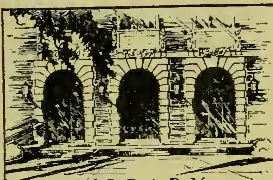

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SWEET ANNE PAGE.

VOL. II.

SWEET ANNE PAGE.

BY

MORTIMER COLLINS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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SWEET ANNE PAGE.

CHAPTER I.

AN ELOPEMENT.

SWEET Anne Page was exceedingly dissatisfied with what she had done. She was a timorous creature, and had written to Humphrey in a fright, and now was in a fright as to the result. Anne was a parasitic plant—a clinging creature, unable to stand alone. Her heart was a treasure of sweetness, which she was glad to bestow on anyone who seemed to deserve it. Humphrey Morfill had accurately estimated her receptive and reflective character. With Stephen, she was thoughtful and dreamy; with Humphrey she was gay and vivacious; and at both times she was happy. But now her letter

had filled her with remorse and terror. She thought of Stephen, whom her father had deemed worthy to wed her. With a pang of regret she thought of Humphrey, to whom she had offered herself in sudden fear, with utter dismay. What should she do? Of whom should she ask counsel? If Claudia had not left Kingsleat, I believe Anne would have thrown herself at her feet and confessed everything, for she had faith in her cousin, while she feared her; but for her uncle Walter and Winifred she had only fear, no faith.

She sat in the schoolroom at the Rectory, thinking of these things, in her hand some dreary volume of lessons, which she was supposed to be learning. Not a word was visible to her troubled eyes. Stiff Miss Marsden sat opposite her, doing some ridiculous feminine work. The forenoon was a bright one, softening towards spring; and poor little childish Anne, if there had been anybody to love and guide her, would have been as good and as happy a girl as you would wish to see on a spring morning. Immured in a schoolroom, tortured

with long lessons, threatened with a marriage to some one she had never seen, she was thoroughly miserable. Anne always dreaded people she did not know, and always loved people whom she knew ever so little, if they would let her. If the Raphael Branscombe who terrified her could have entered at this moment he might easily have won her from both her boyish wooers.

"Are you ready with your lesson, my dear?" asked the governess, in the chill voice of the species.

Anne started, conscious of her naughtiness. She did not even know what book she had in her hand. It turned out to be a work by the ingenious M. Le Page, with this sort of thing in it—"Joséphine, je viens d'invite M. L. à déjeûner, qu'as tu à nous donner? Du jambon, des côtelettes, du fromage, et de la crême avec le café. Il y a en bas des œufs tout frais, on peut ajouter une omelette." Breaking down over "*jambon*," Anne burst into tears.

"You are not well, my dear, I am afraid," said the governess. "Have you a headache? Would you like to go and lie down?"

Anne assented to the proposition, glad to obtain solitude. When she reached her own room she locked the door, and sat down and tried to think; but she was in no state to decide what she ought to do. Always trustful and irresolute, she was at this moment pliant as a reed. She could come to no decision. There was no one she could ask. She could only moan and sob, and wish sometimes for Stephen, sometimes for Humphrey, sometimes even for Claudia—and often, ah, how often, poor child, for her lost father.

There came a tap at the door.

"They can't let me alone," she murmured fretfully. "I shall have to take some gruel, or some senna, or something. I am very wretched."

She opened the door, and there entered—not as she expected, her cousin or the governess—but the parlour-maid, Rebecca. She was a wonderful smart young person, with a fly-away air, and a taste for cherry-coloured ribbons. Humphrey, guessing that the wearer of such finery was corruptible, had made her his messenger by

occasional half-crowns, and on this occasion she brought Anne a letter from him.

"My poor little pet, I will save you. Come down into the garden this evening at eleven, or as soon after as you can. Becky will open the side-door for you. Don't be afraid. Put on your bonnet and shawl, as it is very cold.

"Just tell Becky to say—yes.

"Your loving

"HUMPHREY."

"*Yes*, Becky," said Anne, emphatically, so delighted with definite guidance that she did not hesitate a moment.

"You've been crying, Miss," said Becky, familiarly. "I wouldn't, if I were you. There's nobody dare put upon you, now Miss Claudia is gone. You're a better lady than any of 'em."

This well-meant speech was made in consequence of Humphrey's orders to Becky to advise Miss Page to keep up her spirits; but as she went down stairs the flighty *cameriste* said to herself,—

"Silly little chit! What does she want crying there like a baby? I'm sure I don't wonder at Miss Claudia's whipping her. I wonder what Mr. Humphrey can see in *her*—but *there*, she's got money."

And Becky tossed her cherry-coloured cap-ribbons, and thought, if *she* had money, how the young men would all be after her. And by-and-by she managed to slip out and convey the affirmative monosyllable to Morfill, who was lying perdu at a public-house near the Rectory, and who gave Becky a sovereign and certain directions to which she promised attention.

Humphrey, as we have said, had gone straight to Idlechester, and to Stephen's rooms. He found his old friend in a dreamy, melancholy mood.

"Well, old boy," he said, "you seem dull in these queer rooms of yours. Do you stay here all day? Why don't you wake up a little?"

"Oh, I go out often enough," replied Stephen. "But I am rather dull, I confess."

"No wonder. And it's entirely your own fault; your money makes you independent.

Why not go to college?—you'll be jolly enough there."

"I don't wan't to be jolly," said Stephen. "But what brings you here in the middle of term? Anything the matter?"

"Well," said Humphrey, hesitatingly, "the fact is this. I want you to do me, if you can, a great favour. I want to borrow two hundred pounds for about three months. And you must trust to my honour; I cannot tell you what I want it for—only there's a lady in the case."

"You can have it to-morrow morning as soon as the bank opens," said Stephen. "And now, what shall we do this evening?"

"I'm going to stay here," said Morfill, "and what's more, I mean to sleep on your sofa, if you'll let me. I don't wish it generally known that I am not at Cambridge. And, by the way, if you are going out at all, stroll down to the Half Moon, and hear if anybody talks about me. I got off the coach half a mile from town, and don't think I was recognized."

Stephen did as he was told, and found that

Humphrey had not quite succeeded in maintaining his incognito.

"Why, there's an old friend of yours in town, Mr. Stephen," said Jack Winslow. "How is it he's not with you?"

"I have no friends, Miss Winslow, old or new," said Stephen, solemnly.

"Oh, don't talk such stuff! But you can't mean to say you haven't seen Mr. Morfill?"

"My dear Jack, I regret to find that you are losing your sanity. Is it incipient *D. T.*, and must I warn that respectable old gentleman whom you condescend to acknowledge as papa that it is time you were sent to the County Lunatic Asylum? Your head should be shaved, and you should be put in a straight waistcoat."

"What nonsense you are talking! I tell you Mr. Morfill came in by this evening's coach, and I want to know what he has come for."

"I should think you did. So should I if I thought he was here. Is it likely he'd leave Cambridge in the middle of term?"

"I don't know what's likely," said Jack. "I

only know Harry Tipper says he saw him."

"Did you ever know Harry drive that last stage sober? Says he saw him! Saw old Vosper the butcher, that weighs twenty stone, and thought he was such a genteel young man, he must be fresh from the University."

Thus cunningly did Stephen attempt to conceal his rival from observation, little guessing the direction of Humphrey's designs. And the next morning he drew from the bank two hundred pounds, which he handed to his friend; and Humphrey got quietly away, leaving Stephen under the impression that he was going back to Cambridge. Instead of this, he made his way to Kingsleat, and entered into negotiations with his old ally of the cherry-coloured ribbons.

The evening was dull at the Rectory. The evenings always were so, now that the brilliant Claudia had departed, and there was no "swell" baronet dropping in to flirt with her. The Rector and his daughter lived tête-à-tête, and with the dessert entered our little friend Anne, demure and infantile, plump and *petite*, still in the

short frocks and fringed pantaloons to which she had been relegated by the persecuting Panther. When they went to the drawing-room, Winifred was wont to sit by the fire and read some saintly book, while Anne looked out of the window till it became too dark to see anything. Then the Rector came and had his coffee, and read the London morning paper, which reached Idlechester about eight o'clock. He was a taciturn man, who seldom found in his journal anything to talk about. Some children would have found pabulum in the books, illustrated and otherwise, in which the house abounded. Stephen, for example, would have been only too content to be thus let alone; but Anne was a social creature, who pined for a loving voice, and a protecting arm. She did not care to read; but would listen by the hour if anyone read to her. Her sweetness was like the fragrant spirit of the limoncina tree, which yields itself to the caressing hand.

This evening seemed interminable. Anne thought the Rector would never come to the drawing-room—that he would never have finish-

ed his *Morning Chronicle*—that the time for prayers would never arrive. But it came at last; and, as the Rev. Walter Branscombe's sonorous voice read the evening lesson, Anne was fascinated by the cherry-coloured cap ribbons gleaming amid the line of servants. But at last there was an end; and Anne, after the ordinary evening embraces, was according to custom accompanied to her room by Miss Marsden, who always made her kneel down and say a hymn in her presence. And in time the governess departed, and Anne waited in a frightful state of fidgettiness, of ineffable terror, for eleven o'clock to come, and for Becky to assure her that all was safe.

It was about five minutes past the hour when Becky cautiously opened the door, and found Anne in a terrible state of alarm and anticipation.

"Now, Miss," she whispered, energetic in the expectation of future sovereigns, "slip on your cloak and bonnet—it's a dreadfully frosty night. Mr. Humphrey's waiting."

Anne could do nothing for herself. Becky

wrapped her up and led her trembling down the back stairs to a side door which opened on the garden. She could scarcely stand. But waiting at the door was Humphrey Morfill, who took her in his arms and kissed her.

"My darling!" he said, "I want you to come with me. I have a carriage waiting. I will make you my wife to-morrow."

She did not understand him. She lay almost insensible in his arms.

"It's no good talking to her, Mr. Humphrey," whispered the practical parlour-maid—"she's frightened to death almost. You put her in the coach and take her away—and that's what you do."

Humphrey acted on this excellent advice. He lifted Anne into the postchaise, and off it flew along the hard, frosty road. Becky went back to the house, fastened the side door with quiet deliberateness, and did not look at Morfill's parting gift till she reached her room. It was a ten-pound note, and she had expected only five.

"Well," she said, "he's a generous young

fellow, and deserves a better wife than that poor thing. She *is* a baby, if I ever saw one."

Becky had locked the door of Anne's room, and removed the key. It was Miss Marsden's custom in the morning, when herself dressed, to go to her pupil's room, and see that she was properly attired, and cause her to repeat another hymn—the most punctual of young persons, she never failed to be at Anne's door at eight precisely.

The door was locked, and Anne did not open it.

"The child must be ill," said the governess. "How silly of her to lock her door. I must tell Miss Branscombe."

But Winifred was in her bath, and did not mean to be disturbed for anything, and, when the governess reiterated her raps at the door, exclaimed in an unsaintly way—

"Wait, can't you?"

When her toilet was a trifle more advanced, she threw on a loose wrapper, and, appearing on the landing, said to the governess—

"Well, what is it?"

"Miss Page's door is locked, and we can't

make her hear. I am afraid she's ill. She complained of headache yesterday."

"Pooh! There's nothing the matter with her —she's very sly. Tell her you'll punish her if she doesn't open the door."

Miss Marsden conveyed the threat, but of course nothing came of it, and at last the Rector was aroused by the unusual noise. He had the door forced open. We are already aware of what he was likely to find.

There was poor little Anne's bed, unslept in. The room was tidy as usual—just as tidy as when she had knelt down and said her hymn to the govereness, the night before. There was nothing to prate of her whereabouts. Nor could any creature in the Rectory, except the maiden of the cherry-coloured cap-ribbons, guess what had become of her. The Rector was utterly perplexed, and could not tell what in the world to do. He felt no disposition to publish abroad the fact that his ward was missing, so at length he determined to wait awhile, and see if she returned.

But during the morning the rumour of her

disappearance travelled beyond the Rectory walls into the town of Kingsleat. And it encountered and coalesced with another rumour, which was that a post-chaise with four horses, from the Mitre, had taken Mr. Humphrey Morfill and a female companion a stage out of Kingsleat, on the North road.

As when acid meets alkali, and neutral salt is formed, so these two rumours combined to form a third—that Mr. Morfill had run away with Miss Page. The Rector heard this at last, and started for the Mitre to question the landlord of that ancient hotel and posting house. On his way he was joined by Dr. Winter, who had heard the same rumour, and had started on the same errand.

Stout old rubicund Dawson, when these two magnates of the town, both clergymen, and one a country magistrate, came to ask him what he knew of the matter, would have turned pale if it had been possible. He told them all he knew—which was that Mr. Morfill had engaged post horses late the previous evening, and that they started between eleven and twelve,

and that they had since returned. A postboy was called in, and stated that they took Mr. Morfill and a lady to Radford, and that he got fresh horses at the Bell, and went on immediately.

"Didn't you think there was something wrong, Dawson," said Dr. Winter, "when a mere boy like my nephew ordered post-horses?"

"No, sir," replied Dawson. "The young gentleman has always been so very steady, I took his order just as soon as if it was yours."

The two clergymen left the hotel, convinced that the thing was done, and that no interference could avail.

"You call your nephew a mere boy," said the Rector. "Is he of age?"

"He is twenty-two," said Winter. "This is a sad business for you, of course, but for me it is worse. That boy was my adopted son; I thought him incapable of meanness and dishonour; I hoped that he would have a noble career. Now I hope never to see him again. I thank God he is not my son."

"You are too harsh, my dear friend," replied

the Rector. "He is a fine intelligent young man, and though his conduct has been inexcusable, I would not give him up altogether. Young men are not always amenable to reason when there is a lovely girl in the case. He may have a fine career before him yet."

"I cannot agree with you," said Dr. Winter, briefly.

The Rector went home, with a great deal of correspondence on his hands. He wrote to Mr. Drax and to Raphael. Winifred poured out her indignation to Claudia in a letter inexplicably crossed. The Panther's feelings on receiving it may easily be imagined. And Raphael was not at home that morning—had gone off to Richmond the previous afternoon, and had not returned—so that she could find nobody to sympathise with her, but walked up and down the Clarges-street drawing-room in impotent anger. The idea of that little Anne Page serving them such a trick—and with Humphrey Morfill, too, whom she had believed quite safe. And now Stephen Langton, who had rejected her, would be almost a rich man, with half Mr. Page's money. Claudia

could not resist telling Sir Arthur Willesden of the affair, when the baronet paid a morning visit.

"Aw—by Jove!" said the baronet, "how interesting! Why, Miss Page—aw—was quite a child I think—short frocks—aw—and all that sort of thing. I wish—aw—that I could be the hero—aw—of an elopement, Miss Branscombe."

"Do you? I wish I had the heroine of this elopement here," said the Panther, looking anything but amiable.

"Well—aw—let us hope she will never repent it."

"She will: she *shall*. She shall be sorry for it every day of her life."

Claudia did not quite see how to fulfil this tremendous threat, but felt that she should like to realize it. Sir Arthur, finding his charmer in rather a terrifying humour this morning, did not prolong his visit.

Raphael did not see his sister till late. He dined out, but found her awaiting him at eleven, when he returned. She brought out her news at once.

"Anne Page has run away with young Morfill, Raphael."

He looked rather pleased than otherwise.

"When did that happen?" he asked.

"The night before last. They must be married by this time."

"Of course. It does young Morfill credit. You see he was not quite such a fool as you thought him, Claudia. Well, I need not go down to Kingsleat, now."

"You take it very coolly."

"Why not? Morfill plays ace of trumps and I lose the trick. Am I to spoil my hair by tearing it? The cleverest of women, Claudia—and you are the cleverest I ever met—ruin their game by temper. You are angry now with everybody—with Mr. and Mrs. Morfill for beating you, with me for not going down in time to stop it, with yourself for not perceiving that the little girl had an understanding with Morfill. This is foolish; or rather, it is womanish, and you, my poor Claudia, cannot help being a woman."

"You are very provoking, Raphael."

"I am philosophical, that is all. Now I shall

be spared the nuisance of going out of town just as the season is beginning. And I don't see that you need return, unless, indeed, you think of marrying that young Langton, who is really worth having now."

Claudia did not reply. She was always a little alarmed when Raphael approached this subject.

The news did not take long in travelling to Idlechester. Stephen, lounging past the Half Moon in the afternoon, was called in by the landlord, who had just heard the story from some of the Kingsleat folk. He was perfectly astounded. Himself trustful and worthy of trust, he could not believe in Morfill's having thus acted. And to borrow money of him for the purpose! It was incredible.

Alas, the incredible is too often the true—especially when human character is the basis of our incredulity. Stephen found the evidence too strong for him. He sat down in the inn-parlour, and drank a glass of port wine which kind-hearted Jack Winslow got for him.

"It can't be true," he said to himself.

"It's no good to take on so," said the bright-

eyed barmaid, eager to console him. "There's as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"I shall never marry, Jack," he said. "I believed in Anne; I can never believe in anybody else. And I trusted Morfill too; he was my friend. There is no such thing as friendship in the world, or love either."

"What ought I to do, Jack?" he said, after a time. "I'm a mere boy, you know: I don't know what a man ought to do. I suppose Mr. Branscombe now would shoot him."

"Don't talk in that cruel way," she said. "The Branscombes ain't men and women, from all I hear; they've no hearts in their bodies. You leave Mr. Humphrey alone: you'd only break Miss Anne's heart if you were to kill him; and perhaps you would be killed yourself."

"I should like that," said Stephen, calmly.

A day or two later, when letters had arrived from Humphrey—plausible letters, admirably concocted, but which deceived nobody—the great Mr. Drax fixed a time for reading the sealed codicil, and Stephen found himself the possessor of an additional two thousand a year.

He wanted to decline it in favour of her whom we must now call Mrs. Morfill, but Mr. Drax assured him this was out of the question.

"Humphrey Morfill is better off than he deserves," said the lawyer, and his auditors fully agreed with him.

When the first shock was over, Stephen thought a great deal about Claudia. He recollected her threat that he should never marry Anne Page. Had she contrived this elopement? It seemed impossible, but he had learned to doubt impossibilities. And then he vividly recalled the Panther's beauty and brilliancy—and that strange moment when she flung herself into his arms—and wondered whether she really hated him now. The idea of being loved by such a creature—a woman wholly different from all other women of his experience—a woman whom he found himself comparing with those imperious and terrible beauties who lived in the maddening atmosphere of the Rome of the Cæsars—was in itself a fascination. He did not love her as he had loved the honey-sweet girl who had been stolen from him; but how

fine it would be to tame such a glorious creature, to possess her, to make a slave of one who seemed born to be mistress and queen. It was a cruel lust of conquest that he felt—not love.

And having ascertained that she was likely to remain in London, he resolved to go thither. Stephen had never seen London; his world lay within a radius of twenty miles or less, round Idlechester Cathedral. He would go to London. He communicated his intention to the great Mr. Drax, whom in his boyhood he had regarded with reverent awe, but who was now assiduously affable to his young client; and Mr. Drax recommended him to go to the Chapter Coffee-house in St. Paul's Churchyard, and wrote down for him a few memoranda of guidance.

I suppose, in describing the effects of Anne Page's evasion, I have permitted time enough to elapse for her to reach Gretna and become Mrs. Morfill. She was helpless when the post-chaise started. Humphrey held her in his arms, and comforted her, and at Radford, where they first changed horses, he made her take a little brandy. He had no fear of pursuit, feeling

pretty sure of about eight hours' start. At the first possible place, and after daylight had arrived, he purchased some additional wrappages for Anne; he had taken her away with only a light cloak thrown over her ordinary dress. It was a cold, long, dreary ride; but with hot coffee at every stage, he contrived to keep her from freezing; and she slept in his arms like a child through a great part of the journey.

At last they crossed the Border, and reached the dwelling of the blacksmith priest, and were welded together in his rough fashion, Anne rather unresisting than consenting. In the presence of a strong will she was powerless. She was doing wrong, she knew; she dreaded to think of Stephen, of Claudia; but she could not oppose Humphrey. So Mr. and Mrs. Morfill duly reached the Bush Hotel at Carlisle, and sat down together to an excellent dinner, amid the suppressed amusement of chambermaids and the like. For be it remembered that Anne was still in frock and frilled *caleçons*, looking quite a child. But this was a trifle, which by the landlady's kind help was soon amended.

Humphrey wrote a series of letters to the Rector, to Mr. Drax, to his uncle, to Stephen. The Rector replied formally and ceremoniously, expressing his extreme regret that his niece's character had been injured by a runaway marriage, and hoping that Mr. Morfill's future conduct would in some degree evoke amends for his imprudence. Mr. Drax communicated the contents of the codicil, whereat Humphrey was very angry, holding it a great shame that Stephen should have half the property. Dr. Winter wrote a curt severe letter, in which he disowned his nephew entirely, and requested him to refrain from writing to him. Stephen Langton made no answer.

From Carlisle Humphrey had gone to Wetheral, a beautiful village on the divine river Eden, where he found quiet lodgings. He was too shrewd to spend much money in travelling until he could grasp his wife's property. So he spent a few quiet weeks at this place, which Wordsworth has immortalized, and which De Quincey loved. The red railway bridge over the Eden had not then been built; the only way

across to Corby Castle was by Mr. Howard's ferry. Belted Will Howard has forded that river in the rare old days; and there have been border fights there; and perchance Sir William of Deloraine, good at need, has splashed into the roaring torrent.

> "To the peers of Scotland woe! when the strong shafts fly
> like snow—
> Such the shout of long ago—
> Time of slaughter.
>
> "Ah, the dream is all forget. One sole beauty of the spot,
> Changing ever, changes not—
> Eden water."

By whose marge let us leave the runaways to spend their honeymoon.

CHAPTER II.

STEPHEN IN LONDON.

STEPHEN went to town by the night mail. He took no leave of his relations, which caused Aunt Harriet, when she heard he was gone, to talk of his "black-hearted ingratitude;" but indeed his brain was in a whirl, Anne Page's unfaithfulness had been so sudden a shock, that he could not collect himself after it. He would hardly have taken formal leave of his kind-hearted *confidante*, Jack Winslow, if that young lady had not been on the spot when the coach started. Indeed Jack generally saw the mail off, and occasionally, as my readers are aware, drove a stage herself.

In a very dreamy state was Stephen Langton. Idlechester, with its beautiful river, its mighty

minster, with patulous elms of immemorial growth about it; its picturesque High Street and Market Cross, in those days unrestored, for Gilbert Scott had not arisen; Mr. Page's house, with its gardens that seemed a fragment of Elysium; his grandfather's house and tanyard, and his grandfather himself—all these things seemed a part of his personal identity. But now, in the broad moonlight, on the box behind four horses, racing along the London road with wide stretches of undulating chalk down lying bare beneath the moon on either side, Stephen began to think that the Cathedral City was a dream of the past—that there had been no reality in his visions of the Close, the river, the tanyard—that even Claudia Branscombe and Anne Page were creatures of the element. Here are four lines of a poem that the young gentleman had sent to *Fraser* (then in the vigour of its hot youth), which may show something of the state of his mind:—

"And I long through the gloomy gate of the unknown world to go,
Where truth is whispered, perchance, by angels under their breath;

For I know not whether the dreams I dream are dreams or no,
Or whether to die is life, or whether to live is death."

Strange fancies had he nurtured in those quaint rooms in Little College Green; and he had read the opium-dreams of De Quincey, and the fever-fancies of Hoffman. And now, as the long panorama of down and woodland, of sleeping villages and towns, swept swiftly by, he looked upon Idlechester as a dream—upon the present as a dream—and marvelled whether he should still dream on without hope of wakening.

Lo a blush in the East—Aurora rising bathed in one tingling blush from the couch of Tithonus. Early, before the sordid smoke has had time to veil the beauty of the sleeping city, the mail enters London. Stephen saw it as a great poet had seen it from Westminster Bridge, and thought with Wordsworth, that—

"Earth has not anything to show more fair."

The man who has not looked upon London when—

"The City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning"—

when, in an intense calm that may be felt, "all

that mighty heart is lying still," has yet to see one of the most pathetic and majestic sights the world can show.

Stephen, dismounting at one of those dear old Holborn hostelries, was with his luggage rattled in a ramshackle hackney-coach to the Chapter Coffee-house, and, being cold and stiff, and having a fine healthy capacity for sleep, very wisely went to bed. Mr. Drax did well to send him to a place like the Chapter. Young men were seldom seen in that home of middle-aged clergymen and old port; there was nobody who could lead the verdant young visionary astray, whereas, if he had been landed in a Covent Garden hotel, he would soon have been introduced to the vulgar vice of the metropolis; and Stephen was of a temperament only too easily misled. The eye creates beauty, and music is the product of the ear. Stephen's imaginative faculty was of a quality to paralyse his judgment. Any clever *hetaira* might ruin him.

He locked himself into his room with a feeling of intense satisfaction. He always felt a delight in the isolation and independence of the

bed-chamber. There, without interruption, he could indulge in sleeping, or in waking dreams. Elia has devoted a delightful essay to the praises of *bed*; but the majority of us do not half enjoy that delicious locality. Thomson, perhaps, best understood its luxury, its infinite resources; and to read *The Castle of Indolence* in bed—the first part, I mean, before the vexatiously-virtuous knight arrives to disturb the enchantment of the place—is a great treat. Well, Stephen, within that quaint old comfortable den in the shadow of St. Paul's, built for himself a city within a city—a microscopic London of the imagination, widely different from the real capital; and he dwelt with his visions till nearly one o'clock, when he descended to look for breakfast.

The coffee-room, amber in its prevailing hue, was deserted. A noble fire was burning; the morning papers lay on a table near it; Stephen contentedly seated himself thereby, and rang for breakfast. Frederic, the head waiter, the most urbane, not to say ecclesiastical of waiters, awaited his orders. Young gentlemen were rather

out of place in this dignified atmosphere; but this young gentleman was recommended by Mr. Drax, of Idlechester, a good customer, an attorney that did business for bishops and deans, so Frederic patronized him. He gave him the hottest and strongest coffee in a silver ewer, the richest cream, the greenest watercresses, the freshest eggs, the thinnest slices of the ruddiest and most toothsome ham. Stephen took his ease in his inn with as much gusto as if he had been Jack Falstaff or Dr. Johnson.

"Would he dine at home?" asked Frederic. He would, and on that affable waiter's suggestion, ordered dinner at six—a bit of fish and a rump-steak and oyster sauce, and then he started to see London. His first few steps took him into the great Churchyard. Why should not he begin by seeing St. Paul's? He entered, and, by an expenditure of about five shillings, managed to see everything, from the catacombs to the hollow ball at the summit. As he climbed the rude staircase by which the visitor passes through the monstrous timber ribs on which the dome is constructed, he thought of Piranesi,

the architect, who in his fever dreams imagined himself climbing endless staircases up through interminable heights of architecture. Stephen reached the ball, and looked from its rectangular openings upon the Lilliputian world below. Now that London is so overcrowded, why should not a colony find airy lodgings in the skeleton of the dome of St. Paul's?

I scarcely know what places the young explorer did not see that day. He went eastward as far as the Tower; he went westward as far as Piccadilly. He returned to Faithfull's cosy quarters dead beat; so long a walk over pavement had thoroughly tired him. But Frederic had remembered him; his table was laid, and, by the time he had eaten his steak and drunk for the first time some of the famous London stout, Stephen was himself again. The waiter, who had taken a fancy to him, actually allowed him to have a bottle of 15*s.* port; and our hero, sipping this nectar and cracking his filberts, almost forgot Anne Page and the tragical fact that his heart was broken.

Although the other occupants of the coffee-

room were chiefly clergymen, they were not devoid of vivacity. Stephen watched with much interest a party of three who dined at a table near him. One of these, a man nearly fifty, but bearing his years as if they were a light load, was evidently facetious almost beyond endurance. When the sweet o' the night came on, and the duller folk retired, and the trio in question had begun to smoke, their laughter had scarcely any intermission. Every now and then Stephen caught snatches of strange rhyme, as thus—

> " Sow your poetic oats—
> Not to say wild oats ;
> Give up the petticoats
> On which this child dotes !"

By-and-by, these three gentlemen and Stephen were the sole occupants of the room : whereupon the Rhymer said,

"Frederic, bring the materials for a bowl of punch. And," he continued, addressing Stephen, "if you, young gentleman, are not afraid of a splitting headache in the morning, perhaps you'll come over and join us?"

Stephen expressed his pleasure.

"Youth," said the unknown, "seldom enters this mahogany-coloured room, or sees dignitaries of the Church drink good punch and make bad verses. But it may not be unprofitable to you, my young friend, of whose name I am ignorant——"

"Stephen Langton, sir," he interposed.

"An excellent ecclesiastical name—the name of a man to whom England owes much. It may not be unprofitable to you, Mr. Langton, to learn by actual observation that clergymen are human."

"Some clergymen," remarked one of his friends.

"A timely qualification, my worthy *frere*. The priesthood are indeed divisible into three classes: they are either men, women, or fiends. Now, my fiendish brother would excommunicate me and send me—you all know where, for concocting this wonderful bowl of liquid headache; and my womanish brother would pray for me, hysterically; but you, my manly brethren, will right manfully help me to drink it."

The punch was worthy of its maker, whose humorous eye twinkled as he tasted it.

"Will it do, Mr. Langton?" he asked.

"I never tasted punch before," said Stephen, frankly. "It is delicious."

"Frederic," said the Rhymer, "see that the doors are shut, or my bass voice may wake some of my sleeping brethren. I am about to sing a song which I did into English from Béranger the other day. 'Tis called *The Keys of Paradise.*"

He had a noble bass voice, and did justice to the rather heterodox lyric.

"Noble Saint Peter lost, of late,
The golden keys of the heavenly gate;
  (Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Pretty Margaret passed one day,
And cunningly snatched the keys away.
    'I say, Margot!
    'Twon't do, you know:
  Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Margaret lost not a moment's time,
But opened the gates of the heavenly clime—
  (Queerest story ever put in metre!)
And devotees strict and sinners accurst
All rushed in with a furious burst.
    'I say, Margot!
    'Twon't do, you know:
  Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Singing together passed merrily through
A Protestant, a Turk, a Jew—
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Then came a Pope, the Popedom's pride,
Who, but for Maggie, would have stayed outside.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Jesuits, too, whom we all detest,
Came for a seat among the blest,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
And without struggles or shoves or wrenches,
Sat with the seraphs on the foremost benches.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Vainly did a fool exclaim,
That such facility was downright blame,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
For Satan escaped from his hot restraint,
And the beauty made him a horned saint.
'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"The devil being safe, 'twas then thought well
By royal edict to extinguish hell,
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
Such kindness quickly converted most,
So that soon there was nobody left to roast.

'I say, Margot!
'Twon't do, you know:
Give me my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter.

"Heaven was getting so extremely gay
That Peter himself wished to pass that way;
(Queerest story ever put in metre!)
But he'd sent too many to a warmer place,
So Maggy shut the door in his apostolic face.
'I say, Margot!
That's too bad, you know:
My keys! my keys!' exclaimed Saint Peter."

"Much too bad," chorussed his companions.

"Oh, no doubt Maggy relented in time," said one of them, "after she had frightened the apostolic suitor."

"I don't know," said Stephen. "Young ladies are cruel creatures."

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed the Rhymer, "that's where you are, is it? A victim of feminine heartlessness.

Perfida, sed quamvis perfida, cara tamen.

Why not tell us your story? You need not name names, as the Speaker would say. It will do you good."

"I don't suppose," said Stephen, "it will do me any harm. The simple truth is that I was

engaged to marry a young lady, with the approval of her father; that, on her father's death, her guardians declined to allow me to see her; and that my most intimate friend, having access to her, persuaded her to elope with him."

"You are laudably laconic," said the Rhymer. "I hope the event has not turned you into a Byronic misanthrope. How old was the lady?"

"Nearly seventeen."

"Ah! a child. You can't blame her. She is too young to know her own mind. And the man you call your friend was not your friend. Friends are few, Mr. Langton. Be your own friend. Take your own part. That is the best advice I can give you. And now, if it is not too late, and nobody objects, and the punch is not exhausted, I'll tell you a short story."

The offer was received with enthusiasm.

"A young man whom I knew fell in love. He was the son of a perpetual curate—which happily does not mean a man doomed to perpetual curacy. The lady whom he loved was the only child of the Lord of the Manor, a

many-acred baronet. She was beautiful beyond the imagination of man, of course. *Cela va sans dire.* When I last saw her she was a very puffy old personage.

"The hero of my story, whom I will call Smith to save trouble, was much given to dreaming. He dreamt one night that a Greek book in his father's library lay open before him, and that on one of the pages a single line stood out in red letters, and it was revealed to him that if he uttered that line thrice his lady-love would come to him, wherever he was. But he could not, when he awoke, recollect the line; and as he knew exactly as much Greek as Byron's Donna Inez, it was not quite clear to him how to look for it. He felt sure, however, that if he saw the line he should recognise it.

"Now, though Smith was a dolt, Smith's father was very much the reverse, and was the possessor of a very fair library, wherein there was much Greek. Smith astounded his father by suddenly taking to the study of Greek. It was in a curious fashion, though. He took the first Greek volume on a given shelf, seated

himself (he was a lazy rascal) in an easy chair, and looked carefully through it for a certain line. Smith's father was amazed to see his son read Greek so rapidly. Being a very Low Churchman, and a firm believer in all manner of miracles, he began to think his son had the gift of tongues. Smith rattled away through Æschylus, Sophocles, Homer, Herodotus, Pindar, and Plato, and a good many other fellows in the same line of business, at a pace unparalleled.

"But, as the Irish proverb hath it,

'Patience and perseverance
Found a wife for his Reverence;'

which, as priests of the Latin schism can't by any possibility have wives, was rather a hard matter. And so at last the mighty line flashed upon Smith. This was it:—

ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ ποῦ ποῦ 'στι, ποῦ

I'm not at all surprised at Smith's recognizing it.

"Having recognized it, he toiled hard to learn it by heart. This did not take him above

an hour and a half. He carried away this famous line in his brain, and when he went to bed that night he uttered the spell.

"At the first utterance of the magical verse there was a sound as if water were being poured into a vessel.

"At the second utterance of the magical verse there was a strong smell of brown Windsor soap.

"At the third utterance of the magical verse the walls of the chamber opened, and the lady entered, sitting in her night-dress, with her feet in hot water."

Here the Rhymer made an obstinate pause.

"Did she speak?" asked Stephen. "What happened?"

"I know nothing more. The canon says, *Solus cum solâ non præsumitur orare.* The young man is now a Bishop, and pretty often in hot water himself."

Soon after this queer tale had been told, they went to bed, the Rhymer telling Stephen that he should be glad to meet him at breakfast. The other two gentlemen were off by an early

coach to distant country parsonages.

Stephen awoke the next morning with the great-grandfather of headaches. He was young, you know, and unaccustomed to punch. Much icy water scarcely removed the leaden oppression on his brow, and he felt thankful that the breakfast hour was late. His new acquaintance had appointed eleven.

And at eleven they met. Everybody else in that sedate hostelry had breakfasted long before. With the sagacity which experience confers, the Rhymer ordered Stephen to begin with the soda and brandy, and then recommended him some anchovies done on toast. To his amazement, our young friend found he could eat. As to his companion, his appetite was Homeric.

And, having elicited from Stephen his position in the world, and his utterly indefinite designs, he proceeded to give him some excellent advice. As it turned out entirly useless, it is scarcely worth while to record it here. I am sure my readers would not take any of it.

They were long over their breakfast. The

Rhymer, as I must continue to call him, for Stephen was unable to extract his name from Frederic or anybody else in the establishment of *the Faithfull*, had nothing to do all the morning, and so, as he said, could indulge his laziness. So the ripe and thoughtful clergyman, whose humour years had not destroyed, and the mere boy, dreamy and poetic, full of wonder as to what years might give him, gossipped loiteringly together over their coffee.

Amid their gossip entered a singularly handsome young man, of the middle height, dressed in the utmost fashion. The affable Frederic approached him, somewhat awed by an aristocratic apparition of an order that coffee-room seldom saw.

"Waiter," he said, "is Mr. Langton staying here?"

"This is Mr. Langton, sir," said Frederic.

Stephen came forward.

"Ah, Mr. Langton," said the stranger, "you have forgotten me, no doubt. You were a boy when we met. My name is Branscombe—Raphael Branscombe. I heard you were in town

from our friend Drax, and I thought you might be puzzled sometimes how to spend your evenings, so I thought I'd ask you to look in upon us when you want amusement. Claudia and I are at No. —— Clarges-street. Claudia told me to say she would always be glad to see you."

Which was quite true. When a note from Mr. Drax informed Raphael, among other things, that Stephen was in town, he at once said,

"I shall look up that boy, Clandia!"

"What for?" asked the Panther, well aware that her brother seldom did anything without a reason.

"Well, apart from the fact that he would be an exceedingly good match for a certain young lady whom it is my duty to get married" (Claudia winced), "there is never any harm in the acquaintance of verdant boys with money."

"Don't victimize him, Raphael," pleaded the Panther.

"You have still a *tendresse* for him, have you? Well, why should all old Page's money go out

of the family? Send him a message, child."

"You may tell him I shall always be glad to see him."

"Very well. Don't be surprised if I bring him home to dinner."

Raphael drove his mail-phaeton eastward—specially to call on Stephen. And, after the speech already narrated, he sat down, and called for a pint of claret, and the three entered into desultory converse. Raphael perceived that the Rhymer, whoever he might be, belonged to a higher order of mind than he commonly encountered: while the Rhymer studied Raphael with much interest, as a variety of the human animal entirely new to him. I wish he had had to describe him rather than I.

"Let me give you a drive, Mr. Langton," said Raphael. "London is famous as possessing the most beautiful suburbs of any city in the world. I've a pair of horses outside that want exercise, and I've nothing in the world to do this morning, so you'll be doing me a service by accepting."

Stephen accepted. Raphael took him through

Brompton and Fulham, across Putney Bridge, that villanous old structure, up the hill to the heath, and then away to the right through Richmond Park, across Richmond Bridge, and along the banks of the Thames, through Twickenham and Teddington and Hampton Wick to Hampton Court. He put his horses up at the Toy, and shewed Stephen the Palace, and then they lounged into the Tennis Court.

"Do you play?" said Raphael.

"No."

"Ah! that's unlucky: 'twould have given you an appetite for a bit of luncheon. Here, marker, come and play."

Having beaten the marker with infinite ease—for, as I have said, Raphael was master of all games—he proposed that they should lunch. So they returned to the Toy and refreshed themselves, Stephen all the while wondering at his companion's cool and skilful style of doing everything.

Returning, Raphael drove northward through Weston, getting into the Uxbridge Road somewhere near Hanwell, and making his way

through Ealing and Acton to homewards. It was a long and pleasant drive; there was life on the great roads in those days before steam; and it was past five o'clock when Raphael pulled up in Clarges-street.

"We dine at six," he said to Stephen. "Come in. There will be no one but my sister, who'll forgive your dress. Come to my dressing-room and wash your hands."

Stephen presently found himself in the drawing-room alone, his companion having excused himself to look after the wine.

"I'm always my own butler," he said, in his airy fashion.

So Stephen lay back in a soft chair of ruddy velvet, and looked at the hot caverns of fire amid the coals in the grate, and dreamt. His heart was palpitating with a dread of Claudia, whose last words had told him that she hated him—and with a longing to subjugate and tame her, a wild and beautiful and queenly creature, with all the subtlety of womanhood, and all the strength of manhood. His quick brain went off in its usual way, combining, plot-

ting, imagining scenes, and with the vanity of inexperience, fancying the victory won. He was a new Alnaschar. As he mentally revelled in a fine dramatic situation, in which the Panther was sobbing at his feet, the silence was disturbed by a rustle of silk, and a voice which he had never forgotten—a voice that he had heard imperious and imperial, that he had heard broken and beseeching, that he had heard whispering passionately in his ear the strong temptation of an offered love—said calmly,

"How do you do, Mr. Langton?"

And they were seated opposite each other and talked. And he looked in vain into those great black eyes for either the soft light of love or the angry glare of rage. And he thought to himself, "Ah, me, what do I here? This woman is wise. I am a child, I am a fool, I am lost."

Yes, Stephen Langton was wise enough to think thus.

In the calmest and most common-place way did Claudia Branscombe talk to Stephen concerning the news of Idlechester and Kingsleat.

Lightly did she refer to Anne's elopement, quoting the ancient proverb anent marrying in haste and repenting at leisure, and saying—

"Poor child! A mere baby, and now Mrs. Morfill. I hope the young man will be kind to her; but his conduct shows that he is selfish, and selfish men have seldom much kindness."

"Only a brute could be unkind to her," said Stephen.

"What, are you in love with her still? You were very fortunate to lose her. Your own character—excuse my frankness—has not yet much stability, and if you had married her it would have been terrible for both. You would have been like— Well, comparisons are odious," she said, laughing. "But I think it was well for you."

"Possibly," said Stephen. "One is not always perfectly satisfied with what everybody else professes to think the best thing that could happen. I had a certain faith and loyalty which Mrs. Morfill's conduct has shattered. I have now to recommence the world on a new principle."

"Don't you think," asked Claudia, "that you may be hasty in condemning the whole of our sex because one little girl has been unfaithful?"

"Ah, I wish I could tell. Nothing except experience will enable me to correct an error of that kind. Can you wonder that I am in a state of utter uncertainty?"

"I don't wonder, but I think you would be wise not to come to hasty conclusions. However, it is an unimportant matter to everyone but yourself."

Raphael Branscombe presently joined them, and dinner was announced. A good dinner, we may be sure, at an establishment of which Raphael was the head. From the oysters and anchovy salad to the ice-pudding—from the dry Sillery to the Château Yquem—everything was perfect. Stephen, whose capacity for enjoyment was enviably complete, dined like an Emperor.

By-and-by the Panther retired, and Raphael and Stephen were left alone. Their conversation was curious. Neither understood the other. Raphael regarded Stephen as a mere greenhorn,

a foolish, inexperienced boy, who could be enticed into any kind of extravagance or absurdity; whereas Stephen had in him just so much of the poetic faculty as enabled him to detect what was false and forged, to shrink from what was ridiculous. Stephen thought Raphael a marvellous specimen of the human race, for beauty, for skill, for general cleverness—nor ever suspected in him that astucity which lay at the base of his other qualities. The game, therefore, which these two were playing, unconsciously, so far as one of these was concerned, was singular. Each imagined he knew the other's cards and didn't.

"Do you intend to remain long in London?" asked Raphael, in the course of conversation.

"I really have no decided intention," said Stephen. "It seems to me that for a man without any definite object in life, London is about the best place to live."

"Well, I don't see why you should have an no object in life," returned Raphael; "but that, of course, is your affair, only if you think of remaining in town, you should belong to a club,

and I'll put your name down at the Chandos, if you like."

"I shall be very glad," said Stephen.

"And what are you going to do this evening?"

"This evening!" replied Stephen, in some amazement, looking at his watch. "Why, it is ten o'clock now. I thought of going back to the Chapter Coffee-house in about an hour."

"Just the time to begin the evening," said Raphael. "However, nobody can wonder at your inexperience, seeing that you are fresh from an old-world place like Idlechester. But if you don't mind making a night of it, you and I will turn out presently, after a cup of tea."

"I am at your service," said Stephen.

"And if you mean to remain in town, don't stay at that place in St. Paul's Churchyard. Let me find you rooms somewhere in this part of London."

Stephen assented, Raphael rang the bell, and sent for his valet. When Louis arrived, his master said—

"Find Mr. Langton rooms somewhere be-

tween this and St. James's Church. Let them be comfortable, but not extravagant. See that the cookery is good. And, if you know a fellow who would do as Mr. Langton's valet, tell me."

"I know precisely the man," said Louis. "His name is Auguste Lancel. He is just seeking employment."

"Very well. Let me see him to-morrow. I can judge," he said to Stephen, "whether he is fit for anything; and if he is, you can see him."

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble."

"You don't give me any. It amuses me. I am delighted to be able to help anybody so thoroughly ignorant of the world as you are."

"That's no great compliment," said Stephen.

"Well, I'd willingly change places with you. You're about ten years younger than I am; you're good-looking and clever, and tolerably well off; you've got the world before you, and are quite ignorant of both the bright and the dark side of it. You're an uncommonly lucky fellow. I should like to be in your position."

"Meanwhile," said Stephen, "I shall be laughed at for my ignorance."

"Why not? Those who laugh at you will be people who overestimate the value of their own knowledge. I think I know the world as well as most men, and I have long been of opinion that it is not worth knowing. Honestly," said Raphael, "I envy you."

They passed to the drawing-room, where the Panther gave them coffee; gave them also music and song. Have we not heretofore heard the passionate melody throb through that white throat of hers? I don't quite know how she felt that evening. For this supercilious boy her kirtle had fallen in vain; he had refused her, he had pitied her. *Now*, the love which caused him to refuse and pity her was wholly frustrate. *Now*, he might think otherwise. *Now*, also, the plot to which for her father's sake she had pledged herself was frustrate. True, if she married this boy, there would be money enough to live at ease; and he would be a docile husband. But as I am analyzing a lady's thoughts, I must here remark that there arose to disturb

her calculations a vision of a handsome baronet, superbly apparelled, magnificent in moustache.

Strange to say, Sir Arthur Willesden had made an impression on Claudia. I really had hoped that my Panther was above womanish weaknesses—not so. You see, she wanted to be tamed, to be tyrannized over, to be lashed into obedience. The man to do this came not: she, with wistful eyes desiring a master, imagined strength of will and stern resolve in this Sir Arthur Willesden, simply because he was big and muscular, and looked as if he could knock down an ox. 'Tis the way with womankind: if they cannot find the right man they endow some utterly wrong man with the requisite characteristics.

Well, this night Claudia was affable to Stephen, and sang and played for him, and chatted pleasantly with him, and expressed a hope that he would not let Raphael lead him into mischief. Raphael's practical reply was the production of some remarkably fine cavendish.

"By mischief, my sister means smoke," said Raphael; "but she doesn't object to it."

She did not, as we know.

"Is that wonderful old grandfather of yours still flourishing?" asked Raphael. "I remember his bringing you to see us one morning at Kingsleat, heaven knows how many years ago. Claudia petted you, and I scolded her afterwards for falling in love with you."

The Panther looked fierce.

"My grandfather is in very good condition," said Stephen, "though he is growing old, like the rest of us. I assure you, Mr. Branscombe, I have often great difficulty in assuring myself that I am the unfortunate little schoolboy whom your sister petted. Indeed I am sometimes doubtful as to the reality of even later events."

"He's not such a fool as he looks," thought the Seraph.

"He has not forgotten," thought the Panther.

No: he was not a fool, this Stephen Langton; nor had he forgotten. He could not comprehend Raphael Branscombe's friendly interest in him and his affairs; but he knew there must be some reason for it, and he waited for time to

reveal that reason. And he had not forgotten even the flavour of the peach which the beautiful Claudia had given him, so many years ago—or the touch of her lips when he lay in bed at Kingsleat, and she and the bishop's wife curvetted like a couple of young fillies, unrestrained by his childish presence—still less that moment when she had thrown herself into his arms, and he had rejected her. Nothing did he forget; but he could not understand on what terms they were to meet in future. Were they enemies or friends, or coldly neutral?

He did not know. Did she?

Stephen made a night of it. It was midnight when Raphael and he left the Panther to her own devices. They went away to the Chandos Club, where Raphael gave Stephen his first lesson in billiards, and introduced him to a very select circle of pleasant fellows, given to bad habits. It was exactly six when he reached the Chapter Coffee House, and went to bed. It was two in the afternoon when he came down to breakfast the next day.

Raphael did not resign his office as guardian

and guide. In a very few days Stephen found himself comfortably established in rooms in Jermyn Street, with Auguste Lancel in attendance; and he very much enjoyed his new style of life. He seemed to take to it naturally. Dressed by the most fashionable tailors, Stephen Langton, if he had suddenly appeared in the High Street of Idlechester, would scarcely have been recognised by Jack Winslow or his aunt Harriet. The Panther was quite amazed at his development.

And not the Panther only. Humphrey Morfill, having arranged all matters of business satisfactorily, came from Wetheral to London with full intent to conquer the world. He had married Anne Page, as he intended; why should he not carry out his other intentions? True, he hadn't as much money with her as he expected; and for this he often, with a want of logic of which a Cambridge man should have been ashamed, blamed his unoffending little wife. But a couple of thousand a year was a good start, and Humphrey was resolved not to lose a single chance. His ambition was al-

most a mania. He came to town, and took a house in Mesopotamia, which Lady Morley christened Cubitopolis. He entered himself at the Middle Temple, and took to the study of law with avidity. He left his wife a good deal alone, of necessity. When Stephen knew of their being in town, he called at once, and his unfaithful sweetheart was astounded to see him so complete a man of fashion. The Panther also called, under Raphael's orders, and found Humphrey, who chanced to be at home, excessively glad to find anybody who would occasionally entertain his wife in his absence; and the result was that, all previous occurrences apparently forgotten, Mr. and Mrs. Morfill, and Mr. and Miss Branscombe, and Mr. Langton, associated very freely and pleasantly. Raphael, however, did not call on the Morfills for some time after their arrival in London. When he did, and it was over, as Claudia and he were walking homeward, the Seraph said—

"What a devilish pretty little thing she is! I wish I had seen her in time."

Sweet Anne Morfill was at the same moment

thinking that she had never seen so fascinating a man as Mr. Raphael Branscombe, but she did not mention this idea to her husband.

CHAPTER III.

MR. AND MRS. MORFILL.

HUMPHREY MORFILL and his wife, in Mesopotamia, were not perhaps as happy as they ought to have been. And the reason was tolerably clear. Humphrey, to begin with, had never loved the pretty little infantile creature whom he had married. Indeed it may fairly be stated that he had never loved anyone except himself. His sole object had been to obtain a wife with money, and in this he had succeeded. Sweet Anne Page, on the other hand, had lived all her life in a delicious dream of love; she was a child still, and did not know what love meant; but she assuredly expected a kind of chivalrous deference which Humphrey Morfill did not give her. In truth, he gave her something very

different. He was her tyrant. He had already regretted the position in which he had placed himself. More than once had he considered it an inexcusable blunder to have sacrificed that fine intellect of his for a couple of thousand a year. The thing was done, but he could not help behaving to his bride as if he thought she ought to be ashamed of herself. Of course the poor child, who at any rate fancied she loved him, could not comprehend his horrible baseness.

Still he managed to make her extremely unhappy. He treated her in a very childish fashion. The method of the marriage had made him master of the money, and he took the earliest possible opportunity of showing her that it was so. He soon taught her to consider herself dependent on him. Gladly would she have been dependent on any creature who showed her the love for which she craved eternally : but this Humphrey would show her none. Indeed, he had none to show.

I do not blame this man. There are beings —I suppose I must say *human* beings—who do

not know the meaning of *love*—the utmost to which they can rise is *affection.* The passionate love wherewith a man (who *is* a man) can love a wife, or a sister, or a son, or a daughter, is to them unintelligible. So much the better for them, perhaps; who knows? Never is there great love without great grief. I fancy Humphrey Morfill belonged to this class—to this pitiable or enviable class, I know not which. At any rate, he was a man capable of being extremely affectionate, and quite incapable of loving. Ah me, that terrible incapacity! You who have loved, and have through your love been compelled to endure grief unutterable, torture such as would have maddened Prometheus,

> "The vulture at his vitals and the links
> Of the lame Lemnian festering in his flesh,"

take my word for it that this is infinitely better than not to have tested

> "The cruel madness of love,
> The honey of poison flowers, and all the measureless ill."

And you *affectionate* men and women—if indeed there be any affectionate women—God help ye

all! Why were ye not cows? ruminating animals? chewers of the cud?

Little Anne would, I think, have been happy enough with even an *affectionate* husband, if only her husband had not been tyrannical. But Humphrey was a tyrant of the coolest order. He wore no glove over the steel gauntlet. He was her master, and took every opportunity of letting her know it. So Anne was wretched enough; and you cannot be surprised if she was extremely glad to see anybody who was not her husband. Especially as her husband spent long matutine hours at the Temple, with an eye to the Solicitor-Generalship—*et cetera.*

So she welcomed Claudia, whom in her babyhood she had feared. She had learned that a petticoated tyrant with a riding-whip is more endurable than the tyrannic husband whose frown is torture. As to the Panther, it must be confessed that her first visit to the Mesopotamian terrace was not satisfactory. She felt that she had been rather severe to her little friend. She thought the best way of dealing with the matter was to laugh it off altogether. She man-

aged pretty well, but there was a little preliminary shyness. It is not everybody who has the coolness of the Eton boy who happened to dine with Keate on a long-standing invitation on the very day when that best of head masters had had to administer a flogging.

"I have not seen you for a long time," said the Doctor.

"Not this side of me, sir," responded his promising alumnus.

But Anne, who had quite forgiven the Panther her trifling tyrannies, was delighted to find anyone who would comfort her. Poor child! she wanted comfort. Naturally dull, the dreadful fact that Humphrey had married her merely as a matter of convenience had not yet occurred to her. Naturally obedient, she had not thought of rebelling against the routine to which he had condemned her. And here, I regret to say, Claudia was her accomplice—nay, her prompter—in naughtiness. Claudia told her that, as the actual owner of the property on which her penniless husband lived, she ought to have plenty of enjoyment. Thereby Claudia gave a con-

siderable amount of trouble to Mr. Humphrey Morfill, who spent a great deal of his time in proving to his wife that it was necessary to avoid extravagance. A little pleasure, pleasantly given, would have satisfied her. She was not exorbitant in her demands. If he had loved her, he could have supplied what she needed with infinite ease. But love teaches lessons not to be learnt elsewhere.

Stephen was too proud not to visit her. Between them there was no explanation. Indeed, Stephen would not have listened to a word. He had made up his mind that love was a swindle, a sell. He had come to consider religion cant and morality a myth. It is a mental and moral disease, this, to which young men of any brain are subject, and which they take with special readiness, if they happen to encounter a disappointment. They argue from the particular to the universal in delicious deference of Aldrich. My friend Stephen, having been jilted by a plump child of the most infantile character, came to the terribly tragical conclusion that *all women were false.* He had never

known a woman. But, if ever he had been right in arguing from sweet Anne Page to every creature that wears petticoats, would that have justified him in denying the inspiration of the New Testament? I am inclined to think not.

Raphael Branscombe saw a good deal of Mrs. Morfill. As Humphrey spent his mornings at the Temple, Anne, weary of her loneliness, took refuge with her friend, the Panther. The Seraph, discovering this, and having a constitutional tendency to amuse himself, was wont to lounge into his sister's apartments, and talk to Anne. Claudia, we know, had plenty of morning visitors, so Raphael had ample time to flirt with this innocent child. And he did it. And it looked very much as if she liked it. One evening, as he was smoking alone in his sanctum, Claudia made her way thither. It showed the Panther's daring. Raphael had strictly prohibited all invasion there. But Claudia, at about midnight, majestic in a rustling purple silk, entered the room in which the Seraph sat. It *almost* surprised him: I cannot say more.

But he merely removed from his lips the amber mouthpiece of a hookah from which he had been drawing cool draughts of fragrant smoke, and said—

"Well?"

The Panther was not easily shut up. She settled herself tidily and gracefully in an easy chair, and said, very deliberately—

"I want to speak to you, Raphael."

"Talk away, child," he replied.

"What is there between you and Anne Page?" she asked peremptorily.

"A husband, my dear," he said. "At least, if by Anne Page you mean your nice little friend, Mrs. Morfill."

"Raphael," she said, with eager earnestness, "I implore you to leave them alone. Poor little Anne! She has married a man who does not love her, and she has not learnt the meaning of love herself. Don't be cruel to them, Raphael. I know how dangerous you are. They have done you no harm."

The Seraph rose from his seat, dropping the mouthpiece of his hookah, and stood with his

back to the fire. He seemed to deliberate for a minute or two. Then he spoke.

"Claudia, I thought better of you. *They have done me no harm!* They have simply deprived me of a pleasant and ample income which I could have commanded. If I had seen Anne Page ten minutes before she ran away with this young fellow, do you think she would have gone? She's a mere child: a man need not be proud of winning her: she would have said yes to any man."

"Then why be vexed about it?" said the Panther. "She is not fit to be *your* wife. And there are plenty of girls with twice the money who would be glad to marry you. Why not leave her alone?"

"Are you a Branscombe, Claudia?" asked Raphael. "What, do you think I care for the silly child and her two thousand a year? Not but what, pretty as she is, I might have married her had I seen her in time—but I care no more about it than I care what I shall have for dinner to-morrow."

"Then," said Claudia, after a pause, "why

do you waste so much time upon her? Why do you make her like you?"

Raphael gave utterance to a sardonic laugh, but made no reply.

"Tell me," said the Panther.

"Tell you what, child?"

"Why you flirt with that poor little Anne Morfill till she wishes her husband was hanged."

"My dear Claudia, I shall continue to think you *are* a Branscombe, even against the strong evidence to the contrary you have just given. But you are a strange girl, and I think you had better go to bed."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you are losing that piquant perspicacity which used to distinguish you. Here you are asking me why I flirt with your little bride? Have you ever asked a cat why he chases mice; or, if that simile is not poetic enough for your taste, can you tell me why a falcon kills smaller birds? If you desire to remonstrate, Claudia, by all means lecture your frivolous flippant little friend. Cry *Ware hawk.* Give her the very best advice, moral, re-

ligious, social. I hope it will do her good."

"I can't think what you see in her," said the Panther, meditatingly.

"Dear me, can't you? Why, a plump morsel of flesh and blood and loveliness—that's all; and that's enough to tempt any man to delicious morsiunculæ. She's not a marvel of the jungle, like you—a terror to mild men—a creature to be tamed with a wrist of steel and a lash of wire. No, she's all love and melting sweetness, like a candied conserve of the East."

"Well, I shall warn her," said Claudia.

"Do, and discharge your conscience. If you warn her against me, and make her afraid of me, you will increase my amusement, and I doubt whether you will decrease her danger. That is an affair entirely for your consideration. Meanwhile, my dear Claudia, permit me to say that *I warn you.*"

"Oh, you're not going to frighten me," said the Panther, frightened all the while.

"You mistake me. I do not wish to warn you against advising your friend. I wish you in that to do exactly what you deem wisest. But

I warn you against too intimate a flirtation with that blockhead Willesden."

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed, indignantly.

"Be calm—that's a good girl. I have not the least fear that you will do anything silly. The men of our family have always been *sans peur*, and the women *sans reproche*—an excellent way of dividing the old motto. But Willesden can't marry, you know; and if you flirt too much with him there may be talk; and if any talk comes to my ears, you know I *must* shoot him, which would be devilish inconvenient for all parties. So be prudent; I don't see what there is to admire in such a large awkward mass of jewelry and Eau-de-Cologne—but that's your affair."

"Well, good night, Raphael," said Claudia; "I shall warn her."

And she did. She got her into her bedroom at her next visit, and told her it was very wrong to flirt so much with Raphael. Anne became mutinous.

"Flirt!" she said. "What do you mean by flirting? I merely talk to Mr. Branscombe, and

not half as much as you to do Sir Arthur Willesden. You seem to forget that I am a married woman now."

"Mr. Morfill wouldn't like it," said the Panther, amused at her little friend's assumption of dignity.

"Then Mr. Morfill should not leave me alone all day, without any amusement, and come home to his dinner as stupid and cross as he can be. He is living on my money, and he ought to know better."

The meekest little women in the world get a spirit in them when conscious of possessing money.

"I mean to do just as I like, Claudia," she continued. "Mr. Branscombe is very pleasant to talk to, and he won't eat me, I suppose, though he is your brother; and I really think you had better attend to your own affairs."

Claudia was both amused and amazed at her friend's rebellious spirit. Being a wife, the young lady considered herself in a rank above all unmarried women; she thought it impertinent of Claudia to venture to lecture her. Marriage had

conferred a funny kind of dignity upon her; so the Panther's lecture had no effect, save perhaps to increase Anne's interest in her intercourse with Raphael, by reason of its appearing perilous.

As to Raphael, when Claudia left him on the evening of her lecture, he fell to soliloquy.

"I rather like the little girl," he said to himself. "She's a dainty pet. Æmilia is a fine woman, no doubt; and Fiordilisa is a girl out of Shakespeare, as poetic as she is beautiful; and, by Jove! I wish I was back with her in Isola Rossa. But this little Morfill is such a lump of sweetness; she'd melt in a fellow's mouth like a ripe greengage; and then that villain Morfill stole her—stole her from *me*, too, the unprincipled reprobate. 'Twould be a fine thing to revenge myself upon him by carrying off his wife."

So Claudia's remonstrance rather increased her brother's tendency to flirt with Mrs. Morfill. And, a few days later, he made a movement in advance. The scene was Claudia's drawing-room; the Panther was singing divinely for Sir

Arthur's delectation; Raphael was talking in low tones to Anne.

"How delightfully your sister sings!" she had said.

"Not half so delightfully as you talk. I could listen to your pretty prattle for ever."

"You speak as if I was a child," she said.

"So you are, and a very charming child, too. Why, you are not ashamed of being young, surely?"

"If I am old enough to be married, I ought not to be treated like a child," she replied, with petty fretfulness.

"I never said you *were* old enough to be married. But never mind: I'll treat you with the greatest respect in future—just as if you were fifty."

"Oh! no. Don't do that."

"I shall see you to-morrow morning, I suppose. Claudia is going to be out all day. By the way, can one ever find Mr. Morfill at home?"

"Very seldom; he generally goes to the Temple the moment breakfast is over."

"And you are all alone? Well, I think I

shall call to-morrow morning, and see if I can find him."

"I don't think it will be any use," said Anne, "unless I tell him to wait at home for you."

"Don't on any account interfere with his business for me."

And she did not. By some curious caprice, Humphrey lounged longer over his breakfast than usual, that next morning. He found something in the newspaper to interest him. Anne thought he was never going. But he went at last, after giving orders about the dinner two or three times over. He liked a good dinner after his work—not what Raphael would have called a good dinner, but something full flavoured and substantial. None of your delicate *entrées* and curious wines for Mr. Morfill: leg of mutton, sirloin, steak, Reid's stout, Carbonell's fruitiest port—these were his favourite eatables and drinkables. He was not refined. He liked onions.

In the course of the morning Raphael appeared; regretted that Mr. Morfill was not at home, and sat down for a chat with Mrs. Morfill.

She was looking very nice. There was a rosy flush, and childish freshness, about her; a deal of pink in her print dress, of coral and cream in her complexion, of loving innocence in her soft glance. Raphael thought her the prettiest specimen of babyish beauty he had ever seen.

"I should like to put you under a glass case, Mrs. Morfill," he said, "and keep you in my own room to look at."

"Make me a prisoner, as Humphrey does. I'm sure I wish he was anything but a lawyer; he slaves at it night and day, and I get no pleasure at all."

"What would you like? You ought to be playing *Les Graces* with a dozen other little girls upon a green lawn under shady trees."

"That's the way with you all," she said, with a provoking pout. "You talk to me as if I was a baby. Humphrey always does. And Claudia used to, at Kingsleat; but I'm better off than she is; I *am* married, at least, and I don't think she ever will be."

"Don't you sometimes wish yourself unmarried?" said the Seraph, laughing.

"Indeed I do, every day of my life. What induced me to marry Humphrey I can't think. I should have been better off with Stephen."

"You should have waited for me."

"Oh, you're too old. And you think me a mere baby, I know."

"I think you the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life," he said seriously. "And as I have said before, your youth is only too valuable a possession. We all get old fast enough. But you will always be young, I believe."

"You are laughing at me, Mr. Branscombe. You think I am not fit to be anybody's wife—only fit for a hoop or a skipping-rope."

"I wish you were my wife," he said. "I wish I had seen you in time."

"You vain being! So you really have conceit enough to fancy that I should have liked you better than Humphrey?"

She sprung from her seat, and danced round the room, laughing and clapping her hands.

"I am sure you would," he said. "More than that, I am sure you like me better now."

"Go away! go away! You are getting naughty. I shall ring the bell and order 'Mr. Branscombe's carriage.'"

"Don't you think you could be serious for a minute?" he said.

"No, not half a minute—not a second."

She had taken a long scarf, and was vainly trying to use it as a skipping-rope.

"Now, do sit down, just for a moment. I want to talk to you."

"But I don't in the least want to talk to you. I think I shall send out and buy a skipping-rope. I wonder what the dignified Mr. Morfill will say when he comes home to dinner if he finds me skipping in the Square."

Raphael rose from his seat, and tried to catch her arm, she ran away. He followed her. In a moment the chase had become exciting. The room was large, with much heavy furniture in it, in the regular Mesopotamian style; so there were plenty of opportunities for dodging. But the young lady's foot caught in a rug; she almost fell; and before she could recover herself Raphael had overtaken her.

She was an infant in his grasp. He coolly took her hands in one of his, and returned to his chair, and make her sit upon his knee.

"Now, young lady," he said, "you are my prisoner, and I can punish you for all the trouble you have given me."

"Oh! let me go, let me go, *please.* If Humphrey were to come! I'll scream, Mr. Branscombe, I will, positively."

"No, you won't. Come, I want a quiet talk, so sit still and let us have it."

"Let me go to my own seat, then."

"And run away again? Not exactly. No, you'll stay where you are. Come, let me put your hair back out of your eyes."

Her abundant hair had fallen over her brow amid their romp. He smoothed it gently back. Then he kissed her forehead, bringing up a blush to brighten all her beautiful young face.

"Oh! Mr. Branscombe, you are very very wicked! Let me go, do please let me go!"

"No, child. I want to ask you a question. Look at me now, and answer truly, just as if you were saying your catechism."

"Well, what is it? I will answer if you'll promise to let me go."

"Very well, I promise. Do you think," he asked, slowly and deliberately, "that if you had met me in time, you could have loved me?"

Anne's bright young beauty was reddened this time by a more vivid blush. Her long eyelashes drooped to veil her eyes. She did not speak.

"Answer!" he said, in a passionate whisper.

She said not a word.

"Answer!" again he said, pressing her close to his breast—so closely that it was almost pain.

For sole reply she hid her face on his shoulder, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh! my darling!" he exclaimed. "My poor little pet! My sweet love!" And all the while he rained kisses on her brow, her eyelids, her lips. And all the while she clung to him, quivering with ecstasy. She did not want to escape now. She lay in his arms like a bird in its nest.

"Kiss me!" he exclaimed, in the imperious tones of passion. "Kiss me! Speak to me! Call me by my name!"

She kissed him with clinging kisses, honey-sweet, fragrant as the jasmine's breath. And she looked at him with bright, loving fearless eyes, from which all tears had passed. And she said, in a low voice like the coo of the doves that haunted her father's Idlechester garden—

"I love you, Raphael."

CHAPTER IV.

ISOLA CHESTER.

STEPHEN found that he was spending a good deal of money. It was expensive to be patronized by Raphael. Not that the Seraph deigned to borrow money of his frinds, though quite willing to win money of them at any game they might choose to play. Debt with him was a fine art, and he had the rare capacity, however great might be his difficulties, of always providing himself with ready money. How he did this I don't pretend to say. He was, however, an extravagant man to associate with ; he denied himself no luxury ; he rode the best horses, drank the best wines, dressed in the best style. Stephen imitated him in all this. He was by no means satisfied with himself. But the shock of

Anne Page's elopement had completely upset him; he lived a false factitious life; he sought pleasure, careless what it cost.

One day they were talking of Mrs. Morfill. Stephen had called in Clarges-street; had entered for a brief visit Claudia's saloon, where he encountered his lost love, and then he and Raphael strolled into Piccadilly.

"That little girl who jilted you was looking particularly nice this morning, old fellow," said the Seraph.

She was: only a few days had passed since the scene of my last chapter, and in Raphael's presence she looked the very essence, the consummate flower, of beauty.

"Don't talk about her," said Stephen, "she is as heartless as she is pretty—a cruel coquette from the cradle."

"An abominable little flirt, certainly," replied the Seraph. "I pity Morfill."

"Why pity him? The fellow never cared about her. He got her money, which was all he wanted."

"Only half of it, my boy," laughed Raphael.

"You got the rest, I'm glad to say, and are spending it like a prince. But come into Hatchett's, and have a glass of sherry. I've got an idea."

"You have no special affection for the young lady," said the Seraph, as they sat overlooking

> "Piccadilly—shops, palaces, bustle, and breeze,
> The whirring of wheels and the murmur of trees."

"I despise her utterly," he replied with emphasis.

"And your friend, Morfill."

"Him I both despise and hate. He has taught me to disbelieve both love and friendship."

"What, my friendship!" said the Seraph. "That's too bad. Well, shall I teach you to believe in revenge?"

"It is usless. I can't horsewhip the fellow, or shoot him, because she preferred him to me."

"There is another mode of revenge," said the Seraph, deliberately, leaning back in his chair, and sipping his sherry—"*through her*. Upon my

word, I feel very like Mephistopheles talking to Faust. You're a philosophic fellow, Langton—do you think that though I look like a human being, I may be a demon without knowing it? They called my father Devil Branscombe, you know. I think there is something fiendish in my blood."

Stephen felt disposed to think likewise. We know his dreamy fantastic nature. He began to speculate whether this marvellous friend of his, so handsome, so daring, so coolly wicked, so regardless who suffered while he enjoyed himself, had not a touch of Asmodeus or Mephisto in him. And Claudia—was *she* a fiend? Was that scene of passion, which he could never forget, a diabolical temptation?

"You're off at a tangent," said Raphael. "Leave metaphysics till you smoke your midnight cigar, and tell me if you would like to see Morfill punished through her."

"I should; they both deserve it."

"Then it shall be done. *You* hate Morfill. *I* don't; he's not worth hating. But he foiled me, and I'll punish him for it. I intended to

marry Anne, in which case you'd have hated and despised me, I guess."

"You were not my friend," he replied, sadly.

"That's true. Well, if you agree to assist me, the thing shall be done. It's two o'clock; I shall want another accomplice; we'll call on Miss Chester—she'll be at breakfast."

"Who is Miss Chester?"

"You'll see, my friend. You have not yet learnt everything worth knowing in London. We have not far to walk. Mind, you are under my orders."

They left the hotel, and turned northwards till they came to a very quiet street indeed. It seemed to lead nowhere in particular. Even now the fierce traffic of London has not invaded it. It was tranquil and respectable. And at the dark green door of a very elegant little house Raphael knocked. The tidiest of bright-eyed maid-servants opened to them, and recognizing Raphael with a smile, showed them at once into Miss Chester's breakfast-room.

She had "hair like sea-moss," this girl who lay loosely apparelled in the easiest of chairs—

curious coloured hair, whose hue depended on the light in which you saw it. And her eye-lashes were very dark and long, and her eyes were a strange glinting green, and her mouth, not very small, was exquisitely expressive. But her long white throat, and the curve from her shell-like ear, were unusual in their beauty, and her white hands had the same slender sinuous length and grace, and so, indeed, had every part of her form. And in her expression there was a strange blending of laziness with sauciness. Such was Isola Chester.

"Ah! Seraph! how do? Brought any good news? Friend of yours?"

"Yes; and a very good fellow. I want you to like him."

"That's easy. He looks only half baked. What's his name?"

"Langton, my pet. Now, don't chaff him, but let's have a talk. Why don't you eat your breakfast?"

"I can't. I'm seedy, and don't feel well by any means."

"I wish you'd talk English, Isola. I can't

understand half you say, and as to Langton, you might as well talk Hebrew to him. And now, Miss Chester, perhaps you'll kindly give me your attention."

"All serene," she said.

"My friend Langton wants you to dine with him at Greenwich to-morrow. Will you go?"

"Like a bird," she answered; "but why doesn't he make it to-day? I've nothing to do."

"That's his affair—and mine. Perhaps he'll take you somewhere else to-day, if he's disengaged. But you mustn't talk slang."

"No, I won't," she said. "I'll talk as tall as you please. It's a beautiful day—send for horses, and let us ride somewhere."

"I don't mind that," said the Seraph. "Put on your habit. We'll go round to the stables, and see what we can get."

"I don't understand your plan," said Stephen, as they walked along.

"You will, to-morrow. We'll ride down to Richmond to-day, and give her some dinner at the Star, and to-morrow you must be at the

Ship at Greenwich with her at five o'clock. I'll manage everything else."

"But why not explain your scheme?"

"Because I like mystery, and because I may have to vary it. It won't hurt you, I suppose, to eat your fish in the company of a pretty girl?"

"She is singularly pretty," said Stephen. "I never saw anybody like her. But I wish she would talk intelligibly."

"I'll make her. She can talk as good English as you or I, or Mrs. Morfill."

Isola Chester looked charming on horseback. She had a graceful seat, and a delicate hand, and the prettiest figure in the world. It was a fine breezy spring day, and the ride to Richmond was delightful, nor less so the dinner. Miss Chester condescended to talk her purest English, and Stephen got on very well with her.

"You must see Isola home," said Raphael as they rode back to town. "I've an engagement this evening connected with our little plot. You will be punctual at Greenwich to-morrow?"

"To the minute," said Stephen gaily, for the iced champagne and Isola's effervescent chit-chat had aroused him from his customary gloom. "I hope it will be as jolly a dinner as to-day's."

"No fear," replied the Seraph, and turned his horse's head in another direction. Stephen and his companion broke into a canter, and soon reached Miss Chester's residence.

"Come in and smoke a cigar," she said, as he lifted her from her horse. "It's early."

Having given him what she declared to be a "a capital weed," and installed him in an easy-chair by the fire, she went off to get rid of her habit, and soon returned in the loosest of luxurious wrappers, of some soft and delicate material, made so as to reveal the beauties which it seemed to conceal. She looked at Stephen, who was gazing dreamily at the fire.

"What are you thinking about, Curls?" she asked. It was a custom of Miss Chester's to confer nicknames on her acquaintances, and Stephen's curly hair had already suggested one for him.

"I was thinking of Branscombe," he answered.

"Ah! now, if you can explain that mysterious Seraph to me, I'll thank you. What does this dinner at Greenwich mean? You're not spoons upon me, I know, so it can't be for my sake."

"What do you mean by spoons?" inquired Stephen, laughing.

"Oh, you verdant child! Why, you're not in love with me. You're always thinking about somebody else. Shall I tell you your fortune? I've got a pack of cards here."

And with the words she began to spread the cards upon the table, and to utter certain predictions. Suddenly she stopped.

"Oh! I can't tell you," she said. "There's murder and madness, and all sorts of dreadful things; and you won't marry the lady you love, nor yet the lady that loves you—you'll marry—"

"I shall never marry at all," interrupted Stephen. "Put away that nonsense. Tell me how long you have known Raphael Branscombe?"

"What, hasn't he told you? Well, I don't

know why he should, either. Do you like him?"

"You ask me questions instead of answering mine," said Stephen. "Yes, I like him. We are great friends. But he puzzles me."

"I should rather think he did," said the pretty Isola, stretching her arms lazily above her head, so that the loose sleeves fell back to reveal their round whiteness. "He puzzles everybody. He's what the Scotch call not canny. I don't like being alone with him. I'm always expecting he'll disappear with a strong smell of brimstone."

"How long have you known him?" asked Stephen again.

"How old do you think I am?"

"Eighteen, perhaps."

"Sixteen, Mr. Langton; not a day more. I've got the certificate of my birth; it's almost the only thing my mother left me. And the Seraph has known me just ten years. He bought me when I was six."

"Bought you?"

"Yes, bought me. My mother was a tramp,

and she fell down and died on the great Bath road, at the corner of Maidenhead Thicket. I've seen the place often since. There's a little inn close by. Mr. Branscombe was driving past, and he pulled up to ask what was the matter, for I was like a little mad thing. Well, they told him, and he found I had no relations but my mother's brother, and he bought me of him. And he told the people at the inn to wash me and get me some clothes, and to send me to a ladies' school that was close by. I was there eight years. Yes, it's just two years ago I ran away."

"Ran away!"

"Yes; the silliest thing I ever did. But there is wild blood in me. I'm a Bohemian, the Seraph says. I got terribly tired of the eternal stupid lessons, and church on Sundays. And a young fellow in the neighbourhood—his name was Pringle—was spoons upon me. I didn't care twopence about him; but the fun of it was, he pretended to make love to Charlotte Newton, one of the governesses. You see, I had to be there all the holidays, and the Miss Mellishes,

who kept the school, used to go away for a trip; so Miss Newton, who was their niece, had to take care of me. And we took long walks together, and young Pringle joined us, and he was cunning enough to make her think he admired her immensely, and every time he used to slip a little note into my hand, which, of course, I answered. Poor Miss Charlotte! she quite thought he'd marry her, and he was a gentleman farmer with a good deal of money. She was a large fat girl, and tremendously proud of her plump shoulders, and she used to go out to meet him in a very low dress, with just a scarf thrown over it, which she could drop to her waist, just to exhibit those shoulders of hers. Oh! I never shall forget poor Charlotte Newton's shoulders!"

And Miss Chester laughed melodiously.

"Well, at last, Fred Pringle proposed that we should amputate our mahogany——"

"What?" asked Stephen.

"Oh! I forgot your ignorance. Why, that we should cut—go away together. And he fixed a lonely part of the thicket, where he said

a carriage should be waiting. He wrote this to me, you know, having told Charlotte that we were to meet him there next day. They had got on very fast, and used to kiss one another, and what I principally thought of was the spree of seeing Charlotte in a rage when she knew that he wanted me and not her. You see, I'm a remarkably nice party, Curls."

"Very nice," said Stephen—"to look at."

"Ha! ha! One to you, sir! Well, we walked to this place, and Fred met us, and a carriage and pair was waiting. And you may imagine Charlotte's fury when he told her that he and I were going in it, and that she might go back alone. She rushed at me, and called me all the names she could think of, and tore off my bonnet, and boxed my ears so that I felt it for a week after. But Fred got her away, and he and the driver tied her to a tree—it was a horse-chestnut, I remember—so that she shouldn't run away and give an alarm. Didn't she bite and scratch, that's all? She was as strong as a donkey, Fred said. I shall never forget it."

Again the fair Isola indulged in a tinkling burst of silvery laughter.

"So then you ran away with Mr. Pringle," said Stephen.

"Yes, Curls, I did; stupid little fool that I was. But before I started, I just thought I'd pay Miss Charlotte out for boxing my poor little ears. So I pulled the scarf away from her great fat shoulders, and got a bunch of nettles, and made her tingle a little, I promise you. What an object she must have looked when they found her!"

Again the wicked musical laughter.

"Rather cruel, don't you think?" said Stephen.

"I don't know. I didn't hurt her as much as she hurt me, I expect. Nettles only sting a little. Let's have some supper."

It was one o'clock—a very excellent supper hour. Isola rang the bell, and a charming little supper was served. But why chronicle suppers, even if one's hero enjoys them? And is Stephen Langton my hero? Well, if he is, I am not bound to follow him at all hours, or to ask impertinent questions which might meet with

the reply a certain inquisitive Roman received—

> "Quædam inquit, nudum sinum reducens;
> En hic in roseis latet papillis."

I hope I have written these two lines so clearly that some poor spiteful Southampton-street reviewer may not knock his ligneous sinciput against a *u* that ought to have been *n*.

Stephen drove Isola to Greenwich next day. He had had a brief interview with Raphael previously. The pretty creature looked desperately fascinating. It would be hard to chronicle the ever-changing colours of her eyes. And he took her to a pleasant room looking out upon Thames, where a table was laid for four.

Raphael, when he left his companions on the previous evening had gone straight to a certain Mesopotamian terrace, where dwelt a young wife whom he held in the hollow of his hand. For Humphrey Morfill had gone out of town for two days, and sweet Anne Page was alone. The ambitious husband eagerly pursuing aught that could yield him vantage, thought little of his pretty, lonely, desolate wife. Somebody else thought of her, though.

Yes, Raphael, reckless of consequences, came in upon her late that evening, and told her she was to dine at Greenwich with him next day.

She was just in the state to do anything with him or for him. She was subjugated, magnetized. And on the following day she met him by appointment at the Pantheon, and he took her down to the Ship on the box-seat of a drag, behind four horses. As they pelted along past China Hall, he said—

"You will meet an old friend at dinner, my pet."

"Who?" she asked, with some alarm.

"Oh, a very good old friend, you ungrammatical child. But I daresay you have forgotten him. You'll forget me in a week or two."

"You know I can never forget you for a moment, Raphael," she said reproachfully.

"Charming child! Well, you'll enjoy your dinner, and the society thereat. I wish that infernal fellow, Morfill, hadn't run away with you."

He gave the off-leader a vicious touch of the lash under the ear, with a wish that it was

Humphrey he was hitting. His companion only sighed.

They reached the Ship. They were shown up into a room. There they found Stephen and Miss Chester waiting for them, and for dinner. It was a queer meeting.

"Mrs. Morfill—Miss Chester," said the Seraph, introducing the two ladies. "You'll like one another. Langton, you don't need any introduction here, I know."

"Not the slightest," he replied, and walking over to his old sweetheart, gave her a kiss before she knew what he was about.

"Come, Curls," exclaimed Isola, "that won't do."

"Oh, we're old friends," said Stephen. "Mrs. Morfill was engaged to be married to me, but liked somebody else better."

Poor little Anne could not understand all this; she kept as close to Raphael as possible. Very soon dinner was served, and a nescient observer might have said it was a perfect party of four. Raphael, the very ideal of a handsome fiend, sat opposite Stephen, the very ideal of a poetic

young Englishman, while Anne Morfill, the simplest and most innocent-looking creature that ever got beyond the doors of a nursery, faced Isola Chester, the fascinating Bohemian, a wild young "tramp" dressed in ladylike perfection. Ay, it was a queer party.

Whitebait! Brown bread and butter! Hock in green glasses! Sweet little lasses! Who has not had this effervescent experience? But this present affair was rendered more piquant by circumstances. Here was sweet Anne Page, dining between her first sweetheart and her last, utterly oblivious of her husband. Here was that slangy little Bohemian, Isola Chester, sitting opposite our heroine, and wondering what it was all about. Here was Stephen, dining, drinking, dreaming —but especially dreaming; and now and then pinching himself to ascertain whether he was awake or asleep. Here was the Seraph, amused as Mephistopheles, having, I verily believe, brought these people together just for the sake of seeing how they behaved. At any rate, if he thought to humiliate Anne he was mistaken. He forgot her infantile ignorance of the world;

he forgot her love for him, which made everything right that happened in his presence. She was in Elysium; Isola was in Greenwich, dining at the Ship; Stephen was in Nephelococcygia, and I really don't know where the Seraph was.

"What do you think of this, Baby Morfill?"

She had found an apposite sobriquet for Anne at once.

"It is very nice," replied Anne. "But I don't care much about wine."

"Dear child, it prefers pap," said Isola. "I never saw such a pullet. Why, Seraph, what do you mean by bringing your baby here without her pyjamas."

"Don't be impudent, Isola," said Raphael.

"Don't *you*. I didn't come here to be sat upon. Wake up old slow-coach, there; he's as grave as an earwig, and looks as dazed as if he saw a ghost."

"Quiet, my child," said the Seraph, in her own style.

"It appears to me," said Stephen, at this point, "that you are coolly monopolizing the conversation. Now, look here, Branscombe, as Miss

Chester is at present my property, I'll trouble you not to promise her anything. If you do, I shall make love to Anne—Baby, I mean. Baby, my pet, another glass of fiz."

"Fizzing fiz it certainly is," said Isola. "Seraph, I'll have a glass with you, to show that I forgive you."

"I say, Seraph," said Isola, "the short hours are getting long again. Let's go home."

This proposition was accepted. Raphael put his three companions inside the drag, leaving Stephen's trap to its fate. He dropt Stephen and Isola at the latter's residence. He took Mrs. Morfill to Mesopotamia, and then he drove home, as sober as a judge.

CHAPTER V.

STEPHEN'S DREAM.

"WELL, Branscombe," said Stephen, the next time he met his friend, which was several days after the dinner at Greenwich, "I don't see what good—or rather what harm—you did the other night."

"And I'm sure I don't," said Raphael. "But I suppose you'll admit that it was a very amusing scene. Isola was in her element, and wasn't Baby Morfill mystified?"

"Oh, it was amusing enough. I enjoyed it. I should like a similar divertisement about once a week. But you know you talked grandly about revenge, and all that sort of thing. And when I saw you had brought Mrs. Morfill down with you I thought you really meant something."

"My dear Langton, I thought exactly the same; but one cannot always control circumstances. I fancied I had a fine combination; at the last moment it eluded me. Still, as I said, we had a pleasant, odd sort of evening with those two girls; and we can at any moment now develop a row with Morfill."

"How so?"

"Simply enough. By some amazing chance, he does not seem to have heard of his wife's late hours in his absence. But nothing is easier than to make him aware of them; and then, as your little friend Isola would say, there'll be the devil to pay."

"And of course he would discover that you were the culprit?"

"Of course—unless, being a lawyer, and therefore an ass, he managed to mistake you for me. But that wouldn't do; he might shoot you."

"So he might you," said Stephen.

"Might he?" returned the Seraph, laughing. "Egad, I'll give him leave when he likes."

"Well, what do you mean to do now?"

"I mean to wait a little. Are you in a hurry for your revenge, old fellow?"

"I should like to see him properly punished, I confess," said Stephen.

"Exactly. Well, I'm in no immediate hurry. You see Baby would be thrown on my hands, and I don't know that I want her. If she brought her two thousand a year with her it would be another affair. If I were in love with the child, or if, like you, I had been, it would alter the case. As it is, I'm getting on easily enough in London, and am in no haste to do something which might oblige me to go to Paris or Rome."

And he thought of Venice and Isola Rossa—of Lady Æmilia Hudson, whom he had met a day or two before—of his wife, Fiordilisa, whom he might never see again. Ah, how fared the Lily of Isola Rossa?

> "Flower of May!
> Who wooed thee and won thee, is far, far away."

"I don't want to inconvenience you," said Stephen. "I was only led to speak by your

own proposal. You, of course, can't feel as I do. You only cared for her money. I loved her years ago, and love her still. If I had your power over her I'd take her away with me, and keep out of Morfill's way till he was tired of seeking her, and then come suddenly forward, and meet him and kill him, and then abandon her to her fate."

"Ah," said the Seraph, "that's fine melodramatic revenge, suitable to the Surrey side. I wonder whether one could manage to make Morfill think she was gone away with you? That would be fine. You could take her, acting for me, and I could stay at home and give Morfill excellent advice, and put him off the scent; and then at last we could let him find us, all three together, and so situated that he wouldn't know which of us he ought to fight, you or me. By Jove, Langton, that's not so bad a notion. Will it suit you?"

"My dear fellow, I don't care what I do. There's no amusement for me in London. I'll do anything you tell me if we can punish Morfill. I'm tired of this monotonous business."

"Isola has not fascinated you, then?" said the Seraph.

"I verily think she would, if any woman could. She is a marvellous creature."

"A witch, sir," said the Seraph. "The Witch of Atlas, that did naughty tricks to oblige my friend, Percy Bysshe. She puzzles me sometimes, that Isola, almost as much as I puzzle her—or you."

"She told me where you first encountered her."

"It was a curious business."

That afternoon Stephen isolated himself from his acquaintances, and took three grains of opium—a habit his reading had taught him. He ate opium when his brain wanted to be either calmed or stimulated. The magical drug will tranquillize the restless, and will arouse the somnolent. Raphael had left him with a promise to let him know what he proposed to do in reference to Morfill. And Stephen, whom recent excitement had unsettled, resorted to opium in order to obtain quietude of thought.

For a strange fantasy had seized him. His

intercourse with the Seraph had become intimate to the extreme. Sometimes it appeared to him that the Seraph and he exchanged souls—that his body was inhabited by Raphael's spirit—daring, remorseless, devilishly cool. So strongly had this idea seized him, that he would consult a mirror to see whether it reflected his own or Raphael's presentment. Sometimes he fancied that it was he who had bought Isola Chester on Maidenhead Thicket—he who had for sister that wondrous Panther. And then suddenly he was himself again, longing to subjugate the Panther, to enslave her.

He took opium late in the afternoon, and strolled far eastward into busy streets of plebeian London. He was jostled by evil-smelling crowds, in districts he had never before entered. It was a Saturday night, and in these remote regions men and women and children were doing their weekly marketing, amid the glare of gas-lit shops, amid the raucous roar of untiring costermongers. Stephen moved through these crowds in a dream, stimulated by their noisy life, but unperceptive of its details. Suddenly,

as he turned a corner, a shrill voice screamed in his ear,

"Tell your fortune, young man?"

The scene to which he was aroused by this wild yell was a singular one. Behind the stall of an itinerant seller of coffee and saloop (reader, drankest thou ever saloop?—knowest thou its source and its effects?) stood a tall, gaunt, wild-eyed gipsy, telling fortunes in coffee-grounds. A group of girls surrounded the stand, pressing forward to spend their sixpences in purchasing the preternatural. The primary object of the stall had been superseded, but the juice of the orchis may fitly yield to a prophecy of the orchis. When Stephen appeared, the Romany chi, seeing, it may be supposed, a more extravagant customer, neglected the waiting girls to attract his attention. It took him a minute or two to ascertain what she wanted. When he discovered, he consented to hear her predictions.

She examined the coffee-grounds in a cup, and the palm of his hand. Then she looked at him curiously.

"You will see stranger sights than you have seen, though they were strange enough. You have had a lady at your feet, and you have a devil at your elbow, and there are three beautiful women who have reason to fear you, and three fierce men who have reason to hate you; but you will love when you marry, and you will die in your bed."

"Thank you," said Stephen, dreamily, giving her a sovereign. "Good evening."

He went on. The girls with their sixpences pressed forward eagerly to learn the future.

"No," said the gipsy hag. "I have been forced to tell *him* truth. I will tell you no more lies to-night."

Stephen reached his rooms about midnight, and went straight to bed, ordering Auguste not to call him the next morning, whatever happened. He wanted one of those long nights of rest and inspiration which strengthened him for the world. And he got what he wanted—delicious sleep, yet a pageant of dreams.

He dreamt that Isola Chester and the wild-eyed gipsy were one—one prophetess, vainly

prophesying his future. He dreamt that he was Raphael Branscombe, and that Claudia, his sister, confessed that she loved Stephen Langton, and that he killed her kneeling at his feet. He dreamt that he (still Raphael) wandered on a beautiful seashore with a woman more beautiful than he had ever seen, and that they stepped into a white-sailed bark, and that a tempest caught them amid the summer calm, and that they were drowned together. Yes, they lay at the very bottom of the ocean, on a bed of soft sands and tiny shells, and she was folded in his arms, and the great fish sailing by glared at them with glassy eyeballs. He dreamt (still as Raphael) that the beautiful unknown changed in his embrace to sweet Anne Page, and they were both alive again, and suddenly an old man, centuries old, stabbed her as she lay in his arms, and the hot blood from her white breast flooded him with a hideous red. Thus he dreamt, vividly, and when he awoke, he found by his watch that he had slept twelve hours. He awoke refreshed in mind as well as body.

"Why," he said to himself, "should I persecute poor little Anne, or aid Raphael in his diabolical schemes? I won't do it. Anne has suffered sufficiently: to throw her into Branscombe's hands would be shameful. But is there any saving her? She seems madly in love with him. I fear that nothing I can say will be of any use.

"I had a dream of making Claudia love me. Is it possible, I wonder? She can't care about Willesden. Why shouldn't I win her? She is wonderfully beautiful. *If* she loved, by heaven it would be a fiery passion indeed. She is seven years older than I am, I suppose; but what are seven years? I should rather like to be her master, just because she has always seemed so much beyond me; and I would be her master if I married. Egad, the Panther should be tamed."

Somewhat after this foolish fashion Stephen soliloquized. He would leave Morfill unpunished for Anne's sake. He would try to save Anne from Raphael. He would go and tell Claudia that he loved her. He would even, he thought,

venture on giving some good advice to Isola Chester.

How to begin? He began the very next day, when the hour for morning calls arrived. He ordered his horse, and rode to the Mesopotamian terrace. Mrs. Morfill was at home and alone.

"Anne," he said, after the usual commonplaces of converse, "you look upon me as an old friend, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, nervously, aware that such a commencement preluded some of that excellent advice that old friends think they have a right to inflict upon us.

"Don't you think it was a great pity you came to Greenwich with Mr. Branscombe? What would your husband say if he knew it?"

"I don't know," she answered, faintly.

"Well, my dear Anne," proceeded Stephen, "you know I have a right to look upon you as my sister. You are only seventeen now, and I have known you ever since you were six. You are quite a child?"

"Quite a child!" she exclaimed, resentfully. "Yes, everybody tells me that. Claudia put me in short frocks and beat me, and Humphrey makes me do exactly what he tells me, and that impudent Miss Chester called me Baby. Nobody thinks me a woman except Raphael, and he loves me."

"Loves you, you silly girl!" interrupted Stephen, "don't you think it. He's only playing with you to revenge himself on Morfill for marrying you. Would he have made you dine at Greenwich if he loved you?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "Everybody's against me. I know I love *him*. I'd lie down and let him tread upon me if he liked. I'd kill myself if he told me to."

At that very moment the Seraph entered.

"Ah, Langton," he said, pleasantly, "you've turned traitor, eh? I heard some of your talk. You want to save this child whom you used to love. Well, I think you are right, perhaps. And yet I don't know."

He sat down and seemed to reflect. Anne remained silent. Stephen said—

"I told Mrs. Morfill you did not love her, and only cared to revenge yourself on her husband. Is not that true?"

"My dear fellow," said the Seraph, "suppose it granted, for argument's sake. Suppose I leave this poor child to that surly husband of hers. This would be right, of course—virtuous—Christian; and you imagine Mr. and Mrs. Morfill living long and prosperous years, with children around them; Morfill, M.P. and Attorney-General, and Sir Humphrey—or even Chancellor and Baron Kingsleat; little Anne a comely and contented matron. You think this would happen? Oh, no, no. This little girl here would break her heart, would pine away, would die in a year or two; that miserable Morfill would have her money, and would be rather glad to get rid of her. Is not this true, Anne?"

"Yes," she said, her brown eyes glistening through their tears.

"Come here," he said. She came.

The Seraph smoothed from her fair brow the abundant chestnut hair, and gazed into the tearful brown eyes, and said,

"Kiss me, pet."

She kissed him as lovingly as Acme her Septimillus.

"You see, my dear Langton, that this child loves me. Now, it is a great misfortune that anyone should love me, who am heartless and a breaker of hearts; but I am unable to see that I should do her any good by acting virtuously, and never seeing her again, and leaving her to be slowly murdered by the vaurien who possesses her. Marriage is a great institution, though such a marriage as Morfill's is nothing to boast of; but love is omnipotent, and will sometimes supersede even marriage. This little girl is *mine*—by a stronger claim than Morfill has. Whether I shall take her away from him I have not yet decided, but I will not kill her by refusing to see her again."

"It is a strange business," said Stephen. "You should not have made her love you, Branscombe."

"I should not, that's true. Still, mine was not the first or the greatest crime. Love *will* have its way. But Morfill should not have pretended

to love her, for the sake of her money. For that scoundrelism he deserves the worst that can happen to him."

"Well," said Stephen, "I can say no more. I have loved Anne since she was a tiny child of three, and it is a bitter grief to me to see her married to a villain, and loving you so madly. I would save her from sorrow if I could, but how can I? I have a terror of what may happen to her. I fancy her a deserted, starving, wretched wanderer, dying God knows where."

"We won't let her do any of those horrid things," said the Seraph, patting her soft cheek. "If I run away with her, and Morfill shoots me, you'll take care of her, I know; but the barrel is not made that is to carry my death."

"Good-bye," said Stephen. "It is useless to talk more."

"Oh! if you're going, so am I," said the Seraph. "It's getting late, and I don't care to meet that fellow Morfill. Good-bye, Baby, I'll drop in upon you again soon."

"Soon," she said, in a low entreating voice, "soon, very soon!"

"Poor little Anne!" said the Seraph, as he and Stephen parted in the street; "I wish she did not love me; but it is too late. Shall you dine at the Chandos to-day?"

"I think I shall."

"Well, let us meet at eight. I want to talk to you. I wish that fellow Morfill would break his neck, but lawyers never do such things."

"No, confound them!" said Stephen.

"If we were in Italy now, a few gold coins would buy a stealthy stiletto. I don't approve of such things in general; but really Morfill's baseness makes me feel like a Borgia."

They parted. As Stephen rode away, the tread of his horse's hoofs, the roar of the streets, every sound that he heard, seemed to syllable themselves into

"*Too late! Too late!*"

CHAPTER VI.

THE PANTHER WOO'D.

CLAUDIA BRANSCOMBE was at this period somewhat perplexed. That happy inventor of names who first called her the Panther touched in certain points the very essence of her character. She was beautiful and wild and strong. Was she loving also? The feline tribe are not, so far as we can judge. Mr. Henry Taylor, who is too often rather a prose-poet, has, at least, one passage of poetic humour in "St. Clement's Eve." There are two young ladies, Flos and Iolande, the one a charming saint, the other a charming coquette. Iolande gives Flos a lecture, in the form of a dream; pretty little naughty Flos retaliates :

"Yes, Iolande,
You're ever dreaming dreams, and when they're bad
They're always about me. I, too, can dream,
But otherwise than you. The god of dreams
Who sleeps with me is blithe and debonair,
Else should he not be partner of my bed.
I dreamt I was a cat, and much caressed,
And fed with dainty viands; there was cream,
And fish, and flesh, and porridge, but no mice;
And I was fat and sleek, but in my heart
There rose a long and melancholly mew
Which meant *I must have mice.* And therewithal
I found myself transported to the hall
Of an old castle, with the rapturous sound
Of gnawing of old wainscot in my ears;
With that I couched and sprang, and sprang and couched,
My soul rejoicing."

The little girl's longing (for everybody knows what) is poetically given here, though some of the phraseology is stupid enough for Tupper; but unhappily Mr. Taylor is not a poet, and nothing is more painful than to see a man straining himself to appear something which he is not and cannot be.

Well, Flos wanted mice. The Panther was not unlike her. But the Panther, who had been studying her own character intelligently enough for about a dozen years, was not yet certain

of herself. She knew that she was not wholly feline, but that was almost all she knew. She had been purely feline, nothing else, in her little affair with Stephen. What might have occurred if she had got him well under those soft velvet paws of hers, she had not considered. Even cats catch Tartars now and then: a very fine Tom of mine, who pounced on a tame peregrine falcon, under the impression that he would be easy eating, was a case in point. The hawk lost a few feathers, but poor old Tom never mewed again. However, Stephen had slipped from under her velvet paws, leaving her with nothing save a vehement desire to scratch him. And now he seemed likely to give her a chance. He spent long mornings in her drawing-room. He rode with her, met her at parties, brought her bouquets and opera boxes. He showed her a timid tranquil style of attention, which was subtly flattering. He devoted himself to her evidently.

But then there was Sir Arthur Willesden. In reference to him, Claudia had committed one of those strange blunders from which no women

are free. She pined, as I have said, for subjugation. She wanted a strong hand to tame and subdue her. No such had come; and her restless fancy made a fit hero of Sir Arthur. He was big, burly, weighty, magnificent in apparel, jewelry, odours. He had that absolute self-confidence often found in men whose extreme dullness prevents their forming an accurate estimate of themselves. You couldn't flatter Sir Arthur Willesden. He verily believed himself unusually handsome, unusually clever. The Panther fascinated him; but that she was too good for him, a creature above him, a being whose brilliant vivacious opalescent nature he could not appreciate, was a notion that he would have laughed to scorn. What could be too good for Sir Arthur Willesden?

It would be untrue to say that Claudia took him at his own estimate. Not at all. There were, indeed, times of unusual clear-sightedness, when he seemed to her ridiculous—when she saw him almost what he was, an empty vulgar "swell." But so strong was her craving to be mastered, that she could not or would not shake

off the notion that Sir Arthur was her predestined master. That Stephen Langton could fill that position was to her simply ridiculous. She thought of him as a mere boy—a boy whom she had petted—a fit sweetheart for little Anne.

Sometimes, it must be admitted, there came upon her with vivid remembrance that scene in the Idlechester garden, when Stephen had seemed to exercise kingly sway over her—when, lying carelessly on the turf, with closed eyes, he had appeared to compel her lips to his by some mysterious magnetism. She could see herself blush from head to foot sometimes, when, standing at night before her mirror, brushing out her long black tresses, the thought of that incident suddenly occurred to her. Stephen had mastered her then.

Again, she thought of him in another mood. Guided by evil counsel she had offered herself to him. Had she been a Circassian in some Eastern slave-market, offering herself for sale to Vizier or Sultan, she could not more thoroughly have accepted humiliation. That humiliation he had deepened unutterably by refusal. The Sultan

had looked at the ivory shoulders and rosy-flushed bosom, at the bright eyes and lissom limbs, and had said, "No; she won't do." When Claudia thought keenly of this, she felt disposed to marry Stephen Langton, that she might torture him to the utmost—that she might have a comfortable matrimonial right to torture him.

It was obvious to her that Stephen was ready to make her an offer at any moment. This was not obvious about Sir Arthur. She could not quite understand this change in Stephen's conduct. She had not, as we have, followed him in his interviews with Anne Page and Isola Chester. She would probably have been extremely indignant if she had known how much pity mingled with and even prompted his present feelings towards her. His poetic temperament gave him insight into character; he saw that she deserved pity, and pitied her accordingly. But when you take to pitying a woman of surpassing beauty, the result of such pity is predicable. We know what happened to Bacchus when he found Ariadne deserted in Naxos—

"Florens volitabat Iacchus,
Cum thiaso Satyrorum et Nysigenis Silenis,
Te quærens, Ariadna, tuoque incensus amore."

Hang it! I can't get over that vile habit of quoting the classics, which incenses my kind critics.

So constant a visitor at Clarges-street was Sir Arthur Willesden that Stephen seldom got a minute's *téte-à-tête* with Claudia. Raphael, who lounged into the room occasionally, was an amused spectator of the comedietta. There was the Panther almost ready to accept Sir Arthur, who didn't propose, and in a perpetual state of apprehension of a proposal from Stephen, whom she could not bring herself to accept. There was the Baronet, playing a game which often brought the lightning into Raphael's eyes—making love to Claudia, yet with an ever-present prudential care not to commit himself. And there was Stephen, not quite in love with Claudia, yet getting daily more near to the boiling-point, and assuredly eager to offer himself to her. It was very amusing to the Seraph.

At last he determined to act the part of a

Deus ex machina. He wanted Stephen to try his luck, and have it over. So, one morning, when the four were as usual assembled, he said—

"Willesden, you are a good judge of horse-flesh, I know. I wish you'd come down to Tattersall's, and give me your opinion of a hunter I thought of buying."

They went. Stephen and the Panther were left alone. Of course they talked for some time in a constrained fashion of matters utterly uninteresting to both of them. But this could not last. The moment had come for which Stephen was longing. He saw a strange light in the mysterious depths of Claudia's black eyes. The memory of old days came upon him; the terror of two wasted lives urged him on; he rose from the seat in which he had been idly plucking a geranium to pieces, and said abruptly,

"Claudia, I love you."

Though the Panther must have expected this, its suddenness rendered her breathless. She looked at him with a strange vague uncertain gaze, as if to assure herself of his identity. She

also rose from her seat, and stood facing him—a wondrous creature, whose beauty seemed almost terrible, whose possession a thing to be dreaded, save by a man to whom fear was unknown.

"I love you, Claudia," repeated Stephen, vehemently. "Say you love *me*."

And he approached her, putting out his hands to embrace her; but she waved him back, as Cassandra might have waved back the god whom she deluded; and she stood with bright eyes, full of fire, with one arm outstretched, as if for a moment inspired.

"Stephen," she said, "I *hate* you."

"No, Claudia, no," he went on, with eager rapidity, "you don't hate me. I won't believe it. You say it to punish me for my foolishness. Oh! Claudia, my love, my darling, you know you loved me once—you told me so—you threw yourself into my arms, and told me so."

She laughed a scornful laugh.

"You believed *that*," she said. "Foolish boy! It was a *lie*."

"My God!" exclaimed Stephen Langton,

starting back as if he had received a terrible blow. "My God! are *all* women false? No, Claudia—say you are deceiving me—say you loved me *then*, at least—let me think I had your love just one moment!"

"Stephen Langton, you are foolish," said Claudia. "You took a mere comedy for reality. You fancied you had humiliated me. How could I care for a mere boy like you? I tried an experiment on you—a cruel experiment, perhaps—because I knew what a trivial flirt Anne Page was, and I wished to discover if you really loved her. I was glad to find you did. I should have had a higher opinion of you, now, if you had not tried to persuade yourself that you were in love with me. I regret to destroy your poetic visions, but really I never cared for you. I always thought you a child."

The Panther's change of mood was perfect. The calm and contemptuous way in which she enunciated these sentences was harder for Stephen to bear than their actual meaning.

"It is all over," he said. "Good-bye, Clau-

dia." He caught her hand and kissed it, and left the room.

"There," said the Panther, "that's done, and I'm rather sorry for it. I've thrown away a true heart. But he is a child. He could never be my master."

She had said these words aloud. Hardly had she uttered them when the door opened, and Stephen re-entered. A change had come over him. He was impelled by a strong resolution. He walked quickly across to this wild creature who had rejected him, and caught her hands in his, and said with swift passionate emphasis,

"Claudia, you are false. You love me. You loved me that day. You are mine, and by Heaven I will have you!" He caught her in his arms. "Claudia," he said, "the truth! Tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

She had slipped from his embrace to the floor, where she knelt, one white arm on the sofa, the other resting on his knee. Her face drooped downwards, veiled by her profuse black tresses, but he forced her to look at him, though she shrank from the strong light in his eyes, though

a ruddy blush covered her face; and he repeated his question—

"Tell me, do you love me?"

"Yes," she said, in a low strange voice.

"And did you love me *then*?"

"Yes."

He arose from his seat, but she still knelt by the sofa.

"I think I know the truth now, but it is too late."

And with no further word, he went away. And Claudia knelt where he left her, stunned, stupefied, thunderstruck, while in her ears there seemed for ever to resound the fatal words—

"*Too late! too late!*"

And when she aroused herself, and sought her room, the Panther thought to herself that after all she had been wrong in her estimate of Stephen. He had power in him, this boy; he had conquered her; he had made her say she loved him, though she was by no means certain it was true. But he was her master; she would gladly be his slave and do his bidding; and she had lost him! Why was this? What had first

brought him back to subjugate her, and had then taken him away, rejecting her? Was he destined for ever to humiliate her?

Stephen would have found it hard to answer these very questions. A fierce resolve had brought him back, determined to tame her; a shuddering re-action had carried him away again, he knew not why. She was as beautiful as ever; she loved him; she knelt at his feet; he knew he had conquered her, yet in the hour of his conquest he flung her from him. Why? He was an enigma to himself. He ordered his horse, and rode out of London on the western road, through "Brentford town, a town of mud," through the towns, almost as muddy, of Hounslow and Colnbrook—he rode without pause. His horse was a good one, of Raphael's selection; but the pace at which he pushed him along the hard road sorely tried him. By-and-by, after about two hours' hard riding, he crossed the Thames, and passed through a long narrow-streeted little town, and found himself on a fine wide expanse of open heath, dotted with trees. As he crossed this heath, there came upon him

the unpleasant knowledge that his horse was dead lame. He pulled up at a small wayside public-house—the Coach-and-Horses, or Horse-and-Groom, or something similar—and dismounted. The landlord came out—a "horsey" landlord, by good luck.

"Leave him to me, sir," said the man. "You've rode him a sight too far and too fast. I'll doctor him, though. We've got a very snug stable."

Stephen, in his present mood, was glad to be relieved from all anxiety about his horse. He sat on a wooden bench outside the house.

"Landlord," he said, "some ale."

A mighty draught he drank. The ale of Berkshire had not at that time become utterly undrinkable. Burton-on-Trent has annihilated almost all other breweries.

"Upon my life," said Stephen, after his thirst was quenched, "I am uncommonly hungry. Can you give me something to eat, landlord?"

"Bacon and eggs, sir," he suggested.

"Bacon and eggs is a very fair dish, but I should like something besides. Are those fel-

lows intended to be eaten?" he asked, pointing to some very fine ducks that were splashing in a pond close by.

Stephen contrived to dine. Having finished, he strolled out to see the neighbourhood. He had not thought of inquiring where he was; he had ridden simply to get rid of his strange excitement; he did not know how far he was from London. But as he stood in the road looking towards London, and saw on the right the little inn, and on the left, behind an orchard, a square stone edifice with an inscription over its gateway, it suddenly occurred to him that he was on the very spot where Isola Chester, a tramp's brat, had been bought by Raphael Branscombe, the inexplicable, ten years before. Surely this was the place. Yes, that building on the left was a girls' school. A labourer came by at this moment.

"Is this Maidenhead Thicket?" asked Stephen.

"Yes, sir," he said, touching his hat.

"Why am I brought here without any design of my own?" said Stephen to himself. "There is something strange about it. I have always

been the victim of coincidences. I must unravel this mystery."

He returned to the inn.

"Landlord," he said, "how long before my horse will be fit to ride?"

"Not less than a couple of days, sir. He's very lame."

"Then he must stay here, and I'll send my groom for him. How can I get to London?"

"Very easy, sir. We've fifteen coaches up every day, and as many down. There's one due in about a quarter of an hour."

"Ah! I'm in no such hurry as that. I'm rather tired. I suppose you can give me a bed if necessary?"

"Oh! yes, sir, as clean and comfortable as there is in the county."

"Very well. I'll sleep here."

The sun had just set in glory; daylight was fading; but the radiant light of a moon almost at the full compensated the loss. Stephen lighted a cigar and loitered away over the Thicket. His brain was in a whirl with this day's work. *He had tamed the Panther!* Ay,

for this he had longed. She had excited within him the lust of conquest. He felt as Theseus felt when Hippolyta was his captive and slave.

But—what next?

And why was he here? Stephen firmly believed that the circumstances of his life were modified by certain special interferences. I am not saying that his belief was correct; I merely say that it was of moment, for it never ceased to influence his conduct. Finding himself at the very point where Isola Chester had been saved from the roads for Heaven knows what fate, he felt an absolute assurance that he was there for some reason.

He loitered along the grassy ways of the Thicket in the silver moonlight. When he returned to the little inn he found a stage-coach just stopping in front, a tall man in a heavy cloak descending, while the guard groped in the hind boot for luggage. The bright lamps of the coach made paths of light through the mist which began to gather.

Stephen stood at the inn door, and watched. The tall man came rapidly across the plot of

grass which separated the inn from the high-road, carrying a travelling-bag in one hand, a box of no great size in the other. The coach was already whirling away across the Thicket towards London.

"Landlord," said the stranger, in a voice of command, "supper. I sleep here to-night."

"You can have supper at once, sir, but I don't know about sleeping. This gentleman," indicating Stephen, "has just taken a bed."

"Well, I must sleep here, somehow. Supper first, at any rate."

A private sitting-room in this little place was impossible. Stephen and the stranger sat opposite each other by the fire. The Thicket is a good deal changed since Elizabeth's days, when the Vicar of Hurley was paid an additional salary for the peril of crossing it to preach at Maidenhead, but Stephen thought the new comer would have seemed a doubtful customer on that lonely heath. He was very brown and bearded, with sunken sinister eyes, that glared from under heavy eyebrows like torches in caverns,

and a great scar across his forehead, that reddened when he spoke, and mighty gnarled hands, with massive gold rings, in which uncouth stones were set.

Stephen dreamed that he had seen this man—elsewhere—in some pre-existent state perhaps. He felt absolutely certain that there was a mysterious connexion between them—that they were brought together in this inn for some strange purpose. He smoked, and sipped his ale, and waited.

The stranger supped with a fine appetite—such appetites men got outside mail-coaches in the old days. A couple of ducks had been dressed for Stephen, who had eaten about half of one; but this hungry man polished off every scrap that was left, and then devoured a hissing dish of eggs and bacon. When it was over, this meal, he filled a huge pipe with black negro-head tobacco, and said to the landlord,

"Just bring me that box, will you?"

It was not a large box—about eighteen inches square—made of oak, and well secured with brass. The landlord could scarcely lift it to the

table. He made an exclamation of surprise as he placed it before its owner.

"Yes, it's heavy," he said. "Now look here, landlord, I've had enough of your beer, and I'm going to drink some stuff of my own—medicine, you know, that my doctor prescribes for a complaint I've got. But you may charge me for every glass of hot water I use, just as well as if I put spirit in it."

Therewith he produced from the chest a good-sized bottle of rum, and a lemon of noble size.

"Try some of this, sir," he said to Stephen. "It's real old Jamaica."

It was—glorious stuff; and the lemon when cut diffused a fine fragrance through the room.

"Landlord," he said, "help yourself to a glass, and mind you put it in the bill."

After this he sat for about half an hour, drinking this superb rum, and smoking his enormously strong negrohead, apparently well pleased with his position, Stephen the while quietly studying him. At length he said—

"Landlord, how about a bed?"

"We've only one room, your honour. It's

double-bedded, to be sure, but perhaps neither you nor the other gentlemen would like that?"

"Oh!" said Stephen, "I really do not care. At a country inn one expects to rough it. I have no objection to your occupying one of the beds, sir, if you have none."

"Good," said he. "I'm obliged to you, sir. I shan't disturb you. I've a good conscience, and can sleep soundly. But I'm not going to bed yet, so keep up the supply of hot water, landlord."

All this time there had been other guests in the little parlour—coachmen and grooms and gamekeepers of the neighbouring gentry. By eleven these were all gone and the landlord's wife and daughter went off to bed.

"Now," said the stranger, "we can have a quiet gossip. Here, landlord, try some more rum. It won't hurt an old hand like you. How long have you kept this little inn?"

"About fifteen years, sir," said the host, who had very willingly responded to the stranger's invitation.

"You must see some queer things on the

roadside sometimes. Can't you spin us a yarn?"

"I'm no hand at that kind of thing, sir, else I have seen some odd sights. Once two gentlemen came by two different coaches, one up and the other down, and went out on the Thicket and fought a duel. And another time a young lady and gentleman were running away to get married, and the lady's father overtook them just here, and she had to go back again. And another time a poor gipsy woman or tramp died just by the horse-trough, and a gentleman riding by bought a little girl she had with her, and sent her to school close here."

Somehow, Stephen was prescient of the landlord's telling Isola's story—prescient also of its producing some strange effect on the stranger. At this point the flames in those cavernous eyes gave a leap. And he said, but coolly enough—

"That was a curious fancy. How long ago is that?"

"About ten years," said the landlord.

"And is the child at school now?"

"No, sir. She ran away about two years ago

with a young farmer that lived here, and we've never heard of her since."

The stranger had his tumbler in his right hand. A sudden contraction of the fingers smashed it to fragments. The landlord sprang up to remove them.

"Wait," he said. "I am interested in that girl. What has become of the young farmer who took her away?"

"He came back without her. But he got such a bad character about here that he went off altogether. I think he went to sea."

"And nothing is known of the girl by the schoolmistress?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Who was the gentleman who bought her and sent her to school?"

"Nobody knows. He called himself Johnson, but it wasn't his name. But we heard that he took her away from Pringle—that's the farmer she ran off with—and horsewhipped him well. He deserved it, the scamp!"

"By Heaven!" said the stranger, striking his fist heavily on the table, "I'm glad he is away

from here. I should kill him. Landlord, are you *quite* sure nobody about here knows where the girl is?"

"Quite, sir."

"My God!" exclaimed the stranger with almost a sob. "What shall I do?"

All this time Stephen Langton had not spoken.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD WOLF.

STEHHEN did not speak. He sat and watched the wild old man, scarred and bearded. He felt as if he had possessed prevision of this strange occurrence. Destiny had brought him to this wayside inn—brought him face to face with the man who hungered to know what he could tell. A curious coincidence, the ordinary moralizer would say. Stephen Langton thought otherwise. For him life was full of what we call curious coincidences. When he found himself, by mere accident, a dweller at this little hostelry on Maidenhead Thicket, at whose door the mother of Isola had died, he felt conscious of an impending event.

We do not sufficiently allow for the wide dif-

ferences in human temperament. Some men hear the music of the spheres; others, deaf to that sublime harmony, are delighted with what they get at the Alhambra. Some men see visions and dream dreams; others go through the world unconscious of everything that does not appeal to their senses. Some men can love, can hate, can feel; others are mere automata, for aught that can be perceived. And I am not sure that Mr. Browning has seen the whole truth in that wondrous poem of his, "Mr. Sludge the Medium." Are there not men with what may be called the preternatural temperament? Just as the poet's temperament vibrates to delicate influences utterly unfelt by an average shopkeeper, may not a certain nature feel dimly conscious of the presence or the passage of a spiritual visitant?

And as to events. "Adventures are to the adventurous," says Mr. Disraeli. This is a half truth. Many a man pines for adventure, seeks for it over wide realms and desolate seas, yet never meets it. Another shall be unable to walk down the common-place street in which

he dwells without an adventure. Ay, and he knows that it is coming; he feels it afar off, as you feel the advent of the mist that as yet has not climbed past the horizon; he rises from his bed in the morning, and says to himself, "Something will happen to-day." Nor is that prophetic instinct ever wrong.

Well, when a chymist can tell us why the rose is red, or why magnesium gives a brilliant light, or why a drop of hydrocyanic acid extinguishes life, or why iodine cures goitre and takes sun-pictures, or why chloroform for a time annihilates the senses, then, perhaps, the philosopher may discover some reason for the differences which exist in human temperaments. But, for the man to whom there is something laughably absurd in the idea of a coexistent invisible world—a world which osculates this material world at rare points and under rare circumstances—for that man to maintain that what to him is incomprehensible is, therefore, impossible, is silly beyond measure. As well may the unmathematical man deride the notion that

$$y^2(2a—x)=x^3$$

is suggestive of ivy.

Let the event evolve, thought Stephen, as he gazed sometimes at his companion, sometimes at the calcined caverns of the fire. Let us see who he is, this stranger whom I have been impelled to come thirty miles to meet. We shall not part without some weighty converse. Let time reveal.

"Landlord," said the stranger after a while, "you can go to bed. This gentleman and I will stay by the fire an hour longer. If I burn down the house, I'll pay for it."

"It's contrary to my rules, sir," said the innkeeper.

"Pshaw! who told you to make rules for *us?* I obey no rules. Be off, here's a trifle for breaking your rules."

He flung upon the table a huge gold-coin, bigger than a crown-piece, the product of some far foreign mint. The amazed landlord took it and went away without a word.

"I don't know why I met you here, sir," said the stranger to Stephen, after a long pause.

" When I was a boy I read a singular poem about an old sailor and an albatross. The old fellow went about the world half-crazed, telling his story ; and he always knew at a first glimpse the man who was bound to listen to him. Now I feel something like that. You will listen to me, that I know: and you will have something to tell me, I believe. Let's make a night of it."

The night was pretty well worn already. Stephen, however, cared little. To him it mattered not whether he slept at noon-day or the noon of night. He expressed his willingness to pass the hours in any way that suited his comrade.

"You see those letters," said the stranger, pointing to a brazen M. B. on the cover of his oaken chest. "Here they are again, and he bared one of his massive arms, and showed them distinctly tattooed upon the skin, with a fierce-looking quadruped under them. "Those are my initials. Mark of the Beast, some of my complimentary friends call them. Well, sir, there they are, at any rate, and here am I; and my

name's Marmaduke Branscombe. Did you ever hear of the Branscombes?"

"Yes," said Stephen.

He did not feel surprised at this fresh coincidence. He seemed to have foreknown it.

"Ay, the Branscombes, of Branscombe. A wild lot—three brothers of us—Ralph and Walter and Marmaduke. I was the youngest. They sent me to school—to Winchester. I never learnt anything, never could, was always in trouble. One day the head-master tells me it was no good flogging me—it wasn't—he couldn't hurt me; so next time I did any mischief he'd expel me. Thinks I to myself, I'll expel you, old gentleman; so I just walked off to Southampton, and got a berth aboard ship. And I've been knocking about the world ever since, and never set eyes on any of my relations. They all think I'm dead long ago.

"I don't know where I haven't been, or what I haven't done. I've been a pirate, and a smuggler, and a poacher, and a highwayman. I've dug for diamonds in the Ural mountains, and wandered fortune-telling with the gipsies.

My mates call me Wolf Branscombe, and I think the name suits. I'm altogether a nice fellow to sleep with in a double-bedded room in a lonely inn on Maidenhead Thicket."

Stephen laughed.

"Ah, you're made of the right stuff, and don't mean to be frightened. You needn't. I never did anything shabby. If a fellow had what I wanted, I didn't get behind him and strangle him: no, I gave him fair notice I meant to have his watch, or his money, or whatever it might be, and that he'd better be ready to fight for it. And I only want one thing of you—that is, to tell me what you know of the little girl that was brought here ten years ago."

"Is she related to you?" asked Stephen.

"She is my daughter. The fellow who sold her—he was her uncle—confessed to me what he had done, when I had my knee on his chest, and my fingers at his lying throat. And I let him go—but promised if I found she had come to harm, I would hunt him down and kill him. And so I will, by God!"

The old Wolf emphasized his resolve with a

blow of his fist on the table. He looked grim and fierce, and the scar on his brow was red as blood. Stephen began to think that he was rather in a fix. He did not know how far it would be safe to tell this man where to find Isola. Poor girl! she *had* come to harm; might not her father choose to kill some one besides the scoundrel whom he threatened?

"I can wait," said Marmaduke Branscombe. "I can wait for what you have to tell, whether it is much or little. Don't hurry yourself."

"You have never since seen either of your brothers or their children?" said Stephen, tentatively.

"No, but I have heard all about them. I know that Ralph has spent all his money, and Walter's a parson. Poor old Ralph! how he used to lick me when I was a youngster. And now he's hard up. But I've got money enough for both of us; there's more in this box than 'll pay his debts twice over."

"Do you know anything about his son, Raphael?"

"I only know he's said to be devilish clever.

You know him, I can see; what do you say about him?"

"Upon my word, I can't tell you," said Stephen; "sometime I think he's a very good fellow; sometimes there seems something fiendish about him. He has always been very kind to me."

"The Branscombes are true to their friends, and know how to hate their enemies. But you have something to tell me; you have heard of my little girl. Look here; you are a gentleman, and don't want a bribe, but I'll give any man *this* who can tell me where she is."

He took from his box a superb Oriental sapphire, as big as a duck's egg, which an emperor or a bill-discounter might vainly long to buy.

"It cost me that little cut across the forehead," said the Wolf. "You may have it, if you like to tell me all you know about my little girl. It will buy any place in this county, except Windsor Castle."

"Thank you," replied Stephen; "but you rightly said just now that I did not need a bribe.

I will tell you what I can. The person who bought your daughter and placed her at school was her cousin, Raphael."

"My God!" exclaimed the other, in amaze.

"She seems to have inherited your tendencies, for she ran away from school with a young farmer."

"Did he marry her?" interrupted Marmaduke Branscombe, impetuously.

"No."

"Where is he? By heaven, let me meet him!"

"I don't know what has become of him. Raphael followed them, and horsewhipped him, and took her away. She is living in London now."

"How does she live? What is she doing?"

"I can't tell you, indeed."

"You know her? You have spoken to her?"

"Oh, yes, often."

"What is she like? Do you know—it is strange, isn't it?—I have never seen her. Never. I left England just before she was born, and

though I've been twice back since, I could never hear anything about her, until the other day I met my rascally brother-in-law. By heaven, I frightened him! I squeezed the truth out of his lying throat; I'd have squeezed the life out if he hadn't told me all he knew."

The old Wolf paused for some time, and meditatively puffed his negro-head.

"I don't even know her name," he said at last, as if to himself. "And she will hardly be able to believe I am her father. If I thought she was happy I would go away without her knowing anything about it."

He sat in reflective mood, with corrugated brows, looking into the fire.

"No," he said, after a while; "I must see her; I must get her to tell me everything. I must find out for myself whether she is happy. And I will give her money enough to tempt a prince to marry her. Is she pretty?"

"Very beautiful," answered Stephen.

The old man looked at him curiously.

"Very beautiful, eh?" he said, half in soliloquy. "Very beautiful—very young—very poor.

Who shall blame *her* if she is very wicked. Not I—not her father. But there may be others to blame—others to punish."

"Well," he resumed, "I shall go to bed. I must sleep upon all this. Will you take me to her, to-morrow?"

"Had you not better see your nephew first?" asked Stephen.

"Perhaps I had. We can see him to-morrow, I suppose?"

"No doubt of it. I will go with you to London, and take you straight to his house."

"That's right. And now, if you are not afraid of a wild old wolf like me, let us find out our double-bedded room."

Marmaduke Branscombe, oak chest in hand, slowly and heavily ascended the creaking stairs of the little inn. He kicked off his boots, and threw himself on one of the beds without any further undressing.

"Good night," he said; "don't be afraid to sleep."

"Not at all," said Stephen, with a laugh. But he could not sleep. It was about four o'clock

when they came up stairs. Stephen heard the rickety old clock on the stairs strike five and six. His companion lay still enough, only moving once or twice to fill his pipe, which Stephen could see in the darkness like an hyæna's eye in a cavern. Soon after six he suddenly sprang up, pulled on his boots, and went out. Stephen rose and watched him from the window stride rapidly away over Maidenhead Thicket, smoking as he strode.

And then, at last, Stephen Langton slept—no very healthful sleep, for potent rum and late hours have baneful tendencies. It was almost noon when he awoke—awoke uncertain where he was, what had really occurred, how much of what he remembered was actual fact, and how much mere phantasm. As he looked around the quaint old-fashioned room, with its slanting roof and odd bulwarks, he perceived that his companion of the previous night was even now lying upon his bed, puffing away at his negrohead. When he saw Stephen moving, he rose and stretched himself, exclaiming—

"Ha, young man, so your sleep is over at last?

You youngsters can't stand the racket—your nerves are weak. I went away half-a-dozen miles some hours ago, and had a dip in the Thames, and was lucky enough to get some fish for breakfast. So now, if you like to get up I'll go and cook the fish—these country bumpkins don't understand it."

When Stephen descended he found the Wolf had been even better than his word. Not only had he dressed the fish, but he had also devilled another of those ill-fated ducks. A very grizzled old Wolf he looked by day-light—he had been knocked about evidently; his fierce face and massive hands bore many traces of hot work. Yet there was now discernible that curious faint family likeness which strangers see better than friends. Stephen could find in his conntenance something that reminded him of both Raphael and Claudia.

"You are looking at my old cuts, Mr. Langton," he said. "I've been pretty nearly cut to pieces more than once. I'd a bayonet slap through my chest, and a ball through all my left ribs, and a dozen other little things that would have kill-

ed most men. Perhaps I'm born to be hanged."

He looked by no means an unlikely subject for that operation. But he was in high glee this morning, doubtless with the thought of finding his daughter, and he made a prodigious breakfast, while poor Stephen could scarcely touch anything.

"What have they called my little girl?" he asked, abruptly.

"Isola," said Stephen.

"An outlandish mame, Isola Branscombe! I wonder whether she'll like to see me. I wonder whether she'll wish I had been drowned or shot. I'm a rough old fellow, Mr. Langton, but I've been longing for years to see that little lass. If she's afraid of me—if she won't believe I'm her father, I'll blow my brains out."

"She can't well help believing it," said Stephen. "And as to being afraid, I don't much think she would be afraid of anything."

"Glad to hear it, sir—shows she's a Branscombe. Look here, Mr. Langton, you're doing me a great service; you must take a trifling token of remembrance."

He opened his wonderful chest and produced a diamond ring, that flashed like a star.

"Wear that for my sake," he said. "It's only a trifle."

Stephen tried hard to refuse, but the old man was obstinate. At about three o'clock they caught an up-stage, which landed them in Piccadilly at six. According to promise, Stephen led the Wolf at once to Clarges-street.

But neither Raphael nor Claudia was at home.

"He may be at the club," said Stephen. "Shall we go and see? We can leave your things at my rooms, and if you like I can give you a bed there."

"That will do," he said. "And if we find Raphael, you can just tell him at once I'm his uncle Marmaduke. It won't frighten him, I daresay."

They made their way, first to Jermyn-street, then to the Chandos. The waiters of that club are in the habit of seeing some very queer people, and did not flinch from Marmaduke's vast bulk and portentous ugliness. Stephen, on inquiry, found that the Seraph had ordered din-

ner for two, and was at present waiting for it in the smoking-room. Thither they went, and found Raphael, enjoying his weed in company with Humphrey Morfill. What had led that hard-working young gentleman to leave his home in Mesopotamia for a dissipated evening with the Seraph? And why did the Seraph trouble himself with him?

"Ah!" said Raphael, as they entered, "I thought I had lost you, Langton. Has anything happened?"

"One or two things," answered Stephen, drily. "Allow me to introduce a very pleasant acquaintance I have made—Mr. Marmaduke Branscombe, Mr. Raphael Branscombe."

"Egad, how queer!" said the Seraph. "It's not a hoax, I see; in fact, Uncle Marmaduke, you're devilish like my father. But everybody thought you were dead years ago."

"I thought so myself more than once."

"Queer, certainly. And, may I ask, do you bring back a wife and family with you? I suppose not, as you seem to have been knocking about the world all your life."

"We'll talk of that presently," he answered in a tone significant enough to Stephen.

"Precisely," said the Seraph. "Excuse my abrupt inquiry. We may as well all dine together."

"I am afraid I shall be rather in rhe way now," remarked Morfill.

"Not a bit of it. You see, Langton," said the Seraph, "Mrs. Morfill and Claudia have got some engagement together—a purely feminine affair —I don't understand it; so Morfill and I decided to dine together. As for you, you'll see yourself advertised for in all the papers to-morrow morning. Your sudden disappearance was most mysterious. Even Claudia couldn't account for it."

"Couldn't she? Well, I'm fiercely hungry, now; I have eaten no breakfast."

"No," said the Wolf, with a grunt of laughter. "We drank a little rum together, last night, and the young gentleman seemed qualmish this morning."

"He's not a Branscombe," observed the Seraph.

They dined. Very soon after dinner, Humphrey Morfill, whose conversational powers seemed to have been destroyed by his unflagging attention to business, and who, probably, was not very much at his ease in Stephen's company, left them, on the plea of having important papers to look over. The trio then went off to the smoking-room. Marmaduke had said nothing about family affairs during dinner. He had talked freely, narrating a few of his adventures, one or two of which would have added a flavour to "Munchausen." Over his pipe he showed a disposition to change the subject.

"Ralph is abroad, I suppose," he said.

"Yes," said the Seraph; "he can't face the bailiffs just now."

"We'll change all that," growled the Wolf; "I'll pay his debts."

"You?"

"Ay, why not? I'm his brother: he won't be too proud to accept my help, I hope!"

"Certainly not," answered the Seraph. "But I did not suppose you had been fortunate."

"It depends on what you call fortunate. If

to have got enough to buy back every inch of land that ought to be Ralph's is fortunate, then I have been. If to be kept from sleep every night by the ghosts of men I have killed is fortunate, then I have been. But, pshaw! this is nonsense. What's that ring worth, if you know a good stone when you see it?"

He pointed to the diamond he had given Stephen, who handed it to the Seraph. Raphael examined it critically.

"Well," he said, "I'm not a jeweller; but I can tell that's worth money. Five hundred pounds, perhaps."

"I don't know," said his uncle. "I only know I've got a hatful of better stones than that. And what is Walter doing? Preaching, I suppose. I hope he won't want to preach to me."

"Not very likely," said Raphael. "My uncle Walter is an excellent hand at minding his own business."

"And that's an excellent thing. Well, are the girls married? You see, though I haven't come to look after you, I have found out some-

thing about you. I know that Ralph and Walter had each a daughter."

"Neither of them is married. My sister, Claudia, is living with me."

"Well, it is time they were married, if they're ever going to. And now," continued the old man, after a long pull at his pipe, "you asked me whether I had any family. I have one child, a daughter, a very pretty girl, I am told, for I never saw her."

"Never saw her!"

"No. England got too hot for me just before she was born. And I lost sight of her for years, and have only just got a trace of her from your friend Mr. Langton."

"This is all very strange," said the Seraph. "How in the world could Langton help you?"

"Because he knew the girl—because he knew the man who saved her and protected her when her mother died on the Bath-road, at the corner of Maidenhead Thicket."

"Why, you can't mean Isola!" exclaimed the Seraph.

"Yes," said Stephen Langton, for Marmaduke

did not reply; "Isola Chester is his daughter."

"The devil!" exclaimed Raphael.

"When can I see her?" said the old Wolf, after a time.

"To-night!" said the Seraph promptly. "See her as soon as you like. I had better just break it to her beforehand; it will take her so much by surprise."

"You are right. I have not thanked you, Raphael, for taking care of this child, though you could not know she was a Branscombe. But I'll show my gratitude to your father as well as to you. Mr. Langton has told me what happened to her; I know you were not to blame; and as for the scoundrel who took her from school, it will be well for him if I never meet him. Now let us go."

They had not far to walk to Isola's residence. The evening was chilly; and she, curled in a vast easy chair in front of the fire, was warming her feet and sleepily reading a novel. The flickering flame seemed endlessly to change the colours of her strange hair, and still stranger eyes. What a picture she was!

"Ho! Seraph," she cried, "I'm glad to see you. Haven't you run away with Baby Morfill yet?"

"Be serious, Isola," he replied; "I have something very important to say to you."

She stretched her feet lazily at the fire, and gave him a saucy nod, as much as to say, "Go on."

"I suppose it has sometimes occurred to you that you had a father."

"Oh! yes. But he's dead, I know. Drowned at sea, they told me."

"They told you a falsehood. He is alive still. He has come back to claim you."

"He shan't have me!" she said defiantly. "He must not have me, Raphael. Of course, he's a brute, or he would not have deserted my mother. You must hide me from him."

"Wait," he said; "your father is a rough sort of a man, but I should not call him a brute. And you know he has a right to you. I could not consent to hide you from him. And there's one more thing that is sure to please you, Isola; he seems to be immensely rich."

"Ha! ha!" she exclaimed gleefully, "that's charming. But tell me, how did he find me?"

"That's very curious," said the Seraph; "he found you through Stephen Langton."

"Dear old Stephen!"

"But there's something more curious still, Isola. You have never heard, of course, that an uncle of mine, my father's younger brother, ran away to sea before I was born, and has never been heard of since. Well, this is the very man. You and I are cousins."

"Oh! how delightful!" she said, springing from her chair and pirouetting. "Dear me, to think that I'm a Miss Branscombe! Quite a heavy swell, Raphael. But I *am* pleased about that, that's the truth."

"I should have been better pleased if——but never mind, Isola. Your father is waiting with Stephen at the corner. Shall I fetch him in?"

"Oh! yes. You and Stephen will come too, won't you?"

"No; we should be in the way."

"But I am frightened," she urged. "Perhaps he'll be cruel to me. Are you quite sure he *is* my father?"

"Yes, you silly child. So don't be afraid; he'll be as kind to you as possible. He's longing to see you, and has been trying to find you for years. Good-bye; I'm going to fetch him."

The Seraph left her, and rejoined his uncle.

"Is she ready?" asked Marmaduke, in a voice hoarse with eagerness.

"Quite. Don't let us keep you. Good night."

Raphael and Stephen walked slowly away. The old Wolf pushed open the hall-door, which stood ajar, and entered Isola's room. She had risen, and pushed back her chair, and stood in front of the fire looking, in her quaint costume, and fanciful jewelry, with those changeful lights in her hair and eyes, more like a princess of fairyland than an ordinary young lady. And when Marmaduke Branscombe came looming through the doorway, gaunt, grizzled, impa-

tient, she demurely dropped a graceful curtsey, and said,

"Good evening, papa."

CHAPTER VIII.

ISOLA ROSSA.

THE peaks of the Balagna were capped with snow. And a chill, icier than all the snows of the Caucasus, had fallen upon Fiordilisa, the Lily of Isola Rossa. And the little town itself was melancholy; there was less gaiety in the less frequent songs that arose under Chilina's mulberry tree; for the stranger who had brought joy to Isola Rossa had now given it grief.

The letters of Raphael Branscombe to his wife had grown fewer and briefer. There was something forced and false in their tone. They jarred upon the ear of love. Raphael was not a fiend; he had simply great power of enjoying the present, great power of forgetting the past.

What of the future? Well, it did not trouble him much. He was a Pyrrhonist as to the far future, while of the immediate future he took no count. He could sup well and sleep well, though to be called in the greyest, chilliest hours of morning to fight a duel. He could utterly forget a man killed or a woman ruined. And he could enjoy the present with a boyish and poetic glee, with a gaiety and insouciance which seemed dreadful to those who knew him best. Students of human nature will not readily declare such a temperament impossible. Critics will doubtless declare him a monster—a mere novelist's Frankenstein. *I know the man.*

Raphael occasionally reflected with what he called seriousness on the position in which he found himself. It was curious, if not awkward. He was married to Fiordilisa; he loved her with the purest love of which he was capable; he had spent with her the happiest days of his life. But now that, having left Isola Rossa far behind, he had re-entered London's strong and vivid life, he felt a curious reluctance to return to the idyl of that Corsican seashore. Was it

indeed true that he had been there? Was the *Fantasia* a real barque, or "a painted ship upon a painted ocean?" Was there indeed such a fountain, with children playing round it—such a house of refreshment as merry guitar-playing Chilina's, with the marble bench under the mulberry tree—such a white sea-beach, veined with red coral—such a noble old patriarch as Angelo Montalti—above all, such a delicious creature, pure in her maidenhood as Eve in Eden, as Fiordilisa? Or was it all a vision? Was Fiordilisa a phantom, a myth, like the fair-haired Lilith, the first wife of Adam? Verily that picture of the mid-sea island seemed much like a dream. But the Seraph had certain bills of jewellers and others to show that it was not altogether visionary; and therefore he could not escape from the undoubtful conviction that there existed a person with a right to be called *Fiordilisa Branscombe.* Strange mixture of language between the liquid South and the harsh and guttural North.

The Seraph, at intervals, wished himself back at Isola Rossa—in the quaint Casa Montalti,

living a life of the heroic age, with his Nausicaa to serve him with goat's flesh and fruit and wine, and in due time to place in his arms a young Branscombe in whom the blood of the famous races commingled. But then, he was very jolly where he was; he could not bring himself to quit the fatal fascinations of London. Besides, he had his sister Claudia to look after, and he felt a strong misgiving that there would be hard work there. Moreover, he had a strange amorous hunger for that pretty little plump Anne Page, of whom he deemed himself defrauded by Humphrey Morfill. And he felt a strong impulse to revenge himself on the said Humphrey Morfill by means of his wife. Wherefore evil predominated over good in his mental processes.

And my last chapter's discovery of course increased the chances against our poor little Fiordilisa. There was a new uncle on the scene, an "uncle from India," as the French novelists put it. What was the grim old unexpected Wolf going to do with his doubloons and his diamonds and his daughter?

The Seraph, fond of eventful living, could not conceal from himself the fact that this abrupt apparition was what they call in dull country society "a great acquisition." Here was a man who openly announced his intention of reinstating Devil Branscombe in his ancestral acres—a man who carried about with him a box full of sapphires as big as eggs, and gold coins that resembled cheese-plates—a man who owed a heavy debt of revenge to poor Farmer Pringle, and a heavy debt of gratitude to him, the Seraph. Hang it! he must stop and see it out.

This is the species of reasoning wherewith Raphael Branscombe blocked the swift bowling of remorse. Meanwhile, what were they doing at Isola Rossa? Ah, the Lily was fading. She kept up, womanfully. None ever heard from her lip a word of complaint; none ever saw a tear in her beautiful eye. A true woman, true and pure, and loving and believing, this little Corsican endured martyrdom for her recreant husband. To her the ties of civilization were incomprehensible. She was wearily perplexed by her husband's strange absence; and as it length-

ened, she began to believe he never would return; but the idea of his basely deserting her would not enter her mind. Had he not, this wise man of the world, been fool enough to send her chilly apologetic letters—had he become suddenly silent—she would have believed him dead, and gone to her grave in that faith. But those apologetic letters, which in time (as the Seraph got tired) ceased altogether, were merely an enigma to her. Aud when at length no news came, she faded—nothing more.

But Angelo Montalti understood better. He came, slowly and painfully, to the conclusion that Raphael Branscombe was a villain. Of this conviction nothing did he say to any man; but in the midnight solitude he agonized over the terrible blunder he had made in giving this darling of his, this cherished girl, the last of the Montalti, the sweetest flower of the race, to a wandering Englishman, of whom he knew nothing. What a fool he had been! She would die—Fiordilisa would die—and there would be a sad ending to the Montalti. Thus soliloquized venerable Angelo, in his chamber, alone.

Marc Antonio had gone round to Ajaccio in the *Fantasia* to meet the Marseilles steamer for letters. The beautiful barque came merrily round the point into the phosphorescent bay. All Isola Rossa was awaiting it, that evening. All the little town was silently sympathetic with the grief of the Montalti. Chilina was there of course, awaiting her husband. And tall old Angelo had walked down in stately fashion, with pretty Fiordilisa leaning on his arm. Ah me, she leaned too lightly.

There was no letter.

Angelo and his grand-daughter returned slowly to the Casa Montalti. The sun was setting over that sapphire sea in beauty that would foil the words of Shelley or the colours of Titian. Had a stranger suddenly descended, as in an evil moment descended Raphael, upon Isola Rossa, he would have thought it a Paradise. He would not have dreamt that the noble old man, the exquisitely beautiful girl, who went slowly homeward amid the ruddy light, were stricken by a great grief—a great grief from a cause so commonplace as that the post had

brought no letter. But let me ask my reader whether he has not known the two common-place words, *no letter*, involve a tragedy?

Angelo Montalti sat down to supper. Fiordilisa did not allow her bitter misery to interfere with her duties. Was she not a Corsican, like Vittoria Malaspina? She served her grandfather at table, in the primitive old fashion; and brought him the viands and the wine which he loved; and made no moan, though the anguish of a lost love gnawed her innocent breast. But later in the evening, just before they went to bed, she said, in a low constrained voice,

"Will he ever come back, grandfather?"

"I do not know, my flower," replied the old man.

"Oh! I hope he will," she said—"I hope he will. Would he not love his baby, grandfather, as you love me?"

In her room that night Fiordilisa knelt before a picture of the Madonna, and confessed to the Virgin Mother a grief which yet she had scarcely confessed to herself. Ave Maria! Beautiful worship, which Doctors Colenso and Cumming.

together with Archbishop Longley and Mr. Spurgeon, unite to assure me is wicked. Wicked? Possibly. Better perchance worship the Virgin Mother than Mammon or Belial, each of whom has fashionable chapels of ease among us Protestants. To whom could this crushed lily so fitly tell her sorrow as to her who bore upon her breast the Man of Sorrows—to her who knew, with a knowledge shared by no other creature, that God had become man?

However, as our poor darling Fiordilisa was a good Catholic, she needs no excuse. She belonged to a Faith with which Reason has never entered into partnership—the only lasting kind of Faith, by the way. And she knelt before her picture—and she told the Lady of Galilee what she might have told her mother, had a mother's ever-loving breast been vouchsafed to Fiordilisa in her trouble, that she knew not where her husband was, or whether ever she should see him again, and that there moved within her bosom a young life that belonged to him as well as her. And oh! how fervently those young pure lips prayed that Raphael

might soon return, to embrace his child! Well,

> "Saints will aid if men will call,
> For the blue sky bends over all:"

and it is certain that Fiordilisa's sleep that night was calmer and happier after her prayer than it had been for a long time.

Poor child! She lies upon her snowy pillow, her too fair face flushed by a dream of *him*, her sweet lips half apart with some delicious visionary anticipation, her arm astray upon the coverlet. Well for her that in her dreams she cannot see that recreant Raphael. Well for her indeed that she cannot behold the interior of the adjacent room, where Angelo Montalti holds sleepless counsel with himself.

Angelo Montalti knew nothing of the world beyond Corsica. He was a thorough islander of that marvellously romantic island. Through his long life he had never known fear or shame, he had never uttered an untruth, he had never even contemplated the possibility of doing a deed of dishonour. More than this: I doubt if Angelo Montalti had ever *heard* a falsehood. You see, he must be excused; he lived in an

uncivilized country. The lie is a noble invention; they are to be pitied, doubtless, to whom it is unfamiliar; but it would be unfair to blame them.

There is good old blood in Corsica. The Buonapartes, comparatively *novi homines*, seem to have been there A.D. 947—and my friend, Mr. Bertrand Payne, can only trace the progenitors of Millais the painter back to 1331. For me, I can trace no farther than Ralph de Mortimer, *tempore* William I.; but my friend James Hannay is the fellow for a genealogy. Was it not of his ancestors Bon Gualtier the inimitable wrote—

> "Hannay had a son
> Who married Noah's daughter,
> And nearly spoiled ta Flood
> By trinking up ta water:
> Which he would have done
> (I at least believe it)
> Had ta mixture peen
> Only half Glenlivet."

Strange how family failings last through centuries! However, the Montalti, though not so preposterously antique, belonged to a good old

race—a race among whom brave men and chaste women were the only men and women known. And now he found himself face to face with a terrible event. He had accepted a stranger as the husband of the last of his race. Bitterly now did he regret the simple trustfulness, natural to a man who has never deceived or been deceived. This stranger was gone, none knew whither; of his return there seemed slight hope; and Fiordilisa was shamefully deserted—would be mother of a child whose father was devoid of all honour and faith. Thus thought Angelo, wrung by a manly agony, and more than paternal pity for the last fading flower of his race.

He was bowed down by a double grief. It was sad that the Montalti should be thus insulted—that the pure old race should end disgracefully. But it was even more sad that Fiordilisa, that sweet mixture of gaiety and gentleness, that purest, most loving of women, should die of grief. Nothing less could happen to her, Angelo Montalti knew well. Her love was her

self; when it died, she also must die. The old man foresaw this, without question; he foresaw himself, bereaved of his daughter, wandering vaguely, a dagger in his breast, over realms which were as yet mere names to him, seeking for revenge on Raphael Branscombe. And the thought came suddenly upon him, filling him with pain—

"Shall I live to do it?"

And he also knelt—not to pray, but to vow—and he vowed that he would live to take vengeance on Raphael Branscombe.

There was no *if* in that vow. The future for him had assumed certainty.

He unlocked a quaint cabinet, of some wood blackened with age. He took down, one after another, curious weapons, that seemed to belong to the Middle Ages. One after another he examined them carefully—at last he seized a dagger with a long sharp blade of bluest steel, on which were engraved some strange Arabic characters. The handle was a cross of ivory, on which shone a plain silver plate. This

weapon Angelo Montalti selected, returning the others to their places.

Then he took from a shelf in the cabinet a corrosive liquid and an engraver's tool, and on the silver plate which adorned the handle of the dagger he cut three words—twenty-two letters. It was a careful and a painful work. But Angelo Montalti grudged neither care nor pain for the purpose before him.

It is hard to describe the way of life which became the rule with Fiordilisa and her grandfather at this time. The old man was mellowed by age into the ripeness of Nestor. He was incapable of hasty conclusions. He was incapable of injustice. He had, moreover, the old man's power of prevision. He saw that a brief time must infallibly show the truth. And he had that tenderness of great age to girlish youth which Landor nobly showed in his *Heroic Idyls*, in the relation of Laertes to Agatha. To a very old man there is nothing more touching than a dainty young girl. The one is a finished product of the race: the other is its freshest bud of promise. Angelo Montalti did

his utmost to conceal from the beautiful child whom he loved the fierce thirst for revenge which had seized upon him—the result of an unalterable conviction that Raphael deserved his vengeance. He was kind to her with an old man's kindness. They wandered together on that coral-tinted sand where you see Isola Rossa's blood-red cliffs glowing in the sunlight. They watched the *Fantasia* at anchor. Ah me! that was a cruel sight for our sweet Fiordilisa. That was the merry skiff which had carried her and her Raphael over the joyous sea in the happy days of love. There it lay waiting—for a freight that might never come. And Fiordilisa waited also; waited with that divine patience and child-like faith which God has given to women, and which ought to paralyse the man who ventures to deceive them. She hid the anguish in her bosom; she faded, poor child—she could not help it: but even to her grandfather she made no complaint of Raphael, but only asked, in the supreme moments of sorrow—

"Will he come back *soon?*"

The stern old Corsican knew not how to reply to this sad questioning.

CHAPTER IX.

THREE LOVE AFFAIRS.

CLAUDIA BRANSCOMBE, rejected abruptly by Stephen Langton, felt within her a feminine determination to marry somebody. Sir Arthur Willesden, she thought, was at her service. So, when this impertinent boy left her, she became kinder to the baronet, who thereupon presumed immensely. Sir Arthur was a man so utterly devoid of sensitiveness that it took much to move him; of all delicate shades of human feeling he was as ignorant as a blind man of colours; but if he did get an idea into his head he carried it out with that fine, obstinate, unreasoning ferocity with which a bull butts at a young lady's scarlet petticoat, under

the impression apparently that it is a personal insult to himself.

Now, my feminine readers will, I trust, understand that the Panther had a somewhat difficult business in making this burly baronet believe that she really did like him a little. I wish I had the delicate hand to thoroughly work out this part of the affair. It is such a nice bit of comedy. Here's the fiery Claudia anxious to make the stolid Sir Arthur believe that she loves him. He, poor fellow, though dull enough to be member for Stamford, has sufficient wit to see that she ought not to love him. Besides, there's another element. *He can't marry her.* The Hebrews (dear descendants of Abraham) only permit him to exist on condition of his making a good marriage. Claudia Branscombe *has nothing.*

Now, if you'll get any generous manager of a theatre to pay for pure comedy, I'll work this little situation out in three acts, and put it on the stage. But I can't afford that expenditure of brain for a mere novel. I must merely narrate results. A game being played between the

Panther and the Baronet, we know where lay the skill. If the Destinies gave the antagonists anything like equal cards, we know whose must be the victory. But the Destinies didn't. They gave the Baronet the ace of trumps. For when a game is played between a man and a woman, the man of necessity holds the ace of trumps—that card invincible being his *sex.* Indeed the moment the game begins, it is lost by the female player. She can't win. She draws the game about once in a millennium.

Claudia lost. Claudia, with all her beauty, all her experience, all her dauntlessness, all her wit, lost the game to this perfumed Assyrian—this miserable melange of Poole and Buckmaster and Lincoln and Bennett and Jouvin and Atkinson and Truefitt, and God knows whom else. *Lost!* to this animal. Oh! if Raphael could have known in time. Raphael was not a hero—something very different, indeed; but at the critical point of this desperate damnable game, he would not have thought twice before killing Sir Arthur Willesden.

Meanwhile, what *was* Raphael doing? He

was not introducing the old Wolf, his uncle, to the more exclusive regions of aristocratic society. The Wolf did not want that sort of thing, and would not have had it at any price. The Wolf had devoted himself to his daughter Isola.

Her arch "Good evening, papa," had been sufficient introduction. The Wolf, mind you, was of gentle blood; and, like our old friend Odysseus, he had seen the world, city and country, palace and hovel, princess and wench; and wide experience had given pliancy to his mind; and he could appreciate and enjoy the beauty, the quaintness, the serpentine flexile movement, the uniqueness of his daughter Isola. So the rough old boy buried himself in her *menage*, and monopolized her. He declined Stephen's offer of quarters with him in Jermyn Street. He brought his weighty oaken casket, and much other luggage, which came later by the Plymouth waggon, to Isola's abode. The little girl was bored, but she did her duty well. She shut her door resolutely to all admirers; she excluded Raphael, whom she held in the deepest reverence as her saviour, and Stephen, whom

(this in strict confidence) she loved; and she did her girlish best to rejoice the heart of this rugged old villain of a father who had just turned up to claim her, and to enrich her. Do her justice, I beg. She did not care overmuch about his gems and gold, diamonds and doubloons, sapphires and opals. She liked the idea of them, of course. What woman does not delight in adornment? The apple with which Satan tempted Eve was a jewelled fruit, I suspect. But what delighted Isola above all things was his love. It was true fatherly love; had there been no other proof, it might have shown his relationship. The old Wolf had been doing cruel and wicked and lustful things all his life. I will not defile this page with any deed of his. And yet he came home to look for his daughter; and somewhere in his flinty old heart there was a spring of love that burst out towards her. And now he would have cut his own rascally old throat if he had thought it would do her any good. It was supreme and infinite happiness to him to sit in front of the fire in that room, where we first saw Isola, while she, strangely charm-

ing, sat lightly on his massive knee, and passed her tiny slender fingers through his mighty matted beard, and lavished upon him a daughter's endearments.

Wisely, he asked her no questions of the past. Had he done so, she would have told him truth. But he did not know how far truth would pain her, so he left her alone. Love taught him delicacy. What will not love teach as instantaneously as lightning? He caught her to his bosom, this stern old wanderer; he treated her with loving tenderness; he tried his utmost to give her happiness. *How* to do this was the problem which he could not solve. It was the only point on which he ventured to question her.

"How can I make you happy, Isola?" he would ask.

"Oh! papa," she would exclaim, "am I not happy enough with you? What more can I want? I'll pull your beard if you tease me."

And her fairy hands, white as snowflakes, would weave themselves into the vast waves

of that noble beard, the growth of realms where razors are not known.

"But you will want to marry, some day, my child," the old Wolf would say. "You are very young, I know, but youth will not last for ever; and I shan't last for ever, either. And why shouldn't I find you a husband you could love?"

"There is but one man I will ever marry, papa," she said, one day; "and I know he will not marry me. So why say any more about it?"

"Tell me who he is," said the Wolf, sternly.

"*Never*, sir; if you talk like that. Why, you don't surely think you're going to frighten a Branscombe!" she exclaimed, springing from her seat, and clapping her hands delightedly.

"Well, I really *should* like to know who he is," said her father, whom her merry antics soothed and fascinated.

"Should you? I suppose, sir, you think you'd frighten *him* into marrying me. But I should not wish for a husband on those terms."

"I won't say a word to him, if you'll only tell me, Isola."

"And I won't tell you, papa. Why, you'd

always, when I happened to be at all out of spirits, be laughing at me for being spoons upon him. No; he doesn't care twopence about this child, and this child is a little too proud to go down on her marrow-bones and say, 'Please, Mr. So-and-So, marry me, and I'll always be a very obedient wife.' If I could do anything that would make him love me, I'd do it, though I died the next minute. I'd put my hand into that fire to save him from trouble. But he doesn't care for me, papa, so I may as well shut up."

Isola moderated her slang somewhat, inasmuch as her father's long absence abroad had rendered him unacquainted with the more recent niceties of "young English."

The old Wolf could not, from his daughter's language, ascertain who was the man whom she loved. But being a sagacious old Wolf, he thought that in process of time he might discover it from her manner to the few persons whom at this time she began to re-admit. He heartily hoped it was her cousin Raphael, for whom, as her deliverer from a miserable life, she

had a strong affection. Isola had been wont to *tener salon* after a pleasant lax fashion of her own; and she resumed the habit for a short time after her father's return; but by-and-by she declared herself tired of it, and cared to see nobody save the Seraph and Stephen. Subtle as she was, Marmaduke Branscombe did not take long to decide that it was Stephen whom his daughter loved.

Stephen, of course, paid no visits to the Panther now. And he was, therefore, glad to spend an hour occasionally in Isola's drawing-room. He greatly delighted in this strange girl. To his poetic, dreamy nature, her romantic circumstances gave her an additional charm. There seemed some destined connexion between her and himself. Her rare and singular beauty, her oddities of costume and language, lent her an attraction.

Isola had given up "scamandering." She spent her evenings quietly at home with her father, except when she declared a dinner at Richmond or Hampton or Greenwich necessary to dispel her dulness. The old Wolf always

took her wherever she wanted to go, and lavished upon her every luxury wealth could procure; but preferred a quiet dinner at home, and any quantity of old Jamaica and negrohead afterwards. He encouraged his nephew and Stephen to drop in unceremoniously, either to dine, or to pass the evening, or both. Stephen came often. Raphael was a much rarer visitor.

One evening the Seraph met his friend about five, and proposed going over to see if Isola would give them some dinner.

"I've got two or three things on my mind, Langton," he said. "I'm in no mood for the Club; I can be as surly as I like in the company of my dear uncle, Marmaduke, who is a surly old beggar himself. And you can amuse the child."

"How about his paying your father's debts?" asked Stephen. "Is that to come off?"

"Oh! yes. The old gentleman's expected in London in about a week. There'll be a great gathering of the clan. I wish it was over. I want to be off."

"Where are you going so suddenly?"

"I've only one reason for not telling you, my dear fellow, which is that if anybody asks you, you can say you don't know."

"Well, I hope I shan't lose you for long. You're my guide, philosopher, and friend. I shall be all at sea without you."

"Faust will be better without Mephistopheles," said the Seraph.

They went to Isola's residence, and found the Wolf smoking, as usual, in an easy chair by the fire. All the patchouli and mousseline and maréchale and frangipanni which his dainty daughter used would not conquer that negrohead. Like Charles Lamb, he thought tobacco "the only manly scent."

"Ah!" he said, in gruff tones of hospitality, "glad to see you both. Isola's dressing for dinner. The young minx always dresses for dinner, though she's only got me to show off upon. However, she'll have you to-day."

"Yes," said the Seraph, "we came here purposely to dine, and have some of that wonderful rum."

"Ha! ha! We'll brew a mighty bowl of

punch. I bought a great china punch-bowl a day or two ago: it holds twelve gallons. That'll be enough for us, I guess."

"Rather," said Raphael.

"Have you given notice to all those confounded lawyers that are pestering Ralph?"

"Yes," answered the Seraph. "I set a solicitor to work a week ago. All the claims will be ready in due time."

"You can't guess how much there is, I suppose?"

"About twenty-five thousand, besides the mortgages."

"And they're forty-five, you told me," said the Wolf. "Seventy thousand, more or less. It's not much."

"Egad, I think it's a good deal," remarked Raphael. "Where the deuce it has all gone puzzles me."

"Well, luckily I don't think it much. I paid more than double into Coutts's yesterday," said the Wolf. "We shall be ready for the rascals. I think, when they meet, I shall kick them all round, if they charge it in their bills."

He laughed ferociously. He evidently regarded a lawyer as something far worse than a brigand or a pirate. He was right, I think.

"I have made a discovery to-day," he said, in a changed tone. "I have set some of my people on the track of a scoundrel I want to find. I think he's found."

"Whom do you mean?" asked his nephew.

"*Pringle*," said the old man, in a low tone.

"The devil! Where is the fellow? What do you mean to do?"

"He's in England. I don't know as yet what I shall do. Hist! here's Isola."

She entered. In her wealth of hair lay a circlet of pearls, and a loose pearl necklace fell with a graceful curve into her bosom. A low dress of light blue, soft and devoid of rustle, was set off with knots of amber ribbon. Her bright eyes brightened more when she saw her friends; she put out one little hand to Raphael, the other to Stephen; she laughed merrily and said—

"Oh! how glad I am! So you are come to dinner."

To dinner they went. Isola's dinners were now of a mixed order. She was a dainty, delicate little bird, and liked to peck at two or three particularly nice things, just as a blackbird pecks at the cherries and peaches, and liked therewith a glass or two of some light fragrant sparkling wine. But the Wolf was a ponderous portentous feeder, a drinker of mighty draughts and strong. Isola eating her sweetbread and sipping her Moselle, while her father devoured sirloin or steak, and drank great draughts of old ale, made up a curious contrast. The Seraph was wont to remark that at this table one could get any sort of dinner.

After dinner Isola went away to her drawing-room, and sang a song or two in rippling merry fashion, for her own delectation. "O pescator dell' onda!" came first; and then some merry, quaint chanson, with a refrain of "Larirette-larira;" and then a romance of Madrid by Alfred de Musset; and then, in sudden change to melancholy—

"But now they are moaning
On ilka green loaming;
The Flowers of the Forest
Are a' wede awa."

She had no marvellous vocal organ, this Isola; she had none of the Panther's passion and power; but she had a sweet voice, and a quick ear for all the innumerable *nuances* of song. From the sad pathos of Jane Elliot of Minto's tearful ballad to the old Frenchman's

"Ca donc, mignonne, vien-t'-en,
c Et m'étend
Ta bouchette coraline"—

the transition for her was easy and natural.

She wiled away an indolent half hour at the piano; then, curling her little form in her habitual fashion in a vast easy-chair, she was soon fast asleep over a novel.

Meanwhile the Wolf and his guests drank port wine. Marmaduke Branscombe had ransacked the cellars of the city wine-merchants for stuff of the right sort; and as he scattered his gold lavishly, he had got what he wanted. A magnum of Château Margaux just sufficed

to cool the port, and then they went to claim coffee of Isola. The little beauty was fast asleep in her chair; and, when she awoke, looked round upon her father and his friends with an expression of drowsy amazement that was very comical.

By-and by Marmaduke Branscombe produced his mighty punch-bowl, and would have brewed punch therein. But Raphael convinced him of the impossibility of doing justice to such a beverage; so a smaller vessel was brought, which, however, would hold quite enough to intoxicate three ordinary gentlemen. The Wolf showed himself a master in the art of preparing the fragrant fascinating beverage. Stephen recollected his clerical friend's punch at the Chapter Coffee House, and thought he was predestined to headache from that especial liquid.

"Ay," growled the Wolf, when Isola had left them "to get mops and brooms by themselves." "Ay, I have found that young Pringle. I can't make up my mind what to do with him."

"Better leave him alone," said the Seraph.

"I'll be hanged if I do. But he can't get

away—he's watched—and there's no hurry. We'll settle with those cursed lawyers first."

"What is Pringle doing?"

"He's turned carrier. Comes twice a week to London with a waggon."

"Are you sure it is the man?"

"Quite sure," said Marmaduke. "He's been traced from the time you thrashed him at Brighton. My people don't make mistakes."

"I suppose we mustn't ask who your people are," said Stephen.

"You may *ask*," he said. "They're people who know their work, and do it. Look here."

He took from his pocket a small silver whistle. The room in which they sat was on the ground-floor, fronting the street. The Wolf opened the shutters, lifted the window, and blew a shrill call upon this whistle.

"We shall have the new police here," said the Seraph.

Scarcely two minutes had elapsed when the window was opened farther from the outside, and a very ruffianly head was intruded. The Wolf made some brief remark in a foreign lan-

guage. The fellow shut the window and went away.

"You see I am well attended to," said Marmaduke.

"I hope you're not engaged in any awful conspiracy to dethrone His Majesty, or rob the Bank of England, or blow up the Houses of Parliament, or set the Thames on fire," said the Seraph.

"No," replied his uncle. "My work is pretty well over. The people whom I employ at present have seen some sharp service, but they have done almost all I want them to do."

"I have three things to do," he resumed. "When they are done I don't care much what happens to me. I have to set Ralph straight; that's very simple work. I have to punish that fellow, Pringle. And I have to see Isola happily settled. When those things are done, I'll just go quietly into a corner, and drink rum and smoke negro-head till I die."

"But why are you in any hurry to see Isola settled?" urged Raphael. "She is very happy with you."

"No, she is not. She is a good little thing,

and makes believe to be happy extremely well; but she would be a deal happier married to a man she loved. And I could make him rich. He might live like a prince, if he liked. I wish you and she fancied one another, Raphael."

"Cousins shouldn't marry," said Stephen, with a laugh. "So they say—but it's a mistake. If you've a good breed, it doesn't want crossing."

"It was a fortunate thing for me, Mr. Langton, that we met that night on the Thicket. Though, no doubt, I should have learnt all about Isola from Raphael, in time. But you and I were bound to meet."

"I am very glad we did," said Stephen.

When Raphael and his friend were walking homewards, arm-in arm, under a frosty crescent moon, the former said—

"He wants you to marry Isola, Langton. Why not? She's young, and exquisitely beautiful, and rich. And—I think she loves you. Anne Page is lost to you; and as for my sister, if she would have you, she is too old. But Claudia will not marry."

Stephen made an inquiring remark to Raphael, almost in a whisper.

"*Never, by heaven!*" said the Seraph.

Now, whether it was to Isola or Claudia Stephen's question referred, must as yet remain a mystery. Or, perchance, it had reference to neither.

"Do you think that uncle of yours will murder Pringle?" asked Stephen.

"Likely enough. He doesn't look the man to stick at anything. It was very curious that you should pick him up; but Destiny has evidently determined that you shall be mixed up with our affairs. From the day your amiable old grandfather brought you over to Kingsleat you have been drawn into the current. I can't congratulate you."

"Well," replied Stephen, "I've got some two thousand a year out of your family; and if you are right in supposing the old gentleman wants me to marry Isola, there's a prodigious fortune to be had without trouble."

"Which you won't take, I suppose."

"You can easily guess a few of the considera-

tions which would cause any man to hesitate."

"Why," said the Seraph, with a laugh, "you don't know where the old boy got his money. I suspect *he* didn't hesitate. However, I don't think my respected father will hesitate either, when it comes to paying his debts and making him Branscombe of Branscombe again."

"That's not all," said Stephen. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Have I! I don't think I was ever out of it. I've had no end of grand passions. And I'm in love now with Baby Morfill—as Isola calls her; —by-the-way, if you make Isola Mrs. Langton, you must cure her of slang."

They had strayed from their homeward path, and had unconsciously reached Waterloo Bridge. Any bridge over the Thames is a pleasant place to lounge on a moonlight night—when the misty radiance falls upon the silent city and shadowy stream. Unluckily, the parapets of Waterloo are ridiculously high. If I remember rightly, a Bœotian baronet wanted those of beautiful Westminster Bridge heightened, for the purpose

of rendering suicide difficult! That's legislating for the minority with a vengeance.

The Seraph and his friend had mounted on one of the stone seats or steps, and were looking over the parapet upon the royal river, smoking thoughtfully.

"There must be a difference, Branscombe," said Stephen at length, "between your love and mine. I loved Anne Page, you know. I love her still. I thought I wanted to have revenge on Humphrey; but now my feeling towards her is such that I would implore you not to tempt her—if I thought my eloquence would move you. But I have never felt what I imagine to be love for anybody else. I had an ambition—which I don't mind confidentially confessing to you—to teach your sister that I am not a mere boy, to pet and play with; and as to little Isola—why, she fascinates and delights me as if she were a fairy—I can hardly think of her as a woman."

"She isn't; she's a Branscombe. There'd be some truth in applying Walpole's or some fellow's saying to us. The human race should be divided into *Men, Women, and Branscombes.*

But how did your laudable ambition get on with the Panther? Did she scratch?"

"I don't think I should tell you."

"All right," said the Seraph. "But, look here. My worshipful uncle, for reasons which he does not assign, is going to settle the business with my father's creditors down at Idlechester. It will be convenient, in some respects. The estates are all thereabout, and a good many of the mortgagees are local people; and Drax, who is our agent, wouldn't like to be long in town. We're going to have a grand affair, I assure you; the whole of the Half Moon Hotel has been engaged for our especial use. So there'll be plenty of room for you, and you must come down and look on. It will be as good as a play."

"I shall be in the way," urged Stephen.

"Not a bit of it. My dear fellow, I should be as dull as a catalogue without you. Besides, I'm going abroad directly afterwards, and mayn't see you again for an age. We shall all be there; my father, my two uncles, Claudia, Winifred, Isola. And all the townspeople, from the Bishop downwards, will go down on their knees to us,

now that we have come into our fortune; and our creditors will be plaguy polite, though they've been hunting us with sheriffs' officers for years. It will be great fun, Langton."

"Well," said Stephen, "I suppose I may as well go down with you. Of course it will amuse me very much; but a stranger seems always in the way when a family party is assembled on business."

"You're *not* a stranger. You belong to us. You have come among us, and can't extricate yourself. And you're safe to marry a Branscombe. By Jove, it will be Winifred, I dare say, as you don't relish either of the others."

Stephen Langton laughed, and suggested turning homeward. The clock of St. Paul's struck two, and a hundred other clocks gave similar evidence of the flight of time. Dr. Young ought to have been there to moralize, in a long night-shirt, as I remember seeing him depicted in my boyhood in the frontispiece to his "Night Thoughts"—a book which, thank heaven, I have never seen since. And, a few seconds after the chronometric clangour had subsided, a sudden

rocket flashed upwards from somewhere near the great Cathedral's sombre dome, leaving a momentary trail of light, and descending in a shower of blue and crimson and golden globes. It was not a meteor: they heard the hissing sound of its ascent.

"That's queer," said the Seraph. "Fireworks in London! Peel's new police must be asleep."

They strolled westward, and parted at Stephen's door, Raphael remarking,

"Then, you'll come. We'll go down together. My father and uncle can take care of the girls."

Stephen Langton gave an hour to reflexion when he was alone. He liked to reflect luxuriously, by his dressing-room fire, in loose costume, with a cigar. He was right, I think. When you throw off the attire which society demands of you, you isolate yourself, render yourself independent, become quite a different being. If we may judge by analogy from the freedom a man feels when he gets rid of coats and waistcoats and other gear, what a wondrous liberty the spirit or soul or whatever you like to call it

—the *Ego*—will experience when it throws off the body with which it was clothed, without being asked whether it liked the pattern, and which is so often a confounded misfit! Besides, when one has to wear that corporeal clothing till it gets shabby, and ragged, and past all patching from the sartorial empirics who write M.D. and M.R.C.S. after their names, how great will be the luxury of undressing!

"I certainly *am* drawn in among these Branscombes very queerly," reflected Stephen. "First, Mr. Page takes a fancy to me, then Claudia; then that perfectly unintelligible Seraph determines that we shall be cronies; then I get intimate with Isola, who certainly *is* a nice child; then I pick up her father at an out-of-the-way inn, where I never intend to go. I'll be hanged if it isn't odd. I wonder if they have any more missing relations for me to discover. I shall be sure to drop upon them, if there are. I'll ask Raphael to-morrow.

"And what the deuce am I to do? I've promised to go down to Idlechester, and I don't at all know how the Panther will look at me

when we meet. And then, there's Isola—I'm almost tempted to make love to that little party. Would Claudia be jealous? Would there be a row? I musn't do anything that would rile Raphael, or he'll be wanting to fight a duel, and I really don't particularly care about being shot.

"'Gad, I'll go to bed."

He carried out that wise resolve, and did not ring for his brandy and soda till noon.

As to the Seraph, he also reflected. He was rather dissatisfied with himself. This little Anne Morfill had, somehow, got a hold upon him. He had subjugated *her*, without much difficulty; but now she had caught hold of him. This was absurd, unphilosophic, contrary to the law of his life. Although he looked forward with much expectation of amusement to the Idlechester gathering, he really did not like the notion of suspending his flirtation with her—a flirtation rendered facile by her intimacy with Claudia. But, bah! this was very absurd. He couldn't take her with him, clearly. 'Twould be hardly the thing to ask Morfill for the loan of his

wife for a week or two. Still, mightn't Morfill be invited to the gathering, by reason of his assumed legal knowledge, and asked to bring his wife, who was, after all, half a Branscombe? Raphael, amused at his own weakness, determined to mention this to his uncle Marmaduke.

So he dropt in upon that gentleman at about eleven. Isola was not yet down; she was dressing, according to her maid's report. The old Wolf, whose early habits adhered to him even in London, had gone out, and had not returned. The Seraph sat down, and waited.

"What were you doing on Waterloo Bridge last night?" asked the Wolf, when he entered, with a grim noiseless laugh, which seemed to be transacted low in his chest.

"How did you know we were there, may I ask?"

"Oh, I get plenty of news brought me. Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Well," replied the Seraph, "as you know we were there, I suppose you know what we saw. Was it *you* who were letting off fireworks?"

"Only a signal. It was odd you should be

there to see it. However, it doesn't matter. What news brings you here so early?"

"No news. Only I have been thinking Morfill and his wife may as well meet us at Idlechester; so I came to suggest it."

Now, the old Wolf, whose half-sister, Algernon Page's wife, had been born after he ran away to sea, had not been much interested by what he heard of this niece of his; except one point, gathered from Isola's laughing gossip, that Raphael was "spoons" upon her. This amused him. He gave the Seraph a knowing look, and said—

"All right, my boy; you don't want your flirtation interrupted, I see. I'll ask them."

Humphrey Morfill promised to come, of course, He foresaw possible business from the connexion. He liked the idea of re-appearing in Idlechester with the Branscombes in the flush of their unexpected and most marvellous prosperity. He thought only of himself; all the rest of the world was subservient to him, the hard-working law student, soon to be a rising barrister, with Parliament and the Attorney General-

ship not far ahead, and the Woolsack in the divine distance. His was the right temperament for a successful lawyer.

"A hard heart and a strong stomach," said Talleyrand, or somebody, will carry you happily through the world. The Irishman says, "A light heart and a thin pair of breeches." Some of those sayings attributed to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord are as full of concentrated pabulum as Périgord pies—and about as wholesome.

Raphael, when he reflected on Marmaduke's acquaintance with his stroll on the bridge, and on his claim to the midnight pyrotechny, thought to himself that a deucedly queer melodramatic uncle had turned up. "And now," he said to himself, "he's going to take us all down to Idlechester, and bring us into the same inn, and invite our friends and enemies to meet us. What if he means to do some deed of horror! A massacre of the innocents—an utter destruction of all the creditors and their attendant lawyers—would have a fine effect. Just the way the Sultan pitched into the Janissaries the

other day. I'm sure I don't mind, if it takes the old Wolf's fancy. It would make the papers readable for at least a week; and, by heaven, that would be an enormous blessing. There's nothing in them now, except the howlings of a lot of unmitigated idiots who want Reform."

Thus reflected the unenlightened Seraph, who thought politics the depth of babyish silliness. But shortly the papers contained a short announcement which surprised a good many people, and interested even him, videlicet:—

"Ralph Branscombe, Esquire, of Branscombe, has arrived at the Clarendon Hotel, from the Continent."

CHAPTER X.

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

IDLECHESTER was not, normally, a dull city. A city with a Bishop of latitudinarian tendencies, matched against a Dean who, besides being the very lowest of Low Churchmen, was a relation of the First Minister, and had married a lady divorced by or from somebody else, could scarcely be very dull: not to mention the fact that the Archdeacon of Riverdale, who was a near relation of that mighty potentate, the Duke of Axminster, Lord Lieutenant of the county, was the highest of High Churchmen. Socio-theologic disputes were not unusual in this sacerdotal vicinage: Bishop Bythesea, an episcopal Gallio, who cared precious little for High and Dry or Low and Slow if only he was left in

peace, often desired translation to some sea in which there was a slighter infusion of hot water.

Apart, however, from polemic amusements, Idlechester assuredly was not a dull city. Its society was pleasant. County and ecclesiastic society blended amicably; your county people can't condescend to an ordinary town, but a cathedral town is a different thing. People who wouldn't have been seen in the Rope Walk of Riverdale gossiped with one another in the booksellers' and drapers' shops of Idlechester High-street. It was quite a fashionable lounge indeed. You might see the Duchess of Axminster, a very pretty girl in those days, of whom the severest criticism I ever heard was that she hadn't pride enough to match the Duke, walking along the not too ample pavement with Mrs. Bythesea or Lady Hinton Powys. And all manner of pleasant ladylike dissipations came off at Idlechester. Croquet and the Social Science Association had not been invented; Jaques of Hatton Garden, Brougham and Vaux (hall), had not entered on their lofty

career as purveyors of feminine amusement. But there were plenty of fixtures at Idlechester, notwithstanding. It was a city in which pretty girls got married with alarming rapidity. It was a city whose picnics, balls, archery meetings, and other pleasant arrangements for flirtation, were a caution.

But Idlechester, never dull, grew wonderfully excited in expectation of the coming of the Branscombes. Marmaduke Branscombe, whom his daughter Isola rightly described as "a wary old card," took all possible precautions to prevent the general public from knowing anything about the family assembly. But he had to engage the Half Moon Hotel; and what old Winslow knew was hardly likely to be a secret from his daughter, and I fear Jack Winslow gossipped a little. Queer rumours got into circulation. Something was to happen at a certain time in June: but *what*, nobody seemed able to conjecture. All Idlechester, however, looked forward to the date announced, and one or two people thought it worth while to make inquiry.

For example, Mrs. Bythesea thought it worth

while to ask her friend, Miss Branscombe, with whom she had not corresponded for an age, what the rumour meant. And she got an answer of this sort—

"Clarges-street, Piccadilly.

"DEAR CIS,—Yes, I'm coming down. So is papa. So are several others of our bad lot. I shall call and request your episcopal blessing.

"Your untamed

CLAUDIA."

Which note the Bishop's wife, being not precisely the same individual who once romped in a Kingsleat bedroom, thought rather impertinent. However, she deemed it advisable not to quarrel with a lady of fashion like Miss Branscombe, especially as it appeared that her father was likely to resume his ancient position. And in this the Bishop entirely agreed with her, being a thorough man of the world, and far readier to believe in the Premier than in St. Paul.

So Claudia received a marvellously affectionate epistle from her old acquaintance, and laughed over it with provoking perspicacity.

And Devil Branscombe himself, when it was noised abroad that he was indeed in London, and was coming down to Idlechester, got a note of inquiry from his true liegeman, his loyal follower, Stephen Langton the tanner. The old boy was not dead yet. Writing letters had never been a favourite business with him, but he was resolved to know what this report meant. So he indited a laborious epistle to Ralph Branscombe, at the Clarendon Hotel, where the *Idlechester Guardian*, copying the London papers, had informed him the Squire was staying; and the old gentleman handed it over with a heap of others to his son, and said,

"Write to old Langton, Raphael. He's been a true friend."

So the Seraph, whom it rather amused to write letters, sat down to delight the old tanner with the following:—

"DEAR MR. LANGTON,

"What you have heard is quite true. My father is coming down to Idlechester on the seventh, to settle a few debts

that have been outstanding rather too long, and Claudia and I shall be with him. My intimate friend, Mr. Stephen Langton, your grandson and namesake, has promised to come down with me, although he can scarcely get away from London society. We shall stay at the Half Moon Hotel, where we shall hope frequently to see you. Convey our regards to your amiable family—especially to Miss Harriet Langton, whom I have often heard my friend Stephen mention in terms of the warmest affection.

"Yours, &c.,

"RAPHAEL BRANSCOMBE."

"There," said the Seraph to himself, after rapidly writing this epistle, "I fancy Langton's relations will be astonished, rather. I wonder what that old catamaran of a maiden aunt of his will say to my piece of flattery."

The Seraph did not know much of the nature of maiden aunts. He had never encountered the animal. Old Langton received the letter in the morning, and brought it into the breakfast-room, and read it aloud for the edification of his as-

sembled progeny. When he had finished he said,

"The Squire don't forget old friends, you see. And how well Steve seems to be getting on!"

And Aunt Harriet exclaimed—

"The dear boy! I was sure he had never forgotten me. How glad I shall be to see him again. He was always a good boy."

Whereat one or two of his cousins, there present, grinned to excess, mindful of Aunt Harriet's past objurgations. The said cousins, sons of Uncle Charles and Uncle Tom, naturally envied Stephen: sheer luck had made him a gentleman: *they* were destined to work at a rather unpleasant trade to the end of their days. And, when they got together, these young louts of Langtons, they talked over some possible way of revenging themselves upon him for his unmerited good-fortune. They had no rapidity of imagination, and could not readily hit on a scheme of vengeance. But there was a consensus of opinion that something ought to be done to make him ridiculous. If a man unexpectedly rises in the world, his own relations are naturally ag-

grieved. They cannot see anything in *him* which justifies his elevation above *them*. Of course, the less refined the original breed, the more certain is this feeling to arise. It was very strong in the breasts of the three or four male cousins whom Stephen Langton had at Idlechester. They would have liked to duck him in a peculiarly unsavoury tan-pit. Their ultimate decision was, to await an opportunity to do something.

Far different were the feelings of old Stephen Langton, the tanner. He was not a good old man, this—as we already know. But he was loyal to the Squire. And the idea that the Squire should have his own again filled him with as much delight as the most loyal of cavaliers experienced when Charles II. came from over the water. And, when he found the Squire's son writing of *his* grandson as his intimate friend, it rejoiced his heart. His delight took a form which would have given no special satisfaction to Stephen—but still less to Stephen's uncles and cousins.

"By jingo," said the old tanner, "he's my eldest son's eldest son—and he's my namesake

—and he's the only fellow in the lot with any spunk in him. *I'll leave him the business.*"

And he went off to the great Mr. Drax, and insisted on his drawing a will to this effect, and keeping it a secret. The lawyer vainly reminded his client that Stephen was already a man of property, aud would not carry on the business if he had it.

"Never you mind," said the old man. "*He's my heir.* You draw up the will so that he shall have every penny and every stick that belongs to me when I die. If little Polly had lived, 'twould have been different. But Steve shall have it all, now—and don't you tell a creature, Mr. Drax."

As to Aunt Harriet, whom, without offending many of my readers, I may now venture to call an elderly lady, she was delighted with Stephen's kind mention of her, as averred in Raphael Branscombe's letter. She went about boasting of it. She persuaded herself that she had been very kind to him. It is to be regretted that, in time, we forget our own misdeeds. The Past fades; the Present glares upon us with all its sunlight.

Aunt Harriet began to believe that her nephew had really been a great pet of hers, and that he ought naturally to be enthusiastic in his gratitude. So she looked forward to his arrival in this enthusiastically grateful state.

By-and-by the great day came. The Event was ripe. Post-chaises, in the early morning, brought to the Half Moon Hotel the august travellers, who had travelled through the night. A vague tremour of excitement passed through the city of Idlechester. Post-chaises brought the travellers from town. Humphrey and his wife in one; the old Wolf and his daughter in another; Devil Branscombe and the Panther in the third. The Seraph and Stephen were, however, of a different taste. They preferred His Majesty's mail; they liked the changeable company, the possible adventure, the gay open-air travel. But adventure, though possible, is not always obtainable; and I think it will be admitted that our two friends had recently had their share.

The Half Moon had a large room in its very centre, with a corridor running round it, in

which balls and concerts were wont to be given. Marmaduke Branscombe had this turned into a kind of public room, whither might come all who sought audience of his brother and Mr. Drax. With that ferocious fancy for food which pertained to him, he made even such people as bill-discounters and mortgagees eat and drink, so that this room was a perpetual refectory. Of course, any real business was carried on with greater privacy; but, for the nine or ten days in which settlement was being made, this great room was from morning to night thronged with visitors, and the old Wolf thoroughly enjoyed the humour of the scene. As for the ladies, they had a gay time of it, driving about the neighbourhood, and seeing all that was to be seen. One delicious moonlight evening they went together to those old enchanted gardens—no longer kept in the Elysian beauty in which Algernon Page had loved to keep them, but still full of marvellous bloom, and breathing a magical fragrance. The Seraph was with them and Stephen. Mr. Morfill was having an interesting legal after-

dinner conversation with Mr. Drax, whom, as a giver of briefs, he desired to impress favourably. For Stephen those gardens were haunted; there he had wandered hand in hand with his sweet Anne Page in their poetic childhood; there Claudia Branscombe had pressed upon his lips a kiss. Mrs. Morfill did not experience any feelings of remorse or even regret as she tripped along the familiar paths. One feeling only could occupy her at a time, and she was filled to the brim by that wild and wicked passion which Raphael had awakened in her heart. Not so with Claudia. That first evening amid those emerald lawns and delicious flower-plots and long lustrous avenues and sleeping lakelets was all agony to her. Her heart throbbed with passionate fierceness. Well she remembered the days long ago, when she had humbled herself to gain Stephen's love. Now he had contemptuously rejected her. Yet she was obliged to walk with decorous placidity with him and the rest of their friends. Well for Stephen Langton, perhaps, that she did not, like many a Spanish maiden, carry a keen stiletto sheathed

in her corset. As for Isola and the Seraph, the situation to them was picturesque comedy.

"You have been here before," said Raphael to Stephen, as they stood beneath the pendent acacias, still the favourite resort of the ruby-eyed ringdoves.

"Ages ago," he replied.

"Ay, but since we came down?"

"Oh, yes. I came here to smoke a cigar and revive old memories a couple of nights ago."

"Quite romantic," laughed Isola; and she sang—

"Blossom of hawthorn whitens in May:
Never an end to true love's sway.
Blossom of hawthorn fades in June:
I shall be tired of my true love soon.
Blossom of hawthorn's gone in July:
Darling—I must be off—good-bye!"

Merrily rang through the garden alleys Isola's exquisite girlish voice. Not so silvery the plash of the fountains, or so musical the coo of the doves. Stephen said—

"I hope I am not quite so bad as that. When I love once, I love always."

"A mistake," said the Panther. "If you hate once, hate always; that's wise. But don't try to believe love permanent, or you'll be alone in the world, Mr. Langton; nobody else does it. You'll be isolated."

"Isolate him with Isola," said the Seraph, laughingly, "and he won't mind. But don't be bitter, Claudia, or people will say you're an old maid."

"As I am. Don't you think the *rôle* suits me! I wish you'd marry, Raphael, and give me some babies to nurse. Marry Isola."

"Talking of marriage," said the Seraph, "I have been recommending Winifred to Langton, but he doesn't seem inclined to take good advice. He says she's too religious. I feel certain that he is destined to marry a Branscombe."

"Why?" asked Isola.

"Because he has become so queerly associated with us. From first to last we have borrowed him from the people over the way. You did not know, perhaps, Isola, that he was born just across the street. Have you called on your worthy relations yet, Langton?"

"No, faith. I have seen my grandfather at the Half Moon, you know."

"Irreverent boy, not to pay your respects to that charming old aunt of yours. That's a pattern of maiden aunts, if you like, Claudia. You should study her, if you want perfection in the part."

"Let us all go there in force to-morrow morning," said the Panther, "and see the tanyard. I never saw a tanyard It must be very amusing. What do you say, Mr. Langton?"

"I shall be delighted," said Stephen. "There is something picturesque about a tanyard, and I like the smell. As to the aunt—the less said of her the better, I think."

Hence was it that this moonlight stroll in Mr. Page's gardens was followed by a morning visit to Mr. Langton's tanyard. Winifred accompanied her three cousins; the Seraph and Stephen were their cavaliers. It was very amusing to see Winifred and Isola together. The Panther to some extent understood her new-found cousin, but the Saint was utterly perplexed by the charming little vagrant's oddity

and slang. Winifred was by this time more thoroughly than ever the deaconess-nun ; Father Remigius confessed her still, but she had relinquished the faint half-unconscious hope she had entertained of making him renounce his vow of celibacy ; she had settled down contentedly to that semi-sacerdotal old-maidenism which is so common among English ladies. Yet Winifred Branscombe was not thirty, by a year or two, and was still very beautiful.

They were a gay company in that old house of the Langtons. The gray old tanner received them with delight, and Aunt Harriet shone upon them so smilingly that they all declared her charming. They were shown that famous best bed-room in which the head of the Branscombes lay perdu, awaiting his daughter's visit, and baffling the bailiffs. They were shown the very tanpit in which the unlucky attorney had passed the night. Stephen, acting as cicerone, doubted whether he was awake or asleep, and fancied that all that had occurred since his boyhood was a dream.

The gathering of the Branscombes at Idle-

chester was remembered in that city for many a day. Marmaduke, resolute to do nothing by halves, set Mr. Drax to reorganize the estates, and to rebuild the old Manor-house, which had been uninhabitable for at least a quarter of a century. Everybody was paid in full, principal and interest; and everybody in gold. The old Wolf had laid in an enormous stock of sovereigns; he would have nothing to do with notes or cheques. The Idlechester bank did a good stroke of business at this period.

Of course the restoration of the Branscombes excited the county and city magnates. The Duke of Axminster drove over to visit the head of the house; minor potentates of all sorts did him honour. The Duke asked him to come to Beau Sejour while the Manor-house was rebuilding; the Bishop and Mrs. Bythesea wanted him to bring the Panther and stay at the Palace; half a dozen equally hospitable offers were pressed upon the man who a week or two before dared not have walked down High-street.

The Mayor and Corporation of Idlechester pre-

sented him an address: the Mayor and Corporation of Kingsleat followed suit.

Meanwhile the time was fruitful of events. One afternoon, Nathaniel Narrowsmith, bill discounter, of Kingsleat, had received payment of the small amount due to him—two thousand five hundred pounds, all in gold. He had come in too late for the Idlechester bank.

"I'd just as soon have your cheque, Mr. Branscombe," he said.

"We don't give cheques," growled the Wolf. "Sorry you don't like gold."

"It's so much trouble to take home."

"Leave it till to-morrow," suggested Ralph Branscombe. "You can pay it into the bank first thing. We'll give you entertainment if you like to stay, though you have charged sixty per cent."

But the old rascal didn't like keeping his money at an inn; and wanted to get home, because the idea of his servants wasting food and drink in his absence, made him utterly miserable; so, groaning over the expense, he hired a post-chaise, and transferred thereto himself and

his five canvas bags of five hundred pounds each.

Poor Nat Narrowsmith! Half way to Kingsleat the post-chaise was stopped by a couple of men on horseback, and he and the postilion were gagged and tied to a couple of trees, and the bags disappeared. It caused an immense sensation. Ralph Branscombe liberally offered a reward of a hundred pounds for the conviction of the thieves. But nothing was ever heard of them; and the nnhappy bill discounter lost his money, and was never the same man afterwards.

Another event of about the same date was an assault made upon our friend Stephen by three of his disaffected cousins. They had noted his habit of taking a solitary stroll late at night in the gardens he had loved in his boyhood. Their idea was to revenge themselves upon him for his good fortune by giving him a ducking in one of the ponds which ornamented those gardens. Now it chanced, on the evening fixed by these cowardly louts for their idiotic enterprise, that the Seraph had accompanied his friend. But

they resolved to carry out their scheme ; Raphael was not apparently the sort of person to show fight ; Stephen they believed to be a milk-sop ; and they were three burly thick-set fellows of the true Langton stamp. So they made a sudden rush at the two friends in a solitary part of the gardens, and separated Stephen from his companion, and hauled him towards a piece of water. They found they had made a slight mistake. Stephen was stronger and more determined than they fancied. But Raphael, when he saw their game, sprang after them—struck one fellow a blinding blow across the eyes with a small cane which he carried—seized a second by the wrist, giving it so sharp a twist that he yelled with pain—and exclaimed to Stephen,

"I leave the other to you."

The words were scarcely uttered when that other splashed into the water in which he had designed a ducking for his cousin. It may be supposed that the trio sneaked away in lamentable plight.

"What fools !" ejaculated the Seraph.

And the next morning there was much mirth

in connexion with the adventure which, somehow or other, became generally known. It made the old tanner more resolute to adhere to that astonishing will of his.

However, this gathering of the Branscombe clan came to an end at last, after various incidents of fun, flirtation, assault, and highway robbery. The last day arrived, and there were assembled at supper the whole family, with Morfill, and old Langton, and his grandson—no others. They sat together in the cosiest room of the Half Moon—a room such as old-fashioned inns contain, but which are not to be found elsewhere. There was Devil Branscombe, lazily lying back in a huge easy chair; again the recognised chief of this wild race; again furnished with the sinews of war for as fast a life as he might choose to live. But too old for this—too old—Ralph Branscombe began clearly to see that the time had arrived for him to settle down quietly, to consider his wild oats sown, to live like a highly respectable Lord of the Manor of Kingsleat. And he accepted the rather melancholy fact. He had tasted the marrow of life. It would be hard to

mention any gentlemanly wickedness in which Devil Branscombe had not participated to the utmost. His only hope was that his son Raphael would do him credit, and it was a subject on which he had not much fear.

Yet the inexperienced spectator, who had seen the Seraph this evening, would scarce have shared his father's confidence. His boyish beauty—the beauty that had ensnared Æmilia and Fiordilisa—adhered to him. He looked a creature to be petted and played with. You would not for a moment have deemed the Seraph dangerous—have imagined him to be utterly devoid both of conscience and of fear. I don't think he cared much for the changed position of his family. He had always lived a pleasant reckless life, and always meant to do so, whatever might happen; and so, though the eventful current of affairs interested him, he certainly cared less about the change in his circumstances than any other member of the family.

I can scarcely say what Claudia Branscombe felt. Her recent adventure with Stephen Langton had completely disturbed her ordinary

course of thought and feeling. She would have liked to revenge herself on that young gentleman, but saw no way to such an issue. She, of course, enjoyed the idea of plenty of money, and accordingly plenty of fun; but there was no definite hope in her heart, and it was a very vague species of happiness to which she looked forward. Perhaps she thought, now and then, of the boy-baronet.

The Rev. Walter Branscombe was there, cordially rejoicing in the improved prospects of the family, though to him personally they mattered little. He had received his long lost brother, Marmaduke, with true Christian kindness, asking no inconvenient questions. His faith in the Branscombes took precedence of all other faith. As to Winifred, she was rather puzzled. She had some idea that the right thing for her unexpected uncle to do was to build a cathedral, or an abbey, or something. Any nice feminine endowment, of which she could have been Lady Abbess, would have been the very thing. St. Winifred was patron saint of the Branscombes, everybody knew. Why shouldn't she be a second St.

Winifred? Ah *petite*, are you not aware that this is the wicked nineteenth century—in which hypocrisy is permitted, but not sanctity—in which you can only play at being a saint.

As to Isola, who chanced to be sitting between Winifred and Mrs. Morfill, I don't think she wanted to be a saint. I know what she did want. I know she longed, pined, panted for it. I know, too, that she thought herself wholly unworthy of it. Poor Isola! so gay, so bewitching, so exquisitely formed to conquer the world—yet so humble. She would have given herself to be the slave of the man she loved.

As to our heroine, she was in a dream all this time, and it was a dream of Raphael. To be in his presence sufficed for Anne Morfill. Her keen-sighted husband must, I think, have perceived this, had he not possessed that fatal fatuity of the quick but shallow intellect which estimates itself far higher than any other entity. Humphrey Morfill was, I believe, quite as able a man as Lord Westbury, and he looked down upon Stephen Langton and Raphael Branscombe, just as Lord Westbury would probably have

looked down upon, say, Count d'Orsay and Lord Byron, if he had known them. He had an impracticable incapacity for understanding faculties different from his own.

The old Wolf felt, I believe, very much like the creator of a mighty drama. To have restored his brother and recovered his daughter, surely these were mighty deeds. All was his doing. He was both dramatist and protagonist. And he had an unselfish delight in what he had accomplished, and, beyond that, thorough gratitude to Stephen Langton, from whom he had received aid so valuable; and one especial longing he had, to which he gave no utterance—that Stephen would marry Isola.

As to the two Langtons, grandfather and grandson, who completed the party on that last evening at the Half Moon, their feelings were naturally peculiar. The old tanner was rather mystified. He was delighted at the Squire's restoration, and puzzled at the sort of share which his grandson seemed to have in it. As to Stephen the younger, to him it seemed a vision. I suspect he felt very much as De Quincy was

wont to feel when, in magnificent panorama, there swept before him in his opium-dreams some tale of Troy divine, some tragic story of Thebes or Argos. Stephen Langton's principal perplexity was, what would happen when he woke.

The last hours of this last night waned rapidly. Several were going away at an early hour—the Rector and his daughter home to Kingsleat, Ralph Branscombe and Claudia and Mr. and Mrs. Morfill to London.

"Raphael," said the Wolf to the Seraph, "will you take charge of Isola to town to-morrow?"

"With pleasure. But are you not coming?"

"No; I have other business of considerable importance. You won't see me for a week perhaps."

"Well, Isola wont be afraid to trust herself with me, I know. Will you, *cugina mia?*"

She gave a merry trustful smile as answer.

"By-the-way," said the Seraph, "Stephen and I meant going together. I hope you're not afraid of *him*, Isola."

Isola blushed.

For some ridiculous reason, Devil Branscombe and Morfill had decided to start at an early hour in the morning. Not so Raphael. When the proposition was made to him, he replied,

"No, thank you. I never waste the hours of night, except for some good reason. Sleep comfortably in your bed a third of your day, and you may do pretty much what you like the other two-thirds."

So, when the sun was just rising the Seraph and his friend had the pleasure of seeing off a couple of post-chaises, containing four members of the party. To their surprise, when these had started, there came up to the gateway a dog-cart, with an unknown personage sitting in it, and Marmaduke Branscombe, oak chest in hand as usual, got into it and took the reins.

"Good-bye, my boys," he said cheerily. "Take care of Isola."

So Raphael and Stephen returned to their sitting-room, where wisely a fire had been kept up, by which Isola at this time was sitting, half asleep. And the Seraph sent that young lady

to bed, authoritatively, and, having done so, he said,

"Look here, Langton, we'll go by the mail. It's a deuced deal pleasanter than posting."

"Most certainly. By-the-way, where is the Wolf gone? and who is his friend?"

"I suppose his friend is one of those agreeable banditti who let off sky-rockets when you and I are lounging on Waterloo Bridge. *Where* the old pirate is gone I don't know; but I can guess what he's gone to do."

"What?" asked Stephen.

"*Pringle*," replied the Seraph, with emphatic laconism.

"By Jove, I hope he won't murder that bucolic idiot. Can't we prevent anything tragical?"

"I don't quite see how. We don't know where he's gone, and we haven't an idea where Pringle is. It is all mere conjecture, of the emptiest kind. No, we must leave them both to their fate."

"It would be rather awkward," said Stephen, drily, "if your highly respected uncle were to

be hanged, which doesn't seem entirely impossible."

"Egad, I'll take the risk," said the Seraph. "The old beggar deserves hanging, no doubt. But he looks as if he was tolerably capable of taking care of himself."

Raphael and Stephen, with that elfin beauty Isola under their convoy, did not start for London till the following day. And before leaving the Half Moon Isola delighted the heart of Jack Winslow by a magnificent present of jewelry in remembrance of her loyal service to Devil Branscombe in days gone by. And Jack, by way of showing her appreciation of the generous gift, drove the mail the first stage towards London, the Seraph on the box by her side, chaffing her on her style of holding the ribbons.

Thus ended the famous gathering of the Branscombes at Idlechester.

CHAPTER XI.

PRINGLE.

JONAS PRINGLE was a flourishing specimen of the British farmer in his youth. He was of the middle height, stout and florid, and fond of beer. He rode after the hounds, and kept greyhounds for the coursing meetings. He could drink any quantity of the diabolical stuff which the bucolic lout calls beer. He had excessive pleasure in smoking the worst possible tobacco in a clay pipe. He went to church regularly. He read, with some difficulty, the news as supplied weekly by that famous periodical, the *Reading Mercury*. Though Reading is the chief town of the county in which Jonas Pringle dwelt, reading is far from being the chief accomplishment of its farmers.

Jonas Pringle's entanglement with that wicked little Isola was a surprise to himself. He never could distinctly remember how it began. He never could recollect how it was suggested that he should pretend to make love to teacher instead of pupil. Somehow or other the gay girl had bewitched the young farmer; and in her presence he possessed a capacity which never approached him elsewhere. These things are not impossible. The electric effect of intellect has never been properly estimated. There is an undeveloped science in that direction. I may perhaps elucidate it when I have made a snug little fortune by novel writing. But it is certain—to dwell only on the roughest elements of the subject—that a great general may make an army of cowards brave, that a great preacher may make a congregation of scoundrels religious, and that a loving woman may inform a mere clod with much of her own exquisite *esprit.*

Such was the temporary effect on Jonas Pringle of our Isola's influence. He could not understand his own marvellous cleverness. Indeed, stupidity was a kind of heirloom of the

Pringle family, whereof they were rather proud than otherwise; so when this Jonas found himself making love to one girl while he admired another, he could scarcely believe in his own identity. You must associate with small farmers to learn how stupid they are (out of their own vocation, of course), and how proud of their stupidity. I am not inclined to blame them. Keener intelligence would probably result in discontent—in a desire to be something entirely different from what they are.

Isola made Jonas Pringle for the time clever enough to conduct an intrigue to successful issue. We know already a good deal of what happened. In process of time they reached Brighton, and took lodgings at Hove, and there the girl of fourteen proved mistress of the situation. She was already contemptuously weary of the blatant and florid young agriculturist. She took the lead in everything. She informed the old lady whose lodgings they engaged that they were brother and sister. She would not permit him even to kiss her. Poor young man, infatuated though he was, I verily think he

would gladly have escaped from her. She tyrannized over him. He heartily wished, more than once, that he had run away with the fat governess with the shoulders.

And worse things yet were in store for him. Isola was wont to make him walk with her regularly every afternoon. Gladly would Jonas Pringle have been back smoking a pipe of horribly bad tobacco with his cronies in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead; but he was Isola's slave, and dared not say her nay. And then came the terrible day when, summoned by Isola, the Seraph fell upon him on the Chain Pier, like an avenging angel indeed. The young farmer was not a coward. He could hold his own well among his lumbering equals. But when our friend Raphael came down upon him with such appalling suddenness, his presence of mind departed. He was "knocked out of time."

So the Seraph took Isola to his hotel—Pegg's, I think—Harry Pegg was a little boy at the time —and poor Jonas Pringle went miserably home to his lodgings at Hove. And at those lodgings, over which, even for this dull fellow, Isola had

shed a kind of poetic halo, he had received from Raphael a contemptuous message to the effect that he would fight him if he wished.

Pringle by no means liked the idea. He was not a coward, I have said: but both courage and cowardice have different phases: and the young farmer had no idea of setting himself up to be shot at, twelve paces off. You see he was not a gentleman. The code of honour among *gentlemen* is such that they learn to supersede physical cowardice by moral courage. At least, it was so: the foolish way in which the law has been rendered more stringent against duelling has done infinite harm: and men in the army, who are in a difficulty whether they fight or whether they decline to fight, are singularly ill-used. There are some injuries which nothing save the duel can redress; and I firmly believe that there will be a reaction from the milksop legislation of recent days. We are already beginning to flog again; I pray God we may soon begin to fight again.

Well, Pringle did not want to be shot at, and so slinked off. Raphael made no inquiry about

him. He was profoundly disappointed in Isola. He had imagined a career for this wild waif, this baby Bohemian. She had run away with a stupid young farmer. It was sadly disappointing. However, he was the man to make the best of a bad bargain; so he found her a home in London, where we have already had the pleasure of meeting her.

Pringle returned to his own neighbourhood. But he found it impossible to live there. His old friends looked askance at him. His was an iniquity of a different kind from any they were accustomed to. They would sell you pork the product of choleraic pigs, or mutton which resulted from the slaughter of very invalid sheep: but the abstraction of a little girl from a boarding-school was a form of rascality to which the worthy farmers were unaccustomed. Such is life. There are men who would deem the sale of diseased pork for food a crime that deserved hanging, but who would think it very correct to run away with a pretty girl. The farmers, Pringle's friends, thought quite otherwise. They made the poor fellow's life miserable, when he

returned. So he got somebody to take his farm, and turned his stock into money, and, hearing of a carrier's business to be sold on the Great North Road, purchased it, and settled down to its necessary work.

The old Wolf, Marmaduke Branscombe, had traced him. Pringle's waggons started for London twice a week, from a town about forty miles down the road. In the outskirts of this town there was an old-fashioned inn, the Bel and Dragon, with a court-yard surrounded by galleries. From this inn the waggons had been wont to start, and Jonas Pringle had taken it with the carrying business. Here, late one night, some twenty-four hours after his departure from Idlechester, Marmaduke Branscombe pulled up in his dog-cart, along with a very villanous-looking ruffian who officiated as his groom and valet. We saw them depart from the cathedral city.

Jonas Pringle came out to welcome the visitors, who had driven under the gateway into the yard. There was a fine ruddy flush of brandy and water in his broad face, as he stood in the

line of light which crossed the courtyard from the bright bar-parlour. The young fellow had married; married the daughter of the man from whom he had purchased the business, a fine buxom wench, who kept him in capital order, and certainly suited him a world better than Isola would have done. Fancy Isola mated to this coarse crass carrier and innkeeper!

Marmaduke Branscombe and his henchman descended.

"Look to the mare," said the old Wolf gruffly to his follower. "I want to sleep here to-night," he said further, to Pringle; and then stalked into the bar, where a few of Pringle's cronies sat smoking and drinking, while Mrs. Pringle served them in buxom buoyant fashion. He sat down without hesitation in an arm-chair by the fire-side which chanced to be unoccupied; and then, opening his marvellous chest, produced a bottle of rum and a lemon, and called for hot water. The assembled company stared at him, open-mouthed and silent. He was worthy of amazement, that grim old Wolf, lying

back in his chair, and drinking rum of fragrance and flavour miraculous.

By-and-by Pringle came in, and the Wolf's follower, a grimmer-looking fellow than even the Wolf himself, and the company began to resume its previous loquacity. They discussed the price of wheat and of pigs; they talked of a hundred things dear to the bucolic heart. They became very gay indeed when Marmaduke, fixing his eyes upon a punchbowl high upon an upper shelf, proposed a bowl of punch. And not only did he propose it, but he also made it —an artistic bowl, a full and fragrant, strong and steaming bowl—a bowl such as these rustics had never conceived. Very gay they got over it. Stout, red-faced Mrs. Pringle was induced to sip a glass or two, and seemed to like it.

"By the way," said Marmaduke, suddenly, "didn't you use to live down Maidenhead way, Pringle?"

The landlord of the Bel and Dragon did his best to turn pale.

"I know something of those parts," he answered.

"You didn't get married down there, I guess," said the Wolf. "The 'missus' is too fine a woman for Berkshire."

Mrs. Pringle accepted the compliment, you could see. Her husband murmured something unintelligible.

"I asked the question," said the Wolf,—"your health, Mrs. Pringle—I asked the question because somebody was telling me the other day of a young man of the name of Pringle running away with a girl from boarding-school. Some relation of yours, perhaps?"

The red-faced young landlord began to show unquestionable pallor. The old Wolf chuckled inwardly, and gulped a glass of punch. But Pringle's wife interposed—a *dea ex machina*—pert and decisive.

"He's got no relations that would do such things. And *I* don't look much like a boarding-school miss, do I? No, no, you've come to the wrong shop, master."

"It was a curious story I heard," said Marmaduke, meditatively, puffing away at his negro-head. "The young lady was taken away to

Brighton, I think; and some friend of hers followed her there. But of course it doesn't interest you: only, being the same name, I thought of it to-night when I came in."

The old Wolf looked peculiarly grim and savage. Young Pringle, although, as I have said, not a coward in ordinary circumstances, was utterly unprepared for such an attack as this. His boon companions, as well as his wife, could see that in some mysterious way it affected him. Marmaduke smoked and drank, as if to smoke and drink were life's only business; and his villanous-looking associate imitated him; but a curious chill fell upon the rest of the company, which no quantity of rum punch seemed able to dispel. By-and-by they dropt off, one after the other, and there was no one left save Marmaduke and his henchman, and Mr. and Mrs. Pringle.

"You can go to bed, Gregory," growled the old Wolf. "Mind and be early to-morrow."

The fellow took a final gulp of punch, and Mrs. Pringle showed him to his room.

"Send your wife to bed, Pringle," said Mar-

maduke, in that lady's absence, to the luckless landlord. "I want to talk to you."

Pringle began a hesitating explanation, but the Wolf stopped him at once with—

"Do as I tell you."

He dared not disobey. He got rid of his spouse, how I know not—and sat down opposite his grim guest in a strange state of trepidation. Marmaduke took very little notice of him for a long time, but went on smoking and drinking without cessation.

At last he said—

"Pringle, is your wife safe in her own room? Isn't she listening at some keyhole? I know what women are. Go quietly and see."

Pringle was stupefied into obedience to this terrible stranger. He crept up the stairs towards his own room. The door stood ajar, as was usual when Mrs. Pringle went first to bed; a rushlight burnt upon the table; and cautiously putting his head into the room, he saw a ruddy face upon the pillow, and heard his stout spouse snore the snore of the virtuous.

So he descended again—slowly, I must admit,

for he had no special desire to face his strange guest. However, he came back and resumed his chair, and sat awaiting what might happen.

"Safe, is she?" said Marmaduke.

"Fast asleep."

"Good. Drink some more punch. This is better tobacco than yours. Help yourself."

Poor Pringle obeyed orders.

"You were the man," said Marmaduke Branscombe, at last, with diabolical deliberation—"you were the man who took a young lady away from a school on Maidenhead Thicket. Is it not so?"

"Yes," said Pringle.

"You took her to Brighton?"

"Yes."

You lived with her as your wife?"

No," he answered. "I was willing to marry her," he went on to say, speaking with unusual volubility. "She was above me—I knew it. But she wouldn't have anything to say to me; and she laughed at me till I thought she was bewitched; and then she wrote for the gentleman who put her to school, and——"

"I know. He came down at once, and gave you the horsewhipping you richly deserved, and took her away. I know."

The old Wolf smoked for some time in silence.

"Look here, Pringle," he said at last. "I have reason to think you are telling me the truth. *Are you?*" he asked, with fierce emphasis, rising from his seat, and glaring at him. "By God, if you lie, I'll find you out and kill you, wherever you are."

"It's all true that I say—I swear it is," said the landlord of the Bel and Dragon, now thoroughly frightened.

I am not astonished at his fright—Marmaduke Branscombe was not at any time nice to look at; but when that scar on his forehead grew innumerable colours with rage, and his great eyes glared fiercely down in the dark caverns where they dwelt, he was an appalling apparition. Pringle was frightened.

"It's all true—I swear it's all true," he said, over and over again; and even while, in his ab-

ject terror, he repeated this formula, rather to the old Wolf's amusement, the door was burst open, and in came Mrs. Pringle.

She had not been asleep. Infallible uxorious instinct had told her there was something wrong. She had heard Pringle creep up the creaking stairs. She had snored the snore of the virtuous with unnatural unction. And now, after vainly attempting to listen, her fear that something would happen to her husband had conquered all other fear, and she burst suddenly into the room. Her round, ruddy face was surrounded by curl-papers and a voluminously-frilled night-cap. She was rather a picture.

Marmaduke Branscombe laughed grimly and quietly as he looked at her.

"Give your wife a chair, Pringle," he said. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, madam?"

But, having ventured into the room, Mrs. Pringle did not know what to do next. She had an instinctive idea that there was something wrong, but could not understand what.

She was naturally rather a dull woman—in this well suited to her husband—and the present position of affairs completely paralysed all her faculties.

"You had better take Mrs. Pringle to bed," said the old Wolf, at last, "and then you can show me where I am to sleep."

Pringle continued obedient. When he returned, Marmaduke said—

"Don't be frightened, my good fellow. I did intend to kill you, but I have altered my mind. You are a fool, I see."

And he went to bed.

And so did Pringle, who received from his wife a strangely incoherent curtain lecture. It had dawned upon her, somehow, that there was another woman involved in the affair. The dullest female intellect brightens a little with this stimulus. That her "master," to use the good country phrase, should ever have run away with a young lady from a boarding-school, was to her incredible. Yet clearly there was something in it. Clearly there was ground for objurgation. So she objurgated—in that weary

whine of the stupid scold which is one of this world's worst inflictions.

Pringle fell asleep.

CHAPTER XII.

A GLASS OF MONTRACHET.

"LET us have a glass of Montrachet together," said Stephen to the Seraph.

They had taken Claudia and Isola to see the exhibition of paintings at Somerset House. Claudia had come unwillingly, and she was getting more and more interested in the Assyrian baronet; but there was talk of trying to induce Sir Thomas to paint the portraits of the ladies, and so art was the fashion of the moment.

They went to Stephen's rooms. Auguste Lancel, his admirable valet, knew exactly what sort of a luncheon to produce for ladies. It was spread with a master's hand, and the Montrachet, to which Stephen had invited them, was

decanted with skill. 'Tis a delicate wine, and needs skill.

Isola, exquisitely lost in a vast velvet chair, held her bell-glass up to the light, and regarded the pale sparkling fluid with the air of a connoisseuse, but the light which glittered in her wondrous eyes was more beautiful than the sparkle of the wine.

"You look wicked, Isola," said the Panther. It would be hard to say precisely how Claudia at this time felt towards Stephen. Before the Idlechester gathering he had kept out of her way; but that event had forced them into proximity, and they could not ignore one another. I think Claudia heartily regretted that she had discovered real strength and manliness in Stephen at the moment of altogether losing him. But she was infatuate. She had dressed up that doll, Sir Arthur Willesden, in all manner of adventitious attributes which did not belong to him—and then she fell down and worshipped him.

'Tis woman's habit this, and has absurd results now and then. Yet it is fortunate for man-

kind—if a woman in love could see the man she loves as he really is, instead of as she imagines him, how long would her love continue?

"When are you off?" said Stephen to the Seraph.

It was tacitly understood that Raphael Branscombe was going somewhere or other very soon; he had dropped remarks to that effect in various directions; but nobody understood where he was going, or when to return.

"It's a question of days, now—hours, I may say. It doesn't quite depend on myself."

"I hope you won't be long away," said Stephen.

"Oh! so do I," exclaimed Isola, with eager emphasis. "I *shall* miss you so, Seraph. Do come back soon."

"Can't promise, child," he said; "I'm rather tired of you all, and want a change."

"Complimentary," said the Panther, listlessly.

"Well, hang it, Claudia," said her brother, "you give us all the impression that you're deucedly tired of *us*. I don't know what's come over you lately. I should say you were in love,

if I thought our family given to that very ridiculous weakness."

"You're not, we know," she said.

"Certainly not," he replied, with a laugh; "I leave that absurdity to your sex, my child. If they like to fall in love with me, 'tis another affair."

"What a coxcomb you are," said the Panther.

"But I fear it is true," interposed Stephen Langton. "All the handsomest and cleverest women do fall in love with him. He has the fatal gift of Paris."

"Paris! what do you mean?" asked Isola. "Is there any secret at Paris to make people fall in love with you? How delightful! I'll make papa take me there directly. Where do you buy it?"

"There, that's your punishment for talking classically before ladies," said the Seraph. "Even Claudia doesn't understand you, though she has read everything."

"I plead guilty," said Stephen. "But you have more than once reminded me of Alexander *Theoeides*, that's the fact. Hadn't you an in-

ter view with Aphrodite on Ida once upon a time?"

"I should not object to anything of the kind. But don't be pedantic, old fellow. Remember that you've a pretty fresh recollection of your Greek, while I've learnt languages enough to extinguish it since I left Eton. Not that I ever knew much. My great accomplishment was playing girls' parts in our Datchet Lane theatricals. We played in a coal warehouse, if I remember, after the Long Chamber performances were given up. It was great fun. You've no idea what a pretty girl I made."

"You'd do that now, I think," said Isola. "Suppose you dress up, and let's go and have a spree somewhere?"

The Panther looked horrified.

"What you used to call scamandering," said the Seraph. "I really should not mind, if I knew where to go to the spree in question; but town is very dreary just now."

"If you were anxious to cause a sensation in that particular line, you should have exhibited at Idlechester," said Claudia. "We might have

introduced you to everybody as another of Uncle Marmaduke's daughters."

Stephen, struck by a sudden idea, rang the bell.

"Auguste," he said, "what's going on to-night?"

The intelligent valet enumerated several public entertainments.

"All slow, you see," said the Seraph. "What's the use of asking?"

"Pardon, monsieur," said Lancel, "I forgot one thing. Signor Cellini has a *bal masqué* to-night."

"Cellini," said Raphael; "is that the fellow who calls himself greater than Vestris? Where is it?"

"At the Clarendon Rooms," said the valet.

"Get tickets," said Stephen. "Four—it will be grand. We can dine with you, Isola, can't we, and then arrange about the dresses?"

"Better get five tickets," she said. "Papa will be sure to want to go."

It was settled with electric rapidity. The Panther was not in her gayest mood, and did

not enter into the fun very readily; but the contagious vivacity of her companions soon aroused her; and she made a sensible suggestion.

"If we are to have dresses fit for anything, it's absurd to leave it so late. It is two o'clock now."

"I thought Raphael could borrow a dress from you, perhaps," said Stephen.

"Look here," said the Seraph, "send your fellow round to Louis; he'll bring a costumier here in no time."

This was done, and very shortly a couple of Hebrews, male and female, had audience of the merry party, who had not yet grown tired of Montrachet. And, after much discussion, they came to a decision. Raphael, the main figure of the quartet, was to be arrayed as a lady of fashion, in the days of the Second Charles. Stephen appeared as a cavalier—a tall edition of the wicked and witty Earl of Rochester. Isola chose to be costumed as a page—a Lilliputian page she looked; a baby servitor.

"You ought to go as a baby in long clothes," laughed Stephen, "and I'd be your nurse."

The Panther was difficult to determine, but at length resolved on a Spanish costume, which suited her dark beauty and lithe figure exquisitely well. And, these important arrangements being finally made, they went to dine at the Wolf's Den, as Raphael irreverently styled the residence of his uncle and Isola.

The grim old Wolf was away. He used occasionally to rush off abruptly, as if on momentous business, just scratching down a brief note to tell his daughter not to expect him. So they sat down to dinner together, these four. At about half-past nine the dresses arrived, and away went the ladies to try their part. They were soon ready. Claudia looked as if she had just stepped out of one of Alfred de Musset's lyrics; she was that very marquise whom the passionate chansonnier loved; the beautiful Andalusian, half demon and half angel, to whom he sang songs in Madrid. He who caught the gleam of her black eyes flashing through her mask, would be fixed and fascinated at once.

As to Isola, in her close-fitting, quaint costume of azure velvet with silver tags; and cap

of the same with crimson feather, hiding her beautiful hair; her silk stockings revealing the daintiest of well-cut legs and ankles—she was a marvel of Lilliput.

"Some one will steal you, Isola," said the Seraph. "Some giantess will put you in her muff and carry you away."

"I'm not afraid," she said with a laugh of silver. "Go and dress, Raphael."

There was great fun in getting him into his feminine garments—much difficulty with bodice and caleçon; but, when the clothing was done, nobody would have detected his real character. He was a very piquant beauty of the days of amorous comedy. There was not a masculine turn about him; Count Antony Hamilton would have recognised him as one of his own portraits.

As to Stephen, he made a very fair imitation of a Caroline cavalier. The dress is sufficiently becoming to a good-looking young fellow. He was to take the two apparent ladies under his escort, Isola following as page. A carriage came for them at eleven.

The Clarendon Rooms have disappeared in the improvements of London. But, beloved readers, if any of you remember the building of the Burlington Arcade, or even the foundation of the University of London, you will surely have both danced and dined in these dear old rascally rooms. You will remember their awkward staircases, their tortuous passages, their convenient anterooms. You will possibly have played whist and vingt-un in their card-rooms. If not, why, so much the better for you.

There was a great crush at the Clarendon to-night. When our friends arrived the fun had already become fast and furious, though the dancing was not as yet precisely Tam O'Shanterish. They were soon in the thick of adventure. A domino in blue was intriguing Stephen; the Seraph found a partner in a burly personage, magnificent in the attire of Henry VIII.; but the Spanish lady, not so easily pleased, held longer aloof, and her page kept close to her.

By-and-by, however, the Panther was accosted by a mask bearing a suspicious resem-

blance to Sir Arthur Willesden. She turned away with him; and Isola, finding herself deserted, naturally looked round for a companion. She soon found one in the shape of a gentleman over six feet high, dressed in excellent imitation of a giantess from Yorkshire, at that time being exhibited in London. A good-humoured giantess apparently, ever on the broad grin. She and Isola went through a quadrille together in grotesque fashion, and then made their way to the supper-room for champagne.

So the party were separated. Stephen, soon tired of his domino in blue, looked round for some of his companions; finding none, he strove to console himself with a domino in amber. This was a gayer creature rather, and he took her down to supper, all the while keeping a look-out for his missing friends. When he had polished off a prodigious quantity of pigeon-pie, with that abnormal appetite which such scenes create, he returned to the ball-room. There, to his satisfaction, he found that the Seraph and Claudia had joined each other; they were walking up and down in the pauses of the

dance with a buoyant vivacity which attracted numberless eyes. Stephen tried vainly to shake off his amber domino, in order to join them. All at once their way was impeded by three or four resolute admirers. They were surrounded. Some of these fellows had evidently found the wine too potent. One stalwart personage, dressed as a Highlander, "shivering in kilt," as Theodore Hook has it, made a sudden attempt to embrace the Seraph, whose masculine character was unsuspected. This was too much. Down he went with a well-planted facer from Raphael's rapid fist; and then the Seraph and his sister slipped into an anteroom, where Stephen at once joined them.

"We shall have a row," he said. "These fellows are half of them drunk. I should be for going home at once, only I can't imagine where Isola is."

"Who the deuce cares for a row!" said the Seraph, contemptuously. "If you and I can't take care of Claudia, it's queer. We'll keep together, and stroll through the rooms, and look for Isola."

This they did, accordingly, and encountered no further molestation. The Highlander had disappeared. The Seraph's prowess had astonished and appalled these ebrious Lotharios. A lady who could hit so straight and hard, though in the costume of a Duchess of Portsmouth, was not with impunity to be annoyed.

But where was the page, the dainty Lilliputian in azure velvet? They could not find her in any of the rooms. It is notoriously difficult to find a friend in an ever-moving crowd—especially when that crowd surges through a labyrinth of rooms and anterooms. The company grew thinner—but no Isola.

At length there seemed a sudden tendency of the whole crowd of revellers in one direction, as if led by a rumour or a noise. Stephen and his companions went with the rest. The current of motley humanity drew them to one of the entrances. The folding doors were open; and as they looked down the wide stone staircase, they saw a strange sight below them.

It was a giantess flying down those steps,

with a pretty page in azure velvet grasped in her mighty embrace.

"Stop her!" shouted Stephen in a thunderous voice, rushing down the stairs with headlong haste, much to the discomfiture of the crowd below.

But before he could reach the hall the scene had changed. There was a struggle—a flash of steel; the giantess lay on the ground, a stream of blood staining her dress; and he had a momentary vision of Isola, full in the glare of gas, which brought out the strange opalescent splendour of her wild eyes and wondrous hair, uncovered and dishevelled. On the instant she was gone; but he picked up the jaunty cap with its crimson plume.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WOLF'S DEN

WASN'T there a sensation that night at the Clarendon Rooms? Didn't the new police muster in force? Weren't the inspectors of that Peelite phalanx preternaturally wise? Didn't sex amusingly betray itself—gallant cavaliers fainting at the sight of blood, while charmingly coquettish ladies did their utmost to revive them? It was truly a curious scene.

Stephen, having picked up Isola's cap, had stepped forward to the entrance, and peered vaguely into the street—of course, without perceiving any trace of the runaway. Returning, he found a group around the giantess—as I have hitherto styled the stupid masquerader who had attempted to carry away Isola—and

ascertained that the only harm the fellow had received was a stab through the fleshiest part of his right arm. Like most men of vast bulk, he was a coward, and had fainted at the sight of his own blood. Who he was, concerns not this history. Uncommonly glad was he to escape from all inquiry, and deposit himself in a hackney coach, and slink out of the way altogether; which, with an impromptu bandage of handkerchiefs around his huge arm, he was permitted to do.

"We may as well be off," said the Seraph. "That little party will find her way back to the Den. Let us go."

The carriage was ready, and away they went towards the quiet street.

"I hope she has come to no harm," said the Panther.

"Harm!" laughed the Seraph. "Harm! Why, Claudia, I shouldn't have much fear of *you* in such a contingency; but Isola—pshaw! We shall find her waiting for us."

"Do you really think so?" asked Stephen.

"Unquestionably. What's to prevent it?

After so thoroughly shutting up her giantess, I wonder you can doubt her ability to take care of herself."

Raphael was right. When they reached the Wolf's Den, they found Isola sitting by a comfortable fire—the morning was growing chilly—with a *pâté des foies gras* before her, and a bottle of Moselle open. She had got rid of her Page's dress, and was comfortably attired in one of the loose wrappers which arrided her. On the white cloth lay a tiny jewelled stiletto, with *blood* upon its blade.

"Well," said the Seraph, shaking down his brocaded petticoats, "this looks deucedly comfortable."

And then he pulled off his long gloves, and made a great gap in the *pâté*, and filled a huge goblet with Moselle. And Isola gaily sang the chorus of the poet-king's old humorous melancholy song:—

"And we'll gang nae mair a-roving,
A-roving in the night;
We'll gang nae mair a-roving,
Let the moon shine e'er so bright."

"Well," said Stephen, as he helped the Panther to some *pâté*, "this is what comes of a glass of Montrachet."

"Now, Isola," said Claudia, "tell us your adventures."

"All right," she said. "I'm all there. The giantess caught a Tartar, rather. You know it struck me before I started that I wasn't very big; and your saying somebody might carry me away made me think of this little article." She took up the tiny dagger, and poised it on her delicate little hand. "I didn't expect to have to use it; but I thought I'd be safe. Well that big woman made up to me, and was great fun. You should have seen us dance. And then we sloped off to have some supper; and she—that is, he—tried to make me drink a lot of wine, but I didn't quite see it; and then we got away into one of the side rooms, and flirted like a thousand of bricks. And the scoundrel wanted to find out who I was, and where I lived, and to make an appointment with me; but I wasn't to be done, as he soon found out. And at last, when he thought the coast was clear, he took me in his

arms, the beggar! and rushed off with me down the staircase as hard as he could pelt. And then at the bottom I managed to get hold of this little affair—he was holding me so tight I couldn't move my arms before—and just give him a sharp prod in the arm. By St. George, he dropped me like a red-hot coal. I never saw such a gonoph. And then, you know, I made tracks, and got here safe as eggs, and pulled off my togs. I made Lotty light a fire, and get supper. Which, golopshious it is," she concluded, helping herself to more *pâté*.

It is amazing what little women can eat and drink.

"You don't seem to care much about the fate of your big friend," said the Seraph.

"I don't quite see why I should. The fellow wasn't particularly polite to me. And I know I didn't hurt him; I just bled him a little with this lancet."

"He looked as if a little bleeding would do him good," said Stephen. "He ought to be greatly obliged to you. If he knew where you live, I should think he'd call and thank you."

"I don't want to see him, I'm sure. I hate big, stupid, cowardly men."

"You should fall in love with Branscombe," said Stephen. "He's neither of the three."

I am sorry to record that this party of four sat chatting in this careless, pointless fashion long after broad daylight had brightened the street. Supper, indeed, merged in breakfast.

Nightwork tells. A shiver crept over the party. Isola called for coffee—which came, with an accompaniment of grilled chicken and other hot comestibles.

"By Jove," said the Seraph, "we've been eating and drinking ever since we accepted your unlucky invitation to lunch, Langton. I suspect a little sleep for a change would do us all good."

Can anybody tell me why people have so strong a disinclination to go to bed after a certain hour is past? It is an enigma to me. Dull as may be one's associates—ay, and one's self also—there is the most unaccountable aversion from the pleasant couch, which, soft and warm and white, awaits one with unreproachful bosom.

Of course, if a man is conscious that his *placens uxor* is implacably waiting for him, it is quite another thing. But to be dog-tired, to be conscious that the yielding bed is ready, and that you have only to lock your door and undress to be in the soft arms of silence and sleep—and yet to waste the hours in amusements of which you are utterly weary, is so strange, so inexplicable a proceeding. I have done it hundreds of times, wondering at myself all the while.

All these four people were aware that the right thing to do was to go to bed, but not one of them moved. Isola excepted, they were still in their masquerade dresses, and a queer picture they made. The Seraph, tough and well-seasoned, showed no symptom of weariness, and looked a very easy-going and careless young lady, indeed.

"I am doubtful," he said, after a pause, "whether I shall go to bed at all. A warm bath will make me as fresh as paint, as Isola would say."

"That's a mistake," said Stephen; "you feel it afterwards. I think we had better move at once. What say you, Miss Branscombe?"

"I am almost too sleepy to move," she said, with a yawn.

At this moment the door opened, and Marmaduke Branscombe entered, followed by the villanous-looking comrade who was with him at Pringle's. The old Wolf looked round upon the company with a glare of amazement and surprise. His daughter clapped her hands merrily, and broke into one of her silvery peals of laughter.

"Why, who's this?" he exclaimed in bewildered interrogation. He recognised Stephen and the Panther after the first glance, but Raphael puzzled him.

The Seraph was equal to the occasion. He rose and saluted the old gentleman with a stately curtsey. "You're just in time to have supper with us, Uncle Marmaduke," he said, in a feminine falsetto.

"Supper!" exclaimed the old Wolf. "Why, Isola, what is it? Who's that lady?"

"That lady is a gentleman," she replied, with a laugh. "You can't have forgotten Mr. Raphael Branscombe."

"Well," he growled, "you do make a stunning girl, Raphael. Have you been out like that? Did anybody make love to you?"

"Yes," he said, "somebody did, and I knocked him down for his politeness. But you should hear your daughter's adventure."

And he reported to the old gentleman the way in which Isola had distinguished herself.

"A good girl," said the Wolf, taking up the stiletto, and passing his thumb along the edge. "A chip of the old block! You know how to take care of yourself, Isola."

"We were just going when you came in," said Langton. "It's rather late, and we want some sleep."

"You can sleep here, all of you, if you like," he said. "I've plenty of beds. I don't like turning people out when they've had a wet night."

"'Gad," said the Seraph, "that's a fine idea. Show us your cribs, uncle. Then we shall be all together to begin another evening. What do you say, Langton?"

"I'm game; but what does Miss Branscombe say?"

The Panther was asleep.

"'Twould be a shame for her to go to Clarges Street when there's a bed nearer."

So Isola guided her cousin to a room. The old Wolf had fitted up a considerable number of very comfortable bed-chambers, several of them with two beds. His hospitality was generous; he had numerous visitors of all sorts; and, after what he called a wet night, he liked to be able to stow away his guests in close proximity to himself, so as to begin a second revel by way of epilogue to the first.

Claudia Branscombe was tired out. I think that fine spirit of hers had lost some of its original nerve. She had failed once or twice, and it had quelled her courage. She had been lamentably foiled by Stephen at Idlechester; and then, recommencing the contest in London, she had been subjugated and rejected. And she was playing anything but a satisfactory game with the Assyrian baronet. These things had cowed her; else, in truth, I do not think the

Panther would have been so thoroughly knocked up by a glass of Montrachet and its consequences. She could scarcely undress; and when, with Isola's help, she was safely in bed, she fell asleep with that delicious suddenness for which it is worth while to undergo any fatigue. She slept in Elysium. As to Isola, the wayward little beauty seemed scarcely tired at all. Having got rid of Claudia, she ran down again to take a final leave of her father, who had lighted his pipe, and was talking to Raphael and Stephen.

"Claudia was asleep before she was in bed," she observed. "And now, I'm off. Good morning to you all. Don't keep those boys up any longer, papa."

"We'll be off too," said the Seraph. "I suppose you can send round for some of our people by-and-by. I don't much care for walking about London in petticoats."

"Nobody would suspect you," said the Wolf. "But come along. I'll show you your room."

He led them to a large room at the oack, in which were two beds. It was fitted up with

every luxury, and a good fire had been lighted. I don't object to a fire in a large bedroom even in warmish weather; and Marmaduke Branscombe was of the same way of thinking.

"By Jove!" said the Seraph, throwing himself into an easy-chair, and stretching his legs, with small regard to his petticoats, "this is pleasant. Where's your cigar-case, Langton? I *must* have a smoke."

"You'll want a *fille de chambre* to undress you," said Langton.

"Egad, yes. I thought I should never get into these blessed things, and now I don't see my way out of them. Thank heaven I'm not a girl!"

"Or you couldn't make love to them, as Montaigne or somebody said."

"The reply to that is Lady Mary's remark—that her only reason for being glad that she was a woman was that she should not be obliged to marry one. But, I say, old fellow, do you think the Wolf has any sinister reason for bringing us all here to sleep? Mayn't he mean to murder us?"

As Raphael said this, he was running a penknife through the troublesome fastenings of his dress, by way of cutting the Gordian knots of feminine attire.

"I don't see any good he could gain by such a proceeding," said Langton. "I suspect he wouldn't hesitate long if there were. He's a nice old boy."

Herewith he was about to spring into bed, when there came a knock at the chamber door. The Seraph, in the relics of a bodice and pyjamas, opened it.

Enter, Marmaduke Branscombe, Esquire, *alias* the Wolf, bearing a bowl of punch!

"One glass more will do you good," said the old Wolf. "This night work is chilly, so I've brewed a wonderful bowl, and you'll sleep after it like Rip van Winkle."

"'Pon my life," said the Seraph, "I think we have imbibed almost enough since we began with that confounded glass of Montrachet of Langton's. However, I don't object. It's only twelve o'clock, I see."

It was noon, actually. Raphael wound up

his watch. Then the trio sat down to this untimely bowl of punch. It was a miraculous concoction.

"Egad," said Stephen Langton; "it is worth while to have lived in the mysterious East, in order to know how to produce such a divine drink as this. It's Helen's nepenthe, by Zeus Kronion."

Stephen usually became classical when ebrious.

"It's not bad stuff," said the Seraph. "I was quite ready to sleep before, but after this, hang me if I shan't go off like a top."

"Well, I thought it would do you both good," said the old Wolf. "The fact is, if you drink sufficiently, your sleep won't hurt you. After this, you'll wake without a headache."

"You must give us the receipt," said Langton; "a good bowl of punch that cures the headache, instead of giving it, would be a blessing."

They finished the punch, strange to say; and Marmaduke Branscombe took friendly leave of them, and in ten minutes they slept.

* * * * * * *

Stephen Langton, the youngest and less seasoned, was the first to awake. Notwithstanding the old Wolf's promise, he awoke with a headache—a splitting headache, that seemed capable of splitting a tough planet into infinitesimal fragments. Moreover, he had an awful insatiable thirst—a thirst for a long deep draught of icy water, such as one might get on some green mountain side. And there fell upon him, like a nightmare, a longing to be beside a wayside well not far from Idlechester, where the crystal water perennially flowed from beneath a pointed arch through a gryphon's mouth into a stone ivy-mantled trough, whereon some cleric of old days had inscribed a Greek legend, signifying —"Let all men praise the Lord." And it was utterly dark, pitch dark, dark as Erebus, so that he could not see even the vaguest form. And his memory wholly failed him as to where he was.

That the place was strange, he felt rather than knew. He was in bed—where? His per-

plexed memory struggled with the past, but could evoke from it nothing definite. He had no recollection of the glass of Montrachet, or the Cellini ball, or the Wolf's punch. Sleep had utterly subjugated him: he could only feel that he had a tremendous headache, an unquenchable thirst, and a nightmare-longing to know where he was.

If you have never been in a position of this kind, reader, let us hope you never may. I have tried it. It is excessively unpleasant.

Stephen Langton got out of bed, and groped about the room. He found a window—drew back the curtains,—but all was dark. He threw open the casement, and the cool night air refreshed him. He made a farther exploration, and touched the chill marble of a washing apparatus. A great gulp from the water-caraffe was ecstasy to his parched throat. Then he poured water into the basin, and immersed his head with a mighty splash.

Wasn't it a luxury!

Having repeated this operation, and rubbed his hair dry, he was groping again towards

where he assumed his bed to be—of course entirely in the wrong direction—when he heard a voice exclaim—

"Who's there?"

"Who the devil are you?" asked Stephen.

"Who am I? Come, that's good! Fellow comes prowling about in *my* room in the middle of the night, and washing at *my* washstand, and then coolly asks me, who I am? Now, look here, my friend, I'm not irascible by nature, but I shall shy a boot at your head if you don't explain your conduct."

And Stephen could hear a hand searching for the threatened missile. But he was still so obfuscated that he did not realize the situation.

"Shy away!" he said; "whoever you are, you'll be rather clever to hit me in the dark. And I'll forgive you, if you'll tell me where I am!"

"Why, confound you! you're in my room, I tell you," exclaimed the Seraph, who verily believed himself at home in Clarges-street. "Who the devil are you, I say?"

By this time Stephen had reached his bed, and comfortably settled himself again.

"Well," he replied, "as you seem so anxious to know, my name's Stephen Langton."

The Seraph, on whom the position of affairs flashed suddenly, burst into laughter.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, "we're in the Den, and it's the middle of the night apparently. I'll be hanged if I had not forgotten all about it."

"Faith, so had I. And I've got a most confounded headache, though the old beggar said the punch wouldn't give me one. How do you feel?"

"Oh! I'm all right; rather hungry. He might have left us some matches; but I suppose we must go to sleep again, and wait for daylight."

Which they did accordingly.

And when next Stephen Langton awoke, it was broad daylight. The sun was apparently as near the zenith as he ever gets in these latitudes. Stepen jumped out of bed, and looked vainly for a pair of trowsers wherein to encase his nether limbs. He was compelled to be

content with his velvet breeches—*tempore* Charles II.

The Seraph still slept seraphically. They talk of the sleep which a good conscience gives, but nothing can rival the calm repose of the man who has no conscience at all.

Stephen roused his friend. Raphael, when thoroughly himself, remarked—

"Well, I never felt sleepier. What time is it?"

Both their watches had stopped.

"Curious!" said the Seraph, "I wound up mine, I know. Ring the bell, old fellow."

Stephen found a bell-pull, and rang loudly. There came no reply.

"I suppose everybody else is asleep too," said the Seraph. "Go and find out, that's a good fellow. You've got some trowsers, and I haven't."

"Call these trowsers!" said Stephen, disconsolately looking down upon his purple breeches, beyond which protruded legs worthy of Hyperion. "Suppose I meet your sister—or Isola!"

"Well, hang it," reasoned the Seraph, "you

must do something. You don't seriously expect *me* to walk about in petticoats. I wonder what was done with the clothes I took off."

"I suppose I must venture," said Stephen.

So he went to the door, which, to his amazement, was fastened on the outside.

"The old Wolf's locked us in!" he exclaimed.

"The devil!" cried Raphael, jumping out of bed. "He's been playing us a trick; it's just like him."

They broke open the door, which had been fastened by an outside bolt. Then Stephen, as being the most decently attired, started to explore, and went from room to room, finding nothing. Whereupon he returned, reporting that to all appearance the house was utterly deserted.

"Here's a nice position," said the Seraph. "The old gentleman has played us a pretty trick. But where the deuce are Claudia and Isola, and the servants? I hope there's something in the house to eat, for I am diabolically peckish."

Further search made it obvious that there was not a creature save themselves in the house. Marmaduke and his myrmidons—the Panther—Isola and her neat little ancilla Lotty—were all gone. The clothes which they had taken off to dress for Cellini's masquerade had mysteriously disappeared. And here were Raphael and Stephen, with nothing but their absurd costumes, without a creature to send to Clarges-street or Jermyn-street.

"What shall we do?" asked Stephen Langton, perfectly puzzled.

"Find something to eat and drink first," said the Seraph.

About this there was slight difficulty. The commissariat at the Den was always excellent. A slight search in cupboard and cellaret soon furnished an excellent breakfast.

"The state of my appetite," said the Seraph, "leads me to suppose we have been some time asleep. My highly-respectable uncle must have administered opium in that rascally punch of his. We must have had twenty-four hours sleep, I fancy."

"How are we to get out of this? Catch a policeman."

"For heaven's sake, no. Those fellows would take us for thieves, perhaps, and carry us off to Bow-street. That won't do. I've cut my precious dress to pieces, almost, or I think I might walk to Clarges-street."

Fortune favoured them. There passed along the quiet street a small boy, whistling—"a little vulgar boy," such as swindled Tom Ingoldsby. Stephen tapped cautiously at the window. The youngster came across, and they managed to induce him to come in. In a few minutes he was running away to Clarges-street with a note to Louis.

And when the faithful valet and Auguste arrived with linen and clothing, the Seraph and Stephen were astonished to find that, instead of twenty-four, they had actually passed forty-eight hours in bed. Cellini's ball was on Wednesday evening; it was noon on Thursday when they turned in; it was past noon on Saturday when they awoke to find themselves alone in the Wolfs Den!

"By the powers!" said the Seraph, "I never was played so cool a trick. I wonder whether the old gentleman is mad or not."

"I wonder what he has done with the ladies," said Stephen.

"Egad, yes. I'll tell you what. As he has deserted the Den, we'll just take possession of it. What do you say?"

"A capital notion. I suppose he's sure to return here."

"I should be sorry to predicate anything at all definite about him. He may have vanished as mysteriously and abruptly as he arrived. *You* found him first—perhaps you'll look for him now."

"Not if I know it. No, the plan is to encamp here, as you propose, and await his return. But couldn't we serve him some trick? Suppose we take lodgers, and admit nobody who can't play on an instrument. If we got a houseful of trombones and fiddles and drums, I think the old beggar would swear a little."

"Possibly," replied the Seraph. "But, as you and I think of staying here, don't you think *we*

might be inclined to swear first? No, that won't do."

"We ought to think upon some way of giving him a Roland for his Oliver," said Stephen, meditatively.

"Leave it to me," said the Seraph, after a pause. "I've got an idea."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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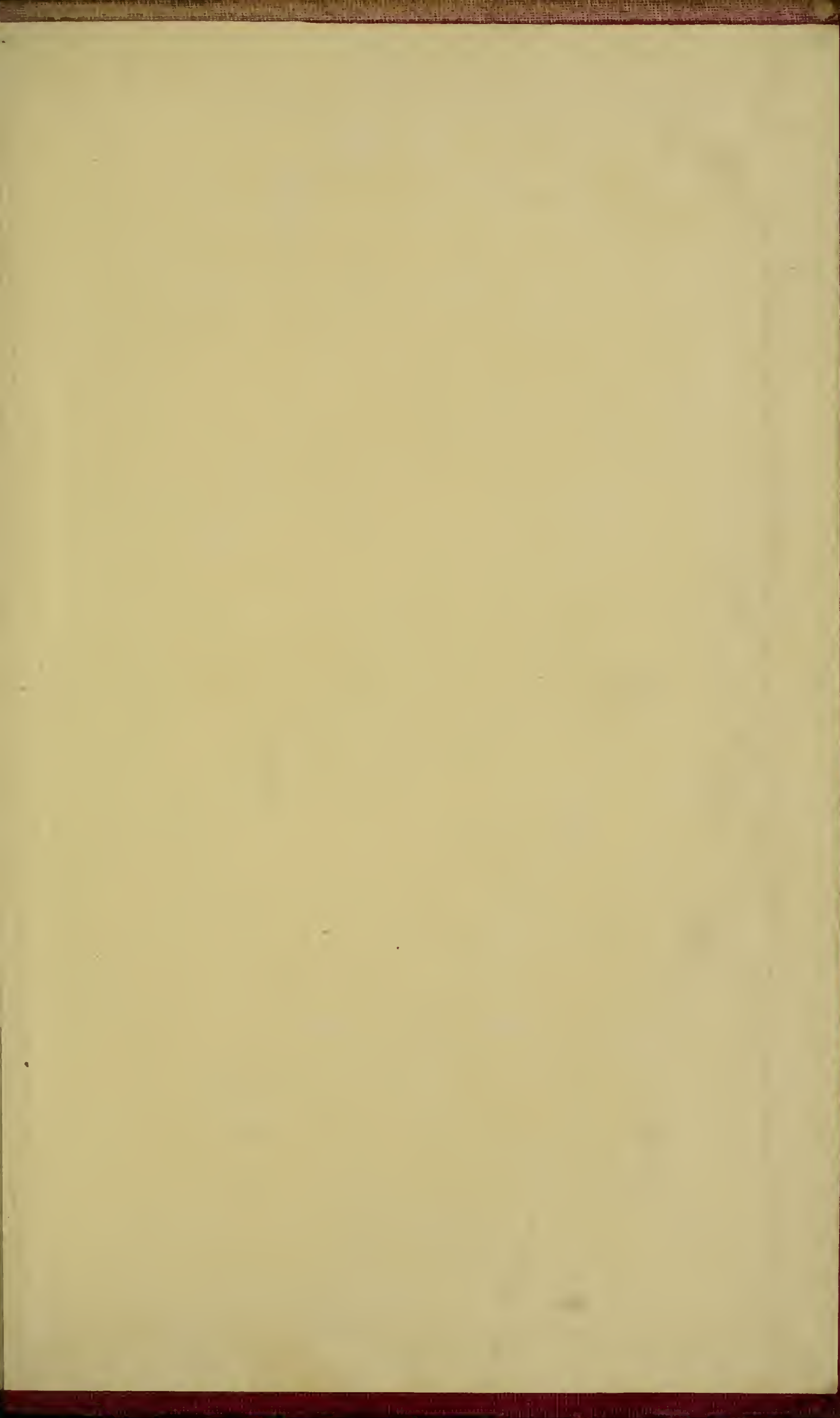

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