she said, "why, he's a mere boy, papa."

"So much the easier to manage. But come, what difference is there between you? seven or eight years, perhaps. It is a mere trifle—and you don't look above twenty, really."

"You flatter, Mr. Branscombe. But what good should I do by marrying him? He's only got five hundred a year."

"That's not the point. We have discovered the nature of that sealed paper of Page's. If Langton marries your little cousin, they are to have all the property; and if she should refuse him, each is to have half; but if he declines to have her, she gets the whole."

"Well, I don't see."

"Why, if you get hold of young Langton, Raphael can marry the girl."

"Oh, indeed. Well, it's a brilliant idea—Uncle Walter's, I guess. Let me think—if I marry Stephen, we shall have about seven hundred a year between us, which isn't much. Then he's a mere boy: why, I remember saving him from being whipped when he was a child at school.

Still, he's good looking, and he might be obedient. Well, then, Raphael is to marry Anne. Will he? And will she have him? I don't think she'd break her heart about Stephen, and I believe anybody could marry her who chose to try. But are you sure about Raphael, papa?"

"One can't be sure about anything; but if he isn't compromised elsewhere, I fancy he'll do it. I have written to him to meet me as soon as I get away from here."

"And you want to get away at once, of course, because it is dangerous. Well, I'll sacrifice myself, if Stephen will have me. He's a nice boy after all."

"How long will it take you to land him?" asked her father, in angler's phrase.

"A month or two, perhaps. What shall you do in the meantime?"

"Go to Baden, I think, and try a new martingale. Poor Page's thousand will last some little time, as of course I shan't pay any debts."

"But, papa, if Raphael marries Anne, won't it be possible to make things square, and live

quietly again? You must be dreadfully weary of this hide and seek."

"We'll try what can be done," he replied. "I think my wild oats ought to be nearly sown."

Claudia left him, and he watched her cross the street to Mr. Page's. He stood looking thoughtfully out of the window for some time, and by-and-by noticed a stout seedy man pass slowly up the pavement, giving what seemed a significant glance at the opposite house. He was just the sort of man one associates with writs, and Devil Branscombe felt an uneasy sensation. The man was followed at some distance by two other men; one of these looked like an Essex or Salisbury-street lawyer; the other Ralph Branscombe knew too well. He was a shrewd and resolute officer who had been in pursuit of him for a year or two.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "those beggars have traced me somehow. How the deuce have they managed it? Luckily they don't seem to guess I'm here. I'm glad Claudia was safe across before they could see her."

At that moment he started; for his door,

which he had not locked after Claudia, was suddenly opened, but the person who entered was only old Langton.

"There are sharks abroad, Squire," he said. "I've just seen Laurie, the Sheriff's officer, looking very knowingly at Page's house; and two other fellows followed him, and they went away together. I was standing at the gate, and saw them. The others are London chaps, I guess."

"I saw them, Langton, and know who they are. How shall I get away? They'll watch all the coaches."

"I've got an idea, Squire. There's a night mail that passes the cross roads a way towards Eastford about two in the morning. It goes right over the Downs to Salisbury. It's fourteen miles, about; my mare 'll do it easy in an hour and a quarter. Shall I drive you over to-night?"

"The very thing," he replied. "We can start after your people are in bed. It won't do to go from the High-street, though."

"No," said Langton, "I thought of that. We

can have the trap down in the back lane, and walk across the tanyard."

"But how will you get the mare round there? And who'll be in charge of her till we come?"

"Ah," replied the tanner, "that's a puzzler. I can't trust her with everybody, and besides, any giddy boy won't do."

After a pause, he resumed.

"I think I see what to do. The mare and trap are in the Half Moon stables, luckily; I left them there when I drove in with a commercial the other day. I'll manage it, Squire, never fear."

Away went the loyal old tanner to the Half Moon, and called for ale. Jack Winslow served him, looking as piquant as ever.

"Jack," he said, "you're not timorsome, I know. I want you to take out my mare and trap to-night at a quarter past twelve, and drive down to Lane End, and wait for me and a friend. You must do it all yourself, and not say a word to anybody, before or after. It's a matter of life and death, almost. You're not afraid?"

"Not likely. I'll do it. It will be a jolly lark. I'll be there to a minute. You won't have the lamps, I suppose?"

"No, certainly not. And if anybody interferes with you down there——"

"He won't interfere with anybody else for some time. Don't be afraid for me, Mr. Langton. I can take care of myself."

The tanner was on tenter hooks till his family were gone to bed that night. But they were all off in capital time; and he and Ralph, after a stiff glass of brandy and water, made their way into the tanyard at the hour appointed. There was neither moon nor stars, and it was pitch-dark.

"Keep right behind me, Squire, and put your hand on my shoulder. There are lots of pits about here, but I know my way blindfold."

A tanyard is not a nice place to walk in at night, the pits being divided by very narrow pathways, awkward enough by daylight, while the lime pits, in which the hair is scorched from the hides, are so surrounded by a white deposit, that when quite full, they can hardly be distinguished from the firm earth around them. As

the two men advanced along a path so strewn with soft tan that their footsteps gave no sound, Langton became suddenly aware of a light moving in front of them. He stood still for a moment. It was evidently a lantern.

"I verily believe those villains are prowling about here, Squire. What can they be after at this time of night?"

"Perhaps they want to find some place to hide and keep watch," whispered Ralph.

"I'll be hanged if I can make it out. But come along quietly, and be ready for a row. We shall have to meet them, they're right in our way."

The lantern which the approaching party carried carefully in front of them served to expose them to Ralph and the tanner. There were two men only, who turned out to be the lawyer and the London officer. Laurie, the local man, was not interested enough in the capture to undertake midnight reconnoissances. They carried their light low, and stooped as they walked to make out the path, and did not notice anyone approaching till the tanner collared

one of them with his strong right hand, and exclaiming,

"Thieves, by Jingo!" swung the unlucky intruder into the nearest tan-pit. The lantern was smashed; the other man was so affrighted by his perplexing position that he went down on his hands and knees, groping for the path; and Langton and Branscombe, kicking him out of the way, pushed forward down the hill, crossed the brook, and were soon at Lane End.

"That poor devil won't be drowned, I hope," said Ralph.

"Drowned, no!" said Langton. "He'll be tanned, though. There isn't much stuff in that pit, but I doubt if he'll get out till the morning, unless the other rascal has sense enough to help him."

"I expect he'll be afraid to move," said Ralph. "It's a deuced awkward trap to be caught in. Your men will probably find them both there in the morning."

Which turned out to be the case. You have probably never fallen into a tan-pit, reader. I have, and I assure you it is not nice. It was

the lawyer who got in, and there he was found at about half-past six, up to his arm-pits in tan. The bailiff, more fortunate, had scrambled to the sloping side of a bark stack, where he had slept, but he had not strength enough to get his companion out, and so they had to wait till the men came to work. Everybody roared with laughter at the professional gentleman's plight; but the old tanner told him it would do him good, substituting a healthier smell for the bad odour observable in low attorneys. He had a great mind, he said, to give them into custody for trespassing, and on suspicion of theft.

Ralph and his guide found the trap standing at Lane End, the mare now and then giving an impatient stamp of her fore-foot. Jack Winslow jumped out, and it was not so dark that Devil Branscombe could not recognize a petticoat.

"By Jove, Langton," he said, "why, who's this?"

"You know her well enough, Squire; it's Jack Winslow."

"Egad," he exclaimed, "you *are* a trump,

Jack; I must give you a kiss for this. Why, there isn't another girl in England would have had the pluck to do it."

So Ralph Branscombe pressed the buxom barmaid's lips, and sprang into the trap, and away went the mare with that long swinging trot into which the tanner broke the animals he drove. Meanwhile Jack Winslow walked fearlessly up the lane, and through the stable entrance to the Half Moon, and found her way to her bedchamber.

"I didn't think it was the Squire," she said to herself while disrobing. "Well, he's a gentleman every inch, though they do say he's so wild, and he's just the man I'd marry, if he was young enough and would have me."

How these wild men fascinate women of all sorts!

"I'm well out of that, Langton," said Ralph, as the mare went merrily along.

"Yes; they were on the scent, evidently. Downright fools to come into the yard by night, though. I suppose those Londoners had never seen a tanyard before."

"They won't want to see another," said Ralph, laughing. "What a thorough trump that little Winslow girl is! I gave her a kiss, but I'd have given her a handful of guineas if I'd thought she'd take them."

"You'd have mortally offended her," said the tanner. "Send her some trifle when you're safe—a bit of your hair in a locket, or some such truck, and she'll be delighted."

"I will," said Branscombe—and he did.

A night drive in fine weather is always pleasant, and is peculiarly exhilarating when you have just succeeded in eluding some imminent evil—when you feel safe and free after long suspense. So Branscombe and Langton were in high glee when they reached the cross roads. The mare had gone like the wind; it wasn't half-past one, and the mail came by at two. They knocked up the landlord of the little inn, and the kitchen fire was resuscitated, and something hot and strong prepared Ralph Branscombe for his ride over the great plain. Oh! those old country inns, with their generous kitchens, their strong home-brewed ale, their

great flitches always ready to be sliced and broiled, their fresh eggs, their wholesome, neat-handed waitresses! Steam has annihilated them; and I am one of those who find no consolation in the gaudy coffee-rooms of the Magnificent Hotel (Limited).

But there are the lamps of the Salisbury mail.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PANTHER'S WOOING.

CLAUDIA had undertaken a task of double difficulty—difficult for Stephen, difficult for herself. Perhaps she rather under-estimated the difficulty, so far as Stephen was concerned. He was a boy, she thought, and boys are seldom true to their first love fancy; and surely she was far more bewitching than that little Anne Page. But she looked her own difficulty fairly in the face; she was old enough to know her own need; she required, as old Langton had said to himself ten years before, a *man* to rule her; she was well aware that a miserable life awaited her if she married a person her inferior in strength of will, in force of character. She should have her own way in such a case; but

she did not want her own way; she wanted to be obliged to accept the way of a man she worshipped, a man she loved and feared, a man at whose feet she crouched, a very tame submissive panther indeed. Knowing all this, she felt that the sacrifice she contemplated making for her father was of no common magnitude.

I venture to think that the neoteric novelist is generally a trifle too fond of little girls. I mean—don't be offended, young ladies—children of eighteen or nineteen, infantile heroines, who are very pretty, and fresh, and nice, but who can by no possibility have any definite character. Watch, as I have watched, a girl's development from seventeen to twenty-seven, and say if from her peculiarities at the former age it is possible to judge what she will be at the latter. It is hard to understand why pretty creatures fresh from the nursery are perpetually chosen as heroines. They are seldom such in real life, and it would be a dreadful bore if they were. Only boys and foolish elderly men think of marrying girls of eighteen or thereabout. Perhaps the truth is that the woman in her

blamed. It was quite a boy-and-girl engagement between her and Stephen. What child of sixteen can be expected to know her own mind? And Stephen was away; she never saw him; she dared not receive a letter from him, for fear of her cousin Claudia. So she listened to Humphrey, who skilfully carried on the campaign, notwithstanding the keenness of Claudia's eyes. But Claudia was busy with her baronet.

In mid-January Humphrey left "his little wife"—as he already styled her, unrebuked, and Miss Marsden and *Mangnall's Questions* returned. And Sir Arthur Willesden went to town, leaving the Panther plenty of time to look after Anne. And, when the year had advanced a little further, Claudia one day received a letter in a hand she had not seen for an age. Thus it ran:—

"No. —, Clarges Street.

"Dear Claudia,—I have just returned to England, after a few days with the old gentleman, who has got the gout, and is delightfully fierce. I've a deal to do in town, and I want a

long talk to you about the position of affairs; so come up and let us converse. Start at once, that's a good girl.

"RAPHAEL."

Claudia always obeyed her brother; besides at this period she desired the diversion of a trip to London. So having received this letter at the breakfast hour, she at once announced that Raphael had returned, and that she was going to London to meet him, and that, no doubt, he would come back with her. Her uncle and cousin were delighted at the news, and Anne Page opened her ears.

"You will like your Cousin Raphael, Anne," said Claudia, condescendingly. "He likes pretty little girls."

Miss Page by no means admired Miss Branscombe's condescension.

The Panther was to start early the next morning; that night she and Winifred had a talk, part of which Anne Page overheard—for "little pitchers have long ears." This was the part:—

What, it may be asked, could this brilliant creature, a social expert, learn of a boy like young Langton? Much. A poet of the day has described a young lady who, being christened Louisa, and being rather fast, has been re-christened "Unlimited Loo," in rhymes like these, so far as I can remember them:—

"Loo's a voice most delicious to carol
Mr. Tennyson's songs to the harp;
She can manage a light double-barrel;
She can angle for trout or for carp:
So wisely she talks about science,
You'd think her a regular blue:
She sets every rule at defiance—
And we style her Unlimited Loo.

"She can pull a stroke-oar on the river,
Like that muscular hero, Tom Brown;
She can ride, and at fences don't quiver
Where many a hunter goes down;
She's plucky, but vastly more pleasant
Than most of the nursery crew;
She can shoot, dress, and carve a cock pleasant,
This wilful Unlimited Loo."

Now Claudia had all Miss Loo's accomplishments, and was quite as unlimited; but there was one thing whereof Claudia had a ladylike ignorance, and that was literature. I don't of

course mean contemporary literature—*i.e.*, Tennyson, Tupper, all the new novels, and the *Saturday Review*. She knew nothing of the classical literature of this or any other nation; and here she found a teacher in Stephen. He, being omnivorous, had read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher—had gone farther afield, reading all that is best in the literature of Greece and of Rome—had mastered Spanish, Italian, German, French, and could quote for her Calderon, Camoens, Chiabrera, Goethe, or Heine and Alfred de Musset. I do not mean to say he had scholarly or accurate knowledge of any one of these languages; he had not. But he had, in that apprehensive faculty of his, a power which enabled him to understand great poets more thoroughly than many a perfect scholar. Porson was the victim of false quantities to the last, though he taught us the laws of Greek verse. Peacock, whose algebra has well been styled "The *Ivanhoe* ot Cambridge," could not solve an equation problem. Stephen Langton could scarcely write a grammatical phrase in any tongue save English;

but he tasted authors as diverse as Aristophanes, Anacreon, Heine, Béranger, with most appreciative palate.

Now Claudia Branscombe's policy was transitive from the brilliant social mood to the Platonic and psychological. And here, as I have said, Stephen was so apt as to astonish her—almost to alarm her. She became rather afraid of the boy's progress being too rapid. Learned in the love-lore of the poets, he was first lecturer and then improvisator. The noble library furnished abundant material. Pleasant mornings of autumn vanished but too swiftly in its easy chairs or out beneath the leafage of the gardens. Let me sketch but one such morning.

Humphry Morfill had brought Anne Page to that seat beneath the acacia where Stephen had declared himself her lover, and was teaching her chess. It was a most barefaced pretext. Anne couldn't learn the moves, and wouldn't try; her pretty white hands played with the white ivory; her sweet cheek flushed as she listened to Humphrey's gay joyous spirited talk. A capital talker, Humphrey; never dull or taciturn or

melancholy, like Stephen; always ready with easy converse that had perhaps very little in it, but was enlivening and effervescent, like the foam of champagne. So they were pretending to play chess, and Humphrey was chattering, and Anne was listening dreamily, delightedly. Where were the other twain?

There was a cool shady seat under the tent-like greenery of a superb plane-tree: "such tents the patriarchs loved." On a mimic lake, tranquil and pellucid, swam a very flotilla of unusual water-fowl, *raræ aves in terris*. The mound on which rose the plane sloped to this lakelet. Claudia sat upon the turf, a volume wide open on her lap. Stephen looked over the fair white page, and with eager finger pointed to the lines—

> "Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand,
> Steal from his figure and no pace perceived;
> So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand
> Hath motion and mine eye may be deceived;
> For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred?
> Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead."

"Very poetic flattery," said Claudia; "but even Shakespeare was too weak for time. The

fair face faded. Who was she, I wonder?"

"She is immortal in his verse, at any rate," said Stephen. "But nobody believes that beauty's summer is dead."

"It is melancholy to think that what poor beauty one may have is stealing away every moment just as certainly as the shadow moves on the dial."

"Heraclitus remarked that you never twice cross the same stream or twice look on the same face. Yet," went on Stephen—daring boy!—"you seem to me the very same vision of beauty that dawned upon me at that sordid school."

"Don't talk of it," she interposed, hurriedly. "Why, there have been ten April perfumes in ten hot Junes burned since then! I could almost cry, Stephen, when I think how dreadfully old I am growing—and you, why you are just beginning to live."

There certainly was a misty moisture in those wondrous black eyes of hers.

"You are not altered," said Stephen. "I could fancy—I do sometimes fancy—that the

whole time is a dream, and that I shall wake up in the morning a little boy, in that snug room at Kingsleat, with your nightdress on. I remember now what wonderful frills it had."

"You were a wicked little boy," she said, turning round upon him with a flash of the liquid black eyes. "What business have you with my nightdresses?"

"Ah!" said Stephen, throwing himself back upon the soft green turf and closing his eyes, "it *is* a dream, I know. I am not on the grass under a plane-tree: I am half asleep in a delicious bed—half asleep, drowsily dozing—and you are going to get into bed in the next room —and before you do, you will stoop over me and give me a kiss. I know you will."

Why, Claudia, Claudia, what can this impudent boy mean? Is he not a trifle too precoce? Is he forgetting sweet Anne Page? Or is it only that facile humour which ever coexists with poetry? A momentous problem.

Claudia looked down upon him. His eyes were closed; the leaf shadows of the plane fluttered over his boyish face; his lips were half

parted, expectant. She stooped, and her abundant black tresses showered over him, and she pressed her lips to his. She could not resist the impulse; it was magic, magnetic. He caught her before she could rise again, and gave her kiss for kiss. Springing to his feet, he laughed merrily, and exclaimed,

"Then come kiss me, sweet-and-twenty."

He could see Claudia blush a rosy red—she who blushed seldom indeed. And Claudia could feel the warm blush tingle and redden through her every limb. What had she done? She was playing with edged tools. She was afraid of this boy whom hitherto she had regarded with tolerant contempt. She was afraid of herself and of him.

"Sweet-and-thirty, you mean," she said. "Now, you must not do that again, Stephen, or I shall be very angry. You are a naughty boy."

He stooped over her, caught her two hands in his, and looked right into those great black changeful eyes. There was a strange expression in them—an almost piteous expression.

"Why, Claudia," he said, "there is no need

to be angry. We went back a few years, that is all. I was a poor little schoolboy again, and you were the kind and beautiful vision that came suddenly to give me one day's pleasure. And you gave me a kiss of your own free will, you must admit."

"You are cruel," she said, looking away from him. "Let me go. I am tired of this child's play."

She rose to her feet, imperious and angry as the virgin goddess, that day the luckless huntsman beheld her white-skinned beauty in the Gargaphian waters. If Claudia had been at this moment a goddess I don't know what might have chanced to Stephen. You see, being very angry with herself, she naturally vented her ire upon him.

"You should go back to school again if I had my way," she said, "and learn better manners. I wonder at your impertinence."

"My dear Miss Claudia," said Stephen, "will you listen for a minute? You are unreasonably angry with yourself for being so generous as to recall old times by giving me a kiss, and so you

pretend to be angry with me. Now what harm in the world have you done or have I done? In point of fact you were only kissing a little boy in one of your own night-gowns."

Claudia thought it best to laugh. She knew it was ridiculous to quarrel with Stephen for her own mistake.

"I'll never kiss you again, sir, never," she said.

"Don't make rash promises," replied Stephen. "I really think that in order to console me for the scolding I have had, you ought to give me one more kiss—or at least let me take one. I shan't be able to believe you forgive me, else."

I think I may leave the reader to guess how this overture was received.

Claudia could not for a long time decide whether Stephen had any touch of feeling towards her. His manner perplexed her. With Anne Page he assumed the rights of betrothal, and tacitly treated her as his future wife, giving her indeed slight lectures, and making suggestions as to her conduct, all which Anne took

with sweet submission. But he appeared to prefer Claudia's society, and lost no occasion for a quiet conversation with her, and wrote verses for her, and left Anne Page for Humphrey Morfill to amuse. He, nothing loth, amused her, and little Anne seemed quite content. Winifred tried once or twice to make her jealous of Claudia; but Anne could not feel jealousy.

"He likes Claudia's company," said Anne, "and why shouldn't he enjoy it? We love one another, you know, Stephen and I; but we need not always be talking about it."

"It appears to me," said Winifred, "that neither of you cares about the other. If he runs away with Claudia, I suppose you'll take up with Mr. Morfill."

"Claudia is much too old for Stephen. She is like a mother to him," said Anne, with a touch of demure spitefulness.

Winifred only wanted to make a little mischief. She and her father watched Claudia's game with much interest, and hoped to see her successful; and I suppose, if they had witnessed

that scene under the plane tree, they would have felt certain of her triumph. The Panther felt no such certainty.

When they parted, she went to her room, and kneeling on a stool at the window, looked out upon the garden. There was still upon her cheeks the remnant of that angry blush, like the rosy streaks in the west that mark where the sun went down in splendour. She bit her beautiful nether lip; she clenched on one another her small white hands; her bosom panted beneath her bodice; her great black eyes had a lurid light in them.

"Shall I gain him?" she soliloquised. "I don't know. He is a strange boy, with something about him that I cannot understand. He *made* me kiss him just now. I believe he could do it again, this moment, though I hate him for it. Yes, I *hate* him sometimes. I like him a little now and then; but he *shall* not have such power over me. Why, I could have cried with spite. Oh! if he was only the little puny boy he was when I knew him first, I'd whip him to death almost—I declare I would. Hateful crea-

ture! When I marry him he shall pay for all this. I'll make him my slave. *Can I?* I will —I must; he shall submit to my will. To think that this mere boy should be able to make me hate him so. I wonder what Cis would say, if I told her!"

The idea of the Bishop's lady's probable amazement made our Panther laugh. She grew less moody. She bathed her fair cheeks in fragrant water, and cooled away the excitement which had so thrilled every nerve of her body. She looked out upon the garden; Stephen and Humphrey and Anne Page were grouped together by the fountain: Humphrey was throwing pebbles into the water; Stephen, holding his sweetheart's hand in his, was saying something to which she eagerly listened.

"No; she shall not have him," said the Panther to herself. "I will not be defied by two children. They cannot know what love is."

So through the pleasant autumn weather she did her utmost to charm him. She wasted upon him a myriad times the art which had been triumphant with admirers of far greater

pretension. It was a strange game they played—she conscious, Stephen unconscious. Day after day passed delightfully, yet the Panther could not be sure of her prey. His very innocence foiled her—his boyish love for sweet Anne Page—his reverent admiration for herself, reverent, though, as we have seen, chequered with irreverent incidents. And the great term time of Cambridge came rapidly on, when Humphrey Morfill would be away, and her work would be retarded by Anne Page's company. She resolved soon to make some decisive move. It was most important, for her father's sake, to win this game; and, besides, she was now too excited in the pursuit to relinquish it.

Whence it happened that, after much reflection, she fixed upon an evening for that purpose. Eager in her enterprise, she was yet cool and considerate. "This boy," she said to herself, "cannot believe that I really love him, as I want him to believe; he thinks me beyond him; I must prove to him that I am not so. He will fall at my feet and worship me, when once he perceives his good fortune. As yet he is afraid."

And so she decided upon time and place, and on a plan of action.

There was a lecture at some Idlechester Institute, by one of those wandering geniuses who skim the froth of other men's minds, and retail it for a few guineas nightly. I rather think it was on chemistry; and sweet Anne Page, having a pretty childish liking for seeing potassium flaming upon ice, and hearing the explosion of oxyhydrogen soap-bubbles, asked Stephen to take her. But Stephen was too busy, he said; the foolish fellow was hard at work on a magazine article, which of course was eventually refused; so he suggested that Humphrey would be glad to go. And thus it was arranged.

Which our wicked Panther knowing, that afternoon in the garden she reminded Stephen of a translation he had promised her of those delicious verses of Chiabrera's—

> "Belle rose porporine,
> Che tra spine
> Sull' aurora non aprite:
> Ma ministre degli Amori,
> Bei testori
> Di bei denti custodite."

Cunning as Eve her progenitrix, mother and mistress of many tricks, she knew well that the young scribbler could not refuse her his rhymes, whensoever she desired them; and so she desired them this very evening. And so, when Humphrey had taken Anne away to their chemistry, Stephen arrived with his MS., and began with more fluency than felicity—

"Ruddy Roses! not the blossoms
Whose sweet bosoms
Morning wets with crystal dew;
But lip-roses,
Where reposes
Love, and music trembles through!"

And of course the Panther's lustrous eyes brightened with admiration; and of course he read more of his polyglottisms, all about love—leave the boy alone for that. But by-and-by Claudia interrupted the readings with—

"Stephen, how old is Anne Page?"

"In her seventeenth year," he said.

"And when are you going to marry her?"

"That," he replied, "depends on her guardians. If Mr. Page had lived, he would doubtless have wished her to wait a few years."

"And you are in no hurry?"

"Why should I be? We are both very young. It would be wrong to hurry her. She is scarcely old enough to know her own mind."

"Are *you?*" asked Claudia, with some emphasis.

"Well," he said, rising from his seat and walking up and down the room, "I think I am. You know I have been in love with her for ten years at least," he continued, with a light laugh.

"Stephen," she said, with a very low inflection of her most musical voice, "Stephen, do not make a mistake in this matter. Do not mistake a mere childish fancy for true love. You young poets rhyme about true love without dreaming of its marvellous power. Oh! it is something so delicious that the delight is on the very verge of agony. It is too divine for us to enjoy it fully, and that is why its course can never run smooth. The gods envy those who love. Be careful, Stephen."

"Why, Claudia," he said, astonished at her vehemence, "have you ever known true love, then?"

"Shall I tell you a great secret, Stephen? No," she said, playfully putting her pretty finger to her lip, "no, you cannot be trusted. No, I won't tell you."

"You may trust me," he said. "I should very much like to know that there is anyone whom *you* think worth loving."

"Oh! there is," she said; "there is."

There was a pause. At length she said—

"Come here, Stephen. Kneel down. I don't want you to look at me while I tell you my secret."

He knelt at her feet, and buried his face in her lap, as if they were playing forfeits. She ran her delicate fingers through his bright crisp curly hair. He was very patient. At last she said,

"I am afraid. Can't you guess, Stephen?"

"I can only guess that he is a very happy man," he answered, trying to raise his head and look at her face. But she would not let him.

"He is too happy," she said, "too fortunate. He cares nothing for me. Oh! I cannot tell you, Stephen."

"How you delight to tantalize me," he said.

"Listen, Stephen, listen," she whispered. "Tell nobody. Forget that you have heard it. She bowed her head towards him, so that he felt her breath upon his hair. "*It is you I love!*"

Still she held him in his sweet prison; then, as with a sudden revulsion, she pushed him from her, saying—

"Go away—you despise me, I know—go away directly."

She buried her face in her hands, and sobbed passionately.

Stephen was astounded. With all her apparent passion, he could not believe her. He had never dreamt of loving Claudia, of being unfaithful to sweet Anne Page. He was thunderstruck, yet scarcely credulous.

"Claudia," he said, "what have you told me?"

"Stephen," she replied, standing erect, and looking upon him fearlessly with dilated orbs of living light, "I have told you the truth. I am foolish enough, wicked enough, to love you,

though I know you can never love me. Perhaps you some day will love as madly, and then you will know how vain it is to strive to repress such love. Oh! Stephen, Stephen, my darling, pity me!"

She threw herself upon him. She flung her arms around him wildly, and clung to him, lip, breast, and lissom limb. She kissed him as Cleopatra might have kissed broad-fronted Cæsar in her youth. He could not help returning the pressure of that irresistible embrace. For a half-minute, it may be, locked in each other's arms, Stephen and Claudia forgot, or seemed to forget, everything but love. So Hero and Leander may have clung together ere the bold swimmer sprang into Hellespont on his return.

But the Panther felt that she had not triumphed. She had miscalculated her power over him. And she was not surprised, when that vehement embrace was over, to hear him say,

"Claudia, this is very terrible. I pity you."

Yes, this was her humiliation, only too well

deserved, she felt. She had vainly exhausted all her resources, even those which no woman should stoop to use. She had offered herself to this boy, and was rejected. Even the secret might not be kept; he and Anne Page perhaps would talk of her with a pitying smile as "poor Claudia." Her haughty temper chafed at the numberless probabilities which crowded her imagination. If Raphael should hear of it! Raphael would believe Stephen to blame—would call him to account; and what would he say to her? Oh, that she had never run such a risk! Oh, that she had never taken a fancy to this contemptuous boy years before!

"I wish I could love you, Claudia," he went on, breaking the silence, "I owe you a great debt of gratitude."

This was worse than all. Every word he uttered, though intended kindly, filled her with deeper shame, with hotter ire. She bit her lip till it bled; she clenched her beautiful hands till the nails indented their soft palms. She would have given half her life at that moment to be revenged upon Stephen. Oh! to torture

him with some intense ingenuity of torture—something beyond all that the Inquisition ever invented!

Humphrey Morfill's knock was heard at the front door.

"Tell them I have a headache—anything," she said, and was gone in an instant.

So Stephen told them he had called in to hear their account of the lecture, and that Miss Branscombe had a bad headache; and Anne Page ran away to see if she could do anything for her cousin; and Humphrey criticised the lecturer's theories, and laughed at the awkwardness of his experiments, and was learned upon isomeric substances; and by-and-by Anne returned to say that Claudia was coming presently, and they must stop to supper, which they did; and Humprey Morfill announced his intention of performing a chemical experiment superior to any at the lecture, and accordingly, being furnished with a lobster and some anchovies and olives and capers and lettuce and endive and various condiments, made such

a salad as only a first-rate operator could produce.

Claudia came down looking radiant, and supper went off with joyous gaiety.

"Chemistry," said Humphrey, "is a wonderful science, if one only knew somthing beyond its mere facts. I want to know *why* two gases form water, when mixed in given proportions—why chlorine destroys colours and odours—why laughing gas intoxicates you. What we call science is only classified ignorance."

"Then it is just as well to be ignorant without classification, as ladies generally are," said Claudia.

"What a beautiful colour the vapour of iodine is!" said Anne. "I don't think I ever beheld anything so exquisite."

"If I recollect," observed Claudia, "it is very much the colour of Stephen's eyes."

"Ironical flattery is cruel," said Stephen, who was rather surprised at Claudia's gaiety.

"How strange," said Anne, "that that stuff—what did he call it?—should catch fire when it touches water! It seems so absurd."

"Potassium, you mean," said Humphrey. "Well, that experiment illustrates the weakness of what is called chemical science."

"How so?" asked the Panther.

"Why, look here. Two elements, oxygen and hydrogen, are in close partnership—closer than man and wife a great deal. The result we call water, and drink it—some of us. Now why should there be a third malignant element that takes delight in separating these two attached lovers? Potassium is the rascal; he—or perhaps I had better say she, for it is quite a ladylike business—has so strong a passion for oxygen, that she forcibly extracts her true love from the water, and so violently as to set both the hydrogen and herself on fire. Whence this mad passion? Chemists only say—'Oh! potassium has a great affinity for oxygen.' To me it almost seems like the jealous work of a living creature, just as if Rosaline, the scarlet-lipped beauty whom that rascal Romeo deserted for Juliet, had followed him in wild anger, and killed both Juliet and herself."

"That is the action of potassium, is it?" said

Claudia. "The chemical type of a jealous woman. Curious! Anne, the lecturer did not tell you all this, did he?"

"No, it is some of Mr. Morfill's fantastic speculation. He is fond of odd notions. I think he would have been an alchemist or an astrologer if he had lived in old times."

"I believe in both sciences," said Stephen.

"I believe it is getting late," said Humphrey. "Come, the ladies are tired of us."

They rose to go. Claudia took an opportunity to approach Stephen, and whispered in his ear with singular distinctness—

"*I hate you, Stephen. You shall never marry Anne Page.*"

He gave her a sorrowful look, and then went away with his friend. But not home, as yet; it was a night of glorious moonlight, and they paced the cathedral close, solacing themselves with the enchanted weed.

CHAPTER IX.

IN A GONDOLA.

HE is somewhat daring who ventures to make Venice a scene of his romance. Has not Shakespeare the myriad-minded been there twice?—once with his wondrous comedy and peerless Portia, and that divine little Jewess Jessica—

> "In such a night
> Did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew,
> Slander her love, and he forgave it her"—

once with that tear-compelling tragedy of the doom of Desdemona, with

> "That whiter skin of hers than snow,
> And smooth as monumental alabaster"?

Nor Shakespeare only; but men of smaller mould than he, to whom yet we in this day seem pigmies. Voltaire's kings, and Schiller's masked

Armenian: Byron, hymning in his strongest verse the "sea Cybele, fresh from ocean," fed with gems of "the exhaustless East," and in another mood telling the story of Beppo; Shelley, longing

> "Never to leave sweet Venice, for to me
> It was delight to ride by the lone sea;
> And then the town is silent—one may write
> Or read in gondolas, by day or night,
> Unseen, uninterrupted:

later, Disraeli the younger, with that hero whose story, as his preface tells us, "has had the rare fortune of being cherished by great men:" and Ruskin, who puts artistic and architectural paradox in sonorous prose: and Arthur Clough, exclaiming,

> "O beautiful beneath the magic moon
> To walk the watery way of palaces;
> O beautiful, o'er-vaulted with gemmed blue
> This spacious court; with colour and with gold,
> With cupolas and pinnacles and points,
> And crosses multiplex and tips and balls,
> (Wherewith the bright stars unreproving mix,
> Nor scorn by hasty eyes to be confused;)
> Fantastically perfect this lone pile
> Of Oriental glory; those long ranges
> Of classic chiselling; this gay flickering crowd,
> And the calm Campanile!"

Last, but how far from least, the greatest of living poets has been "In a Gondola," and has sung

> "O which were best, to roam or rest?
> The land's lap or the water's breast?
> To sleep on yellow millet-sheaves
> Or swim in lucid shallows, just
> Eluding water-lily leaves,
> An inch from Death's black fingers, thrust
> To lock you, whom release he must;
> Which life were best on summer eves?"

Ah, can I venture on the charmed Venetian water after these? Can I write in my gondola after Shelley's divine lyrics, or look up eagerly for a flushed face at a balcony for an embrace of her whom Browning beheld stretching to regain her lost loory, till

> "Quick the round smooth cord of gold,
> The coiled hair on her head, unrolled,
> Fell down her like a gorgeous snake
> The Roman girls were wont of old,
> When Rome there was, for coolness' sake,
> To let lie curling o'er their bosoms"?

Pshaw! Authors must not be cowards in these days: "faint heart never won fair lady:" and there is one fair lady whom I fain would win to read this story.

Raphael Branscombe was in the silent city; not because, like Contarini Fleming, he was drawn thither by some magic impulse, but simply because he rather liked it. And though, again unlike Contarini, the Seraph had no special predisposition for conspiraces, he had a wonderful genius for adventure. He was in the midst of one now; or perhaps 'twere better to say it had reached its acme, and Raphael was getting a little tired of it.

The Seraph was singularly unaltered since we saw him at Kingsleat, so long ago. He was boyish and beautiful as ever. No trace of beard or whisker marred the feminine curves of cheek and chin. You might have thought that he drank the elixir of youth. He lay back in his chair at breakfast, according to his old custom; and Louis supplied him abundantly with comestibles; and he gazed languidly through an open window towards a palace on the opposite side of the narrow canal.

In that palace dwelt two English ladies, the Countess of Shottesbrooke and Lady Æmilia Hastings, her youngest daughter. The elder

lady was an average countess dowager, unpleasantly hard up. As for Lady Æmilia—I am tempted again to quote a famous poet—

> "Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red,—
> On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
> O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head."

Yes: Æmilia was very much "such a lady." She reminded me often of Browning's Ottima, or of Byron's Dudù—

> "Being somewhat large and languishing and lazy,
> Yet of a beauty that would drive you crazy."

She had driven a good many people crazy in her time; and was at present occupied in doing the same kind act for a young Mr. Bouverie Hudson, a millionaire of five and twenty, whose father was generally believed to have been a tailor, and whose prænomen, according to some wicked wit, had been given him because he lodged in Bouverie-street. Hudson was a very agreeable affable innocent young fellow, who was maddened by Lady Æmilia's sleepy beauty. The Countess encouraged him; he would be a

capital match for her daughter; but he could not succeed in awakening the slightest amount of interest in those great drowsy eyes of hers.

Even now, as Raphael lounged over his late breakfast, Mr. Bouverie Hudson was in attendance on the lady of his love. He had arranged a morning stroll in a gondola, if I may use such a phrase, to see some church or palace or island of the lagoons—I forget what. And the hour had come, and the Countess had already dressed to start, and Lady Æmilia declined to move.

"I am so weary of it all," she said. "And it is so hot."

And she sank back in her chair the very picture of lassitude.

"It will be pleasantly cool on the water," said the Countess.

"Oh, mamma, don't try to persuade me. You know what an indolent creature I am. *You* go with Mr. Hudson—you'll enjoy it, I daresay—and bring him back to dinner."

She sighed with the exertion of saying so much. Her invincible indolence made her quite

an autocrat. So the Countess of Shottesbrooke and Mr. Bouverie Hudson started together, the young gentleman looking anything but happy.

Their gondola had scarcely left the steps when Lady Æmilia so far exerted herself as to rise from her seat, and fasten to the blind of the balcony a morsel of rosy ribbon. Then she actually went and dressed herself, and, returning to the saloon, sat watching by the window.

"Confound the girl!" murmured Raphael to himself, as he saw that silken signal. "Louis, the gondola."

He prepared to go out, though in leisurely fashion. Having lighted a cigar, he also fastened a strip of ribbon to the blind. When Æmilia saw it, she sprang up with a promptitude, and tripped down the marble stairs with an agility, which you would not have imagined in her.

Raphael's gondola shot rapidly across from one palace portal to the other. When the Lady Æmilia had entered it, away it floated through these labyrinthine canals—what matter whither?

A sunny atmosphere of delight seemed to surround Æmilia as she lay back on the cushions, alone with Raphael. They were silent for a long time. At last Raphael, having finished his cigar, half rose from his seat, and looked upon the lady's face, and kissed her drooping eyelids.

"So Hudson is teasing you still, my child?" he said.

"Yes, and Mamma encourages him dreadfully. Oh, I am so tired of it all. I wish I had never seen you, Raphael."

"Why, you silly little thing," he exclaimed, "what next? You know that an hour with me on these quiet waters is worth a year of your slow lazy life. What have I taught you, come?"

"You have taught me to love you, Raphael. And I wish I had not learnt it. And I never know whether you love me, or not."

"That is a question on which no young lady should permit herself to have a doubt."

"*Do* you love me, Raphael?" she asked, eagerly.

"How many times have you asked me that,

Æmilia? And how many times have I told you that I don't care very much for anybody but myself? When will you learn to know me, child?"

"I don't like you when you jest in this way," she said. "If you don't love me, why do you kiss me?—why do you——?"

"Because I like it," he replied. "You are very nice—and you love me, I know, which is very pleasant—and I like to float in a gondola with my arm round your waist, and your charming head on my shoulder. And if I am satisfied, why should not you be, my pet?"

"But this can't go on for ever," she said, in speech far more rapid than his; for she was eager, and he was cool and calm. "You know it can't; what am I to do?"

"For ever," said Raphael, meditatively. "No, *indeed.* Perhaps an eternity of it might get monotonous, but I am not yet very much fatigued. Oh! if I could only stay in one place without being bored, and you could always be beautiful and young, it would be very tolerable here in Venice."

And he kissed her lips this time. And then he lazily lit another cigar.

"But, Raphael," she said, after a long pause, "what *am* I to do? Tell me. You haven't told me?"

"Marry Hudson, I should think."

"Oh! now you are cruel!" she cried, passionately. "You know I hate that man."

"Which need not prevent your marrying him. He worships you. Come, child, be reasonable; you know I can't marry; you know you must marry money. Here is this good-tempered young fellow as madly in love with you as you are with me. Make him happy—and be as contented as you can manage to be yourself."

"Raphael, you are a fiend!"

"Don't be abusive, my pet, or I won't give you another kiss this morning. Was it my fault, you little fool, that you fell passionately in love with me? Why, you were like a ripe peach—you dropt into my hand, you know you did. I have told you all this before; you need not make a man talk so much this hot weather. There! my cigar is out."

Æmilia was half smiles, half tears. So foolishly she loved this man that she could not be angry with him. She was his slave. She could have thrown herself on the ground at a word, for him to tread upon her. I believe she would have cast herself headlong into the canal, if Raphael had bidden her. And now, while he talked with this cool cynicism, she clung to him with servile love.

"If I could marry," resumed the Seraph, after a while, "I would marry you, Æmilia—and that is more than I ever said to any woman before. If either you or I had a clear thousand a year, I would marry you. I don't know that I should be happy; I think not; if I know myself at all, I should desert you in about six months. But *you* would be happy—for a week or two."

And he hummed—he had a capital tenor voice, Raphael—a stanza of Murger's song:

"Yesterday seeing the swallows whirl,
Summer's guests in a happier clime,
I thought once more of the darling girl
Who used to love me—when she had time—
"—When she had time!"

"Ah!" said Lady Æmilia, with a sigh, after

another pause, "what would my brother say if he knew?"

"My dear girl," said Raphael, "you are in a fanciful state this morning. Be calm. I like repose. If you worry yourself your eyes will lose their brightness, and your cheeks their colour, and your bust its divine curve—and then you won't catch me in a gondola with you again in a hurry. Your brother the Earl is as gallant a boy as ever lived—and if he knew, why, I suppose he'd kill me, for it wouldn't be gentlemanly for me to kill him, you know—and I really shouldn't so much care if I felt sure there was a Venice in the next world, and a pretty Æmilia ready to love me. But the parsons, who ought to know, I suppose, don't give one any such ideas, I'm sorry to say."

The well-disciplined gondolier, who knew the value of time, had brought them back to where Lady Æmilia dwelt. Raphael gave her a farewell kiss.

"Good-bye, child," he said. "Go and tell mamma, like a dutiful daughter, that you think you'll marry Hudson, if he'll make a good settle-

ment on you. I'll make you a wedding present. Run away."

She ascended the stairs. He, returning to his palace, found that the post had in the interval arrived, and that there was a letter in his father's well-known hand. Better say "fist," perhaps; Devil Branscombe wrote a most characteristic and unmistakeable fist, and sealed his letters with a vast shapeless splash of wax, whereon a muzzled mastiff and the motto "*Cave!*" seemed equally characteristic.

"What's the row now?" said Raphael, breaking the seal. The letter was dated from Idlechester. "By Jove," said Raphael to himself, "the old gentleman has taken a queer fancy." Thus ran the epistle:—

"DEAR RAPHAEL,

"You remember old Langton the tanner—big old fellow with a strong smell of leather. Well, here I am in his house in the High-street, comfortably shut up in a front bed-room, and watching all that goes on at poor Page's opposite. Amusing rather. No-

body knows I'm here, though Walter knew I was coming; settled it all with him at the Dolphin at Southampton. Very fair wine at the Dolphin, for a country inn.

"You'll say, what the deuce is it all about? Well, Page left his money so that half of it will go to old Langton's grandson, if we don't look sharp. Your uncle, who's got his wits about him, suggested the best way out of it—Claudia to marry young Langton, and then you to come over and marry Page's little girl. She's very pretty, I hear; and, as you've had your fling, it can't matter much whom you marry. She's got close upon four thousand a year.

"So I want you to come and meet me and talk it over. I shall start for Guernsey as soon as I've talked to Claudia. I saw her go along the street just now. Wouldn't she have been astonished if she had known who was looking at her! "R. B.

"P.S. I mean to go to Baden or some such place, and see if I've any luck with the thousand Page left me. He might as well have made it

ten. I shall wait for you in Guernsey—but be as quick as you can, for I'm tired of the infernal hole."

"That's your game, is it, old gentleman?" said Raphael. "Under the circumstances, perhaps I'd better not hurry myself. You can't spend much money in Guernsey, at any rate. However, I must go to talk to you, that's certain—and it will be a fine opportunity of dropping that little Hastings. She's getting tiresome, poor child. As to Anne Page, why, she must be a mere baby yet. So much the better perhaps, in some respects. Her money would make us all right."

The next morning Raphael signalled early to his fair neighbour opposite, and sat smoking in proximity to the window, awaiting a reply. None came all through the long bright day.

"Strange," he thought. "Æmilia is generally in a deuce of a hurry. I suppose the old woman has made her go out somewhere."

But when on the next day the same thing happened, Raphael said to his valet,

"Louis, I want you to find out quietly what Lady Shottesbrooke is doing."

"Her ladyship has left Venice, sir," said Louis, promptly. "I have just heard it."

Louis was a model valet, always knew what his master wanted to know, but never entered on a subject except by his master's desire.

"Left, eh!" soliloquized Raphael. "I wonder if there has been a row. Louis," he said to his valet, "I shall leave too. I shall go to Rome for a day or two, and then I think of crossing to Corsica. We'll start this evening."

There *had* been a row. We left Æmilia slowly ascending the palace stairs. When she reached the saloon, to her amazement she was received by her mother.

"Well, Lady Æmilia Hastings, pray where have you been? I thought you were too indolent to move."

"I suppose one may change one's mind, mamma."

"Oh! of course. At the same time I presume I may inquire where you have been, and in whose company."

"Whom do I know here?" asked Lady Æmilia. "What do you mean by '*In whose company?*'"

"I mean," said the Countess, "that for a young lady of your rank to be alone in a gondola with a man whose character is so bad as Mr. Raphael Branscombe's is sufficient to ruin her reputation."

The girl was taken by surprise. Though the noiseless labyrinthine canals of Venice, with their mysterious gondolas, are the natural home of intrigue, yet the secrets of the Venetian waters are not always kept. Gossip exists there, especially among the resident English: and the Countess had that very morning encountered another dowager who knew more than herself of her daughter's movements. So she had hastily returned, finding some pretext for the alteration of her design, and dismissing Mr. Hudson till dinner-time.

"If Mr. Branscombe has so bad a character," said Lady Æmilia, "why do you let him come here?"

"It is impossible," said the Countess, "to ex-

clude an Englishman of fashion, whom you meet everywhere. But if he were the most virtuous man in the world, it would not justify you in going out with him alone."

"Not if I were affianced to him?" she asked.

"Why, that would be worse than all," the Countess almost shrieked. "He has no money; he is a pauper, and is far too clever to marry a pauper. Æmilia," she said solemnly, "I don't know how far you have gone with him, and I have no wish to know, but we shall leave Venice at once—and you will accept Mr. Hudson."

"*Never*," said Æmilia.

"*You will*," replied her mother, firmly. "Otherwise I will write at once to Edward, and tell him of your intrigue with this Mr. Branscombe."

The threat was effective. The young Earl, his sister knew well, had a high notion of the family honour. *Sans peur et sans reproche* himself, and descended from a stainless ancestry, he was certain to hear of her doings with indignation.

"Good heaven!" she thought, "and Raphael would be killed. He said he could not defend himself. It is dreadful."

Poor girl, she was awakened from her indolent languor now. She loved this man, who was utterly unworthy of her, with the most absolute love. And if she sacrificed herself to a man for whom she cared nothing, it was to save Raphael from her brother's vengeance.

"Mamma," she said, faintly, "I submit. Now leave me alone, please." She sank back in her chair and wept as if her heart would break.

The Countess, heedless of her daughter's tears, went away smiling at her own success.

That day the happy Hudson, after a charming dinner, received from the Countess a hint that he might speak. And he spoke, frankly and fairly, like a fine foolish young fellow as he was; and Lady Æmilia intoxicated him with an indolent *Yes*. But ah, poor child, she shuddered at his delight, and shrank from the lips that touched her own. And, before they started for England, she wrote a note to Raphael, which came to him through a gondolier, after she was gone. It was a very little note.

"DEAR CRUEL RAPHAEL,—I have obeyed you. I should not have had courage, but Mamma

found out that I love you, and I was afraid Edward would kill you. I don't know *what* she knows. Forget me, *please*. "ÆMILIA."

"Poor little rogue!" thought Raphael, when he read it. "That's all over."

He went, as he intended, to Rome; having written to his father to say that he was on his way to Guernsey. Rome had not at that time become quite such a suburb of London as it now is. People had not begun to write—

> "Jemima was cross, and I lost my umbrella,
> That day at the tomb of Cæcilia Metella."

There was no croquet at the Aldobrandini. Story and Weld had not written their dreary books, nor had my friend Mr. Locker set up as Laureat of the eternal city. Raphael only stayed a day or two; there was, of course, nobody there; and he took wing to Naples, to look once more upon its voluptuous bay and the pale cone of Vesuvius. Raphael, a thorough Epicurean, intensely enjoyed fine scenery. All his tastes were exquisite. If he had possessed any kind of ethics, he would have been a very good sort of fellow.

CHAPTER X.

ON AN ISLAND.

I DO not know what drew Raphael Branscombe to Corsica. I am disposed to think it was destiny. When a man does a thing inexplicable not only to the world but to himself, he is perhaps drawn into one of those *currents* of life which seem often to interfere with its main tidal movement. If any one had asked Raphael why he was going to the mysterious island of revenge and of conquest, he certainly could not have told. The idea had only occurred to him when he heard that Æmilia had left Venice; but he made up his mind instantly, although he knew that his father was anxiously awaiting him in quite another island, eager to start for some place where he could get rid of that unlucky thousand pounds.

Raphael crossed in a sailing-boat from Livorno. The Tuscan channel is sprinkled with lovely islets—sporades of the Italian sea. Passing out of sight of Livorno's crowded harbour, lying at the foot of Monte Nero; passing Meloria, a solitary rock with a shattered tower, by which was fought the sea fight which destroyed the Genoese republic; passing Gorgona and Capraja, where one remembers Dante's execration against Pisa—

> "Movasi la Capraja e la Gorgona,
> E faccian siepe ad Arno in su la foce,
> Si ch' egli annieghi in te ogni persona,"—

and where one also naturally thinks of anchovies; passing Elba too, where men vainly thought to imprison a Titan; the voyager approaches Bastia. Raphael entered the harbour with its dark amphitheatre of mountains, at eventide. The first words that he heard through the dim light upon the quay were *Ammazzato! ammazzato!* A Corsican had become rather excited in conversation with a friend, and had stabbed him with three strokes of a dagger; *ammazzato con tre colpi di pugnale.*

The *sbirri* were after him; he had fled to the *macchia*. He who once flies to the *macchia*, the wild mountains and forests of Corsica, is a bandit for life.

Raphael was rather amused than alarmed by this ominous reception. After some trouble he got into a locanda where, by the smoky light of an ill-trimmed oil-lamp, he supped on wheaten bread and cheese of ewe's milk and fiery Corsican wine. He got slight rest that night. In the early morning he strolled down to the beach, and dipped in the divine wave, and feasted his sight with the islets of Capraja and Elba and romance-empurpled Monte Cristo, afar amid the haze. Then, an experienced traveller, he went to the fish-market to look for breakfast; and was recommended to try the murena, the best of all fish, which resembles a serpent of porphyry; and gazed with delight on the innumerable piscine forms of the Corsican waters. Thence to the fruit-market on the Piazza Favaleni, where the peaches, apricots, green almonds, pomegranates, Muscat grapes from Cape Corso, figs, magnificent melons, were crowded in pro-

fuse abundance. Beautiful young girls bring them in baskets on their heads, whose abundant tresses are hidden by the picturesque *mandile*, a head-dress older than the Tarquins.

Raphael thoroughly enjoyed all this. He had with him but one book, a favourite comrade of travel, a Tauchnitz *Odyssey;* he read it by the sea in Corsica, and thought himself in Ogygia. Do not fear, reader, that I am going to follow him step by step. Forgetting his eager father, he went to Fabiani, the bookseller, and bought of him Marmocchi's topographic work on Corsica. He climbed the green mountain Cardo, and looked down upon the Mediterranean, whose hue, as Dante said, is *color del oriental zaffiro*, and crushed out as he climbed the odour of those myriad flowers and herbs which caused Napoleon to say at St. Helena, "I should know Corsica with my eyes shut, by its fragrance." Then from Bastia he traversed Cape Corso, and entered the beautiful stalactite cavern of Brando, and rested in Luri's enchanted valley, tasting its wondrous wine, and crossed the Serra to Pino on the Ligurian Sea, and ascended to the

Tower of Seneca, where the Stoic and poetaster expiated his ambitious love by eight years' exile, exclaiming—

"Hic sola hæc duo sunt, exsul et exsilium,"

and returning, sailed the coast to Vesovato, whence Murat, "a great knight and a small intellect," made his last attempt to recover his lost kingdom, and climbed through the chestnut groves and festooned clematis to lofty Oreto (*oros*), where he found no locanda, but frank hospitality. A peasant, in brown smock and Phrygian cap, gave him soup of vegetables, goat's flesh, and peaches, the pretty daughter waiting at table, and wondering at the stranger. After supper he went to the church, standing on the verge of a steep rock, whence there is an incomparable view over chestnut-covered mountains and an island-dotted sea; and there meeting the Curé, enjoyed a delicious glass of wine with him, and a pleasant talk about the two Paolis, Pasquale and Clement, the one statesman and leader, the other soldier and fanatic. Then he returned and chatted to the playful Giulia, a merry maiden of sixteen, who did not

know her own age, but knew she looked very pretty in the *faldetta*, and so brought it out and arrayed herself with it for the wanderer's amusement. And the next day, with the peasant as guide, he rode through the chestnut forests of Orezza, where a family can live if they possess six groats and as many chestnut-trees, to Morosaglia, the birthplace of Paoli.

Ferdinand Gregorovius, in his delightful book about this romantic island, says that it contains men of Homer, of Plutarch, and of Goethe. Raphael found some of each among the goat-herds of Monte Rotondo, where the wild waters of the milk-white Restonica foam endlessly, and the herdsmen store their cheeses in the very caverns of Polyphemus; on the dizzy steep of Bonifazio, whence you see the fanal on Sardinia's northernmost cape, while on the islets below lie half-hewn columns which were meant for mighty houses in the Rome of the Cæsars; above all, at Isola Rossa, whose blood-red island cliffs and gray Pisan towers and phosphorescent sea delighted him. He echoed the poetic traveller who exclaimed, "Verily, I swear I have

reached the magic shore of the Lotos-eaters." As you enter the town there rises a fountain in an open space, where is a bust of Paoli, who built the place under a fire from Genoese gun-boats. Children were playing there; one of these, a beautiful boy about eight years old, showed him the way to a little coffee-house. Here a merry young landlady, Chilina Benvenuta, made him an abundant supper of fish and fruit, and gave him pleasant songs to the guitar as he sipped his wine on a marble bench outside, gazing at sunset on the sea.

"By the ghost of Odysseus," he said to himself, "here will I stay awhile, though I eat nothing save murenas and mulberries, and though the head of the house of Branscombe never reach Baden."

He stayed. He sailed on those charmed waters in a boat called the *Fantasia*—a poetic name; he loitered on the three red cliffs, and on the snow white sands streaked with sanguine coral dust, and along by the little nunnery in a garden by the sea, where dwell the Sisters of the Madonna alle Grazie. And he made the ac-

quaintance of a fine old Corsican, kingly as Alcinous, who dwelt among his olive grounds and vineyards and mulberry gardens in Homeric simplicity, with only a granddaughter as companion. Angelo Montalti made the Englishman wondrously welcome, and gave him *broccio* cake, and trout from the hill-streams, and goat's flesh dressed by his own hands, and fruit from his multitudinous trees, and the fragrant but too fiery wine of his own vineyards, while sweet young Fiordilisa Montalti stood and served the guest in primæval fashion.

Fiordilisa, the lily of Isola Rossa, was slender and shapely, and full of maidenhood's pure simplicity. She looked upon Raphael as Nausicaa on that famous wanderer of the elder world. She would have delighted an Italian painter with her hair of Apollo's auburn, and her eyes of Athene's colour, and her fluent flexile form. A child; no more; but how beautiful a child! Those bare round warm white arms; those hands, snowy as the delicate *broccio*; that liquid Italian voice, which at eventide rang sweetly in the wild plaintive *voceri*; that dainty rosebud of

a mouth, honey-sweet for the kisses that are to come—Raphael found them only too attractive. And Raphael always coveted the beauty which he saw.

It was an out-door life at Isola Rossa. On the sea-shore or in the sea itself the children of the village played in happy crowds. At night, sometimes outside the little locanda, sometimes in a great green orchard of Angelo Montalti's, full of grey olives and old gnarled mulberry trees—there was idyllic song, sometimes playful, sometimes touched with divine melancholy. The young girls and boys would improvise couplets, as in *Fra Lippo Lippi*—

"Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb."

"Flower o' the quince,
I let Lisa go, and what good's in life since?"

"Flower o' the rose,
If I have been merry, what matter who knows?"

"Flower o' the clove,
All the Latin I construe is *amo* I love."

"Flower o' the thorn,
Joy of the midnight is sorrow at morn!"

Or sometimes—

"Amo un presidente,
Sta in letto senza dente!"
"Amo un cameriere.
Sta in letto senza bere!"

Oh! what a ripple of laughter from gay young lips at each successive distich! Raphael, sensitive to all sweet influences, thought he had never known any enjoyment so near perfection. He forgot Venice, and poor beautiful Æmilia soon to be tied to her millionaire; he forgot sweet Anne Page, whom he was expected to marry; I regret to say he forgot Devil Branscombe, who used to stalk up and down the cacodorous old pier at Guernsey, and into Redstone's shop, and through the market towards Cadic's for his cigars, swearing in muttered thunder at his recusant son and heir.

"You should buy land, signor, and settle among us," said the coquettish Chilina one morning, as Raphael sat over his breakfast under a great mulberry tree which shaded the *casa*. Then she sang—

"I love a stranger who
Lingers here with nothing to do."

Raphael smiled at the notion of his buying land, but answered—

"If I were obliged to remain here I should want to be away. I enjoy being here, because I ought to be somewhere else."

Chilina laughed merrily, showing the whitest teeth in the world.

"You are as bad as my husband," she said; "he is always wanting to go to Paris. What is Paris like? Is it much larger than Corsica? Is England in Paris?"

Raphael had often to reply to questions such as these. After giving such explanation as he could, he lit a cigar and started for Montalti's, lazily loitering along the sands, and gazing where birds innumerable haunted the blood-red cliffs.

Angelo Montalti was about seventy—a fine athletic old patriarch, full of spirit. The history of Corsica, the noble career of Paoli, the marvellous triumphs of Napoleon, were his favourite subjects of converse with the stranger. Raphael found him amid his olive and orange trees, with Fiordilisa, fresh as the dewy dawn, by his side. And he also this morning said:

"Why not remain among us, Signor Raf-

faelle? Camillo Saliceti is dead: his house is to be sold—the white house with the green blinds under the great chestnut trees where the little river Ostriconi enters the sea."

"Ah! that would be charming," said the Lily with delight. "You will stay, will you not?"

"I will stay," he answered, "till I am obliged to go. It must be soon, I fear. And I am happier than I ever was, or shall be again."

"And you fly from happiness?" said Angelo. "Thus all men do, so I cannot wonder at you. But stay while you will, and when you abandon us we shall regret you."

I wish I had the magic pencil of Millais to paint that old grey house with its orchards by the sea, and the aged Angelo, and the beautiful child, and Raphael standing under the golden-fruited and purple-berried leafage. I can see it all: I can hear Fiordilisa's low sweet voice, more musical than the coo of a dove: but, reader, I want you also to see and hear.

"I want to sail this morning in the *Fantasia*," said Raphael. "Will you come, Fiordilisa? Will you come, Angelo?"

"Go you, Fiordilisa," said Montalti. "I have many things to do."

So away tripped the beautiful girl for her faldetta, and she and Raphael went over the white coral-veined sands to where the lateen-sailed boat had been pushed out by a couple of fishermen; and soon they were outside the ruddy islands, whence the long peninsula of Cape Corso, and the little town, and the three magnificent mountains behind it, Santa Angiola, Santa Susanna, and rugged Feliceto, with villages clinging to their steep sides, made up a glorious landscape. Raphael steered: Fiordilisa trailed her fingers in the sparkling sea, and murmured a low song.

"Sing, Lisa," he said, "so that I may hear you."

"After you, Signor Raffaelle," she said. "You first."

So he sang, in that luscious tenor of his—

"Come to the garden, Minna, my sweet!
  Foamless and calm is the violet sea:
O thy dainty lips and thy finger tips
  Shall be stained with the fruit of the mulberry tree.

"Heat of the noontide, Minna, my sweet!
 Chains back the winds from their wandering glee,
But the air is cool as a forest pool
 Under dense green boughs of the mulberry tree.

"Loop back thy tresses, Minna, my sweet!
 Those rich brown ringlets fluttering free;
And the summer shall flush thee with brighter blush
 Than the ruddiest fruit of the mulberry tree.

"Summer and Love, O, Minna, my sweet!
 Are angels twain who dwell with thee:
Lo now they pursue us, and merrily woo us
 Forth to the shade of the mulberry tree."

The song died across the windless wave. The Lily of Isola Rossa looked at the singer with madid eyes and lips half parted. Raphael, only too skilled in such devil's diagnosis, saw in those moist orbs and tremulous lips the first symptoms of love.

"Now, Fiordilisa, I am going to tack. Then sing." And she sang—

"Why do I love the sea's sweet lustre
 When with him o'er the waves I go?
Is it because the foam bells cluster?
 Is it because the free winds blow?
 Is it for sunset's beauty? *No!*

"Why do I love the garden alleys,
 Golden above and green below?

Why do I love the shadowy valleys
Cooled by the icy brooklet's flow ?
Is it for shade and sweetness ? *No !*

" Ah, should I love the ocean-furrows
Purple and green in sunset's glow—
Ah, should I love the wind's susurrus
Where on the hills gray olives grow—
If I were there without him ? *No !* "

Very poorly have I translated the easy simplicity of the fluent Italian. These Corsican maidens have the art of the Improvisatrice; their song is spontaneous. How gaily the arch and piquant "*No*" came with exquisite iteration and reiteration from Fiordilisa's charming lips.

Raphael could resist no longer. He drew the beautiful creature to himself, and kissed her with passionate kisses.

"Will you be my wife, Lisa?" he said.

Fiordilisa sank upon his breast. She was won, this Nausicaa of Corsica. She gave herself to him with utter love, with a child's faith, in the simplicity and purity of her nature. And, as he steered the *Fantasia* shorewards, with the Lily of Isola Rossa lying in his arms, and gazing into his dreamy inscrutable eyes, Raphael

thought there might be a worse fate than to dwell upon

> "Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas"

with a creature so divine as Fiordilisa. Love had breathed a soul into her, as into Undine; she was no longer the childish little Corsican village girl, but a maiden of romance, fit bride for the knightliest wooer; and Raphael knew that amid all his many amours, he loved never so truly, never so worthily.

He ran the *Fantasia* ashore. He lifted the little beauty over the shallow water to the sands. They walked together, slowly and lovingly, to old Montalti's. It was a delicious afternoon in that land

> "In which it seemed always afternoon."

They entered the gray gateway, and the patriarchal Corsican advanced towards them under the fantastic trees. As he approached, the Lily ran forward and threw her arms around him, and kissed him. Then she ran away; for it was nearly dinner time, and dinner was her care.

"Signor Montalti, I love your granddaughter," said Raphael.

Old Angelo looked surprised.

"She is a child," he said.

"How old is she?" asked Raphael.

"She is sixteen. Well, perhaps it is not too young. Her mother married at sixteen. But, will you stay among us, Signor Raffaelle?"

"I will stay among you," said Raphael.

"Then I say nothing against it," said Angelo. "She loves you?"

"She does."

"It is well. You are wiser than we, and wealthier, and when I die, you may desire to leave Corsica. But do not sell the old house of the Montaltis."

"Do not fear," answered Raphael. "I belong myself to too old a race not to respect old memories."

Raphael Branscombe, a complete Epicurean, with whom indolence was a passion and energetic action only an occasional impulse, abandoned himself wholly to the delight of love. How pleasantly they dined that day, the two men at table, as usual, and Fiordilisa waiting upon them—an island princess of the primæval

time ministering to Nestor and Odysseus! How her fair face flushed as she looked upon her hero —the wanderer she had won!

"Now," said Angelo, putting aside the green wine-flask, whose sole stopper was a vine-leaf, "now will I show you there is wine in Corsica."

The old man descended into a cool crypt, and brought thence a stone jar, holding about three quarts—dark red its hue, its form Etruscan. He poured the wine into the great globular goblets, an oily amber liquid with a strange sparkle in its depths.

"It is of the year in which my son Angelo was born—Fiordilisa's father. He would be thirty-five if he lived now."

The Seraph had tasted wine, in his time—in as many places and of as many qualities as most men. But never had there passed his lips anything to equal this old wine of Corsica, which, fiery in its youth, had mellowed into nectarous perfection. They drank to the happiness of the bridal that was to come.

It was fixed early—a month from that day.

And, when the day came, a *Trovata* or triumphal arch of greenery and flowers arose opposite the Casa Montalti. And Fiordilisa, mounted on a snow-white pony, gaily caparisoned, passed under this archway amid a joyous procession to the little town. And girls from the balconies of Isola Rossa strewed flowers and grains of wheat as the bride passed; and guns were fired, and the mandoline and cornamusa played as they went to the church. And, after the venerable priest had performed the ceremony, there was a gay festival at Montalti's house; and a baby, in swaddling clothes, with numberless ribbons and flowers, was placed in Fiordilisa's hands, and they sang

> "Dio vi dia buona fortuna,
> Tre di maschi e femmin' una!"

Raphael, in whom the dramatic faculty was strong, entered into all this with consummate felicity. When the revel was over, and the sweet night of autumn fell with its veiling mist upon Isola Rossa, Angelo Montalti said to his son-in-law,—"Raffaelle, you should have been born a Corsican."

But Fiordilisa—white, slender, fragrant, as the snowy hyacinth—is gone to her chamber, and the silence of sleep falls on Isola Rossa.

Previous to his bridal, Raphael had sent his faithful attendant Louis to England for money, telling him also to go to Guernsey and make the best excuses he could to Ralph Branscombe for his son's delay. Louis was despatched before anything was known in the village of his master's marrying design, and was directed to wait for orders in Paris. For the astute Raphael, without contemplating bigamy or anything of the kind, thought it advisable, at least for the present, to keep his marriage unknown. He did not send any such notice to the *Times* as this :—

" On the 19th of September, at Isola Rossa, Corsica, by the Abbate Malaspina, Raphael, only son of Ralph Branscombe, of Branscombe, to Fiordilisa, granddaughter of Angelo Montalti."

But he actually wrote out such a notice, to see how it looked, and laughed heartily as he thought of the sensation it would cause in society. What

would his father say, and his uncle, and Claudia, and Lady Æmilia, and a thousand others who knew him? And who did not know the Seraph —who, at least, that was anybody? Satan's rude remark to Ithuriel and Zephon was strictly applicable here.

So away went Louis on his master's affairs to England. And, having done his London business, he found his way to Guernsey, and told Devil Branscombe a long story of his own invention about his master's being taken ill in Sardinia, and being so anxious about the delay that he insisted on his valet's leaving him to explain it to his father. Which the old gentleman believing, only swore a little at Raphael's stupidity in going to such out of the way places, and told Louis to make haste back to his master, and intrusted him with the following characteristic note:—

"Dear Raphael,

"What the devil do you fall ill for, just now? Look alive and get better, and make haste home and marry that little girl. I shall

still wait here for you; it's pleasant in the cold weather; and I'll be hanged if you *can* spend anything, for claret and brandy and cigars cost nothing, and there isn't a pretty woman in the place. So I've put a couple of hundreds into this letter, for I'm better off just now than I have been since we cleared out young Ranthorp, who was so spoony on Claudia.

"Louis says I may expect you in a fortnight; so, mind, I expect you.

"R. B."

Louis had thought it best to make such an assertion, in order to keep the old gentleman quiet. Moreover, he knew nothing of his master's intentions, and judged, from being ordered to await him in Paris, that he meant soon to leave Corsica. So the valet, having faithfully fulfilled all his orders, and sent Raphael his letters and remittances, took holiday in Paris, waiting patiently.

And Raphael and Fiordilisa spent their honeymoon at Isola Rossa. The Seraph felt no *ennui*. He found his child-bride in all things per-

fect, exquisite. She worshipped him; he had been worshipped before, and by highborn English maidens; but the royal dignity and primæval simplicity of this daughter of romance delighted him far more. Born far beyond the weary world of fashion and flirtation, the Lily of Isola Rossa was a creature of poetry, poetic, even when she milked the goats, and made the white balls of cheese-curd, and came with bare round arms to serve her grandfather and husband at the table. Ay, a simple mythical Ionian poetry surrounded her, as she came sometimes through the breezy shadows of the orange-orchard with a basket of Hesperian fruit, or a red jar of clear water from the fountain upon her sunny head. Raphael would meet her at the portal, and kiss her white brow, and say—

"Now, Lisa, you have done enough work. Let us sail on the bay in the *Fantasia.*"

Raphael was popular in the little Corsican town. His remarkable personal beauty, the beauty of the son of Cinyras, was strange and attractive to the artistic perceptions of the towns-folk. He was liberal: for though poor in

London, Raphael found himself opulent in Isola Rossa, and liberality was a characteristic of the Branscombes. He made friends of everybody, and went out fishing with the fishermen, and astonished them by the skill with which his rifle brought down the cliff-pigeons, by the daring with which he swam far out to sea. He brought Fiordilisa down on moonlit evenings to join in the merry music outside Chilina's coffee-house. And when the old shoemaker of Calvi came over with his sixteen-stringed *cetera*, the same which Gregorovius heard in his wanderings, and improvised a wonderous *serenata* which told how—

> "A stranger to Isola Rossa
> Has come in a fortunate hour,
> And he sees the sweet maid of Montalti
> In the shade of the mulberry bower,
> And he woos the fair darling whose tresses
> All golden fall down in a shower
> On her shoulders of rosy white marble—
> Our Fiordilisa, the flower"—

then Raphael gladdened the old man's heart with a gift such as a chieftain of the *Odyssey* might have bestowed on Demodocus.

So Raphael was popular in Isola Rossa—and

old Angelo Montalti was happy—and sweet Fiordilisa was happy with that transcendant happiness which no pen can describe, but which the girl's heart feels when Eros has entered the warm white nest of her bosom, which heaves to the flutter of his wings. She drank perilous draughts of the vintage of love. There was no prophetic troubadour to sing to her—

> "Ay, quench thy deep thirst, ere the moment has flown
> But once in the lifetime of mortals 'tis known—
> But once—and old Care, an inflexible churl,
> Will darken the days of the prettiest girl."

And so the charmed hours flew by joyously, and all was tranquil on that delicious coast. It was an idyl: alas! I am not Theocritus.

Raphael's letters reached him safely; with them the thoughtful Louis had sent files of papers from London and Paris, and an ample supply of the novels of both cities. Some choice comestibles and liqueurs were also forwarded: for the Epicurean, much as he enjoyed the fish and fruit of Corsica, missed his old luxuries. And a few chaste gems for Fiordilisa, which an æsthetic crony of Raphael's had been requested

to choose for him. All these came to Ajaccio by the steamer from Marseille; and Raphael sailed in the *Fantasia* round the coast to fetch them. Wilful Fiordilisa longed to go, but he would not let her; and as they shoved off from the white sands the pretty creature wept at this first parting. The sagacious man of the world knew that to accustom her to partings would be wise.

'Tis myth, doubtless, that Ajaccio was founded by Ajax; but a greater hero than the son of Telamon was born there. Raphael, having received his letters and packages, and written to Louis a letter of three words—"Wait at Paris"—and visited the Casa Buonaparte, and passed one delightful evening on the Place du Diamant, looking on the glorious bay, again started for Isola Rossa. His sole companion was the husband of Chilina, the merry young landlady of the coffee-house. Marc Antonio, though a fisherman, had never voyaged as far as Ajaccio before, and thought that Paris could not be grander. The Corsicans are a stay-at-home people, except when they turn banditti.

And Fiordilisa and Chilina were waiting on the sands where the saucy *Fantasia*, as good a sea-boat as my old friend Harry Waring's *Secret*, came flashing round the red tongue of land on the left. As she ran in upon the sands, the eager girl sprang into the shallow water towards Raphael.

"My God!" he said to himself, "how the child loves me!"

They went home to dinner, Marc Antonio bringing up the packages, which Raphael had not opened. And when the pleasant simple meal was over, he said,

"Now, Lisa, you shall see what they have sent me."

She knelt upon the floor, opening package after package, while old Angelo and Raphael sipped their wine, and Marc Antonio, who had just brought up the last, stood with wondering eyes.

"Books!" she exclaimed. "Oh, what a number! Why, you cannot read all these, my Raphael. What are these square boxes? Oh! what hundreds of cigars! And this case—help

me to open it, Marc Antonio. Bottles, I declare. Why, have we no wine in Isola Rossa?" she asked, reproachfully.

"That is not wine," he said, and took out a bottle of Curaçao, "Now, Angelo, let us try this."

The old gentleman and Marc Antonio, drinkers by habit of a fiery wine, took to the liqueur naturally.

"It is good," said they both, with simultaneous sententiousness.

"Here is what will suit you better," said Raphael to Fiordilisa, sprinking her with the Frangipanni of Piesse.

"Oh, how sweet!"

And then she found a superb Cashmere shawl, which she threw gracefully over her shoulders; and then Raphael opened the casket of jewelry, and fastened round her beautiful throat a necklace of Orient pearls, almost as white as her skin.

"You will make her vain, Raffaelle," said old Montalti, gravely.

"He has done that already," she said; "he has loved me."

A brooch of emerald, the very colour of the Mediterranean; a brilliant set in dead gold, to sparkle on her white finger; a tiny watch, with heavy gold chain, that seemed too massive for her delicate neck: these were some of the beautiful gifts which Raphael lavished upon her in loving profusion. Marc Antonio went home and told his light-hearted little wife of these unprecedented splendours; and Isola Rossa that evening and all the next day had a most delightful theme for gossip and for marvel.

"The Englishman is a great prince," said Marc Antonio, with an air of profound belief.

"He is a hero, and our friend," said Chilina.

Pleasantly passed the flying hours for Raphael and his beautiful bride. But at last there arrived from Paris more despatches, of various kinds; and, when he had read them, he said to Fiordilisa,

"My Flower, I must leave you for a while."

"Oh, why, Raffaelle?"

"My father is ill at Paris, and wants much to see me. I cannot disobey his desire; you would not wish me to?"

"No, Raffaelle," she said, though her beautiful bright eyes were dimmed with tears. "You must go. Go soon and soon return."

"My darling, yes. And you must be very happy, for my sake."

"I will try," she replied. "I shall think of nothing but your return. Oh! how I shall watch for the *Fantasia* when Marc Antonio is gone to meet you at Ajaccio!"

So Raphael departed for Ajaccio, and caught the Marseille steamer, and made no pause upon his journey until he reached the Hotel Bristol at Paris. There he arrived late in the evening, and ordered supper, and sent a messenger with a note to Louis's quarters. That prince of valets made his appearance on the instant.

"I am going to England, Louis," he said. "Be ready to start to-morrow morning. I hope you have enjoyed your long holiday."

"Passably, Monsieur," was the reply. "I prefer being in attendance on Monsieur."

"We shall have to cross to Guernsey, Louis," said Raphael. "My father is still there."

"Would not Monsieur prefer to go to St.

Malo, and cross by the Jersey steamboat?"

"An excellent idea," said Raphael.

Before he went to bed he wrote a long and loving letter to Fiordilisa.

When it was finished and sealed, he said,

"Poor little rogue! I wonder if I shall ever see her again."

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER WOOER.

SHORTLY after the chemical lecture, the Rev. Walter Branscombe, having to return to Kingsleat, took his ward with him. Claudia of course accompanied him, and they settled down at the Rectory. This step was in contravention of Mr. Page's will; but the Rector and Mr. Drax were both of opinion that though Miss Page was directed to reside in the house at Idlechester, it was quite allowable for her occasionally to visit her relations. The suggestion was Claudia's; she recommended Anne's being as much as possible separated from Stephen Langton.

"I thought," said her uncle, indirectly referring to the plot which he had suggested to his

brother, "that you might like to see him yourself now and then, Claudia."

"I despise the boy,'" she said, viciously emphatic: whence the Rector, whose acumen was considerable, at once guessed that she had tried and failed.

Ah, that poor Panther! how she vexed herself, tortured herself, over the affair! To have offered herself—she, whom so many had vainly wooed—to a mere boy, and to be refused! She wept tears of rage in the solitude of her chamber. She vowed to be revenged on Stephen Langton. Whatever happened, he should not marry Anne Page, she was thoroughly determined. But she felt powerless to do him injury, and all her indignation recoiled upon herself, intensifying her punishment.

The Rectory was a very quiet household. The Rector did his duty in his old regular fashion; Winifred was as parochial as ever, and rather more ceremonial; Anne Page continued her studies with her governess; and Claudia conjugated *s'ennuyer*. She was prodigiously bored at Kingsleat. So long as she had a plot to carry out,

her life had some interest in it; but the plot had failed, and she was utterly without occupation. She could not drive tandem to Idlechester, as in the old days when she was left mistress of her father's establishment. She could only go out for decorous airings in the Rector's dignified equipage. She heard not a line from her father; she did not know when to expect Raphael, to come and wed the little heiress. And, indeed, she was a trifle afraid of the Seraph's arrival. He was almost preternaturally acute. She was in mortal dread of his discovering what had occurred between her and Stephen. Altogether, Claudia was anything but happy.

At length however something occurred to render the Panther a little less miserable. It was a fine December day, and the first flakes of a snow storm were descending. Claudia and Winifred sat together in the drawing-room, which looked out upon the steep deserted street of Kingsleat. The Panther was listlessly reading *La Pucelle de Belleville:* and the Saint was writing an interminable letter. At last the former spoke—

"Really, Winifred, the scratching of your pen is very irritating. Who in the world will read a letter of such prodigious length?"

"Oh! it will be read," answered Winifred.

"Now do tell me to whom you are writing at such unconscionable length. I won't say a word to Uncle Walter."

"My father is quite welcome to know all about it," she replied, indignantly. "As you are so inquisitive, I am writing to Father Remigius. He is my confessor, and when I am at Kingsleat I confess to him by letter."

The Panther burst into a silvery peal of laughter. It was quite a relief in the monotony of Kingsleat to have anything so ridiculous to laugh at.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, "what a number of sins you must have committed to fill all those sheets! I had no idea you were such a dreadfully wicked girl. Do let me read it, Winny, I am sure it will be more amusing than Paul de Kock, though he is great fun about *caleçons*."

"I am ashamed of you, Claudia," said the

Saint. "I would not let you see it for the world."

"Well, *is* there anything about *caleçons* in it?"

At this interesting point of the colloquy the door opened, and a servant announced Sir Arthur Willesden.

"Dear me, Sir Arthur," exclaimed the Panther, rising from her chair to meet him, "how glad I am to see you! You are welcome, in this desert. This is my cousin Winifred."

Sir Arthur was a fine young fellow, an awful swell, whose brains and morals had all run to whiskers and moustache. He was just Mr. Tennyson's "oiled and curled Assyrian bull." He had been very wild in his time, and had kept racehorses, and other beautiful animals, and had played écarté with Devil Branscombe, in that villa by the Thames where the Panther presided at the little suppers, and now he was in the hands of the Hebrews. He had come to Kingsleat entirely to see Claudia, on whom, to use his own elegant English, "he was—aw—spoons, rather," and had been vainly racking his brain all through the journey to invent some osten-

sible reason for coming. But she was so pleased to see an old acquaintance of the nobler sex that she asked him no questions.

"It's—aw—a dull place this, rather, I fancy," he said.

"Dismally dull," said Claudia, "suicidally dull. Winifred and I were just drawing lots who should drink laudanum first, when you interrupted us: weren't we, Winny?"

The Saint looked aghast.

"It would be shocking—aw—for two such—aw—divine creatures to commit suicide."

"Thank you, Sir Arthur," said the Panther. "Thank you for Winny too: nobody ever tells her she's divine except her father-confessor. Now you're here, you must stay to luncheon, Sir Arthur."

"Very happy—aw," said he. "No particular fun—aw—walking about in this infernal snow. Horrid bad wine at the—aw—Mitre, where I'm stopping."

"You shall have a good glass of wine here," said the Panther, "and then you shall tell me all the news of the town. Papa and Raphael

are both on the Continent, and I hear nothing from anybody."

"Is—aw—the Seraph all right?" he asked.

"Oh! he's quite seraphic, I expect," she answered. "But positively I don't know: I haven't heard from him for an age. I am in some hopes of his coming down here."

"Do you—aw—know his address? I owe him a monkey on the Leger."

"No," she said. "I dare say he'll be very glad of it, for he's always hard up."

"Aw—so am I—so's everybody, I think."

Winifred was rather perplexed by this offhand confabulation. She didn't know anything about the Leger, and hadn't the least idea what a monkey meant, and had no notion of any cherubim and seraphim except those in the *Te Deum*. I fear the fast young ladies of the day will think her ignorance exaggerated; but I can assure them it is true to the letter.

So Arthur Willesden stayed to luncheon, and to dinner, and astonished the Rector by flooring a couple of bottles of his finest port and being none the worse for it.

"Don't—aw—hunt at Melton for nothing," he remarked. "That's the place to learn to drink port."

The young baronet, though he rode sixteen stone, was a first-flight man in the shires, and never funked anything. He was a cool head, like Raphael, but his was the coolness of unconquerable stolidity. The Panther, to keep Anne Page in the background till the Seraph's arrival, had ordained that that young lady should dine at midday, and only appear at dessert: she had also put her back into short frocks and frilled trowsers, very much to her indignation. These alterations had been made on the removal to Kingsleat. Sweet Anne Page was very indignant about it; she thought herself quite a woman, being nearly seventeen, and engaged to be married; but Claudia was resolute, and her will, as we know, was pretty strong. So Anne, who was very fresh and *petite*, really looked about twelve in her infantile costume. When she entered the dining-room, shy and bashful, on the present occasion, Sir Arthur exclaimed,

"Aw—what a pretty little girl! Come here, my dear—aw—and give me a kiss." He was sitting near the door, and had actually pulled her on his knee and kissed her before she was aware of his intention. The poor child burst into tears.

"Don't be silly, Anne," said Claudia. "If you cry, you shall be sent to bed."

The Panther could not get at Stephen, but she could persecute his poor little sweetheart for his sake, and she did so mercilessly. If Stephen could have known it, she would have been delighted.

Sir Arthur Willesden stayed at the Mitre for a long time, much to the landlord's satisfaction. He carried on a continuous flirtation with Claudia. He was always lunching or dining at the Rectory; but, as the Rector kept ecclesiastic hours, he used to sup at the Mitre about midnight, and play billiards with whomsoever he encountered. He seldom lost. Raphael, the best amateur in England, had made him pay for his skill in the game; and now the baronet made sad havoc with the fast young fellows of

Kingsleat. But then they were delighted to lose money to a baronet—and so distinguished a baronet as Sir Arthur Willesden. Why, his name was in *Bell's Life* every week! Hadn't he won the Two Thousand with Isosceles, and run second for the Derby? And he actually condescended to win their provincial unaristocratic half-crowns at pool!

Meanwhile, Stephen was melancholy enough in his Idlechester lodgings. The Rector had courteously informed him that he considered Anne Page too young to be regarded as actually engaged to him; that, in fact, her education had been greatly neglected, and it was requisite that she should pass her time in the school-room; and that correspondence was not to be thought of. Stephen was of course obliged to acquiesce, and to have faith in his fairy princess. Such faith he had; and it consoled him pretty well; and he pursued his studies after his desultory fashion. It was desperately dull work.

He wanted a *confidante*. Humphrey Morfill was away; and besides, he had always shrunk from talking of his engagement to Humphrey.

Stephen had a chivalrous idea of women. Spenser, or Sir Philip Sidney, or the Earl of Surrey could not have put them on a loftier, purer pedestal. But Humphrey professed to be a man of the world; he had lax and cynical notions about women; he thought Anne Page a nice little girl enough, but much too young for any practical purposes. So, had Humphrey been in the cathedral city, Stephen would not have confided in him. And having no friend in his own family, Stephen was at length driven to tell his difficulties to Jack Winslow, and found in the vivacious barmaid a warm sympathizer. Even she, however, thought Anne very young to be anybody's sweetheart; but she was highly indignant at the Rector's interfering with an arrangement which Mr. Page had sanctioned.

One frosty forenoon Stephen, utterly weary of writing and reading, with which his uncontrollable thoughts perpetually interfered, strolled down to the Half Moon and solaced himself with a tankard of bitter ale and a cigar. He often met his grandfather there, who would

hail him with "Well, Steve!" but deemed him too much a boy for a sustained conversation. But this morning business was slack, and the bar-parlour empty, and the fair barmaid had leisure to gossip.

"I should write to the young lady," she said, "if I were you."

"Mr. Branscombe prohibits it," he replied.

"What right has he or anybody to come between you and Miss Page, when her poor dead father wished her to marry you? I *would* write, I tell you."

"But then," urged Stephen, "they probably examine the letters, and I should get her into trouble."

"Ah, that would be a pity. But I'll tell you what: I'm going over to Kingsleat to see my aunt one day next week. You write a letter, and I'll see if I can't get her to have it so that no one shall know."

This project delighted Stephen, who had the letter ready in good time. Wednesday was market day at Kingsleat, and was the day Miss Winslow chose for her visit. To her honour be

it said, that she allowed Stephen's affairs to take precedence of her own. Before visiting her aunt she took a walk through the crowded High Street, and was rewarded by seeing Anne and her governess returning homewards after a morning stroll. At this moment occurred to Jack what before she had not thought of—that, though she knew Anne by sight, Anne probably did not know her. This was perplexing. However, she decided to watch for an opportunity.

Kingsleat street is very steep. Very slowly did Anne and the governess walk up it, Jack Winslow following. By-and-by Miss Marsden looked into a bookseller's shop at some new print there exhibited: and Jack, with great promptitude, gave Anne a gentle touch, and showed her the letter. Instinct told her it came from Stephen: she took it, and her hand returned with it to her muff: and the kind-hearted messenger was gone before the governess turned from the window.

But alack, Kingsleat street is narrow as well as steep. By ill fortune, Claudia was descending on the other side, and her keen glance took

in the whole transaction. She crossed the street and addressed Miss Marsden.

"If you are not tired," she said, "will you go to old Mason's in East Street, and tell him Winifred can't come to see him to-day? I'll take charge of Anne."

The governess obeyed. Claudia had promised the Saint to call for her on this old bed-ridden client of hers, whom she supplied with broth and sermons. The other two walked slowly to the Rectory.

"Come up to my room, dear," said the Panther, in the hall, "I want to speak to you."

Anne followed her cousin, devoid of suspicion, though anxious in the possession of a letter which she eagerly desired to read.

"Sit down, child," said Claudia, "and take off your hat, I have something to say to you."

Anne did as she was bid, putting on a table that stood in the centre of the room her muff with the precious letter in it. Claudia also disrobed; and, having done so, took up the muff, which she held carelessly in her hand. Out fell the letter. Claudia picked it up.

"Why, Anne, my dear," she said to her cousin, who was in a state of consternation, "where did you get this? Who is it from?"

Anne was too thoroughly consternated to reply. Claudia broke the seal.

"Oh! Claudia, please don't read it!" cried Anne Page, eagerly; "it is only for *me* to read."

"Indeed," said the Panther, coolly. "You evidently know all about it. I see it is from Stephen Langton, with whom you have been forbidden to correspond."

Claudia read it. It was a good letter, loving yet trustful, eager yet patient, boyish yet manly. The Panther did not love Stephen; but what would she not have given for such a letter from him? Oh! the bitter pain of reading it! Oh! the thirst for revenge it caused in her jealous heart! Having read it, she folded it up and put it aside.

"Oh! Claudia, dear," cried Anne, with straining eyes, "you will let me have it now, won't you?"

"Certainly not," she replied. "I shall show it to your uncle, and shall then send it back to

the writer. It is a most improper letter."

Poor little Anne!

But, after all, was not Claudia most to be pitied? Every word of that loving letter had gone keen to her passionate heart, a barbed arrow, which would not be withdrawn. She was athirst for revenge.

"Sweet is revenge—especially to women"—

according to Byron's version of Juvenal.

"I am very much ashamed of you, Anne," she continued, after a pause, "a mere child like you. I could not have believed you were so sly and cunning as to carry on a clandestine correspondence."

Anne was silent. She was too prostrated to defend herself from such a charge, or to plead her father's authority for her engagement to Stephen. I think Claudia's feelings of revenge ought by this time to have been satisfied, but it is a passion insatiable. And, by evil hap, the Panther's eye caught among the ladylike trifles upon her centre table, among smelling-flasks and inkstands and gem-cases and *bonbonnières*,

a small jewelled riding-whip. She took it up.

"Come with me to your own room, Anne," she said. "I shall punish you, and you will go to bed."

Poor little Anne! Have you ever seen a wasp catch flies, reader? Sweet Anne Page was as powerless in the hands of the Panther as a fly in the clutches of a wasp. I don't think Claudia hurt her very much, but the humiliation was too cruel. What young lady, engaged to be married, would like to be whipt and sent to bed—even if she deserved it? And really our poor little heroine did not deserve it.

Claudia felt a good deal better on her return to her own room. She put the letter in an envelope and sent it back to Stephen. And she told what had occurred to her Uncle Walter and Winifred, who mildly approved. And when, at dessert that day, Sir Arthur missed "that pretty child," she said,

"Oh! she has been naughty to-day, Sir Arthur. She has been sent to bed."

It was an ineffable luxury to Claudia to humiliate, to persecute, to subject to mental and

physical pain, the girl for whom she had been rejected by Stephen Langton.

About the middle of the month Humphrey Morfill appeared on the scene from Cambridge. As the Rector and Dr. Winter were on good terms—and as Claudia had encouraged Humphrey's visits at Idlechester—it would have been difficult to prevent his having some intercourse with Anne Page. But the Panther had no such intention. She wisely considered that the great thing to be done was to efface from her cousin's mind the memory of Stephen. Humphrey, she thought, was not dangerous; and Humphrey could occupy Anne with a little harmless semi-flirtation till Raphael's much-desired advent. Accordingly, Anne's schoolroom imprisonment was relaxed, and the governess went away to spend her Christmas with her relations—that is, if governesses have relations; and Humphrey Morfill used to look in pretty often at the Rectory, though not quite so often as Sir Arthur.

Humphrey was ambitious and astute. He did not know that any engagement, authorised or

unauthorised, existed between Stephen and Anne, although it was clear to him that there was some sort of understanding. But, if he had known of their betrothal, he would have cared little, deeming all things fair in love and war. To this young man, eager above everthing to rise in the world, it had occurred that to marry Anne Page would be of immense service to him. He knew that gold has a power of floatation in the ocean of life akin to that of cork in the actual ocean. He had conversed much with the little Page at Idlechester; had done his best to open her mind; and had come to the conclusion that it would not break her heart if she did not marry Stephen. He resolved to carry his operations somewhat farther this Christmas vacation. And, as the Rector was always busy, and Winifred busier, and the governess absent, and the Panther greatly occupied with the Assyrian baronet, Humphrey had ample opportunities.

He was rather astonished the first morning, when the charming child entered in her short frock and frilled *caleçons*. But he did not exhibit his astonishment. Winifred and Claudia

and Sir Arthur were all present: he awaited his opportunity. It soon came. The Saint had parochial business which took her away. The Baronet wanted to skate—had heard of a pond half a mile out of town where the ice was capipital—would Claudia come? Wouldn't she? The Panther skated superbly; and by good hap, her maid, Margot, remembered where a pair of her skates might be found. Humphrey found himself left alone with sweet Anne Page—which was just what he wanted. They soon became confidential: and by-and-by Humphrey ventured to ask the reason of her infantile costume.

"Oh! I don't know," said Anne blushing. "Claudia wants to make me out a baby. I suppose it's because she's not very young herself."

"I have no doubt," said Humphrey, "she would very much like to be as young and as pretty as you are. But you need not care about it. You look a very charming little girl: only you know one fancies you are not too old to be taken on one's knee and kissed."

"Yes,—that horrid Sir Arthur Willesden positively did it one day at dessert. It's just

like Claudia, flirting with that man, all because he's a baronet."

"You don't seem very fond of your cousin, Miss Page?" said Morfill.

"Fond of her! If you knew—but oh! I couldn't tell you. I detest her."

"What, isn't she kind to you? No one could be cruel to *you*, surely."

"I don't know what you would call cruel," said the young lady. "I only know I should very much like to do to her what she did to me."

"What was it?" asked Humphrey in the kindest tone. "Tell me. Let me try to help you. No one ought to be cruel to *you*."

This sort of thing was successful at last: and Anne with much blushing hesitation, confided to Humphrey the fact that Claudia had actually whipped her; but she would not tell the cause, though he tried very hard to get at it. And he advised her never again to submit to any such indignity, but to ring the bell for the servants, if Claudia threatened her. Which she promised to do, though with a conviction that her courage would fail in the Panther's presence.

"By Jove!" said Morfill to himself, as he walked towards the Grammar School, "that is a verdant little party. I don't wonder at her knocking under to Miss Branscombe, though; she's enough to terrify anybody at all weak-minded. I'll tell you what, sir"—he was talking to himself, a habit of his—"I think I'll marry that child. She doesn't care for Stephen. He's too philosophic and poetic for her. She'll marry anybody who'll put her in long frocks and promise not to whip her. She's a passive, receptive, reflective sort of girl—takes her colouring from the last man that's with her. I'd rather have a girl with a character; but then her money's worth having. If I get it, I can make myself Lord Chancellor. By Jove, I'll marry her."

Humphrey Morfill adhered to the policy which he had marked out for himself. He devoted all his spare time to Anne Page. He won her confidence, and consoled her under her persecutions. Not that she was very much persecuted: Claudia was too fully occupied to trouble herself about her; but she was still

treated in the childish fashion, which she disliked. Humphrey was not far wrong in his judgment of her character. Stephen had magnetized her by his imaginative power; but she had just come to an age when the material excitements of the real world attracted her more than Stephen's poetic visions; and Humphrey stimulated her fancy with pictures of London life, balls and evening parties, the undreamt delights of the Opera and the theatres. He knew well what he was about. She "drank the milk of paradise"—that paradise of pretty women, society. She thought it would be delightful to escape from the nursery into the wondrous independence of married womanhood. Therefore she listened to Humphrey with much attention. Stephen, she thought, would never take her beyond Idlechester; he said nothing about those gaieties which Humphrey so eloquently described. I am sorry to say that, as a result of all this, Humphrey hit upon an ingenious arrangement whereby Anne and he could correspond upon his return to Cambridge.

Sweet Anne Page is not to be too severely

blamed. It was quite a boy-and-girl engagement between her and Stephen. What child of sixteen can be expected to know her own mind? And Stephen was away; she never saw him; she dared not receive a letter from him, for fear of her cousin Claudia. So she listened to Humphrey, who skilfully carried on the campaign, notwithstanding the keenness of Claudia's eyes. But Claudia was busy with her baronet.

In mid-January Humphrey left "his little wife"—as he already styled her, unrebuked, and Miss Marsden and *Mangnall's Questions* returned. And Sir Arthur Willesden went to town, leaving the Panther plenty of time to look after Anne. And, when the year had advanced a little further, Claudia one day received a letter in a hand she had not seen for an age. Thus it ran:—

"No. —, Clarges Street.

"DEAR CLAUDIA,—I have just returned to England, after a few days with the old gentleman, who has got the gout, and is delightfully fierce. I've a deal to do in town, and I want a

long talk to you about the position of affairs; so come up and let us converse. Start at once, that's a good girl.

"RAPHAEL."

Claudia always obeyed her brother; besides at this period she desired the diversion of a trip to London. So having received this letter at the breakfast hour, she at once announced that Raphael had returned, and that she was going to London to meet him, and that, no doubt, he would come back with her. Her uncle and cousin were delighted at the news, and Anne Page opened her ears.

"You will like your Cousin Raphael, Anne," said Claudia, condescendingly. "He likes pretty little girls."

Miss Page by no means admired Miss Branscombe's condescension.

The Panther was to start early the next morning; that night she and Winifred had a talk, part of which Anne Page overheard—for "little pitchers have long ears." This was the part:—

"Look after Anne, Winifred," said the Panther. "She's very sly. You remember when I caught her corresponding with Stephen?"

"You've not found her out in anything since, have you?"

"No," said Claudia, laughing. "I think this little instrument"—Anne could guess what she took up—"gave her a lesson in the subject that she hasn't forgotten yet. But perhaps she will begin playing her tricks again when my back is turned."

"Do you think Raphael will like her well enough to marry her?" asked Winifred.

"I don't see why not," said the Panther. "She's pretty, you must admit, though it's a very babyish prettiness. She'll improve by-and-by. Won't he keep her in order if he does marry her!"

"Perhaps she won't have him," suggested Winifred.

"Pshaw! she'll fall in love with him directly. The dear fellow is irresistible," she said, with a laugh. "Besides, if she was troublesome, I'd *make* her have him."

This was what Anne Page heard, an interested and terrified eavesdropper. Whence it happened that the mailcoach that took Miss Branscombe townwards, carried also a letter which branched off somewhere to Cambridge.

"DARLING HUMPHREY,—Cousin Claudia is gone to London, and Cousin Raphael is coming back with her, and *I am to marry him.* I hate him. Nobody can help me but you, Humphrey dear. I am *dreadfully* frightened, *dreadfully.*

"Your own little wife,

"ANNE PAGE."

Which epistle, in due course reaching St. John's College, took a certain undergraduate rather aback.

"What's to be done now, sir?" said Humphrey to Morfill in the solitude of his rooms. "I mustn't let this little party slip through my fingers. That Miss Branscombe's so determined, she'd compel the little fool to marry him, and Anne *is* such a little fool, she'd do it if they threatened to whip her for refusing, and, moreover—from all I hear—Mr. Raphael Branscombe is an ex-

perienced and successful practitioner in lovemaking. If he get's down there, you're done, Mr. Morfill, that's obvious. And, as you've got no money, I don't quite see what you're to do. Suppose we have a pipe together, and ruminate?"

The result of his rumination was that he started that very day for Idlechester, and rather astonished Stephen Langton by looking him up in Little College Green.

CHAPTER XII.

AIAIE.

RAPHAEL acted on his valet's advice, crossed from St Malo, and, spending as little time as possible in Jersey, took the mail-steamer for the sister island. And, as he walked up the steps of the pier at Guernsey, one of the first figures that caught his eye was his father's tall and portly form. Ralph Branscombe was enjoying his customary matutine stroll.

"Well, sir," said Raphael, walking up to him, "here I am at last, you see."

"Ah," responded his father, looking at his son from head to foot, as if to ascertain whether he was really the right person. "Well, I'm not sorry to see you. You don't look as if you'd been quite as ill as that rascal of yours pretended."

"He's a capital liar," said Raphael. "I don't think I have had even a headache since I had the pleasure of seeing you last."

"And may one inquire how you have been amusing yourself?" asked Devil Branscombe.

"I found some rather shy game," he replied. "Oh, I have been amused, I assure you. But, with your permission, I'll go and have some breakfast: I'm as hungry as a hunter."

Ralph Branscombe took his son to his rooms on the Esplanade. At first he lived at Marshall's Royal Yacht Club Hotel—in those days a pretentious gloomy place, where, with the usual fatuity of hotel-keepers, you were charged six shillings a bottle for wine that you could buy at Greenslade's, just opposite, at eighteen shillings a dozen. When he had decided to wait for his son in this happy island, beyond the reach of temptation and creditors, Ralph Branscombe took apartments. They were kept by an adipose widow with a couple of daughters, one of whom was so excessively handsome that the old gentleman was almost tempted to make love to her.

"And how do you get on in this tranquil island?" asked Raphael, after he had finished his breakfast, skilfully manufacturing a cigarette the while.

"It is slow—confoundedly slow. And the people are the queerest lot you ever saw. They have a tremendously exclusive aristocracy, Tuppers and Careys and Brocks and Dobrees, who won't look at the unhappy natives that don't belong to their set. Sixties, they call themselves; can't guess why."

"Got about sixty pounds a year each, perhaps," suggested Raphael. "But what *is* the place good for?"

"Well, there's scenery, you know, and sea-bathing. And the fish is capital, and so is the fruit. And claret and cognac and cigars are cheap. And there are some deuced pretty girls."

"These are recommendations," said Raphael, meditatively. "That was a pretty little party who brought in breakfast just now, but she'll be awfully fat at forty. How do you spend your evenings?"

"There's a club," he replied, "and two or

three of the members have satisfactory ideas about van-john and loo. I have been teaching them poker, lately."

"You don't dine out, I suppose?"

"The aborigines have not yet reached that stage of civilization. From what I hear, they invite people to tea."

"Frightful barbarism!" said Raphael. "Well, about this marrying scheme of yours—or the Rector's rather. That little Page is a dumpy child, isn't she, just out of the nursery."

"She's pretty," said his father; "Claudia thinks her charming. And four thousand a year is worth having."

"True. I'll go over and see her, and if she's not very bad style, I may marry her. Will Claudia marry that young Langton?"

"She agreed to the arrangement."

"I don't half like it. She's too good for that sort of fellow. However, I'll see all about it when I go down there."

"You'll stay here a day or two, I suppose," said Ralph. "It's a luxury to get some one to talk to."

"Is there nobody here that you know?"

"Most of the English people are getting out of the way of their creditors, and prefer Jersey, which is a free and easy sort of place. By the way, there's a man lately come that you may know, perhaps, young Hudson; he married a sister of Shottesbrooke's."

"By Jove," exclaimed Raphael, "what brings *him* here? Has he got his wife with him?"

"I believe he has. They are lodging up at a place called the New Ground. Do you know much of him?"

"Never spoke to him. I used to know Lady Æmilia, slightly."

That evening the Branscombes went down to the club, and very shortly Mr. Hudson was for the first time introduced. A very negative young fellow was Lady Æmilia's husband: but gold glorified him—deified him in the eyes of some people. He had a very great belief in himself, and always found plenty of toadies to encourage that belief. His inordinate vanity throve on the flattery of men who dined with him and borrowed money of him.

There was not any very lively play this evening—some old fogies had settled down to whist; Devil Branscombe, despairing of anything faster, had joined a party. Raphael was smoking patiently. At last Hudson exclaimed—

"Confound it, this is uncommonly slow. Is there a billiard-room anywhere?"

"Upon my life, I don't know," said Raphael, "I only came here to-day, and unless I see some improvement, I think I shall be off again to-morrow."

"Well, there *must* be a billiard-room," said Hudson. "Let's go round to the hotel and ascertain."

"I have no particular objection," said Raphael. "Are you a good player?"

"Not a very bad one, I think," he replied.

They went away together, and succeeded in finding a billiard-room down a steep flight of stone steps, in which St. Peter's Port abounds.

"We'll put a sovereign on the game," said Hudson, "if you like."

"Just as you please," answered Raphael, carelessly.

Hudson was an average player, and the Seraph had not touched a cue for some months. The former went ahead at first; but when he was thirty-seven to Raphael's thirteen, the Seraph made a break, and scored his fifty with perfect ease.

"I must give you odds," he remarked, mildly. This sort of thing didn't suit Hudson, who liked winning. So, after another game, he said—

"Suppose we go up to my rooms, and see if we can get some supper? I dare say my wife finds it rather slow."

"Very well," said the Seraph. "I have met Lady Æmilia before now. I used to know the old Earl."

"By Jove," observed Hudson, "she'll be delighted to meet an old acquaintance."

"Shouldn't wonder," soliloquized the Seraph.

The New Ground is a rectangular piece of turf, with gravel walks and some tolerable trees. The houses in its vicinity look as if they had been built for barracks. There are two or three occupied as lodging-houses; and in the largest

of these, a corner house, Mr. Hudson had taken apartments. From the windows there was a fine view over the sea, a mile distant. He and Raphael toiled up Smith-street and the Candie Road, and at length reached this elevated part of the suburbs. When they entered the drawing-room there was no one there, although lights were burning.

"Can't be gone to bed yet," said Hudson. "I'll go and fetch her."

"Don't disturb Lady Æmilia on my account," urged Raphael, with great indifference.

Mr. Hudson found his way to his wife's room. I regret to say the lady in question was "in a temper." She had not been many months married; she knew no one in the island; and she had been sitting in solitary weariness while her husband lost his sovereigns at billiards.

Bouverie Hudson was a good deal afraid of his wife. She was a thorough aristocrat; she was divinely beautiful; she was aristocratically indolent. He felt his insignificance in her presence. He was particularly proud of her, feeling that he had purchased one of the finest wo-

men in the market—a London Circassian of high price. But he was not particularly fond of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

"I have brought you a visitor, Æmilia," he said.

"Have you? How kind! Some vulgar young islander, I suppose, who wants some supper."

"Why, no. He may want some supper, but he's neither vulgar nor young. It's a gentleman you know slightly."

"Indeed! Well, I hope he is rather more amusing than you are. Tell me who he is, that I may judge whether he is worth the trouble of going down stairs again."

"It is Mr. Raphael Branscombe," said Bouverie.

She did not reply for a moment: the news had been sudden. Then she said, languidly,—

"Ah, he will be a change. Well, go down and entertain him. I will come presently." This she uttered in her most lazily imperious tone.

But, when her husband had left her, she locked the door, threw herself on her knees at the foot of the bed, and exclaimed—

"Oh, my God, why have you let this man

come here? What have I done to be so tortured? Oh, Raphael, Raphael, how I love you! and yet how I hate you! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

At last she arose and cooled her eyes and forehead, and threw a lace shawl over those white marble shoulders, and descended, looking like a queen; and very calm and steady was the voice in which she said—

"I am glad to see you again, Mr. Branscombe."

Supper was served, and over a good bottle of claret the Seraph and Hudson got on amicably enough.

"By the way," said Raphael, "isn't there an island called Sark one ought to see—a place with cliffs and caverns, and that sort of thing?"

"Oh, yes," said Lady Æmilia. "Suppose we go across to-morrow, if it's fine. Your father will join us, I dare say, Mr. Branscombe."

"To-morrow is rather too sharp," said Hudson. "We shall have to take provisions; there's nothing on the island but lobsters and rabbits."

"Very well; suppose we fix it for early the next morning," said Raphael. "My man, Louis,

is a capital caterer: he shall look up provisions. We'll inquire about a boat the first thing to-morrow."

Thus it was arranged, the Seraph and Hudson making an appointment to meet in the Market before breakfast; and then he started for the Esplanade, having parted from Æmilia with just one pressure of the hand.

"She's a wonderiully fine woman," thought Raphael to himself, as he smoked his cigar, passing beneath the Bailiff's garden wall; "and she cares about as much as I do for that prig of a Bouverie Hudson; but I must be careful. When those languid creatures get possessed with the devil of love, they are infernally troublesome; and there's Anne Page waiting for me, and poor little Fiordilisa."

I think at that moment the Seraph wished himself back at Isola Rossa again.

Louis was waiting for him. Devil Branscombe had not yet got away from his whist. The Seraph gave his valet some orders about the Sark expedition and dismissed him. Then he sat by the window, watching the moonlight upon

the sea and a flood of glistening silver, and reflected on his position. It was rather an amusing one.

By-and-by—he heard a tap at the door, and said, "Come in!"—entered the widow's prettiest daughter. She wanted to know what time he would like to breakfast.

"What's your name, child?" asked the Seraph.

"Ellen, sir."

"Ah. And pray, Miss Nelly, what time does my respected father generally breakfast?"

"About twelve, sir."

"Amazing old gentleman! And what time do you breakfast, Nelly?"

"At eight, sir."

"Good. Then you may bring me up a cup of coffee when you breakfast, and mind you make it strong, that's a good girl, and mind you bring it yourself, for I know you'll look so confoundedly fresh and pretty in the morning, you'll give me an appetite."

Ellen blushed. She was only nineteen, this little girl, though her fine development caused her to look several years older. There's a good

deal of flirtation in those islands, and she was not wholly ignorant of the art. And the Seraph's unique beauty of person fascinated her.

"Come here, Nelly," he said. She approached him, and he gave her what he called a fraternal kiss. "There, good night, little girl. Don't forget the coffee."

His father, who had let himself in with a latch-key, had been an amused spectator of this brief scene.

"You get on fast, Raphael," he remarked. "I fear you don't improve. Now, Ellen, be off to bed, or I'll tell your mamma of your naughtiness."

"The Hudsons and I are going to Sark the day after to-morrow," said the Seraph. "Will you come? How can we get a boat?"

"I can find you a clipping little cutter-yacht that will just do. I want to see Sark, but certainly shouldn't have made any great effort in that direction."

The following day the necessary arrangements were made: and the party was increased by two persons. These were a Mr. and Mrs. Wugk,

who, notwithstanding their queer name, were tolerably English. Wugk was a musician of Flemish descent, but born in England—a man of real genius as a composer, but unutterably lazy. Mrs. Wugk was a native of Guernsey, and one of the most charming of the island beauties. Ralph Branscombe had made Wugk's acquaintance at the club; and encountering him in the Market, enlisted him for the trip. He was a capital comrade, knowing the island well—and of course Lady Æmilia would be glad of a feminine companion.

So in due time they started, a pleasant party; and were landed in Sark, an island where landing is difficult—so difficult indeed that the Lords of the Admiralty are said to have come there on a tour of inspection, and to have gone away again without discovering where the harbour lay. The legend is not incredible; the tunnel by which you must approach the interior is quite invisible from the sea. I have always fancied that Circe's mystical island must have been very like Sark. But there were no painters in water-colours in Homer's days, whereas Sark has been

fortunate in an artist of the Channel, Mr. Paul Naftel, who has done upon canvas, for its cliffs and bays, what words can never do. Its caverns are wondrous. The Gouliots are famous for their population of zoophytes, many very rare; a perfect tapestry of these creatures, blood-red and yellow and olive-green, hides the rugged walls. But the Boutiques are transcendently fine. After scrambling through tortuous passages in half-darkness, it is glorious to come out upon a platform of rock beneath a Titanic portal open to the ocean. Surely the sons of Poseidon dwelt in those colossal halls, and looked forth upon the solitary waste of waters. Does that single white sail in the distance carry Odysseus and his heroic followers across the wine-coloured sea?

Our party stayed longer in the island than they at first intended. The wind changed, so that they could not easily get back to Guernsey—and they thoroughly enjoyed the beautiful loneliness of the place. It is a charming islet for lovers of laziness and scenery—of lobsters and rabbits. Louis exhibited his culinary skill,

and produced a marvellous variety of capital dishes from these materials only.

One day they started to see the Boutiques—all but Devil Branscombe, who had a touch of gout, and was smoking in bed. You go along a broad green terrace above the sea; the steep grassy slope beneath grows steeper as it descends to the brink of the cliff. This is on your right; presently you pass an opening on your left, which gives you a view right *through* the island. A little farther the path narrows and grows steeper; and then you have to descend and reascend in a way which Alpine clubmen would think a trifle, but which perplexes weak nerves. Hudson and Lady Æmilia were in advance; then Wugk and his wife; finally Raphael.

Suddenly there was a pause.

"I can't stand this," said Hudson. "I'm geting giddy. You'd better turn back, Æmilia."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind. I came out to see the caves, and I mean to see them. If you are giddy, go back and wait; Mr. Wugk will take care of me, and Mr. Branscombe of Mrs. Wugk."

Hudson acceded to this arrangement: but presently Mrs. Wugk's courage also failed, so Raphael brought her back and left her with Hudson.

"Lady Æmilia can't come to much harm now," said the Seraph, "as there will be two of us to take care of her."

The trio made their way through the caverns, standing at last upon a great ocean-threshold, with a gateway of giants above. It was a strangely beautiful way to approach that vast stretch of hyaline. A sail or two, far off—a sea-mew or two, nearer at hand—no other sign of life. The golden sunlight slept upon an immeasureable waste of blue.

To return was found rather harder work than entry had been. They were getting on very well, however, when Lady Æmilia felt faint, and was unable to proceed. After some little discussion, Raphael said—

"You see, she's afraid to go on. We must get a boat round. I'll go and see to it, if you'll stay with Lady Æmilia."

"No, no," she said. "Let Mr. Wugk go—

he knows the island better—he will be quicker."

And Wugk, seeing no objection to the arrangement, went.

"Well," thought Raphael, "she is determined to have a tête-à-tête with me. I deserve a scolding, no doubt, and I suppose she means to give me one."

He found her a confortable seat of the everlasting granite, and then lighted a cigarette.

"Why did you come here, Raphael?" she asked after a time.

"Not to see you, child. I had filial duties to perform. Having performed them, I mean to be off."

"I wish you were drowning in that water, Raphael. I should like to watch you sinking, and know that I could save you if I liked."

"And not do it, of course, amiable girl! Tell me now, what harm have I done you?"

"Did not you make me love you? Is that no harm, when you cared nothing for me, when I had to marry another man?"

"Well, you don't seem to have much love for me now; and as that is the case, and as you

have a husband with plenty of money, I again say I have done you no harm."

"What, there is no harm in remorse—no harm in lying beside a husband I detest—no harm in being a murderess! I *am* a murderess, if longing to do murder makes one. I want to be away from these tempting cliffs. I fear—Oh, I fear I shall push *him* over the brink some day."

"Really, Æmilia," he said, calmly, "you are very foolish. You are a perfect child to talk all this nonsense. Hudson seems a very good fellow—try and be comfortable with him."

"Yes, that's it—that's the way you talk. Oh, why couldn't I guess all this before I loved you? You win a woman's love—you win a woman who is your slave, who would die for you, who cares for no other creature in the wide world, and then you crush her and throw her away, caring no more for her than for the end of a cigar. Oh, I know *now*; but why can't girls know in time, before they begin to love men with the beauty of devils and with ten times more cruelty?"

Raphael was taken aback by this torrent of

words. He said nothing, but wished the boat would come round; and by good luck, so it did, within five minutes.

"If I kill him it is your doing," she whispered, as they advanced towards the boat.

"Tired of waiting?" shouted Hudson, cheerily. "Catch me going to see caverns again!"

Next day the wind shifted, and they got back to Guernsey, no murder having as yet been committed. And the day after, Raphael took the mail steamer to Southampton, resolving to leave Lady Æmilia to her own devices. And, as we have seen, Claudia heard of him from Clarges-street.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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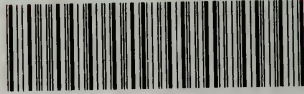
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