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THE
BRAMLEIGHS OF BISHOP'S FOLLY.

BY
CHARLES LEVER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE

BRAMLEIGHS OF BISHOP'S FOLLY.

CHAPTER I.

A PLEASANT DINNER.

PRUDENT people will knit their brows and wise people shake their heads at the bare mention of it, but I cannot help saying that there is a wonderful fascination in those little gatherings which bring a few old friends around the same board, who, forgetting all the little pinchings and straits of narrow fortune, give themselves up for once to enjoyment without a thought for the cost or a care for the morrow. I do not want this to pass for sound morality, nor for a discreet line of conduct; I only say that in the spirit that can subdue every sentiment that would jar on the happiness of the

hour there is a strength and vitality that shows this feeling is not born of mere conviviality, but of something deeper, and truer, and heartier.

“If we only had poor Jack here,” whispered Augustus Bramleigh to L’Estrange, as they drew around the Christmas fire, “I’d say this was the happiest hearth I know of.”

“And have you no tidings of him?” said L’Estrange, in the same low tone; for, although the girls were in eager talk together, he was afraid Julia might overhear what was said.

“None, except that he sailed from China on board an American clipper for Smyrna, and I am now waiting for news from the Consul there, to whom I have written, enclosing a letter for him.”

“And he is serving as a sailor?”

Bramleigh nodded.

“What is the mysterious conversation going on there?” said Julia. “How grave George looks, and Mr. Bramleigh seems overwhelmed with a secret of importance.”

“I guess it,” said Nelly, laughing. “Your brother is relating your interview with Sir Marcus

Cluff, and they are speculating on what is to come of it."

"Oh, that reminds me," cried L'Estrange, suddenly, "Sir Marcus's servant brought me a letter just as I was dressing for dinner. Here it is. What a splendid seal—supporters, too! Have I permission to read?"

"Read, read by all means," cried Julia.

"DEAR SIR,—If I could have sufficiently conquered my bronchitis as to have ventured out this morning, I would have made you my personal apologies for not having received you last night when you did me the honour to call, as well as opened to you by word of mouth what I am now reduced to convey by pen."

"He is just as prolix as when he talks," said Julia.

"It's a large hand, however, and easy to read. 'My old enemy the larynx—more in fault than even the bronchial tubes—is again in arms——'"

"Oh, do spare us his anatomical disquisition, George. Skip him down to where he proposes for me."

"But it is what he does not. You are not

mentioned in the whole of it. It is all about Church matters. It is an explanation of why every one has withdrawn his subscription and left the establishment, and why he alone is faithful and willing to contribute, even to the extent of five pounds additional——”

“ This is too heartless by half ; the man has treated me shamefully.”

“ I protest I think so too,” said Nelly, with a mock seriousness ; “ he relies upon your brother’s gown for his protection.”

“ Shall I have him out ? But, by the way, why do you call me Mr. Bramleigh ? Wasn’t I Augustus—or rather Gusty—when we met last ? ”

“ I don’t think so ; so well as I remember, I treated you with great respect, dashed with a little bit of awe. You and your elder sister were always ‘ personages ’ to me.”

“ I cannot understand that. I can easily imagine Temple inspiring that deference you speak of.”

“ You were the true Prince, however, and I had all Falstaff’s reverence for the true Prince.”

“ And yet you see after all I am like to turn out only a Pretender.”

“ By the way, the pretender is here ; I mean—if

it be not a bull to say it—the real pretender, Count Pracontal.”

“Count Pracontal de Bramleigh, George,” said Julia, correcting him. “It is the drollest mode of assuming a family name I ever heard of.”

“What is he like?” asked Ellen.

“Like a very well-bred Frenchman of the worst school of French manners: he has none of that graceful ease and that placid courtesy of the past period, but he has abundance of the volatile readiness and showy smartness of the present day. They are a wonderful race, however, and their smattering is better than other men’s learning.”

“I want to see him,” said Augustus.

“Well,” broke in L’Estrange, “Lady Augusta writes to me to say that he wants to see *you*.”

“What does Lady Augusta know of him?”

“Heaven knows,” cried Julia; “but they are always together; their rides over the Campagna furnish just now the chief scandal of Rome. George, you may see, looks very serious and rebukeful about it; but, if the truth were told, there’s a little jealousy at the root of his morality.”

“I declare, Julia, this is too bad.”

“ Too true, also, my dear George. Will you deny that you used to ride out with her nearly every evening in the summer, rides that began at sunset and ended—I was always asleep when you came home, and so I never knew when they ended.”

“ Was she very agreeable ? ” asked Nelly, with the faintest tinge of sharpness in her manner.

“ The most—what shall I call it ?—inconsequent woman I ever met, mixing up things the most dissimilar together, and never dwelling for an instant on anything.”

“ How base men are,” said Julia, with mock reproach in her voice. “ This is the way he talks of a woman he absolutely persecuted with attentions the whole season. Would you believe it, Nelly, we cut up our nice little garden to make a school to train her horse in ? ”

Whether it was that some secret intelligence was rapidly conveyed from Julia as she spoke to Nelly, or that the latter of herself caught up the quizzing spirit of her attack, but the two girls burst out laughing, and George blushed deeply, in shame and irritation.

“ First of all,” said he, stammering with confusion, “ she had a little Arab, the wickedest animal

I ever saw. It wasn't safe to approach him; he struck out with his forelegs——”

“Come, Nelly,” said Julia, rising, “we'll go into the drawing-room, and leave George to explain how he tamed the Arab and captivated the Arab's mistress, for your brother might like to learn the secret. You'll join us, gentlemen, when you wish for coffee.”

“That was scarcely fair, Julia dear,” said Nelly, when they were alone. “Your banter is sometimes too sharp for him.”

“I can't help it, dearest—it is part of my nature. When I was a child, they could not take me to a wild-beast show, for I would insist on poking straws at the tiger—not that poor dear George has much ‘tiger’ in him. But do you know, Nelly,” said she, in a graver tone, “that when people are very poor, when their daily lives are beset by the small accidents of narrow fortune, there is a great philosophy in a little banter? You brush away many an annoyance by seeming to feel it matter for drollery, which, if taken seriously, might have made you fretful and peevish.”

“I never suspected there was method in your madness, Ju,” said Nelly, smiling.

“Nor was there, dearest; the explanation was almost an after-thought. But come now and tell me about yourselves.”

“There is really little to tell. Augustus never speaks to me now of business matters. I think I can see that he is not fully satisfied with himself; but, rather than show weakness or hesitation, he is determined to go on as he began.”

“And you are really going to this dreary place?”

“He says so.”

“Would any good come, I wonder, of bringing your brother and Pracontal together? They are both men of high and generous feelings. Each seems to think that there ought to be some other settlement than a recourse to lawyers. Do you think he would refuse to meet Pracontal?”

“That is a mere chance. There are days he would not listen to such a proposal, and there are times he would accept it heartily; but the suggestion must not come from me. With all his love for me, he rather thinks that I secretly disapprove of what he has done, and would reverse it if I knew how.”

“What if I were to hint at it? He already said he wished to see him. This might be mere curiosity,

however. What if I were to say, 'Why not meet Pracontal? Why not see what manner of man he is? There is nothing more true than the saying that half the dislikes people conceive against each other would give way if they would condescend to become acquainted.'"

"As I have just said, it is a mere chance whether he would consent, and then——"

"Oh, I know! It would be also a chance what might come of it."

Just as she said this, the young men entered the room, with smiling faces, and apparently in high good-humour.

"Do you know the plan we've just struck out?" cried Bramleigh. "George is to come and live at Cattaro. I'm to make him consular chaplain."

"But is there such an appointment?" asked Julia, eagerly.

"Heaven knows; but if there is not, there ought to be."

"And the salary, Mr. Bramleigh. Who pays it? What is it?"

"There again I am at fault; but her Majesty could never intend we should live like heathens,"

said Augustus, "and we shall arrange it somehow."

"Oh, if it were not for 'somehow,'" said Julia, "we poor people would be worse off in life than we are; but there are so many what the watchmakers call escapements in existence, the machinery manages to survive scores of accidents."

"At all events we shall be all together," said Augustus, "and we shall show a stouter front to fortune than if we were to confront her singly."

"I think it a delightful plan," said Julia. "What says Nelly?"

"I think," said Nelly, gravely, "that it is more than kind in you to follow us into our banishment."

"Then let us set off at once," said Augustus, "for I own to you I wish to be out of men's sight, out of ear-shot of their comments, while this suit is going on. It is the publicity that I dread far more than even the issue. Once that we reach this wild barbarism we are going to, you will see I will bear myself with better spirits and better temper."

"And will you not see M. Pracontal before you go?" asked Julia.

“Not if I can avoid it; unless, indeed, you all think I ought.”

Julia looked at Nelly, and then at her brother. She looked as if she wanted them to say something—anything; but neither spoke, and then, with a courage that never failed her, she said—

“Of course we think that a meeting between two people who have no personal reasons for dislike, but have a great question to be decided in favour of one of them, cannot but be useful. If it will not lead to a friendship, it may at least disarm a prejudice.”

“I wish I had you for my counsel, Julia,” said Bramleigh, smiling. “Is it yet too late to send you a brief?”

“Perhaps I am engaged for the other side.”

“At all events,” said he, more seriously, “if it be a blunder to meet the man, it cannot much matter. The question between us must be decided elsewhere, and we need not add the prejudices of ignorance to the rancour of self-interest. I’ll see him.”

“That’s right; I’m sure that’s right,” said L’Estrange. “I’ll despatch a note to Lady Augusta, who is eager for your answer.”

CHAPTER II.

A STROLL AND A GOSSIP.

As well to have a long talk together as to enjoy the glorious beauty and freshness of the Campagna, the two young men set out the next morning for a walk to Rome. It was one of those still cold days of winter, with a deep blue sky above, and an atmosphere clear as crystal as they started.

There was not in the fortunes of either of them much to cheer the spirits or encourage hope, and yet they felt—they knew not why—a sense of buoyancy and light-heartedness they had not known for many a day back.

“How is it, George,” asked Augustus, “can you explain it, that when the world went well with me, when I could stroll out into my own woods, and walk for hours over my own broad acres, I never felt so cheery as I do to-day?”

“It was the same spirit made you yesterday declare you enjoyed our humble dinner with a heartier zest than those grand banquets that were daily served up at Castello.”

“Just so. But that does not solve the riddle for me. I want to know the why of all this. It is no high sustaining consciousness of doing the right thing; no grand sense of self-approval: for, in the first place, I never had a doubt that we were not the rightful owners of the estate, nor am I now supported by the idea that I am certainly and indubitably on the right road, because nearly all my friends think the very reverse.” L’Estrange made no answer. Bramleigh went on: “You yourself are so minded, George. Out with it, man; say at once you think me wrong.”

“I have too little faith in my own judgment to go that far.”

“Well, will you say that you would have acted differently yourself? Come, I think you can answer that question.”

“No, I cannot.”

“You can’t say whether you would have done as I have, or something quite different?”

“ No ; there is only one thing I know I should have done—I'd have consulted Julia.”

If Bramleigh laughed at this avowal the other joined him, and for a while nothing was said on either side. At last Bramleigh said, “ I, too, have a confession to make. I thought that if I were to resist this man's claim by the power of superior wealth I should be acting as dishonourably as though I had fought an unarmed man with a revolver. I told Sedley my scruples, but though he treated them with little deference, there they were, and I could not dismiss them. It was this weakness—Sedley would give it no other name than weakness—of mine that made him incline to settle the matter by a compromise. For a while I yielded to the notion ; I'm afraid that I yielded even too far—at least Cutbill opines that one of my letters actually gives a distinct consent, but *I* don't think so. I know that my meaning was to say to my lawyer, ‘ This man's claim may push me to publicity and much unpleasantness, without any benefit to him. He may make me a nine-days' wonder in the newspapers and a town talk, and never reap the least advantage from it. To avoid such exposure I would pay, and pay handsomely ; but

if you really opined that I was merely stifling a just demand, such a compromise would only bring me lasting misery.' Perhaps I could not exactly define what I meant; perhaps I expressed myself imperfectly and ill; but Sedley always replied to me by something that seemed to refute my reasonings. At the same time Lord Culduff and Temple treated my scruples with an open contempt. I grew irritable, and possibly less reasonable, and I wrote long letters to Sedley to justify myself and sustain the position I had taken. Of these, indeed of none of my letters, have I copies; and I am told now that they contain admissions which will show that I yielded to the plan of a compromise. Knowing, however, what I felt—what I still feel on the matter—I will not believe this. At all events the world shall see now that I leave the law to take its course. If Pracontal can establish his right, let him take what he owns. I only bargain for one thing, which is, not to be expelled ignominiously from the house in which I was never the rightful owner. It is the act of abdication, George—the moment of dethronement, that I could not face. It is an avowal of great weakness, I know; but I struggle against it in vain. Every morning when I

awoke the same thought met me, am I a mere pretender here? and by some horrible perversity, which I cannot explain, the place, the house, the grounds, the gardens, the shrubberies, the deer-park, grew inexpressibly more dear to me than ever I had felt them. There was not an old ash on the lawn that I did not love; the shady walks through which I had often passed without a thought upon them grew now to have a hold upon and attraction for me that I cannot describe. What shall I be without these dear familiar spots; what will become of me when I shall no longer have these deep glades, these silent woods, to wander in? This became at last so strong upon me that I felt there was but one course to take—I must leave the place at once, and never return to it till I knew that it was my own beyond dispute. I could do that now, while the issue was still undetermined, which would have broken my heart if driven to do on compulsion. Of course this was a matter between me and my own conscience; I had not courage to speak of it to a lawyer, nor did I. Sedley, however, was vexed that I should take any steps without consulting him. He wrote me a letter—almost an angry letter—and he threatened—for it

really amounted to a threat, to say that, to a client so decidedly bent on guiding his own case, he certainly felt his services could scarcely be advantageously contributed. I rejoined, perhaps not without irritation; and I am now expecting by each post either his submission to my views, or to hear that he has thrown up the direction of my cause."

"And he was your father's adviser for years!" said L'Estrange, with a tone almost despondent.

"But for which he never would have assumed the tone of dictation he has used towards me. Lord Culduff, I remember, said, 'The first duty of a man on coming to his property is to change his agent, and his next to get rid of the old servants.' I do not like the theory, George; but from a certain point of view it is not without reason."

"I suspect that neither you nor I want to look at life from that point of view," said L'Estrange, with some emotion.

"Not till we can't help it, I'm sure; but these crafty men of the world say that we all arrive at their *modus operandi* in the end; that however generously, however trustfully and romantically, we start on the morning of life, before evening we come to see that in

this game we call the world it is only the clever player that escapes ruin."

"I don't—that is, I won't believe that."

"Quite right, George. The theory would tell terribly against fellows like us; for let us do our very best we must be bunglers at the game. What a clever pair of hacks are those yonder! that grey the lady is on has very showy action."

"Look at the liver chestnut the groom is riding,—there's the horse for my money,—so long and so low,—a regular turnspit, and equal to any weight. I declare, that's Lady Augusta, and that's Pracontal with her. See how the Frenchman charges the ox-fences; he'll come grief if he rides at speed against timber."

The party on horseback passed in a little dip of the ground near them at a smart canter, and soon were out of sight again.

"What a strange intimacy for her, is it not?"

"Julia says, the dash of indiscretion in it was the temptation she couldn't resist, and I suspect she's right. She said to me herself one day, 'I love skating, but I never care for it except the ice is so thin that I hear it giving way on every side as I go.'"

“She gave you her whole character in that one trait. The pleasure that wasn't linked to a peril had no charm for her. She ought, however, to see that the world will regard this intimacy as a breach of decency.”

“So she does ; she's dying to be attacked about it ; at least, so Julia says.”

“The man too, if he be an artful fellow, will learn many family details about us, that may disserve us. If it went no further than to know in what spirit we treat his claim,—whether we attach importance to his pretensions or not,—these are all things he need not, should not be informed upon.”

“Cutbill, who somehow hears everything, told us t'other morning, that Pracontal is ‘posted up,’—that was his phrase—as to the temper and nature of every member of your family, and knows to a nicety how to deal with each.”

“Then I don't see why we should meet.”

“Julia says it is precisely for that very reason ; people are always disparaged by these biographical notices, their caprices are assumed to be tastes, and their mere humours are taken for traits of character ; and she declares that it will be a good service to the

truth that bringing you together. Don't take my version, however, of her reasons, but ask her to give them to you herself."

"Isn't that the wall of the City? I declare we are quite close to Rome already. Now then, first to leave my name for Lady Augusta—not sorry to know I shall not find her at home, for I never understood her, George. I never do understand certain people, whether their levity means that it is the real nature, or simply a humour put on to get rid of you; as though to say, rather than let you impose any solemnity upon me, or talk seriously, I'll have a game at shuttlecock!"

"She always puzzled me," said L'Estrange, "but that wasn't hard to do."

"I suspect, George, that neither you nor I know much about women."

"For *my* part, I know nothing at all about them."

"And I not much."

After this frank confession on either side, they walked along, each seemingly deep in his own thought, and said little till they reached the City. Leaving them, then, on their way to Lady Augusta's

house, where Bramleigh desired to drop his card, we turn for a moment to the little villa at Albano, in front of which a smart groom was leading a lady's horse, while in the distance a solitary rider was slowly walking his horse, and frequently turning his looks towards the gate of the villa.

The explanation of all this was, that Lady Augusta had taken the opportunity of being near the L'Estranges to pay a visit to the Bramleights, leaving Pracontal to wait for her till she came out.

"This visit is for you, Nelly," said Julia, as she read the card; "and I'll make my escape."

She had but time to get out of the room when Lady Augusta entered.

"My dear child," said she, rushing into Nelly's arms, and kissing her with rapturous affection. "My dear child, what a happiness to see you again, and how well you are looking; you're handsomer, I declare, than Marion. Yes, darling,—don't blush; it's perfectly true. Where's Augustus? has he come with you?"

"He has gone in to Rome to see you," said Nelly, whose face was still crimson, and who felt

flurried and agitated by the flighty impetuosity of the other.

“ I hope it was to say that you are both coming to me? Yes, dearest, I'll take no excuse. It would be a town-talk if you stopped anywhere else; and I have such a nice little villa—a mere baby-house; but quite large enough to hold you; and my brother-in-law will take Augustus about, and show him Rome, and I shall have you all to myself. We have much to talk of, haven't we?”

Nelly murmured an assent, and the other continued:

“ It's all so sudden, and so dreadful,—one doesn't realize it; at least *I* don't. And it usually takes me an hour or two of a morning to convince me that we are all ruined; and then I set to work thinking how I'm to live on—I forget exactly what—how much is it, darling? Shall I be able to keep my dear horses? I'd rather die than part with Ben Azir; one of the Sultan's own breeding; an Arab of blue blood, Nelly,—think of that! I've refused fabulous sums for him; but he is such a love, and follows me everywhere, and rears up when I scold him,—and all to be swept away as if it

was a dream. What do you mean to do, dearest? Marry, of course. I know that,—but in the meanwhile?”

“ We are going to Cattaro. Augustus has been named consul there.”

“ Darling child, you don't know what you are saying. Isn't a consul a horrid creature that lives in a seaport, and worries merchant seamen, and imprisons people who have no passports ?”

“ I declare I haven't a notion of his duties,” said Nelly, laughing.

“ Oh, I know them perfectly. Papa always wrote to the consul about getting heavy baggage through the custom-house ; and when our servants quarrelled with the porters, or the hotel people, it was the consul sent some of them to jail ; but you are aware, darling, he isn't a creature one knows. They are simply impossible, dear, impossible.” And as she spoke she lay back in her chair, and fanned herself as though actually overcome by the violence of her emotion.

“ I must hope Augustus will not be impossible ;” and Nelly said this with a dry mixture of humour and vexation.

“ He can't help it, dearest. It will be from no fault of his own. Let a man be what he may, once he derogates there's an end of him. It sounds beautifully, I know, to say that he will remain gentleman and man of station through all the accidents of life ; so he might, darling, so long as he did nothing—absolutely nothing. The moment, however, he touches an “ *emploi* ” it's all over ; from that hour he becomes the custom's creature, or the consul, or the factor, or whatever it be irrevocably. Do you know that is the only way to keep men of family out of small official life ? We should see them keeping lighthouses if it were not for the obloquy.”

“ And it would be still better than dependence.”

“ Yes, dearest, in a novel—in a three-volume thing from Mudie—so it would ; but real life is not half so accommodating. I'll talk to Gusty about this myself. And now, do tell me about yourself. Is there no engagement ? no fatal attachment that all this change of fortune has blighted ? Who is he, dearest ? tell me all ! You don't know what a wonderful creature I am for expedients. There never

was the like of me for resources. I could always pull any one through a difficulty but myself."

"I am sorry I have no web to offer you for disentanglement."

"So then he has behaved well; he has not deserted you in your change of fortune?"

"There is really no one in the case," said Nelly, laughing. "No one to be either faithful or unworthy."

"Worse again, dearest. There is nothing so good at your age as an unhappy attachment. A girl without a grievance always mopes; and," added she, with a marked acuteness of look, "moping ages one quicker than downright grief. The eyes get a heavy expression, and the mouth drags at the corners, and the chin—isn't it funny, now, such a stolid feature as the chin should take on to worry us?—but the chin widens and becomes square, like those Egyptian horrors in the Museum."

"I must look to that," said Nelly, gravely. "I'd be shocked to find my chin betraying me."

"And men are such wretches. There is no amount of fretting they don't exact from us; but if we show any signs of it afterwards,—any hard lines

about the eyes, or any patchiness of colour in the cheek,—they cry out, ‘Isn’t she gone off?’ That’s their phrase, ‘Isn’t she gone off?’”

“How well you understand; how well you read them!”

“I should think I do; but after all, dearest, they have very few devices; if it wasn’t that they can get away, run off to the clubs and their other haunts, they would have no chance with us. See how they fare in country-houses, for instance. How many escape there! What a nice stuff your dress is made of!”

“It was very cheap.”

“No matter; it’s English. That’s the great thing here. Any one can buy a ‘gros.’ What one really wants is a nameless texture and a neutral tint. You must positively walk with me on the Pincian in that dress. Roman man remark everything. You’ll not be ten minutes on the promenade till every one will know whether you wear two buttons on your gloves or three.”

“How odious!”

“How delightful! Why, my dear child, for whom do we dress? Not for each other; no more

than the artists of a theatre act or sing for the rest of the company. Our audience is before us ; not always a very enlightened or cultivated one, but always critical. There, do look at that stupid groom ; see how he suffers my horse to lag behind : the certain way to have him kicked by the other ; and I should die, I mean really die if anything happened to Ben Azir. By the way how well our parson rides. I declare I like him better in the saddle than in the pulpit. They rave here about the way he jumps the ox-fences. You must say ' tant des choses ' for me, to him and his sister, whom I fear I have treated shamefully. I was to have had her to dinner one day, and I forgot all about it ; but she didn't mind, and wrote me the prettiest note in the world. But I always say, it is so easy for people of small means to be good-tempered. They have no jealousies about going here or there ; no heart-burnings that such a one's lace is Brussels point, and much finer than their own. Don't you agree with me ? There, I knew it would come to that. He's got the snaffle out of Ben Azir's mouth, and he's sure to break away."

" That gentleman apparently has come to the

rescue. See, he has dismounted to set all to rights."

"How polite of him. Do you know him, dear?"

"No. I may have seen him before. I'm so terribly short-sighted, and this glass does not suit me; but I must be going. I suppose I had better thank that strange man, hadn't I? Oh, of course, dearest, you would be too bashful; but I'm not. My old governess, Madame de Forgeon, used to say that English people never knew how to be bashful; they only looked culpable. And I protest she was right."

"The gentleman is evidently waiting for your gratitude; he is standing there still."

"What an observant puss it is," said Lady Augusta, kissing her. "Tell Gusty to come and see me. Settle some day to come in and dine, and bring the parson: he's a great favourite of mine. Where have I dropped my gauntlet? Oh, here it is. Pretty whip, isn't it? A present, a sort of a love-gift from an old Russian prince, who wanted me to marry him: and I said I was afraid; that I heard Russians knouted their wives. And so he assured me I should have the only whip he

ever used, and sent me this. It was neat, or rather, as Dumas says, 'La plaisanterie n'était pas mal pour un Cossaque.' Good-by, dearest, good-by."

So actually exhausted was poor Nelly by the rattling impetuosity of Lady Augusta's manner, her sudden transitions, and abrupt questionings, that, when Julia entered the room, and saw her lying back in a chair, wearied looking and pale, she asked—

"Are you ill, dear?"

"No; but I am actually tired. Lady Augusta has been an hour here, and she has talked till my head turned."

"I feel for you sincerely. She gave me one of the worst headaches I ever had, and then made my illness a reason for staying all the evening here to bathe my temples."

"That was good-natured, however."

"So I'd have thought, too, but that she made George always attend her with the ice and the eau-de-cologne, and thus maintained a little ambulant flirtation with him, that, sick as I was, almost drove me mad."

"She means nothing, I am certain, by all these

levities, or, rather, she does not care what they mean ; but here come our brothers, and I am eager for news, if they have any."

"Where's George?" asked Julia, as Augustus entered alone.

"Sir Marcus Something caught him at the gate, and asked to have five minutes with him."

"That means putting off dinner for an hour at least," said she, half pettishly. "I must go and warn the cook."

CHAPTER III.

A PROPOSAL IN FORM.

WHEN Sir Marcus Cluff was introduced into L'Estrange's study, his first care was to divest himself of his various "wraps," a process not very unlike that of the *Hamlet* gravedigger. At length, he arrived at a suit of entire chamois-leather, in which he stood forth like an enormous frog, and sorely pushed the parson's gravity in consequence.

"This is what Hazeldean calls the 'chest-sufferer's true cuticle.' Nothing like leather, my dear sir, in pulmonic affections. If I'd have known it earlier in life, I'd have saved half of my left lung, which is now hopelessly hepatized."

L'Estrange looked compassionate, though not very well knowing what it was he had pity for.

"Not," added the invalid hastily, "that even this constitutes a grave constitutional defect. Davies

says, in his second volume, that among the robust men of England you would not find one in twenty without some lungular derangement. He percussed me all over, and was some time before he found out the blot." The air of triumph in which this was said showed L'Estrange that he too might afford to look joyful.

"So that, with this reservation, sir, I do consider I have a right to regard myself, as Borcas pronounced me, sound as a roach."

"I sincerely hope so."

"You see, sir, I mean to be frank with you. I descend to no concealments."

It was not very easy for L'Estrange to understand this speech, or divine what especial necessity there was for his own satisfaction as to the condition of Sir Marcus Cluff's viscera; he, however, assented in general terms to the high esteem he felt for candour and openness.

"No, my dear Mr. L'Estrange," resumed he, "without this firm conviction—a sentiment based on faith and the stethoscope together—you had not seen me here this day."

"The weather is certainly trying," said L'Estrange.

“ I do not allude to the weather, sir ; the weather is, for the season, remarkably fine weather ; there was a mean temperature of 68° Fahrenheit during the last twenty-four hours. I spoke of my pulmonary condition, because I am aware people are in the habit of calling me consumptive. It is the indiscriminating way ignorance treats a very complex question ; and when I assured you that without an honest conviction that organic mischief had not proceeded far, I really meant what I said when I told you you would not have seen me here this day.”

Again was the parson mystified, but he only bowed.

“ Ah, sir,” sighed the other, “ why will not people be always candid and sincere ? And when shall we arrive at the practice of what will compel—actually compel sincerity ? I tell you, for instance, I have an estate worth so much—house property here, and shares in this or that company—but there are mortgages, I don’t say how much, against me ; I have no need to say it. You drive down to the Registration Office and you learn to a shilling to what extent I am liable. Why not have the same system for physical condition, sir ? Why can’t you

call on the College of Physicians, or whatever the body be, and say, 'How is Sir Marcus Cluff? I'd like to know about that right auricle of his heart. What about his pancreas?' Don't you perceive the inestimable advantage of what I advise?"

"I protest, sir, I scarcely follow you. I do not exactly see how I have the right, or to what extent I am interested, to make this inquiry."

"You amaze—you actually amaze me!" and Sir Marcus sat for some seconds contemplating the object of his astonishment. "I come here, sir, to make an offer for your sister's hand——"

"Pardon my interrupting, but I learn this intention only now."

"Then you didn't read my note. You didn't read the 'turn over.'"

"I'm afraid not. I only saw what referred to the church."

"Then, sir, you missed the most important; had you taken the trouble to turn the page, you would have seen that I ask your permission to pay my formal attentions to Miss L'Estrange. It was with intention I first discussed and dismissed a matter of business; I then proceeded to a question

of sentiment, premising that I held myself bound to satisfy you regarding my property, and my pulmonary condition. Mind, body, and estate, sir, are not coupled together ignorantly, nor inharmoniously; as *you* know far better than me,—mind, body, and estate," repeated he, slowly. "I am here to satisfy you on each of them."

"Don't you think, Sir Marcus, that there are questions which should possibly precede these?"

"Do you mean Miss L'Estrange's sentiments, sir?" George bowed, and Sir Marcus continued: "I am vain enough to suppose I can make out a good case for myself. I look more, but I'm only forty-eight, forty-eight on the twelfth September. I have twenty-seven thousand pounds in bank stock—stock, mind you,—and three thousand four hundred a year in land, Norfolk property. I have a share—we'll not speak of it now—in a city house; and what's better than all, sir, not sixpence of debt in the world. I am aware your sister can have no fortune, but I can afford myself, what the French call a caprice, though this ain't a caprice, for I have thought well over the matter, and I see she would suit me perfectly. She has nice gentle ways, she

can be soothing without depression, and calm without discouragement. Ah, that is the secret of secrets! She gave me my drops last evening with a tenderness, a graceful sympathy, that went to my heart. I want that, sir—I need it, I yearn for it. Simpson said to me years ago, ‘Marry, Sir Marcus, marry! yours is a temperament that requires study and intelligent care. A really clever woman gets to know a pulse to perfection; they have a finer sensibility, a higher organization, too, in the touch.’ Simpson laid great stress on that; but I have looked out in vain, sir. I employed agents; I sent people abroad; I advertised in *The Times*—M. C. was in the second column—for above two years; and with a correspondence that took two clerks to read through and minute. All to no end! All in vain! They tell me the really competent people never do reply to an advertisement; that one must look out for them oneself, make private personal inquiry. Well, sir, I did that, and I got into some unpleasant scrapes with it, and two actions for breach of promise; two thousand pounds the last cost me, though I got my verdict, sir; the Chief Baron very needlessly recommending me, for

the future, to be cautious in forming the acquaintance of ladies, and to avoid widows as a general rule. These are the pleasantries of the Bench, and doubtless they amuse the junior bar. I declare to you, sir, in all seriousness, I'd rather that a man should give me a fillip on the nose than take the liberty of a joke with me. It is the one insufferable thing in life." This sally had so far excited him that it was some minutes ere he recovered his self-possession. "Now, Mr. L'Estrange," said he, at last, "I bind you in no degree—I pledge you to nothing; I simply ask leave to address myself to your sister. It is what lawyers call a 'motion to show cause why.'"

"I perceive that," broke in L'Estrange; "but even that much I ought not to concede without consulting my sister and obtaining her consent. You will allow me therefore time."

"Time, sir! My nerves must not be agitated. There can be no delays. It was not without a great demand on my courage, and a strong dose of chlorodine—Japps's preparation—that I made this effort now. Don't imagine I can sustain it much longer. No, sir, I cannot give time."

“After all, Sir Marcus, you can scarcely suppose that my sister is prepared for such a proposition.”

“Sir, they are always prepared for it. It never takes them unawares. I have made them my study for years, and I do think I have some knowledge of their way of thinking and acting. I'll lay my life on it, if you will go and say, ‘Maria’——”

“My sister's name is Julia,” said the other, dryly.

“It may be, sir—I said ‘Maria’ generically, and I repeat it—‘Maria, there is in my study at this moment a gentleman, of irreproachable morals and unblemished constitution, whose fortune is sufficiently ample to secure many comforts and all absolute necessaries, who desires to make you his wife;’ her first exclamation will be, ‘It is Sir Marcus Cluff.’”

“It is not impossible,” said L'Estrange, gravely.

“The rest, sir, is not with you, nor even with me. Do me, then, the great favour to bear my message.”

Although seeing the absurdity of the situation, and vaguely forecasting the way Julia might possibly hear the proposition, L'Estrange was always so much

disposed to yield to the earnestness of any one who persisted in a demand, that he bowed and left the room.

“Well, George, he has proposed?” cried Julia, as her brother entered the room, where she sat with Nelly Bramleigh.

He nodded only, and the two girls burst out into a merry laugh.

“Come, come, Julia,” said he, reprovingly. “Absurd as it may seem, the man is in earnest, and must be treated with consideration.”

“But tell us the whole scene. Let us have it all as it occurred.”

“I’ll do nothing of the kind. It’s quite enough to say that he declares he has a good fortune, and wishes to share it with you, and I think the expression of that wish should secure him a certain deference and respect.”

“But who refuses, who thinks of refusing him all the deference and respect he could ask for? Not I, certainly. Come now, like a dear good boy, let us hear all he said, and what you replied. I suspect there never was a better bit of real-life comedy. I only wish I could have had a part in it.”

“Not too late yet, perhaps,” said Nelly, with a dry humour. “The fifth act is only beginning.”

“That is precisely what I am meditating. George will not tell me accurately what took place in his interview, and I think I could not do better than go and learn Sir Marcus’ sentiments for myself.”

She arose and appeared about to leave the room when L’Estrange sprang towards the door, and stood with his back against it.

“You’re not serious, Ju?” cried he, in amazement.

“I should say very serious. If Sir Marcus only makes out his case, as favourably as you, with all your bungling, can’t help representing it, why—all things considered, eh, Nelly? *you*, I know, agree with me—I rather suspect the proposition might be entertained.”

“Oh, this is too monstrous. It is beyond all belief,” cried L’Estrange. And he rushed from the room in a torrent of passion, while Julia sank back in a chair, and laughed till her eyes ran over with tears of merriment.

“How could you, Julia! Oh, how could you!” said Nelly, as she leaned over her and tried to look reproachful.

“If you mean, how could I help quizzing him? I can understand you; but I could not—no, Nelly, I could not help it! It is my habit to seize on the absurd side of any embarrassment; and you may be sure there is always one if you only look for it; and you’ve no idea how much pleasanter—ay, and easier too—it is to laugh oneself out of difficulties than to grieve over them. You’ll see George, now, will be spirited up, out of pure fright, to do what he ought: to tell this man that his proposal is an absurdity, and that young women, even as destitute of fortune as myself, do not marry as nursetenders. There! I declare that is Sir Marcus driving away already. Only think with what equanimity I can see wealth and title taking leave of me. Never say after that that I have not courage.”

CHAPTER IV.

“A TELEGRAM.”

“THIS is a very eventful day for me, George,” said Augustus, as they strolled through the garden after breakfast. “The trial was fixed for the 13th, and to-day is the 14th; I suppose the verdict will be given to-day.”

“But you have really no doubt of the result? I mean, no more than anxiety on so momentous a matter must suggest?”

“Pardon me. I have grave doubts. There was such a marriage, as is alleged, formed by my grandfather; a marriage in every respect legal. They may not have the same means of proving that which we have; but we know it. There was a son born to that marriage. We have the letter of old Lami, asking my grandfather to come over to Bruges for the christening, and we have the receipt of Hodges

and Smart, the jewellers, for a silver gilt ewer and cup which were engraved with the Bramleigh crest and cypher, and despatched to Belgium as a present; for my grandfather did not go himself, pretexting something or other, which evidently gave offence; for Lami's next letter declares that the present has been returned, and expresses a haughty indignation at my grandfather's conduct. I can vouch for all this. It was a sad morning when I first saw those papers; but I did see them, George, and they exist still. That son of my grandfather's they declare to have married, and his son is this Pracontal. There is the whole story, and if the latter part of the narrative be only as truthful as I believe the first to be, he, and not I, is the rightful owner of Castello.”

L'Estrange made no reply; he was slowly going over in his mind the chain of connection, and examining, link by link, how it held together.

“But why,” asked he at length, “was not this claim preferred before? Why did a whole generation suffer it to lie dormant?”

“That is easily—too easily explained. Lami was compromised in almost every country in Europe;

and his son succeeded him in his love of plot and conspiracy. Letters occasionally reached my father from this latter; some of them demanding money in a tone of actual menace. A confidential clerk, who knew all my father's secrets, and whom he trusted most implicitly, became one day a defaulter and absconded, carrying with him a quantity of private papers, some of which were letters written by my father, and containing remittances which Montagu Lami—or Louis Langrange, or whatever other name he bore—of course, never received, and indignantly declared he believed had never been despatched. This clerk, whose name was Hesketh, made Lami's acquaintance in South America, and evidently encouraged him to prefer his claim with greater assurance, and led him to suppose that any terms he preferred must certainly be complied with! But I cannot go on, George; the thought of my poor father struggling through life in this dark conflict rises up before me, and now I estimate the terrible alternation of hope and fear in which he must have lived, and how despairingly he must have thought of a future, when this deep game should be left to such weak hands as mine. I thought they

were cruel words once in which he spoke of my unfitness to meet a great emergency,—but now I read them very differently.”

“ Then do you really think he regarded this claim as rightful and just ? ”

“ I cannot tell that ; at moments I have leaned to this impression ; but many things dispose me to believe that he saw or suspected some flaw that invalidated the claim, but still induced him to silence the pretension by hush money.”

“ And you yourself——”

“ Don't ask me, my dear friend ;—do not ask me the question I see is on your lips. I have no courage to confess, even to you, through how many moods I pass every day I live. At moments I hope and firmly believe I rise above every low and interested sentiment, and determine I will do as I would be done by ;—I will go through this trial as though it were a matter apart from me, and in which truth and justice were my only objects. There are hours in which I feel equal to any sacrifice, and could say to this man :—‘ There ! take it ; take all we have in the world. We have no right to be here ; we are beggars and outcasts. And then—I can't tell

how or why—it actually seems as if there was a real Tempter in one's nature, lying in wait for the moment of doubt and hesitation; but suddenly, quick as a flash of lightning, a thought would dart across my mind, and I would begin to canvass this and question that; not fairly, not honestly, mark you, but casuistically and cunningly; and worse, far worse than all this,—actually hoping, no matter on which side lay the right, that *we* should come out victorious.”

“But have you not prejudiced your case by precipitancy? They tell me that you have given the others immense advantage by your openly declared doubts as to your title.”

“That is possible. I will not deny that I may have acted imprudently. The compromise to which I at first agreed struck me, on reflection, as so ignoble and dishonourable, that I rushed just as rashly into the opposite extreme. I felt, in fact, George, as though I owed this man a reparation for having ever thought of stifling his claim; and I carried this sentiment so far that Sedley asked me one day, in a scornful tone, what ill my family had done me I was so bent on ruining them? Oh, my dear friend, if it be a great relief to me to open my heart to you,

it is with shame I confess that I cannot tell you truthfully how weak and unable I often feel to keep straight in the path I have assigned myself. How, when some doubt of this man's right shoots across me, I hail the hesitation like a blessing from heaven. What I would do; what I would endure that he could not show his claim to be true, I dare not own. I have tried to reverse our positions in my own mind, and imagine I was he; but I cannot pursue the thought, for whenever the dread final rises before me, and I picture to myself our ruin and destitution, I can but think of him as a deadly implacable enemy. This sacrifice, then, that I purpose to make with a pure spirit and a high honour, is too much for me. I have not courage for that I am doing;— but I'll do it still!”

L'Estrange did his utmost to rally him out of his depression, assuring him that, as the world went, few men would have attempted to do what he had determined on, and frankly owning, that in talking over the matter with Julia they were both disposed to regard his conduct as verging on Quixotism.

“ And that is exactly the best thing people will say of it. I am lucky if they will even speak so favourably.”

“What’s this—a telegram?” cried L’Estrange, as the servant handed him one of those square-shaped missives, so charged with destiny that one really does not know whether to bless or curse the invention, which,^f annihilating space, brings us so quickly face to face with fortune.

“Read it, George; I cannot,” muttered Bramleigh, as he stood against a tree for support.

“Ten o’clock. Court-house, Navan. Jury just come out—cannot agree to verdict—discharged. New trial. I write post.

“SEDLEY.”

“Thank heaven, there is at least a respite,” said Bramleigh; and he fell on the other’s shoulder, and hid his face.

“Bear up, my poor fellow. You see that, at all events, nothing has happened up to this. Here are the girls coming. Let them not see you in such emotion.”

“Come away, then; come away. I can’t meet them now; or do you go and tell Nelly what this news is—she has seen the messenger, I’m sure.”

L’Estrange met Nelly and Julia in the walk,

while Augustus hastened away in another direction. “There has been no verdict. Sedley sends his message from the court-house this morning, and says the jury cannot agree, and there will be another trial.”

“Is that bad or good news?” asked Nelly, eagerly.

“I’d say good,” replied he; “at least, when I compare it with your brother’s desponding tone this morning. I never saw him so low.”

“Oh, he is almost always so of late. The coming here and the pleasure of meeting you rallied him for a moment, but I foresaw his depression would return. I believe it is the uncertainty, the never-ceasing terror of what next, is breaking him down; and if the blow fell at once, you would see him behave courageously and nobly.”

“He ought to get away from this as soon as possible,” said L’Estrange. “He met several acquaintances yesterday in Rome, and they teased him to come to them, and worried him to tell where he was stopping. In his present humour he could not go into society, but he is ashamed to his own heart to admit it.”

“Then why don't we go at once?” cried Julia.

“There's nothing to detain us here,” said L'Estrange, sorrowfully.

“Unless you mean to wait for my marriage,” said Julia, laughing, “though, possibly, Sir Marcus may not give me another chance.”

“Oh, Julia!”

“Oh, Julia! Well, dearest, I do say shocking things, there's no doubt of it; but when I've said them, I feel the subject off my conscience, and revert to it no more.”

“At all events,” said L'Estrange, after a moment of thought, “let us behave when we meet him as though this news was not bad. I know he will try to read in our faces what we think of it, and on every account it is better not to let him sink into depression.”

The day passed over in that discomfort which a false position so inevitably imposes. The apparent calm was a torture, and the efforts at gaiety were but moments of actual pain. The sense of something impending was so poignant that at every stir—the opening of a door or the sound of a bell—there came over each a look of anxiety the most intense

and eager. All their attempts at conversation were attended with a fear lest some unhappy expression, some ill-timed allusion might suggest the very thought they were struggling to suppress; and it was with a feeling of relief they parted and said good-night, where, at other times, there had been only regret at separating.

Day after day passed in the same forced and false tranquillity, the preparations for the approaching journey being the only relief to the intense anxiety that weighed like a load on each. At length, on the fifth morning, there came a letter to Augustus in the well-known hand of Sedley, and he hastened to his room to read it. Some sharp passages there had been between them of late on the subject of the compromise, and Bramleigh, in a moment of forgetfulness and anger, even went so far as to threaten that he would have recourse to the law to determine whether his agent had or had not overstepped the bounds of his authority, and engaged in arrangements at total variance to all his wishes and instructions. A calm but somewhat indignant reply from Sedley, however, recalled Bramleigh to reconsider his words, and even ask pardon for them, and since

that day their intercourse had been more cordial and frank than ever. The present letter was very long, and quite plainly written, with a strong sense of the nature of him it was addressed to. For Sedley well knew the temper of the man—his moods of high resolve and his moments of discouragement—his desire to be equal to a great effort, and his terrible consciousness that his courage could not be relied on. The letter began thus :—

“ MY DEAR SIR,—

“ IF I cannot, as I hoped, announce a victory, I am able at least to say that we have not been defeated. The case was fairly and dispassionately stated, and probably an issue of like importance was never discussed with less of acrimony, or less of that captious and overreaching spirit which is too common in legal contests. This was so remarkable as to induce the Judge to comment on it in his charge, and declare that in all his experience on the bench, he had never before witnessed anything so gratifying or so creditable alike to plaintiff and defendant.

“ Lawson led for the other side, and, I will own, made one of the best openings I ever listened to,

disclaiming at once any wish to appeal to sympathies or excite feeling of pity for misfortunes carried on through three generations of blameless sufferers ; he simply directed the jury to follow him in the details of a brief and not very complicated story, every step of which he would confirm and establish by evidence.

“ The studious simplicity of his narrative was immense art, and though he carefully avoided even a word that could be called high-flown, he made the story of Montagu Bramleigh’s courtship of the beautiful Italian girl one of the most touching episodes I ever listened to.

“ The marriage was, of course, the foundation of the whole claim, and he arrayed all his proofs of it with great skill. The recognition in your grandfather’s letters, and the tone of affection in which they were written, his continual reference to her in his life, left little if any doubt on the minds of the jury, even though there was nothing formal or official to show that the ceremony of marriage had passed ; he reminded the jury that the defence would rely greatly on this fact, but the fact of a missing registry-book was neither so new nor so rare in this country as to create any astonishment, and when he offered

proof that the church and the vestry-room had been sacked by the rebels in '98, the evidence seemed almost superfluous. The birth and baptism of the child he established thoroughly ; and here he stood on strong grounds, for the infant was christened at Brussels by the Protestant Chaplain of the Legation at the Hague, and he produced a copy of the act of registry, stating the child to be son of Montagu Bramleigh, of Cossenden Manor, and Grosvenor Square, London, and of Enrichetta his wife. Indeed, as Lawson declared, if these unhappy foreigners had ever even a glimmering suspicion that the just rights of this poor child were to be assailed and his inheritance denied him, they could not have taken more careful and cautious steps to secure his succession than the simple but excellent precautions they had adopted.

“The indignation of Lami at what he deemed the unfeeling and heartless conduct of Montagu Bramleigh—his cold reception of the news of his son’s birth, and the careless tone in which he excused himself from going over to the christening—rose to such a pitch that he swore the boy should never bear his father’s name, nor ever in any way

be beholden to him, and ‘ this rash oath it was that has carried misery down to another generation, and involved in misfortune others not more blameless nor more truly to be pitied than he who now seeks redress at your hands.’ This was the last sentence he uttered after speaking three hours, and obtaining a slight pause to recruit his strength.

“ Issue of Montagu Bramleigh being proved, issue of that issue was also established, and your father’s letters were given in evidence to show how he had treated with these claimants and given largely in money to suppress or silence their demands. Thos. Bolton, of the house of Parker and Bolton, bankers, Naples, proved the receipt of various sums from Montagu Bramleigh in favour of A. B. C., for so the claimant was designated, private confidential letters to Bolton showing that these initials were used to indicate one who went under many aliases, and needed every precaution to escape the police. Bolton proved the journal of Giacomo Lami, which he had often had in his own possession. In fact, this witness damaged us more than all the rest ; his station and position in life, and the mode in which he behaved under examination, having great effect on

the jury, and affording Lawson a favourable opportunity of showing what confidence was felt in the claimant's pretensions by a man of wealth and character, even when the complications of political conspiracy had served to exhibit him as a dangerous adventurer.

“Waller's reply was able, but not equal to his best efforts. It is but fair to him, however, to state that he complained of our instructions, and declared that your determination not to urge anything on a point of law, nor tender opposition on grounds merely technical, left him almost powerless in the case. He devoted his attention almost entirely to disprove the first marriage, that of Mr. B. with Enrichetta Lami; he declared that the relative rank of the parties considered, the situation in which they were placed towards each other, and all the probabilities of the case duly weighed, there was every reason to believe the connection was illicit. This view was greatly strengthened by Mr. B.'s subsequent conduct: his refusal to go over to the christening, and the utter indifference he displayed to the almost menacing tone of old Lami's letters; and when he indignantly asked the jury ‘if a man were likely to treat in this

manner his wife and the mother of his first-born, the heir to his vast fortune and estates?’ there was a subdued murmur in the court that showed how strongly this point had told.

“He argued that when a case broke down at its very outset, it would be a mere trifling with the time of the court to go further to disprove circumstances based on a fallacy. As to the christening and the registration of baptism, what easier than for a woman to declare whatever she pleased as to the paternity of her child? It was true he was written son of Montagu Bramleigh: but when we once agree that there was no marriage, this declaration has no value. He barely touched on the correspondence and the transmission of money abroad, which he explained as the natural effort of a man of high station and character to suppress the notoriety of a youthful indiscretion. Political animosity had, at that period, taken a most injurious turn, and scandal was ransacked to afford means of attack on the reputations of public men.

“I barely give you the outline of his argument, but I will send you the printed account of the trial as soon as the shorthand writer shall have completed it

for press. Baron Jocelyn's charge was, I must say, less in our favour than I had expected; and when he told the jury that the expressions of attachment and affection in Mr. B.'s letters, and the reiterated use of the phrase 'my dear, dear wife' demanded their serious consideration as to whether such words would have fallen from a man hampered by an illicit connection, and already speculating how to be free of it;—all this put with great force and clearness, and a certain appeal to their sense of humanity, did us much disservice. The length of time he dwelt on this part of the case was so remarkable that I overheard a Q.C. say he had not known till then that his lordship was retained for the plaintiff.

“When he came to that part where allusion was made to the fact of the claimant being a foreigner, he made an eloquent and effective appeal to the character of English justice, which elicited a burst of applause in the court that took some seconds to repress; but this, I am told, was more owing to the popular sympathy with the politics of old Lami, and his connection with the rebellion of '98, than with any enthusiasm for his lordship's oratory.

“The jury were three hours in deliberation. I

am confidentially informed that we had but five with, and seven against us ; the verdict, as you know, was not agreed on. We shall go to trial in spring, I hope with Holmes to lead for us, for I am fully persuaded the flaw lies in the history subsequent to the marriage of Mr. B., and that it was a mistake to let the issue turn on the event which had already enlisted the sympathies of the jury in its favour.

“In conclusion, I ought to say, that the plaintiff’s friends regard the result as a victory, and the National press is strong in asserting that, if the Orange element had been eliminated from the jury-box, there is little doubt that Count Bramleigh—as they call him—would at that hour be dispensing the splendid hospitalities of a princely house to his county neighbours, and the still more gratifying benefits of a wide charity to the poor around him. Writing rapidly, as I do, I make no pretension to anything like an accurate history of the case. There are a vast variety of things to which I mean to direct your attention when a more favourable moment will permit. I will only now add, that your presence in England is urgently required, and that your return to Castello, to resume there the style of living that

alike becomes the proprietor and the place, is, in the opinion of all your friends, much to be desired.

“ Mr. Waller does not hesitate to say that your absence decided the case against you, and was heard to declare openly that ‘ he for one had no fancy to defend a cause for a man who voluntarily gave himself up as beaten.’

“ May I entreat, then, you will make it your convenience to return here? I cannot exaggerate the ill effects of your absence, nor to what extent your enemies are enabled to use the circumstance to your discredit. Jurors are, after all, but men, taken from the common mass of those who read and talk over the public scandals of the hour, and all the cautions of the Bench never yet succeeded in making men forget, within the court-house, what they had for weeks before been discussing outside of it.

“ At all events, do not dismiss my suggestion without some thought over it, or better still, without consulting some friends in whose sense and intelligence you have confidence. I am, with many apologies for the liberty I have thus taken,

“ Most faithfully, your servant,

“ T. SEDLEY.”

When Bramleigh had read this letter carefully over, he proceeded to Nelly's room, to let her hear its contents.

“ It's not very cheery news,” said he, “ but it might be worse. Shall I read it for you, or will you read it yourself? ”

“ Read it, Gusty ; I would rather hear it from you,” said she, as she sat down with her face to the window, and partially averted from him as he sat.

Not a word dropped from her while he read, and though once or twice he paused as if to invite a remark or a question, she never spoke, nor by a look or a gesture denoted how the tidings affected her.

“ Well,” asked he at last, “ what do you say to it all ? ”

“ It's worse—I mean worse for us—than I had ever suspected ! Surely, Gusty, *you* had no conception that their case had such apparent strength and solidity ? ”

“ I have thought so for many a day,” said he gloomily.

“ Thought that they, and not we——” she could not go on.

“Just so, dearest,” said he, drawing his chair to her side, and laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder.

“And do you believe that poor papa thought so?” said she, and her eyes now swam in tears.

A scarcely perceptible nod was all his answer.

“Oh, Gusty, this is more misery than I was prepared for!” cried she, throwing herself on his shoulder. “To think that all the time we were—what many called—outraging the world with display; exhibiting our wealth in every ostentatious way; to think that it was not ours, that we were mere pretenders, with a mock rank, a mock station.”

“My father did not go thus far, Nelly,” said he, gravely. “That he did not despise these pretensions I firmly believe, but that they ever gave him serious reason to suppose his right could be successfully disputed, this I do not believe. His fear was, that when the claim came to be resisted by one like myself, the battle would be ill fought. It was in this spirit he said, ‘Would that Marion had been a boy!’”

“And what will you do, Gusty?”

“ I’ll tell you what I will not do, Nelly,” said he firmly : “ I will not, as this letter counsels me, go back to live where it is possible I have no right to live, nor spend money to which the law may to-morrow declare I have no claim. I will abide by what that law shall declare, without one effort to bias it in my favour. I have a higher pride in submitting myself to this trial than ever I had in being the owner of Castello. It may be that I shall not prove equal to what I propose to myself. I have no over-confidence in my own strength, but I like to think, that if I come well through the ordeal, I shall have done what will dignify a life, humble even as mine, and give me a self-respect, without which existence is valueless to me. Will you stand by me, Nelly, in this struggle—I shall need you much ? ”

“ To the last,” said she, giving him both her hands, which he grasped within his, and pressed affectionately.

“ Write, then, one line from me to Sedley, to say that I entrust the case entirely to his guidance ; that I will not mix myself with it in any way, nor will I return to England till it be decided ; and say, if you can, that you agree with me in this deter-

mination. And then, if the L'Estranges are ready, let us start at once."

"They only wait for us; Julia said so this morning."

"Then we shall set out to-morrow."

CHAPTER V.

A LONG TÊTE-À-TÊTE.

“SCANT courtesy, I must say,” exclaimed Lady Augusta, as, after rapidly running her eyes over a note, she flung it across the table towards Pracontal.

They were seated tête-à-tête in that small drawing-room which looked out upon the garden and the grounds of the Borghese Palace.

“Am I to read it?” asked he.

“Yes, if you like. It is from Augustus Bramleigh, a person you feel some interest in.”

Pracontal took up the note, and seemed to go very carefully over its contents.

“So then,” said he, as he finished, “he thinks it better not to meet—not to know me.”

“Which is no reason on earth for being wanting in a proper attention to *me*,” said she, angrily.

“To leave Rome without calling here, without con-

sulting my wishes, and learning my intentions for the future, is a gross forgetfulness of proper respect."

"I take it, the news of the trial was too much for him. Longworth said it would, and that the comments of the press would be insupportable besides."

"But what have *I* to do with that, sir? Mr. Bramleigh's first duty was to come here. *I* should have been thought of. *I* was the first person this family should have remembered in their hour of difficulty."

"There was no intentional want of respect in it, I'll be bound," cried Pracontal. "It was just a bashful man's dread of an awkward moment—that English terror of what you call a 'scene'—that sent him off."

"It is generous of you, sir, to become his apologist. I only wonder"—here she stopped and seemed confused.

"Go on, my lady. Pray finish what you began."

"No, sir. It is as well unsaid."

"But it was understood, my lady, just as well as if it had been uttered. Your ladyship wondered who was to apologize for *me*."

She grew crimson as he spoke ; but a faint smile seemed to say how thoroughly she relished that southern keenness that could divine a half-uttered thought.

“How quick you are,” said she, without a trace of irritation.

“Say, rather, how quick he ought to be who attempts to parry *you* at fence. And, after all,” said he, in a lighter tone, “is it not as well that he has spared us all an embarrassment? *I* could not surely have been able to condole with *him*, and how could he have congratulated *me*?”

“Pardon me, Count, but the matter, so far as I learn, is precisely as it was before. There is neither subject for condolence nor gratulation.”

“So far as the verdict of the jury went, my lady, you are quite right; but what do you say to that larger, wider verdict pronounced by the press, and repeated in a thousand forms by the public? May I read you one passage, only one, from my lawyer Mr. Kelson’s letter?”

“Is it short?”

“Very short.”

“And intelligible?”

“Most intellegible.”

“Read it then.”

“Here it is,” said he, opening a letter, and turning to the last page. “‘Were I to sum up what is the popular opinion of the result, I could not do it better than repeat what a City capitalist said to me this morning, “I’d rather lend Count Pracontal twenty thousand pounds to-day, than take Mr. Bramleigh’s mortgage for ten.”’”

“Let me read that. I shall comprehend his meaning better than by hearing it. This means evidently,” said she, after reading the passage, “that your chances are better than his.”

“Kelson tells me success is certain.”

“And your cautious friend, Mr.—; I always forget that man’s name?”

“Longworth?”

“Yes, Longworth. What does he say?”

“He is already in treaty with me to let him have a small farm which adjoins his grounds, and which he would like to throw into his lawn.”

“Seriously?”

“No, not a bit seriously; but we pass the whole morning building these sort of castles in Spain, and

the grave way that he entertains such projects ends by making me believe I am actually the owner of Castello and all its belongings."

"Tell me some of your plans," said she, with a livelier interest than she had yet shown.

"First of all, reconciliation, if that be its proper name, with all that calls itself Bramleigh. I don't want to be deemed a usurper, but a legitimate monarch. It is to be a restoration."

"Then you ought to marry Nelly. I declare that never struck me before."

"Nor has it yet occurred to me, my lady," said he, with a faint show of irritation.

"And why not, sir? Is it that you look higher?"

"I look higher," said he; and there was a solemn intensity in his air and manner as he spoke.

"I declare, Monsieur de Pracontal, it is scarcely delicate to say this to *me*."

"Your ladyship insists on my being candid, even at the hazard of my courtesy."

"I do not complain of your candour, sir. It is your—your——"

"My pretension?"

“Well, yes, pretension will do.”

“Well, my lady, I will not quarrel with the phrase. I do ‘pretend,’ as we say in French. In fact, I have been little other than a pretender these last few years.”

“And what is it you pretend to? May I ask the question?”

“I do not know if I may dare to answer it,” said he, slowly. . . . “I will explain what I mean,” added he, after a brief silence, and drawing his chair somewhat nearer to where she sat. “I will explain. If, in one of my imaginative gossipries with a friend, I were to put forward some claim—some ambition—which would sound absurd coming from me *now*, but which, were I the owner of a great estate, would neither be extravagant nor ridiculous, the memory of that unlucky pretension would live against me ever after, and the laugh that my vanity excited would ring in my ears long after I had ceased to regard the sentiment as vanity at all. Do you follow me?”

“Yes, I believe I do. I would only have you remember that I am not Mr. Longworth.”

“A reason the more for my caution.”

“ Couldn’t we converse without riddles, Count Pracontal ? ”

“ I protest I should like to do so.”

“ And as I make no objection——”

“ Then to begin. You asked me what I should do if I were to gain my suit; and my answer is, if I were not morally certain to gain it, I’d never exhibit myself in the absurd position of planning a life I was never to arrive at.”

“ You are too much a Frenchman for that.”

“ Precisely, madam. I am too much a Frenchman for that. The exquisite sensibility to ridicule puts a very fine edge on national character, though your countrymen will not admit it.”

“ It makes very tetchy acquaintances,” said she, with a malicious laugh.

“ And developes charming generosity in those who forgive us ! ”

“ I cry off. I can’t keep up this game of give and take flatteries. Let us come back to what we were talking of, that is, if either of us can remember it. O yes, I know it now. You were going to tell me the splendid establishment you’d keep at Castello. I am sure the cook will leave nothing to desire—but

how about the stable? That 'steppere' will not exactly be in his place in an Irish county."

"Madame, you forget I was a lieutenant of hussars."

"My dear Count, that does not mean riding."

"Madame!"

"I should now rise and say 'Monsieur!' and it would be very good comedy after the French pattern; but I prefer the sofa and my ease, and will simply beg you to remember the contract we made the other day—that each was to be at liberty to say any impertinence to the other, without offence being taken."

Pracontal laid his hand on his heart, and bowed low and deep.

"There are some half a dozen people in that garden yonder, who have passed and repassed—I can't tell how many times—just to observe us. You'll see them again in a few minutes, and we shall be town-talk to-morrow, I'm certain. There are no tête-à-têtes ever permitted in Rome if a cardinal or a monsignore be not one of the performers."

"Are those they?" cried he, suddenly.

"Yes, and there's not the least occasion for that

flash of the eye, and that hot glow of indignation on the cheek. I assure you, Monsieur, there is nobody there to 'couper la gorge' with you, or share in any of those social pleasantries which make the 'Bois' famous. The curiously minded individual is a lady—a Mrs. Trumpler—and her attendants are a few freshly arrived curates. There now, sit down again, and look less like a wounded tiger, for all this sort of thing fusses and fevers me. Yes, you may fan me, though if the detectives return it will make the report more highly coloured."

Pracontal was now seated on a low stool beside her sofa, and fanning her assiduously.

"Not but these people are all right," continued she. "It is quite wrong in me to admit you to my intimacy—wrong to admit you at all. My sister is so angry about it, she won't come here—fact, I assure you. Now don't look so delighted and so triumphant, and the rest of it. As your nice little phrase has it, you 'are for nothing' in the matter at all. It is all myself, my own whim, my fancy, my caprice. I saw that the step was just as inadvisable as they said it was. I saw that any commonly discreet person would not have even made your

acquaintance, standing as I did; but unfortunately for me, like poor Eve, the only tree whose fruit I covet is the one I'm told isn't good for me. There go our friends once more. I wish I could tell her who you are, and not keep her in this state of torturing anxiety."

"Might I ask, my lady," said he, gravely, "if you have heard anything to my discredit or disparagement, as a reason for the severe sentence you have just spoken?"

"No, unfortunately not, for in that case my relatives would have forgiven me. They know the wonderful infatuation that attracts me to damaged reputations, and as they have not yet found out any considerable flaw in yours they are puzzled, out of all measure, to know what it is I see in you."

"I am overwhelmed by your flattery, madam," said he, trying to seem amused, but, in spite of himself, showing some irritation.

"Not that," resumed she, in that quiet manner which showed that her mind had gone off suddenly in another direction, "not that I owe much deference to the Bramleighs, who, one and all, have treated me with little courtesy. Marion behaved shamefully—

that, of course, was to be expected. To marry that odious old creature for a position, implied how she would abuse the position when she got it. As I said to Gusty, when a young Oxford man gives five guineas for a mount, he doesn't think he has the worth of his money if he doesn't smash his collar-bone. There, put down that fan, you are making me feverish. Then the absurdity of playing *Peeress* to me! How ashamed the poor old man was; he reddened through all his rouge. Do you know," added she, in an excited manner, "that she had the impertinence to compare her marriage with mine, and say, that at least rank and title were somewhat nobler ambitions than a mere subsistence and a settlement. But I answered her. I told her, 'You have forgotten one material circumstance. I did not live with your father!' O yes! we exchanged a number of little courtesies of this kind, and I was so sorry when I heard she had gone to Naples. I was only getting into stride when the race was over. As to my settlement, I have not the very vaguest notion who'll pay it; perhaps it may be *you*. Oh, of course, I know the unutterable bliss, but you must really ask your lawyer, how is my lien to be disposed

of. Some one said to me the other day that, besides the estate, you would have a claim for about eighty thousand pounds."

"It was Longworth said so."

"I don't like your friend Longworth. Is he a gentleman?"

"Most unquestionably."

"Well, but I mean a born gentleman? I detest and I distrust your nature-made gentlemen, who, having money enough to 'get up' the part, deem that quite sufficient. I want the people whose families have given guarantees for character during some generations. Six o'clock! Only think, you are here three mortal hours! I declare, sir, this must not occur again; and I have to dress now. I dine at the Prince Cornarini's. Do you go there?"

"I go nowhere, my lady. I know no one."

"Well, I can't present you. It would be too compromising. And yet they want men like you very much here. The Romans are so dull and stately, and the English, who frequent the best houses, are so dreary. There, go away now. You want leave to come to-morrow, but I'll not grant it.

I must hear what Mrs. Trumpler says before I admit you again."

"When then may I ——?"

"I don't know; I have not thought of it. Let it be—let it be when you have gained your lawsuit," cried she, in a burst of laughter, and hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER VI.

CATTARO.

IF Cattaro was more picturesque and strange-looking than the Bramleighs had expected, it was also far more poverty-stricken and desolate. The little town, escarped out of a lofty mountain, with the sea in front, consisted of little more than one straggling street, which followed every bend and indentation of the shore. It is true, wherever a little "plateau" offered on the mountain, a house was built; and to these small winding paths led up, through rocks bristling with the cactus, or shaded by oleanders large as olive-trees. Beautiful little bits of old Venetian architecture, in balconies or porticoes, peeped out here and there through the dark foliage of oranges and figs; and richly ornamented gates, whose arabesques yet glistened with tarnished gilding, were festooned with many a flowery creeper, and that

small banksia-rose, so tasteful in its luxuriance. From the sea it would be impossible to imagine anything more beautiful or more romantic. As you landed, however, the illusion faded, and dirt, misery, and want stared at you at every step. Decay and ruin were on all sides. Palaces, whose marble mouldings and architraves were in the richest style of Byzantine art, were propped up by rude beams of timber that obstructed the footway, while from their windows and balconies hung rags and tattered draperies, the signs of a poverty within great as the ruin without. The streets were lined with a famished, half-clothed population, sitting idly or sleeping. A few here and there affected to be vendors of fruit and vegetables, but the mass were simply loungers reduced to the miserable condition of an apathy which saw nothing better to be done with life than dream it away. While Bramleigh and L'Estrange were full of horror at the wretchedness of the place, their sisters were almost wild with delight at its barbaric beauty, its grand savagery, and its brilliantly picturesque character. The little inn, which probably for years had dispensed no other hospitalities than those of the café, that extended

from the darkly columned portico to half across the piazza, certainly contributed slightly to allay the grumblings of the travellers. The poorly furnished rooms were ill kept and dirty, the servants lazy, and the fare itself the very humblest imaginable.

Nothing short of the unfailing good temper and good spirits of Julia and Nelly could have rallied the men out of their sulky discontent; that spirit to make the best of everything, to catch at every passing gleam of sunlight on the landscape, and even in moments of discouragement to rally at the first chance of what may cheer and gladden,—this is womanly, essentially womanly. It belongs not to the man's nature; and even if he should have it, he has it in a less discriminative shape and in a coarser fashion.

While Augustus and L'Estrange then sat sulkily smoking their cigars on the sea-wall, contemptuously turning their backs on the mountain variegated with every hue of foliage, and broken in every picturesque form, the girls had found out a beautiful old villa, almost buried in orange-trees in a small cleft of the mountain, through which a small cascade descended and fed a fountain that played in the hall; the

perfect stillness, only broken by the splash of the falling water, and the sense of delicious freshness imparted by the crystal circles eddying across the marble fount, so delighted them that they were in ecstasies when they found that the place was to be let, and might be their own for a sum less than a very modest "entresol" would cost in a cognate city.

"Just imagine, Gusty, he will let it to us for three hundred florins a year; and for eighteen hundred we may buy it out and out, for ever." This was Nelly's salutation as she came back full of all she had seen, and glowing with enthusiasm over the splendid luxuriance of the vegetation and the beauty of the view.

"It is really princely inside, although in terrible dilapidation and ruin. There are over two of the fireplaces the Doge's arms, which shows that a Venetian magnate once lived there."

"What do you say, George?" cried Bramleigh. "Don't you think you'd rather invest some hundred florins in a boat to escape from this dreary hole than purchase a prison to live in it?"

"You must come and see the 'Fontanella'—so they call it—before you decide," said Julia. "Mean-

while here is a rough sketch I made from the garden side."

"Come, that looks very pretty, indeed," cried George. "Do you mean to say it is like that?"

"That's downright beautiful!" said Bramleigh. "Surely these are not marble—these columns?"

"It is all marble—the terrace, the balconies, the stairs, the door-frames; and as to the floors, they are laid down in variegated slabs, with a marvellous instinct as to colour and effect. I declare I think it handsomer than Castello," cried Nelly.

"Haven't I often said," exclaimed Bramleigh, "there was nothing like being ruined to impart a fresh zest to existence? You seem to start anew in the race, and unweighted too."

"As George and I have always been in the condition you speak of," said Julia, "this charm of novelty is lost to us."

"Let us put it to the vote," said Nelly, eagerly. "Shall we buy it?"

"First of all let us see it," interposed Bramleigh. "To-day I have to make my visit to the authorities. I have to present myself before the great officials, and announce that I have come to be the representa-

tive of the last joint of the British lion's tail; but that he being a great beast of wonderful strength and terrific courage, to touch a hair of him is temerity itself."

"And they will believe you?" asked Julia.

"Of course they will. It would be very hard that we should not survive in the memories of people who live in lonely spots and read no newspapers."

"Such a place for vegetation I never saw," cried Nelly. "There are no glass windows in the hall, but through the ornamental ironwork the oranges and limes pierce through and hang in great clusters; the whole covered with the crimson acanthus and the blue japonica, till the very brilliancy of colour actually dazzles you."

"We'll write a great book up there, George,— 'Cattaro under the Doges:' or shall it be a romance?" said Bramleigh.

"I'm for a diary," said Julia, "where each of us shall contribute his share of life among the wild-olives."

"Ju's right," cried Nelly; "and as I have no gift of authorship, I'll be the public."

“No, you shall be the editor, dearest,” said Julia; “he is always like the Speaker in the House,—the person who does the least and endures the most.”

“All this does not lead us to any decision,” said L’Estrange. “Shall I go up there all alone, and report to you this evening what I see and what I think of the place?”

This proposal was at once acceded to; and now they went their several ways, not to meet again till a late dinner.

“How nobly and manfully your brother bears up,” said Julia, as she walked back to the inn with Nelly.

“And there is no display in it,” said Nelly, warmly. “Now that he is beyond the reach of condolence and compassion, he fears nothing. And you will see that when the blow falls, as he says it must, he will not wince nor shrink.”

“If I had been a man, I should like to have been of that mould.”

“And it is exactly what you would have been, dear Julia. Gusty said, only yesterday, that you had more courage than us all.”

When L'Estrange returned, he came accompanied by an old man in very tattered clothes, and the worst possible hat, whose linen was far from spotless, as were his hands innocent of soap. He was, however, the owner of the villa, and a Count of the great family of Kreptowicz. If his appearance was not much in his favour, his manners were those of a well-bred person, and his language that of education. He was eager to part with this villa, as he desired to go and live with a married daughter at Ragusa; and he protested that, at the price he asked, it was not a sale, but a present; that to any other than Englishmen he never would part with a property that had been six hundred years in the family, and which contained the bones of his distinguished ancestors, of which, incidentally, he threw in small historic details; and, last of all, he avowed that he desired to confide the small chapel where these precious remains were deposited to the care of men of station and character. This chapel was only used once a year, when a mass for the dead was celebrated, so that the Count insisted no inconvenience could be incurred by the tenant. Indeed, he half hinted that, if that one annual celebration were objected to, his

ancestors might be prayed for elsewhere, or even rest satisfied with the long course of devotion to their interests which had been maintained up to the present time. As for the chapel itself, he described it as a gem that even Venice could not rival. There were frescoes of marvellous beauty, and some carvings in wood and ivory that were priceless. Some years back, he had employed a great artist to restore some of the paintings, and supply the place of others that were beyond restoration, and now it was in a state of perfect condition, as he would be proud to show them.

“ You are aware that we are heretics, Monsieur ? ” said Julia.

“ We are all sons of Adam, Mademoiselle, ” said he, with a polite bow ; and it was clear that he could postpone spiritual questions to such time as temporal matters might be fully completed.

As the chapel was fully twenty minutes' walk from the villa, and much higher on the mountain side, had it even been frequented by the country people it could not have been any cause of inconvenience to the occupants of the villa ; and this matter being settled, and some small conditions as

to surrender being agreed to, Bramleigh engaged to take it for three years, with a power to purchase if he desired it.

Long after the contract was signed and completed, the old Count continued, in a half-complaining tone, to dwell on the great sacrifice he had made, what sums of money were to be made of the lemons and oranges, how the figs were celebrated even at Ragusa, and Fontanella melons had actually brought ten kreutzers—three-halfpence—apiece in the market at Zara.

“Who is it,” cried Julia, as the old man took his leave, “who said that the old mercantile spirit never died out in the great Venetian families, and that the descendants of the doges, with all their pride of blood and race, were dealers and traders whenever an occasion of gain presented itself?”

“Our old friend there has not belied the theory,” said Bramleigh; “but I am right glad that we have secured La Fontanella.”

CHAPTER VII.

SOME NEWS FROM WITHOUT.

THERE is a sad significance in the fact that the happiest days of our lives are those most difficult to chronicle ; it is as though the very essence of enjoyment was its uneventful nature. Thus was it that the little household at the Fontanella felt their present existence. Its simple pleasures, its peacefulness never palled upon them. There was that amount of general similarity in tastes amongst them that secures concord, and that variety of disposition and temperament which promotes and sustains interest.

Julia was the life of all ; for though seeming to devote herself to the cares of housethrift and management, and in reality carrying on all the details of management, it was she who gave to their daily life its colour and flavour ; she who suggested occupations and interest to each ; and while Augustus was charged

to devote his gun and his rod to the replenishment of the larder, George was converted into a gardener ; all the decorative department of the household being confided to Nelly, who made the bouquets for the breakfast and dinner-tables, arranged the fruit in artistic fashion, and was supreme in exacting dinner-dress and the due observance of all proper etiquette. Julia was inflexible on this point ; for, as she said, “ though people laugh at deposed princes for their persistence in maintaining a certain state and a certain pageantry in their exile, without these, what becomes of their prestige, and what becomes of themselves ? they merge into a new existence, and lose their very identity. We, too, may be ‘restored’ one of these days, and let it be our care not to have forgotten the habits of our station.” There was in this, as in most she said, a semi-seriousness that made one doubt when she was in earnest ; and this half-quizzing manner enabled her to carry out her will and bear down opposition in many cases where a sterner logic would have failed her.

Her greatest art of all, however, was to induce the others to believe that the chief charm of their present existence was its isolation. She well knew

that while she herself and Nelly would never complain of the loneliness of their lives, their estrangement from the world and all its pursuits, its pleasures and its interests, the young men would soon discover what monotony marked their days, how uneventful they were, and how uniform. To convert all these into merits, to make them believe that this immunity from the passing accidents of life was the greatest of blessings, to induce them to regard the peace in which they lived as the highest charm that could adorn existence, and at the same time not suffer them to lapse into dreamy inactivity or lethargic indifference, was a great trial of skill, and it was hers to achieve it. As she said, not without a touch of vain-glory, one day to Nelly, "How intensely eager I have made them about small things. Your brother was up at daylight to finish his rock-work for the creepers, and George felled that tree for the keel of his new boat before breakfast. Think of that, Nelly; and neither of them as much as asked if the post had brought them letters and newspapers. Don't laugh, dearest. When men forget the post-hour, there is something wonderfully good or bad has befallen them."

“But it is strange, after all, Ju, how little we have come to care for the outer world. I protest I am glad to think that there are only two mails a week—a thing that when we came here, I would have pronounced unendurable.”

“To George and myself it matters little,” said Julia, and her tone had a touch of sadness in it, in spite of her attempt to smile. “It would not be easy to find two people whom the world can live without at so little cost. There is something in that, Nelly; though I’m not sure that it is all gain.”

“Well, you have your recompence, Julia,” said the other, affectionately, “for there is a little ‘world’ here could not exist without you.”

“Two hares, and something like a black cock, they call it a caper, here,” cried Augustus from beneath the window. “Come down, and let us have breakfast on the terrace. By the way, I have just got a letter in Cutbill’s hand. It has been a fortnight in coming, but I only glanced at the date of it.”

As they gathered around the breakfast-table they were far more eager to learn what had been done

in the garden and what progress was being made with the fish-pond, than to hear Mr. Cutbill's news, and his letter lay open, till nigh the end of the meal, on the table before any one thought of it.

“Who wants to read Cutbill?” said Augustus, indolently.

“Not I, Gusty, if he write as he talks.”

“Do you know, I thought him very pleasant?” said L'Estrange. “He told me so much that I had never heard of, and made such acute remarks on life and people.”

“Poor dear George was so flattered by Mr. Cutbill's praise of his boiled mutton, that he took quite a liking to the man; and when he declared that some poor little wine we gave him had a flavour of ‘muscat’ about it, like old Moselle, I really believe he might have borrowed money of us if he had wanted, and if we had had any.”

“I wish you would read him aloud, Julia,” said Augustus.

“With all my heart,” said she, turning over the letter to see its length. “It does seem a long document, but it is a marvel of clear writing. Now for it:—‘Naples, Hotel Victoria. My dear Bramleigh.’

Of course you are his dear Bramleigh? Lucky, after all, that it's not dear Gusty."

"That's exactly what makes everything about that man intolerable to *me*," said Nelly. "The degree of intimacy between people is not to be measured by the inferior."

"I will have no discussions, no interruptions," said Julia. "If there are to be comments, they must be made by *me*."

"That's tyranny, I think," cried Nelly.

"I call it more than arrogance," said Augustus.

"My dear Bramleigh," continued Julia, reading aloud—"I followed the old viscount down here, not in the best of tempers, I assure you; and though not easily outwitted or baffled in such matters, it was not till after a week that I succeeded in getting an audience. There's no denying it, he's the best actor on or off the boards in Europe. He met me coldly, haughtily. I had treated him badly, forsooth, shamefully; I had not deigned a reply to any of his letters. He had written me three—he wasn't sure there were not four letters—to Rome. He had sent me cards for the Pope's chapel—cards for Cardinal Somebody's receptions—cards for a

concert at St. Paul's, outside the walls. I don't know what attentions he had not showered on me, nor how many of his high and titled friends had not called at a hotel where I never stopped, or left their names with a porter I never saw. I had to wait till he poured forth all this with a grand eloquence, at once disdainful and damaging; the peroration being in this wise—that such lapses as mine were things unknown in the latitudes inhabited by well-bred people. 'These things are not done, Mr. Cutbill!' said he, arrogantly; 'these things are not done! You may call them trivial omissions, mere trifles, casual forgetfulnesses, and such like; but even men who have achieved distinction, who have won fame and honours and reputation, as I am well aware is your case, would do well to observe the small obligations which the discipline of society enforces, and condescend to exchange that small coin of civilities which form the circulating medium of good manners.' When he had delivered himself of this he sat down overpowered, and though I, in very plain language, told him that I did not believe a syllable about the letters, nor accept one word of the lesson, he only fanned himself and bathed his

temples with rose-water, no more heeding me or my indignation than if I had been one of the figures on his Japanese screen.

“ ‘ You certainly said you were stopping at the “ Minerva, ” ’ said he.

“ ‘ I certainly told your lordship I was at Spilmans. ’

“ He wanted to show me why this could not possibly be the case—how men like himself never made mistakes, and men like me continually did so—that the very essence of great men’s lives was to attach importance to those smaller circumstances that inferior people disregarded, and so on; but I simply said, ‘ Let us leave that question where it is, and go on to a more important one. Have you had time to look over my account? ’

“ ‘ If you had received the second of those letters you have with such unfeigned candour assured me were never written, you’d have seen that I only desire to know the name of your banker in town, that I may order my agent to remit the money. ’

“ ‘ Let us make no more mistakes about an address, my lord, ’ said I. ‘ I’ll take a cheque for the amount now, ’ and he gave it. He sat down and

wrote me an order on Hedges and Holt, Pall Mall, for fifteen hundred pounds.

“I was so overcome by the promptitude and by the grand manner he handed it to me, that I am free to confess I was heartily ashamed of my previous rudeness, and would have given a handsome discount off my cheque to have been able to obliterate all memory of my insolence.

“‘Is there anything more between us, Mr. Cutbill?’ said he, politely, ‘for I think it would be a mutual benefit if we could settle all our outlying transactions at the present interview.’

“‘Well,’ said I, ‘there’s that two thousand of the parson’s, paid in, if you remember, after Portlaw’s report to your lordship that the whole scheme must founder.’

“He tried to browbeat at this. It was a matter in which I had no concern; it was a question which Mr. L’Estrange was at full liberty to bring before the courts of law; my statement about Portlaw was incorrect; dates were against me, law was against me, custom was against me, and at last it was nigh dinner-hour, and time was against me; ‘unless,’ said he, with a change of voice I never heard equalled

off the stage, 'you will stay and eat a very humble dinner with Temple and myself, for my lady is indisposed.'

"To be almost on fighting terms with a man ten minutes ago, and to accept his invitation to dinner now, seemed to me one of those things perfectly beyond human accomplishment; but the way in which he tendered the invitation, and the altered tone he imparted to his manner, made me feel that not to imitate him was to stamp myself for ever as one of those vulgar dogs whom he had just been ridiculing, and I assented.

"I have a perfect recollection of a superb dinner, but beyond that, and that the champagne was decanted, and that there was a large cheese stuffed with truffles, and that there were ortolans in ice, I know nothing. It was one of the pleasantest evenings I ever passed in my life. I sang several songs, and might have sung more if a message had not come from my lady to beg that the piano might be stopped, an intimation which closed the *séance*, and I said good-night. The next morning Temple called to say my lord was too much engaged to be able to receive me again, and as to that little matter I had

mentioned, he had an arrangement to propose which might be satisfactory; and whether it was that my faculties were not the clearer for my previous night's convivialities, or that Temple's explanations were of the most muddled description, or that the noble lord had purposely given him a tangled skein to unravel, I don't know, but all I could make out of the proposed arrangement was that he wouldn't give any money back—no, not on any terms: to do so would be something so derogatory to himself, to his rank, to his position in diplomacy, it would amount to a self-accusation of fraud; what would be thought of him by his brother peers, by society, by the world, and by THE OFFICE?

“He had, however, the alternate presentation to the living of Oxington in Herts. It was two hundred and forty pounds per annum and a house—in fact ‘a provision more than ample,’ he said, ‘for any man not utterly a worldling.’ He was not sure whether the next appointment lay with himself or a certain Sir Marcus Cluff—a retired fishmonger, he thought,—then living at Rome; but so well as I could make out, if it was Lord Culduff's turn he would appoint L'Estrange, and if it was Cluff's, we

were to cajole, or to bully, or to persuade him out of it; and L'Estrange was to be inducted as soon as the present incumbent, who only wanted a few months of ninety, was promoted to a better place. This may all seem very confused, dim, and unintelligible, but it is a plain ungarbled statement in comparison with what I received from Temple—who, to do him justice, felt all the awkwardness of being sent out to do something he didn't understand by means that he never possessed. He handed me, however, a letter for Cluff from the noble viscount, which I was to deliver at once; and, in fact, this much was intelligible, that the sooner I took myself away from Naples, in any direction I liked best, the better. There are times when it is as well not to show that you see the enemy is cheating you, when the shrewdest policy is to let him deem you a dupe and wait patiently till he has compromised himself beyond recall. In this sense I agreed to be the bearer of the letter, and started the same night for Rome.

Cluff was installed at the same hotel where I was stopping, and I saw him the next morning. He was a poor broken-down creature, sitting in a room saturated with some peculiar vapour which seemed

to agree with him, but half suffocated me. The viscount's letter, however, very nearly put us on a level, for it took his breath away, and all but finished him.

“ ‘ Do you know, sir,’ said he, ‘ that Lord Culduff talks here of a title to a presentation that I bought with the estate thirty years ago, and that he has no more right in the matter than he has to the manor-house. The vicarage is in my sole gift, and though the present incumbent is but two-and-thirty, he means to resign and go out to New Zealand.’ He maundered on about Lord Culduff's inexplicable blunder; what course he ought to adopt towards him; if it were actionable, or if a simple apology would be the best solution, and at last said, ‘ There was no one for whom he had a higher esteem than Mr. L'Estrange, and that if I would give him his address he would like to communicate with him personally in the matter.’ This looked at least favourable, and I gave it with great willingness; but I am free to own I have become now so accustomed to be jockeyed at every step I go, that I wouldn't trust the Pope himself, if he promised me anything beyond his blessing.

“ I saw Cluff again to-day, and he said he had half written his letter to L’Estrange ; but being his post-fumigation day, when his doctor enjoined complete repose, he could not complete or post the document till Saturday. I have thought it best, however, to apprise you, and L’Estrange through you, that such a letter is on its way to Cattaro, and I trust with satisfactory intelligence. And now that I must bring this long narrative to an end, I scarcely know whether I shall repeat a scandal you may have heard already, or, more probably still, not like to hear now, but it is the town-talk here ; that Pracontal, or Count Bramleigh,—I don’t know which name he is best known by—is to marry Lady Augusta. Some say that the marriage will depend on the verdict of the trial being in his favour ; others declare that she has accepted him unconditionally. I was not disposed to believe the story, but Cluff assures me that it is unquestionable, and that he knows a lady to whom Lady Augusta confided this determination. And, as Cluff says, such an opportunity of shocking the world will not occur every day, and it cannot be expected she could resist the temptation.

“I am going back to England at once, and I enclose you my town address in case you want me : ‘4, Joy Court, Cannon Street.’ The Culduff mining scheme is now wound up, and the shareholders have signed a consent. Their first dividend of fourpence will be paid in January, future payment will be announced by notice. Tell L’Estrange, however, not to ‘come in,’ but to wait.

“If I can be of service in any way, make use of me, and if I cannot, don’t forget me, but think of me as, what I once overheard L’Estrange’s sister call me,—a well-meaning snob, and very faithfully yours,

“T. CUTBILL.”

CHAPTER VIII.

ISCHIA.

THE sun had just sunk below the horizon, and a blaze of blended crimson and gold spread over the Bay of Naples colouring the rocky island of Ischia till it glowed like a carbuncle. Gradually, however, the rich warm tints began to fade away from the base of the mountains, and a cold blue colour stole slowly up their sides, peak after peak surrendering their gorgeous panoply, till at length the whole island assumed a tinge blue as the sea it stood in.

But for the memory of the former glory it would have been difficult to imagine a more beautiful picture. Every cliff and jutting promontory tufted with wild olives and myrtle was reflected in the waveless sea below; and feathery palm-trees and broad-leaved figs trembled in the water, as that gentle wash eddied softly round the rocks, or played on the golden shore.

It was essentially the hour of peace and repose. Along the shores of the bay, in every little village, the angelus was ringing, and kneeling groups were bowed in prayer; and even here, on this rocky islet, where crime and wretchedness were sent to expiate by years of misery their sins against their fellow-men, the poor galley-slaves caught one instant of kindred with the world, and were suffered to taste in peace the beauty of the hour. There they were in little knots and groups—some lying listlessly in the deep grass; some gathered on a little rocky point, watching the fish as they darted to and fro in the limpid water, and doubtless envying their glorious freedom; and others, again, seated under some spreading tree, and seeming, at least, to feel the calm influence of the hour.

The soldiers who formed their guard had piled their arms, leaving here and there merely a sentinel, and had gone down amongst the rocks to search for limpets, or those rugged "*ricci di mare*" which humble palates accept as delicacies. A few, too, dashed in for a swim, and their joyous voices and merry laughter were heard amid the plash of the water they disported in.

In a small cleft of a rock overshadowed by an old ilex-tree two men sat moodily gazing on the sea. In dress they were indeed alike, for both wore that terrible red and yellow livery that marks a life-long condemnation, and each carried the heavy chain of the same terrible sentence. They were linked together at the ankle, and thus, for convenience sake, they sat shoulder to shoulder. One was a thin, spare, but still wiry-looking man, evidently far advanced in life, but with a vigour in his look and a quick intelligence in his eye that showed what energy he must have possessed in youth. He had spent years at the galleys, but neither time nor the degradation of his associations had completely eradicated the traces of something above the common in his appearance; for No. 97—he had no other name as a prisoner—had been condemned for his share in a plot against the life of the king; three of his associates having been beheaded for their greater criminality. What station he might originally have belonged to was no longer easy to determine; but there were yet some signs that indicated that he had been at least in the middle rank of life. His companion was unlike him in every way. He was a

young man, with fresh complexion and large blue eyes, the very type of frankness and good-nature. Not even prison diet and discipline had yet hollowed his cheek, though it was easy to see that unaccustomed labour and distasteful food were beginning to tell upon his strength, and the bitter smile with which he was gazing on his lank figure and wasted hands showed the wearing misery that was consuming him.

“ Well, old Nick,” said the young man at length. “ this is to be our last evening together; and if I ever should touch land again, is there any way I could help you—is there anything I could do for you ? ”

“ So then you're determined to try it ? ” said the other, in a low growling tone.

“ That I am. I have not spent weeks filing through that confounded chain for nothing: one wrench now, and it's smashed.”

“ And then ? ” asked the old man with a grin.

“ And then I'll have a swim for it. I know all that—I know it all,” said he, answering a gesture of the other's hand; “ but do you think I care to drag out such a life as this ? ”

“ *I do,*” was the quiet reply.

“ Then why you do is clear and clean beyond me. To me it is worse than fifty deaths.”

“ Look here, lad,” said the old man, with a degree of animation he had not shown before. “ There are four hundred and eighty of us here ; some for ten, some for twenty years, some for life ; except yourself alone there is not one has the faintest chance of a pardon. You are English, and your nation takes trouble about its people, and, right or wrong, in the end gets them favourable treatment, and yet you are the only man here would put his life in jeopardy on so poor a chance.”

“ I’ll try it, for all that.”

“ Did you ever hear of a man that escaped by swimming ? ”

“ If they didn’t it was their own fault—at least they gave themselves no fair chance ; they always made for the shore, and generally the nearest shore, and of course they were followed and taken. I’ll strike out for the open sea, and when I have cut the cork floats off a fishing-net, I’ll be able to float for hours, if I should tire swimming. Once in the open, it will be hard luck if some coasting

vessel, some steamer to Palermo or Messina, should not pick me up. Besides, there are numbers of fishing-boats——”

“ Any one of which would be right glad to make five ducats by bringing you safe back to the police.”

“ I don't believe it—I don't believe there is that much baseness in a human heart.”

“ Take my word for it, there are depths a good deal below even that,” said the old man, with a harsh grating laugh.

“ No matter, come what will of it, I'll make the venture; and now, as our time is growing short, tell me if there is anything I can do for you, if I live to get free again. Have you any friends who could help you? or is there any one to whom you would wish me to go on your behalf? ”

“ None—none,” said he, slowly but calmly.

“ As yours was a political crime——”

“ I have done all of them, and if my life were to be drawn out for eighty years longer it would not suffice for all the sentences against me.”

“ Still I'd not despair of doing something——”

“ Look here, lad,” said the other, sharply; “ it is my will that all who belong to me should believe

me dead. I was shipwrecked twelve years ago, and reported to have gone down with all the crew. My son——”

“ Have you a son, then ? ”

“ My son inherits rights that, stained as I am by crime and condemnation, I never could have maintained. Whether he shall make them good or not will depend on whether he has more or less of *my* blood in his veins. It may be, however, he will want money to prosecute his claim. I have none to send him, but I could tell him where he is almost certain to find not only money, but what will serve him more than money, if you could make him out. I have written some of the names he is known by on this paper, and he can be traced through Bolton the banker at Naples. Tell him to seek out all the places old Giacomo Lami worked at. He never painted his daughter Enrichetta in a fresco, that he didn't hide gold, or jewels, or papers of value somewhere near. Tell him, above all, to find out where Giacomo's last work was executed. You can say that you got this commission from me years ago in Monte Video; and when you tell him it was Niccolo Baldassare gave it, he'll believe you. There. I

have written Giacomo Lami on that paper, so that you need not trust to your memory. But why do I waste time with these things? You'll never set foot on shore, lad—never."

"I am just as certain that I shall. If that son of yours was only as certain of winning his estate, I'd call him a lucky fellow. But see, they are almost dressed. They'll be soon ready to march us home. Rest your foot next this rock till I smash the link, and when you see them coming roll this heavy stone down into the sea. I'll make for the south side of the island, and, once night falls, take to the water. Good-by, old fellow. I'll not forget you—never, never," and he wrung the old man's hand in a strong grasp. The chain gave way at the second blow, and he was gone.

Just as the last flickering light was fading from the sky, three cannon shots, in quick succession, announced that a prisoner had made his escape, and patrols issued forth in every direction to scour the island, while boats were manned to search the caves and crevasses along the shore.

The morning's telegram to the Minister of Police ran thus:—"No. 11 made his escape last evening,

filing his ankle-iron. The prisoner 97, to whom he was linked, declares that he saw him leap into the sea and sink. This statement is not believed; but up to this, no trace of the missing man has been discovered."

In the afternoon of the same day, Temple Bramleigh learned the news, and hastened home to the hotel to inform his chief. Lord Culduff was not in the best of tempers. Some independent member below the gangway had given notice of a question he intended to ask the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and the leader of a Radical morning paper had thus paraphrased the inquiry:—"What Mr. Bechell wishes to ascertain, in fact, amounts to this,—'Could not the case of Samuel Rogers have been treated by our resident envoy at Naples, or was it necessary that the dignity and honour of England should be maintained by an essenced old fop, whose social successes—and we never heard that he had any other—date from the early days of the Regency?'"

Lord Culduff was pacing his room angrily when Temple entered, and, although nothing would have induced him to show the insolent paragraph of

the paper, he burst out into a violent abuse of those meddling Radicals, whose whole mission in life was to assail men of family and station.

“ In the famous revolution of France, sir,” cried he, “ they did their work with the guillotine ; but our cowardly canaille never rise above defamation. You must write to the papers about this, Temple. You must expose this system of social assassination, or the day will come, if it has not already come, when gentlemen of birth and blood will refuse to serve the Crown.”

“ I came back to tell you that our man has made his escape,” said Temple, half trembling at daring to interrupt this flow of indignation.

“ And whom do you call our man, sir ? ”

“ I mean Rogers—the fellow we have been writing about.”

“ How and when has this happened ? ”

Temple proceeded to repeat what he had learned at the prefecture of the police, and read out the words of the telegram.

“ Let us see,” said Lord Culduff, seating himself in a well-cushioned chair. “ Let us see what new turn this will give the affair. He may be recaptured,

or he may be, most probably is, drowned. We then come in for compensation. They must indemnify. There are few claims so thoroughly chronic in their character as those for an indemnity. You first discuss the right, and you then higggle over the arithmetic. I don't want to go back to town this season. See to it then, Temple, that we reserve this question entirely to ourselves. Let Blagden refer everything to us."

"They have sent the news home already."

"Oh! they have. Very sharp practice. Not peculiar for any extreme delicacy either. But I cannot dine with Blagden, for all that. This escape gives a curious turn to the whole affair. Let us look into it a little. I take it the fellow must have gone down—eh?"

"Most probably."

"Or he might have been picked up by some passing steamer or by a fishing-boat. Suppose him to have got free, he'll get back to England, and make capital out of the adventure. These fellows understand all that nowadays."

Temple, seeing a reply was expected, assented.

"So that we must not be precipitate, Temple,"

said Lord Culduff, slowly. "It's a case for caution."

These words, and the keen look that accompanied them, were perfect puzzles to Temple, and he did not dare to speak.

"The thing must be done this wise," said Lord Culduff. "It must be a 'private and confidential' to the office, and a 'sly and ambiguous' to the public prints. I'll charge myself with the former; the latter shall be your care, Temple. You are intimate with Flosser, the correspondent of the *Bell-Weather*. Have him to dinner and be indiscreet. This old Madeira here will explain any amount of expansiveness. Get him to talk of this escape, and let out the secret that it was we who managed it all. Mind, however, that you swear him not to reveal anything. It would be your ruin, you must say, if the affair got wind; but the fact was Lord Culduff saw the Neapolitans were determined not to surrender him, and, knowing what an insult it would be to the public feeling of England that an Englishman was held as a prisoner at the galleys, for an act of heroism and gallantry, the only course was to liberate him at any cost and in any way.

Flosser will swear secrecy, but hint at this solution as the on dit in certain keen coteries. Such a mode of treating the matter carries more real weight than a sworn affidavit. Men like the problem that they fancy they have unravelled by their own acuteness. And then it muzzles discussion in the House, since even the most blatant Radical sees that it cannot be debated openly ; for all Englishmen, as a rule, love compensation, and we can only claim indemnification here on the assumption that we were no parties to the escape. Do you follow me, Temple ? ”

“ I believe I do. I see the drift of it at least.”

“ There’s no drift, sir. It is a full, palpable, well-delivered blow. We saved Rogers ; but we refuse to explain how.”

“ And if he turn up one of these days, and refuse to confirm us ? ”

“ Then we denounce him as an impostor ; but always, mark you, in the same shadowy way that we allude to our share in his evasion. It must be a sketch in water-colours throughout, Temple ; very faint and very transparent. When I have rough-drafted my despatch you shall see it. Once the

original melody is before you, you will see there is nothing to do but invent the variations."

"My lady wishes to know, my lord, if your lordship will step upstairs to speak to her?" said a servant at this conjuncture.

"Go up, Temple, and see what it is," whispered Lord Culduff. "If it be about that box at the St. Carlos, you can say our stay here is now most uncertain. If it be a budget question, she must wait till quarter-day." He smiled maliciously as he spoke, and waved his hand to dismiss him. Within a minute,—it seemed scarcely half that time,—Lady Culduff entered the room, with an open letter in her hand; her colour was high, and her eyes flashing, as she said:—

"Make your mind at ease, my lord. It is no question of an opera box, or a milliner's bill, but it is a matter of much importance that I desire to speak about. Will you do me the favour to read that, and say what answer I shall return to it."

Lord Culduff took the letter and read it over leisurely, and then, laying it down, said, "Lady Augusta is not a very perspicuous letter-writer, or else she feels her present task too much for her tact,

but what she means here is, that you should give M. Pracontal permission to ransack your brother's house for documents, which, if discovered, might deprive him of the title to his estate. The request, at least, has modesty to recommend it."

"The absurdity is, to my thinking, greater than even the impertinence," cried Lady Culduff. "She says, that on separating two pages, which, by some accident had adhered, of Giacomo Lami's journal,—whoever Giacomo Lami may be,—*we*,—*we* being Pracontal and herself—have discovered that it was Giacomo's habit to conceal important papers in the walls where he painted, and in all cases where he introduced his daughter's portrait; and that as in the octagon room at Castello, there is a picture of her as Flora, it is believed—confidently believed—such documents will be found there as will throw great light on the present claim—."

"First of all," said he interrupting, "is there such a portrait?"

"There is a Flora; I never heard it was a portrait. Who could tell after what the artist copied it?"

"Lady Augusta assumes to believe this story."

“Lady Augusta is only too glad to believe what everybody else would pronounce incredible; but this is not all, she has the inconceivable impertinence to prefer this request to us, to make us a party to our own detriment,—as if it were matter of perfect indifference who possessed these estates, and who owned Castello.”

“I declare I have heard sentiments from your brother Augustus that would fully warrant this impression. I have a letter of his in my desk wherein he distinctly says, that once satisfied in his own mind,—not to the conviction of his lawyer, mark you, nor to the conviction of men well versed in evidence, and accustomed to sift testimony, but simply to his own not very capacious intellect,—that the estate belongs to Pracontal, he'll yield him up the possession without dispute or delay.”

“He's a fool, there is no other name for him,” said she passionately.

“Yes, and his folly is very mischievous folly, for he is abrogating rights he has no pretension to deal with. It is just as well, at all events, that this demand was addressed to us and not to your brother, for I'm certain he'd not have refused his permission.”

“I know it,” said she fiercely; “and if Lady Augusta only knew his address and how a letter might reach him, she would never have written to us. Time pressed however; see what she says here. ‘The case will come on for trial in November, and if the papers have the value and significance Count Pracontal’s lawyers suspect, there will yet be time to make some arrangement,—the Count would be disposed for a generous one,—which might lessen the blow, and diminish the evil consequences of a verdict certain to be adverse to the present possessor.’”

“She dissevers her interests from those of her late husband’s family with great magnanimity, I must say.”

“The horrid woman is going to marry Pracontal.”

“They say so, but I doubt it, at least, till he comes out a victor.”

“How she could have dared to write this, how she could have had the shamelessness to ask *me*,—*me* whom she certainly ought to know,—to aid and abet a plot directed against the estates,—the very legitimacy of my family—is more than I can conceive.”

“She’s an implicit believer one must admit,

for she says, 'if on examining the part of the wall behind the pedestal of the figure nothing shall be found, she desires no further search.' The spot is indicated with such exactness in the journal, that she limits her request distinctly to this."

"Probably she thought the destruction of a costly fresco might well have been demurred to," said Lady Culduff angrily. "Not but for my part, I'd equally refuse her leave to touch the moulding in the surbase. I am glad, however, she has addressed this demand to us, for I know well Augustus is weak enough to comply with it, and fancy himself a hero in consequence. There is something piquant in the way she hints that she is asking as a favour what, for all she knows, might be claimed as a right. Imagine the woman saying this!"

"It is like asking me for the key of my writing-desk to see if I have not some paper or letter there, that might, if published, give me grave inconvenience."

"I have often heard of her eccentricities and absurdities, but on this occasion I believe she has actually outdone herself. I suppose, though this appeal is made to us conjointly, as it is addressed to me, I am the proper person to reply to it."

“Certainly, my lady.”

“And I may say,—Lord Culduff feels shocked equally with myself at the indelicacy of the step you have just taken ; failing to respect the tie which connects you with our family, you might, he opines, have had some regards for the decencies which regulate social intercourse, and while bearing our name, not have ranked yourself with those who declare themselves our enemies. I may say this, I may tell her that her conduct is shameless, an outrage on all feeling, and not only derogatory to her station, but unwomanly ?”

“I don’t think I’d say that,” said he, with a faint simper, while he patted his hand with a gold paper-knife. “I opine the better way would be to accept her ladyship’s letter as the most natural thing in life *from her* ; that she had preferred a request, which coming from *her*, was all that was right and reasonable. That there was something very noble and very elevated in the way she could rise superior to personal interests, and the ties of kindred, and actually assert the claims of mere justice ; but I’d add that the decision could not lie with us,—that your brother being the head of the family, was the person

to whom the request must be addressed, and that we would, with her permission, charge ourselves with the task. Pray hear me out—first of all, we have a delay while she replies to this, with or without the permission we ask for; in that interval you can inform your brother that a very serious plot is being concerted against him; that your next letter will fully inform him as to the details of the conspiracy, —your present advice being simply for warning, and then, when, if she still persist, the matter must be heard, it will be strange if Augustus shall not have come to the conclusion that the part intended for him is a very contemptible one—that of a dupe.”

“Your lordship’s mode may be more diplomatic; mine would be more direct.”

“Which is exactly its demerit, my lady,” said he, with one of his blindest smiles. “In *my* craft the great secret is never to give a flat refusal to anything. If the French were to ask us for the Isle of Wight, the proper reply would be a polite demand for the reasons that prompted the request,—whether ‘Osborne’ might be reserved,—and a courteous assurance that the claim should meet with every consideration and a cordial disposition to make every

possible concession that might lead to a closer union with a nation it was our pride and happiness to reckon on as an ally."

"These fallacies never deceive anyone."

"Nor are they meant to do so, any more than the words 'your most obedient and humble servant' at the foot of a letter; but they serve to keep correspondence within polite limits."

"And they consume time," broke she in, impatiently.

"And, as you observe so aptly, they consume time."

"Let us have done with trifling, my lord. I mean to answer this letter in my own way."

"I can have no other objection to make to that, save the unnecessary loss of time I have incurred in listening to the matter."

"That time so precious to the nation you serve!" said she, sneeringly.

"Your ladyship admirably expresses my meaning."

"Then, my lord, I make you the only amends in my power; I take my leave of you."

"Your ladyship's politeness is never at fault," said he, rising to open the door for her.

“Has Temple told you that the box on the lower tier is now free—the box I spoke of?”

“He has; but our stay here is now uncertain. It may be days; it may be hours——”

“And why was I not told? I have been giving orders to tradespeople—accepting invitations—making engagements, and what not. Am I to be treated like the wife of a subaltern in a marching regiment—to hold myself ready to start when the route comes?”

“How I could envy that subaltern,” said he, with an inimitable mixture of raillery and deference.

She darted on him a look of indignant anger, and swept out of the room.

Lord Culduff rang his bell, and told the servant to beg Mr. Temple Bramleigh would have the kindness to step down to him.

“Write to Filangieri, Temple,” said he, “and say that I desire to have access to the prisoner Rogers. We know nothing of his escape, and the demand will embarrass—There, don’t start objections, my dear boy; I never play a card without thinking what the enemy will do after he scores the trick.” And with this profound encomium on himself he dismissed the secretary, and proceeded to read the morning papers.

CHAPTER IX.

A RAINY NIGHT AT SEA.

THE absurd demand preferred by Lady Augusta in her letter to Marion was a step taken without any authority from Pracontal, and actually without his knowledge. On the discovery of the adhering pages of the journal, and their long consideration of the singular memorandum that they found within, Pracontal carried away the book to Longworth to show him the passage and ask what importance he might attach to its contents.

Longworth was certainly struck by the minute particularity with which an exact place was indicated. There was a rough pen sketch of the Flora, and a spot marked by a cross at the base of the pedestal with the words, "Here will be found the books." Lower down on the same page was written, "These volumes, which I did not obtain without difficulty,

and which were too cumbrous to carry away, I have deposited in this safe place, and the time may come when they will be of value.—G. L.”

“Now,” said Longworth, after some minutes of deep thought, “Lami was a man engaged in every imaginable conspiracy. There was not a State in Europe, apparently, where he was not, to some extent compromised. These books he refers to may be the records of some secret society, and he may have stored them there as a security against the lukewarmness or the treachery of men whose fate might be imperilled by certain documents. Looking to the character of Lami, his intense devotion to these schemes, and his crafty nature and the Italian forethought which seems always to have marked whatever he did, I half incline to this impression. Then, on the other hand, you remember, Pracental, when we went over to Portshannon to inquire about the registry books, we heard that they had all been stolen or destroyed by the rebels in '98?”

“Yes, I remember that well. I had not attached any importance to the fact; but I remember how much Kelson was disconcerted and put out

by the intelligence, and how he continually repeated, 'This is no accident; this is no accident.' "

"It would be a rare piece of fortune if they were the church books, and that they contained a formal registry of the marriage."

"But who doubts it?"

"Say rather, my dear friend, why should any one believe it? Just think for one moment who Montague Bramleigh was, what was his station and his fortune, and then remember the interval that separated him from the Italian painter—a man of a certain ability, doubtless. Is it the most likely thing in the world that if the young Englishman fell in love with the beautiful Italian, that he would have sacrificed his whole ambition in life to his passion? Is it not far more probable, in fact, that no marriage whatever united them? Come, come, Pracontal, this is not, now at least, a matter to grow sulky over; you cannot be angry or indignant at my frankness, and you'll not shoot me for this slur on your grandmother's fair reputation."

"I certainly think that with nothing better than a theory to support it, you might have spared her memory this aspersion."

“ If I had imagined you could not talk of it as unconcernedly as myself, I assure you I would never have spoken about it.”

“ You see now, however, that you have mistaken me—that you have read me rather as one of your own people than as a Frenchman,” said the other, warmly.

“ I certainly see that I must not speak to you with frankness, and I shall use caution not to offend you by candour.”

“ This is not enough, sir,” said the Frenchman, rising and staring angrily at him.

“ What is not enough ?” said Longworth, with a perfect composure.

“ Not enough for apology, sir; not enough as ‘amende’ for an unwarrantable and insolent calumny.”

“ You are getting angry at the sound of your own voice, Pracontal. I now tell you that I never meant—never could have meant—to offend you. You came to me for a counsel which I could only give by speaking freely what was in my mind. This is surely enough for explanation.”

“ Then let it all be forgotten at once,” cried the other, warmly.

“ I'll not go that far,” said Longworth, in the same calm tone as before. “ You have accepted my explanation ; you have recognised what one moment of justice must have convinced you of—that I had no intention to wound your feelings. There is certainly, however, no reason in the world why I should expose my own to any unnecessary injury. I have escaped a peril ; I have no wish to incur another of the same sort.”

“ I don't think I understand you,” said Pracontal, quickly. “ Do you mean we should quarrel ? ”

“ By no means.”

“ That we should separate, then ? ”

“ Certainly.”

The Frenchman became pale, and suddenly his face flushed till it was deep crimson, and his eyes flashed with fire. The effort to be calm was almost a strain beyond his strength ; but he succeeded, and in a voice scarcely above a whisper, he said, “ I am deeply in your debt ; I cannot say how deeply. My lawyer, however, does know, and I will confer with him.”

“ This is a matter of small consequence, and does not press : besides, I beg you will not let it trouble you.”

The measured coldness with which these words were spoken seemed to jar painfully on Pracontal's temper, for he snatched his hat from the table, and with a hurried, "Adieu—adieu, then," left the room. The carriages of the hotel were waiting in the courtyard to convey the travellers to the station.

"Where is the train starting for?" asked he of a waiter.

"For Civita, sir."

"Step up to my room, then, and throw my clothes into a portmanteau—enough for a few days. I shall have time to write a note, I suppose?"

"Ample, sir. You have forty minutes yet."

Pracontal opened his writing-desk and wrote a few lines to Lady Augusta, to tell how a telegram had just called him away,—it might be to Paris, perhaps London. He would be back within ten days, and explain all. He wished he might have her leave to write, but he had not a moment left him to ask the permission. Should he risk the liberty? What if it might displease her? He was every way unfortunate; nor, in all the days of a life of changes and vicissitudes, did he remember a sadder moment than this in which he wrote himself

her devoted servant, A. Pracontal de Bramleigh. This done, he jumped into a carriage, and just reached the train in time to start for Civita.

There was little of exaggeration when he said he had never known greater misery and depression than he now felt. The thought of that last meeting with Longworth overwhelmed him with sorrow. When we bear in mind how slowly and gradually the edifice of friendship is built up; how many of our prejudices have often to be overcome; how much of self-education is effected in the process; the thought that all this labour of time and feeling should be cast to the winds at once for a word of passion or a hasty expression, is humiliating to a degree. Pracontal had set great store by Longworth's friendship for him. He had accepted great favours at his hand; but so kindly and so gracefully conferred as to double the obligations by the delicacy with which they were bestowed. And this was the man whose good feeling for him he had outraged and insulted beyond recall. "If it had been an open quarrel between us, I could have stood his fire and shown him how thoroughly I knew myself in the wrong; but his cold disdain is more than I can

bear. And what was it all about? How my old comrades would laugh if they heard that I had quarrelled with my best friend. Ah, my grandmother's reputation! Ma foi, how much more importance one often attaches to a word than to what it represents!" Thus angry with himself, mocking the very pretensions on which he had assumed to reprehend his friend, and actually ridiculing his own conduct, he embarked from Marseilles to hasten over to England, and entreat Kelson to discharge the money obligation which yet bound him to Longworth.

It was a rough night at sea, and the packet so crowded by passengers that Pracontal was driven to pass the night on deck. In the haste of departure he had not provided himself with overcoats or rugs, and was but ill suited to stand the severity of a night of cold cutting wind and occasional drifts of hail. To keep himself warm he walked the deck for hours, pacing rapidly to and fro: perhaps not sorry at heart that physical discomfort compelled him to dwell less on the internal griefs that preyed upon him. One solitary passenger besides himself had sought the deck, and he had rolled himself in a multiplicity

of warm wrappers, and lay snugly under the shelter of the binnacle—a capacious tarpaulin cloak surmounting all his other integuments.

Pracontal's campaigning experiences had taught him that the next best thing to being well cloaked oneself is to lie near the man that is so; and thus, seeing that the traveller was fast asleep, he stretched himself under his lee, and even made free to draw a corner of the heavy tarpaulin over him.

“I say,” cried the stranger, on discovering a neighbour; “I say, old fellow, you are coming it a bit too free and easy. You've stripped the covering off my legs.”

“A thousand pardons,” rejoined Pracontal. “I forgot to take my rugs and wraps with me; and I am shivering with cold. I have not even an overcoat.”

The tone—so evidently that of a gentleman, and the slight touch of a foreign accent—apparently at once conciliated the stranger, for he said, “I have enough and to spare; spread this blanket over you; and here's a cushion for a pillow.”

These courtesies, accepted frankly as offered, soon led them to talk together; and the two men

speedily found themselves chatting away like old acquaintances.

“I am puzzling myself,” said the stranger at last, “to find out are you an Englishman, who has lived long abroad, or are you a foreigner?”

“Is my English so good as that?” asked Præcontal, laughing.

“The very best I ever heard from any not a born Briton.”

“Well, I’m a Frenchman—or a half Frenchman—with some Italian and some English blood, too, in me.”

“Ah! I knew you must have had a dash of John Bull in you. No man ever spoke such English as yours without it.”

“Well, but my English temperament goes two generations back. I don’t believe my father was ever in England.”

With this opening they talked away about national traits and peculiarities: the Frenchman with all the tact and acuteness travel and much intercourse with life conferred; and the other with the especial shrewdness that marks a Londoner. “How did you guess I was a Cockney?” asked he, laughingly. “I don’t take liberties with my H’s.”

“If you had, it’s not likely I’d have known it,” said Pracontal. “But your reference to town, the fidelity with which you clung to what London would think of this, or say to that, made me suspect you to be a Londoner ; and I see I was right.”

“After all, you Frenchmen are just as full of Paris.”

“Because Paris epitomises France, and France is the greatest of all countries.”

“I’ll not stand that. I deny it *in toto*.”

“Well, I’ll not open the question now, or, maybe, you’d make me give up this blanket.”

“No. I’ll have the matter out on fair grounds. Keep the blanket, but just let me hear on what grounds you claim precedence for France before England.”

“I’m too unlucky in matters of dispute to-day,” said Pracontal, sadly, “to open a new discussion. I quarrelled with, perhaps, the best friend I had in the world this morning for a mere nothing ; and though there is little fear that anything we could say to each other now would provoke ill feeling between us, I’ll run no risks.”

“By Jove ! it must be Scotch blood is in you. I never heard of such caution !”

“ No, I believe my English connection is regular Saxon. When a man has been in the newspapers in England, he need not affect secrecy or caution in talking of himself. I figured in a trial lately; I don't know if you read the cause. It was tried in Ireland—Count Bramleigh de Pracontal against Bramleigh.”

“ What, are you Pracontal ? ” cried the stranger, starting to a sitting posture.

“ Yes. Why are you so much interested ? ”

“ Because I have seen the place. I have been over the property in dispute, and the question naturally interests me.”

“ Ha ! you know Castello, then ? ”

“ Castello, or Bishop's Folly. I know it best by the latter name.”

“ And whom am I speaking to ? ” said Pracontal ; “ for as you know me perhaps I have some right to ask this.”

“ My name is Cutbill ; and now that you've heard it, you're nothing the wiser.”

“ You probably know the Bramleighs ? ”

“ Every one of them ; Augustus, the eldest, I am intimate with.”

“It’s not my fault that I have no acquaintance with him. I desired it much; and Lady Augusta conveyed my wish to Mr. Bramleigh, but he declined. I don’t know on what grounds; but he refused to meet me, and we have never seen each other.”

“If I don’t greatly mistake, you ought to have met. I hope it may not be yet too late.”

“Ah, but it is! We are ‘*en pleine guerre*’ now, and the battle must be fought out. It is he, and not I, would leave the matter to this issue. I was for a compromise; I would have accepted an arrangement; I was unwilling to overthrow a whole family and consign them to ruin. They might have made their own terms with me; but no, they preferred to defy me. They determined I should be a mere pretender. They gave me no alternative; and I fight because there is no retreat open to me.”

“And yet if you knew Bramleigh——”

“*Mon cher*; he would not give me the chance; he repulsed the offer I made; he would not touch the hand I held out to him.”

“I am told that the judge declared that he never tried a cause where the defendant displayed a more honourable line of conduct.”

“That is all true. Kelson, my lawyer, said that everything they did was straightforward and creditable; but he said, too, don't go near them, don't encourage any acquaintance with them, or some sort of arrangement will be patched up which will leave everything unsettled to another generation;—when all may become once more litigated with less light to guide a decision and far less chance of obtaining evidence.”

“Never mind the lawyers, Count, never mind the lawyers. Use your own good sense, and your own generous instincts; place yourself—in idea—in Bramleigh's position, and ask yourself could you act more handsomely than he has done? and then bethink you, what is the proper way to meet such conduct.”

“It's all too late for this now; don't ask me why, but take my word for it, it is too late.”

“It's never too late to do the right thing, though it may cost a man some pain to own he is changing his mind.”

“It's not that; it's not that,” said the other, peevishly, “though I cannot explain to you why or how.”

“I don’t want to hear secrets,” said Cutbill, bluntly; “all the more that you and I are strangers to each other. I don’t think either of us has had a good look at the other’s face yet.”

“I’ve seen yours, and I don’t distrust it,” said the Frenchman.

“Good night, then, there’s a civil speech to go to sleep over,” and so saying, he rolled over to the other side, and drew his blanket over his head.

Pracontal lay a long time awake, thinking of the strange companion he had chanced upon, and that still stranger amount of intimacy that had grown up between them. I suppose, muttered he to himself, I must be the most indiscreet fellow in the world; but after all, what have I said that he has not read in the newspapers, or may not read next week or the week after? I know how Kelson would condemn me for this careless habit of talking of myself and my affairs to the first man I meet on a railroad or a steamer; but I must be what nature made me, and after all, if I show too much of my hand, I gain something by learning what the bystanders say of it.

It was not till nigh daybreak that he dropped off to sleep; and when he awoke it was to see Mr.

Cutbill with a large bowl of hot coffee in one hand, and a roll in the other, making an early breakfast; a very rueful figure, too, was he—as, black with smoke and coal-dust, he propped himself against the binnacle, and gazed out over the waste of waters.

“You are a good sailor, I see, and don't fear sea-sickness,” said Pracontal.

“Don't I? that's all you know of it; but I take everything they bring me. There's a rasher on its way to me now, if I survive this.”

“I'm for a basin of cold water and coarse towels,” said the other, rising.

“That's two points in your favour towards having English blood in you,” said Cutbill, gravely, for already his qualms were returning; “when a fellow tells you he cares for soap, he can't be out and out a Frenchman.” This speech was delivered with great difficulty, and when it was done he rolled over and covered himself up, over face and head, and spoke no more.

CHAPTER X.

THE LETTER BAG.

“WHAT a mail-bag!” cried Nelly, as she threw several letters on the breakfast-table; the same breakfast-table being laid under a spreading vine, all draped and festooned with a gorgeous clematis.

“I declare,” said Augustus, “I’d rather look out yonder, over the blue gulf of Cattaro, than see all the post could bring me.”

“This is for you,” said Nelly, handing a letter to L’Estrange.

He reddened as he took it; not that he knew either the writing or the seal, but that terrible consciousness which besets the poor man in life leads him always to regard the unknown as pregnant with misfortune; and so he pocketed his letter, to read it when alone and unobserved.

“Here’s Cutbill again. I don’t think I care for

more Cutbill," said Bramleigh; "and here's Sedley; Sedley will keep. This is from Marion."

"Oh, let us hear Marion by all means," said Nelly. "May I read her, Gusty?" He nodded, and she broke the envelope. "Ten lines and a post-script. She's positively expansive this time:—

"Victoria, Naples.

"MY DEAR GUSTY,—OUR discreet and delicate stepmother has written to ask me to intercede with you to permit M. Pracontal to pull down part of the house at Castello, to search for some family papers. I have replied that her demand is both impracticable and indecent. Be sure that you make a like answer if she addresses you personally. We mean to leave this soon; but are not yet certain in what direction. We have been shamefully treated, after having brought this troublesome and difficult negotiation to a successful end. We shall withdraw our proxy.

"Yours ever, in much affection,

"MARION CULDUFF.

"P.S.—You have heard, I suppose, that Culduff has presented L'Estrange to a living. It's not in a hunting county, so that he will not be

exposed to temptation; nor are there any idle young men, and Julia may also enjoy security. Do you know where they are? ”

They laughed long and heartily over this post-script. Indeed, it amused them to such a degree that they forgot all the preceding part of the letter. As to the fact of the presentation, none believed it. Read by the light of Cutbill's former letter, it was plain enough that it was only one of those pious frauds which diplomacy deals in as largely as Popery. Marion, they were sure, supposed she was recording a fact; but her comments on the fact were what amused them most.

“ I wonder am I a flirt ? ” said Julia, gravely.

“ I wonder am I a vicar ? ” said George ; and once more the laughter broke out fresh and hearty.

“ Let us have Cutbill now, Nelly. It will be in a different strain. He's lengthy, too. He not only writes on four, but six sides of note paper this time.”

“ ‘ DEAR BRAMLEIGH,—You will be astonished to hear that I travelled back to England with Count

Pracontal, or Pracontal de Bramleigh, or whatever his name be—a right good fellow, frank, straightforward, and, so far as I see, honest. We hit it off wonderfully together, and became such good friends that I took him down to my little crib at Bayswater,—an attention, I suspect, not ill timed, as he does not seem flush of money. He told me the whole story of his claim, and the way he came first to know that he had a claim. It was all discovered by a book, a sort of manuscript journal of his great grandfather's, every entry of which he, Pracontal, believes to be true as the Bible. He does not remember ever to have seen his father, though he may have done so before he was put to the Naval School at Genoa. Of his mother, he knows nothing. From all I have seen of him, I'd say that you and he have only to meet to become warm and attached friends; and it's a thousand pities you should leave to law and lawyers what a little forbearance, and a little patience, and a disposition to behave generously on each side might have settled at once and for ever.

“ ‘ In this journal that I mentioned there were two pages gummed together, by accident or design,

and on one of these was a sketch of a female figure in a great wreath of flowers, standing on a sort of pedestal, on which was written,—“Behind this stone I have deposited books or documents.” I’m not sure of the exact words, for they were in Italian, and it was all I could do to master the meaning of the inscription. Now, Pracontal was so convinced that these papers have some great bearing on his claim, that he asked me to write to you to beg permission to make a search for them under the painting at Castello, of which this rough sketch is evidently a study. I own to you I feel little of that confidence that he reposes in this matter. I do not believe in the existence of the papers, nor see how, if there were any, that they could be of consequence. But his mind was so full of it, and he was so persistent in saying, “If I thought this old journal could mislead me, I’d cease to believe my right to be as good as I now regard it,” that I thought I could not do better, in your interest, than to take him with me to Sedley’s, to see what that shrewd old fox would say to him. P. agreed at once to go; and, what pleased me much, never thought of communicating with his lawyer nor asking his advice on the step.

“ ‘Though I took the precaution to call on Sedley, and tell him what sort of man P. was, and how prudent it would be to hear him with a show of frankness and cordiality, that hard old dog was as stern and as unbending as if he was dealing with a housebreaker. He said he had no instructions from you to make this concession ; that, though he himself attached not the slightest importance to any paper that might be found, were he to be consulted, he would unquestionably refuse this permission ; that Mr. Bramleigh knew his rights too well to be disposed to encourage persons in frivolous litigation ; and that the coming trial would scatter these absurd pretensions to the winds, and convince M. Pracontal and his friends that it would be better to address himself seriously to the business of life than pass his existence in prosecuting a hopeless and impossible claim.

“ ‘I was much provoked at the sort of lecturing tone the old man assumed, and struck with astonishment at the good-temper and good-breeding with which the other took it. Only once he showed a slight touch of resentment, when he said, “Have a care, sir, that, while disparaging my pretensions,

you suffer nothing to escape you that shall reflect on the honour of those who belong to me. I will overlook everything that relates to *me*. I will pardon nothing that insults *their* memory." This finished the interview, and we took our leave. "We have not gained much by this step," said Pracontal, laughing, as we left the house. "Will you now consent to write to Mr. Bramleigh, for I don't believe he would refuse my request?" I told him I would take a night to think over it, and on the same evening came a telegram from Ireland to say that some strange discoveries were just being made in the Lisconnor mine; that a most valuable "lode" had been artificially closed up, and that a great fraud had been practised to depreciate the value of the mine, and throw it into the market as a damaged concern, while its real worth was considerable. They desired me to go over at once and report, and Pracontal, knowing that I should be only a few miles from Bishop's Folly, to which he clings with an attachment almost incredible, determined to accompany me.

"I have no means of even guessing how long I may be detained in Ireland—possibly some weeks;

at all events let me have a line to say you will give me this permission. I say "give *me*" because I shall strictly confine the investigation to the limits I myself think requisite, and in reality use the search as one means of testing what importance may attach to this journal, on which Pracontal relies so implicitly; and in the event of the failure—that I foresee and would risk a bet upon—I would employ the disappointment as a useful agent in dissuading Pracontal from farther pursuit.

“ ‘ I strongly urge you, therefore, not to withhold this permission. It seems rash to say that a man ought to furnish his antagonist with a weapon to fight him; but you have always declared you want nothing but an honest, fair contest, wherein the best man should win. You have also said to me that you often doubted your own actual sincerity. You can test it now, and by a touchstone that cannot deceive. If you say to Pracontal, "There's the key, go in freely; there is nothing to hide—nothing to fear," you will do more to strengthen the ground you stand on than by all the eloquence of your lawyer; and if I know anything of this Frenchman, he is not the man to make an ill requital to such

a generous confidence. Whatever you decide on, reply at once. I have no time for more, but will take my letter with me and add a line when I reach Ireland.

“*Lisconnor, Friday Night.*”

“‘They were quite right; there was a most audacious fraud concocted, and a few days will enable me to expose it thoroughly. I’m glad Lord Culduff had nothing to say to it, but more for your sake than his. The L’Estranges are safe; they’ll have every shilling of their money, and with a premium, too.’”

Nelly laid down the letter and looked over to where George and his sister sat, still and motionless. It was a moment of deep feeling and intense relief, but none could utter a word. At last Julia said,—

“‘What a deal of kindness there is in that man, and how hard we felt it to believe it, just because he was vulgar. I declare I believe we must be more vulgar still to attach so much to form and so little to fact.’”

“‘There is but one line more,’” said Nelly, turning over the page.

“‘Pracontal has lost all his spirits. He has been over to see a place belonging to a Mr. Longworth

here, and has come back so sad and depressed as though the visit had renewed some great sorrow. We have not gone to Bishop's Folly yet, but mean to drive over there to-morrow. Once more, write to me.

“ ‘Yours ever,

“ ‘T. CUTBILL.’ ”

“I shall not give this permission,” said Bramleigh, thoughtfully. “Sedley’s opinion is decidedly adverse, and I shall abide by it.” Now, though he said these words with an air of apparent determination, he spoke in reality to provoke discussion and hear what others might say. None, however, spoke, and he waited some minutes. “I wish you would say if you agree with me,” cried he at last.

“I suspect very few would give the permission, said Julia, “but that you are one of that few I believe also.”

“Yes, Gusty,” said Nelly. “Refuse it, and what becomes of that fair spirit in which you have so often said you desired to meet this issue?”

“What does George say?” asked Bramleigh. “Let’s hear the Church.”

“Well,” said L’Estrange, in that hesitating,

uncertain way he usually spoke in, "if a man were to say to me, 'I think I gave you a sovereign too much in change just now. Will you search your purse, and see if I'm not right?' I suppose I'd do so."

"And of course you mean that if the restitution rose to giving back some thousands a year, it would be all the same?" said Julia.

"It would be harder to do, perhaps—of course; I mean—but I hope I could do it."

"And *I*," said Bramleigh, in a tone that vibrated with feeling, "*I* hoped a few days back that no test to my honesty or my sincerity would have been too much for me—that all I asked or cared for was that the truth should prevail—I find myself now prevaricating with myself, hair-splitting, and asking have I a right to do this, that, or t'other? I declare to heaven, when a man takes refuge in that self-put question, 'Have I the right to do something that inclination tells me not to do?' he is nearer a contemptible action than he knows of. And is there not one here will say that I ought, or ought not, to refuse this request?"

"I do not suppose such a request was ever made

before," said L'Estrange. "There lies the real difficulty of deciding what one should do."

"Here's a note from Mr. Sedley," cried Nelly. "Is it not possible that it may contain something that will guide us?"

"By all means read Sedley," said Bramleigh. And she opened and read:—

"DEAR SIR,—A Mr. Cutbill presented himself to me here last week, alleging he was an old and intimate friend of yours, and showing unquestionable signs of being well acquainted with your affairs. He was accompanied by M. Pracontal, and came to request permission to make searches at Castello for certain documents which he declared to be of great importance to the establishment of his claim. I will not stop to say what I thought, or indeed said, of such a proposal, exceeding in effrontery anything I had ever listened to.

"Of course I not only refused this permission, but declared I would immediately write to you, imploring you, on no account or through any persuasion, to yield to it.

"They left me, and apparently so disconcerted and dissuaded by my reception that I did not believe

it necessary to address you on the subject. To my amazement, however, I learn from Kelson this morning that they actually did gain entrance to the house, and, by means which I have not yet ascertained, prosecuted the search they desired, and actually discovered the church registers of Portshannon, in one page of which is the entry of the marriage of Montague Bramleigh and Enrichetta Lami, with the name of the officiating clergyman and the attendant witnesses. Kelson forwards me a copy of this, while inviting me to inspect the original. My first step, however, has been to take measures to proceed against these persons for robbery; and I have sent over one of my clerks to Ireland to obtain due information as to the events that occurred, and to institute proceedings immediately. I do not believe that they committed a burglary, but it was a felonious entry all the same.

“ ‘ The important fact, however, lies in this act of registration, which, however fraudulently obtained, will be formidable evidence on a trial. You are certainly not happy in your choice of friends, if this Mr. Cutbill be one of them; but I hope no false sentiment will induce you to step between this man

and his just punishment. He has done you an irreparable mischief, and by means the most shameful and inexcusable. I call the mischief irreparable, since, looking to the line of argument adopted by our leading counsel on the last trial, the case chiefly turned on the discredit that attached to this act of marriage. I cannot therefore exaggerate the mischief this discovery has brought us. You must come over at once. The delay incurred by letter writing, and the impossibility of profiting by any new turn events may take, renders your presence here essential, and without it I declare I cannot accept any further responsibility in this case.

“ ‘ A very flippant note from Mr. Cutbill has just reached me. He narrates the fact of the discovered books, and says, “ It is not too late for B. to make terms. Send for him at once, and say that Count P. has no desire to push him to the wall.” It is very hard to stomach this man’s impertinence, but I hesitate now as to what course to take regarding him. Let me hear by telegraph that you are coming over; for I repeat that I will not engage myself to assume the full responsibility of the case, or take any decisive step without your sanction.’ ”

“What could Cutbill mean by such conduct?” cried Nelly. “Do you understand it at all, Gusty?” Bramleigh merely shook his head in token of negative.

“It all came of the man’s meddlesome disposition,” said Julia. “The mischievous people of the world are not the malevolent—*they* only do harm with an object; but the meddling creatures are at it day and night, scattering seeds of trouble out of very idleness.”

“Ju’s right,” said George; but in such a tone of habitual approval that set all the rest laughing.

“I need not discuss the question of permitting the search,” said Bramleigh; “these gentlemen have saved me *that*. The only point now open is, shall I go over to England or not?”

“Go by all means,” said Julia, eagerly. “Mr. Sedley’s advice cannot be gainsayed.”

“But it seems to me our case is lost,” said he, as his eyes turned to Nelly, whose face expressed deep sorrow.

“I fear so,” said she, in a faint whisper.

“Then why ask me to leave this, and throw myself into a hopeless contest? Why am I to quit

this spot, where I have found peace and contentment, to encounter the struggle that, even with all my conviction of failure, will still move me to hope and expectancy?"

"Just because a brave soldier fights even after defeat seems certain," said Julia. "More than one battle has been won from those who had already despatched news of their victory."

"You may laugh at me, if you like," said L'Estrange, "but Julia is right there." And they did laugh, and the laughter was so far good that it relieved the terrible tension of their nerves, and rallied them back to ease and quietude.

"I see," said Bramleigh, "that you all think I ought to go over to England; and though none of you can know what it will cost me in feeling, I will go."

"There's a messenger from the Podestà of Cattaro waiting all this time, Gusty, to know about this English sailor they have arrested. The authorities desire to learn if you will take him off their hands."

"George is my vice-consul. He shall deal with him," said Bramleigh, laughing, "for as the steamer

touches at two o'clock, I shall be run sharp to catch her. If any one will help me to pack, I'll be more than grateful."

"We'll do it in a committee of the whole house," said Julia, "for when a man's trunk is once corded he never goes back of his journey."

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRISONER AT CATTARO.

So much occupied and interested were the little household of the villa in Bramleigh's departure—there were so many things to be done, so many things to be remembered—that L'Estrange never once thought of the messenger from the Podestà, who still waited patiently for his answer.

“I declare,” said Julia, “that poor man is still standing in the hall. For pity's sake, George, give him some answer, and send him away.”

“But what is the answer to be, Ju? I have not the faintest notion of how these cases are dealt with.”

“Let us look over what that great book of instructions says. I used to read a little of it every day when we came first, and I worried Mr. Bramleigh so completely with my superior knowledge that he carried it off, and hid it.”

“ Oh, I remember now. He told me he had left it at the consulate, for that you were positively driving him distracted with official details.”

“ How ungrateful men are ! They never know what good ‘ nagging ’ does them. It is the stimulant that converts half the sluggish people in the world into reasonably active individuals.”

“ Perhaps we are occasionally over-stimulated,” said George, drily.

“ If so, it is by your own vanity. Men are spoiled by their fellowmen, and not by women. There now, you look very much puzzled at that paradox—as you’d like to call it—but go away and think over it, and say this evening if I’m not right.”

“ Very likely you are,” said he, in his indolent way ; “ but whether or not, you always beat me in a discussion.”

“ And this letter from the Podestà ; who is to reply, or what is the reply to be ? ”

“ Well,” said he, after a pause, “ I think of the two I’d rather speak bad Italian than write it. I’ll go down and see the Podestà.”

“ There’s zeal and activity,” said Julia, laughing. “ Never disparage the system of nagging after that.”

Poor George," said she, as she looked after him while he set out for Cattaro, "he'd have a stouter heart to ride at a six-foot wall than for the interview that is now before him."

"And yet," said Nelly, "it was only a moment ago you were talking to him about his vanity."

"And I might as well have talked about his wealth. But you'd spoil him, Nelly, if I wasn't here to prevent it. These indolent men get into the way of believing that languor and laziness are good temper, and as George is really a fine-hearted fellow, I'm angry when he falls back upon his lethargy for his character, instead of trusting, as he could and as he ought, to his good qualities."

Nelly blushed, but it was with pleasure. This praise of one she liked—liked even better than she herself knew—was intense enjoyment to her.

Let us now turn to L'Estrange, who strolled along towards Cattaro—now stopping to gather the wild anemonies which, in every splendid variety of colour, decked the sward—now loitering to gaze at the blue sea, which lay still and motionless at his feet. There was that voluptuous sense of languor in the silence—the loaded perfume of the air—the

drowsy hum of insect life—the faint plash with which the sea, unstirred by wind, washed the shore—that harmonized to perfection with his own nature; and could he but have had Nelly at his side to taste the happiness with him, he would have deemed it exquisite, for, poor fellow, he was in love after his fashion. It was not an ardent impulsive passion, but it consumed him slowly and certainly, all the same. He knew well that his present life of indolence and inactivity could not, ought not, to continue—that without some prompt effort on his part his means of subsistence would be soon exhausted; but as the sleeper begs that he may be left to slumber on, and catch up, if he may, the dream that has just been broken, he seemed to entreat of Fate a little longer of the delicious trance in which he now was living. His failures in life had deepened in him that sense of humility which in coarse natures turns to misanthropy, but in men of finer mould makes them gentle, and submissive, and impressionable. His own humble opinion of himself deprived him of all hope of winning Nelly's affection, but he saw—or he thought he saw—in her that love of

simple pleasures and of a life removed from all ambitions, that led him to believe she would not regard his pretensions with disdain. And then he felt that, thrown together into that closer intimacy their poverty had brought about, he had maintained towards her a studious deference and respect which had amounted almost to coldness, for he dreaded that she should think he would have adventured, in their fallen fortunes, on what he would never have dared in their high and palmy days.

“ Well,” said he, aloud, as he looked at the small fragment of an almost finished cigar, “ I suppose it is nigh over now ! I shall have to go and seek my fortune in Queensland, or New Zealand, or some far-away country, and all I shall carry with me will be the memory of this dream—for it is a dream—of our life here. I wonder shall I ever, as I have seen other men, throw myself into my work, and efface the thought of myself, and of my own poor weak nature, in the higher interests that will press on me for action.”

What should he do if men came to him for guidance, or counsel, or consolation. Could he play the hypocrite, and pretend to give what he had not

got? or tell them to trust to what he bitterly knew was not the sustaining principle of his own life? "This shall be so no longer," cried he; "if I cannot go heart and soul into my work, I'll turn farmer or fisherman. I'll be what I can be without shame and self-reproach. One week more of this happiness—one week—and I vow to tear myself from it for ever."

As he thus muttered, he found himself in the narrow street that led into the centre of the little town, which, blocked up by fruit-stalls and fish-baskets, required all his address to navigate. The whole population, too, were screaming out their wares in the shrill cries of the South, and invitations to buy were blended with droll sarcasms on rival productions and jeering comments on the neighbours. Though full of deference for the unmistakable signs of gentleman in his appearance, they did not the less direct their appeals to him as he passed, and the flatteries on his handsome face and graceful figure mingled with the praises of whatever they had to sell.

Half amused, but not a little flurried by all the noise and tumult around him, L'Estrange made his way through the crowd till he reached the dingy

entrance which led to the still dingier stair of the Podestà's residence.

L'Estrange had scarcely prepared the speech in which he should announce himself as charged with consular functions, when he found himself in presence of a very dirty little man, with spectacles and a skull cap, whose profuse civilities and ceremonious courtesies actually overwhelmed him. He assured L'Estrange that there were no words in Italian—nor even in German, for he spoke in both—which could express a fractional part of the affliction he experienced in enforcing measures that savoured of severity on a subject of that great nation which had so long been the faithful friend and ally of the imperial house. On this happy political union it was clear he had prepared himself historically, for he gave a rapid sketch of the first empire, and briefly threw off a spirited description of the disastrous consequences of the connection with France, and the passing estrangement from Great Britain. By this time, what between the difficulties of a foreign tongue, and a period with which the poor parson was not, historically, over conversant, he was completely mystified and bewildered. At last the great func-

tionary condescended to become practical. He proceeded to narrate that an English sailor, who had been landed at Ragusa by some Greek coasting-vessel, had come over on foot to Cattaro to find his consul as a means of obtaining assistance to reach England. There were, however, suspicious circumstances about the man that warranted the police in arresting him and carrying him off to prison. First of all, he was very poor, almost in rags, and emaciated to a degree little short of starvation. These were signs that vouched little for a man's character; indeed, the Podestà thought them damaging in the last degree; but there were others still worse. There were marks on his wrists and ankles which showed he had lately worn manacles and fetters—unmistakable marks; marks which the practised eyes of gendarmes had declared must have been produced by the heavy chains worn by galley-slaves, so that the man was, without doubt, an escaped convict, and might be, in consequence, a very dangerous individual.

As the prisoner spoke neither Italian nor German there was no means of interrogating him. They had therefore limited themselves to taking him into

custody, and now held him at the disposal of the consular authority, to deal with him as it might please.

“May I see him?” asked L’Estrange.

“By all means; he is here. We have had him brought from the prison awaiting your excellency’s arrival. Perhaps you would like to have him handcuffed before he is introduced. The brigadier recommends it.”

“No, no. If the poor creature be in the condition you tell me, he cannot be dangerous.” And the stalwart curate threw a downward look at his own brawny proportions with a satisfied smile that did not show much fear.

The brigadier whispered something in the Podestà’s ear in a low tone, and the great man then said aloud,—“He tells me that he could slip the handcuffs on him now quite easily, for the prisoner is sound asleep, and so overcome by fatigue that he hears nothing.”

“No, no,” reiterated L’Estrange. “Let us have no handcuffs; and with your good permission, too, I would ask another favour: let the poor fellow take his sleep out. It will be quite time enough for me to see him when he awakes.”

The Podestà turned a look of mingled wonder and pity on the man who could show such palpable weakness in official life ; but he evidently felt he could not risk his dignity by concurrence in such a line of conduct.

“ If your Excellency,” said he, “ tells me it is in this wise prisoners are treated in your country I have no more to say.”

“ Well, well ; let him be brought up,” said L’Estrange, hastily, and more than ever anxious to get free of this Austrian Dogberry.

Nothing more was said on either side while the brigadièr went down to bring up the prisoner. The half-darkened room, the stillness, the mournful ticking of a clock that made the silence more significant, all impressed L’Estrange with a mingled feeling of weariness and depression ; and that strange melancholy that steals over men at times, when all the events of human life seem sad-coloured and dreary, now crept over him, when the shuffling sounds of feet, and the clanging of a heavy sabre, apprised him that the escort was approaching.

“ We have no treaty with any of the Italian Governments,” said the Podestà, “ for extradition ;

and if a man be a galley-slave, as we suspect, we throw all the responsibility of his case on you." As he spoke, the door opened, and a young man with a blue flannel shirt and linen trowsers entered, freeing himself from the hands of the gendarmes with a loose shake, as though to say, "In presence of my countryman in authority, I owe no submission to these." He leaned on the massive rail that formed a sort of barrier in the room, and with one hand pushed back the long hair that fell heavily over his face.

"What account do you give of yourself, my man?" said L'Estrange, in a tone half-commanding, half-encouraging.

"I have come here to ask my consul to send me on to England, or to some seaport where I may find a British vessel," said the man, and his voice was husky and weak, like that of one just out of illness.

"How did you come to these parts?" asked L'Estrange.

"I was picked up at sea by a Greek trabaccolo, and landed at Antivari; the rest of the way I came on foot."

“Were you cast away? or how came it that you were picked up?”

“I made my escape from the Bagni at Ischia. I had been a galley-slave there.” The bold effrontery of the declaration was made still more startling by a sort of low laugh which followed his words.

“You seem to think it a light matter to have been at the galleys, my friend,” said L’Estrange, half reprovingly. “How did it happen that an Englishman should be in such a discreditable position?”

“It’s a long story—too long for a hungry man to tell,” said the sailor; “perhaps too long for your own patience to listen to. At all events, it has no bearing on my present condition.”

“I’m not so sure of that, my good fellow. Men are seldom sentenced to the galleys for light offences; and I’d like to know something of the man I’m called on to befriend.”

“I make you the same answer I gave before,—the story would take more time than I have well strength for. Do you know,” said he, earnestly, and in a voice of touching significance, “it is twenty-eight hours since I have tasted food?”

L'Estrange leaned forward in his chair, like one expecting to hear more, and eager to catch the words aright; and then rising, walked over to the rail where the prisoner stood. "You have not told me your name," said he, in a voice of kindly meaning.

"I have been called Sam Rogers for some time back; and I mean to be Sam Rogers a little longer."

"But it is not your real name?" asked L'Estrange, eagerly.

The other made no reply for some seconds; and then moving his hand carelessly through his hair, said, in a half-reckless way, "I declare, sir, I can't see what you have to do with my name, whether I be Sam Rogers, or—or—anything else I choose to call myself. To you—I believe, at least—to you I am simply a distressed British sailor."

"And you are Jack Bramleigh?" said L'Estrange, in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper, while he grasped the sailor's hands, and shook them warmly.

"And who are you?" said Jack, in a voice shaken and faltering.

"Don't you know me, my poor dear fellow? Don't you remember George L'Estrange?"

What between emotion and debility, this speech unmanned him so that he staggered back a couple of paces, and sank down heavily, not fainting, but too weak to stand, too much overcome to utter.

CHAPTER XII.

AT LADY AUGUSTA'S.

“THE Count Pracontal, my lady,” said a very grave-looking groom of the chambers, as Lady Augusta sat watching a small golden squirrel swinging by his tail from the branch of a camelia tree.

“Say I am engaged, Hislop—particularly engaged. I do not receive—or, wait; tell him I am much occupied, but if he is quite sure his visit shall not exceed five minutes, he may come in.”

Count Pracontal seemed as though the permission had reached his own ears, for he entered almost immediately, and, bowing deeply and deferentially, appeared to wait leave to advance further into the room.

“Let me have my chocolate, Hislop;” and, as the man withdrew, she pointed to a chair, and said, “There. When did you come back?”

Pracontal, however, had dropped on his knee

before her, and pressed her hand to his lips with a fervid devotion, saying, "How I have longed and waited for this moment."

"I shall ring the bell, sir, if you do not be seated immediately. I asked when you returned?"

"An hour ago, my lady—less than an hour ago. I did not dare to write; and then I wished to be myself the bearer of my own good news."

"What good news are these?"

"That I have, if not won my suit, secured the victory. The registries have been discovered—found in the very spot indicated in the journal. The entries are complete; and nothing is wanting to establish the legality of the marriage. Oh, I entreat you, do not listen to me so coldly. You know well for what reason I prize this success. You know well what gives its brightest lustre in my eyes."

"Pray be narrative now—the emotional can be kept for some other time. Who says that this means success?"

"My lawyer, Mr. Kelson. He calls the suit won. He proves his belief, for he has advanced me money to pay off my debt to Longworth, and to place me in a position of ease and comfort."

“And what is Kelson ; is he one of the judges?”

“Of course not. He is one of the leading solicitors of London ; a very grave, thoughtful, cautious man. I have shown you many of his letters. You must remember him.”

“No ; I never remember people ; that is, if they have not personally interested me. I think you have grown thin. You look as if you had been ill.”

“I have fretted a good deal—worried myself ; and my anxiety about you has made me sleepless and feverish.”

“About *me* ! Why, I was never better in my life.”

“Your looks say as much ; but I meant my anxiety to lay my tidings at your feet, and with them myself and my whole future.”

“You may leave the chocolate there, Hislop,” as the man entered with a tray ; “unless Count Pracontal would like some.”

“Thanks, my lady,” said he, bowing his refusal.

“You are wrong then,” said she, as the servant withdrew. “Hislop makes it with the slightest imaginable flavour of the cherry laurel ; and it is most soothing. Isn't he a love ?”

“Hislop?”

“No, my darling squirrel yonder. The poor dear has been ill these two days. He bit Sir Marcus Cluff, and that horrid creature seems to have disagreed with the darling, for he has pined ever since. Don't caress him—he hates men, except Monsignore Alberti, whom, probably he mistakes for an old lady. And what becomes of all the Bramleighs—are they left penniless?”

“By no means. I do not intend to press my claim farther than the right to the estates. I am not going to proceed for—I forget the legal word—the accumulated profits. Indeed, if Mr. Bramleigh be only animated by the spirit I have heard attributed to him, there is no concession that I am not disposed to make him.”

“What droll people Frenchmen are! They dash their morality, like their cookery, with something discrepant. They fancy it means ‘piquancy.’ What, in the name of all romance, have you to do with the Bramleighs? Why all this magnanimity for people who certainly have been keeping you out of what was your own, and treating your claim to it as a knavery?”

“ You might please to remember that we are related.”

“ Of course you are nothing of the kind. If *you* be the true prince, the others must be all illegitimate a couple of generations back. Perhaps I am embittered against them by that cruel fraud practised on myself. I cannot bring myself to forgive it. Now, if you really were that fine generous creature you want me to believe, it is of *me*, of *me*, Lady Augusta Bramleigh, you would be thinking all this while: how to secure *me* that miserable pittance they called my settlement; how to recompence *me* for the fatal mistake I made in my marriage; how to distinguish between the persons who fraudulently took possession of your property, and the poor harmless victim of their false pretensions.”

“ And is not this what I am here for? Is it not to lay my whole fortune at your feet?”

“ A very pretty phrase, that doesn't mean anything like what it pretends; a phrase borrowed from a vaudeville, and that ought to be restored to where it came from.”

“ Lord and Lady Culduff, my lady, wish to pay their respects.”

“ They are passing through,” said Lady Augusta, reading the words written in pencil on the card presented by the servant. “ Of course I must see them. You needn't go away, Count; but I shall not present you. Yes, Hislop, tell her ladyship I am at home. I declare you are always compromising me. Sit over yonder, and read your newspaper, or play with Felice.”

She had barely finished these instructions when the double door was flung wide, and Marion swept proudly in. Her air and toilette were both queenlike, and, indeed, her beauty was not less striking than either. Lord Culduff followed, a soft pleasant smile on his face. It might do service in many ways, for it was equally ready to mean sweetness or sarcasm, as occasion called for.

When the ladies had kissed twice, and his lordship had saluted Lady Augusta with a profound respect, dashed with a sort of devotion, Marion's eyes glanced at the stranger, who, though he arose, and only reseated himself as they sat down, neither lifted his glance nor seemed to notice them further.

“ We are only going through; we start at two o'clock,” said she, hurriedly.

“At one-forty, my lady,” said Lord Culduff, with a faint smile, as though shocked at being obliged to correct her.

“It was so kind of you to come,” said Lady Augusta; “and you only arrived this morning?”

“We only arrived half-an-hour ago.”

“I must order you some lunch; I’m sure you can eat something.”

“My lady is hungry; she said so as we came along,” said Lord Culduff, “allow me to ring for you. As for myself, I take Liebig’s lozenges and a spoonful of Curaçoa—nothing else—before dinner.”

“It’s so pleasant to live with people who are ‘dieted,’” said Marion, with a sneering emphasis on the word.

“So, I hear from Bramleigh,” interposed Lord Culduff, “that this man—I forget his name—actually broke into the house at Castello, and carried away a quantity of papers.”

“My lord, as your lordship is so palpably referring to me, and as I am quite sure you are not aware of my identity, may I hasten to say I am Count Pracontal de Bramleigh?”

“Oh, dear! have I forgotten to present you?”

said Lady Augusta, with a perfect simplicity of manner.

Marion acknowledged the introduction by the slightest imaginable bow and a look of cold defiance; while Lord Culduff smiled blandly, and professed his regret if he had uttered a word that could occasion pain.

“Love and war are chartered libertines, and why not law?” said the Viscount. “I take it that all stratagems are available; the great thing is, they should be successful.”

“Count Pracontal declares that he can pledge himself to the result,” said Lady Augusta. “The case, in fact, as he represents it, is as good as determined.”

“Has a jury decided, then?” asked Culduff.

“No, my lord; the trial comes on next term. I only repeat the assurance given me by my lawyer; and so far confirmed by him that he has made me large advances, which he well knows I could not repay if I should not gain my cause.”

“These are usually cautious people,” said the Viscount, gravely.

“It strikes me,” said Marion, rising, “that this sort of desultory conversation on a matter of such

importance is, to say the least, inconvenient. Even the presence of this gentleman is not sufficient to make me forget that my family have always regarded his pretension as something not very far from a fraud."

"I regret infinitely, madam," said Pracontal, bowing low, "that it is not a man has uttered the words just spoken."

"Lady Culduff's words, sir, are all mine," said Lord Culduff.

"I thank your lordship from my heart for the relief you have afforded me."

"There must be nothing of this kind," said Lady Augusta, warmly. "If I have been remiss in not making Count Pracontal known to you before, let me repair my error by presenting him now as a gentleman who makes me the offer of his hand."

"I wish you good morning," said Marion. "No, thank you; no luncheon. Your ladyship has given me fully as much for digestion as I care for. Good-by."

"If my congratulations could only shadow forth a vision of all the happiness I wish your ladyship," began Lord Culduff.

"I think I know, my lord, what you would say,"

broke she in, laughingly. "You would like to have uttered something very neat on well-assorted unions. There could be no better authority on such a subject; but Count Pracontal is toleration itself: he lets me tell my friends that I am about to marry him for money, just as I married poor Colonel Bramleigh for love."

"I am waiting for you, my lord. We have already trespassed too far on her ladyship's time and occupations." The sneering emphasis on the last word was most distinct. Lord Culduff kissed Lady Augusta's hand with a most devoted show of respect, and slowly retired.

As the door closed after them, Pracontal fell at her feet, and covered her hand with kisses.

"There, there, count; I have paid a high price for that piece of impertinence I have just uttered; but when I said it, I thought it would have given her an apoplexy."

"But you are mine—you are my own!"

"Nous en parlerons. The papers are full of breaches of promise; and if you want me to keep mine, you'll not make it odious to me by tormenting me about it."

“But, my lady, I have a heart; a heart that would be broken by a betrayal.”

“What a strange heart for a Frenchman! About as suitable to the Boulevards Italiens as snow shoes to the tropics. Monsieur de Pracontal,” said she, in a much graver tone, “please to bear in mind that *I* am a very considerable item in such an arrangement as we spoke of. The *whole* question is not what would make *you* happy.”

Pracontal bowed low in silence; his gesture seemed to accept her words as a command to be obeyed, and he did not utter a syllable.

“Isn't she handsome?” cried she, at length. “I declare, count, if one of your countrywomen had a single one of the charms of that beautiful face she'd be turning half the heads in Europe; and Marion can do nothing with them all, except drive other women wild with envy.”

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE INN AT CATTARO.

WHEN L'Estrange had carried off Jack Bramleigh to the inn, and had seen him engaged with an excellent breakfast, he despatched a messenger to the villa to say that he was not to be expected home by dinner-time, but would be back to tea "with a friend," for whom he begged Gusty Bramleigh's room might be prepared.

I shall not delay to chronicle all the doubt, the discussion, and the guessing that the note occasioned; the mere fact that George had ventured to issue an order of this kind without first consulting Julia, investing the step with a degree of mysteriousness perfectly inscrutable. I turn, however, to Cattaro, where L'Estrange and Jack sat together, each so eager to hear the other's tidings as to be almost too impatient to dwell upon himself.

To account for their presence in this remote spot, George, as briefly as he could, sketched the course of events at Castello, not failing to lay due stress on the noble and courageous spirit with which Augustus and Nelly had met misfortune. "All is not lost yet," said L'Estrange; "far from it; but even if the worst should come, I do not know of two people in the world who will show a stouter front to adversity."

"And your sister, where is she?" said Jack, in a voice scarce above a whisper.

"Here—at the villa."

"Not married?"

"No. I believe she has changed less than any of us. She is just what you remember her."

It was not often that L'Estrange attempted anything like adroitness in expression, but he did so here, and saw, in the heightened colour and sparkling eye of the other, how thoroughly his speech had succeeded.

"I wonder will she know me," said Jack, after a pause. "*You* certainly did not at first."

"Nor, for that matter, did *you* recognize *me*."

"Ah, but I did though," said Jack, passing his

hand over his brow, "but I had gone through so much, and my head was so knocked about, I couldn't trust that my senses were not deceiving me, and I thought if I make any egregious blunder now, these people will set me down for mad. That was the state I was in the whole time you were questioning me. I promise you it was no small suffering while it lasted."

"My poor fellow, what trials you must have gone through to come to this. Tell me by what mischance you were at Ischia."

With all a sailor's frankness, and with a modesty in speaking of his own achievements just as sailor-like, Jack told the story of the storm at Naples.

"I had no thought of breaking the laws," said he, bluntly. "I saw ships foundering, and small craft turning keel uppermost; on every side of me there was disaster and confusion everywhere. I had no time to inquire about the morals of the men I saw clinging to hencoops or holding on by stretchers. I saved as many as I could, and sorry enough I was to have seen many go down before I could get near them; and I was fairly beat when it was all over, or perhaps they'd not have captured me so easily. At

all events," said he, after a minute's silence, "they might have let me off with a lighter sentence, but my temper got the better of me in court, and when they asked me if it was not true that I had made greater efforts to save the galley-slaves than the soldiery, I told them it might have been so, for the prisoners, chained and handcuffed as they were, went down like brave men, while the royal troops yelled and screamed like a set of arrant cowards, and that whenever I pulled one of the wretches out of the water I was half ashamed of my own humanity. That speech settled me, at least the lawyer said so, and declared he was afraid to say a word more in defence of a man that insulted the tribunal and the nation together."

"And what was your sentence?"

"Death, commuted to the galleys for life; worse than any death! It's not the hardship or the labour, I mean. A sailor goes through more downright hard work on a blowy night than these fellows do in a year. It is the way a man brutalises when vice and crime make up the whole atmosphere of his life. The devil has a man's heart all his own, whenever hope deserts it, and you want to do wickedness just because it *is* wickedness. For three weeks before I

made my escape it was all I could do not to dash the turnkey's brains out when he made his night round. I told my comrade—the man I was chained to—what I felt, and he said, 'We all go through that at first, but when you're some years here you'll not care for that or anything.' I believe it was the terror of coming to that condition made me try to escape. I don't know that I ever felt the same ecstasy of delight that I felt as I found myself swimming in that fresh cold sea in the silence of a calm starry night. I'm sure it will be a memory that will last my lifetime. I thought of you all—I thought of long ago, of our happy evenings, and I pictured to my mind the way we used to sit around the fire, and I wondered what had become of my place: was I ever remembered, was I spoken of; could it be that at that very moment some one was asking, where was poor Jack? And how I wished you might all know that my last thoughts were upon you, that it was the dear old long ago was before me to the last. I was seventeen hours in the water. When they picked me up I was senseless from a sun-stroke, for the corks floated me long after I gave up swimming. I was so ill when I landed that I went to hospital;

impatient to see them, I have much to ask you about."

As they issued from the inn, it was, as L'Estrange surmised, to meet a most respectful reception from the townsfolk, who regarded Jack as a mountaineer chief of rank and station. They uncovered and made way for him as he passed, and from the women especially came words of flattering admiration at his handsome looks and gallant bearing.

"Are they commenting on the ass in the lion's skin?" said Jack, in a sly whisper; "is that what they are muttering to each other?"

"Quite the reverse. It is all in extravagant praise of you. The police are on the alert, too: they think there must be mischief brewing in the mountains, that has brought a great chief down to Cattaro."

Thus chatting and laughing they gained the outskirts of the town, and soon found themselves on one of the rural paths which led up the mountain.

"Don't think me very stupid, George, or very tiresome," said Jack, "if I ask you to go over again what you told me this morning. Such strange things have befallen me of late that I can scarcely distinguish

between fact and fancy. Now, first of all, have we lost Castello—and who owns it?”

“No. The question is yet to be decided; the trial will take place in about two months.”

“And if we are beaten, does it mean that we are ruined? Does it sweep away Marion and Nelly’s fortunes, too?”

“I fear so. I know little accurately, but I believe the whole estate is involved in the claim.”

“Gusty bears it well, you say!”

“Admirably. I never saw a man behave with such splendid courage.”

“I’ll not ask about Nelly, for I could swear for *her* pluck. She was always the best of us.”

If L’Estrange drank in this praise with ecstasy, he had to turn away his head, lest the sudden flush that covered his face should be observed.

“I have no wish to hear the story of this claim now; you shall tell it to me some other time. But just tell me, was it ever heard of in my father’s time?”

“I believe so. Your father knew of it, but did not deem it serious.”

“Marion, of course, despises it still; and what does Temple say?”

“Don't talk balderdash ; my head is weak enough already. If you're not ashamed of the tatterdemalion that comes back to you, it's more than I deserve. There now, go off, and do your business, and don't be long, for I'm growing very impatient to see them. Give me something to smoke till you come back, and I'll try and be calm and reasonable by that time.”

If L'Estrange had really anything to do in the town he forgot all about it, and trotted about from street to street, so full of Jack and his adventures that he walked into apple-stalls and kicked over egg-baskets amid the laughter and amusement of the people.

If he had told no more than the truth in saying that Jack was still like what he had been, there were about him signs of suffering and hardship that gave a most painful significance to his look, and more painful than even these was the poor fellow's consciousness of his fallen condition. The sudden pauses in speaking, the deep sighs that would escape him, the almost bitter raillery he used when speaking of himself, all showed how acutely he felt his altered state.

L'Estrange was in no wise prepared for the change half an hour had made in Jack's humour. The handsome dress of Montenegro became him admirably, and the sailor-like freedom of his movements went well with the easy costume. "Isn't this a most appropriate transformation, George?" he cried out. "I came in here looking like a pick-pocket, and I go out like a stage bandit!"

"I declare it becomes you wonderfully. I'll wager the girls will not let you wear any other dress."

"Ay, but my toilet is not yet completed. See what a gorgeous scarf I have got here—green and gold, and with a gold fringe that will reach to my boots, and the landlord insists on lending me his own silver-mounted sabre. I say, old fellow, have you courage to go through the town with me?"

"You forget you are in the last fashion of the place; if they stare at you now, it will be approvingly."

"What's the distance? Are we to walk?"

"Walk or drive, as you like best. On foot we can do it in an hour."

"On foot be it then; for though I am very

impatient to see them, I have much to ask you about."

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“ I believe so. Your father knew of it, but did not deem it serious.”

“ Marion, of course, despises it still ; and what does Temple say ? ”

“ One scarcely knows. I don't think they have had a letter from him since they left Ireland.”

“ See what a wise fellow I was !” cried he, laughing. “ I sank so low in life, that any change must be elevation. You are all great folk to *me* !”

There was a long and painful pause after this—each deep in his own thoughts. At last Jack asked suddenly, “ How is Marion? Is she happy in her marriage ?”

“ We hear next to nothing of her ; the newspapers till us of her being at great houses and in fine company, but we know no more.”

“ Of course she's happy then. When she was a child, she would only play with us if we made her a queen ; and though we often tried to rebel,—we were great levellers in our way,—she always kept us down, and whether we liked it or not, we had to admit the sovereignty.”

“ Your younger sister”—he did not call her Nelly—“ was not of this mould ?”

“ Not a bit of it ; she was the peace-maker, always on the side of the weak, and though she was a delicate child, she'd fight against oppression with the passion of a tigress. Wasn't it strange ?” said

he after a pause. "There we were, five of us, treated and reared exactly alike; in early life certainly there were no distinctions made, nor any favouritism practised. We were of the same race and blood, and yet no two of us were alike. Temple had perhaps some sort of resemblance to Marion, but he had not her bold daring spirit. Where *she* was courageous, *he'd* have been crafty. Whatever good there was amongst us, Nelly had it."

Another and longer pause now succeeded. "I say, George," cried Jack at last, "how do you mean to break it to the girls that I'm here? I take it, poor Nelly's nerves must have suffered sorely of late. Is she likely to stand a shock without injury?"

"It is exactly what I'm trying to resolve this moment. Flushed with the walk, and cheered by the fresh air, you don't look sickly now."

"Ah, my dear fellow, that's not the worst of it. It is the sight of me as recalling my fallen fortune,—that's what I fear for her; her last good-by to me was blended with joy at my promotion—I was going to take up my command! She has never seen me since my disgrace."

“ Don't call it that, Jack ; we all know there is no other blame attaches to you than rashness.”

“ When rashness can make a man forget his condition, it's bad enough ; but I'll not go back to these things. Tell me how I am to meet her.”

“ Perhaps it would be best I should first see Julia, and tell her you are here. I always like to ask her advice.”

“ I know that of old,” said Jack with a faint smile.

“ I'll leave you in the summer-house at the end of the garden there, till I speak with Julia.”

“ Not very long I hope.”

“ Not an instant ; she never requires a minute to decide on what to do : follow me now along this path, and I'll place you in your ambush. You'll not leave it till I come.”

“ What a lovely spot this seems, it beats Castello hollow !”

“ So we say every day. We all declare we'd like to pass our lives here.”

“ Let me be one of the party, and I'll say nothing against the project,” said Jack, as he brushed through a hedge of sweet briar, and

descended a little slope, at the foot of which a shady summer-house stood guardian over a well. "Remember now," cried he, "not to tax my patience too far. I'll give you ten minutes, but I won't wait twenty."

L'Estrange lost no time in hastening back to the house. Julia, he heard, was giving orders about the room for the stranger, and he found her actively engaged in the preparation. "For whom am I taking all this trouble, George?" said she, as he entered.

"Guess Julia, guess! Whom would you say was best worth it?"

"Not Mr. Cutbill,—whom Nelly fixed on,—not Sir Marcus Cluff, whose name occurred to myself, nor even the Pretender Count Pracontal; and now I believe I have exhausted the category of possible guests."

"Not any of these," said he, drawing her to his side. "Where is Nelly?"

"She went down to gather some roses."

"Not in the lower garden, I hope," cried he eagerly.

"Wherever she could find them best—but why

not there? and what do you mean by all this mystery?"

"Go and fetch her here at once," cried he. "If she should see him suddenly, the shock might do her great harm."

"See whom? see whom?" exclaimed she wildly. "Don't torture me this way!"

"Jack, her brother, Jack Bramleigh," and he proceeded to tell how he had found him, and in what condition: but she heard nothing of it all, for she had sunk down on a seat and sat sobbing with her hands over her face, then suddenly wiping the tears away, she rose up, and, while her voice trembled with each word, she said—"Is he changed, George? is he greatly changed?"

"Changed! yes, for he has been ill, and gone through all manner of hardships, and now he is dressed like a Montenegro chief, for we could get no other clothes, so that you'll scarcely know him."

"Let us find Nelly at once," said she, moving towards the door. "Come George,—come," and she was down the stairs, and across the hall, and out at the door, before he could follow her. In her agitated manner, and rapid expression, it was evident

she was endeavouring to subdue the deep emotion of her heart, and, by seeming to be occupied, to suppress the signs of that blended joy and sorrow which rack the nature more fatally than downright misery.

“ See, George, look there ! ” cried she wildly, as she pointed down a straight alley, at the top of which they were standing. “ There they are. Nelly has her arm round him. They have met, and it is all over ; ” and so saying, she hid her face on her brother’s shoulder, and sobbed heavily ; meanwhile the two came slowly forward, too much engaged with each other to notice those in front of them.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VILLA LIFE.

It is not, at this the eleventh hour of my story, I can stop to dwell on the life of the villa at Cattaro, though I am free to own it was about the sunniest bit of landscape our long journey has offered us.

Seated or lying on the grass, under the shade of a broad-leaved fig-tree, they listened to Jack's adventures, told with a quaint humour, of which they who knew him well could appreciate every shade and tint. In his days of prosperous fortune it was rare to hear him speak of himself: the routine life he led seemed to develop little or nothing of his real nature, but now, dependent as he was altogether on intrinsic qualities, for whatever estimation he might obtain, owing nothing to station, it was remarkable how his character had widened and expanded, how his sympathies with his fellow-men had increased.

Though nothing could be farther from his nature than any mawkish sentimentality, there was that show of trustfulness, that degree of hopeful belief in the world at large, which occasionally, led Julia to banter him on his optimism, and this, be it said passingly, was the only show of freedom between them; their manner to each other from the moment they met being marked by a studied reserve on each side.

“And surely, Prince,” said she, calling him by the title which, in honour of his dress, they had given him, “surely you must have met some charming creatures at the galleys. All the good qualities of human nature were not reserved for the cockpit or the steerage, or whatever it is.”

“Aye, even at the galleys they weren’t all bad, though it’s not exactly the sort of place men grow better in. I had a capital old fellow as comrade, and, I take shame to say, I ought to have thought of him before this. I say, George, have you any friends of influence at Naples? I wish I could get my old companion his liberty.”

“George has gone in to write to Augustus,” said Nelly; “but if Lord Culduff could answer your

purpose, I'd ask Marion to interest him in the matter."

"There's a dear good girl, do write a line to Marion; tell her it's the greatest favour she could bestow on me. The poor fellow is a political criminal; he only shot at the king I believe, and where they do that every week or so, it's hard to make it a capital offence. "I'll give you his name and his number when I go into the house."

"The post leaves early," said she, rising. "I must do this at once."

"Wait till I have finished this corner of my netting, and I'll go with you," said Julia.

"I say No to that," cried Jack. "I'm not going to be left alone here. If that's the way you treat a distinguished guest, the sooner he takes his leave the better. Stay where you are, Miss Julia."

"But I shall have no work, Master Jack. My net will be finished in a few minutes."

"Make cigarettes for me then. There's the bag," said he, lazily.

"I declare our Bohemianism progresses famously," said she, half tartly. "What do you think of this proposal, Nelly?" The question came late, how-

ever, for Nelly was already on her way to the house.

“Don’t go, that’s a good girl; don’t leave me here to my own thoughts—they’re not over jolly, I promise you, when I’m all alone.”

“Why, it’s your good spirits that amaze me,” replied she. “I don’t remember seeing you so cheerful or so merry long ago, as you are now.”

“You mean that I wasn’t so happy when I had more reason to be so? but what if I were to tell you out of what a sad heart this joy comes; how every day I say to myself, ‘This is to be the last of it.’ Not,” said he, in a bolder voice, “that I want to think about myself; this terrible disaster that has befallen my family is infinitely worse than anything that can attach to *me*. Even yet I cannot bring myself to believe this great smash.” She made no answer; and he went on: “I can’t make out if Nelly herself believes it. You all wear such cheerful faces, it’s not easy to understand in what spirit you take this reverse.”

“I think that your return has recompensed Nelly for everything.”

“She was always the best of us; it’s no great

praise that same ; but I mean—but it's no matter what I mean, for you are laughing at me already."

"No, indeed, I was not. If I smiled it was in thinking how little all your casualties have changed you."

"For that matter I suspect we may compliment or condemn each other, whichever it be, on equal terms."

"So at last I have got you to say a civil thing to me ; you tell me I am the same delightful fascinating creature you knew me long ago."

"I said nothing about fascination," said he, sternly.

"Not directly, of course. Your tact and delicacy were proof against such indiscretion, but you know you meant it."

"I'll tell you what I know : I know that I never saw a girl except yourself who liked to pain—aye, to torture—those who cared for her ; who would infinitely rather indulge her mood of mockery than—than——"

"Pray finish. It's not every day I have the fortune to hear such candour. Tell me what it is that I postpone to my love of sarcasm ?"

"I've done. I've been very rude to you, and I

ask your pardon. I was not very polished in my best of days, and I take it my late schooling has not done much to improve me. When I was coming here I swore an oath to myself that, no matter what you'd say to me, I'd not lose temper, nor make a resentful answer to anything; and now I see I've forgotten all my good intentions, and the best thing I can do is to ask you to forgive me, and go my ways."

"I'm not offended," said she, calmly, without raising her eyes. "I suppose if the balance were struck between us, I did more to provoke *you* than you did to wound *me*."

"What is this I hear about being provoked and wounded?" cried Nelly, coming up to where they sat.

"Your brother and I have been quarrelling, that's all. We thought it the pleasantest way to pass the time till you came back; and we have succeeded to perfection."

"I declare, Julia, this is too bad," cried Nelly.

"But why Julia? Why am I singled out as the culprit? Is he so above reproach that he could not be in the wrong?"

"I know I was in the wrong, and I've said so"

but now let Nelly be judge between us. Here is the way it began,——”

“The way what began, pray?” asked Julia.

“There now, that’s the way she pushes me to lose my temper, and when she sees I’m angry she grows all the calmer.”

“She’s downright disagreeable,” said Julia; “and I don’t know why a frank, outspoken sailor condescends to speak to her.”

“Well, he’s pretty sure to get the worst of it,” muttered he.

“Poor Jack,” said Nelly, caressingly. “And for all that he likes the ill treatment better than all the flatteries he meets elsewhere.”

“That shrug of his shoulders does not say so,” said Julia, laughing. “Come,” cried she, with a merry voice, “let us do something more worthy of this delicious morning; let us have a walk up the mountain; we can have shade all the way.”

“What’s that little dome;—there above the trees?” asked Jack.

“That’s the campanile of our little chapel. I’ll fetch the key, and we’ll go and visit it. We’ve not been to see it yet.”

“ But George would like to come with us ; ” and so saying, Julia hastened away to find him.

“ Oh, Nelly, I love her better than ever, and she scorns me even more,” said he, as he hid his head on his sister’s shoulder.

“ My poor, dear Jack ; how little you know her ! You never sorrowed over your last parting as she did. We have had all of us great reverses. They, as well as ourselves ; and that spirit of Julia’s—there is another name for it than mockery—has carried her through her troubles better than a more pretentious philosophy.”

“ But she is not even friendly with me, Nelly. None of you make me feel what I have sunk to as she does.”

“ There again you are unjust——”

“ Right or wrong, I’ll bear it no longer. I only wait now till Gusty comes back. I want to shake his hand once more, and then, girl, you have seen the last of me.”

Before Nelly could reply, Julia and her brother had joined them.

“ Here’s news,” said George, showing a letter, “ Augustus will be with us to-morrow ; he only

writes a few lines to say,—‘ I have nothing particularly cheering to report, and it will all bear keeping. I mean to be at home on Wednesday next. I am all impatience to see Jack ; the thought of meeting him more than repays me my reverses here. Give him my love.—A. BRAMLEIGH.’ ”

“ We shall have plenty to do to prepare for his arrival,” said Julia ; “ we must postpone our visit to the chapel. Would this illustrious prince condescend to help us to move tables and chests of drawers ? ”

Jack threw a very significant glance towards Nelly, as though to say, “ She is at the old game.”

“ Well, sir ? I wait your answer,” said Julia.

“ For twenty-four hours I am at your orders,” said Jack.

“ And then under what commander do you serve ? ”

“ Captain Fortune, I suspect,” said he, gravely. “ A gentleman, or lady, perhaps, that has shown me no especial fondness up to this.”

“ Jack says he is going to leave us,” said Nelly, as her eyes filled up.

“ But why ? ” cried George.

“ But why ? ” echoed Julia.

“ Haven’t I given proof enough,” said Jack, with a faint laugh, “ that I’m not what Miss Julia there calls a very logical animal ; that when I get a wayward fancy in my head I follow it as faithfully as if it was a strong conviction. Well, now, one of these moments has come to me ; and thinking, besides, that this pleasant sort of life here is not exactly the best preparation for a rougher kind of existence, I have made up my mind to slip my cable after I’ve seen Gusty.”

“ Well, then, let us profit by the short time left us,” said Julia, quietly. “ Come and help me in the house. I shall want you, too, George.”

“ You must do without me, Julia ; I have only just discovered a letter in my pocket, with the seal unbroken, that I ought to have answered at least a fortnight ago. It is from Sir Marcus Cluff,” said he, in a whisper, “ making me an offer of the vicarage at Hoxton.”

“ What a kind fellow.”

“ Who’s a kind fellow ?” asked Jack.

“ A certain gentleman, who made me the flattering proposal to become his wife and nurse, and who now offers to make George his chaplain.”

“It rains good luck here,” said Jack, with a half bitter smile; “why won’t it drift a little in *my* direction? By the way, Nelly, what about the letter I asked you to write to Marion?”

“It is written. I only want to fill in the name of the person; you told me to keep a blank for it.”

“I’ll go and fetch my pocket-book,” said he, and broke away at once, and hastened towards the house.

“I’m delighted at your good news, Julia,” said Nelly; “though it almost breaks my heart to think how desolate we shall soon be here.”

“Never anticipate evil fortune. We are still together, and let us not mar the present by glancing at a possible future.”

“And poor Jack,” began Nelly; but unable to finish, she turned away her head to hide the emotion she felt.

“He shall,—he must stay,” cried Julia.

“You know the price, dearest,” said Nelly, throwing herself into her arms.

“Well, who says I am not ready to pay it? There, that’s enough of folly. Let us now think of something useful.”

CHAPTER XV.

A VERY BRIEF DREAM.

JULIA was seldom happier than when engaged in preparing for a coming guest. There was a blended romance and fuss about it all that she liked. She liked to employ her fancy in devising innumerable little details, she liked the active occupation itself, and she liked best of all that storied web of thought in which she connected the expected one with all that was to greet him. How he would be pleased with this, what he would think of that? Would he leave that chair or that table where she had placed it? Would he like that seat in the window, and the view down the glen, as she hoped he might? Would the new-comer, in fact, fall into the same train of thought and mind as she had who herself planned and executed all around him.

Thus thinking was it that, with the aid of a stout

Dalmatian peasant-girl, she busied herself with preparations for Augustus Bramleigh's arrival. She knew all his caprices about the room he liked to occupy. How he hated much furniture, and loved space and freedom ; how he liked a soft and tempered light, and that the view from his window should range over some quiet secluded bit of landscape, rather than take in what recalled life and movement and the haunts of men.

She was almost proud of the way she saw into people's natures by the small dropping preferences they evinced for this or that, and had an intense pleasure in meeting the coming fancy. At the present moment, too, she was glad to busy herself in any mode rather than dwell on the thoughts that the first interval of rest would be sure to bring before her. She saw that Jack Bramleigh was displeased with her, and, though not without some misgivings, she was vexed that he alone of all should resent the capricious moods of a temper resolutely determined to take the sunniest path in existence, and make the smaller worries of life but matter for banter.

“He mistakes me altogether,” said she aloud,

but speaking to herself, "if he imagines that I'm in love with poverty and all its straits; but I'm not going to cry over them for all that. They may change me in many ways. I can't help that. Want is an ugly old hag, and one cannot sit opposite her without catching a look of her features; but she'll not subdue my courage, nor make me afraid to meet her eye. Here, Gretchen, help me with this great chest of drawers. We must get rid of it out of this, wherever it goes." It was a long and weary task, and tried their strength to the last limit; and Julia threw herself into a deep-cushioned chair when it was over, and sighed heavily. "Have you a sweetheart, Gretchen?" she asked, just to lead the girl to talk, and relieve the oppression that she felt would steal over her. Yes, Gretchen had a sweetheart, and he was a fisherman, and he had a fourth share in a "bragotza;" and when he had saved enough to buy out two of his comrades he was to marry her; and Gretchen was very fond, and very hopeful, and very proud of her lover, and altogether took a very pleasant view of life, though it was all of it in expectancy. Then Gretchen asked if the signorina had not a sweetheart, and Julia, after a

pause, and it was a pause in which her colour came and went, said "No!" And Gretchen drew nigh, and stared at her with her great hazel eyes, and read in her now pale face that the "No" she had uttered had its own deep meaning; for Gretchen, though a mere peasant, humble and illiterate, was a woman, and had a woman's sensibility under all that outward ruggedness.

"Why do you look at me so, Gretchen?" asked Julia.

"Ah, signorina," sighed she, "I am sorry—I am very sorry! It is a sad thing not to be loved."

"So it is, Gretty; but every day is not as nice and balmy and fresh as this, and yet we live on, and, taking one with the other, find life pretty enjoyable, after all!" The casuistry of her speech made no convert. How could it?—it had not any weight with herself.

The girl shook her head mournfully and gazed at her with sad eyes, but not speaking a word. "I thought, signorina," said she, at last, "that the handsome prince——"

"Go to your dinner, Gretchen. You are late already," said Julia, sharply, and the girl withdrew,

abashed and downcast. When thus alone, Julia sat still, wearied by her late exertions. She leaned her head on the arm of the chair, and fell fast asleep. The soft summer wind that came tempered through the window-blinds played with her hair and fanned her to heavy slumber—at first, dreamless slumber, the price of actual fatigue.

Jack Bramleigh, who had been wandering about alone, doing his best to think over himself and his future, but not making any remarkable progress in the act, had at length turned into the house, strolling from room to room, half unconsciously, half struck by the vastness and extent of the building. Chance at last led him along the corridor which ended in this chamber, and he entered, gazing carelessly around him, till suddenly he thought he heard the deep-drawn breathing of one in heavy sleep. He drew nigh, and saw it was Julia. The arm on which her head lay hung listlessly down, and her hand was half hid in the masses of her luxuriant hair. Noiselessly, stealthily, Jack crept to her feet, and crouched down upon the floor, seeming to drink in her long breathings with an ecstasy of delight. Oh, what a moment was that! Through how many years of life

was it to pass ; the one bright thread of gold in the dark tissue of existence. As such he knew it ; so he felt it ; and to this end he treasured up every trait and every feature of the scene. “ It is all that I shall soon have to look back upon,” thought he ; and yet to be thus near her seemed a bliss of perfect ecstasy.

More than an hour passed over, and he was still there, not daring to move lest he should awake her. At last he thought her lips seemed to murmur something. He bent down, close—so close that he felt her breath on his face. Yes, she was dreaming—dreaming, too, of long ago ; for he heard her mutter the names of places near where they had lived in Ireland. It was of some party of pleasure she was dreaming—her dropping words indicated so much ; and at last she said, “ No, no ; not Lisconnor. Jack doesn't like Lisconnor.” Oh, how he blessed her for the words ; and bending over, he touched the heavy curl of her hair with his lips. Some passing shock startled her, and she awoke with a start and a faint cry. “ Where am I ?” she cried ; “ what is this ?” and she stared at him with her wide full glance, while her features expressed terror and bewilderment.

“Don’t be frightened, dearest. You are safe, and at home with those who love you.”

“And how are you here? how came you here?” asked she, still terrified.

“I was strolling listlessly about, and chance led me here. I saw you asleep in that chair, and I lay down at your feet till you should awake.”

“I know nothing of it all,” muttered she. “I suppose I was dreaming. I fancied I was in Ireland, and we were about to go on some excursion, and I thought Marion was not pleased with me;—how stupid it is to try and disentangle a dream. You shouldn’t have been here, Master Jack. Except in fairy tales, young princes never take such liberties as this, and even then the princesses are under enchantment.”

“It is *I* that am under the spell, not *you*, Julia,” said he fondly.

“Then you are come to ask pardon for all your crossness, your savagery of this morning?”

“Yes, if you desire it.”

“No, sir; I desire nothing of the kind; it must be spontaneous humility. You must feel you have behaved very ill, and be very, very sorry for it.”

“ I have behaved very ill, and am very, very sorry for it,” repeated he softly after her.

“ And this is said seriously ? ”

“ Seriously.”

“ And on honour ? ”

“ On honour ! ”

“ And why is it said,—is it because I have asked you to say it ? ”

“ Partly ; that is, you have in asking given me courage to say it.”

“ Courage to ask pardon ! what do you mean by that ? ”

“ No ; but courage to make me hope you care to hear it. Oh, Julia, for once listen to me seriously and let me tell you how I love you ; how I have always loved you ; how you are to me all that is worth living for.”

“ It would be very nice to be told such pretty things, all the more being bound to believe them.”

“ And do you doubt ? ”

“ I'll tell you what there is not, nor can be any doubt about, Jack : that we are both very poor, and though I, woman-like, may feel it a very comforting and sustaining thought, through my poverty, that one

honest heart beats affectionately for me, yet I'm far from sure that it would be the same good influence over *your* life ; in fact, our bargain would be unequal, and I should have all the best of it."

" Oh, Julia, could you love me——"

" I think I've done things fully as hard," said she with affected thoughtfulness.

" Do you think me then so hopeless of advancement in life that I shall live and die the humble creature you now see me ? "

" No, I don't think that. I think if fate is not very dead against you, you are likely, whatever you turn to, or wherever you go, to make your way, but to do this, you must be heart-whole ; the selfishness that men call ambition cannot afford to be weighted with thought of another and another's welfare. Have a little patience with me—hear me out, for I am saying what I have thought over many and many an hour—what I have already told Nelly. There's an old Persian fable that says, the people who love on through life, are like two lovers who walk on opposite banks of a river and never meet till the river mingles with the ocean, which is eternity, and then they are parted no more. Are you satisfied

with this? I thought not. Well, what are your plans for the future?"

"I have scores of them. If I would take service with any of those South American republics, there is not one would not give me rank and station to-morrow. Brazil would take me. If I offered myself to the Sultan's Government, where I am known, I could have a command at once."

"I don't know that I like Turkish ideas on the marriage state," said she gravely.

"Julia, Julia! do not torture me," cried he anxiously. "It is my very life is at stake,—be serious for once;" he took her hand tenderly as he spoke, and was bending down to kiss it, when a heavy foot was heard approaching, and suddenly L'Estrange burst into the room with an open newspaper in his hand.

"I have got something here will surprise you, Jack," he cried. "You will be astonished to learn that you owe your escape from Ischia to no intrepidity of your own, that you had neither act nor part in the matter, but that it was all due to the consummate skill of a great diplomatist, who represented England at Naples. Listen to this—it is

‘our own special correspondent’ who writes:—‘I have naturally been curious to ascertain the exact history of Rogers’ escape, the journals of this country having invested that event with most melodramatic, I might go further, and say incredible details. My own knowledge of the precautions adopted against evasion, and the jealous care bestowed by the Neapolitan Government towards political prisoners, rendered me slow to believe that an unaided convict would have the slightest chance of effecting his liberation, and so far as I can learn, late events have not diminished in any degree my faith in this opinion.’

“ ‘If the stories which circulate in diplomatic circles are to be credited, it was H. B. M.’s special envoy at this Court who planned the whole achievement. He, seeing the fatal obduracy of the King’s Ministers, and the utter impracticability of all proceedings to instil into them notions of right or honour, determined, while prosecuting the cause with unusual ardour, to remove the basis of the litigation. By what bribery he effected his object, or of whom, I do not profess to know, though very high names are mentioned with unsparing freedom

here, but the fact remains, that when the last despatch of the Foreign Secretary was on its road to our envoy, Rogers was careering over the glad waters in one of H.M.'s steam-launches—thus relieving the controversy of a very material and interesting item in the negotiation. Of course, this has no other foundation than mere rumour, but it is a rumour that no one assumes to discredit, nor, indeed, any to deny, except the very discreet officials of our mission here, who naturally protest that it is a fabrication of the French press. The envoy is still here, and actively proceeding against the Government for an indemnity for unjust imprisonment.' And now, Jack, here is the best of all. Listen to this: 'So sensible are our ministers at home of the great service rendered by this adroit measure, the relief experienced by the removal of what at any moment might have become the very gravest of all questions—that of peace or war—that no reward is deemed too high for its distinguished author, and his Excellency Lord Viscount Culduff'—Culduff—'

"Lord Culduff!" cried Jack and Julia, in amazement.

“ ‘ Viscount Culduff has been offered the post of ambassador at Constantinople ! ’ ”

Jack snatched the paper from his hands, and stared in mute amazement at the lines.

“ And is this the way fortunes are made in the world ? ” cried he at last.

“ Only in the great walks of life, Jack,” said Julia. “ Small people talk and labour, take service in Argentine republics, or fight for Mussulmen ; distinguished people fire but one shot, but it always explodes in the enemy’s magazine.”

“ I wonder what he would have thought if he had known for whom he was negotiating,” said Jack, drily. “ I half suspect my distinguished brother-in-law would have left me in chains far rather than drive down the Corso with me.”

“ I declare—no, I won’t say the spiteful thing that crossed my mind—but I *will* say, I’d like to have seen a meeting between you and your brother Temple.”

“ You think he’d have been so ashamed of me,” said Jack, with a laugh.

“ Not a bit of it. *You* might possibly have been ashamed of the situation—shocked with being such

an unworthy member of a great house—but *he*, Temple, would have accepted you like a fever or an ague—a great calamity sent from above—but he would not have felt shame, any more than if you had been the scarlatina. Look at poor George,” cried she, with a merry laugh. “He thinks I’ve said something very wicked, and he feels he ought to deplore it, and possibly rebuke me.”

Jack could not help laughing at the rueful expression of L’Estrange’s face, and his emotion was catching, for the others joined in the laugh, and in this merry mood returned to the garden.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RETURN HOME.

THE morning that followed this scene broke very happily on the villa, for Augustus was to arrive by the afternoon packet, and all were eager to meet him. His telegram said, "Cutbill is with me ; but I do not know if he will stop." And this announcement, indeed, more than tempered the pleasure they felt at the thought of meeting Augustus.

Jack, whose sailor's eye had detected a thin streak of smoke in the sky long ere the others had seen it, and knew by what time the steamer might arrive, hastened down to the shore to meet his brother alone, not wishing that the first meeting should be observed by others. And he was so far right. Men as they were,—tried and hardened by the world's conflict,—they could not speak as they clasped each other in their arms ; and when they separated to gaze at each

other's faces, their eyes swam in heavy tears. "My poor fellow!" was all that Augustus could say for several minutes, till, struck by the manly vigour and dignified bearing of the other, he cried out, "What a great powerful fellow you have grown, Jack. You are twice as strong as you used to be."

"Strong enough, Gusty; but I suppose I shall need it all. But how comes it that you have grey hair here?"

"You find me terribly changed, Jack? I have aged greatly since we met."

"You are tired now, old fellow. A little rest and the pleasant care of the villa will soon set you up again."

"Perhaps so. At all events I have strength enough for what I am called on to bear. How are they all?"

"Well and hearty. I'd say jollier than I ever saw them before."

"What a noble girl is Nelly."

"Ay, and her companion, too. I tell you, Gusty, there's the same comrade spirit amongst girls that there is in a ship's company; and where good ones come together, they make each other better. But tell me now of yourself. What's your news?"

“Not good; far from it. I believe, indeed, our cause is ‘up.’ He—Pracontal I mean—intends to behave handsomely by us. There will be no severity used. Indeed, he means to go further; but I’ll have time enough for all this later on. I’m so glad to see you again, my poor dear fellow, that I have no mind to think of anything else.”

“How did you get rid of Cutbill?”

“I haven’t got rid of him; he is on board there. I don’t think he means to land. I suspect he’ll go on with the steamer to-night; and he is so ashamed to show, that he is snug in his berth all this time.”

“But what does he mean by that?”

“He’s in a scrape, Jack, and had to get away from England to save himself from a gaol; but I’ll tell you the story this evening,—or better still, I’ll make him tell you, if you can manage to persuade him to come on shore:”

“That he shall do,” said Jack. “He behaved like a trump to me once when I was in trouble; and I don’t forget it.” And so saying, he hastened on board the packet, and hurried below, to re-appear in a few minutes, holding Cutbill by the collar, as though he were his prisoner.

“Here’s the culprit,” cried Jack; “and if he won’t land his luggage, he must take to a Montenegro rig like mine; and he’ll become it well.”

“There, don’t collar me that fashion. See how the fellows are all staring at us. Have you no decency?”

“Will you come quietly, then?”

“Yes; let them hand up my two trunks and my violin case. What a droll place this is.”

“There’s many a worse, I can tell you, than our villa yonder. If it were my own, I’d never ask to leave it.”

“Nor need you, Jack,” whispered Augustus. “I’ve brought back money to buy it; and I hope it will be our home this many a day.”

“What’s this scrape of yours, Cutty?” said Jack, as they made their way homewards. “Whom have you been robbing this time, or was it forgery?”

“Let him tell you,” said Cutbill, doggedly, as he motioned with his hand towards Gusty.

“It’s a mixed case of robbery with housebreaking,” said Augustus. “Pracontal had taken it into his head that certain papers of great value to himself were concealed in some secret press in our house at

Castello ; and Cutbill was just as convinced that there were no papers and no press, and that the whole was a dream or a delusion. They argued the case so often that they got to quarrel about it."

"No, we didn't quarrel," broke in Cutbill, sulkily ; "we betted."

"Yes, that is more correct. Pracontal was so firmly persuaded that the papers existed that he offered three to one on it, and Cutbill, who likes a good thing, took it in hundreds."

"No. I wish I had. It was in fifties."

"As they had no permission to make the search, which required to break down the wall, and damage a valuable fresco——"

"No. It was under the fresco, in a pedestal. I'd engage to make it good for thirty shillings," broke in Cutbill.

"Well, we'll not dispute that. The essential point is, that Pracontal's scruples would not permit him to proceed to an act of depredation, but that Cutbill had more resolution. He wanted to determine the fact."

"Say that he wanted to win his money, and you'll be nearer the mark," interposed Cutbill.

“ Whichever way we take it, it amounts to this, Pracontal would not be a housebreaker, and Cutbill had no objection to become one. I cannot give you the details of the infraction—perhaps *he* will.”

Cutbill only grunted, and the other went on,—
 “ However he obtained entrance, he made his way to the place indicated, smashed the wall, and dragged forth a box with four or five thick volumes, which turned out to be the parish registries of Portshannon for a very eventful period, at least a very critical one for us, for, if the discovery loses Mr. Cutbill his fifty pounds, it places the whole estate in jeopardy.”

“ That’s the worst of it,” cried Cutbill. “ My confounded meddling has done it all.”

“ When my lawyer came to hear what had occurred, and how, he lost no time in taking measures to proceed against Cutbill for a felony; but Master C. had got away, and was already hiding in Germany, and our meeting on the steamboat here was a mere hazard. He was bound for—where was it, Cutbill?”

“ Albania. I want to see the salt mines. There’s something to be done there now that the Turks are

not sure they'll own the country this time twelve-month."

"At all events, it's better air than Newgate," said Jack.

"As you politely observe, sir, it's better air than Newgate. By the way, you've been doing a little stroke of work as a gaolbird latterly—is it jolly?"

"No; it ain't exactly jolly; it's too monotonous for that. And then the diet."

"Ah, there's the rub! It's the skilly, it's the four-ounce system, I'm afraid of. Make it a good daily regimen, and I'll not quarrel with the mere confinement, nor ask for any extension of the time allotted to exercise."

"I must say," said Jack, "that, for a very acute and ingenious gentleman, this same piece of burglary was about one of the stupidest performances I ever heard of."

"Not so fast, admiral, not so fast. I stood on a double event. I had lent Pracontal a few hundreds, to be repaid by as many thousands if he established his claim. I began to repent of my investment, and my bet was a hedge. Do you see, old fellow, if there were no books, I pocketed a hundred and fifty. If

the books turned up, I stood to win on the trial. You may perceive that Tom Cutbill sleeps like a weazel, and has always one eye open."

"Was it a very friendly part, then, to lend a man money to prosecute a claim against your own friend?" asked Jack.

"Lord love ye, I'd do that against my brother. The man of business and the desk is one thing, the man of human feelings and affections is another. If a man follows any pursuit worth the name of a pursuit, the ardour to succeed in it will soon swamp his scruples; aye, and not leave him one jot the worse for it. Listen to me a minute. Did you ever practise fly-fishing? Well, can you deny it is in principle as ignoble a thing as ever was called sport? It begins in a fraud, and it finishes with a cruelty; and will you tell me that your moral nature, or any grand thing that you fancy dignifies you, was impaired or stained when you landed that eight-pound trout on the grass?"

"You forget that men are not trout, Master Cutbill."

"There are a good number of them gudgeons, I am happy to say," cried he. "Give me a light for

my cigar, for I am sick of discussion. Strange old tumble-down place this—might all be got for a song, I'd swear. What a grand spec it would be to start a company to make a watering-place of it: 'The Baths of Cattaro, celebrated in the time of Dioclesian'—eh? Jack, doesn't your mouth water at the thought of 'preliminary expenses?'"

"I can't say it does. I've been living among robbers lately, and I found them very dull company."

"The sailor is rude; his manners smack of the cockpit," said Cutbill, nudging Augustus in the side. "Oh, dear, how I'd like a commission to knock this old town into a bathing machine."

"You'll have ample time to mature your project up at the villa. There, you see it yonder."

"And is that the British flag I see waving there? Wait a moment till I master my emotion, and subdue the swelling feelings of my breast."

"I'll tell you what, Master Cutbill," said Jack, sternly, "if you utter any stupid rubbish against the Union Jack, I'll be shot if I don't drop you over the sea wall for a ducking; and, what's more, I'll not apologize to you when you come out."

“Outrage the second. The naval service is not what I remember it.”

“Here come the girls,” said Augustus. “I hear Julia’s merry laugh in the wood.”

“The L’Estrange girl, isn’t it?” asked Cutbill; and though Jack started and turned almost as if to seize him, he never noticed the movement.

“Miss L’Estrange,” said Augustus Bramleigh.

“Why didn’t you say she was here, and I’d not have made any ‘bones’ about stopping? I don’t know I was ever as spooney as I was about that girl up at Albano. And didn’t I work like a negro to get back her two thousand pounds out of that precious coal mine? Aye, and succeeded too. I hope she knows it was Tom Cutbill saved the ship. Maybe she’ll think I’ve come to claim salvage.”

“She has heard of all your good-nature, and is very grateful to you,” said Gusty.

“That’s right; that’s as it ought to be. Doing good by stealth always strikes me as savouring of a secret society. It’s Thuggee, or Feenian, or any other dark association you like.”

“I’ll go forward and meet them, if you’ll permit me,” said Augustus, and, not waiting a reply, hurried on towards the wood.

“Look here, Master Jack,” said Cutbill, stopping short, and facing round in front of him. “If you mean as a practice to sit upon me on every occasion that arises, just please to say so.”

“Nothing of the kind, man; if I did, I promise you once would be quite enough.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“Shake hands then, and let us have no more squabbling. If you ever find me getting into shoal-water, and likely to touch a sandbank, just call out ‘stop her!’ and you’ll see how I’ll reverse my engine at once. It’s not in my line, the locomotives, but I *could* drive if I was put to it, and I know well every good lesson a man acquires from the practice.”

“What do you think of this cause of ours, Cutty; how does it look to your eyes?”

“Just as dark as thunder! Why you go to trial at all next term I can’t make out. Pracontal’s case is clear as noonday. There’s the proof of the marriage,—as legal a marriage as if an archbishop celebrated it, and there’s the registry of birth, and there is, to confirm all, old Bramleigh’s letters. If

you push on after such a show of danger signals as these, it is because you must like a smash."

"You'd strike then without firing a shot?"

"To be sure I would, if it was only to save the expense of the powder; besides, Pracontal has already declared, that if met by an amicable spirit on your brother's part, there are no terms he would not accede to, to secure recognition by your family, and acceptance as one of you."

"I'm sure I don't see why he should care for it."

"Nor I, for the matter of that. If there's a lot in life I'd call enviable, it would be to be born in a foundling hospital, and inherit ten thousand a year. A landed estate, and no relations, comes nearer to my ideas of Paradise than anything in Milton's poems."

"Here they come," cried Jack, as a merry group issued from the road, and came joyously forward to meet them.

"Here's this good fellow Tom Cutbill come to spend some days with us," said Jack, as the girls advanced to greet him.

"Isn't it kind of him?" said Cutbill, "isn't it like that disinterested good-nature that always marks

him? Of course I'm heartily welcome! how could it be otherwise. Miss Bramleigh, you do me proud. Miss Julia, your slave. Ah, your reverence! let's have a shake of your devout paw. Now I call this as pleasant a place for a man to go through his sentence of transportation as need be. Do the ladies know what I'm charged with?"

"They know nothing, they desire to know nothing," said Augustus. "When we have dined and had our coffee, you shall make your own confession; and that only if you like it, and wish to disburden your conscience."

"My conscience is pretty much like my balance at my banker's,—it's a mighty small matter, but somehow it never troubles me; and you'll see by-and-by that it doesn't interfere with my appetite."

"You saw my sister at Naples, Mr. Cutbill," said Nelly, "how was she looking?"

"Decidedly handsome, and as haughty as handsome; as an Irish friend who was walking with me one day her carriage passed, observed, 'A bow from her was the next thing to a black-eye.'"

"Marion's pride always became her," said Nelly coldly.

“It must be a comfort to her to feel she has a great stock of what suits her constitution.”

“And the noble Viscount,” asked Jack, “how was he looking?”

“As fresh as paint. The waxworks in the museum seemed faded and worn after him. He was in an acute attack of youth, the day I dined with him last, and I hope his system has not suffered for it.”

“Stop her,” muttered Jack, with a sly look at Cutbill; and to the surprise of the others, that astute individual rejoined, “Stop her, it is.”

“We dine at four, I think,” said Bramleigh, “and there’s just time to dress. Jack, take charge of Cutbill, and show him where he is to lodge.”

“And is it white choker and a fiddle coat? Do you tell me you dress for dinner?” asked Cutbill.

“Mr. Cutbill shall do exactly as he pleases,” said Julia; “we only claim a like privilege for ourselves.”

“You’ve got it now, Tom Cutbill,” said he sorrowfully, “and I hope you like it.”

And with this they went their several ways; Jack alone lingering in the garden in the hope to have one word with Julia, but she did not return, and his “watch on deck,” as he called it, was not relieved.

CHAPTER XVII.

LADY CULDUFF'S LETTER.

A LONG letter, a letter of several pages, from Marion reached the villa ; and though it is not my intention to ask the reader to listen to it textually or throughout, I crave permission to give certain parts of its contents.

As Lady Culduff prospered in the world, she became what she thought "devout," and perpetually reminded all around her that she was well aware she was living in a very sinful world, and keeping daily company with transgressors ; and she actually brought herself to believe that by a repeated reference to the wickedness of this life, she was entering a formal protest against sin, and qualifying herself, at this very cheap price, for something much better hereafter.

She was—and it was a pet phrase with her—

“resigned” to everything : resigned to Lord Culduff’s being made a grand cross and an ambassador, with the reasonable prospect of an earldom ; resigned to her own great part—and was it not a great part?—in this advancement ; resigned to be an ambassadress ! That she was resigned to the ruin and downfall of her family, especially if they should have the delicacy and good taste to hide themselves somewhere, and not obtrude that ruin and downfall on the world, was plainly manifest ; and when she averred that, come what might, we ought to be ever assured that all things were for the best, she meant in reality to say it was a wise dispensation that sent herself to live in a palace at Pera, and left her brothers and sisters to shiver out existence in barbarism.

There was not a shadow of hypocrisy in all this. She believed every word she said upon it. She accepted the downfall of her family as her share of those ills which are the common lot of humanity ; and she was very proud of the fortitude that sustained her under this heavy trial, and of that resignation that enabled her not to grieve over these things in an unseemly fashion, or in any way that might tell on her complexion.

“After that splendid success of Culduff’s at Naples,” wrote she, “of which the newspapers are full, I need not remind you that we ought to have had Paris, and, indeed, must have had it, but the Ministry made it a direct and personal favour of Culduff that he would go and set that troublesome Eastern question to rights. As you know nothing of politics, dear Nelly, and, indeed, are far happier in that ignorance, I shall not enter upon what, even with the fullest explanation, would only bewilder you. Enough if you know that we have to out-manceuvre the Russians, baffle the French, and bully the Greeks; and that there is not for the task Culduff’s equal in England. I think I see your astonishment that I should talk of such themes: they were not certainly the sort of subjects which once occupied our thoughts: but, my dear Nelly, in linking your fate to that of a man of high ambition, you accept the companionship of his intellect, instead of a share in his heart. And, as you well know I always repudiated the curate and cottage theory, I accept the alternative without repining. Can I teach you any of this philosophy, Nelly, and will it lighten the load of your own sorrows to learn how I have come to bear mine? It

is in the worldliness of people generally lies their chief unhappiness. They will not, as Culduff says, 'accept the situation.' Now we have accepted it, we submit to it, and, in consequence, suffer fewer heart-burnings and repinings than our neighbours. Dear Augustus never had any costly tastes; and as for yourself, simplicity was your badge in everything. Temple is indeed to be pitied, for Temple, with money to back him, might have made a respectable figure in the world and married well; but Temple a poor man, must fall down to a second-class legation, and look over the Minister's larder. Culduff tried, but failed to make something of him. As C. told him one day, you have only to see Charles Mathews act, to be convinced that to be a coxcomb a man must be consummately clever; and yet it is exactly the 'rôle' every empty fellow fancies would suit him. T. resented this, well meant as it was, and resigned his secretaryship. He has gone over to England, but I do not imagine with much prospect of re-employment.

"Do not think, my dear Nelly, of quitting your present refuge. You are safe now, and in harbour, and be slow to adventure on that wide ocean of life

where shipwrecks are occurring on every hand. So long as one is obscure, poverty has no terrors. As Culduff says, you may always wear a ragged coat in the dark. It is we, who unfortunately must walk in the noonday, cannot be seen unless in fine raiment. Do not mistake me, however. I say this without complaint ; I repine at nothing.

“ I had written so much of my letter, dear Nelly, intending to finish it at Rome ; but Culduff is obliged to hurry on to Ischl, where some great diplomatic gathering is now assembled, and I must omit a number of things I desire to say to you.

“ Culduff thinks we must call on Lady Augusta as we go through. I own I have done my best to avoid this, and if I must go, it will not be in the best of tempers. The oddest thing of all is, C. dislikes her fully as much as I do ; but there is some wonderful freemasonry among these people that obliges them, like the members of a secret society, to certain ‘ égards ’ towards each other ; and I am satisfied he would rather do a positive wrong to some one in middle-class life than be wanting in some punctilio or attention to a person of her condition. I have often been much provoked by displays of this

sentiment, needlessly paraded to offend my own sense of propriety. I shall add a line after my visit.

“ Rome.

“ I have news for you. M. Pracontal—if this be his name—not only takes your estates, but your step-mother. The odious woman had the effrontery to tell us so to our faces. How I bore it, what I said, or felt or suffered, I know not. Some sort of fit, I believe, seized me, for Culduff sent for a physician when I got back to the hotel, and our departure was deferred.

“ The outrage of this conduct has so shaken my nerves that I can scarcely write, nor is my sense of indignation lessened by the levity with which it pleases Culduff to treat the whole matter. ‘ It is a bold coup—a less courageous woman would have recoiled from it—she is very daring.’ This is what he says of her. She has the courage that says to the world, ‘ I am ready to meet all your censures and your reproaches;’ but I never heard this called heroism before. Must I own to you, Nelly, that what overwhelms me most in this disgraceful event is the confidence it evinces in this man’s cause. ‘ You may swear,’ said Culduff, ‘ that she is backing

the winner. Women are timid gamblers, and never risk their money without almost every chance in their favour.' I know that my lord plumes himself on knowing a great deal about us, prompting him at times to utter much that is less than complimentary; but I give you this opinion of his here for what it is worth, frankly owning that my dislike to the woman is such I can be no fair judge of any case into which she enters.

“Pracontal—I only saw him for an instant—struck me as a third-class Frenchman, something between a ‘sous-officier’ of cavalry and a commis-voyageur; not ill-looking, and set up with that air of the soldier that in France does duty for dignity. He had a few hasty words with Culduff, but did not persist nor show any desire to make a row in presence of ladies. So far, his instincts as a corporal guided him safely. Had he been led by the commis-voyageur side of his character, we should have had a most disgraceful scene, ending by a hostile meeting between a British peer and a bagman.

“ My nerves have been so shaken by this incident, and my recollection is still so charged with this odious woman's look, voice, and manner, that I cannot trust myself to say more. Be assured, dear

Nelly, that in all the miserable details of this great calamity to our family, no one event has occurred equal in poignant suffering to the insult I have thus been subjected to.

“Culduff will not agree to it, but I declare to you she was positively vulgar in the smirking complacence in which she presented the man as her future husband. She was already *passée* when she married my father, and the exuberant joy at this proposal revealed the old maid's nature. C., of course, calls her charming, a woman of very attractive qualities, and such like; but men of a certain age have ideas of their own on these subjects, and, like their notions on cookery, make no converts among people under forty. I believe I told him so, and, in consequence, the whole theme has been strictly avoided by each of us ever since.”

The remainder of the letter was devoted to details as to her future life at Constantinople, and the onerous duties that would devolve on her as ambassadress. She hinted also to a time when she would ask dear Nelly to come and visit her; but, of course, until matters were fully settled and concluded, she could not expect her to leave dear Gusty.

The postscript ran thus :—“Culduff meant to have given some small Church promotion to young L'Estrange, and, indeed, believed he had done so ; but some difficulty has arisen. It is either not his turn, or the Bishop is troublesome, or the Ecclesiastical Commissioners—if there be such people—are making objections. If he—I mean L'Estrange—be still disengaged, would it be wise to offer him the chaplaincy to the embassy? I mean wise as regards ourselves ; for I take it the sister may be still unmarried, and, if she be like what I remember her, a person not easily suppressed, nor at all indisposed to assume airs of perfect equality, even with those separated from her by a whole hemisphere of station. Give me your candid advice on this point, not thinking of *them*, but of *me*, for, though I feel Julia—is not that her name?—would be insupportable, the parson himself would be very useful, and I think a comfort to me.

“Of course you will not consult any one upon this matter. It is your own personal opinion I want, and you will give it to me, knowing me and my prejudices—I suppose I had better call them—and not thinking of your own leanings and likings for

the girl. She may, for aught I know, have changed. Culduff has some wise saw about acid wines growing dry by age; I don't know whether young ladies mellow in this fashion, but Julia was certainly tart enough once to have tested the theory, and might be the 'Amontillado' of old maids by this time."

It may be imagined that after a sally of this kind it was not easy for the writer to recover that semi-moralizing vein in which the letter opened. Nor did she. The conclusion was abrupt, and merely directed Nelly to address her next to the Summer Palace at Therapia; "for those horrid people, our predecessors, have left the embassy-house in such a condition it will take weeks and several thousand pounds to make it habitable. There must be a vote taken 'in supply' on this. I am writing Greek to you, poor child; but I mean they must give us money, and, of course, the discussion will expose us to many impertinences. One writer declared that he never knew of a debate on the estimates without an allusion to Lord Culduff's wig. We shall endure this—if not with patience, without resentment. Love to dear Gusty, and believe me your affectionate sister,

"MARION CULDUFF."

Such were the most striking passages of a long letter which, fortunately for Nelly, Mr. Cutbill's presence at the breakfast-table rescued her from the indiscretion of reading aloud. One or two extracts she did give, but soon saw that the document was one which could not be laid on the table, nor given without prejudice to the public service. Her confusion, as she crumpled up the paper, and thrust it back into its envelope, was quickly remarked, and Mr. Cutbill, with his accustomed tact, observed, "I'd lay a 'fiver' we've all of us been led out for a canter in that epistle. It's enough to see Miss Ellen's face to know that she wouldn't read it out for fifty pounds. Eh, what!" cried he, stooping and rubbing his leg; "I told you to say, 'Stop her,' Master Jack, when you wanted to take weigh off, but I never said, Kick my shins."

This absurd exclamation, and the laugh it provoked, was a lucky diversion, and they arose from table without another thought on Marion's epistle.

"Has Nelly shown you Marion's note?" asked Jack, as he strolled with Julia through the garden.

"No, and it is perhaps the only letter I ever knew her to get without handing me to read."

“ I suspect, with Cutbill, that we all of us catch it in that pleasant document.”

“ *You* perhaps are the only one who has escaped.”

“ As for *me*, I am not even remembered. Well, I'll bear even that, if I can be sure of a little sympathy in another quarter.”

“ Master Jack, you ask for too many professions. I have told you already to-day, and I don't mean to repeat it for a week, that you are not odious to me.”

“ But will you not remember, Julia, the long months of banishment I have suffered? Will you not bear in mind that if I have lived longingly for this moment, it is cruel now to dash it with a doubt.”

“ But it is exactly what I am not doing! I have given you fully as much encouragement as is good for you. I have owned—and it is a rash confession for a girl to make at any time—that I care for you more than any part of our prospects for the future could warrant, and if I go one step further there will be nothing for it but for you to buy a bragotza and turn fisherman, and for me to get a basket and sell pilchards in the piazza.”

“ You needn't taunt me with my poverty, I feel it bitterly enough already. Nor have you any right to think me unable to win a living.”

“ There, again, you wrong me. I only said, Do not, in your impatience to reach your goal, make it not worth the winning. Don't forget what I told you about long engagements. A man's share of them is the worst.”

“ But you love me, Julia ? ” said he, drawing her close to him.

“ How tiresome you are ! ” said she, trying to free herself from his arm.

“ Let me once—only once—hear you say this, and I swear to you, Julia, I'll never tease you more.”

“ Well, then, if I must——”

More was not spoken, for the lips were pressed by a rapturous kiss, as he clasped her to his heart, muttering, “ My own, my own ! ”

“ I declare there is Nelly,” cried Julia, wresting herself from his embrace, and starting off; not, however, towards Ellen, but in the direction of the house.

“ Oh, Nelly,” said Jack, rushing towards his

sister, "she loves me—she has said so—she is all my own."

"Of course she is, Jack. I never doubted it, though I own I scarcely thought she'd have told it."

And the brother and sister walked along hand in hand without speaking, a closer pressure of the fingers at intervals alone revealing how they followed the same thoughts and lived in the same joys.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DEALING WITH CUTBILL.

“WHAT’S to be done with Cutbill?—will any one tell me this?” was the anxious question Augustus asked as he stood in a group composed of Jack, Nelly, and the L’Estranges. “As to Sedley meeting him at all, I know that is out of the question; but the mere fact of finding the man here will so discredit us in Sedley’s eyes that it is more than likely he will pitch up the whole case and say good-bye to us for ever.”

“But can he do that?” asked Julia. “Can he, I mean, permit a matter of temper or personal feeling to interfere in a dry affair of duty?”

“Of course he can; where his counsels are disregarded and even counteracted he need not continue his guidance. He is a hot-tempered man besides,

and has more than once shown me that he will not bear provocation beyond certain limits."

"I think," began L'Estrange, "if I were in *your* place, I'd tell Cutbill. I'd explain to him how matters stood; and——"

"No, no," broke in Jack; "that won't do at all. The poor dog is too hard up for that."

"Jack is right," said Nelly, warmly.

"Of course he is, so far as Mr. Cutbill goes," broke in Julia; "but we want to do right to every one. Now, how about your brother and his suit?"

"What if I were to show him this letter," said Augustus, "to let him see that Sedley means to be here to-morrow, to remain at farthest three days; is it not likely Cutbill would himself desire to avoid meeting him?"

"Not a bit of it," cried Jack. "It's the thing of all others he'd glory in; he'd be full of all the lively impertinences that he could play off on the lawyer; and he'd write a comic song on him,—ay, and sing it in his own presence."

"Nothing more likely," said Julia, gravely.

"Then what is to be done? Is there no escape out of the difficulty?" asked Augustus.

“Yes,” said Nelly, “I think there is. The way I should advise would be this: I’d show Mr. Cutbill Sedley’s letter, and taking him into counsel, as it were, on the embarrassment of his own position, I’d say, ‘We must hide you somewhere for these three days.’”

“But he wouldn’t see it, Nelly. He’d laugh at your delicate scruples; he’d say, ‘That’s the one man in all Europe I’m dying to meet.’”

“Nelly is quite right, notwithstanding,” said Julia. “There is more than one side to Mr. Cutbill’s nature. He’d like to be thought a very punctilious gentleman fully as much as a very jocose companion. Make him believe that in keeping out of sight here at this moment he will be exercising a most refined delicacy,—doing what nothing short of a high-bred sensibility would ever have dreamed of, and you’ll see he’ll be as delighted with his part as ever he was with his coarse drollery. And here he comes to test my theory about him.”

As she spoke Cutbill came lounging up the garden walk, too busily engaged in making a paper cigarette to see those in front of him.

“I’m sure Mr. Cutbill that cigarette must be

intended for me," cried Julia, "seeing all the pains you are bestowing on its manufacture."

"Ah, Miss Julia, if I could only believe that you'd let me corrupt your morals to the extent of a pinch of Latakia——"

"Give me Sedley's letter, Gusty," said Nelly, "and leave the whole arrangement to me. Mr. Cutbill, will you kindly let me have three minutes of your company. I want a bit of advice from you." And she took his arm as she spoke and led him down the garden. She wasted no time in preliminaries, but at once came to the point, saying, "We're in what you would call 'a fix' this morning, Mr. Cutbill: my brother's lawyer, Mr. Sedley, is coming here most unexpectedly. We know that some unpleasant passages have occurred between you and that gentleman, making a meeting between you quite impossible; and in the great difficulty of the moment I have charged myself with the solution of the embarrassment, and now begin to see that without your aid I am powerless. Will you help me; that is, will you advise with or for me?"

"Of course I will; but, first of all, where's the difficulty you speak of? I'd no more mind meeting

this man,—sitting next him at dinner, if you like, than I would an old creditor—and I have a good many of them—that I never mean to pay.”

“We never doubted *your* tact, Mr. Cutbill,” said she, with a strong emphasis on the pronoun.

“If so, then the matter is easy enough. Tact always serves for two. If *I* be the man you take me for, that crabbed old fellow will love me like a brother before the first day is over.”

“That’s not the question, Mr. Cutbill. Your personal powers of captivation no one disputes, if only they get a fair field for their exercise; but what we fear is that Mr. Sedley, being the hot-tempered, hasty man he is, will not give you this chance. My brother has twice already been on the verge of a rupture with him for having acted on his own independent judgment. I believe nothing but his regard for poor dear papa would have made him forgive Augustus; and when I tell you that in the present critical state of our cause his desertion of us would be fatal, I am sure you will do anything to avert such a calamity.”

“Let us meet, Miss Ellen; let us dine together once—I only ask once—and if I don’t borrow money from him before he takes his bedroom candle, you may

scratch Tom Cutbill, and put him off 'the course' for ever. What does that impatient shrug of the shoulders mean? Is it as much as to say, 'What a conceited snob it is!' eh?"

"Oh, Mr. Cutbill, you couldn't possibly——"

"Couldn't I though? And don't I know well that I am just as vain of my little talents,—as your friend, Miss Julia, called them,—as you and others are ready to ridicule them; but the real difference between us after all is this: *You* think the world at large is a monstrous clever creature, with great acuteness, great discrimination and great delicacy; and I *know* it to be a great overgrown bully, mistaking half it hears, and blundering all it says, so that any one, I don't care who he is, that will stand out from the crowd in life, think his own thoughts and guide his own actions, may just do what he pleases with that unwieldy old monster, making it believe it's the master, all the while it is a mere slave and a drudge. There's another shrug of the shoulders. Why not say it out—you're a puppy, Tom Cutbill?"

"First of all it wouldn't be polite, and secondly——"

"Never mind the secondly. It's quite enough for me to see that I have not convinced you, nor am I

half as clever a fellow as I think myself; and do you know, you're the first I ever knew dispute the position."

"But I do not. I subscribe to it implicitly; my presence here, at this moment, attests how I believe it. It is exactly because I regard Mr. Cutbill as the cleverest person I know—the very ablest to extricate one from a difficulty—that I have come to him this morning."

"My honour is satisfied!" said he, laying his hand on his heart, and bowing with a grand seriousness.

"And now," said Nelly, hurriedly, for her patience had well nigh given in, "what's to be done? I have a project of my own, but I don't know whether you would agree to it."

"Not agree to a project of yours! What do you take me for, Miss Ellen?"

"My dear Mr. Cutbill, I have exhausted all my compliments. I can only say I endorse all the preceding with compound interest."

Slightly piqued by the half sarcasm of her manner, he simply said—"And your project; what is it?"

"That you should be a close prisoner for the

short time Mr. Sedley stays here ; sufficiently near to be able to communicate and advise with you—for we count much on your counsel—and yet totally safe from even the chance of meeting him. There is a small chapel about a mile off, where the family confessor used to live, in two neat little rooms adjoining the building. These shall be made comfortable for you. We will take care—I will—that you are not starved ; and some of us will be sure to go and see you every day, and report all that goes on. I foresee a number of details, but I have no time now to discuss them ; the great point is, do you agree ? ”

“ This is Miss Julia’s scheme, is it not ? ”

“ No, I assure you ; on my word it is mine.”

“ But you have concerted it with her ? ”

“ Not even that ; she knows nothing of it.”

“ With whom, then, have you talked it over ? ”

“ With none, save Mr. Cutbill.”

“ In that case, Mr. Cutbill complies,” said he, with a theatrical air of condescension.

“ You will go there ? ”

“ Yes, I promise it.”

“ And remain close prisoner till I liberate you ? ”

“Everything you command.”

“I thank you much, and I am very proud of my success,” said she, offering her hand. “Shall I own to you,” said she, after a pause, “that my brother’s nerves have been so shaken by the agitation he has passed through, and by the continual pressure of thinking that it is his own personal fault that this battle has been so ill contested, that the faintest show of censure on him now would be more than he could bear. I have little doubt that the cause is lost, and I am only eager that poor Augustus should not feel it was lost through *him*.”

She was greatly agitated as she spoke, and, with a hurried farewell, she turned and left him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CLIENT AND HIS LAWYER.

WHEN the rest of the party had left the dinner-room, and Augustus Bramleigh and Mr. Sedley found themselves alone, a silence of several minutes ensued; a very solemn pause each felt it, well knowing that at such a moment the slightest word may be the signal for disclosures which involve a destiny. Up to this, nothing had been said on either side of "the cause;" and though Sedley had travelled across Europe to speak of it, he waited with decorous reserve till his host should invite him to the topic.

Bramleigh, an awkward and timid man at the best of times, was still more so when he found himself in a situation in which he should give the initiative. As the entertainer of a guest, too, he fancied that to introduce his personal interests as matter of conver-

sation would be in bad taste, and so he fidgeted, and passed the decanters across the table with a nervous impatience, trying to seem at his ease, and stammering out at last some unmeaning question about the other's journey.

Sedley replied to the inquiry with a cold and measured politeness, as a man might to a matter purely irrelevant.

“The Continent is comparatively new ground to you, Mr. Sedley?”

“Entirely so. I have never been beyond Brussels before this.”

“Late years have nearly effaced national peculiarities. One crosses frontiers now, and never remembers a change of country.”

“Quite so.”

“The money, the coinage, perhaps, is the great reminder after all.”

“Money is the great reminder of almost everything everywhere, sir,” said Sedley, with a stern and decisive tone.

“I am afraid you are right,” said Bramleigh, with a faint sigh, and now they seemed to stand on the brink of a precipice, and look over.

“What news have you for me?” said he at last, gulping as he spoke.

“None to cheer, nothing to give encouragement. The discovery at Castello will ensure them a verdict. We cannot dispute the marriage, it was solemnized in all form and duly witnessed. The birth of the child was also carefully authenticated—there isn't a flaw in the registry, and they'll take care to remind us on the second trial of how freely we scattered our contemptuous sarcasms on the illegitimacy of this connexion on the first record.”

“Is the case hopeless then?”

“Nothing is hopeless where a jury enters, but it is only short of hopeless. Kelson of course says he is sure, and perhaps so should I, in his place. Still they might disagree again: there's a strong repugnance felt by juries against dispossessing an old occupant. All can feel the hardship of his case, and the sympathy for him goes a great way.”

“Still this would only serve to protract matters,—they'd bring another action.”

“Of course they would, and Kelson has money!”

“I declare I see no benefit in continuing a hopeless contest.”

“Don't be hopeless then, that's the remedy.”

Bramleigh made a slight gesture of impatience, and slight as it was, Sedley observed it.

“You have never treated this case as your father would have done, Mr. Bramleigh. He had a rare spirit to face a contest. I remember one day hinting to him that if this claim could be backed by money it would be a very formidable suit, and his answer was : — ‘When I strike my flag, Sedley, the enemy will find the prize was scarcely worth fighting for.’ I knew what he meant was, he'd have mortgaged the estate to every shilling of its value, before there arose a question of his title.”

“I don't believe it, sir ; I tell you to your face I don't believe it,” cried Bramleigh, passionately. “My father was a man of honour, and never would have descended to such duplicity.”

“My dear sir, I have not come twelve hundred miles to discuss a question in ethics, nor will I risk myself in a discussion with you. I repeat, sir, that had your father lived to meet this contention, we should not have found ourselves where we are to-day. Your father was a man of considerable capacity, Mr. Bramleigh. He conducted a large and important

house with consummate skill ; brought up his family handsomely ; and had he been spared, would have seen every one of them in positions of honour and consequence."

"To every word in his praise I subscribe heartily and gratefully ;" and there was a tremor in his voice as Bramleigh spoke.

"He has been spared a sad spectacle, I must say," continued Sedley. "With the exception of your sister who married that viscount, ruin—there's only one word for it—ruin has fallen upon you all."

"Will you forgive me if I remind you that you are my lawyer, Mr. Sedley, not my chaplain nor my confessor."

"Lawyer without a suit ! Why, my dear sir, there will be soon nothing to litigate. You and all belonging to you were an imposition and a fraud. There, there ! It's nothing to grow angry over ; how could you or any of you suspect your father's legitimacy ? You accepted the situation as you found it, as all of us do. That you regarded Pracontal as a cheat was no fault of yours,—he says so himself. I have seen him and talked with him ; he was at Kelson's when I called last week, and old Kelson

said,—‘My client is in the next room: he says you treated him rudely one day he went to your office. I wish you’d step in and say a civil word or two. It would do good, Sedley. I tell you, it would do good!’ and he laid such a significant stress on the word, that I walked straight in and said how very sorry I felt for having expressed myself in a way that could offend him. ‘At all events, sir,’ said I, ‘if you will not accept my apology for myself, let me beseech you to separate the interest of my client from my rudeness, and let not Mr. Bramleigh be prejudiced because his lawyer was ill mannered.’ ‘It’s all forgotten, never to be recalled,’ said he, shaking my hand. ‘Has Kelson told you my intentions towards Bramleigh?’

“ ‘He has told me nothing,’ said I.

“ ‘Tell him, Kelson. I can’t make the matter plain as you can. Tell Mr. Sedley what we were thinking of.’

“ In one word, sir, his plan was a partition of the property. He would neither disturb your title nor dispute your name. You should be the Bramleighs of Castello, merely paying him a rentcharge of four thousand a year. Kelson suggested more, but he

said a hundred thousand francs was ample, and he made no scruple of adding that he never was master of as many sous in his life.

“ ‘ And what does Kelson say to this ? ’ asked I.

“ ‘ Kelson says what Sedley would say—that it is a piece of Quixotism worthy of Hanwell.’

“ ‘ Ma foi,’ said Pracontal, ‘ it is not the first time I have fired in the air.’

“ We talked for two hours over the matter. Part of what Pracontal said was good sound sense, well reasoned and acutely expressed ; part was sentimental rubbish, not fit to listen to. At last I obtained leave to submit the whole affair to you, not by letter—that they wouldn’t have—but personally, and there, in one word, is the reason of my journey.

“ Before I left town, however, I saw the Attorney-General, whose opinion I had already taken on certain points of the case. He was a personal friend of your father, and willingly entered upon it. When I told him Pracontal’s proposal he smiled dubiously, and said, ‘ Why, it’s a confession of defeat ; the man must know his case will break down, or he never would offer such conditions.’

“ I tried to persuade him that without knowing, seeing, hearing this Frenchman, it would not be easy to imagine such an action proceeding from a sane man, but that his exalted style of talk and his inflated sentimentality made the thing credible. He wants to belong to a family, to be owned and accepted as some one’s relative. The man is dying of the shame of his isolation.

“ ‘ Let him marry.’

“ ‘ So he means, and I hear to Bramleigh’s widow, Lady Augusta.’

“ He laughed heartily at this and said, ‘ It’s the only encumbrance on the property.’ And now, Mr. Bramleigh, you are to judge, if you can ; is this the offer of generosity, or is it the crafty proposal of a beaten adversary ? I don’t mean to say it is an easy point to decide on, or that a man can hit it off at once. Consult those about you ; take into consideration the situation you stand in and all its dangers ; bethink you what an adverse verdict may bring if we push them to a trial ; and even if the proposal be, as Mr. Attorney thinks, the cry of weakness, is it wise to disregard it ?”

“ Would you have laid such a proposal before my

father, Sedley?" said Bramleigh, with a scarcely perceptible smile.

"Not for five hundred pounds, sir."

"I thought not."

"Ay, but remember your father would never have landed us where we stand now, Mr. Bramleigh."

Augustus winced under this remark, but said nothing.

"If the case be what you think it, Sedley," said he at last, "this is a noble offer."

"So say I."

"There is much to think over in it. If I stood alone here, and if my own were the only interests involved, I think—that is I hope—I know what answer I should give; but there are others. You have seen my sister; you thought she looked thin and delicate—and she may well do so, her cares overtax her strength; and my poor brother too, that fine-hearted fellow, what is to become of *him*? And yet, Sedley," cried he suddenly, "if either of them were to suspect that this—this—what shall I call it?—this arrangement—stood on no basis of right, but was simply an act of generous forbearance, I'd stake my life on it, they'd refuse it."

“ You must not consult *them* then, that’s clear.”

“ But I will not decide till I do so.”

“ Oh, for five minutes—only five minutes—of your poor father’s strong sense and sound intellect, and I might send off my telegram to-night.” And with this speech, delivered slowly and determinately, the old man arose, took his bed-room candle, and walked away.

CHAPTER XX.

A FIRST GLEAM OF LIGHT.

AFTER a sleepless, anxious night, in which he canvassed all that Sedley had told him, Bramleigh presented himself at Jack's bedside as the day was breaking. Though the sailor was not worldly wise, nor endowed with much knowledge of life, he had, as Augustus knew, a rough and ready judgment which, allied to a spirit of high honour, rarely failed in detecting that course which in the long run proved best. Jack, too, was no casuist, no hair splitter; he took wide, commonplace views, and in this way was sure to do what nine out of ten ordinary men would approve of, and this was the sort of counsel that Bramleigh now desired to set side by side with his own deeply considered opinion.

Jack listened attentively to his brother's explana-

tion, not once interrupting him by a word or a question till he had finished, and then, laying his hand gently on the other's, said, "You know well, Gusty, that you couldn't do this."

"I thought you would say so, Jack."

"You'd be a fool to part with what you owned, or a knave to sell what did not belong to you."

"My own judgment precisely."

"I'd not bother myself then with Sedley's pros and cons, nor entertain the question about saving what one could out of the wreck. If you haven't a right to a plank in the ship, you have no right to her because she is on the rocks. Say 'No,' Gusty: say 'No' at once."

"It would be at best a compromise on the life of one man, for Pracontal's son, if he should leave one, could revive the claim."

"Don't let us go so far, Gusty. Let us deal with the case as it stands before us. Say 'No,' and have done with the matter at once."

Augustus leaned his head between his hands and fell into a deep vein of thought.

"You've had your trial of humble fortune now, Gusty," continued Jack, "and I don't see that it has

soured you ; I see no signs of fretting or irritability about you, old fellow ; I'll even say that I never remember you jollier or heartier. Isn't it true, this sort of life has no terror for you ? ”

“ Think of Nelly, Jack.”

“ Nelly is better able to brave hard fortune than either of us. She never was spoiled when we were rich, and she had no pretensions to lay down when we became poor.”

“ And yourself, my poor fellow ? I've had many a plan of what I meant by you.”

“ Never waste a thought about me. I'll buy a trabaccolo. They're the handiest coasting craft that ever sailed ; and I'll see if the fruit-trade in the Levant won't feed me, and we'll live here, Gusty, all together. Come now, tell me frankly, would you exchange that for Castello, if you had to go back there and live alone—eh ? ”

“ I'll not say I would ; but——”

“ There's no 'but ;' the thing is clear and plain enough. This place wouldn't suit Marion or Temple ; but they'll not try it. Take my word for it, of all our fine acquaintances, not one will ever come down here to see how we bear our reduced lot in life. We'll

start fresh in the race, and we'll talk of long ago and our grand times without a touch of repining."

"I'm quite ready to try it, Jack."

"That's well said," said he, grasping his hand, and pressing it affectionately. "And you'll say 'No' to this offer? I knew you would. Not but the Frenchman is a fine fellow, Gusty. I didn't believe it was in his nation to behave as nobly; for, mark you, I have no doubts, no misgivings about his motives. I'd say all was honest and above board in his offer."

"I join you in that opinion, Jack; and one of these days I hope to tell him so."

"That's the way to fight the battle of life," cried the sailor, enthusiastically. "Stand by your guns manfully, and, if you're beaten, haul down your flag in all honour to the fellow who has been able to thrash you. The more you respect *him*, the higher you esteem yourself. Get rid of that old lawyer as soon as you can, Gusty; he's not a pleasant fellow, and we all want Cutty back again."

"Sedley will only be too glad to escape; he's not in love with our barbarism."

"I'm to breakfast with Cutty this morning. I

was nigh forgetting it. I hope I may tell him that his term of banishment is nearly over."

"I imagine Sedley will not remain beyond to-morrow."

"That will be grand news for Cutty, for he can't bear solitude. He says himself he'd rather be in the Marshalsea with plenty of companions, than be a king and have no associates. By the way, am I at liberty to tell him about this offer of Pracontal's? He knows the whole history, and the man too."

"Tell him if you like. The Frenchman is a favourite with him, and this will be another reason for thinking well of him."

"That's the way to live, Gusty. Keep the ship's company in good humour, and the voyage will be all the happier."

After a few words they parted, Augustus to prepare a formal reply to his lawyer, and Jack to keep his engagement with Cutbill. Though it was something of a long walk, Jack never felt it so; his mind was full of pleasant thoughts of the future. To feel that Julia loved him, and to know that a life of personal effort and enterprise was before him, were thoughts of overwhelming delight. He was now to

show himself worthy of her love, and he would do this. With what resolution he would address himself to the stern work of life! It was not enough to say affluence had not spoiled him, he ought to be able to prove that the gentleman element was a source of energy and perseverance which no reverses could discourage. Julia was a girl to value this. She herself had learned how to meet a fallen condition, and had sacrificed nothing that graced or adorned her nature in the struggle. Nay, she was more loveable now than he had ever known her. Was it not downright luck that had taught them both to bear an altered lot before the trial of their married life began? It was thus he reasoned as he went, canvassing his condition in every way, and contented with it in all.

“What good news have you got this morning?” cried Cutbill, as he entered. “I never saw you look so jolly in my life.”

“Well, I did find half-a-crown in the pocket of an old letter-case this morning; but it’s the only piece of unexpected luck that has befallen me.”

“Is the lawyer gone?”

“No.”

“Nor thinking of going?”

“I won't say that. I suspect he'll not make a long halt after he has a talk with Gusty to-day.”

And now Jack told in a few words the object of Sedley's coming, what Pracontal had offered, and what Augustus had resolved to send for answer.

“I'd have said the Frenchman was the biggest fool in Europe if I hadn't heard of your brother,” said Cutbill, puffing out a long column of smoke, and giving a deep sigh.

“That's not exactly how I read each of them,” said Jack, sternly.

“Possibly; but it's the true rendering after all. Consider for one moment——”

“Not for half a moment, Master Cutbill. That my brother might make a very good bargain, by simply bartering such an insignificant thing as his honour as a gentleman, is easy to see; and that scores of people wouldn't understand that such a compromise was in question, or was of much consequence, even if it were, is also easy to see; and we need waste no time in discussing this. I say Gusty's right, and I maintain it; and if you like to hold a different opinion, do so in heaven's name, but

don't disparage motives simply because you can't feel them."

"Are you better after all that?" said Cutbill, drily, as he filled Jack's glass with water, and pushed it towards him. "Do you feel refreshed?"

"Much better—considerably relieved."

"Could I offer you anything cooling or calming?"

"Nothing half as cool as yourself, Cutty. And now let's change the subject, for it's one I'll not stand any chaff about."

"Am I safe in recommending you that grilled chicken, or is it indiscreet in me to say you'll find those sardines good?"

Jack helped himself, and ate on without a word. At last, he lifted his head, and, looking around him, said, "You've very nice quarters here, Cutbill."

"As neat as paint. I was thinking this morning whether I'd not ask your brother to rent me this little place. I feel quite romantic since I've come up here, with the nightingales, and the cicálas, and the rest of them."

"If there were only a few more rooms like this, I'd dispute the tenancy with you."

"There's a sea-view for you," said he, throwing

wide the jealousies. "The whole Bocca di Cattaro and the islands in the distance. Naples is nothing to it! And when you have feasted your eye with worldly beauty, and want a touch of celestial beatitude, you've only to do this." And he arose, and walking over to one side of the room, drew back a small curtain of green silk, disclosing behind it an ornamental screen or "grille" of iron-work.

"What does that mean?" asked Jack.

"That means that the occupant of this room, when devoutly disposed, could be able to hear mass without the trouble of going for it. This little grating here looks into the chapel: and there are evidences about that members of the family who lived at the villa were accustomed to come up here at times to pass days of solitude, and perhaps penance, which, after all, judging from the indulgent character of this little provision here, were probably not over severe."

"Nelly has told me of this chapel. Can we see it?"

"No; it's locked and barred like a gaol. I've tried to peep in through this grating; but it's too dark to see anything."

“But this grating is on a hinge,” said Jack. “Don’t you see, it was meant to open, though it appears not to have done so for some years back? Here’s the secret of it.” And pressing a small knob in the wall, the framework became at once moveable, and opened like a window.

“I hope it’s not sacrilege, but I mean to go in,” said Jack, who, mounting on a chair, with a sailor’s agility insinuated himself through the aperture, and invited Cutbill to follow.

“No, no; I wasn’t brought up a rope-dancer,” said he, gruffly. “If you can’t manage to open the door for me——”

“But it’s what I can. I can push back every bolt. Come round now, and I’ll admit you.”

By the time Cutbill had reached the entrance, Jack had succeeded in opening the massive doors; and as he flung them wide, a flood of light poured into the little crypt, with its splendid altar and its silver lamps; its floor of tessellated marble, and its ceiling a mass of gilded tracery almost too bright to look on: but it was not at the glittering splendour of gold or gems that they now stood enraptured. It was in speechless wonderment of the picture that

formed the altar-piece, which was a Madonna,—a perfect copy, in every lineament and line, of the Flora at Castello. Save that an expression of ecstatic rapture had replaced the look of joyous delight, they were the same, and unquestionably were derived from the same original.

“Do you know that?” cried Cutbill.

“Know it! Why, it's our own fresco at Castello.”

“And by the same hand too,” cried Cutbill. “Here are the initials in the corner—G. L.! Of all the strange things that I have ever met in life, this is the strangest!” And he leaned on the railing of the altar, and gazed on the picture with intense interest.

“I can make nothing of it,” muttered Jack.

“And yet there's a great story in it,” said Cutbill, in a low, serious tone. “That picture was a portrait—a portrait of the painter's daughter; and that painter's daughter was the wife of your grandfather, Montagu Bramleigh; and it is her grandchild now, the man called Pracontal, who claims your estates.”

“How do you pretend to know all this?”

“ I know it chapter and verse. I have gone over the whole history with that old painter’s journal before me. I have seen several studies of that girl’s face—‘ Enrichetta Lami,’ she was called—and I have read the entry of her marriage with your grandfather in the parish register. A terrible fact for your poor brother, for it clenches his ruin. Was there ever as singular a chance in life as the re-appearance of this face here ? ”

“ Coming as though to taunt us with our downfall ; though certainly that lovely brow and those tearful eyes have no scorn in them. She must have been a great beauty.”

“ Pracontal raves of her beauty, and says that none of these pictures do her justice, except one at Urbino. At least he gathers this from the journal, which he swears by as if it were gospel.”

“ I’d call her handsomer in that picture than in our fresco. I wonder if this were painted earlier or later ? ”

“ I can answer that question, for the old sacristan who came up here yesterday, and fell to talking about the chapel, mentioned how the painter—a gran’ maestro he called him—bargained to be buried at

the foot of the altar, and the Marchese had not kept his word, not liking to break up the marble pavement, and had him interred outside the walls, with the prior's grave and a monk at either side of him. His brushes and colours, and his tools for fresco-work, were all buried in the chapel, for they had been blessed by the Pope's Nuncio, after the completion of the basilica at Udine. Haven't I remembered my story well, and the old fellow didn't tell it above nine times over? This was old Lami's last work, and here his last resting-place."

"What is it seems so familiar to me in that name? Every time you have uttered it I am ready to say I have heard it before."

"What so likely, from Augustus or your sister."

"No. I can answer for it that neither of them ever spoke of him to me. I know it was not from *them* I heard it."

"But how tell the story of this suit without naming him?"

"They never did tell me the story of the suit, beyond the fact that my grandfather had been married privately in early life, and left a son whom he had not seen nor recognized, but took every

means to disavow and disown. Wait now, a moment ; my mind is coming to it. I think I have the clue to this old fellow's name. I must go back to the villa, however, to be certain."

"Not a word of our discovery here to any one," cried Cutbill. "We must arrange to bring them all here, and let them be surprised as we were."

"I'll be back with you within an hour," said Jack. "My head is full of this, and I'll tell you why when I return."

And they parted.

Before Cutbill could believe it possible, Jack, flushed and heated, re-entered the room. He had run at top speed, found what he sought for, and came back in intense eagerness to declare the result.

"You've lost no time, Jack ; nor have I either. I took up the flags under the altar-steps, and came upon this oak box. I suppose it was sacrilege, but I carried it off here to examine at our leisure."

"Look here," cried Jack, "look at this scrap of paper. It was given to me at the galleys at Ischia by the fellow I was chained to. Read these names, Giacomo Lami—whose daughter was Enrichetta—I

was to trace him out, and communicate, if I could with this other man, Tonino Baldassare or Pracontal—he was called by both names. Bolton of Naples could trace him.”

A long low whistle was Cutbill's only reply as he took the paper and studied it long and attentively.

“Why, this is the whole story,” cried he at last. “This old galley-slave is the real claimant, and Pracontal has no right, while Niccolo, or whatever his name be, lives. This may turn out glorious news for your brother, but I'm not lawyer enough to say whether it may not be the Crown that will benefit, if his estates be confiscated for felony.”

“I don't think that this was the sort of service Old Nick asked me to render him when we parted,” said Jack, drily.

“Probably not. He only asked you to help his son to take away your brother's estate.”

“Old Nick knew nothing about whose brother I was. He trusted me to do him a service, and I told him I would.”

Though Cutbill paid but little attention to him, Jack talked on for some time of his old comrade, recounting the strange traits of his nature, and

remembering with gratitude such little kindness as it was in his power to show.

“I’d have gone clean out of my mind but for him,” said he at last.

“And we have all believed that this fellow was lost at sea,” muttered Cutbill. “Bolton gave up all his papers and the remnant of his property to his son in that belief.”

“Nor does he wish to be thought living now. He charged me to give no clue to him. He even said I was to speak of him as one I had met at Monte Video years ago.”

“These are things for a ’cuter head than yours or mine, Jack,” said Cutbill, with a cunning look. “We’re not the men to see our way through this tangle. Go and show that scrap of paper to Sedley, and take this box with you. Tell him how you came by each. That old fox will soon see whether they confirm the case against your brother or disclose a flaw in it.”

“And is that the way I’m to keep my word to Old Nick?” said Jack, doggedly.

“I don’t suppose you ever bound yourself to injure your own flesh and blood by a blank promise.

I don't believe there's a family in Europe with as many scruples, and as little sense how to deal with them."

"Civil that, certainly."

"Not a bit civil, only true; but let us not squabble. Go and tell Sedley what we have chanced upon. These men have a way of looking at the commonest events—and this is no common event—that you nor I have never dreamed of. If Pracontal's father be alive, Pracontal cannot be the claimant to your estates; that much, I take it, is certain. At all events Sedley's the man to answer this."

Half pushing Jack out of the room while he deposited the box in his hands, Cutbill at last sent him off, not very willingly indeed, or concurringly, but like one who, in spite of himself, saw he was obliged to take a particular course, and travel a road without the slightest suspicion of where it led to.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LIGHT STRONGER.

“SEDLEY asks for the best Italian scholar amongst us,” said Augustus the next morning at breakfast, “and the voice of public opinion calls upon you, Julia.”

“You know what Figaro said of ‘common report.’ I’ll not repeat it,” said she laughing, “and I’ll even behave as if I didn’t believe it. And now what is wanted of me, or my Italian scholarship?”

“The matter is thus: Sedley has received some papers”—here a look of intelligence passed between Augustus and Jack—“which he imagines may be of consequence, but being in Italian, he can’t read them. He needs a translator——”

“I am equal to that,” broke she in, “but why don’t we do it in committee, as you political people call it? Five heads are better than one.”

“ Mr. Sedley is absolute, and will have but one.”

“ And am I to be closeted for a whole morning with Mr. Sedley? I declare it seems compromising. Jack frowns at me. There is nothing so prudish as a sailor. I wish any one would tell me why it is so.”

“ Well, the matter is as you have stated it,” said Augustus. “ Mr. Sedley says, ‘ Let me have the aid of some one who will not grudge me two hours, mayhap three.’ ”

“ What if the documents should turn out love-letters? ”

“ Julia! Julia!” cried Jack, reprovingly; for in reality her sallies kept him in constant anxiety.

“ I can't help it, Jack; I must be prudent, even if I shock you by my precautions. I repeat, if these be love-letters? ”

“ Well, I can answer so far,” said Augustus. “ They are not—at least I can almost assert they are not.”

“ I wish Nelly would go,” said Julia, with mock seriousness. “ I see Jack is wretched about it, and after all Mr. Sedley, though not exactly a young man——”

“ I declare this is too bad,” said Jack, rising

angrily from the table, and then throwing himself back in his chair, as if in conflict with his own temper.

“She *is* provoking, there is no doubt of it, and on board ship we’d not stand that sort of thing five minutes,” said Julia, with a demure air; “but on land, and amongst terrestrial creatures, Master Jack, I know nothing for it but patience.”

“Patience!” muttered he, with an expression that made them all burst out laughing.

“So I may tell Sedley you will aid him?” asked Bramleigh.

“I’m ready now. Indeed, the sooner begun the better, for we have a long walk project—haven’t we, Jack?—for this afternoon.”

“Yes, if we have patience for it,” said he. And once more the laugh broke forth as they arose from table and separated into little knots and groups through the room.

“I may tell you, Julia,” said Augustus, in a half whisper, “that though I have given up hoping this many a day, it is just possible there may be something in these papers of moment to me, and I know I have only to say as much to secure your interest in them.”

“ I believe you can rely upon that,” said she ; and within less than five minutes afterwards she was seated at the table with Mr. Sedley in the study, an oblong box of oak clasped with brass in front of them, and a variety of papers lying scattered about.

“ Have you got good eyes, Miss L'Estrange ? ” said Sedley, as he raised his spectacles, and turned a peering glance towards her.

“ Good eyes ? ” repeated she, in some astonishment.

“ Yes ; I don't mean pretty eyes, or expressive eyes. I mean, have you keen sight ? ”

“ I think I have.”

“ That's what I need from you at this moment ; here are some papers with erasures and re-writings, and corrections in many places, and it will take all your acuteness to distinguish between the several contexts. Aided by a little knowledge of Latin, I have myself discovered some passages of considerable interest. I was half the night over them ; but with your help, I count on accomplishing more in half an hour.”

While he spoke, he continued to arrange papers

in little packets before him, and, last of all, took from the box a painter's pallet and several brushes, along with two or three of those quaintly shaped knives men use in fresco-painting.

“ Have you ever heard of the painter Giacomo Lami ? ” asked he.

“ Of course I have. I know the whole story in which he figures. Mr. Bramleigh has told it to me.”

“ These are his tools. With these he accomplished those great works which have made him famous among modern artists, and by his will—at least I have spelled out so much—they were buried along with him.”

“ And where was he buried ? ”

“ Here ! here in Cattaro ; his last work was the altar-piece of the little chapel of the villa.”

“ Was there ever so strange a coincidence ! ”

“ The world is full of them, for it is a very small world after all. This old man, driven from place to place by police persecutions—for he had been a great conspirator in early life, and never got rid of the taste for it—came here as a sort of refuge, and painted the frescoes of the chapel at the price of being buried at the foot of the altar, which was

denied him afterwards; for they only buried there this box, with his painting utensils and his few papers. It is to these papers I wish now to direct your attention, if good luck will have it that some of them may be of use. As for me, I can do little more than guess at the contents of most of them."

"Now these," continued he, "seem to me bills and accounts; are they such?"

"Yes, these are notes of expenses incurred in travelling; and he would seem to have been always on the road. Here is a curious note: 'Nuremberg: I like this old town much; its staid propriety and quietness suit me. I feel that I could work here; work at something greater and better than these daily efforts for mere bread; but why after all should I do more? I have none now to live for—none to work for! Enrichetta, and her boy, gone! and Carlotta——'"

"Wait a moment," said the lawyer, laying his hand on hers. "Enrichetta was the wife of Montagu Bramleigh, and this boy their son."

"Yes, and subsequently the father of Pracontal."

"And how so, if he died in boyhood?" muttered he; "read on."

“ ‘ Now, Carlotta has deserted me ! and for whom ? For the man who betrayed me ! for that Niccolo Baldassare who denounced five of us at Verona, and whose fault it is not that I have not died by the hangman.’ ”

“ This is very important ; a light is breaking on me through this cloud, too, that gives me hope.”

“ I see what you mean. You think that probably——”

“ No matter what I think, search on through the papers ; what is this ? here is a drawing. Is it a mausoleum ? ”

“ Yes ; and the memorandum says : ‘ If I ever be rich enough, I shall place this over Enrichetta’s remains at Louvain, and have her boy’s body laid beside her. Poor child, that, if spared, might have inherited a princely state and fortune, he lies now in the pauper burial-ground at St. Michel. They let me, in consideration of what I had done in repairing their frescoes, place a wooden cross over him. I cut the inscription with my own hands—G. L. B., aged four years ; the last hope of a shattered heart.’ ”

“ Does not this strengthen your impression ? ”
asked Julia, turning and confronting him.

“Aged four years; he was born, I think, in '99—the year after the rebellion in Ireland; this brings us nigh the date of his death. One moment. Let me note this.” He hurriedly scratched off a few lines. “St. Michel; where is St. Michel? It may be a church in some town.”

“Or it may be that village in Savoy, at the foot of the Alps.”

“True! We shall try there.”

“These are without interest; they are notes of sums paid on the road, or received for his labour. All were evidently leaves of a book and torn out.”

“What is this about Carlotta here?”

“Ah, yes. ‘With this I send her all I had saved and put by. I knew he would ill treat her; but to take her boy from her—her one joy and comfort in life—and to send him away she knows not whither, his very name changed, is more than I believed possible. She says that Niccolo has been to England, and found means to obtain money from M. B.’”

“Montagu Bramleigh,” muttered Sedley; but she read on:—“‘This is too base; but it explains

why he stole all the letters in poor Enrichetta's box, and the papers that told of her marriage.' "

"Are we on the track now?" cried the old lawyer, triumphantly. "This Baldassare was the father of the claimant, clearly enough. Enrichetta's child died, and the sister's husband substituted himself in his place."

"But this Niccolo who married Carlotta," said Julia, "must have been many years older than Enrichetta's son would have been had he lived."

"Who was to detect that? Don't you see that he never made personal application to the Bramleighs. He only addressed them by letter, which, knowing all Enrichetta's story, he could do without risk or danger. Kelson couldn't have been aware of this," muttered he; "but he had some misgivings—what were they?"

While the lawyer sat in deep thought, his face buried in his hands, Julia hurriedly turned over the papers. There were constant references to Carlotta's boy, whom the old man seemed to have loved tenderly; and different jottings showed how he had kept his birthday, which fell on the 4th of August. He was born at Zurich, where Baldassare worked as

a watchmaker, his trade being, however, a mere mask to conceal his real occupation, that of conspirator.

“No,” said Sedley, raising his head at last, “Kelson knew nothing of it. I’m certain he did not. It was a cleverly planned scheme throughout; and all the more so by suffering a whole generation to lapse before litigating the claim.”

“But what is this here?” cried Julia, eagerly. “It is only a fragment, but listen to it:—‘There is no longer a doubt about it. Baldassare’s first wife—a certain Marie de Pracontal—is alive, and living with her parents at Aix, in Savoy. Four of the committee have denounced him, and his fate is certain.’”

“‘I had begun a letter to Bramleigh, to expose the fraud this scoundrel would pass upon him; but why should I spare him who killed my child?’”

“First of all,” said Sedley, reading from his notes, “we have the place and date of Enrichetta’s death; secondly, the burial-place of Godfrey Lami Bramleigh set down as St. Michel, perhaps in Savoy. We have then the fact of the stolen papers, the copies of registries, and other documents. The marriage of Carlotta is not specified, but it is clearly

evident, and we can even fix the time ; and, last of all, we have this second wife, whose name, Pracontal, was always borne by the present claimant."

"And are you of opinion that this same Pracontal was a party to the fraud?" asked Julia.

"I am not certain," muttered he. "It is not too clear ; the point is doubtful."

"But what have we here ? It is a letter, with a post-mark on it." She read, "Leghorn, February 8, 1812." It was addressed to the Illustrissimo Maestro Lami, Porta Rossa, Florence, and signed N. Baldassare. It was but a few lines, and ran thus :—

"Seeing that Carlotta and her child now sleep at Pisa, why deny me your interest for my boy Anatole? You know well to what he might succeed, and how. Be unforgiving to me if you will. I have borne as hard things even as your hatred, but the child that has never wronged you deserves no part of this hate. I want but little from you ; some dates, a few names—that I know you remember,—and last of all, my mind refreshed on a few events which I have heard you talk of again and again. Nor is it for *me* that you will do this, for I leave Europe within a week,—

I shall return to it no more. Answer this Yes or No, at once, as I am about to quit this place. You know me well enough to know that I never threaten though I sometimes counsel, and my counsel now is, consent to the demand of—N. BALDASSARE.”

Underneath was written in Lami's hand,—“I will carry this to my grave, that I may curse him who wrote it here and hereafter.”

“Now the story stands out complete,” said Julia, “and this Pracontal belonged to neither Bramleigh nor Lami.”

“Make me a literal translation of that letter,” said Sedley. “It is of more moment than almost all we have yet read. I do not mean now, Miss Julia,” said he, seeing she had already commenced to write; “for we have these fragments still to look over.”

While the lawyer occupied himself with drawing up a memorandum for his own guidance, Julia, by his directions, went carefully over the remaining papers: few were of any interest, but these she docketed accurately, and with such brevity and clearness combined, that Sedley, little given to compliments, could not but praise her skill. It was not

till the day began to decline that their labours drew to a close. It was a day of intense attention and great work, but only when it was over did she feel the exhaustion of overwrought powers.

“You are very, very tired,” said Sedley. “It was too thoughtless of me; I ought to have remembered how unused you must be to fatigue like this.”

“But I couldn’t have left it, the interest was intense, and nothing would have persuaded me to leave the case without seeing how it ended.”

“It will be necessary to authenticate these,” said he, laying his hand on the papers, “and then we must show how we came by them.”

“Jack can tell you this,” said she; and now her strength failed her outright, and she lay back, overcome, and almost fainting. Sedley hurriedly rang for help, but before any one arrived Julia rallied, and with a faint smile said, “Don’t make a fuss about *me*. You have what is really important to occupy you. I will go and lie down till evening;” and so she left him.

CHAPTER XXII.

SEDLLEY'S NOTES.

JULIA found herself unable to come down to dinner, and Mr. Sedley had to confess that he had overtaxed her strength and imposed too far upon her zeal. "To tell truth," added he, "I forgot she was not a colleague. So shrewd and purpose-like were all her remarks, such aptitude she displayed in rejecting what was valueless, and such acuteness in retaining all that was really important, it went clean out of my head that I was not dealing with a brother of the craft, instead of a very charming and beautiful young lady."

"And you really have fallen upon papers of importance?" asked Nelly, eagerly; for Julia had already, in answer to the same question, said, "Mr. Sedley has pledged me to silence."

"Of the last importance, Miss Bramleigh." He

paused for an instant, and then added, "I am well aware that I see nothing but friends, almost members of one family, around this table, but the habits of my calling impose reserve; and, besides, I am unwilling to make revelations until, by certain inquiries, I can affirm that they may be relied on."

"Oh, Mr. Sedley, if you have a gleam, even a gleam of hope, do give it us. Don't you think our long-suffering and patience have made us worthy of it?"

"Stop, Nelly," cried Augustus, "I will have no appeals of this kind. Mr. Sedley knows our anxieties, and if he does not yield to them he has his own good reasons."

"I don't see that," broke in Jack. "We are not asking to hear our neighbour's secrets, and I take it we are of an age to be entrusted with our own."

"You speak sharply, sir," said Sedley, "but you speak well. I would only observe that the most careful and cautious people have been known to write letters, very confidential letters, which somehow get bruited about, so that clues are discovered and inferences traced which not unfrequently have given the

most serious difficulties to those engaged in inquiry."

"Have no fears on that score, Mr. Sedley," said Jack; "there are not four people in Europe at this moment with fewer correspondents. I believe I might say that the roof of this house covers our whole world."

"Jack is right there," added Augustus. "If we don't write to *The Times* or the *Post*, I don't see to whom we are to tell our news."

"George hasn't even a pulpit here to expound us from," cried Jack, laughingly.

"You have an undoubted right to know what is strictly your own concern. The only question is, shall I be best consulting your interests by telling it?"

"Out with it, by all means," said Jack. "The servants have left the room now, and here we are in close committee."

Sedley looked towards Augustus, who replied by a gesture of assent; and the lawyer, taking his spectacles from his pocket, said, "I shall simply read you the entry of my note-book. Much of it will surprise and much more gratify you; but let

me entreat that if you have any doubts to resolve, or questions to put, you will reserve them till I have finished. I will only say that for everything I shall state as fact there appears to me to be abundant proofs, and where I mention what is simply conjecture I will say so. You remember my condition, then? I am not to be interrupted."

"Agreed," cried Jack, as though replying for the most probable defaulter. "I'll not utter a word, and the others are all discretion."

"The case is this," said Sedley. "Montagu Bramleigh, of Cossenden Manor, married Enrichetta, daughter of Giacomo Lami, the painter. The marriage was celebrated at the village church of Portshannon, and duly registered. They separated soon after—she retiring to Holland with her father, who had compromised himself in the Irish rebellion of '98. A son was born to this marriage, christened and registered in the Protestant church at Louvain as Godfrey Lami Bramleigh. To his christening Bramleigh was entreated to come, but under various pretexts he excused himself, and sent a costly present for the occasion; his letters, however, breathed nothing but affection, and fully recognized the boy

as his son and his heir. Captain Bramleigh is, I know, impatient at the length of these details, but I can't help it. Indignant at the treatment of his daughter, Lami sent back the gift with a letter of insulting meaning. Several letters were interchanged of anger and recrimination; and Enrichetta, whose health had long been failing, sunk under the suffering of her desertion and died. Lami left Holland, and repaired to Germany, carrying the child with him. He was also accompanied by a younger daughter, Carlotta, who, at the time I refer to, might have been sixteen or seventeen years of age. Lami held no intercourse with Bramleigh from this date, nor, so far as we know, did Bramleigh take measures to learn about the child—how he grew up, or where he was. Amongst the intimates of Lami's family was a man whose name is not unfamiliar to newspaper readers of some thirty or forty years back—a man who had figured in various conspiracies, and contrived to escape scatheless, where his associates had paid the last penalty of their crimes. This man became the suitor of Carlotta, and won her affections, although Giacomo neither liked nor trusted Niccolo Baldassare——”

“Stop there,” cried Jack, rising, and leaning eagerly across the table; “say that name again.”

“Niccolo Baldassare.”

“My old companion—my comrade at the galleys,” exclaimed Jack; “we were locked to each other, wrist and ankle, for eight months.”

“He lives then?”

“I should think he does; the old beggar is as stout and hale as any one here. I can't guess his age, but I'll answer for his vigour.”

“This will be all important hereafter,” said Sedley, making a note. “Now to my narrative. From Lami, Baldassare learned the story of Enrichetta's unhappy marriage and death, and heard how the child, then a playful little boy of three years or so, was the rightful heir of a vast fortune,—a claim the grandfather firmly resolved to prosecute at some future day. The hope was, however, not destined to sustain him, for the boy caught a fever and died. His burial-place is mentioned, and his age, four years.”

“So that,” cried Augustus, “the claim became extinct with him?”

“Of course; for though Montagu Bramleigh remarried, it was not till six years after his first wife's death.”

“And our rights are unassailable?” cried Nelly, wildly.

“Your estates are safe; at least they will be safe.”

“And who is Pracontal de Bramleigh?” asked Jack.

“I will tell you. Baldassare succeeded in winning Carlotta's heart, and persuaded her to elope with him. She did so, carrying with her all the presents Bramleigh had formerly given to her sister—some rings of great price, and an old watch with the Bramleigh arms in brilliants, among the number. But these were not all; she also took the letters and documents that established her marriage, and a copy of the registration. I must hasten on, for I see impatience on every side. He broke the heart of this poor girl, who died, and was buried with her little boy in the same grave, leaving old Lami desolate and childless. By another marriage, and by a wife still living, Marie Pracontal, Baldassare had a son; and he bethought him, armed as he was with papers and documents, to prefer the claim to the Bramleigh estates for this youth; and had even the audacity to ask Lami's assistance to the fraud,

and to threaten him with his vengeance if he betrayed him.

“So perfectly propped was the pretension by circumstances of actual events—Niccolo knew everything—that Bramleigh not only sent several sums of money to stifle the demand, but actually despatched a confidential person abroad to see the claimant, and make some compromise with him; for it is abundantly evident that Montagu Bramleigh only dreaded the scandal and the *éclat* such a story would create, and had no fears for the title to his estates, he all along believing that there were circumstances in the marriage with Enrichetta which would show it to be illegal, and the issue consequently illegitimate.”

“I must say, I think our respected grandfather,” said Augustus, gravely, “does not figure handsomely in this story.”

“With the single exception of old Lami,” cried Jack, “they were a set of rascals—every man of them.”

“And is this the way you speak of your dear friend Niccolo Baldassare?” asked Nelly.

“He was a capital fellow at the galleys; but I

suspect he'd prove a very shady acquaintance in more correct company."

"And, Mr. Sedley, do you really say that all this can be proven?" cried Nelly. "Do you believe it all yourself?"

"Every word of it. I shall test most of it within a few days. I have already telegraphed to London for one of the clever investigators of registries and records. I have ample means of tracing most of the events I need. These papers of old Lami's are full of small details; they form a closer biography than most men leave behind them."

"There was, however, a marriage of my grandfather with Enrichetta Lami?" asked Augustus.

"We give them that," cried the lawyer, who fancied himself already instructing counsel. "We contest nothing—notice, registry, witnesses, all are as legal as they could wish. The girl was Mrs. Bramleigh, and her son Montagu Bramleigh's heir; death, however, carried away both, and the claim fell with them. That these people will risk a trial now is more than I can believe; but if they should, we will be prepared for them. They shall be indicted

before they leave the court, and Count Pracontal de Bramleigh be put in the dock for forgery."

"No such thing, Sedley," broke in Bramleigh, with an energy very rare with him. "I am well inclined to believe that this young man was no party to the fraud—he has been duped throughout; nor can I forget the handsome terms he extended to us when our fortune looked darkest."

"A generosity on which late events have thrown a very ugly light," muttered Sedley.

"My brother is right. I'll be sworn he is," cried Jack. "We should be utterly unworthy of the good luck that has befallen us, if the first use we made of it was to crush another."

"If *your* doctrines were to prevail, sir, it would be a very puzzling world to live in," said Sedley, sharply.

"We'd manage to get on with fewer lawyers, anyway."

"Mr. Sedley," said Nelly, mildly, "we are all too happy and too gratified for this unlooked-for deliverance to have a thought for what is to cause suffering anywhere. Let us, I entreat you, have the full enjoyment of this great happiness."

“Then we are probably to include the notable Mr. Cutbill in this act of indemnity?” said Sedley, sneeringly.

“I should think we would, sir,” replied Jack. “Without the notable Mr. Cutbill’s aid we should never have chanced on those papers you have just quoted to us.”

“Has he been housebreaking again?” asked Sedley, with a grin.

“I protest,” interposed Bramleigh, “if the good fairy who has been so beneficent to us were only to see us sparring and wrangling in this fashion, she might well think fit to withdraw her gift.”

“Oh, here’s Julia,” cried Nelly; “and all will go right now.”

“Well,” said Julia, “has any one moved the thanks of the house to Mr. Sedley? for if not, I’m quite ready to do it. I have my speech prepared.”

“Move! move!” cried several together.

“I first intend to have a little dinner,” said she; “but I have ordered it in the small dining-room; and you are perfectly welcome, any or all of you, to keep me company, if you like.”

To follow the conversation that ensued would be

little more than again to go over a story, which we feel has been already impressed with tiresome reiteration on the reader. Whatever had failed in Sedley's narrative, Julia's ready wit and quick intelligence had supplied by conjecture, and they talked on till late into the night, bright gleams of future projects shooting like meteors across the placid heaven of their enjoyment, and making all bright around them.

Before they parted it was arranged that each should take his separate share of the inquiry, for there were registries to be searched, dates confirmed in several places; and while L'Estrange was to set out for Louvain, and Jack for Savoy, Sedley himself took charge of the weightier question to discover St. Michel, and prove the burial of Godfrey Bramleigh.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A WAYFARER.

WHEN the time came for the several members of the family at the villa to set out on the search after evidence, Jack, whose reluctance to leave home—he called it “home”—increased with every day, induced Cutbill to go in his stead, a change which even Mr. Sedley himself was forced to admit was not detrimental to the public service.

Cutbill's mission was to Aix, in Savoy, to see and confer with Marie Pracontal, the first wife of Baldassare. He arrived in the nick of time, for only on that same morning had Baldassare himself entered the town, in his galley-slave uniform, to claim his wife and ask recognition amongst his fellow-townsmen. The house where she lived was besieged by a crowd, all more or less eager in asserting the woman's cause, and denouncing the pretensions of a fellow

covered with crimes, and pronounced dead to all civil rights. Amid execrations and insults, with threats of even worse, Baldassare stood on a chair in the street, in the act of addressing the multitude, as Cutbill drew nigh. The imperturbable self-possession, the cool courage of the man—who dared to brave public opinion in this fashion, and demand a hearing for what in reality was nothing but a deliberate insult to the people around him whose lives he knew, and whose various social derelictions he was all familiar with,—was positively astounding. “I have often thought of you, good people,” said he, “while at the galleys; and I made a vow to myself that the first act of my escape, if ever I should escape, should be to visit this place and thank you for every great lesson I have learned in life. It was here, in this place, I committed my first theft; it was yonder in that church I first essayed sacrilege. It was you, amiable and gentle people, who gave me four associates who betrayed each other, and who died on the drop or by the guillotine, with a courage worthy of Aix; and it was from you I received that pearl of wives who is now married to a third husband, and denies the decent rights of hospitality to her first.”

This outrage was now unbearable ; a rush was made at him, and he fell amongst the crowd, who had torn him limb from limb but for the intervention of the police, who were driven to defend him with fixed bayonets. "A warm reception I must say," cried the fellow, as they led him away bleeding and bruised to the gaol.

It was not a difficult task for Cutbill to obtain from Marie Pracontal the details he sought for. Smarting under the insults and scandal she had been exposed to on the day before, she revealed everything, and signed in due form a *procès verbal* drawn up by a notary of the place, of her marriage with Baldassare, the birth of her son Anatole, with the dates of his birth and baptism, and gave up besides some letters which he had written while at the naval school of Genoa. What became of him afterwards she knew not, nor indeed seemed to care. The cruelties of the father had poisoned her mind against the son, and she showed no interest in his fate, and wished not to hear of him.

Cutbill left Aix on the third day, and was slowly strolling up the Mont Cenis pass in front of his horses, when he overtook the very galley-slave he

had seen addressing the crowd at Aix. "I thought they had sent you over the frontier into France, my friend," said Cutbill, accosting him like an old acquaintance.

"So they did, but I gave them the slip at Culoz, and doubled back. I have business at Rome, and couldn't endure that round-about way by Marseilles."

"Will you smoke? may I offer you a cigar?"

"My best thanks," said he, touching his cap politely. "They smashed my pipe, those good people down there; like all villagers they resent free speech, but they'd have learned something had they listened to me."

"Perhaps your frankness was excessive."

"Há! you were there, then? Well, it was what Diderot calls self-sacrificing sincerity; but all men who travel much and mix with varied classes of mankind, fall into this habit. In becoming cosmopolitan you lose in politeness."

"Signor Baldassare, your conversation interests me much. Will you accept a seat in my carriage over the mountain, and give me the benefit of your society?"

"It is I that am honoured, sir," said he, re-

moving his cap, and bowing low. "There is nothing so distinctively well bred as the courtesy of a man in *your* condition to one in *mine*."

"But you are no stranger to me."

"Indeed! I remarked you called me by my name; but I'm not aware that you know more of me."

"I can afford to rival your own candour, and confess I know a great deal about you."

"Then you have read a very chequered page, sir. What an admirable cigar. You import these, I'd wager?"

"No; but it comes to the same. I buy them in bond and pay the duty."

"Yours is the only country to live in, sir. It has been the dream of my life to pass my last days in England."

"Why not do so? I can't imagine that Aix will prefer any strong claims in preference."

"No, I don't care for Aix, though it is pretty, and I have passed some days of happy tranquility on that little Lac de Bourges; but to return: to what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for the knowledge you possess of my biography?"

“ You have been a very interesting subject to me for some time back. First of all, I ought to say that I enjoy the pleasure of your son’s acquaintance.”

“ A charming young man, I am told,” said he, puffing out a long column of smoke.

“ And without flattery, I repeat it—a charming young man, good-looking, accomplished, high-spirited and brave.”

“ You delight me, sir. What a misfortune for the poor fellow that his antecedents have not been more favourable; but you see, Mr. ——”

“ Cutbill is my name.”

“ Mr. Cutbill, you see that I have not only had a great many irons in the fire through life, but occasionally it has happened to me that I took hold of them by the hot ends.”

“ And burned your fingers ? ”

“ And burned my fingers.”

They walked on some steps in silence, when Baldassare said,—

“ Where, may I ask, did you last see my son ? ”

“ I saw him last in Ireland about four months ago. We travelled over together from England, and

I visited a place called Castello in his company, the seat of the Bramleigh family."

"Then you know his object in having gone there? You know who he is, what he represents, what he claims?"

"I know the whole story by heart."

"Will you favour me with your version of it?"

"With pleasure; but here is the carriage, let us get in, for the narrative is somewhat long and complicated."

"Before you begin, sir, one question: where is my son now? is he at Rome?"

"He is; he arrived there on Tuesday last."

"That is enough—excuse my interrupting—I am now at your orders."

The reader will readily excuse me if I do not follow Mr. Cutbill in his story, which he told at full length, and with what showed a perfect knowledge of all the circumstances. It is true he was so far disingenuous that he did not confess the claim had ever created alarm to the minds of the Bramleighs. There were certain difficulties he admitted, and no small expense incurred in obtaining information abroad, and proving, as it was distinctly proved,

that no issue of Montagu Bramleigh had survived, and that the pretensions of Pracontal were totally groundless.

“And your visit to Savoy was on this very business?” asked Baldassare.

“You are right; a small detail was wanting which I was able to supply.”

“And how does Anatole bear the discovery?”

“He has not heard of it; he is at Rome, paying court to an English lady of rank to whom he hopes to be married.”

“And how will he bear it; in what spirit will he meet the blow?”

“From what I have seen of him, I'd say he'd stand up nobly under misfortune, and not less so here, that I know he firmly believed in his right; he was no party to the fraud.”

“These frauds, as you call them, succeed every day, and when they occur in high places we have more courteous names to call them by. What say you to the empire in France?”

“I'll not discuss that question with you; it takes too wide a range.”

“Anatole must bethink him of some other

livelihood now, that's clear. I mean to tell him so."

"You intend to see him—to speak with him?"

"What, sir, do you doubt it? Is it because my wife rejects me that I am to be lost to the ties of parental affection?" He said this with a coarse and undisguised mockery, and then, suddenly changing to a tone of earnestness, added,—“We shall have to link our fortunes now, and there are not many men who can give an adventurer such counsels as I can.”

“From what I know of the Bramleighs, they would willingly befriend him if they knew how, or in what way to do it.”

“Nothing easier. All men's professions can be brought to an easy test—so long as money exists.”

“Let me know where to write to you, and I will see what can be done.”

“Or, rather, let *me* have *your* address, for my whereabouts is somewhat uncertain.”

Cutbill wrote his name and Cattaro on a slip of paper, and the old fellow smiled grimly, and said,—“Ah! *that* was your clue then to this discovery. I knew Giacomo died there, but it was a most unlikely

spot to track him to. Nothing but chance, the merest chance, could have led to it?"

This he said interrogatively; but Cutbill made no reply.

"You don't care to imitate *my* frankness, sir; and I am not surprised at it. It is only a fellow who has worn rags for years that doesn't fear nakedness. Is my son travelling alone, or has he a companion?"

"He had a companion some short time back; but I do not know if they are together now."

"I shall learn all that at Rome."

"And have you no fears to be seen there? Will the authorities not meddle with you?"

"Far from it. It is the one state in Europe where men like myself enjoy liberty. They often need us—they fear us always."

Cutbill was silent for some time. He seemed like one revolving some project in his mind, but unable to decide on what he should do. At last he said,—

"You remember a young Englishman who made his escape from Ischia last June?"

"To be sure I do—my comrade."

“You will be astonished to know he was a Bramleigh, a brother of the owner of the estate.”

“It was so like my luck to have trusted him,” said the other, bitterly.

“You are wrong there. He was always your friend—he is so at this moment. I have heard him talk of you with great kindness.”

A careless shrug of the shoulders was the reply.

“Tell him from me,” said he, with a savage grin, “that Onofrio—don’t forget the name—Onofrio is dead. We threw him over the cliff the night we broke the gaol. There, let me write it for you,” said he, taking the pencil from Cutbill’s hand, and writing the word Onofrio in a large bold character.

“Keep that pencil-case, will you, as a souvenir?” said Cutbill.

“Give me ten francs instead, and I’ll remember you when I pay for my dinner,” said he with a grating laugh; and he took the handful of loose silver Cutbill offered him, and thrust it into his pocket. “Isn’t that Souza we see in the valley there? Yes; I remember it well. I’ll go no further with you—there’s a police-station where I had trouble once. I’ll take the cross-path here that

leads down to the Pinarola road. I thank you heartily. I wanted a little good-nature much when you overtook me. Good-by."

He leaped from the carriage as he spoke, and crossing the little embankment of the road, descended a steep slope, and was out of sight almost in an instant.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MEETING AND A PARTING.

IN the same room where Pracontal and Longworth had parted in anger, the two men, reconciled and once more friends, sat over their dessert and a cigar. The handsome reparation Pracontal had offered in a letter had been frankly and generously met, and it is probable that their friendship was only the more strongly ratified by the incident.

They were both dressed with unusual care, for Lady Augusta "received" a few intimate friends on that evening, and Pracontal was to be presented to them in his quality of accepted suitor.

"I think," said Longworth, laughingly, "it is the sort of ordeal most Englishmen would feel very awkward in. You are trotted out for the inspection of a critical public, who are to declare what they think of your eyes and your whiskers, if they augur

well of your temper, and whether, on the whole, you are the sort of person to whom a woman might confide her fate and future."

"You talk as if I were to be sent before a jury and risk a sentence," said Pracontal, with a slight irritation in his tone.

"It is something very like it."

"And I say, there is no resemblance whatever."

"Don't you remember what Lord Byron in one of his letters says of a memorable drive through Ravenna one evening, where he was presented as the accepted? There's that hang-dog rascal that followed us through the gardens of the Vatican this morning, there he is again, sitting directly in front of our window, and staring at us."

"Well, I take it, those benches were placed there for fellows to rest on who had few arm-chairs at home."

"I don't think, in all my experience of humanity, I every saw a face that revolted me more. He isn't ugly, but there is something in the expression so intensely wicked, that mockery of all goodness, that Retsch puts into Mephistopheles; it actually thrills me."

“ I don't see that,—there is even drollery in the mouth.”

“ Yes, diabolic humour, certainly. Did you see that ? ”

“ See what ? ”

“ Didn't you see that when I lifted my glass to my lips, he made a pantomime of drinking too, and bowed to me, as though in salutation ? ”

“ I knew there was fun in the fellow. Let us call him over and speak to him.”

“ No, no, Pracontal ; do not, I beseech you. I fell an aversion towards him that I cannot explain. The rascal poisons the very claret I'm drinking just by glancing at me.”

“ You are seldom so whimsical.”

“ Wouldn't you say the fellow knew we were talking of him ? See, he is smiling now ; if that infernal grin can be called a smile.”

“ I declare, I will have him over here ; now don't go, sit down like a good fellow ; there's no man understands character better than yourself, and I am positively curious to see how you will read this man on a closer inspection.”

“ He does not interest, he merely disgusts me.”

Pracontal arose, drew high the window, and waved his napkin in sign to the man, who at once got up from his seat, and slowly, and half indolently, came over to the window. He was dressed in a sort of grey uniform of jacket and trousers, and wore a kerchief on his head for a cap, a costume which certainly in no degree contributed to lessen the unfavourable impression his face imparted, for there was in his look a mixture of furtiveness and ferocity positively appalling.

“Do you like him better now?” asked Longworth, in English.

And the fellow grinned at the words.

“You understand English, eh?” asked Pracontal.

“Ay, I know most modern languages.”

“What nation are you?”

“A Savoyard.”

“Whence do you come now?”

“From the galleys at Ischia.”

“Frank that, anyhow,” cried Longworth. “Were you under sentence there?”

“Yes, for life.”

“For what offence?”

“For a score that I committed, and twice as many that I failed in.”

“Murder, assassination?”

He nodded.

“Let us hear about some of them,” said Pracontal, with interest.

“I don’t talk of these things, they are bygones, and I’d as soon forget them.”

“And do you fancy they’ll be forgotten up there,” said Pracontal, pointing upwards as he spoke.

“What do you know about ‘up there,’” said he sternly, “more than myself? Are not your vague words ‘up there,’ the proof that it’s as much a mystery to *you* as to *me*?”

“Don’t get into theology with him, or you’ll have to listen to more blasphemy than you bargain for,” whispered Longworth; and whether the fellow overheard or merely guessed the meaning of the words, he grinned diabolically, and said,—

“Yes, leave that question there.”

“Are you not afraid of the police, my friend?” asked Longworth. “Is it not in their power to send you back to those you have escaped from?”

“They might with another, but the Cardinal

Secretary knows *me*. I have told him I have some business to do at Rome, and want only a day or two to do it, and he knows I will keep my word."

"My faith, you are a very conscientious galley-slave!" cried Pracontal. "Are you hungry?" and he took a large piece of bread from the sideboard and handed it to him. The man bowed, took the bread, and laid it beside him on the window-board.

"And so you and Antonelli are good friends?" said Longworth sneeringly.

"I did not say so. I only said he knew me, and knew me to be a man of my word."

"And how could a Cardinal know——?" when he got thus far he felt the unfairness of saying what he was about to utter, and stopped, but the man took up the words with perfect calmness, and said:—

"The best and the purest people in this world will now and then have to deal with the lowest and the worst, just as men will drink dirty water when they are parched with thirst."

"Is it some outlying debt of vengeance, an old vendetta, detains you here?" asked Longworth.

"I wouldn't call it that," replied he slowly, "but

I'd not be surprised if it took something of that shape, after all."

"And do you know any other great folk?" asked Pracontal, with a laugh. "Are you acquainted with the Pope?"

"No, I have never spoken to him. I know the French envoy here, the Marquis de Caderousse. I know Field-Marshal Kleinkoff. I know Brassieri—the Italian spy—they call him the Duke of Brassieri."

"That is to say, you have seen them as they drove by on the Corso, or walked on the Pincian?" said Longworth.

"No, that would not be acquaintance. When I said 'know' I meant it."

"Just as you know my friend here, and know *me* perhaps?" said Pracontal.

"Not only him, but *you*," said the fellow with a fierce determination.

"*Me*, know me? what do you know about *me*?"

"Everything," and now he drew himself up, and stared at him defiantly.

"I declare I wonder at you, Anatole," whispered Longworth. "Don't you know the game of menace and insolence these rascals play at?" And again

the fellow seemed to divine what passed, for he said :—

“Your friend is wrong this time. I am not the cheat he thinks me.”

“Tell me something you know about me,” said Pracontal, smiling ; and he filled a goblet with wine, and handed it to him.

The other, however, made a gesture of refusal, and coldly said,—“What shall it be about? I’ll answer any question you put to me.”

“What is he about to do?” cried Longworth. “What great step in life is he on the eve of taking?”

“Oh, I’m not a fortune-teller,” said the man, roughly ; “though I could tell you that he’s not to be married to this rich Englishwoman. That fine bubble is burst already.”

Pracontal tried to laugh, but he could not ; and it was with difficulty he could thunder out,—“Servants’ stories and lacqueys’ talk !”

“No such thing, sir. I deal as little with these people as yourself. You seem to think me an impostor ; but I tell you I am less of a cheat than either of you. Ay, sir, than you, who play fine

gentleman, mi lordo, here in Italy, but whose father was a land-steward; or than you——”

“What of me—what of *me*?” cried Pracontal, whose intense eagerness now mastered every other emotion.

“You! who cannot tell who or what you are, who have a dozen names, and no right to any of them; and who, though you have your initials burned in gunpowder in the bend of your arm, have no other baptismal registry. Ah! do I know you now?” cried he, as Pracontal sank upon a seat, covered with a cold sweat and fainting.

“This is some rascally trick. It is some private act of hate. Keep him in talk till I fetch a gendarme.” Longworth whispered this, and left the room.

“Bad counsel that he has given you,” said the man. “*My* advice is better. Get away from this at once—get away before he returns. There’s only shame and disgrace before you now.”

He moved over to where Pracontal was seated, and placing his mouth close to his ear, whispered some words slowly and deliberately.

“And are you Niccolo Baldassare?” muttered Pracontal.

“Come with me, and learn all,” said the man, moving to the door; “for I will not wait to be arrested and made a town talk.”

Pracontal arose and followed him.

The old man walked with a firm and rapid step. He descended the stairs that led to the Piazza del Popolo, crossed the wide piazza, and issued from the gate out upon the Campagna, and skirting the ancient wall, was soon lost to view among the straggling hovels which cluster at intervals beneath the ramparts. Pracontal continued to walk behind him, his head sunk on his bosom, and his steps listless and uncertain, like one walking in sleep. Neither were seen more after that night.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LAST OF ALL.

ALL the emissaries had returned to the villa except Sedley, who found himself obliged to revisit England suddenly, but from whom came a few lines of telegram, stating that the "case of Pracontal de Bramleigh *v.* Bramleigh had been struck out of the cause list; Kelson a heavy loser, having made large advances to plaintiff."

"Wasn't it like the old fox to add this about his colleague? As if any of us cared about Kelson, or thought of him!"

"Good fortune is very selfish, I really believe," said Nelly. "We have done nothing but talk of ourselves, our interests, and our intentions for the last four days, and the worst of it is, we don't seem tired of doing so yet."

"It would be a niggardly thing to deny us that

pleasure, seeing what we have passed through to reach it," cried Jack.

"Who'll write to Marion with the news?" said Augustus.

"Not I," said Jack; "or if I do it will be to sign myself 'late Sam Rogers.'"

"If George accepts the embassy chaplaincy," said Julia, "he can convey the tidings by word of mouth."

"To guess by his dreary face," said Jack, "one would say he had really closed with that proposal. What's the matter, old fellow; has the general joy here not warmed your heart?"

L'Estrange, pale and red alternately, blundered out a few scarcely coherent words; and Julia, who well knew what feelings were agitating him, and how the hopes that adversity had favoured might be dashed, now that a brighter fortune had dawned, came quickly to his rescue, and said, "I see what George is thinking of. George is wondering when we shall all be as happy and as united again, as we have been here, under this dear old roof."

"But why should we not?" broke in Augustus. "I mean to keep the anniversary of our meeting

here, and assemble you all every year at this place. Perhaps I have forgotten to tell you that I am the owner of the villa. I have signed the contract this morning."

A cry of joy—almost a cheer—greeted this announcement, and Augustus went on.

"My ferns, and my green beetles, and my sea anemonies, as Nelly enumerates them, can all be prosecuted here, and I purpose to remain and live here."

"And Castello?"

"Jack will go and live at Castello," continued he. "I have interceded with a lady of my acquaintance"—he did not glance at Julia, but she blushed as he spoke—"to keep a certain green room, with a little stair out of it down to the garden, for me when I go there. Beyond that I reserve nothing."

"We'll only half value the gift without you, old fellow," said Jack, as he passed his arm around her, and drew her fondly towards him.

"As one of the uninstructed public," interposed Cutbill, "I desire to ask, who are meant by 'We?'"

A half insolent toss of the head from Julia, meant specially for the speaker, was, however, seen by the others, who could not help laughing at it heartily.

“I think the uninstructed public should have a little deference for those who know more,” broke in Jack, tartly, for he resented hotly whatever seemed to annoy Julia.

“Tom Cutbill is shunted off the line, I see,” said Cutbill, mournfully.

“If he were,” cried Augustus, “we should be about the most worthless set of people living. We owe him much, and like him even more.”

“Now, that’s what I call handsome,” resumed Cutbill, “and if it wasn’t a moment when you are all thinking of things a precious sight more interesting than T. C., I’d ask permission to return my acknowledgments in a speech.”

“Oh, don’t make a speech, Mr. Cutbill,” said Julia.

“No, ma’am. I’ll reserve myself till I return thanks for the bridesmaids.”

“Will no one suppress him?” said Julia, in a whisper.

“Oh, I am so glad you are to live at Castello, dearest,” said Nelly, as she drew Julia to her, and kissed her. “You are just the *châtelaine* to become it.”

“There is such a thing as losing one's head, Nelly, out of sheer delight, and when I think I shall soon be one of you I run this risk; but tell me, dearest”—and here she whispered her lowest—“why is not our joy perfect? Why is poor George to be left out of all this happiness?”

“You must ask *him* that,” muttered she, hiding her head on the other's shoulder.

“And may I, dearest?” cried Julia, rapturously. “Oh, Nelly, if there be one joy in the world I would prize above all it would be to know you were doubly my sister—doubly bound to me in affection. See, darling, see—even as we are speaking—George and your brother have walked away together. Oh, can it be—can it be? Yes, dearest,” cried she, throwing her arm around her; “your brother is holding him by the hand, and the tears are falling along George's cheek; his happiness is assured, and you are his own.”

Nelly's chest heaved violently, and two low deep sobs burst from her, but her face was buried in Julia's bosom, and she never uttered a word. And thus Julia led her gently away down one of the lonely alleys of the garden, till they were lost to sight.

Lovers are proverbially the very worst of company for the outer world, nor is it easy to say which is more intolerable—their rapture or their reserve. The overweening selfishness of the tender passion conciliates no sympathy; very fortunately, it is quite indifferent to it. If it were not all-sufficing, it would not be that glorious delirium that believes the present to be eternal, and sees a world peopled only by two.

What should we gain therefore, if we loitered in such company? They would not tell us *their* secrets—they would not care to hear ours. Let it be enough to say that, after some dark and anxious days in life, fortune once more shone out on those whom we saw so prosperous when first we met them. If they were not very brilliant nor very good, they were probably—with defects of temper and shortcomings in high resolve—pretty much like the best of those we know in life. Augustus, with a certain small vanity that tormented him into thinking that he had a lesson to read to the world, and that he was a much finer creature than he seemed or looked, was really a generously minded and warm-hearted fellow, who loved his neighbour—meaning his brother or his sister—a great deal better than himself.

Nelly was about as good as—I don't think better than—nineteen out of every twenty honestly brought-up girls, who, not seduced by the luxuries of a very prosperous condition, come early to feel and to know what money can and what it cannot do.

Jack had many defects of hot temper and hastiness, but on the whole was a fine sailor-like fellow, carrying with him through life the dashing hardihood that he would have displayed in a breach or on a boarding, and thus occasionally exuberant, where smaller and weaker traits would have sufficed. Such men, from time to time, make troublesome first lieutenants, but women do not dislike them, and there is an impression abroad that they make good husbands, and that all the bluster they employ towards the world subsides into the mildest possible murmur beside the domestic hearth-rug.

Marion was not much more or much less than we have seen her; and though she became, by the great and distinguished services of her husband, a countess, she was not without a strange sentiment of envy for a certain small vicarage in Herts, where rosy children romped before the latticed porch, beneath which sat a very blooming and beautiful mother, and worked as

her husband read for her. A very simple little home sketch ; but it was the page of a life where all harmonized and all went smoothly on : one of those lives of small ambitions and humble pleasures which are nearer Paradise than anything this world gives us.

Temple Bramleigh was a secretary of legation, and lived to see himself—in the uniformity of his manuscript, the precision of his docketing, and the exactness of his sealing-wax,—the pet of “the Office.” Acolytes, who swung incense before permanent secretaries, or held up the vestments of chief clerks, and who heard the words which drop from the high priests of foolscap, declared Temple was a rising man ; and with a brother-in-law in the Lords, and a brother rich enough to contest a seat in the Lower House, one whose future pointed to a high post and no small distinction : for, happily for us, we live in an age where self-assertion is as insufficient in public life as self-righteousness in religion, and our merits are always best cared for by imputed holiness.

The story of these volumes is of the Bramleighs, and I must not presume to suppose that my reader interests himself in the fate of those secondary

personages who figure in the picture. Lady Augusta, however, deserves a passing mention, but perhaps her own words will be more descriptive than any of mine ; and I cannot better conclude than with the letter she wrote to Nelly, and which ran thus :—

“ Villa Altieri, Rome.

“ DEAREST CHILD,—

“How shall I ever convey to you one-half the transport, the joy, the ecstasy I am filled with by this glorious news ! There is no longer a question of law or scandal or exposure. Your estates are your own, and your dear name stands forth untarnished and splendid, as it has ever done. It is only as I bethink me of what you and dearest Augustus and darling Jack must have gone through that I spare you the narrative of my own sufferings, my days of sorrow, my nights of crying. It was indeed a terrific trial to us all, and those horrid stories of hair turning white from grief made me rush to the glass every morning at daybreak with a degree of terror that I know well I shall never be able to throw off for many a year ; for I can assure you, dearest, that the washes are a mistake, and most pernicious ! They are made of what chemists call Ethiops

mineral, which is as explosive as nitro-glycerine; and once penetrating the pores, the head becomes, as Doctor Robertson says, a 'charged shell.' Can you fancy anything as horrible? Incipient greyness is best treated with silver powder, which, when the eyelashes are properly darkened *at the base*, gives a very charming lustre to the expression. On no account use gold powder.

“It was a Mr. Longworth, a neighbour of yours, whom you don't know, brought me the first news; but it was soon all over Rome, for his father—I mean Pracontal's—was formerly much employed by Antonelli, and came here with the tidings that the mine had exploded, and blown up only themselves. A very dreadful man his father, with a sabre-scar down the cheek and deep marks of manacles on his wrists and ankles; but wouldn't take money from the Cardinal, nor anything but a passport. And they went away, so the police say, on foot, P. dressed in some horrid coarse clothes like his father; and oh, darling, how handsome he was, and how distinguished-looking! It was young France, if you like; but, after all, don't we all like the Boulevard de Ghent better than the Faubourg St.

Germain? He was very witty, too; that is, he was a master of a language where wit comes easy, and could season talk with those nice little flatteries which, like floriture in singing, heighten the charm but never impair the force of the melody. And then, how he sang! Imagine Mario in a boudoir with a cottage piano accompaniment, and then you have it. It is very hard to know anything about men, but, so far as I can see, he was not a cheat; he believed the whole stupid story, and fancied that there had been a painter called Lami, and a beautiful creature who married somebody and was the mother of somebody else. He almost made me believe it, too; that is, it bored me ineffably, and I used to doze over it, and when I awoke I wasn't quite sure whether I dreamed he was a man of fortune or that such was a fact. Do you think he'll shoot himself? I hope he'll not shoot himself. It would throw such a lasting gloom over the whole incident that one could never fall back upon it in memory without deep sorrow; but men are so essentially selfish I don't think that this consideration would weigh with him.

“Some malicious people here circulated a story that he had made me an offer of marriage, and that

I had accepted it. Just as they said some months ago that I had gone over to Rome, and here I am still, as the police-sheet calls me, a 'Widow and a Protestant.' My character for eccentricity exposes me naturally to these kinds of scandal; but on the other hand, it saves me from the trouble of refuting or denying them. So that I shall take no notice whatever either of my conversion or my marriage, and the dear world—never ill-natured when it is useless—will at last accept the fact, small and insignificant though it be, just as creditors take half-a-crown in the pound after a bankruptcy.

“And now, dearest, is it too soon, is it too importunate, or is it too indelicate to tell your brother that, though I'm the most ethereal of creatures, I require to eat occasionally, and that, though I am continually reprov'd for the lowness of my dresses, I still do wear some clothes. In a word, dearest, I am in dire poverty, and to give me simply a thousand a year is to say, be a casual pauper. No one—my worst enemy—and I suppose I have a few who hate and would despitefully use me—can say I am extravagant. The necessaries of life, as they are called, are the costly things, and these are what I

can perfectly well dispense with. I want its elegancies, its refinements, and these one has so cheaply. What, for instance, is the cost of the bouquet on your dinner-table? Certainly not more than one of your entrées; and it is infinitely more charming and more pleasure-giving. My coffee costs me no more out of Sèvres than out of a white mug with a lip like a milk-pail; and will you tell me that the Mocha is the same in the one as the other? What I want is that life should be picturesque, that its elegancies should so surround one that its coarser, grosser elements be kept out of sight; and this is a cheap philosophy. My little villa here—and nothing can be smaller—affords it; but come and see, dearest—that is the true way—come and see how I live. If ever there was an existence of simple pleasures it is mine. I never receive in the morning—I study. I either read improving books—I'll show you some of them—or I converse with Monsignore Galloni. We talk theology and mundane things at times, and we play besique, and we flirt a little; but not as you would understand flirtation. It is as though a light zephyr stirred the leaves of the affections and shook out the perfume,

but never detached a blossom nor injured a bud. Monsignore is an adept at this game; so serious, and yet so tender, so spiritual, and, at the same time, so compassionate to poor weak human nature—which, by the way, he understands in its conflicts with itself, its motives, and its struggles as none of your laymen do. Not but poor Pracontal had a very ingenious turn, and could reconcile much that coarser minds would have called discrepant and contradictory.

“ So that, dearest, with less than three thousand, or two five hundred, I most positively go to gaol. It has occurred to me that, if none care to go over to that house in Ireland, I might as well live there, at least for the two or three months in the year that the odious climate permits. As to the people, I know they would doat on me. I feel for them very much, and I have learned out here the true chords their natures respond to. What do you say to this plan? Would it not be ecstasy if you agreed to share it? The cheapness of Ireland is a proverb. I had a grand-uncle who once was Viceroy there, and his letters show that he only spent a third of his official income.

“ I'd like to do this, too, if I only knew what my official income was. Ask Gusty this question, and kiss every one that ought to be kissed, and give them loves innumerable, and believe me ever your

“ Doating mamma (or mamina, that's prettier),

“ AUGUSTA BRAMLEIGH.

“ I shall write to Marion to-morrow. It will not be as easy a task as this letter ; but I have done even more difficult ones. So they are saying now that Culduff's promotion was a mere mistake ; that there never was such a man as Sam Rogers at all—no case—no indemnity—no escape—no anything. O dear me, as Monsignore says, what rest have our feet once we leave total incredulity ? ”

THE END.

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