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RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.

A Novel.

BY

EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF "BROKEN TO HARNESS."

FORTITER—FIDELITER—FELICITER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. IN THE TOILS	1
II. EGREMONT PRIORY	28
III. CHECK	55
IV. COUNTERCHECK	70
V. IN THE DRAWING-ROOM	95
VI. DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND	123
VII. CHECKMATE	147
VIII. COLONEL ALSAGER'S COUNSEL	167
IX. KNOCKHOLT PARK	193
X. LORD DOLLAMORE'S COUNSEL	227
XI. MR. EFFINGHAM'S PROGRESS	272

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET.



CHAPTER I.

IN THE TOILS.

SIR CHARLES MITFORD had not been guilty of any exaggeration when he announced his intention of filling his house at Redmoor with a very pleasant set of people. If a man have a kindly genial temper, a sense of humour, a desire to be pleasant to his fellow-creatures, such qualities, however they may have hitherto been concealed, will make themselves felt during a sojourn at a friend's well-filled country-house. There the heavy man, who has sat by one at a dozen dinner-parties during the season and never opened his mouth except to fill it, is discovered to be

full of antiquarian erudition about the old castles and abbeys in the neighbourhood; and imparts his information, pleasantly studded with quaint anecdote and pungent remark. There Lady Katherine gives up her perpetual simper, and rests her aching lips, and occasionally covers her gleaming teeth. There Mrs. Phillimore mixes for a while with people in her own rank in life, and temporarily denies herself the pleasure of hunting orphans into asylums, and dealing out tea and Bibles to superannuated crones. Grinsby would have gone through life despised as a cockney *littérateur*,—indeed they intended to have immense fun out of him at the Duke's,—if he had not knocked over that brace of woodcock, right and left barrel; if, in fact, he had not made better shooting than any other man of the party; and Tom Copus would never have given that delicious imitation of little Mr. Loudswell, the blatant barrister, had it not been coaxed out of him during the private theatricals at Eversholt Park. What glorious flirtations, what happy marriages, what fun, enjoyable at the time, and lasting source

of retrospective enjoyment for long after, have arisen from the gatherings in country-houses! In these days of imitation it is also gratifying to know that country-house society is essentially English. Monseigneur le Duc de Hausse et Baisse has a gathering at his *terre*, or the Graf von Hasenbraten fills his ancestral castle of Suchverloren with intending assistants at a *treibjagd*: but the French people are very unhappy; they long to be back in Paris, and they seek consolation in dressing and behaving exactly as if they had never quitted that city; while the manner of life among Germans alters never:—to shoot a very little, to eat and drink a great deal, and “the sooner it’s over the sooner to sleep,”—such are the simple conditions of Teutonic happiness.

The party at Redmoor was large and well constituted. Captain and Mrs. Charteris, whom every body knew, were there. Tom Charteris had been in the Enniskillens; had run through all his money, and was in daily expectation of being sold up, when his uncle, the senior partner in a large distillery, died, leaving Tom

such a share in the business as would bring him an excellent income, on the sole condition that he should leave the army, and personally attend to the management of the distillery. It is probable that Tom would have been sufficiently idiotic to refuse compliance with these conditions; but, fortunately, he had taken to himself a wife, a young lady who was the daughter of the church-organist in a little town where the Enniskillens had been quartered, and who gave lessons in music and singing to the resident gentry. She was a pretty *piquante* little person; and Tom, lounging out of the barrack-window while he smoked his after-breakfast pipe, had seen her tripping to and fro, always neat, active, and sprightly, and always displaying a remarkably pretty foot and ankle. Admiration of pretty feet and ankles was among Tom's weaknesses, and he watched the little music-mistress with great interest, and began to look forward to her daily appearance with delight. Then he got an introduction to her,—without any definite end or aim, for good or for bad, but simply to

amuse himself; then he became fascinated by her, and finally he married her. It was Mrs. Tom who insisted upon big jolly old Tom giving up the army, and taking to the distillery and the money. She was a funny little woman, and would make her intimates shout with laughter at her imitation of Tom striding about the counting-house among the clerks (he never could get rid of his dragoon-swagger), and talking a haw-haw to the publicans who came to borrow money or beg for time. They had a pretty little house in Clarges Street, whence Tom would bowl away every morning at 9.30 to the distillery in Barbican, remaining there till half-past four, when Mrs. Tom would call for him in the brougham, and air him in the Park till dinner-time. Every body knew them, and hats were bobbing off over the iron-railings all down the Drive as they passed. Whenever a stoppage occurred Tom had to stand a running fire of chaff, being asked what it was a quartern, whether he'd like a drop of something short, with other jokes, in which the

phrases "white tape" and "blue ruin" played conspicuous parts. The little house in Clarges Street was a great resort for a select few after the Opera, and many well-known men would drop in to have the claw of a lobster and a glass of champagne, or to smoke a final cigar while listening to Mrs. Tom's brilliant playing—till two A.M., when Tom turned his guests out, declaring he was a poor tradesman, and had to be up early to business. The house was a pleasant one, where there was a certain amount of *laissez-aller* freedom, but where Tom took care that his wife was thoroughly respected.

Then Mrs. Masters, always spoken of as "pretty Mrs. Masters," or "the pretty widow," was of the party,—a tall handsome woman with large eyes and masses of floating light-brown hair, relict of old Dr. Masters, who had left her a capital income, which she seemed determined to keep to herself. Not more than eight-and-twenty, and eminently attractive, she was a source of wonder to her friends, who could not understand why she did not marry again. She had numbers of

visitors, male and female; she went into society constantly, and did her due share of dancing and flirtation; but the latter was so mild in kind, and so general in its nature, that no man's name had ever been coupled with hers. Her most intimate enemies raised a report that she was at one time madly in love with Colonel Alsager; but if there was any truth in the rumour, she managed her madness so admirably as never to show a trace of it. She was invaluable in a country-house, for she was thoroughly good-tempered, entered heart and soul into every thing that was proposed, and was a great bait for vain bachelors, whose vanity was specially piqued at her long resistance to the charms of their sex. With Mrs. Masters came her cousins, two young ladies named Tyrrell, whose father was a judge in India, and who were of the ordinary stamp of pretty, pert, self-satisfied twenty-year-olds.

The other ladies in the house do not call for description. Chief amongst the men was Captain Bligh, who, as he walked about and inspected the alterations which had been made under his direc-

tions, wondered whether his old father would ever relent, and whether he should have a chance of putting the old hall down in Norfolk in order for himself; or whether he should go on betting and billiard-playing and steeplechase-riding until he “went a tremendous mucker,” and either blew his brains out or levanted. And there was Major Winton, who, dressed in a pair of enormous thigh boots, a dreadnaught, and a sou’-wester, and accompanied by a keeper, went away every morning at dawn to lie out in the marshes for snipe and wild-fowl, and who did not return till dinner-time; immediately after which meal he was accustomed to retire to his bedroom, where a case-bottle of brandy, a jar of Cavendish tobacco, a huge meer-schaum-pipe, and the adventures of the Chevalier Faublas, were awaiting him; and with these he would occupy himself until he went to bed. Laurence Alsager was at Redmoor also, though his visit to his father was yet unpaid; and so was Lord Dollamore. The officers of the garrison had called, and the officers of the frigate cruising off Torquay, and the neighbouring gentry; and the

whole party seemed to enjoy themselves except Sir Charles Mitford,—whose happiness was not to be long delayed, for the Hammonds were expected on a certain day, which now dawned upon the impatient master of Redmoor.

He had returned home after luncheon, leaving the shooting-party under the charge of Captain Bligh, and had been in a state of undisguisable anxiety all the afternoon, unable to settle himself to any thing; now playing a stroke or two at billiards, and looking on at Tom Charteris, who was practising certain hazards preparatory to a match with Bligh; now strolling through the drawing-room, where Alsager was talking to Lady Mitford and Mrs. Masters; now interrupting Lord Dollamore, who was stretched out in an easy-chair in the library reading Montaigne. Sir Charles's impatience and restlessness were not unobserved by any of these. Tom Charteris supposed he was already sick of the quiet of the country, and contemplated recommending him a turn in the distillery by way of a cure. Lady Mitford could not understand his restlessness, and

feared Charley had been annoyed about something. Mrs. Masters ascribed it to want of *savoir faire* on the Baronet's part. Only Colonel Alsager and Lord Dollamore guessed its real cause. The former frowned portentously as he watched his host; and the latter was considerably amused.

“This is positively a very delicious experience of life,” thought Dollamore, as he laid aside his book; “I could not have had a more charming field for study. So many different characters too! There is that remarkably uncouth person our host, who is so horribly raw and undisciplined as to be unable to behave himself decently when expecting the last object of his calf-love. And there's that modern Bayard, Alsager, who has undoubtedly a *tendresse* for our hostess, and who as undeniably wore Laura Hammond's colours a little time ago, and bolted because of some inexplicable row with her. And there's Laura Hammond herself—delicious creature—with a newly-caught mouse in her mouth; and yet her eye constantly roving over the late captive playing round her, lest he should escape beyond possibility of recap-

ture. There's that good-looking widow too, who is as cold as ice, but who is supposed to have thawed a little once in Bayard's favour. And then there's Lady Mitford herself, who is worth all the rest of the women put together. What grace, what beauty, what thoroughly unsophisticated charms and real naturalness of manner! By Jove! compared to her, the widow is a giraffe, and the Hammond a dairy-maid. Talk of their birth and breeding! why, this country parson's daughter has the air and manner of a duchess. They will try and set upon her when she comes to town,—that old Clanronald, who looks like a cook, and the Tappington with her three daughters like grenadiers in petticoats; but if she has any pluck—and I think she has, under all that quietude—she'll ride them down right and left; and she'll have all the men on her side, though I don't know that that's any pull. Meantime this oaf is entertaining an angel unawares, and neglecting her,—is standing at the door of his tent ogling the daughters of the Cities of the Plain. So much the better for Bayard and—and for others. But the

imbroglio is delightful, and I couldn't wish for better fun than to stand by and watch the play; cutting-in of course when I see a chance of holding winning cards."

And then Lord Dollamore rubbed his hands with great gusto, and applied himself with renewed delight to his volume of French philosophy.

At length the noise of wheels on the hard drive was heard, and Sir Charles rang the bell and summoned the servants, and had the hall-door thrown open, and stood on the steps ready to receive his guests in person. Drawn by four horses at full gallop, Mr. Hammond's carriage came thundering along the drive, and ere it pulled up at the door Lady Mitford had joined her husband, prepared to echo his words of welcome. With her came Colonel Alsager, — carrying in his hand a light shawl, which he pressed upon her acceptance when he saw the door open, and felt the rush of the cold air, which sent the flames roaring up from the great open fireplace,—and also Lord Dollamore, who smiled placidly to

himself as he saw this act of attention. "None but your regular Bayard would have done that," said he to himself; "wonderfully thoughtful fellows they are, by Jove!" He suffered under a slight lameness, and always carried a Malacca cane with an ivory crutch-handle, declared by the men at the club to be his familiar, the recipient of his confidence, and the suggester of many of his iniquities. He carried it now, and rapped it against his teeth, and laid it to his ear, as though he were listening to its counsel.

"There they are," he continued, "in a close carriage of course, because of my husband's health; but I am at the open window, and remarkably well I look. Blue always became me, and my eyes are bright, and I've got a high colour. How do you do? My hand out at the window, and a very palpable squeeze to the oaf, who is blushing, by Jove, like a great schoolboy,—a very palpable squeeze. Steps down now, and, leaning heavily on his arm, out we jump, and—oh yes, dear Lady

Mitford! Kiss, kiss—you she-Judas!—and—hallo! rather astonished at seeing Bayard, eh? How do you do, Colonel Alsager? I scarcely thought you would be here. No, of course not; one string too many for her bow. Now for me!—Needn't ask you how you are, Mrs. Hammond; never saw you looking more charming.—And she smiles and passes on. Lord help us! is this Percy Hammond, this unfortunate object that they're helping out now? Why, he's only a year or two older than I; left Haileybury while I was at Eton; but what an awful wreck he is! What on earth made him marry a second time,—especially such a woman as this? Hallo! who have we here? Tall young woman; severely got up, but a neat figure, and a good stepper too. Very cold bow from Sir Charles; little hand-shake from my lady. Must be the governess. Oh yes, that's it; and there's the child. Now, then, all the characters are assembled; ring up the curtain—the play's begun."

Lord Dollamore was right; it had been a palpable hand-squeeze, palpable to him, palpable

to Laurence Alsager, palpable to her from whom it should have been specially hidden—Lady Mitford. She saw it, but could scarcely believe she had seen aright; but then she noticed the manner in which Mrs. Hammond leaned on Sir Charles's arm, and a certain look which passed between them as she alighted. The next instant her guest had caught hold of both her hands, and was embracing her with effusion; but just before Georgie had had time to steal one glance at Laurence Alsager's face, and to read in the lowering brow and compressed lips that he too had noticed the *empressement* of the meeting. The whole thing was so thoroughly strange to her, so utterly unexpected, that she did not know how to act. Her first impulse was to drag herself out of Mrs. Hammond's embrace, to call her a false bad woman, and to go off in a flood of tears; but fortunately she did not attempt this experiment. She did the very best thing under the circumstances, and that was—nothing. She freed herself from her visitor's embracing arms when she had unresponsive received her kiss,

and murmured a few commonplaces about her delight at seeing her; and then she went forward to say a passing word of kindness to Mr. Hammond as he was helped past her by his servants, to exchange salutations with Miss Gillespie, and to kiss the child's forehead. By this time she was perfectly ready to do the honours of her house, and to follow her husband, on whose arm Mrs. Hammond was already leaning, to the suite of rooms prepared for the guests. These were, as Sir Charles had said, the best in the house; and as they entered them, Georgie remembered how he had specially reserved them for the Hammonds, and she winced as her eye lighted on a splendid bouquet of hot-house flowers arranged in a vase on the writing-table. The fires burned brightly, and there was a sufficient air of comfort to justify Mrs. Hammond in clasping her hands and exclaiming, "How very, very charming! Every thing in such exquisite taste; and oh, what lovely flowers, Lady Mitford! You know my passion for flowers, and have indeed

taken pains to gratify it." Georgie bowed in an icy manner, and Sir Charles glowed from his head to his feet. "It's too late to look out now, but I've no doubt that the prospect's delightful."

"Looks towards the south. Good for Hammond, and that kind of thing," said Sir Charles, explanatorily.

"We'll leave you now, Mrs. Hammond; the first dinner-bell has just rung," said Georgie, moving towards the door.

"Any thing you want you've only to ring for, you know; so find out something to ask for by dinner-time. Do! you know you've only to ask and have in this house."

Georgie did not hear this last remark. She was hurrying as quickly as she could towards her own room; and on reaching it she flung herself on a sofa, and burst into tears.

It was the custom at Redmoor to assemble previous to the announcement of dinner in the library,—a large room, rather solemn with its dark oak bookcases, and when lighted only by

two or three moderator-lamps, placed on small tables. Such was Sir Charles's whim; he had a notion that the removal from darkness to light awoke a corresponding cheerfulness; and though it had been often combated by Georgie, on this occasion she was grateful for any respite from the public gaze, and every opportunity of recovering her wonted calmness. Clang! goes the gong. "Dinner is served." Through the indistinct gloom Mrs. Hammond is seen sailing away on the arm of Sir Charles. Alsager has the widow for his companion, and feels a thrill run up his coat-sleeve, to which the arm within his coat-sleeve does not respond. There are officers from the garrison, who file off with the Tyrrell girls and with the young ladies, members of the neighbouring families; and the procession is closed by Lady Mitford, escorted by Lord Dollamore, who takes the opportunity of saying, "Charming woman Mrs. Hammond; so frank, ingenuous, and open! So devoted to her poor invalid husband—don't you think so?" and when Lady Mitford responds, "Yes,

oh yes, quite so," Lord Dollamore lifts the ivory crutch-handle of his Malacca cane to his mouth, and seems whispering to it untellable jokes.

The dinner was very good; but that was more due to Bligh than to any one else, even to Lady Mitford. The *chef* who had been let to the Mitfords with the house in Eaton Place had stuck to his bargain, and refused to go into the country. He had his club, his *menus plaisirs*, and he declined to leave them. So the jolly Captain looked about, took Mrs. Austin the housekeeper into confidence, and found out from her that there was a woman who had lived as kitchenmaid in the first families, and who had always thought of bettering herself, but never had the chance, and was then at Sir John Rumbold's, hard by. This person was fetched over, and directed to try her prentice-hand at cooking a steak and a potato for Captain Bligh, that achievement being, as he opined, the great touchstone of the culinary art; and having been thoroughly successful, she was borrowed for a few days and further tried, and finally engaged. The dinner was

so good that every one enjoyed it, even poor Percy Hammond, who had roused himself sufficiently to come to table, and whose eyes brightened under the influence of a bottle of the celebrated old Madeira placed at his side. It was not the old Madeira which caused Mrs. Hammond's eyes to brighten, but they had never shone more brilliantly, and her spirits had never been higher. She talked incessantly, addressing her conversation chiefly to her host, on whose right hand she was seated.

“I suppose you have some charming old places about here, Sir Charles?—abbeys, and ruins, and castles,” said she after a pause.

“I daresay there are, but as I have only just come here, you know, I can't say. Major Maxse, no doubt, can tell you; they've been quartered in the neighbourhood for the last twelve months, and know every inch of it. Maxse, Mrs. Hammond asks whether there are any old ruins, castles, abbeys, that sort of thing, in the neighbourhood. I tell her she should inquire of you, as the likeliest person to know.”

Major Maxse, the gentleman addressed, a good-looking middle-aged man, replied, "Well, I really think I might earn an honest livelihood by setting up as guide to this region. Though we've been here little more than a twelvemonth, I've been so horribly bored that I think I have explored every nook and corner of the country within a circle of fifty miles; and I am very happy to tell Mrs. Hammond that there are all sorts of ruins for her to choose from, with all sorts of architecture, and all sorts of legends attached. For example, there's Egremont Priory."

"That's Boscastle's place, isn't it?" said Lord Dollamore, from the other end of the table; "who made the legend about that? One of the family probably; for there never was a Boscastle yet who was known to speak truth, even by accident."

"First-rate place for wild-ducks," said Major Winton: "don't send any confounded picnic people there, Maxse; they'll scare the birds."

"Even at the risk of being considered confounded picnic people, if it's a pretty place, and

has a good story attached to it, I propose that we make a party and go," said Georgie.

She was a little astonished at herself when she had said this, but she had said it purposely. She was wondering what it was that had attracted her husband in Mrs. Hammond which she herself did not possess; and she thought perhaps it was a certain dash and *verve*, to which she had never pretended, but which her rival undoubtedly displayed. Poor Georgie felt that perhaps she had been a little too tame and sedate; and this speech was her first attempt in the opposite direction.

"Charmingly said, Lady Mitford; the very thing," said Mrs. Hammond. "And I think we could go, even if there were no story at all—"

"There's a round tower which is occupied by an old woman, who'll boil potatoes, and lay the cloth, and that kind of thing—all under shelter, you know," said Captain Bligh, who was of an eminently practical turn.

"Oh, no; but we must have the legend," said Lord Dollamore. "Come, Major Maxse, you don't get off telling us the Boscastle legend."

“ Oh, it’s the old story with the usual ingredients—love and a ghost,” said Major Maxse.

“ Yes, but what love? whose ghost?” asked Mrs. Hammond. “ You promised to tell me, Major Maxse, and we’re all attention.”

“ It is simply this. After the Restoration Roger Boscastle, who had been serving with the Royalists from the beginning of the war, and who had had to fly the country after Naseby, came back to his estates and to his wife, who during her husband’s absence had been living with her own family, strict Parliamentarians. Lady Boscastle was a very lovely woman; but a little strict and rigid, and scarcely suited to a rollicking swash-buckler like her husband. One day there arrived at Egremont Priory a troop of horse escorting a beautiful lady and her father, both foreigners, who had done the king much service in time of need, and who had known Roger Boscastle when abroad. Roger seemed very much surprised to see them, and so did Lady Mildred; the latter more especially when first the old nobleman threw his arms round Roger’s neck and exclaimed,

“Mon fils!” and then the young lady did ditto and exclaimed, “Mon amour!” but they were neither of them so astonished as were the old gentleman and the young lady when Roger led Lady Mildred forward and presented her as his wife. They were thoroughly taken aback, and the young lady muttered to Roger under her breath something which Lady Mildred could not catch, but which, by the expression of her eyes, must have been very unpleasant. However, they took up their abode in the castle, whither they had been commended by the king; and they were very polite, especially the lady, to Mildred, who hated her with such hatred as is only felt by a woman who suspects another of carrying on with her husband.”

“Bravo, Maxse!” interrupted Lord Dollamore; “gad, that’s really quite graphic,—that last sentence. You’ve mistaken your profession, Maxse; you ought to have been an author.”

“I’m afraid the last sentence was cribbed from the *Guide-book* to the county. However, to cut my story short, one night Lady Mildred overheard a

conversation between her husband and Pepita (that was the foreign lady's name), from which it was pretty clear that Roger had represented himself as a single man when abroad, and had actually married Pepita. Then Mildred had a stormy interview with Roger, and told him of her intention to leave him the next day and go to her brother. But the next morning she was found dead, stabbed to the heart with a dagger, round the handle of which was a scrap of paper, inscribed, 'In a Spaniard's way;' and Pepita, her father, and Roger Boscastle were all gone. The latter came back when quite an old man, but was found dead in his bed the morning after his arrival; frightened, it is supposed, by the ghost of Lady Mildred, which in stormy weather duly walks the castle, wringing its hands and waving the bloody dagger in the air."

"No, I don't like the last bit," said Lord Dollamore; "too much like Richardson's show. All the rest very good and dramatic; don't you think so, Lady Mitford?"

"Oh, very good indeed—thoroughly interest-

ing; and, as usual, the only innocent person in the story was punished."

"That was because she was innocent," said Lord Dollamore; "there must have been eligible persons, even among her Roundhead friends; how very much better to have consoled herself with—"

"As usual, you miss the point of the story, Lord Dollamore," said Alsager, hotly interrupting; "surely it would have been better to have been the murdered than the murderess in such a case."

"It's very lucky there are not any such cases nowadays," said Sir Charles. "No woman would put a knife into another now."

"Into any one who stood between me and my love I would, for one," said Mrs. Hammond under her breath; and she looked for a moment so fierce, that Mitford said, "Gad, I believe you!" in a similar tone.

When the ladies had left the room Laurence Alsager said to Lord Dollamore: "You had heard that story before?"

"What story, my dear Alsager?"

“The legend of Egremont Priory.”

“Had I? Not unlikely. You know I’m a very eccentric reader, and delight in odd stories.”

“It’s a pity you did not save Maxse the trouble of telling it again.”

“Do you think so? Well, do you know I can’t agree with you? It’s recital seemed to bring out the character of some of our friends in the highest degree; and if there’s any thing I delight in, it is the study of character.”

CHAPTER II.

EGREMONT PRIORY.

LADY MITFORD'S proposition of a visit to Egremont Priory, though originally made in a kind of bravado, was remembered by most of her guests—notably by Mrs. Hammond, who saw in it a better chance for flirtation than she had had since her arrival at Redmoor. Ever since Georgie had noticed the warm lingering hand-pressure exchanged between her husband and her visitor on that occasion, she had been thoroughly on the *qui vive*, and, like most young women ignorant of the world's ways, had imagined that the best way to nip a flirtation in the bud was by being perpetually observant of all that took place, and by letting the guilty persons know that their conduct was watched. It requires considerable expe-

rience before a woman discovers that—so long as the affair is confined within certain bounds—totally to ignore its existence is her very best policy; a policy which saves her from infinite domestic discomfort, and is besides the only possible method of galling her rival.

But Georgie was not only young, but country-bred,—which means a great deal, for London girls at seventeen know more of the world than country girls at five-and-twenty,—and had had scarcely any experience. So she went to work naturally, and betrayed her anger in the plainest manner,—in perpetual supervision, in lip-bitings and hand-clenchings, in occasional tears, which *would* come welling up into her eyes, however far back she might hold her head, and were perfectly visible, however hastily brushed away. To Mrs. Hammond, who was a practised duellist, all this behaviour was delightful; she took it as a tribute to her own powers of fascination, and was proportionately pleased. Flirtation, in its strongest sense, was absolutely necessary to her existence; but she never conde-

scended to boys, and she regarded officers, when merely officers and nothing more, as very small game. She liked to entangle men of position and celebrity, no matter how grave or how old (she had perfectly charmed a bachelor bishop; and the enemies of one of our greatest physicians declared that his wife rendered his home unbearable on account of his attentions to Mrs. Hammond); and the latest literary, artistic, or theatrical lion was usually to be found hovering about her. But far beyond any thing else she liked a flirtation with the husband of an acknowledged pretty woman; and the more beautiful the wife, the more bent was Laura Hammond on captivating the husband. That gave her greater *éclat* than any thing else, and she liked *éclat*. She liked being talked about,—up to a certain point; she liked women to express their wonder at what men could see in her to rave about; she liked to have repeated to her what men said at clubs: “ ‘Str’ord’nary little woman the Hammond! There’s Cosmo Gordon been every where with her, leaving that lovely wife of his all by

herself, by Jove! What the doose can there be in her?" and other speeches of a like nature. She also liked to be on good terms with the wives of her admirers—a thing by no means so difficult as might be imagined by the inexperienced. There are women so spaniel-like in their nature that they will fawn on those who injure them; and some of these consorted with Mrs. Hammond with a vain idea of propitiating her by their forbearance, and thus inducing her to give up the chase. She had at first thought that Georgie Mitford might be of this order; but she was by no means disappointed to find her otherwise. She gloried in a contest out of which she could come victorious, and despised all easy triumphs; there was pleasure in captivating a man whose position or celebrity reflected lustre on his enslaver; but there was tenfold pleasure when he, in his blind infatuation, set the rules of society at defiance, and openly neglected the wife whose beauty had hitherto been his greatest pride.

So Mrs. Hammond reminded Sir Charles that

dear Lady Mitford has expressed a wish that they should go over in a party to Egremont Priory, and suggested that he had better see about it at once. Of course Sir Charles saw about it immediately; told Bligh to have some luncheon sent over the next day, and to mind that they had a big fire in the keep, for it was any thing but picnic weather; wrote a line to Major Maxse and other officers to join them; and proceeded to poll his visitors as to how they would go over to the spot. How would Mrs. Hammond go? How? Oh, wouldn't dear Lady Mitford ride over with her on horseback? they could get some gentlemen to escort them; and it would be delightful. Dear Lady Mitford was much obliged, but would rather not. Mrs. Hammond could ride over on horseback if she chose, and doubtless would find plenty of cavaliers; but Lady Mitford would drive in a pony-phaeton. Ah, of course! Mrs. Hammond had forgotten Lady Mitford's charming experience of pony-phaetons; and as she said this she looked round with a light and pleasant smile at Colonel Alsager, who was pulling his black beard, and

glowering horribly close by. Sir Charles Mitford had no objection to Georgie's going in the phaeton—no objection to her driving, for the matter of that; but since that accident, it would be better, he thought, to have some one reliable in coachmanship sitting by her: Lord Dollamore, for instance? But Dollamore declared he was the worst whip in the world; his horrible rheumatism had crippled his hands; and why should not that tremendous fellow Alsager, who had already earned the medal of the Humane Society—why should not he go? Ay, Alsager was the very man, Sir Charles thought; and Laurence, though he saw every atom of the play on Dollamore's part, and felt himself completely jockeyed into the position, could discern no way out of it, and assented with apparent delight. He was not too pleased to see a certain look of terror which had pervaded Lady Mitford's face when Dollamore was proposed as charioteer fade away when the other arrangement was finally decided upon. Many men would have taken the change as a compliment; but Laurence had had experience, and thought otherwise. Lord Dollamore, Tom and

Mrs. Charteris, one of the Tyrrell girls, and Captain Bligh, might post over in the break ; in which also went the luncheon-hampers. Fred Aspen, Ellen Tyrrell, and Major Winton, would ride. So the stud-groom had his orders, and all was arranged. Sir Charles had not said how he intended to go to Egremont Priory, and yet no one was surprised, when the cavalcade was on the point of setting out, to see his big horse Tambour Major brought out by the stud-groom, who was closely followed by a helper leading Lady Jane—a very dark iron-gray mare—with a lady's saddle on her. No one doubted for an instant for whom the lady's horse was intended. A bright red spot burned on Lady Mitford's cheek ; and as she settled herself in the phaeton by Laurence's side, she said in a loud and marked tone, " I hope, Colonel Alsager, I shall not have occasion to-day to increase the debt of gratitude I already owe to you."

Mrs. Masters raised her eyebrows as Lord Dollamore assisted her into the break, and afterwards had two minutes' confidential whispering

with Miss Tyrrell; and Mrs. Charteris had scarcely time to frown down old Tom, who was always full of his *gaucheries*, before he had ejaculated, “ Making the running early, eh? ah, haw, haw !”

Sir Charles Mitford saw nothing of this little performance; but Mrs. Hammond, whose eyes and ears were every where at once, lost not one single scrap of it. So, just before the word for starting was given, while Mrs. Masters was doing her whispering, and Lady Mitford was burning with anger, and Captain Bligh was peering into the various hampers to see that nothing had been forgotten; while Sir Charles himself, intoxicated with her wonderful piquancy (she never looked to such advantage as in her riding-habit), was coming across to mount her, she turned calmly round, and said in a voice which could be heard by all round, “ No, —thanks, Sir Charles—I won’t trespass on your attention. As host you have all sorts of things to look after and to do.—Major Winton, if that chestnut will stand for half a minute—here, boy, look to his head!—I’ll get you to mount me, and if you’ll permit me I’ll join your party. I’m the

best of chaperons, Major ; and when it's required, my talent for admiring the landscape is enormous."

This last was uttered *sotto voce*, and with a quick side-glance towards Ellen Tyrrell. It was a clever move ; and though by no means convincing, had some effect on all the party. Sir Charles bowed, sprang on Tambour Major, and rode away with disgust plainly visible in every feature ; Lady Mitford looked disconcerted ; so did Alsager, though he understood it all ; Dollamore took his familiar stick into consultation, and whispered to it that she was a devilish clever little woman ; Tom Charteris winked quietly at his wife ; and Major Winton was delighted. He told some friends afterwards, in the freedom of barrack-room conversation, that he didn't go in for women's society and that sort of thing, you know, and he'd no idea he was so d——d nice.

So they went on. The party in the break was very humorous ; they kept up a running-fire of jokes against Bligh about something being forgotten, and compelled him (naturally a nervous man, and very proud of his arrangement of such mat-

ters) to dive frequently to the bottom of hampers and return with the supposed missing article in his hand, his face purple with stooping and triumph combined. Captain Bligh was not a humorist, but he retorted with several broad allusions to Tom Charteris's distillery; and, a flash of old sporting experience having suddenly revealed to him that there was an affinity of meaning between the words 'gin' and 'snare,' he dilated thereon after a fashion that Mr. George Cruikshank might have envied. They were very quiet in the pony-phaeton, for Georgie was annoyed at having so plainly shown her anger; and Laurence, finding that his few remarks about the weather and the scenery only gained monosyllabic answers, soon lapsed into silence. Sir Charles was seen going across country at a great pace, apparently comforting himself by taking it out of Tambour Major, and clearing every thing in first-rate style. The mounted party seemed to enjoy themselves most of all; Major Winton was in the seventh heaven, for Mrs. Hammond did all the talking, requiring him only to throw in an occasional word, and

she looked so fascinating that he devoted himself to her during the ride, entirely neglecting Ellen Tyrrell—to that young lady's great gratification, be it said, as she regarded the Major as a fogie, and was infinitely better pleased with the attentions of one of the officers who joined the cavalcade just as it emerged on the Redmoor.

The winter picnic passed off much more pleasantly than might have been augured from its commencement. During the drive Georgie had had time deliberately to examine herself, and to arrive at the conclusion that what she was doing was very foolish, and, more than that, she was afraid, very wrong. It might be that her own jealousy had jaundiced her ideas; it might be that the pressure of the hand, from which her misgiving first dated, was entirely imaginary. What right had she to suspect Charley of fickleness? Had he not proved his truth in the noblest way, by coming back to her in the time of his prosperity and raising her to her present position? Was it likely, then, that he would so suddenly change? Yes, she had been very

wrong to permit the growth of such horrible suspicions, and she would make up for it to Charley by tenfold warmth and affection. Georgie's already-suffused face deepened in hue as she remembered what, in the bitterness of her spirit, she had said to Colonel Alsager on taking her seat in the phaeton. What could he have thought of her? Whatever he may have thought, nothing could be gathered from the calm grave expression of his face. Very likely he guessed what was passing through his companion's mind; for from the little he had seen of Georgie, he believed her to possess more common-sense than is given to the average woman, and he was certain she could show it in no better way than by totally ignoring this business, at all events in its present stage. Laurence saw plainly enough Mrs. Hammond's intentions. There was not a point in her system of strategy which he did not comprehend; and he also saw that Mitford was morally weak, and obviously flattered by her attentions. In the present stage of affairs, however, for Lady Mitford to show herself annoyed

was the very worst policy she could adopt; and while she kept silence Laurence guessed she was arguing the question within herself, and earnestly hoped she would come to the right decision. He knew she had done so when, just as they were nearing their destination, she looked up with a bright smile and said, "I have been a very dull companion, I am afraid, Colonel Alsager; but the truth is I was full of thought."

"A bad thing to bring out to a picnic, Lady Mitford. I should advise you to discard it as speedily as possible."

"I fully intend to do so, and hope every one else will follow your advice. By the way, I may say, 'Physician, heal thyself;' for you've been most sedate ever since we started."

"I was wondering," laughed Laurence, "among other things, what the groom seated behind us could think of us. He's young, I see, and may possibly therefore imagine that silence is a sign of good-breeding."

"In that case, in his opinion we must be perfect aristocrats, for we've not exchanged a

word. Ah, here comes the cavalcade ; how well Mrs. Hammond looks !—doesn't she ? and how perfectly she sits her horse !”

“ Yes, she rides admirably, and — ah, I thought so ; she has just discovered we were looking at her, or she would not have done that.”

“ That” was to put her horse at a bit of bank and hedge bordering the grass-meadow, on which she and her party were cantering. She cleared it admirably, and drew rein close by the phaeton. As her horse jumped, Mrs. Hammond caught Laurence's eye, and her own lighted up with a saucy triumph ; the exercise had done her good, and she was in great spirits.

“ Well, dear Lady Mitford, I hope you've enjoyed your drive ; no accident this time, I see. But Colonel Alsager is a good whip.—I've heard your praises sung often by men who really understand the subject, Colonel Alsager. They say you have the very hand for a restive animal—light, but firm.”

“ They get away from me sometimes, though, Mrs. Hammond,” said Laurence, looking up.

“Ah, that happens with every one,” she replied; “but you always conquer at last, don’t you?”

“Always; and when I get them in hand again, I make them remember their freaks, and pay for them.”

“You’re quite right,” said she carelessly. “Ah, here is Major Winton. I assure you, Lady Mitford, the Major is the most perfect escort; full of talk and fun, he never suffers you to be dull for an instant. And there’s the break arrived, and that energetic Captain Bligh managing every thing as usual. What very large hampers! And I declare there’s Sir Charles arrived before any of us, and superintending the laying of the cloth in that romantic-looking old tower.”

Lady Mitford caught sight of her husband at the same time, and hurried off to him. She was full of penitence, and wanted to set herself right with him at once.

“Ah, and there’s Lady Mitford off at the mere sound of his name. Look at that, Colonel

Alsager, and—will you have the kindness to help me to dismount, Colonel Alsager?—No, thank you, Major, I won't trouble you; the Colonel is already on the ground. There, Laurence Alsager," she whispered, as she sprang from the saddle, "that is what I pine for,—domestic love;" and she heaved a little sigh, and tapped the ground with the delicate little riding-boot, which the lifting of her habit had exposed.

For an instant Laurence was taken off his guard, and said bitterly, "When you might have had it, you spurned it;" then recovering himself, he added, "However, we have had that out once, and—"

"And here is Major Winton," said Mrs. Hammond in her airiest manner. "Luncheon already, eh? then you shall give me your arm, Major, for this turf-hill is awkward to climb, especially in a habit."

Meanwhile Georgie had hurried away to where her husband was standing watching the laying of the cloth in the one room of the keep, by the

old châtelaine and her granddaughter. Georgie made her way up to him, and with the tears rising in her eyes, said, "Oh, Charley, I'm so glad I have found you; I wanted to speak to you."

"Did you, little woman?" said he, looking down at her in great astonishment; "what about? Nothing left behind, is there?"

"No; that is—at least—I don't know; it was not about that I wanted to speak."

"What was it, then? Nothing the matter with the ponies?—not another accident, eh?"

"No, oh no; I only wanted to say that I hoped you would not be annoyed at—at any thing I did when we started from home to-day—about the way in which the party was divided, I mean."

"Why, you silly little woman, of course not; you had nothing to do with it. If Winton chose to make himself ridiculous, it wasn't your fault. There, come, dry your eyes, Georgie, and let's go and look after the people."

So then, he had not noticed her anger or

her foolish speech at all. Georgie hardly knew whether to be pleased or vexed at the discovery.

The indefatigable Captain Bligh had now brought his arrangements to a head, and all was ready for luncheon. A large fire burned in the great open fireplace of the old room, lighting up the grim old walls, and flickering through the narrow slips and embrasures, whence in old days the archers had done good service. Lady Mitford headed the table, with Lord Dollamore and Major Maxse, who had ridden over with some of his brother officers, on either side. Mrs. Masters was delighted to find herself next to Colonel Alsager ; Tom Charteris was placed opposite the largest piece of cold beef, and told to go on carving it until somebody stopped him ; Mrs. Charteris was acting as a kind of female aide-de-camp to Captain Bligh ; and if Mrs. Hammond found Major Winton, who was on one side of her, unusually talkative, she could make no such complaint of Sir Charles Mitford, who sat on the other side, and was unusually silent.

The meal went off with great success. Every body was hungry, and nearly every body was good-tempered; there was abundance of champagne, and the officers and the young ladies had a great deal of laughter; and then they set out to explore the ruins, and there was that charming story of the murdered lady, and the spot where she appeared was pointed out by the old housekeeper, who told the legend in a deliciously-funny manner; and Tom Charteris hid himself behind a buttress, and at its conclusion bounced out among them with a great roar, clanking a dog-chain which he had picked up. All the ladies screamed, and Ellen Tyrrell was so frightened, that she nearly fainted, and had to be supported by Frank Somers, the officer who had ridden with her from Redmoor; and even when she recovered she was so weak as to be compelled to walk very slowly, so that she and her companion were some distance behind the rest of the party.

With this exception they all kept together; and Georgie had the satisfaction of engaging

her husband's arm during the greater portion of their stay. When the time came for their return, the only change made was, that Mrs. Masters had manœuvred so successfully as to induce Lady Mitford to change places with her,—Georgie returning in the break, and Laurence driving the widow in the phaeton. But this time the equestrians all started together. Sir Charles did not tear away on Tambour Major; for though still annoyed with Mrs. Hammond, he had by this time got his temper under control. It was a trying time for Tambour Major, who hated being held back, and pushed and jumped so as to be very disagreeable company at close quarters. He was very disagreeable indeed to Major Winton, who had eaten a large lunch, and wanted to digest it quietly; and equally disagreeable to Frank Somers and Ellen Tyrrell, who were engaged in a conversation which compelled them to keep their horses at a walking-pace. The only person who was really pleased was Mrs. Hammond, who in Tambour Major's struggles and plunges saw her way to

the end which she had all along intended to accomplish.

“That’s more show than business, I’m thinking, Sir Charles,” said she, pointing with her whip to the horse as he gave a tremendous plunge.

“How do you mean ‘show,’ Mrs. Hammond? I only know it’s all I can do to hold him steady.”

“Let him have his head, then; he looks as if he would rush his fences, and had not the least notion of steady jumping.”

“You should have seen him this morning; he—”

“You took good care I should not, by running away from us.”

“He’d do just the same going home. I can take you the way I came, over some of the prettiest jumps you have ever seen,” said Mitford, getting nettled about his horse. “Come, who’ll follow?”

“I, for one,” said Mrs. Hammond; but no one else spoke.

“They only want a lead;—come, let us show them the way;” and as he spoke, Sir Charles turned his horse out of the high-road up a short sloping embankment on to a broad stretch of moorland, and with Mrs. Hammond close by his side, was away at full gallop. The rest of the riding-party looked after them, but did not attempt to follow. Major Winton, finding himself decidedly *de trop*, lit a cigar, and jogged lazily along by himself, while the others continued their conversation.

Away go the big black horse and the dark iron-gray, side by side, flying over the purple moorland, Lady Jane holding her own well with her companion, let him tear and struggle as he may to shake her off. Now far away to the right looms dark the first obstacle, which Sir Charles points out with his whip, and at sight of which Mrs. Hammond rings out a merry little laugh. As they approach, it develops itself as a double line of posts and rails, good stiff oak timber, which must either be cleared or declined, through which there is no scrambling. Tambour Major sees it

already and rushes at it with a great snort of triumph, clearing it at a bound. Nor is the gray to be balked; scarcely has he alighted, foam-flecked and trembling, in the field beyond, than Lady Jane is by his side.

“That’s number one,” said Sir Charles; “the next we shall find just at the end of—” but Mrs. Hammond laid her whip upon his arm. She had previously looked round and marked that they were far out of the range of observation by their late companions.

“Quite enough,” she said; “I am satisfied with Tambour Major’s performances, and own I did him grievous injustice. From the manner in which he went at that, I am certain he could do any thing. Besides,” she added, bending forward and patting Lady Jane’s neck with her pretty dog-skin gauntlet, “I wanted to speak to you.”

“To me, Mrs. Hammond?”

“Yes, to you—to you, alone. You are angry with me?”

“I—angry? ‘Pon my word I can assure you—I—”

“Ah, don't deny it.” Her voice dropped into its most musical and softest key. “Do you think I am not quick to read any change in your manner?”

“No, but really—I haven't the least right to—”

“The least right! I thought you had promised to be my friend,—my firm, steadfast, constant friend. Ah, if you knew how I have longed for such a friend,—one in whom I could confide, and who would advise me!”

She dropped her head on her breast as she said this, and the red rays of the dying sun touched the tight braids of her chestnut hair with gold.

“Such a friend you will find in me,” said Mitford; “I meant it when I said it—I mean it now.”

“No,” said Laura plaintively, “no; you have other ties and other claims upon you, and it must not be. The world cannot understand such confidence as I would give and receive; it is too pure and too earnest for worldly comprehension. Already—but I won't speak of that.”

“Finish your sentence, please.”

“No, it was nothing, really nothing.”

“Then tell me, or I shall fancy it was something. Tell me.”

“How you compel me to obey you! I was going to say—it’s excessively silly of me; very probably it was only my own foolish notion, but I’m so nervous and anxious about any thing which concerns—my friends; I thought that Lady Mitford seemed a little annoyed at your obvious intention of riding with me this morning.”

She stole a look at him under her hat to see how he received this shot.

“Who? Georgie! annoyed? Oh, you must have been mistaken. I should have noticed it in an instant if that had been the case.”

“You think so! Well, then, very likely it was my mistake. And I was so frightened, so fearful of causing any misunderstanding between you, so terrified at the thought of getting you into trouble, that I at once called that odious Major Winton into my service, and have suffered him to bore me with his *niaiseries* throughout the day.”

“Oh, *that* was the reason that you flirted with Winton, then! I thought—”

“Thought what? Ah, I’ve caught you! you were angry, then?”

“Well, perhaps,—just a little.”

“I should have been deeply hurt if you had not been; it would have showed that you had no real interest in me, and that would be dreadful. Just before I knew you, I held my life as utterly valueless, the daily repetition of a dull dreary task,—nothing to live for, nobody to care for. And this morning when I thought that you were really angry with me, that feeling came back so hopelessly—oh, so hopelessly! I think I should die if I had no one to take interest in me now.”

She moved her hand towards the little pocket in her saddle-flap for her handkerchief, but he stopped it in its descent and held it in his own.

“While I live,” said he, “you will never have cause to make that complaint.”

And their eyes met,—hers soft and dreamy, his fierce and eager. A delicious interchange of glances to the persons concerned, but perhaps not

so pleasant to a looker-on. Apparently very displeasing to the only one then present—a tall slim woman, picking her way in a very cattish manner across the adjoining meadow; who stopped on catching sight of the equestrians, frowned heavily as she watched them, and crouched under the shadow of the hedge until they had passed.

CHAPTER III.

CHECK.

THE day after the winter picnic Sir Charles Mitford sat in that little snuggerly next his dressing-room, which had been so deftly fitted up for him by Captain Bligh, in the enjoyment of a quiet after-breakfast pipe. Breakfast was on the table at Redmoor from nine to twelve. Each guest chose his own time for putting in an appearance; rang for his or her special teapot, special relay of devilled kidney, ham, kipper, eggs, or bloater; found his or her letters placed in close proximity to his or her plate; breakfasted, and then went away to do exactly as he or she liked until luncheon, which was the real gathering-hour of the day. On the morning in question everybody had been late, except Major Winton, who, deeply disgusted with the proceedings of the

previous day, had routed up one of the under-keepers at daybreak, and trudged away to his usual shooting-ground. Sir Charles had turned out at ten, but had found no one in the breakfast-room save Captain Bligh, deep in the perusal of the newly-arrived copy of *Bell's Life*. So Sir Charles read his letters, which were of a prosaic business-like character, and ate his breakfast, which he rather enjoyed, and then went up to his room, taking the *Times* with him. Not, however, for the purpose of reading it—Charley seldom resorted to that means of passing time; he never could understand what fellows saw to read in the papers; for beyond the police-intelligence and the sporting-news and the advertisements of horses to be sold, all that enormous sheet of news, gathered with such care and expense, was utterly blank to him. To-day he did not even want to read his usual portion of the paper; he took it up with him half-unconsciously; he wanted to smoke and to think—to smoke a little and to think a great deal.

So he sat before the cheerful fire in the cosey

little room, the firelight glancing on the red-flock paper, and illumining the "Racing Cracks" and the "Coaching Recollections;" pictures which the Messrs. Fores furnished for the delectation of the sporting-men of those days, and which are never seen in these. They were better and healthier in tone than the studies of French females now so prevalent, and infinitely more manly and national. The smoke from his pipe curled round his head, and as he lay back in his chair and watched it floating in its blue vapour, his thoughts filled him with inexpressible pleasure. He was thinking over what had happened the day before, and to him the picnic was as nothing. He only remembered the ride home. Yes; his thoughts were very, very pleasant; his vanity had been flattered, his fur had been stroked the right way. This was his first experience of flirtation since his marriage; and he stood higher than usual in his own opinion when he found that he had attracted the notice of—to say the least of it—a very pretty woman. Very pretty; no doubt about that! By

Jove! she looked perfection in that tight-fitting robe. What a splendid figure she had,—so round and plump, and yet so graceful! and her general turn-out was so good—such natty gloves and jolly little white collars and cuffs, and such a neat riding-whip! And that lovely chestnut hair, gathered into that gleaming coil of braids under her chimney-pot hat! How beautifully she rode too! went at those posts and rails as calmly as though she had been cantering in the Row. He watched her as the mare rose at them; and, but for a little tightening of the mouth, not a feature of her face was discomposed, while most women would have turned blue through sheer fright, even if they would have had pluck to face such a jump at all, which he doubted.

It was uncommonly pleasant to think that such a woman was interested in him; would look forward to his presence, would regret his absence, and would associate him with her thoughts and actions. What an earnest, impulsive, sensitive creature she was! She had seen in an instant what had annoyed him yesterday! Not like

Georgie—he felt a slight twinge of conscience as he thought of her—not like Georgie, who had supposed he was vexed at something she had said, poor child! No; that other woman was really wonderful—so appreciative and intelligent. How cleverly she had befooled that hard-headed old Winton for the sake of keeping things square! Winton was like a child in her hands; and though he could not bear ladies' society, and was supposed to be never happy except when shooting or smoking, had cantered by her side and tried to make civil little speeches, and bowed and smiled, like a fellow just fresh from Eton. And how cleverly she had managed that business about their getting away when she wanted to speak to him! Poor little thing, how frightened she was too at the idea of his being angry, as though one could be angry with a creature like that! And how pretty she looked when her eyes filled with tears and her voice trembled! Gad! she must feel something stronger than interest in him for her to show all that. Yes, by Jove!—there was no use in denying it to himself any longer,—this little

woman was thoroughly fascinated. He recalled the events of that homeward ride—the talk, the looks, the long, long hand-clasp, the passionate manner in which, just before they reached the house, she had implored him to remember that she counted on him, and on him alone, for advice and aid in the troubles of her life. By the way, what were the troubles of her life? She had dwelt very much upon them generally, but had never thought it necessary to go into detail. She spoke frequently of being tied to an invalid husband, of having been intended originally for something better than a sick man's nurse; but that could not prey upon her mind very much, as she was scarcely ever with her husband, or if it did, it was not a case in which any advice or any aid of his would be of much use to her. No; the advice and aid, and the intimate friendship, were devices by which she was endeavouring to blind herself and him to the real state of the case, to the fact that she was deeply, madly in love with him, and that he—well, he— What was that? a rustle of a dress

in the passage outside, a low tap at the door. Can it be she?

The door opened, and a woman entered—not Mrs. Hammond, but Miss Gillespie. Sir Charles Mitford's heart had beat high with expectation; its palpitation continued when he recognised his visitor, though from a different cause. He had risen, and remained standing before the fire; but Miss Gillespie made herself comfortable in a velvet *causeuse* on the other side of the snug fireplace, and pointing to his chair, said:

“You had better sit down again. I shall be some time here.”

As though involuntarily, Mitford re-seated himself. He had scarcely done so when she said:

“You did not expect me? You don't seem glad to see me?”

“Are you surprised at that?” he sneered. “I should be glad never to set eyes on you again.”

“Exactly; as we used to say in the old days, ‘them's my sentiments.’ I reciprocate your cordial feelings entirely. And I can't conceive what adverse fate drove you to come with a pack of

swaggering, sporting, vulgar people, into a part of the country where I happened to be quietly and comfortably settled; for, as I pointed out to you at our last interview, I was the original settler, and it is you who have intruded yourself into my territory.”

“You did not come here to repeat that, I suppose?”

“Of course not; and that’s exactly a point I want to impress upon you—that I never repeat. I hint, I suggest, I command, or I warn—once; after that I act.”

“You act now, you’re always acting, you perpetually fancy yourself on the boards. But it does not amuse me, nor suit me either, and I won’t have it. What did you come here for?”

“Not to amuse you, Sir Charles Mitford, you may be certain, nor to be amused myself; for a heavier specimen of our landed gentry than yourself is not, I should hope for the credit of the country, to be found. You were never much fun; and it was only your good looks, and a certain soft manner that you had, that made you get on at all

in our *camaraderie*. No; I came here on business."

"On business! Ah, it's not very difficult to imagine what kind of business. You want money of course, like the rest of them."

"I want money, and come to *you* for it! No, Charles Mitford; you ought to know me better than that. You ought to know that if I were starving, I would steal a loaf from a child, or rob a church, rather than take, much more ask for, a single penny from you. Like the rest of them, did you say? So they have found you out and begun to bleed you!—the pitiful curs!"

"Well, what do you want, then? My time's precious."

"It is indeed, my friend; if you did but know all, you'd find it very precious indeed. But never mind that; now for my business. I want you to do something."

"And that is—"

"To give up making love to Mrs. Hammond. Now, be quiet; don't put yourself in a rage, and don't try those uplifted eyebrows, and that general

expression of injured astonishment, on me, because it won't do. I was not born last week, and my capacity for gauging such matters is by no means small. Besides, I happened yesterday to be taking my walks abroad in a meadow not far from the western lodge of Redmoor Park, the seat of Sir Charles Mitford, Bart., and I happened to witness an interview of a very tender and touching kind, which took place between a lady and a gentleman, both on horseback. I imagined something of the kind was going on. I saw something when you were leaving the house that night at Torquay which would have surprised any one who had not learned as much of Mrs. Hammond as I had during the time I had been with her. But since we have been here my suspicions have been confirmed, and yesterday's proceedings left no doubt upon my mind. So I determined to speak to you at once, and to tell you that this must not, and shall not be!"

Mitford's face grew very dark as he said :

"And suppose I were to ask you how the flirtation which you allege exists between me

and—and the lady you have named,—which I utterly and entirely deny,—suppose I were to ask how this flirtation affects you, and, in short, what the devil business it is of yours?”

“How it affects me? Why—no, but that’s too preposterous. Not even you, with all your vanity, could possibly imagine that I have in my own mind consented to forget the past, that I have buried the hatchet, that I have returned to my *premier amour*, and am consequently jealous of your attentions to Mrs. Hammond.”

“I don’t suppose that. But I can’t see what other motive you can possibly have.”

“You can’t, and you never shall. I don’t choose to tell you; perhaps I have taken compassion on your wife, who is very pretty—of her style—and seems very good and all that, and very fond of you, poor silly thing! and I don’t choose her to be tormented by you. Perhaps I want that poor wretched invalid to die in peace, and not to have his life suddenly snuffed out by the scandal which is sure to arise if this goes on. Perhaps—but no matter! I don’t intend

to give my reasons, and I've told you what I want."

"And suppose I tell you—as I do tell you—I won't do what you want, and I defy you! What then?"

"Then I will compel you."

"Will you? Do you think I don't know the screw which you would put on me? You'd proclaim all about my former life, my connection with that rascally crew, of whom you were one—"

"Who brought me into it?"

"No matter;—of whom you were one! You'd rake up that story of the bill with my uncle's name to it. Well, suppose you did. What then? It would be news to nobody here—they all know of it."

"No, they don't all know of it. Lord Dollamore does, and so does that good-looking man with the beard, Colonel Alsager, and perhaps Captain Bligh. But I doubt if one of the others ever heard of it: these things blow over, and are so soon forgotten. And it would be very awk-

ward to have the story revived here. Why, the county families who have called, and are inclined to be civil—I heard you boasting of it the other day—would drop you like a red-hot coal. The officers quartered in the barracks would cut you dead; the out-going regiment would tell the story to the in-coming regiment; you would never get a soul over here to dinner or to stop with you, and you would be bored to death. That's not a pleasant look-out, is it?"

He sat doggedly silent until she spoke again.

"But that is not nearly all. I have it in my power to injure your position as well as your reputation; to compel you to change that pretty velvet lounging-coat for a suit of hodden gray, that meerschaum-bowl for a lump of oakum, this very cheery room for — But there's no need to dilate on the difference: you'll do what I ask?"

"And suppose I were to deny all your story."

"Ah, now you're descending to mere childishness. How could you deny what all the men I

have mentioned know thoroughly well? They are content to forget all about it now, and to receive you as a reclaimed man; but if they were asked as men of honour whether or not there had been such a scandal, of course they would tell the truth. Come, you'll do what I ask?"

She had won the day; there was no doubt about that. Any bystander, had one been there, could have told it in a moment; could have read it in his sullen dogged look of defeat, in her bright airy glance of triumph.

"You'll do what I ask?"

"You have me in your hands," he said in a low voice.

"I knew you would see it in the right light," she said, rising. "You see, after all, it's very little to give up; the flirtation is only just commencing, so that even you, with your keen susceptibility, cannot be hard hit yet. And you have such a very nice wife, and it will be altogether so much better for you now you are *rangé*, as they say. You'll have to go to the village-church regularly when you're down here, and to become a magis-

trate, and to go through all sorts of other respectabilities with which this style of thing would not fit at all. Now, good-bye ;” and she turned to go.

“Stay !” he called out ; “when may I expect a repetition of this threat for some new demand ?”

“That rests entirely with yourself. As I have said from the first, I did not seek you ; you intruded yourself into my circle. I like my present mode of life—for the present—and don’t want to change it. Keep clear of me, and we shall never clash. Again, good-bye.”

She made a pretty little bow and, undulating all over, left the room as quietly as she had entered it.

When she had closed the door Mitford rose from his chair with a long sigh of relief, loosened his cravat, and shook his fist.

“Yours to-day, my lady—yours to-day ; but my chance will come, and when it does, look out for yourself.”

CHAPTER IV.

COUNTERCHECK.

MR. EFFINGHAM began to think that the position of affairs was growing serious. A month had elapsed since his interview with old Mr. Lyons at the Net of Lemons, and he had not gained one scrap of information as to the whereabouts of the holder of the forged bill, which was to be held *in terrorem* over Sir Charles Mitford for money-extracting purposes, and which was finally to be given up for an enormous round sum. Not a single scrap; and worse than all, he had so devoted himself to this one scent, that his other chances of money-getting were falling into disuse. Not that there was much to be done elsewhere; it was the off-racing season, so that his trade of tipster and tout, with occasional sallies into the arena

of welching, could not have been turned to very profitable purpose. The Bank authorities had lately been terribly wideawake; several packets of slippery greasy half-crowns, and many rolls of soft sleezy bank-notes, lay hid in their manufacturer's and engraver's workshops, waiting a better time for their circulation. There had been some notable burglaries both in town and country. Gentlemen with blackened faces who wore smock-frocks over their ordinary clothes had done some very creditable work in out-of-the-way mansions and London houses, whose owners were entertaining company in the country, and the melting-pots of old Mr. Lyons and others of his fraternity were rarely off the fire. But this branch of trade was entirely out of Mr. Effingham's line. "He's a good un at passing a half-bull or at spinning a flash fiver. There's a 'air about him that goes down uncommon. He's fust-rate for that, is D'Ossay Butler; but as rank a little cur as ever waddled. When he thinks traps is on, he's off; and as to my cracksman's business, or any thing where pluck's wanted,

Lor' bless you, you might as well have a girl in highstrikes as D'Ossay." That was what his companions said of him, and it was pretty nearly true. Where a little swaggering bantam-cock demeanour was of use, D'Ossay succeeded; but where any thing like physical courage or physical force was required, he was no good at all.

When the lion is on short commons, the jackal is generally in a very bad way. If Mr. D'Ossay Butler was hard up, the condition of tall-hatted Mr. Griffiths was necessarily frightful. That worthy member of society was financially at the lowest ebb, and had resorted to a trade which he reserved for the depths of despair, a mild card-sharping—a "three, two, and vun" game, in which it was an impossibility for the bystander to point out the exact position of the king—at low public-houses. During all his wanderings, however, he kept his eyes open to the necessity of obeying his instructions from D'Ossay Butler, to the necessity of discovering the whereabouts of Lizzy Ponsford, the holder of the bill. There was no

slum that he visited; no public-house, where he first propitiated the landlord by the purchase of half-a-pint of ale, and then proceeded to suggest to the notice of the two or three sawney-looking men at the bar a "curous little game he had there, at which 'atfuls of money had been von, and which was the favourite recreation of the horficers of the Queen's Life-Guards at the Windsor Barracks, where he'd 'ad the pleasure of introducin' it 'imself;" no pedestrian ground, no penny-gaff, where he did not get into conversation with somebody connected with the premises, and try to worm out that all-important secret. But all was of no avail. Many of the persons he spoke to knew or had heard of Tony Butler, and paid many handsome compliments to the deceased—"a vide-avake vun and no mistake," "a feller as vould take your coat off your back on to his own," &c.; but very few had known Lizzie Ponsford, and those had not seen or heard of her for a considerable time.

So Mr. Griffiths began to keep clear of Mr.

Effingham. There was nothing to be got from his employer but abuse, and that was an article of which Mr. Griffiths perhaps had a surfeit, especially after he had picked up a few stray eighteen-pences from the frequenters of the Pig and Whistle, at the noble game of the "three, two, and vun." But one night, finding himself in the neighbourhood of the Strand, and having had rather a successful evening,—he had won fifteen shillings from a sailor, at a public-house in Thames Street; a sailor who paid him rigidly, and then cursed him for an adjective swab and kicked him into the street,—Mr. Griffiths thought he would take a little refreshment at Johnson's. On presenting the crown of his hat within the swing-doors, that article was immediately recognised by Mr. Effingham, seated moodily in the nearest box, and its owner hailed in the nearest approach to a voice of thunder which that small gentleman could accomplish.

"Come in; I see you!" called out the little man. "I've been wondering what had become of you all this time. I thought you'd gone to stay

with some swell in the country for the hunting-season. I was goin' to ask if they'd got your address at the *Morning-Post* office, that I might write you a line and see if you could find it convenient to lend me a trifle."

"You must be in luck to have such spirits, D'Ossay,—you must," said Mr. Griffiths sententially. "Out of collar and out at elbows—that's what I've been out of. Look at my coat," pointing to his arms; "shining like bees-wax. Look at my crabshells," pointing to his boots; "as leaky as an old punt, reg'larly wore down to the sewin', and all through elberin' and cadgin' my way into every crib where I thought there was a chance of my comin' at what we wanted to know."

"And what good have you done with all that tremendous exertion?"

"No good,—not a scrap. I suppose you've been at the same game? How have you got on?"

"About the same as you have. Just as 'ealthy my look out is."

"Well, I'll tell you what I intend to do.

I've worked high and low, here and there, like a blessed black slave, to find out where this gal is, and I've had no luck no more than you have. And I intend to cut it. I'm sick of all this dodgin' and divin', and askin' every body after somebody that nobody knows. I intend to cut it. That's what I intend!"

"And let it go altogether, after all the trouble we've had; after— Not such a flat, Griffiths; don't you fear. Look here, my boy," said Mr. Butler, putting his hand into his waistcoat-pocket, and producing therefrom two sovereigns; "do you see that couple of quid? That, with a shilling and a fourpenny-bit, is all that remains to your friend D'Ossay of the current coin of this realm—the real business, I mean, and no fakement. But these two simple skivs shall be turned into fifty or a hundred before the end of the week. And to show you that I'm not boasting, I'll stand a drink. Here, waiter!—brandy hot, two!"

Mr. Griffiths gazed in double admiration at his friend's generosity and pluck; but low as he was,

he really admired the latter, from which he might possibly derive ultimate benefit, more than the former, from which he was about to receive immediate advantage. After the first sip of his grog he said—

“And how’s it coming off?”

“I don’t mind telling you,” said D’Ossay. “There’s nothing to hide — why should there be? I’m going to try it on again with our friend the Bart.”

“Without the bill?”

“Of course, without the bill, considering that neither you nor I have been able to get hold of it. But didn’t I raise a fiftier out of him without the bill before, and why shouldn’t I do that, or double that, now?”

“Ah, why indeed?” said Mr. Griffiths, who always coincided when he did not know what else to do, and there was nothing to lose by so doing.

“You see, I thought he might down upon me with the extortion dodge, and hand me over to a bobby. But there’s no bobbies where he is now ;

he couldn't ring the bell and send out that sleek-looking vally, and have me in Vine Street in a brace of shakes. He's down in the country ever so far away. I called at Eaton Place to-day, and they gave me his address."

"And how do you mean to get at him? Not by writin'? Don't trust your fist on paper."

"Teach your grandmother, Griffiths! How do I mean to get at him? Why, by paying one of those yellow-boys to a booking-clerk at 6.30 to-morrow morning, and going down by the Great-Western parliamentary to Torquay, which is close by the swell's place."

"And then?"

"Then I shall put up at some quiet crib, and go over the next morning and take him on the bounce—just as I did before."

"And suppose he shows fight and won't part?"

"Then I must send up a line to you, and you must get up a friendly lead, or something of that kind, and work me back to town."

"And you'll chance all that?"

“I’d chance a mile more than that for such stakes, where there’s no knockin’ about or head-punchin’ business, Griffiths. I’ve not got what they call animal courage, which means I don’t like being hurt. Some people do, I suppose, and they have animal courage. Now, let’s settle where I’m to write to you, and all the rest of the business.”

Mr. Effingham spoke thus cheerily, and seemed thoroughly determined on his undertaking and confident of his success, as he sat, late at night, in a warm brilliantly-lit tavern-parlour, with the odours of tobacco and hot spirituous drinks fragrant to him floating pleasantly about. He took quite another view of the subject when he turned out between five and six the next morning into a bald blank street, swept by torrents of rain, in which no one visible but the policeman and the few vagrants huddling round the early-breakfast stall at the corner. Mr. Effingham wrapped himself up as best he might in his fifteen-shilling pea-jacket, and under cover of a

big gingham umbrella, borrowed from his landlady, made the best fight he could against the wind and the rain, which, however, had so far the best of it that he was tolerably damp by the time he reached the Paddington station.

He took his ticket, and seated himself on the shelf in one of those wooden boxes which benevolent railway directors set aside for the conveyance of parliamentarians. His companions were two navvies, who had not slept off the effects of last night's drunkenness, and whose language made Mr. Effingham—albeit not unused to listening to “tall talk”—shrink with disgust; an old woman with steaming black garments, and an umbrella which would not stand up in any corner and would not lie under the seat, and got itself called most opprobrious names for its persistence in leaning against the nearest navvy; and a young woman with a swollen face tied up in a check cotton pocket-handkerchief. Mr. Effingham made an effort to let the very small window on his side down, but the young woman with the toothache had it up in an instant; while the aperture on the

other side was constantly stuffed with the body of one or other of the drunken navvies, who fought for the privilege of leaning half out of the carriage, and running the chance of being knocked to pieces against arches and tunnel-walls. So the navvies fought and swore, and the old woman sniffed and took little snatches of sleep, waking with a prolonged snort and start; and the young woman moaned and rubbed her face, until Mr. Effingham was nearly mad. Circumstances were almost too much for him; he grew first desponding, and then desperate. He wished he had never started on his journey; he would get out at the next station at which the train stopped (and as the parliamentary duly stopped at every station, he would not have had to wait long); he would go back to London. No, he would not do that; he had boasted about his intention to Griffiths, and would lose all authority over that satellite if he did not show at least the semblance of a fulfilment of his purpose. He would get out at the next station, and wait at a public-house in the village until the next day, and

then go back and tell Griffiths he had seen Sir Charles Mitford, and had found it impossible to get any money out of him. And then, just as the whistle shrieked out and the engine reduced its particularly slow pace to a slower still, preparatory to pulling up, Mr. Effingham's hands strayed into his waistcoat-pocket, where he found only a half-sovereign and a few shillings remaining—the extent of his earthly possessions. That decided him; he would go on, come what might! Such a state of impecuniosity nerved him to any thing; and—the absence of policemen in rural districts still pleasantly remembered—he determined upon pursuing his original idea and of continuing his journey.

The next day Sir Charles Mitford, who had been compelled to devote the morning to dry details of business connected with his estate—details to which he listened conscientiously, over which he shook his head visibly, and which he did not in the least understand—had got rid of the man of business from the library about noon, and was just thinking he would go and

see what Mrs. Hammond was doing, when Banks entered, and closing the door after him in a secret and mysterious manner, announced "That party, sir."

"What 'party,' Banks?"

"The party that called in Heaton Place, Sir Charles, and ast to see you, and you wouldn't see at first, but did afterwards, Sir Charles."

"I don't know yet whom you mean, Banks."

"The naval party, Sir Charles; though look-in' more like after the coats and humbrellas in the 'all. The naval party as served with you on board some ship, Sir Charles."

"Oh," said Mitford hurriedly, "I recollect now; one of—one of my sailors from my old yacht—yes, yes, of course. You can show him into my own room, Banks. I'll go up there at once."

"'Sailor,'" said Mr. Banks to himself as he walked down the passage, "'from my hold yacht,' did he say? Why, if what they says at the Club is right, the honly naval concern which he knew

of before comin' in for the title was the Fleet Pris'n! This is a queer start about this feller, this is. I wonder why he wants to see Mitford, and why Mitford can't refuse hisself to him?—This way, young man." And he beckoned haughtily to Mr. Effingham, and preceded him to his master's room. Sir Charles had already arrived there, and was seated in his large arm-chair when the visitor was shown in.

Ah, what a different visitor from the Mr. Effingham who called in Eaton Place! Then full of vulgar confidence and brazen audacity; now flinching, slouching, cowardly. His dress bedraggled from the previous day's wretched journey, his manner downcast from the preconceived notion of failure in his mission, and the impossibility of enforcing his previous demands. A very wretched specimen of humanity was Mr. Effingham as he stood before Sir Charles Mitford, shifting his limp hat from hand to hand, and waiting to be asked to sit down.

When Banks had retired and closed the door, Sir Charles looked up quietly and steadily at his

visitor, and said, "Well, Mr.—I forget your name—you've broken your promise, as I expected, and come to try and extort money from me again!"

"Extort, Sir Charles! that's not the word, sir; I—"

"That *is* the word, sir! Sheer barefaced robbery and extortion—that's what has brought you down here; deny it if you can! Have you come to ask me for money, or have you not?"

"Well, Sir Charles, I—that is—"

"No shuffling, sir! no prevarication! Have you or not?"

"Well, suppose I have?"

"Suppose you have! And suppose that I, as a justice of the peace and magistrate for the county, make out a warrant for your committal to prison as a rogue and a vagabond? We're a long way from London, and justice's law is to be had down in these parts. Besides, how could you appeal? to whom could you refer? I've made a point of having a few inquiries made about you since you last did me the honour of a call, and I find that

if not a regular gaol-bird, you could at all events be recognised by the police as a swindler and an utterer of base coin. What do you think of that, Mr.—Butler?”

What did he think of it? The realisation of his worst fears, the overthrow of his strongest hopes! He ought to have relied on the presentiment which had told him that the man would take this course, though not so promptly or so strongly. He thought he would try one more bit of bounce, and he shook himself together and put as much impudence as he could command into his look as he said,

“How do you know I’ve not got that forged bill in my pocket?”

“By your face, sir! I can see that as plainly as if it were written there in big black letters! Ah, I knew I was right! Now, what have you got to say to this, Mr.—Butler?”

Mr. Effingham fairly collapsed. “Nothing, Sir Charles,” he stammered. “I’ve nothing to say—only have mercy, Sir Charles! I have not brought the bill with me, but I know where it

is, and could lay my hand on it at any time, Sir Charles. And as to what you said about committing me as a rogue and a vagabond, oh, Lord! don't do it, Sir Charles! pray don't! I'm a poor miserable devil without a rap; but if you'll only let me go, I'll find my way back to town, and never intrude on you again, Sir Charles; I—"

All this time Mr. Effingham had been backing, and with his hand behind him feeling for the handle of the door. Having secured it, he was about to vanish, when Sir Charles called out to him "Stop!" and he stopped at once.

"You say you're hard-up, Mr. Butler?"

"I'm positively stumped, Sir Charles."

"Then you'd be glad to earn a little money?"

"If I could do so—" Mr. Effingham was about to say "honestly," but he thought this would be a little too glaring, so he finished his sentence by substituting, "without incurring any danger, I should be delighted."

"There would not be the slightest danger—"

“By danger I mean, punching of heads and that kind of thing.”

“Precisely; there would be nothing of that. The only person with whom you would be brought into contact would be a woman.”

Mr. Effingham's barometrical mercury rose as quickly as it fell. “A woman!” he said, as he settled his limp collar and gave a pull at his dirty wrist-bands,—“a woman, Sir Charles! Oh, then, I've no fear.”

“Wait and hear what you're required to do, sir, before you give an opinion. The person to whom I allude is at the present moment in this house. She is therefore, although not invited by me, to a certain extent my guest, and it would be impossible for me to appear in the matter. You comprehend me?”

“Perfectly.”

“Especially as she is to be got rid of at once and for ever. When I say ‘got rid of,’ I don't mean it in the slang phrase of the penny romances—I don't mean that the woman is to be killed; but simply that she is to be told that she must remain

here no longer, and the danger of doing so must be strongly pointed out to her."

"Exactly, je twig! Now will you please to tell me the name of this good lady, and what reason I'm to give for insisting on her leavingsuch a very swell and pleasant crib as this appears to be?"

"She is called here Miss Gillespie," said Sir Charles; "but you will have heard of her under a very different name—Lizzie Ponsford."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Effingham, leaping from his chair; "Lizzie Ponsford here! She whom I've been—"

"Well, sir?" asked Sir Charles in astonishment.

"Whom I've been hearing so much about!" said Mr. Effingham, recovering himself. "Lizzie Ponsford here!" he continued, going off again. "Well, that is a rum start!"

"Be good enough to attend to me, sir. She is here, and she is in my way. Her presence worries me, bringing back all sorts of hideous associations that I thought I had got rid of, and never want to have revived. You must see her,

talk to her, and get her to go at once; once gone, I could so arrange matters as to leave little chance of her returning."

"I see!" said Mr. Effingham. "Now the question is, how to work her out of this. What would be the best way to frighten her and get her under your thumb?"

"What is your notion on that point?"

"I scarcely know yet! It will want a little thinking over, but I've no doubt I shall be able to hit upon something. Is she pretty comfortable where she is—likely not to give it up without a struggle?"

"You may take your oath she will not move unless compelled—it is for you to find the something that will compel her."

"Exactly. Well, I don't think that there will be much difficulty about that—at least," said he, correcting himself, for he feared that comparative facility might lessen the reward—"at least, not much difficulty for a man whose head's screwed on the right way. Now about the payment?"

Sir Charles opened a drawer in his desk, and

from a little *rouleau* of gold counted out ten sovereigns. The chink of the money sounded deliciously in Mr. Effingham's hungry ears.

"I will give you these ten sovereigns now," said Sir Charles; "and if you succeed in carrying out all I have told you, I will give you fifty more."

"Will you? Well, I always say what I think, and I say that's liberal. Now look here! Very likely I sha'n't see you again; perhaps I shall have to step it with her, in order to be sure she's safe off and not dodging or likely to walk back again. So when you find she's really gone, just you send a cheque for the fifty, made payable to bearer, mind, and not crossed, to this address;" and bending down over the table he took a pen and a scrap of paper and wrote: Mr. Effingham, Mr. Johnson's, The Brown Bear, Shakespeare Street, Strand, London. "Will you do that?"

"I will."

"Having said so as an honourable gent, I know you'll keep your word. Now, how am I to see her?"

“She walks out every day at three o’clock with her pupil—”

“Her pupil! Lizzie Ponsford’s pupil! My eye!”

“With her pupil,” repeated Sir Charles sternly, “in the chestnut-avenue leading from the lodge-gate. A tall woman with very large eyes, and crisp wavy hair over her forehead; a peculiar-looking woman—you couldn’t mistake her.”

“All right! As I go out of the lodge-gate now, I’ll just say a few words to the old lady that keeps it, that she may know me again—don’t you see?—and not be surprised at my coming in and out. And now, as I shall probably have to hang about here for two or three days, where can I put up?”

“You mustn’t remain here in the house—”

“Lor’ bless you, that would never do! isn’t there a public near?”

“There is the Mitford Arms, within a quarter of a mile of the lodge.”

“I saw it; the carrier’s-cart which brought me over from Torquay stopped there. That’ll do.

I'll be a littery gent gettin' up information about the old county families, or an artist sketchin'—that'll do. Now give me a week clear : if nothing's done by then, you'll have spent ten pound very badly, and I shall have lost my time. But if within that time—and it might be to-morrow or any day—you find she's clean gone, you've got the address, and you'll send the cheque to it?"

"You may rely on me."

"I do thoroughly. Now how am I to get out? It wouldn't do for you to be seen with me—my togs, though just the sort of thing for the littery gent, ain't very swell."

"You can go down this staircase," said Sir Charles, leading him to a landing; "it guides on to the garden, take the first to the right, and you'll come at last to the avenue."

Mr. Effingham put his finger to the limp brim of his hat and departed.

But when he arrived in the chestnut-avenue, and had looked carefully round, and found that he was out of sight of any one in the house, and that there was no one near enough to observe his con-

duct, he rubbed his hands together, and almost cut a caper in the air with delight.

“To think of it!” he said. “There never, never was such luck! D’Ossay, my boy, you’ve got the trick of it somehow. What will Griffiths say now? To think that I’ve been hunting for this woman all this time, and that she’s now placed in my hands—and by this very swell too! Two birds with one stone now. Oh, there’s a much bigger game than the Bart.’s cheque for fifty! But it’ll take a deal of thinking over and planning; and if there’s any one to do that, it’s you, D’Ossay, my boy, and no one else!”

CHAPTER V.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

WHAT was Laurence Alsager doing at Redmoor? He was beginning to ask himself that question very frequently. And that question led to another—why had he come down there at all? He had “done” country-houses and their amusements and had tired of them years before; he had not the slightest liking for any of the guests; he had a vague dislike of the host. Why, then, had he come? He was a man who rarely tried to deceive himself; and when he put this question point-blank to himself the answer was, Why? Why, because you take a certain interest in Lady Mitford—no, I allow that perfectly; nothing dishonourable, nothing which at present could even be described as a love-passion; but a certain interest. You think from all you

have seen that she is not merely very charming in her innocence and simplicity, but really good; and you expect from certain signs which you detect, and with the nature of which you are familiar, that she will have to pass through a very perilous ordeal. It is obvious to you that in society, as it is now constituted, a woman of Lady Mitford's personal attractions and position must incur a very great deal of temptation. This, of course, would be to a great extent avoided if she were secure in the affections and certain of the attentions of her husband; but in the present instance you are constrained to admit, contrary to the opinion which you once publicly expressed, that Sir Charles Mitford is a weak, silly, vain person, who has fallen a victim to the wiles of a thoroughly heartless coquette, and who appears to be going from bad to worse as rapidly as possible. So that your certain interest has brought you down here to watch over the lady. Quixotic and ultra-romantic, is it not? You do not mean it to be so, I know—I give you full credit for that; but still that is the designation it would probably

receive from any of your friends. The truth is, that this—I was almost going to call it parental, but we will say fraternal—this fraternal regard for a very handsome woman is a novelty to you; and hence your enjoyment of it. I said expressly a very handsome woman, because I don't believe that the fraternal sentiment could possibly blossom for an ugly one. Beware of it, my friend, if you please! it's the trickiest, most treacherous elf, this fraternal friendship, that exists; it goes on for a certain period perfectly steadily and properly, and then one morning you find it has deserted you, and left in its place a hot flaming riotous passion that scorches you into tinder, makes you miserable, takes away your appetite, and, in fact, possesses all the qualities which, at one time, you knew so well.

Such was the result of Laurence Alsager's self-examination, and he fully admitted its truth. It was the interest which he took in Lady Mitford that had induced him to visit Redmoor; it was the same feeling which kept him lingering there. Then the interest must have

increased; for the necessity for his self-imposed task of protection and supervision had certainly diminished. The actual fact which had decided his coming was the announcement that Lord Dollamore was to be among the guests. He had always had his own opinion of Lord Dollamore's morality; and the way in which that nobleman had spoken of Lady Mitford in the smoking-room of the Mæcenæ had jarred horribly on Alsager's nerves. There was something too in Laura Hammond's look and in the tone of her voice when she spoke of the probability of Dollamore's being left constantly with the ladies, at which Laurence had taken alarm. But Lord Dollamore seemed to be perfectly innocuous. Laurence had watched him narrowly from the first, and, as in the case of the drive to Egremont Priory, he seemed rather to avoid than to seek opportunities of being in Lady Mitford's company *en tête-à-tête*, and, judging from that and one or two other instances, was apparently desirous of keeping in the background, and of pushing Laurence forward. Could he—?

No; he was a man utterly without principle where women are concerned; but he would never attempt such a game as that, more particularly if he, Laurence Alsager, were involved in it. Certainly Sir Charles was going to the bad more rapidly than Alsager had anticipated; but then it was to be said for him that he clearly had fallen into able hands. There had been few such adepts in the art of flirtation in Europe as Laura Molyneux; and she seemed to have become even more fertile in resources and skilful in their development since her marriage. Any thing like the manner in which she had flirted with Mitford during the first few days of her visit to Redmoor, Laurence, in all his experience, had never seen; and he thought at the time of the Egremont-Priory expedition that things were coming rapidly to an end. Lady Mitford had evidently noticed something that day, some *tendresse* between her husband and Mrs. Hammond, which had annoyed her very much; so much that she had almost called her friends' attention to her disgust. But the sweetness of

her disposition had come to the rescue. Laurence knew, as well as if he had been able to read her thoughts, all that had passed in her mind during that drive in the pony-phaeton; he saw how she had reasoned with herself, and how she had finally determined that she had been hasty, inconsiderate, and in the wrong. He had seen her, immediately on alighting, slip away to join her husband; and he could fully understand that she had made silent atonement for what she imagined to be an outburst of groundless jealousy.

An extraordinary change had come over Mitford within the last few days. Before the picnic, and at the picnic, he had been enthralled, *entété*, eagerly waiting for Mrs. Hammond's every look, every word, and scarcely able to behave with decency to any body else. Since then he had acted quite differently. Had his conscience smitten him for neglecting his wife? No; Laurence did not believe in sudden conscience-smites with such men as Sir Charles Mitford; and he had further noticed that though there was

no open flirtation, there was plenty of eye-telegraphy of a very peculiar and significant kind. They had come to some understanding evidently, for Mrs. Hammond now seldom addressed her conversation to her host, but kept her hand in by practising on the susceptible heart of Major Winton, or by coquetting with some of the officers who were invariably to be found dining at Redmoor. She had tried to *réchauffer* a little of the old story with Laurence, but had encountered something so much more marked than mere disinclination, that she suspended operations at once.

However, be this as it might, the necessity for Alsager's stay at Redmoor, even judged by his own peculiar notions, was at an end. The Dollamore question never had been mooted; the Hammond difficulty seemed entirely in abeyance. What further need was there for him to keep watch and ward over the Redmoor household? He could be back in town as soon as they could, go where he might; *something* would occur during the season, he thought, and he might as well

be there on guard; but that was a matter of only a few hours from wherever he might happen to be.

Whither should he go, then? Not back to London—that was impossible. The week or two he had passed there had thoroughly sickened him of London for some time to come. Paris? No, he thought not! The *bals d'opéra* would be on then,—Frisotte and Rigolette, Celestine and Mogador, Brididi and the Reine Pomaré—oh, yes, he knew it all; it was a very long time since those exercitations of the *cancan*, rebuked by the *sergents-de-ville* in a low grumble of “*Pas si fort! pas si fort! point du télégraphe!*” had afforded him the slightest pleasure. Leicestershire? No, though he had purchased Sir Launcelot, and from merely that short experience of him at Ealing, felt sure that he would “show them the way”—no, not Leicestershire this year, he thought, nor any where else, unless he went down to Knockholt to see his father. Yes, by Jove! he ought to have done that long since, and now he would do it at once.

He settled this in his own mind as he was dressing for dinner about a week after the winter picnic. Settled it not without long deliberation and a little sleep, for he began to give the matter his careful consideration after returning from a long day's shooting; and it was not until he had steamed and lathered himself in a warm bath, had pulled the little sofa in front of the fire, and was contemplating his evening clothes neatly arranged on an adjacent chair, that he began to consider the question. His deliberation involved the putting-up of his feet on the sofa, and that proceeding caused him at once to drop helplessly off to sleep, only to be roused by the loud clanging of the second dinner-bell.

An addition accrued to the dinner-party that day, in the persons of Sir Thomas Hayter, a country neighbour, his wife and daughter. Sir Thomas was a hearty old Tory country squire, who during his one season in London had been captivated by and had married her ladyship; at the time of her marriage a *passée* beauty, now

a thin chip of an old woman, still affecting girlish airs. Miss Hayter was a fine, fresh, dashing, exuberant girl, inclined to flirting, and fulfilling her inclination thoroughly. They infused a little new life into the party; for though Sir Thomas did not talk a great deal, he listened to every thing that was said, and threw in an occasional "Ha! dear me!" with great vigour and effect, while Lady Hayter chirped away to Sir Charles Mitford, asking him about all sorts of London people of whom he had never heard, and quite bewildering him with her volubility. She succeeded better with Mr. Hammond, whose health was fast improving in the soft Devon air, and who, in spite of the strongly-expressed opinion of his wife, had come down to dinner that day. He was seated next to Lady Hayter; and shortly after dinner commenced, he found out that he had known her before her marriage, when she was Miss Fitzgibbon; "used to have the pleasure of meeting you at the Silvesters' in South Audley Street;" and then they entered upon a very long conversation about the acquaintances of their youth,

while all the time each was stealing covert glances at the other, and wondering how it was possible—she, that that cadaverous, parchment-faced, bent invalid could be the handsome boy who in those days had just come up from Haileybury, and was going to India with such good prospects; he, that the old woman with the palpably-dyed purple hair, the scraggy neck, and the resplendent teeth—the gold springs of which were so very visible—could have been Emily Fitzgibbon, about whose beauty every one was raving in '25. Miss Hayter too was very happy; she was immensely taken by Laurence Alsager, next to whom she was seated. She had heard of him often; and two years before, when she was in London, he had been pointed out to her at the Opera; and she—then a young lady of seventeen—had gone home and written about him in her diary, and drawn portraits of him in her blotting-book, and thought him the handsomest creature in the world. She told him this, not of course in so many words, but with that charming quiet way of paying a compliment which some well-bred women possess; and she had also

heard of the catastrophe with the ponies at Ealing, and of his gallant conduct.

“For it was very gallant, you know, Colonel Alsager; any one could see that, even through that ridiculous newspaper report; and it was a splendid jump too. I was talking about it the other day to my cousin Fred Rivers, who knows you, I think; and he said he’d seen the place, and Mr. — I forget his name; the head man up there—said it was as fine a thing as ever was done in Leicestershire; and Fred said he thought so too; ‘bar none,’ he said, in that sporting way, don’t you know, which he has of talking.”

“You make a great deal too much of it, Miss Hayter,” said Laurence, smiling; “I’ve seen Fred Rivers take many such jumps himself, for a better horseman never crossed country.”

“Ah, yes, during a run, I daresay; but this was in cold blood, wasn’t it?—not that I wonder at your doing any thing for Lady Mitford. Isn’t she lovely? I declare I never saw such a perfect face in my life.”

Alsager was about to answer, when Major Maxse spoke from the other side of the table, "Oh, by the way, Colonel Alsager, what Miss Hayter was saying reminds me that you ought not to have driven that day we went to Egremont; you should have gone on horseback. There's a very neat country if you do but know it."

"Did you *drive* over, Colonel Alsager?" asked Miss Hayter in astonishment.

"Yes; I drove Lady Mitford in her ponyphaeton." ("Oh!" in a subdued tone from Miss Hayter.) "Sir Charles was the only one who rode."

"And Mrs. Hammond,—I beg your pardon, and Mrs. Hammond!" said Major Winton, the first words he had spoken since he sat down to dinner. "I too was on horseback, but I can scarcely be said to have ridden. But, coming back, they went away splendidly. I never saw any thing better than the manner in which the first fence was cleared by them both. I daresay it was as good all over the course; but they got away after the first, and we never saw any more of them."

And Major Winton sipped his first glass of post-prandial claret with great gusto. He had paid off Mrs. Hammond for using him on the picnic-day, and throwing him off when she no longer required him. It was to be presumed, however, that Mrs. Hammond had not heard this remark; at least she gave no signs of having done so, being occupied in conversation with Captain Bligh. Sir Charles Mitford grew very red; Miss Hayter looked round, enjoying the fun; and an awkward pause ensued, broken by old Sir Thomas Hayter.

“Didn’t I hear you say you were over at Egremont the other day, Mitford?”

“Yes, Sir Thomas; we went over there, and had a kind of winter picnic.”

“You didn’t see any thing of Tom Boscastle, I suppose?”

“No; we only went to the ruins, and lunched in the keep. Besides, I don’t know him.”

“Ah! you wouldn’t have seen him if you had known him. He keeps quite to himself just now.”

“What’s the matter? is he ill?”

“No, not ill in body, you know. What’s that we used to learn in the Latin grammar—‘*magis quam corpore, aegrotat*—his mind, you know.”

“That’s bad; what has brought that about?”

“Well, you see, he’s got a son, a wild extravagant fellow, who has run through I can’t tell you how much money, which poor Tom could very ill afford, as we all know; and the last thing the vagabond did was to get hold of his father’s cheque-book, and forge his name to a terrible amount.”

Had Sir Thomas been a gentleman of quick perception—a charge which had never been brought against him—he would have been very much astonished at the effect of his anecdote. Sir Charles Mitford turned deadly white. Colonel Alsager frowned heavily, and glanced towards Lady Mitford, who, pale as her husband, looked as if she were about to faint; Lord Dolamore glanced sharply at Sir Thomas Hayter, to see whether he had spoken innocently or with malice prepense. Mrs. Hammond was the

only one who seemed to keep her wits thoroughly about her. She glanced at Lady Mitford, and then pushing her chair back sharply, as though obeying a signal from her hostess, rose from the table, followed of course by all the other ladies.

After their departure, and so soon as the door closed behind them, Lord Dollamore addressed himself to Sir Thomas, asking him if he had heard the report that the Whig Ministry intended to impose a new duty on cider—a subject which he knew would engross the old gentleman's attention, to the exclusion of Tom Boscastle and every one else. And, as Lord Dollamore said afterwards, it was an illimitable subject, for he himself invented the report as a herring across the scent; but under old Hayter's fostering care it grew into a perfect Frankensteinian monster. While they were talking, Sir Charles Mitford filled a bumper of claret, and after swallowing half of it, looked round the table to see the extent of the calamity. Then, for the first time, he acknowledged to himself how thoroughly right the girl Lizzie

Ponsford had been in what she had said. Dolamore evidently knew the story, and Alsager—perhaps Hammond, who was leaning back in his chair, enjoying his Madeira; but he could tell in an instant, by the expression of their faces, that none of the others had heard it. Another link had been forged this evening in the chain of his attachment to that charming Mrs. Hammond! how nobly she had behaved! Poor Georgie had lost her head of course, and had very nearly made a mess of it by fainting, or screaming, or something; but that other woman did just exactly the right thing at the right time. And all for him! He was more infatuated with her than ever. He wondered whether he should ever have the chance of telling her so. He wondered how Butler was progressing in his mission.

By the time the gentlemen arrived in the drawing-room all trace of the little awkwardness at the dessert-table had passed away. Indeed, Miss Hayter was the only one of all the ladies who had noticed Georgie's uneasiness, and she

had not attributed it to its right cause. Now Lady Mitford was looking as serenely lovely as ever, listening to Mrs. Charteris warbling away at the piano; and she looked at her husband with such loving solicitude as he entered the room, that he could not refrain from going up to her, smiling kindly, and pressing her hand as he whispered, "All right! quite blown over."

Then Sir Charles went in search of Mrs. Hammond. She was sitting in a low chair near the fire, with a little table bearing a shaded lamp close by her hand, and was amusing herself by turning over an album of prints. She never gave herself the smallest trouble when left alone with women; she did not care what they thought of her, and, save under peculiar circumstances, she made no effort to please them. She wished to stand well with Lady Mitford, but she considered she had done enough to that end for one day by executing the masterly retreat from the dinner-table. So she sat there idly under the shade of the lamp, and Sir Charles Mitford thought he had never seen her to such advantage. Her rounded figure showed

to perfection in her violet-velvet dress trimmed with soft white lace ; her head reclined lazily on the back of her chair, and her eyes rested with calm indifference on the pages of the album—in-difference which was succeeded by bright vivacity as she raised them and marked her host's approach.

He dropped quietly into a chair close by hers and said, " You have increased my debt of gratitude to you a thousand-fold."

" Have I ?" she replied ; " it has been very easily increased. So easily that I don't know how it has been done."

" Don't you ? Then your natural talent is wonderful. I should think there were few better or more useful stratagems in warfare than the diversion of the enemy's attention from your weak point."

" Oh," she said, " that is not worth remembering ; certainly not worth mentioning again. I am so glad," she added, dropping her voice, " to see you by my side again. I have gone through all kinds of self-examination, imagining I had in some way offended you ; going over in my own mind

all that I had said or done since that delicious ride home from Egremont, and I could not tax myself with having wittingly given you any cause for offence. But you seemed to avoid me, to shrink from me, and I cannot tell you how I felt it."

Voice very low here, looks downcast, and general depression.

"Don't speak in that way," said Sir Charles in the same tone; "you don't understand my position. I could explain, and I will some time or other when I have the chance; not now, because—Yes, you are quite right, Mrs. Hammond, Sir Thomas is a thorough specimen of the good old English—"

"Very sorry to interrupt so pleasant a talk, specially when on so charming a subject as Sir Thomas Hayter," said Lord Dollamore, approaching; "but I come as a deputation from the general company to beg that Mrs. Hammond will sing to us."

"Mrs. Hammond would be charmed," said that lady; "but to-night she is out of voice, and really cannot."

“Do, Mrs. Hammond; as a matter of mere charity, do,” said Lord Dollamore. “That delightful person Mrs. Charteris,—most delightful, and kind, and all that,—has been trilling away every evening until one is absolutely sick of her thin little voice. Do, for pity’s sake, change the note, and let us have a little of your contralto. Do.”

“You’re very polite, Lord Dollamore; and ‘as a matter of mere charity’ I should be delighted to help you, but really I am out of voice and cannot. Stay; the old rule in convivial societies was, or I am mistaken, that one should sing or find a substitute. Now I think I can do the latter. Miss Hammond’s companion, governess, what you will,—Miss Gillespie,—sings charmingly. If Lady Mitford will permit me, I will send for her.”

Georgie, appealed to, was only too well pleased to secure such an aid to the evening’s entertainment; so a message was sent to Miss Gillespie, and she was requested to “bring some songs;” Miss Hayter filling up the interval by playing, sufficiently brilliantly, a *pot-pourri* of dance-music.

Towards the end of this performance the door

opened and Miss Gillespie entered. All eyes were instantly turned towards her, and—in the case of all the men at least—the casual glance grew into a lengthened gaze. She was a very striking-looking woman, with her sallow cheeks, her large eyes, her brown hair rolling in crisp waves on her forehead. She was dressed in a tight-fitting brown-silk dress with handsomely-worked collar and sleeves, and in her hand she carried a roll of music, of which Lord Dollamore stepped forward to relieve her; but she thanked him with a slight bow and sat down on the chair close to the door, still retaining her roll of music in her hand.

When Miss Hayter had ceased playing, Lady Mitford crossed the room and shook hands with Miss Gillespie, offered her refreshment, thanked her very sweetly for the promptitude with which she had acceded to their request, and told her that Mrs. Hammond had already raised their expectation very high. Then Sir Charles Mitford came up somewhat stiffly, and offered his arm to Miss Gillespie and led her to the piano;

and there, just removing her gloves, and without the smallest hesitation or affectation, she sat down, and with scarcely any prelude plunged at once into that most delightful of melodies, "Che farò senza Eurydice," from Glück's *Orfeo*. Ah, what a voice! clear, bell-like, thrilling, touching not merely the tympanum of the ear, but acting on the nerves and on the spinal vertebræ. What melody in it! what wondrous power! and as she poured out the refrain, "Eurydice, Eurydice!" what deep passionate tenderness! The company sat spell-bound; Lord Dollamore, an accomplished musician himself, and one who had heard the best music every where, sat nursing his knee and drinking-in every note. Laurence Alsager, rapt in admiration, had even been guilty of the discourtesy of turning his back on Miss Hayter, whose chatter began to annoy him, and was beating time with his head and hand. Tom Charteris had crept behind his wife, who, far too good a little woman to feel professional jealousy, was completely delighted; and the big tears were rolling down Lady Mitford's face. She was still a

child, you see, and had not gone through the Claronald furnace, where all tears are dried up for ever.

When the song was ended, there came a volley of applause such as is seldom heard in drawing-rooms, and far different from the usual languid "Thank you," which crowns the failure of the amateur. Miss Gillespie looked round elated, as though the sound were pleasant and not unfamiliar to her, and was about to rise from her seat, when Laurence Alsager, who was nearest the piano, advanced, and begged she would remain—he was sure he spoke in the name of all present. So Miss Gillespie, after looking him hard in the face, made him a little bow, and remained at the piano, this time starting off into one of Louis Puget's charming French ballads, "Ta main," which she sung with as much fire and *chic* as if she had never quitted Paris.

At the conclusion of the second song, Lady Mitford came across to the piano to thank the singer, and she was followed by Mrs. Charteris and Mrs. Masters. Mrs. Charteris was in the highest delight—a feeling not at all decreased

when Miss Gillespie assured her that she had frequently listened to her, Mrs. Charteris's, singing, and had often envied that lady her correct musical education. Mrs. Masters said her little complimentary say about the songs, but was principally taken up by Miss Gillespie's costume. She was one of those women who never see any thing new worn by any other woman without taking private mental notes of its every detail; thus setting at defiance any attempted extension of the Patent laws in regard to female apparel. So, with her eyes devouring Miss Gillespie's dress, Mrs. Masters said to her: "Yes, so charming that Glück! so full of depth and power!—(Wonderfully good silk; stands by itself like a board!)—And the little French *chansonnette*, so sparkling and melodious, and—(Oh yes, certainly French I should think! no English house could—) may I ask you where you got that collar and those cuffs, Miss—Miss Asplin? They are most peculiar!"

"My name is Gillespie, madam; and the collar and cuffs I worked myself." After which

Mrs. Masters bowed, and went back to her seat.

During this examination Laurence Alsager, who had seated himself next to Miss Hayter, in the neighbourhood of the piano, was conscious that Miss Gillespie's looks constantly strayed towards him. It was very odd. There was nothing coquettish in the regard, he knew every one in that category of glances of old; but these were strangely earnest looks, always averted when she found they were remarked. While they were full upon him, Miss Hayter, in reply to something he had said about his delight in ferns, expressed a hope that they would see him at her father's place, the Arme Wood, where there was a splendid fernery. Laurence, in reply, thanked her, and said how happy he would have been to go, but that he feared it would be impossible, as he intended to leave Redmoor in a day or two. He must be a dutiful son, and visit his father, whom he had not seen since his return to England. As he said this Miss Gillespie's eyes were full on him.

They were very singular eyes, he thought, as he undressed himself lazily before the fire in his bedroom. Very singular eyes; so large, and dark, and speaking. What on earth made the woman look at him so perpetually! He was growing too old to inspire love at first sight, he felt, smiling grimly as he inspected himself in the looking-glass; besides, she was not the style of woman for any such folly. How magnificently she sung! what depth and pathos there was in her voice! “Eurydice, Eurydice!”—those notes were enough to go through any man’s soul; those notes were enough to—hallo, what’s this?

He had strolled across to the dressing-table, and taken up a small sealed note, addressed in a thin fine female hand to Colonel Alsager.

He broke the seal and read:

“I heard you talk of leaving Redmoor. If not impossible, I pray you to stay. Your presence will be a check upon two people, who, liberated from that, will go headlong to ruin, *dragging down a third in their fall*. For the welfare of this third

person both you and I are solicitous. But it seems probable that my sphere of usefulness is ended; so all devolves upon you. Remember this, and for her sake, stay on."

"Ah!" said Laurence Alsager when he had perused this mysterious note for the second time—"there's no doubt that my anonymous correspondent is the handsome woman with the eyes and voice. What she means I'll find out in the morning."

CHAPTER VI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

ON the morning after the day when Miss Gillespie had made so successful a *début* among the company assembled at Redmoor, Mr. Effingham, lounging quietly up the road from the Mitford Arms, rang at the lodge-gate, and after a few minutes' conversation with the old portress, passed up the avenue. His conversation was purely of a pleasant character; there was no inquiry as to who he was, or what he wanted,—all that had been settled long ago. He was a gentleman from London, who was writing a book 'bout all the old fam'ly houses, and was going to put our place into it. He knew Sir Charles, and had his leave to come and go when he liked. A civil-spoken gentleman he

was, and talked most wonderful ; never passed the lodge without stopping to say something. Perhaps of all Mr. Effingham's peculiarities, this impressed the old woman the most ; for, like all country people of her class who live a solitary and quiet life, she was thoroughly reticent, and it is questionable whether, beyond the ordinary salutations to those with whom she was brought in contact, she uttered more than a dozen sentences in a week. But Mr. Effingham's light airy chatter was very welcome to the old lady, and, combined with the politeness which he always exhibited, had rendered him a great favourite.

A considerable alteration had been effected in Mr. Effingham's outward man since his first visit to Redmoor. As in the former instance, his first step on receiving the ten pounds from Sir Charles was to purchase a new suit of clothes. He bought them at the neighbouring town, and in pursuance of his intention to assume a literary or artistic character, he had endeavoured to render his apparel suitable, or

as he called it, "to make up for the part." So he now wore a large slouch felt wideawake hat, a dark velveteen jacket, long waistcoat, gray trousers, and ankle-jack boots. Had he carried out his own views of literary attire, he would have adopted a long dressing-gown and Turkish trousers, such as he had seen in the portraits of celebrated authors; but he felt that these would be out of place in the country, and might attract attention. He, however, armed himself with a large note-book and a pencil of portentous thickness, with which he was in the habit of jotting down visionary memoranda whenever he found himself observed. By the initiated and the upper classes this last-described act may have been recognised as an indisputable literary trait; but by the lower orders Mr. Effingham was regarded as a mystic potentate of the turf, whose visit to the Mitford Arms had mysterious connection with the proximity of Sir Danesbury Boucher's stables, where Limejuice, the third favourite for the Derby, was in training; while the entries of the memoranda were by the same

people ascribed to the exercise of a process known to them as the booking of bets.

The March morning was so splendid in its freshness and bright glittering sunlight, that Mr. Effingham, although little given to admiring the beauties of nature, could not resist occasionally stopping and looking round him. The old elms forming the avenue were just putting forth their first buds; far away on either side stretched broad alternations of turf in level, hill, and glade, all glistening with the morning dew; while on the horizon fronting him, and behind the house, could be seen the outline of the great Redmoor. The jolly old house stood like some red-faced giant, its mullioned windows winking at the sunlight, the house itself just waking into life. From the stable-yard came a string of rugged and hooded horses for exercise. The gardeners were crossing from the conservatory bearing choice flowers for the decoration of the rooms. At the porch was standing the head-keeper, accompanied by two splendid dogs; a groom on horseback, with

the swollen post-bag slung round him, passed Mr. Effingham in the avenue ;—every where around were signs of wealth and prosperity.

“ Yes,” said Mr. Effingham to himself, as he stopped and surveyed the scene, “ this is better than my lodgings in Doory Lane, this is! No end better! And why should this fellow have it, and not me—that’s what I want to know? I could do it up pretty brown, here, I’m thinkin’; not like him—not in the same way, that is, but quite as good. There mightn’t be so many nobs, but there’d be plenty of good fellers; and as for the nobs, Lord bless you, when they found there was plenty of good grub and drink, and good fun to be had, they’d come fast enough. I should just like to try it, that’s all; I’d show him. And why shouldn’t I try it? Not in this way, perhaps—not to cut it quite so fat as this, but still reg’lar comfortable and nice. A nice little box at Finchley or Hampstead, with a bit o’ lawn, and a pony-trap, and chickens, and a spare bed for a pal,—that’s my notion of comfort! And why shouldn’t I have it, if I play my cards properly?

Damme, I will have it! I'm sick of cadgin' about from hand to mouth, never knowin' what's goin' to turn up next. This bit o' stiff ought to be worth any thing to me—any thing in reason, that is to say. So, when I've once got it from our friend here, and that won't be just yet,—I must get her away from here, and have her well under my thumb before I try that on,—when I once get that dockyment, I'll take it straight to Sir Charles, and let him have it for a sum down—must be a big sum too—and then I'll cut the whole lot of 'em, and go and live somewhere in the country by myself! That's what I'll do!"

L'appétit vient en mangeant. When Mr. Effingham was utterly destitute he accommodated himself to his position, and lived on, from hand to mouth, in the best way he could. He retired to the back-ways and slums then, and seeing very few people much better off than he was himself, his envy and jealousy were not excited. Sir Charles's ten pounds had disturbed the little man's mental equilibrium; the readiness with which they melted in his grasp showed him

how easily he could get rid of a hundred, of a thousand, of ten thousand. The sight of the comfort and luxury of Redmoor contrasted horribly with the wretchedness of his own lodging, and lashed him into a storm of rage.

“It’s too bad!” said he, striking his stick against the tree by which he was standing,—“it’s too bad that there should be all this lot of money in the world, and that I should have none of it, while this cove here—oh yes, if you please, my horses goin’ out with the grooms; my gardeners a-bringin’ pines and melons and all the rest of it; my keeper a-waitin’ to know how many pheasants I’m goin’ to kill to-day! Damme, it’s sickening!” Mr. Effingham struck the tree again, pushed his hat over his eyes, and started off in his walk. When he had proceeded about half-way up the avenue, he climbed the iron fence, and started off to the right over the park, until he reached a little knoll, on the top of which were two magnificent cedars. On the other side of these cedars, and completely hidden by them from the house, was a carved rustic seat. On

reaching the top of the knoll, Mr. Effingham looked round, and seeing nobody, sat down, put his feet up, and made himself most comfortable.

A lengthened contemplation of the cedars, however, instead, as might have been expected, of bringing calm to his perturbed soul, served only to remind him that they, in common with all the surroundings, were the property of somebody else, and that on that somebody else he had a tremendous hold, provided he went properly to work.

“And I’ll do it!” said he, taking his feet off the bench, and pushing the felt wideawake hat into all kinds of shapes in his excitement,—“I’ll do it too! Now, let me see! My friend will be here presently—let me just run through what’s to be done. Quiet’s the game with her, I think; no bullyrag and bluster—quiet and soft. No connection with any one here—never even heard the name—sent by the other parties—I’m so innocent. Yes, I think that will do; then, when we’ve once started together, I can make my own

terms.—How late she is! She must be awfully down on her luck at being spotted down here, and she must suspect something by the quick way in which she agreed to meet me here when I spoke to her yesterday as she was walkin' with the young 'un,—made no bones about it at all. She won't fail me, I suppose."

Oh no, she would not fail him. There she was, crossing the park apparently from the back of the stables, and making straight for the cedars. Could it be she? A figure bent nearly double, dressed in an old-fashioned black-silk cloak and a poke-bonnet, and leaning on a thick umbrella. It was not until she was well under the shadow of the cedars, that she straightened herself, pushed back her bonnet, and stood revealed as Miss Gillespie.

"Good-morning," said she, so crisply and blithely that Mr. Effingham, who had expected she would adopt a very different tone was quite astonished; "I'm afraid I'm a little late, Mr. —; you did not favour me with your name; but the fact is, as you probably know, I am not

my own mistress, and my services were required just as I was about to start."

"All right, miss," said Mr. Effingham, taking off his hat, and making a bow as near as possible after the manner of walking-gentlemen on the stage—a proceeding with which the limpness of the wideawake's brim interfered considerably; "my name's Effingham."

"Indeed! what a pretty name! so romantic. You would not mind my sitting down, would you? No; that's all right. And now, Mr. Effingham, I suppose you want something of me, don't you, after that mysterious communication which you made to me yesterday when I was walking with my pupil? Poor child! she's been in a state of wonderment ever since; and I've had to invent such stories about you. And what is it you want, Mr. Effingham?"

Mr. Effingham scarcely liked the tone; he felt he was being "chaffed;" so he thought he would bring matters to a crisis by saying, "My name's not Effingham—at least, not more than yours is Gillespie."

“Oh, I perceive,” said she with a little nod.

“My name’s Butler as much as yours is Ponsford. Now d’ye see?”

“Oh yes; now I see perfectly. Butler, eh? Any relation of a man named Tony Butler who is now dead?”

“Yes—his brother. He may have spoken to you of a brother in America.”

“In America! ay, ay. Well, Mr. Butler,” she continued with a bright smile, “now I know that you’re the brother of Tony Butler, there’s scarcely any need of repeating my question whether you wanted any thing; for—pardon me—you could hardly belong to that interesting family without wanting something. The question is, what do you want? Money? and if so, how much?”

“No; I don’t want money—”

“That’s very unlike Tony Butler. I shall begin to discredit your statements,” said she, still with the pleasant smile.

“At least not yet, nor from you. But I do want something.”

“Ye-es, and that is—”

“I want you to go away from here with me at once.”

“To go away from here! Oh, no. *Connu*, my dear Mr. Butler; I see the whole of the play. This is not your own business at all, dear sir. You dance, and kick your legs and swing your arms very well; but you are a puppet, and the gentleman who pulls the strings lives over yonder;” and she pointed with her umbrella to Redmoor House.

“I can’t make out what you mean.”

“Oh, yes, you can. ‘A master I have, and I am his man.’ You are Sir Charles Mitford’s man, Mr. Butler; and he has set you on to tell me that I must leave this place and rid him of my influence. Now, you may go back to Sir Charles Mitford, your master, and tell him that I set him utterly at defiance; that I won’t move, and that he can’t make me. Do you hear that, my dear Mr. Butler?”

She had risen from her seat, and stood erect before him, looking very grand and savage. Her

companion knew that the success of his scheme depended wholly upon the manner in which he carried out the next move, and accordingly he threw all his power into the acting of it.

“You’re one of those who answer their own questions, I see,” said he, with perfect calmness. “I’ve met lots o’ that sort in my travels, and I never found ’em do so much good as those that waited. All you’ve been saying’s Greek to me. Who’s Sir Charles Mitford? I’ve heard of him, of course, as the swell that lives in that house. They’ve never done talking of him at the Mitford Arms and all about there. But what’s he to do with you? I suppose it don’t matter to him who his friends’ governesses is. He’s not sweet on you, is he? If so, he wouldn’t want you to go away. And what’s he to do with me? and how’s he likely to hear of my having been in the place? I haven’t left my card upon him, I promise you,” said Mr. Effingham with a grim humour.

Miss Gillespie looked at him hard, very hard. But his perfect command of feature had often stood Mr. Effingham in good stead, and it did not

desert him now. The saucy laughter on his lips corresponded with the easy bantering tone of his voice; he sat swinging his legs and sucking his stick, the incarnation of insolence. So far he was triumphant.

She waited a minute or two, biting her lips, and turning her plans in her mind. Then she said, "Granting what you say—and it was rather a preposterous proposition of mine, I admit—you are still a puppet in somebody's hands. You had no knowledge of my previous life, and yet you come to me and say I must come away at once with you. Why must I come away?"

"Because you're wanted."

"And by whom?"

"By the crew of the Albatross. Ah, I thought you wouldn't be quite so much amused and so full of your grins when I mentioned them."

"Oh," said she, recovering herself, "I can still grin when there's any thing to amuse me. But we seem to have changed places; now *you're* talking riddles which I cannot understand."

“Can’t you? then I must explain them for you. If what I’m told is right—but it’s very little I know—you belonged to that crew yourself once. My brother Tony was one of them, I understand; and though he’s dead now, there’s several of ’em left. Old Lyons, for instance,—you recollect him? Crockett, Griffiths—”

“Suppose, to avoid giving you further trouble, I say I do recollect them, what then?”

“You’re angry, although you smile; I can see that fast enough. But what’s the good of being angry with me? You know when a feller gets into their hands what chance he has. You know that fast enough, or ought to. Well, I’m in their hands, and have to do what they order me.”

“And they’ve ordered you to come down to me?”

“They found out where you were, and sent me after you.”

“Ha! And what on earth can have induced them, after a certain lapse of time, to be so suddenly solicitous of my welfare?” said Miss Gillespie, laughingly. “There was never any great

love between any of those you have named and myself. I have no money for them to rob me of, nor do I see that I can be of any great use to them."

"I don't know that," said Mr. Effingham, laying his forefinger knowingly alongside his nose. "You see, you're a pretty gal, and you've rather got over me—"

"Flattered, I'm sure," said Miss Gillespie, showing all her teeth.

"No, it ain't that," said he, with a dim perception that his compliment was not too graciously received; "it ain't that; but I do like a pretty girl somehow. Well, you see, they don't let me much into their secrets—don't tell me the reason why I'm told to do so and so; they only tell me to go and do it. But I don't mind tellin' you—taking an interest in you, as I've just said—that, from what they've let drop accidentally, I think you *can* be of great use to them."

"Indeed! have you any notion how?"

"Well, now look here. I'm blowin' their gaff to you, and you know what I should get if

they knew it; so swear you'll never let on. From what I can make out, there's certain games which you used to do for them that they've never been able to find any body to come near you in. I mean the Mysterious Lady, the fortune-tellin', and the electro-biology business."

Some scenes recalled to her memory by these words seemed to amuse Miss Gillespie, and she laughed heartily.

"But that's 'general work,'" continued Mr. Effingham; "what they want you particular for just now is this. Some swell, so far as I can make out, came to grief early in life, and made a mistake in putting somebody else's name to paper; what they call forgery, you know."

She nodded.

"Old Lyons has got hold of this paper, and he wants to put the screw on the swell and make him bleed. Now there's none of the lot has half your manner, nor, as they say, half your tact; and that's why, as I believe, is the reason they want you back in town amongst them."

"Ah! to—what did you say?—'put the screw

on a swell and make him bleed,' wasn't it? How very nice! Well, now you've obeyed your orders, and it's for me to speak. And suppose—just suppose for the fun of the thing—I were to hold by my original decision and declare I would not come, what would you do?"

"I should go back to town and tell 'em all that had passed."

"And they?—what would they do?"

"I can tell you that, because that was part of my instructions. Old Lyons put that very plain. 'If she rides rusty,' he says,—'and she's got a temper of her own, I can tell you,—just let her know from me that I'll ruin her. I'll never leave her; she knows me of old; it won't be merely,' he says, 'her being turned away in disgrace out of where she is now; but I'll never leave her. She may go where she likes, but I've found her out once, and I'll find her out again; I'll foller her up, and I'll be the ruin of her,' he says, 'so sure's her name's what it is.'"

He looked up to see the effect of his speech, but Miss Gillespie was looking full at him with an

expression of great interest and a very pleasant smile, as if she were listening to the narration of a thrilling story with which she had no connection save that of listener.

“Did he indeed say all that?” said she, after a pause. “Oh, he’s a most terrible old man, and whatever he determines on, he never fails of carrying out. However, I think I won’t put him to much trouble this time.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, do you know I’ve a strong mind to save you any further worry, and to crown you with glory by allowing you to carry me back in triumph.”

“You don’t say so! but this is sudden, you know. I don’t put much trust in such sudden conversions.”

“Mine is not the least sudden. I generally act on the impulse of the moment. That now urges me to go back to my old life. The shackles of this respectability are beginning to strain a little. I feel cramped by them occasionally, and I suppose I have originally some-

thing of the Bohemian in my nature, for you have fired me with an ardent longing for freedom and irresponsibility."

"That's right!" cried Mr. Effingham, delighted at the success of his scheme; "that's just as it should be. It's all very well for those swells to live on here, and go on their daily round. They've got the best of it, so far as they know; but they haven't seen as much as we have. They don't know the pleasure of—well, of pitting your wits against somebody else who think themselves deuced sharp, and beating them, do they?"

"No," said Miss Gillespie, with her crispest little laugh; "of course they don't."

"Well, now," said Mr. Effingham, "you know what old Lyons is, reg'lar man of business; wants every thing done at once, right off the reel. When will you be ready to start?"

"What a practical man you are, Mr. Butler!" cried she, still laughing; "it will be quite delightful to get back again into the society of practical people after all this easy-going *laissez-*

aller time. But you must not be too hard upon me at first. I've several things to do."

"You won't be saying 'good-bye' to any body, or any thing of that sort?"

"Oh no, nothing of that sort, you may depend."

"That's right; you mean putting your things together, eh?"

"Yes; packing, and getting ready to start."

"Well, twenty-four hours will be enough for that, I should think. Suppose we say tomorrow at noon?"

"Ye-es, give me a little longer: say two in the afternoon, then I shall be perfectly ready."

"And where shall we meet?"

"We must get across to the rail at once. Not to Torquay; there's a small station nearer here, where they won't think of looking for us. Not that I suppose they'd take any trouble of that kind when they find I'm once gone. However, it's best to be prepared. Can you drive?"

"I should think so!" said Mr. Effingham with a chuckle. "I've driven most things, from

a shofle-cab in town to the mail-sleigh in Canada!"

"How very nice!" said she; "that will do beautifully, then. You must get a gig or a dog-cart, or something light, from some place in Torquay. I shall have very little luggage, and have it all ready at a little side-gate of the park, which you can see—over there," again bringing the umbrella into requisition. "That gate is invisible from the house; it's perfectly quiet and unfrequented, and I have a key of it. That once closed behind me I'm thoroughly safe."

"And there's no chance of our being met, and you being recognised?"

"Not the very smallest. The people staying in the house will all be at luncheon; the gardeners and stable-people, should we come across any, will all be in that state of comatose repletion which succeeds the after-dinner tobacco. Besides, very few of them know me by sight; and the road which I have pointed out skirts the Redmoor, and is very little frequented."

"That'll do! that will be first-rate! Now,

let me see if all's understood. A dog-cart to be ready to-morrow at yon gate of the park, at two o'clock sharp. There you'll be and your luggage—eh? By the bye, how's that to get there?"

"I told you it would be very little; and there's a boy, devoted to my service, who will carry it."

"All right,—I only wanted to know. Two o'clock to-morrow, then." He put out his hand, and, as she lightly touched it with the tips of her fingers, offered to seize hers and convey it to his lips; but she slid it through his clumsy fist, and had pulled the poke-bonnet over her face, resumed the bent walk and the clumsy umbrella, and was making her way back across the park almost before he had missed her.

"And if ever a man did a good day's work, I've done one this blessed morning," said Mr. Effingham, as he strolled quietly back through the avenue. "They may talk about great genius, if they please. Great genius means getting hold of a good idea at the right minute, and strikin' while the iron's hot. That's great genius! and

they was two great ideas which I've worked just now! That pretendin' to know nothin' of the Bart., and gammonin' her that old Lyons sent me after her, was first-rate! I thought old Lyons's name would bring her round. They're all afraid of him, it seems. Now when we've got some distance on the road, I'll tell her the truth, or, at least, as much as I choose, and just sound her about the bill. D'Ossay, my boy, you've done a good day's work, and can afford to go into Torquay and dine like a swell to-night!"

CHAPTER VII.

CHECKMATE.

MR. EFFINGHAM fulfilled his design of going into Torquay and dining well. In his singular costume he created quite a sensation among the invalids on the Parade, who would have severely resented the healthy and sporting tone of his ankle-jacks if it had not been mitigated by his slouch wide-awake hat and black jacket. As it was, they merely regarded him as an eccentric person staying at one of the country houses in the neighbourhood, and they pardoned his not being consumptive on the score of his being probably either rich or distinguished. So he "did" the town and all the lions to his great satisfaction, and, as affording them subject-matter for conversation over their valetudinarian dinners, to the satisfaction of those whom he encountered. He made an excellent dinner at

the hotel, and then was driven out to his rural lodgings in a fly, having given orders for a dog-cart to be in readiness for him at the particular gate of Redmoor Park which he described at two o'clock the next day.

It was a brilliant starlight night, and Mr. Effingham had the head of the fly opened; he was well wrapped up, and the air being very mild, he wished to enjoy the beauties of nature and the flavour of his cigar simultaneously. As he lay back puffing the smoke out before him his thoughts again reverted to his morning's work, and again he found every reason for self-gratulation. There would be the fifty pounds from Sir Charles—that was safe to start with; he should go up and give him notice in the morning, that that cheque might come up by the evening's post. That would help him to tide over any delay there might be in getting this woman to give up the bill. What a funny one she was! what a regular lively one! how she kept on laughing! and how sly she looked when she said that she was tired of that humdrum respectability, and would like to run away to the

old adventurous life! Not one to be trifled with, though; none of your larks with her; regular stand-offish party. Well, never mind; that did not matter; what he was about now was business, and she seemed thoroughly up to that. He did not think he should have much trouble in making her see what advantage to them both could be got out of a proper use of the forged bill. One point, on which he at one time had had some doubt, the interview of that morning had satisfactorily set at rest. She had been spooney on Mitford—so Griffiths told him—and he feared that the old feeling might still remain, and she would refuse to take any steps about the bill lest she might injure her old flame. But, Lord! he could see plainly enough she did not care a snuff of a candle for Mitford now; rather more t'other might be judged from the flash in her eyes and the sneer on her lips when she spoke of him. That was all right, so—Ah! perhaps her shrewd notions of business might lead her to seeing the value of the bill and to driving a hard bargain for it. He must be prepared for that; but when he got her up to London she would be much more in

his power. The bill must be had somehow, by fair means or foul; and if she resisted—well, there would not be very much trouble in stealing or forcing it from her.

As these reflections passed through his mind the carriage in which he sat reached the top of a height, whence was obtained a view of Redmoor House; its outline standing black and heavy against the sky, its lower windows blazing with light. The sight turned Mr. Effingham's thoughts into a slightly different current.

“Oh, yes! go it; that's your sort,” he said to himself with a certain amount of bitterness; “fine games goin' on there, I've no doubt; the best of drink, and coves with powdered heads to wait on you; game o' billiards afterwards, or some singin' and a dance with the women in the drowin'-room. That's the way to keep it up; go it while you're young. But, my friend the Bart., you'd sing another toon and laugh the wrong side o' your mouth, and cut a very different kind o' caper, if you knew what was so close to you. I've heard of a cove smokin' a pipe and not knowing

that what he was sittin' on was a powder-barrel ; and this seems to me very much the same sort o' thing. To think that close under his nose is the dockyment that would just crop his 'air, put him into a gray soot, Cole-Barth Fields, Milbank, and Portland, and that cussed stone-quarryin' which, from all I've heard, is the heart-breakin'est work. To think that he's been payin' me to get the bill, and I've been employin' Griffiths and givin' skivs to old Lyons and settin' half Doory Lane at work to hunt up the gal, and that there she was under his roof the whole time—it's tremenjous !”

And Mr. Effingham laughed aloud, and lit a fresh cigar, and pulled the rug tighter over his legs.

“She's a rum un, she is. I wonder which of them lights is in her room. There's one a long way off the rest, up high all by itself ; that's it, I shouldn't wonder. She's not fit company for the swells downstairs, I suppose. Well, perhaps not, if they knew every thin' ! But what a blessin' it is people don't know every thin' ! Perhaps if they did, some of 'em wouldn't be quite so fond of sittin'

down with the Bart. I wonder what she's doin' just now. Packin' her traps ready for our start, I shouldn't wonder. What a game it will be! Yes, D'Ossay, my boy, this is the best day's work you ever did in your life; and your poor brother Tony little thought what a power of good he was doin' you when he first let you into the secret of Mr. Mitford and his little games."

And with these reflections, and constantly-renewed cigars, Mr. Effingham beguiled the tedium of his journey to the Mitford Arms.

He was up betimes the next morning, making his preparations for departure. His very small wardrobe—its very smallness regarded by the landlady of the inn as a proof of the eccentricity of literary genius—was packed in a brown-paper parcel. He discharged his modest bill, and began to fidget about until it was time to give his employer a final and fancy sketch of how he had accomplished his mission. Entirely fictional was this sketch intended to be, as widely diverging from fact as possible. Mr. Effingham knew well enough that so long as the removal of Miss Gilles-

pie, or Lizzie Ponsford, had been effected, Sir Charles Mitford would care very little indeed about the means by which it had been accomplished. And as Mr. Effingham was playing a double game, it would be necessary for him to be particularly cautious in making any statement which might reveal the real state of the case to Sir Charles. These reflections, bringing clearly again before him the great fact of the entire business,—that he was being paid for communicating with a person, to communicate with whom he would have gladly paid a considerable sum of money had he possessed it,—put Mr. Effingham into the most satisfactory state of mind, and caused the time, which would otherwise have hung heavily on his hands, to pass pleasantly and quickly.

He knew that there was little use in attempting to see Sir Charles before eleven o'clock; so about that time he made his way up the avenue, on this occasion cutting short the old portress, who, contrary to the usual custom, was beginning to enter into some little story. It was Mr. Effingham's plan—and one which is pretty generally

adopted in this world, especially by the lower order of Mr. Smiles's friends, the "self-made" men,—to kick down the ladder after he had landed from its top; and as Mr. Effingham thought he should be able to make no more use of this old woman, he did not choose to be bored by her conversation. So he cut her short with a nod, and walked up the avenue with a swaggering gait, which she had never known before, and which very much astonished her. He met no one on his way; and when he reached the house he went modestly round to a side-door leading to the billiard-room, through the window of which he observed no less a person than Mr. Banks, Sir Charles's man, who was by himself, with his coat off and a cue in his hand trying a few hazards. Mr. Effingham gave a sharp tap at the glass, which made Mr. Banks start guiltily, drop his cue, and resume his garment; but when he looked up and saw who had caused him this fright, he waxed very wroth and said, "Hallo! is it you? what do you want now?"

His tone did not at all suit Mr. Effingham, who replied sharply, "Your master; go and tell him I'm here."

"He ain't up yet," said Mr. Banks.

"Did you hear what I said? Go and tell him I'm here."

"Did you hear what *I* said, that Sir Charles ain't stirrin'?"

"It'll be as much as your place is worth, my man, if you don't do what I tell you. Have I been here before, or 'ave I not? Have I been let in to him at once before, or 'ave I not? Does he see me d'rectly you tell him who's waitin', or does he not? Now—go."

This speech had such an effect upon Mr. Banks, who remembered that the little man only spoke the truth in his statement of the readiness with which Sir Charles always saw him, that he opened the door, showed Mr. Effingham into the billiard-room (which was decorated with empty tumblers, fragments of lemon-peel, tobacco-ash, and other remnants of the preceding night, and smelt powerfully of stale tobacco),

suggested that he should "knock the balls about a bit," and went up to tell his master.

When he returned he said, "He's just finished dressin', and I'm to take you up in five minutes. You seem quite a favourite of his."

Mr. Effingham laughed. "Yes," he said; "he and I understand one another."

Mr. Banks looked at him for a moment, and then said, "Was you ever in the Pacific?"

"In the what?"

"The Pacific."

Mr. Effingham changed colour. He did not half like this. He thought it was the name of some prison, and that the valet had found him out. But he put a bold face on and said, "What's the Pacific?"

"Ocean," said Mr. Banks.

"No," said Mr. Effingham, "certainly not—nothing of the sort."

"Not when you and he," pointing to the ceiling, "was together?"

"Certainly not."

"Ah!" said Mr. Banks, "kept at home, I

suppose ; it ain't so dangerous or such hard work at home, is it?—Portsmouth, and round there?"

"It's hard enough at Portsmouth, from what I've heard," said Mr. Effingham ; "that diggin' away at Southsea's dreadful work."

"Diggin' aboard ship!" said Banks in astonishment.

"How do you mean 'aboard ship'?" said the other.

"Why, I'm talkin' of when you and him was on board the—what was it? you know—Albatross."

"Oh!" said Mr. Effingham, greatly relieved, and bursting into a fit of laughter ; "we went every where then. And that's where I learned something which I don't mind teaching you."

"What's that?"

"Never to keep Sir Charles waiting. The five minutes is up."

Mr. Banks looked half-annoyed, but his companion had already risen, so he made the best of it, pretended to laugh, and showed Mr. Effingham into Sir Charles Mitford's private snuggerly.

Sir Charles was drinking a cup of coffee. He looked eagerly at Mr. Effingham, and when Banks had closed the door, said :

“ By the expression of your face I should say you bring good news. In two words—do you or not ?”

“ In two words—I do.”

Mitford set down his cup. Through his mind rushed one thought—the spy over his flirtation with Mrs. Hammond was removed ! henceforward he could sit with her, talk to her, look at her, with the consciousness that his words would reach her ear alone, that his actions would not be overlooked. His face flushed with anticipated pleasure as he said :

“ How was it managed ? Did she make much resistance ?”

“ Well, it wasn't a very easy job, and that's the fact. I've seen many women as could be got over with much less trouble. You see the party seems to be in very comfortable quarters here,—all right to eat and drink, and not too much to do, and that sort of thing.”

“ Well, what then ? ”

“ Why, when parties are in that way they naturally don't like movin'. Besides, there's another strong reason I've found out why that young woman don't want to go.”

“ And that is— ? ”

“ She's uncommon fond of you. Ah, you may shake your head, but I'm sure of it.”

“ If she made you believe that, Mr.—Effingham,” said Sir Charles with a very grim smile, “ I'm afraid she has got the better of you altogether.”

“ Has she, by Jove ! No, no. The proof of the puddin's in the eatin', Sir Charles ; and whether I've done the trick or not you'll find out before I've finished. Any how, I'm satisfied.”

“ Well, as you say that, and as the payment of the fifty pounds depends upon the 'trick being done,' as you call it, I suppose before you've finished your story I shall be satisfied too.”

“ What was I saying ? Oh, about her being nuts on you still,—oh yes,—and I had to talk to her about that, and tell her it wouldn't do now

you was married, and, in fact, that that was one of the great reasons for her to go, as parties had observed her feelin's. That seemed to touch her,—for her pride's awful,—and she began to give way, and at last, after a long palaver, she said she'd go, though not before I—”

“Beg your pardon, Sir Charles,” said Banks, opening the door; “Mrs. Hammond, Sir Charles, wishes to speak to you, Sir Charles: she's here at the door.”

“Show her in, by all means,” said Mitford, turning to Effingham and laying his finger on his lips; then to him, *sotto voce*, “Keep your mouth shut!”

“I'm very sorry to trouble you, Sir Charles,” said Mrs. Hammond, entering hurriedly, with a slight bow to the stranger and a glance of astonishment at his appearance; “but I will detain you only an instant. Have you heard any thing of Miss Gillespie?”

“Of Miss Gillespie? I, Mrs. Hammond? Not a word? What has happened?”

“Of course you haven't, but the most extra-

ordinary thing! This morning Miss Gillespie did not come into Alice's room as usual; so the child dressed by herself, and went to Miss Gillespie's room. She tried the door, and found it fast; so, concluding that her governess was ill,—she's subject to headaches, I believe,—Alice went down to breakfast. Afterwards she tried Miss Gillespie's door again, but with no better success; and then she came to me. I sent for Gifford, Mr. Hammond's man, you know; and after calling out once or twice, he burst the door open: we all rushed in, and found the room empty."

"Empty!" cried Sir Charles.

"The devil!" burst out Mr. Effingham. "I beg your pardon! What an odd thing!"

"Empty," repeated Mrs. Hammond. "The bed hadn't been slept in; her boxes were open, and some of the things had been taken out; while on the dressing-table was this note addressed to me."

She handed a small slip of paper to Sir Charles, who opened it and read aloud:

“ You will never see me again. Search for me will be useless. R. G.”

“ Yes,” said Mrs. Hammond, “ she’s gone. ‘ Search for me will be useless.’ So provoking too; just the sort of person one liked to have about one; and I had got quite accustomed to her and all that. ‘ Never see me again;’—I declare it’s horribly annoying. Now, Sir Charles, I want to ask your advice: what would you do? Would you have people sent after her in all directions, eh?”

“ Well, ’pon my word, I don’t see how you can do that,” said Sir Charles. “ She hasn’t taken any thing of yours, I suppose,—no, of course not,—so, you see, she has a right to go away when she likes. Needn’t give a month’s warning, eh?”

“ Right to go away! Well, I don’t know,—I suppose she has—and I suppose I haven’t any right to stop her; but it is annoying; and yet it’s highly ridiculous, isn’t it? What on earth can have driven her away? Nobody rude to her, I should think; she wasn’t that sort of person.

Well, I won't bore you any more now about it, particularly as you're busy. We shall meet at luncheon, and then we can talk further over this unpleasant affair." And with a smile to Sir Charles, and another slight bow to Mr. Effingham, she left the room.

"Well, you certainly have done your work excellently, Mr. Effingham," said Sir Charles, as soon as the door had closed; "in the most masterly manner!"

"Yes, it ain't bad, I think," said Mr. Effingham, with a ghastly attempt at a grin; "I told you it was all square."

"Yes; but I had no notion it would come about so quickly."

"Why, I hadn't half time to tell you about it. However, there it is, done, cut, and dried,—all finished except the payment; and I'm ready for that whenever you like."

"Our agreement was, that the cheque was to be sent to London, to an address which you gave me—"

"Yes; but as I'm here, I may as well take

it myself. You haven't got it in notes or gold, have you? It would be handier."

"No, not sufficient; but they would change my cheque at the bank in Torquay, I've no doubt."

"No, thank you, never mind; it ain't worth the trouble. I shall have to go to town I suppose, and I sha'n't want it till I get there—that is, if you can lend me a couple of sovereigns just to help me on my way. Thank you; much obliged. Now, you've got my address, and you know where to find me when you want me; and you may depend on not seein' me for a very long time. Good morning to you."

He took the cheque and the sovereigns and put them in his waistcoat-pocket, made a clumsy bow, and was gone. Then Sir Charles Mitford rose from his chair and walked to the window, radiant with delight. It was all clear before him now; the incubus was removed, and he was free to carry out his projects.

Mr. Effingham strode down the avenue, switching his stick and muttering:

“Done! sold! swindled!” he exclaimed; “regularly roped,—that’s what I am! It was lucky I kept my face before the Bart., or I should never have collared the cheque; but that’s all right. So far he thinks it was my doin’, and forked out accordin’. That’s the only bright part of it. To think that a yellow-faced meek-lookin’ thing like that should have taken me in to that toon! What can her game be? To get clear of the lot of us?—that’s it! Pretendin’ to be all square with me, and then cuttin’ and runnin’ and shakin’ it all off! Oh, a deep un, a reg’lar deep un! Now what’s my game? After her as hard as I can. Where will she make for? London, I should think,—try hidin’ some where. Ah! if she does that, I’ll ferret her out. It’ll be a quiet place that I don’t hunt her up in, with the means I have for workin’ a search. Here’s two skivs to the good from the Bart. I’ll meet the dog-cart and get down to Torquay, and go up at once by the express. Hallo! gate, there!”

“Why, you *are* in a hurry, sir!” said the

old portress, coming out; "maist as pressed as the young woman as knocked me up at day-dawn this morning."

"Ah! what was that?" said Mr. Effingham, stopping short.

"I would have told you this morning when you came in; but you were so short and snappish!" said the old lady. "She came down wi' a little passel in her hand, and knocked at my door and ast for key. And I got up to let her out, and there were a fly outside—Mullins's fly, and young Mullins to drive; and she got in, and off they went."

"Ay, ay; where does Mullins live?"

"Just close by Mitford Arms. His father were wi' my father—"

"Yes, yes; thank you! all right! good-bye!" and Mr. Effingham rushed off up the by-lane to where he knew the dog-cart was waiting.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL ALSAGER'S COUNSEL.

WHEN Laurence Alsager awoke the morning after Miss Gillespie's piano-performance, his thoughts immediately turned to the mysterious note which he had received on the previous evening, and he stretched out his hand and took it from the dressing-table, where he had placed it just before dropping off to sleep. He read it again and again, and each perusal strengthened his belief. It was written by Miss Gillespie—of that he had little doubt—and was intended to convey a warning of proximate danger to Lady Mitford, and counsel to him to avert this danger if possible, by remaining at Redmoor. It seemed further to imply that some protection which had hitherto been extended over her would necessarily be withdrawn, and that his presence was consequently more than ever need-

ful. At this conclusion Laurence arrived; it was but a lame and impotent one, after all, and he determined to seek the solution at an interview with Miss Gillespie as soon as possible.

He was the earliest in the breakfast-room, and found a batch of letters lying in his accustomed place. They were of all kinds,—foreign letters from men whose acquaintance he had made abroad, and the gist of whose correspondence lay in an endeavour to tempt him to come out to them again; a business letter or two about the investment of some spare cash; a line from Blab Bertram, wondering when L. A. was coming to town, and “what was the use of leaving Egypt if you stuck down in Devon?” and a thick old-fashioned letter, on yellowish gilt-edged paper, sealed with a large seal, and directed in a bold yet tremulous hand—his father’s. Alsager’s conscience pricked him as he came upon this letter at the bottom of the little pile; he had been two months in England, after two years’ absence, and had not yet found time to visit his father. They had been always very good friends; indeed when

Laurence was at Eton, the tie between them was of the strongest, and they were more like brothers than father and son. With the young man's life at Oxford their relations were a little less intimate; Laurence was beginning to see life with his coevals, and found Sir Peregrine's society a check and hindrance on his enjoyment. The father perceived this, and weakly allowed himself to be annoyed at it. He was hurt and jealous at his son's preference of younger companions, at his own inability to amuse or interest his son's friends; and from that time forth there was a slight estrangement between them. Laurence had the enjoyment of his mother's fortune on coming of age, so that he was perfectly independent of his father; and his joining the Guards was entirely his own doing, and to a certain extent against his father's wish. Sir Peregrine was of that old-fashioned school which abhorred London and its ways, and thought a country gentleman ought to live entirely on his own estate, in superintending which, and in joining the sports of the field, he would find plenty of amusement and occupation.

Their ideas and tastes being thus different, it was tacitly felt by both that they were best apart, and during the last few years they had not met a dozen times. Sir Peregrine's annual visit to London was generally made in the winter, when Laurence was staying with country friends; and Laurence found little attraction in the dozy, prosy county-magistrate society which the old gentleman gathered round him at Knockholt.

But his conscience pricked him when he saw the old gentleman's letter, which had been forwarded to him from his club—pricked him sharply after he had opened it and read as follows :

“ Knockholt, Friday.

“ MY DEAR LANCE,—If you have not any very particular engagements, I think it would be as well if you were to come down here for a day or two. There are some things I want to talk over with you, and I think the sooner our business is done the better. I had a nasty fall a fortnight ago, when I was out with Lord Hawkshaw's pack; and though Galton says it's nothing, I was a good deal shaken at the time, and feel it has

jarred me more than they think; for I have an odd kind of all-overish pain, which I can't explain to them, and can't account for to myself. Not that I am going to die, that I know of; but one does not fall lightly when one weighs fifteen stone, nor get over a cropper quickly when one is sixty-seven years old. So, my dear Lance, put up with the old house and the old man for a few days, and come. I have a surprise for you.—Your affectionate father,

P. A.

“P.S. Captain Freeman saw you looking out of the club-window when he was in London in January. He says you had a beard like a billy-goat. For God's sake, my dear Lance, go to a barber before I see you! I hate all such foreign affectations.

P. A.”

Laurence looked grave over the letter, but could not help smiling at the postscript, so characteristic of his father. He did not at all like the aspect of affairs at Knockholt; his father was evidently far more hurt than either the doctors imagined or he himself would allow. His ward,

Miss Manningtree, and her governess, resided with the old gentleman; but Laurence knew too little of either to feel confidence in their capacity, their care, or their judgment in the matter of medical advice. They might think Galton all-sufficient and infallible; he didn't. He would go down at once, at least as soon as he had learned from Miss Gillespie what really was meant by her mysterious letter. He had been too long dallying at Capri; but now that duty called him away, he would obey cheerfully. By the time he had finished his letter and formed his resolution, Captain Bligh had entered the room, and had plunged deeply into his breakfast, which he took standing,—now making a dive at the toast-rack, now impaling a bloater, now walking round and pouring out a cup of tea; for there were no ladies present, and the Captain was in a hurry, having much business on hand.

“Morning, Alsager,” said the Captain, when Laurence looked up. “Queer start this, isn't it?”

“What? I'm only just down; I've seen nobody and heard nothing.”

“ Oh, about that girl that sung last night,— Mrs. Hammond’s governess. What’s her name?”

“ Miss Gillespie?”

“ Ay, that’s she! Wouldn’t have thought it of her—would you?”

“ What’s she done?”

“ Done! Bolted, that’s all!—bolted slick away, no one knows where!”

“ What on earth for?”

“ No one knows that either. Rummet thing is, that she hasn’t taken any thing with her—any thing of any body else’s, I mean. Now, if she’d walked off with some of that little Hammond woman’s swell clothes, or jool’ry, one could understand it; but she’s left a lot of her own behind!”

“ Did she give no hint of this? Has she left no explanation?”

“ Well, I don’t know about explanation. She’s left a note for Mrs. Hammond, which I’ve got in my pocket. Mrs. Hammond gave it to Mitford, and he sent for me and handed it over, and asked me what I thought of it.”

“It’s not private, I suppose. May I look at it?”

“By all means—nothing private about it. Can’t conceive why Mitford gave it to me. I can do nothing with it.” So saying, Captain Bligh took out the little scrap of paper from his waistcoat-pocket, and handed it to Alsager.

There was no longer the least doubt about Laurence’s mysterious correspondent. Both notes were in the same handwriting.

At luncheon that day Miss Gillespie’s disappearance was the principal theme of conversation, and many and various were the comments it evoked. Lady Mitford seemed a little scandalised by the circumstance; but Mrs. Hammond, her first astonishment over, treated it very lightly. She had always thought Miss Gillespie a “curious person,” she said; there was always something “odd” about her. Very likely, when they got back to town, they would find she would return to them. Perhaps, after all, the reason of her flight was that she was a little bored in the country. And then Mrs.

Hammond forgot all about Miss Gillespie in her delight at having Sir Charles Mitford sitting next her again,—at finding him paying her little attentions and compliments, talking to her in a dropped voice, and regarding her with deep tender glances, just as he had done in the first days of her visit to Redmoor. She delighted in all this, and her delight was increased when she marked the grave gloom on Laurence Alsager's face, as she shot a glance of saucy triumph across at him. Then he guessed the meaning of Miss Gillespie's note more thoroughly than he had yet done. She had had some hold either on Mrs. Hammond or on Sir Charles; that was gone, and he alone was left to do his best to keep them in check. And what could he do? Any overt act of his would be misconstrued by Mrs. Hammond, and turned to her own purposes, while over Mitford he had not the smallest power. What could he do? Had Lord Dollamore given any sign of intending to persecute Lady Mitford with his attentions, Laurence thought that his staying in the house might be of some use; but Dollamore had hitherto been

perfectly respectful. So Alsager determined that he would remain a couple of days longer, and then start off for Knockholt.

After luncheon a proposal was made to go and see some new horses which Captain Bligh had inspected when last in Torquay, and which he thought might be obtained as bargains. So most of the party adjourned to the stable-yard, where these horses had been brought; and the visit ended in a pair of them being put to, and Sir Charles and Mrs. Hammond mounting the phaeton to which they were harnessed. The horses were young and fresh, and plunged a great deal at starting; but Sir Charles had them well in hand, and with his companion by his side and a groom in the back-seat, went flying down the avenue. It was full an hour before they returned, and Sir Charles's verdict on the pair was that they were too hot to hold. He had had all his work, he said, to keep them at all within bounds. Mrs. Hammond looked flushed and elated; but she went straight up to Lady Mitford, and told her how she had enjoyed the drive, and was full of

praises of Sir Charles's powers of coachmanship.

That evening Sir Charles took Mrs. Hammond in to the dining-room, and addressed his conversation principally to her. He drank a great deal of wine both with and after dinner, and was in more boisterous spirits than any of his friends had yet seen him. When they went into the drawing-room he made straight for Mrs. Hammond's chair, and there he remained the whole evening, talking to her in a lowered tone, and regarding her with glances the fire of which had by no means been subdued by the quantity of claret he had drunk. Poor Georgie! The events of this day, culminating as they were, had totally upset her and had reduced her very much to the same condition as when she begged Alsager to be her charioteer to Egremont Priory. There could be no mistake about it now. Surely it was a flagrant case; and the colour flushed in her cheeks as she saw Mrs. Masters's shoulder-shrugs and marked Lord Dollamore's ill-disguised cynical manner. Poor Georgie! She asked Mrs. Charteris to sing,

and sat and listened to her as usual, and thanked her at the end of the performance; and she chatted with the Tyrrell girls, and she took the deepest interest in Mrs. Masters's embroidery,—and all the time her heart was sick within her, and she kept stealing glances at the couple seated in the embrasure of the window, with their heads so nearly touching. All present noticed her state of mind; but no one understood it or pitied it like Laurence Alsager, who began to confess to himself that what Dollamore had prophesied at the club was undoubtedly coming true, so far as Mitford was concerned; and did not the wife's future, even in Lord Dollamore's prophecy, hinge upon the husband's conduct? It was a most horrible shame; but how on earth was he to protest against it? He had no position to enable him to do any thing of the kind. There was only one thing that he could do, and that was to speak to Laura Hammond. He could do that; it might not be of much use, but he would do it.

So, accordingly, the next morning after breakfast Colonel Alsager sent to Mrs. Hammond a

polite little note, in which he presented his compliments, and requested the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation; and to which a verbal answer was returned to the effect that Mrs. Hammond would be delighted to see Colonel Alsager, if he could come up at once. He followed the lady's-maid, and found Mrs. Hammond in the boudoir, dressed in her habit and hat. She received him with great cordiality.

"I am so sorry to have sent what may have seemed a peremptory message, Colonel Alsager," said she; "but the fact is, Sir Charles has been round here just now, and we have arranged a little riding-party,—he and I, and Emily Tyrrell, and Captain Bligh, and Mr. Somers, and one or two more; and I promised to be ready by eleven."

"Make no excuses, pray," said Laurence, in a hard dry tone. "I won't detain you, as your time's valuable, by any preamble. I will simply ask, are you determined to persist in your present course?"

"In what course, my dear Colonel Alsager?"

"In bringing destruction on a household,

Laura Hammond! In blighting the happiness of a young wife, and spreading snares for a foolish husband! In rendering yourself conspicuous, and your host contemptible! Do I speak plainly enough?"

"Scarcely," said she with a little smile; "for though you insult me, and give way to your own rage, you do not condescend to—or you dare not—explain your motives. Don't think that I am weak enough to imagine that you are jealous of me, Laurence. I know you too well for that. I know that whatever command I may have had over you is past and gone. But perhaps the passion, the *caprice* that I had for you—call it what you will—continues. Suppose it does? Suppose the sight of you, the meeting with you after so long a separation, has renewed the dormant flame? You scorn me, and I see you prostrate at the feet of a sweetly pretty piece of propriety and innocence—don't interrupt me, please—who then becomes my rival? Revenge is sweet, especially to women, you know. This child of the fields makes herself my rival,—I make myself hers!

I show to you and others, that if you care for me no longer, there are others who will. I show to her and others, that if she is preferred to me by one I—yes, I love,—I am preferred to her by one she loves. As yet I have never run second for any thing for which I've entered, Colonel Alsager, and I don't intend to do so now."

"You are arguing on utterly false premises,—you are talking worse than nonsense. Between me and the lady to whom you allude there is nothing. You need not smile in that way. I swear it! She is as pure as—"

"Oh, pray spare me! Don't fall into raptures about her purity,—there's a good creature. Dear me, dear me! this must be a very bad case, when a man like Colonel Alsager takes a poetical view of his lady-love, and talks about her purity."

"I came to ask you to abandon this shameless flirtation, Laura Hammond, for the sake of our old friendship,—as an act of kindness to me. Your reply is mockery and ridicule. I may use other means to bring about what I want."

"Ah, you threaten! Then I shall certainly

get Mr. Hammond to fight you! He was out once at Nusserabad, or Hylunjee, or some such place, I believe. And we can prop him up on his crutches, and get his man to hold him, and I've no doubt he'd be strong enough to fire a pistol.—No," she added, suddenly changing her tone, "don't threaten, and don't thwart me; else let our innocent young friend look to herself. I'll break her heart, and then I'll spoil her name,—that's all. And now, I really must run away. Sir Charles will have been waiting for me full ten minutes." She touched the brim of her hat, in salute, with the handle of her riding-whip, gathered up her habit with her other hand, and left the room.

"And that is the woman," said Laurence, looking after her, "for whom I nearly broke my heart; whose rejection of my suit caused me to leave England,—intending, hoping, never to return. Great Heavens! once in that state, what idiots we become! Think of this fool flinging away a pearl of price, reputation, decency,—and all for *that!* Think of that poor child his wife

having pinned her faith and her affections on to such a shallow oaf! There can be no doubt about Miss Gillespie's meaning now; no doubt that, partly from innate devilry, partly from pique, Laura Hammond will pursue her scheme to the very end. And I am powerless to interfere."

He went down into the library with the intention of writing a letter to his father announcing his immediate arrival; but as he entered the room, he saw through the deep bay-window fronting him, which looked down upon the terrace, the cavalcade departing down the avenue. At some considerable distance behind the others rode Sir Charles Mitford and Mrs. Hammond; and he was bending towards her, and talking in an apparently impressive manner.

Laurence shrugged his shoulders and turned away in disgust; but he had not reached the writing-table before he heard a deep sigh, succeeded by a passionate sobbing, and turning quickly round, saw Lady Mitford leaning against the window and half-hidden by the heavy curtains,—her face buried in her hands, her whole

frame convulsed with the violence of her grief. Laurence would have retreated from the room, but his footsteps had attracted her attention; and as she looked round their eyes met. He at once approached her, saying, "You will believe me when I say that it was quite by chance I entered the room, Lady Mitford,—without the least idea that you were here; but I am glad now that I came, for you are, I fear, very unwell; and—"

"It is nothing," she said, with a strong but ineffectual effort to resume her usual calmness; "it is nothing, indeed, Colonel Alsager; a little silly woman's weakness—nothing more. I am over-tired, I think; we have been up later the last few nights, you know, and I am so totally unused to dissipation even of the mildest kind."

"You will be better when you return to London, perhaps," said Laurence; "I have a strong notion that the marsh on this great Redmoor is any thing but a sanitary adjunct to the property. I should really advise your getting back to town as soon as possible, now Parliament has met; and soon every body will be there."

In London, Laurence thought, Mrs. Hammond will at all events be out of the house, and in other gaiety there might be a chance of Mitford's getting rid of his infatuation.

"Oh, I'm frightened at the very thought of returning to town; and yet, down here, there are—I mean—it's—how very silly of me!—you must excuse me, Colonel Alsager, I am any thing but strong;" and poor Georgie's tears began to flow again.

"So I see," said Laurence, in a very gentle tone. She had seated herself in one corner of a low brown morocco-leather couch that stood across the window. Hitherto he had been standing, but he now placed himself at the other end of the sofa.

"I think," said he, bending forward, and speaking in the same low earnest voice,—“I think, dear Lady Mitford, that you will be disposed to give me credit for taking a deep and friendly interest in you.”

She looked at him through the tears that still stood in her splendid eyes—a frank, trusting, honest

glance ; and, as he hesitated, she said, " I know it—I have proved it."

" Then, though your sex is taught to believe that mine is thoroughly selfish and heartless,—never moving without some end for its own benefit in view,—you still believe that what I am about to say to you is dictated simply by the hope to serve you, the desire to see you happy?"

She bowed her head, but did not speak this time. Her tears were gone, but there was a painful look of anxiety in her eyes, and the spasmodic motion of the muscles of the mouth betrayed her agitation.

" You are very young," he continued, " and wholly unacquainted with the world. I am certainly past the freshness of youth, and I should think there are not many of my age more thoroughly versed in the world's ways. And one of its ways, dear Lady Mitford, one of its never-failing and most repulsive ways is to rob life of the glamour with which youth invests it; to lift up a corner of the silken curtain of the fairy temple and show the rough bare boards and

wooden trestles behind it; to throw stumbling-blocks in the paths of happiness, and to drag down those now falling to a lower depth; to poison truth's well, to blacken innocence, and to sow distrust and misery broadcast,—these are among the world's ways. To be pure, noble, and beloved, is at once to provoke the world's hatred. Is it any wonder then that some of its emissaries are plotting against *you*?"

A faint blush overspread her cheeks as she said, "I have done nothing to provoke them."

"Pardon me," said Laurence, "you have offended in the three ways I have just pointed out: there are few who offer such a combination of offences. And the world will have revenge for all. To besmirch your purity, to lower the nobleness of your nature, are tasks which as yet it dare not attempt. But to prevent your being beloved,—by those whose love you have a right to claim,—is apparently, not really, far more easily done."

"It is, indeed," cried poor Georgie, mournfully; "it is, indeed."

“I said apparently, not really,” continued Laurence. “To defeat such an attempt as this is the easiest thing in the world, if you only have the *savoir faire*, and will use the weapons in your armory. Even in the most purely pastoral times, love in marriage was not all that was requisite for happiness. If Phyllis had done nothing but sit at Corydon’s feet and worship him—if she had not been his companion and friend as well as his wife,—now talking to him about the crop in the forty-acre pasture, now telling him of the pigs eating the beech-nuts under that wide-spreading tree where that lazy Tityrus used to lie in the summer ; moreover, if Corydon had not had his farm and flock to attend to,—he would at a very early period of their married life have left her solitary, while he sported with Amaryllis in the shade, or played with the tangle of Neæra’s hair.”

He stopped as he marked her half-puzzled, half-frightened look. “Dear, dear Lady Mitford,” he continued, “let me drop parable and mystery, and speak plainly to you. I am going away to-morrow or the next day, and should

probably have left with this unsaid ; but the accidental sight of your sorrow has emboldened me to speak, and—and you know I would say nothing which you should not hear.”

At the last words she seemed reassured, and with a little effort she said, “Speak on, pray, Colonel Alsager ; I know I can trust you entirely.”

“Thank you,” he said, with a very sweet smile ; “I am very proud of that belief. Now listen : you married when you were a child, and you have not yet put away childish things. Your notion of married life is a childish romance, and you are childishly beginning to be frightened because a cloud has come over it. In his wife a man wants a companion as well as a plaything, and some one who will amuse as well as worship him. Your husband is essentially a man of this kind ; his resources within himself are of the very smallest kind ; he cares very little for field-sports, and he conjugates the verb *s’ennuyer* throughout the entire day. Consequently, and not unnaturally, he becomes readily charmed when any one

amuses him and takes him out of himself,—more especially if that some one be pretty and otherwise agreeable. Why should not you be that some one? Why should not you, dropping—pardon me for saying it—a little of the visible worship with which you now regard him,—why should not you be his constant companion, riding with him, making him drive you out, planning schemes for his amusement? If you once do this, and get him to look upon you as his companion as well as his wife, there will be no more cause for tears, Lady Mitford, depend upon it.”

“Do you think so?—do you really think so? Oh, I would give any thing for that!”

“And get him to London quickly, above all things. You are to have your opera-box, I heard you say; and there is the Park; and in this your first season you will never be allowed to be quiet for an instant.”

“Yes; I think you’re right. I will ask Charley to go back to town at once. There will be no difficulty, I think. The Charterises are gone; Mrs. Masters and the Tyrrells go to-morrow; and

Captain Bligh is going to Scotland to look at some shooting-quarters for Charley in the autumn. There are only—only the Hammonds.”

“I really do not think it necessary to take them into account in making your arrangements,” said Laurence. “Besides, unless I’m very much mistaken, when Mrs. Hammond finds the house emptying, Mr. Hammond’s bronchitis will either be so much better that there will be no harm in his going to town, or so much worse that there will be imperative necessity for his consulting a London physician.”

“And now, Colonel Alsager, how can I sufficiently thank you for all this kind advice?” said Georgie hesitatingly.

“By acting up to it, dear Lady Mitford. I hope to hear the best account of your health and spirits.”

“To hear! Will you not be in London?”

“Not just at present. I am at last really going to my father’s, and shall remain there a few weeks. But I shall hear about you from Bertram, and when I return I shall come and see you.”

“There will be no one more welcome,” said she, frankly putting out her hand.

Just at that moment the door opened, and Mr. Banks advanced and handed a closed envelope to Alsager, saying, “From the railway, Colonel.”

It was a telegraphic message; and as such things were rare in those days, Laurence’s heart sunk within him before he broke the envelope. It was from Dr. Galton at Knockholt, and said,

“Lose no time in coming. Sir Peregrine has had a paralytic stroke.”

Half an hour afterwards Laurence was in a phaeton spinning to the railway. His thoughts were full of self-reproach at his having hitherto neglected to go to his father; but ever across them came a vision of Georgie Mitford in the passion of her grief. “Ah, poor child,” he said to himself, “how lovely she looked, and what a life she has in prospect! I am glad I have left her, for it was beginning to grow desperate—and yet how I long, oh, how I long, to be at her side again!”

CHAPTER IX.

KNOCKHOLT PARK.

THE old home which Laurence Alsager had so long slighted, and to which his heart suddenly turned with a strange wild longing, almost powerful enough, he thought, to annihilate the space between it and Redmoor, had seen many generations of Alsagers beneath its peaked and gabled roof. The house stood in a fine park, and occupied a commanding situation on the slope of a well-wooded hill. The features of the scenery were such as are familiar in the midland counties: rich and fertile beauty, with uplands ankle-deep in meadow-grass, tall patriarchal trees, which stood in solemn unending conclave, group by group or singly, with benignant outstretched arms, and wide-spread mantle of green and russet; bright shallow streams, flashing under the

sunbeams, and rippling darkly in the shade. All the land about the picturesque and irregular old house was laid out, partly by nature and partly by art, on ornamental principles; and away to the right and left stretched a wide expanse of farm-lands, whose aspect suggested a thorough practical knowledge of the science of husbandry, and a satisfactory return in profit. The house was surrounded by a broad stone-terrace, bounded by a low balustrade, and flanked at each of the corners by a large stone-vase containing flowers, which varied with the season, but were never missing from these stately *jardinières*. These vases were tended, in common with the formal flower-garden and the particular pet parterre which she called "her own," by Helen Manningtree, the orphan ward of Sir Peregrine Alsager, whom Laurence remembered as a quiet pretty little girl, who had been frank and free with him in her childhood, timid and reserved when he had last seen her, just before he had been driven abroad by the furies of disappointment and wounded pride, and whom he was now to meet again, a grace-

ful, gracious, well-disciplined, and attractive woman.

Knockholt Park was one of those rare places which present a perfect combination of luxury and comfort to the beholder, and impress the latter element of their constitution upon the resident visitor. *Bien être* seemed to reign there; and the very peacocks which strutted upon the terrace, and tapped at the dining-room window as soon as Sir Peregrine had taken his accustomed seat at the head of the long table, seemed less restless in their vanity and brighter in their plumage than their *confrères* of the neighbouring gentlemen's seats. The brute creation had fine times of it at Knockholt Park, except, of course, such of their number as came under the denomination of vermin; and those Sir Peregrine was too good a farmer, to say nothing of his being too enthusiastic a sportsman, to spare. Horses were in good quarters in the stables and the paddocks of Knockholt Park; and well-to-do dogs were to be found every where, the kennel and the dining-room included. Sir Peregrine had the liking for

animals to be observed in all kindly natures which are solitary without being studious, and which affords to such natures a subtle pleasure, a sympathy which does not jar with their pride, a companionship which does not infringe upon their exclusiveness.

Sir Peregrine Alsager was essentially a solitary man, though he hunted pretty regularly and shot a little; though he fulfilled the duties of county hospitality with resignation, which county perceptions mistook for alacrity; and though he associated as much as most resident country gentlemen with the inmates of his house. These inmates were Helen Manningtree and her *ci-devant* governess, Mrs. Chisholm, a ladylike accomplished person, and a distant relative of Sir Peregrine, who had offered her a home with him when the charge of Helen had devolved upon him, almost simultaneously with the death of Mrs. Chisholm's husband,—an over-worked young curate, who had fallen a victim to an epidemic disease, in consequence of the prevalence of which in the parish his rector had found it necessary to remove him-

self and his family to a more salubrious climate, but had *not* found it necessary to procure any assistance for the curate. They were pleasant inmates, but scarcely interesting,—would hardly have been so to a younger man; and there was a certain reserve in Sir Peregrine's manner, though it never lacked kindness, and was distinguished for its courtesy and consideration, which maintained their relative positions quite unchanged. A young girl would have been an unintelligible creature to Sir Peregrine, even if she had been his own daughter; and he contented himself with taking care that all Helen's personal and intellectual wants were amply supplied, and all her tastes consulted and gratified: he left the reading of the enigma to others, or was content that it should remain unread.

Life at Knockholt Park had rolled on very smoothly on the whole, until the accident which recalled his son to his neglected home had befallen Sir Peregrine; and if the master of the fine old house and the fine old estate had had a good deal of loneliness, some bitterness, not a little wistful

haggard remembrance and yearning regret, a sense of discordance where he longed for harmony, with a disheartening conviction that he had not the faculties requisite for setting it right, and would never find them in this world, among his daily experiences, the decent and decorous mantle of pride had hidden these discrepancies in the general order of things from every perception but his own. If the hale old gentleman, on whom every eye looked with respect, and who had filled his place with honour all the days of his life, had unseen companions in those walks shared visibly by his dog alone; if the handsome stately library where he sat o' nights, and read all that a country gentleman is ever expected to read, was haunted now and then by a shadowy presence, by a beckoning hand; if the gentle whisper of a voice, whose music was heard in its full melody among the angels only, came oftener and more often, as "the tender grace of a day that was dead" receded more and more into the past, and stirred the slow pulses of the old man's heart,—he was all the happier, with such solemn happiness as remem-

brance and anticipation can confer, and no one was the wiser.

If "county society" in those parts had been brighter as a collective body, or if the individuals who composed it had had clearer notions of military life, and the obligations of a lieutenant-colonel, the long absence of Laurence Alsager from his father's house might have been made a subject of ill-natured and wondering comment; but the particular county to which Knockholt and its master belonged was rather remarkable for obtuseness, and there was a certain something about the old baronet which rendered it impossible to say unpleasant things in his presence, and difficult even to say them in his absence; and so Laurence Alsager escaped almost scot-free. Helen Manningtree felt some indignant wonder occasionally at the only son's prolonged absence from his father—indignant, be it observed, on Sir Peregrine's account, not on her own. Helen was very sensible, and as little vain as it was possible for a nice-looking and attractive girl to be, without attaining a painful height of perfection; and so

she did not wonder that Laurence Alsager had not been induced by curiosity to see her—of whom Sir Peregrine had doubtless frequently spoken to him—to visit his old home. Her life had been too simple and well regulated to enable her to comprehend an estrangement between father and son arising from diversity of sentiment alone; but it had also been so devoid of strong affections, of vivid emotions, that she was not likely to regard Laurence Alsager's conduct from a particularly elevated point of view. It was wrong, she thought, and odd; but if Laurence had gone to Knockholt at stated periods, and had conformed outwardly to filial conventionalities, Helen would have been the last person in the world to perceive that any thing was wanting to the strength and sweetness of the relationship between Sir Peregrine and his only son.

Mrs. Chisholm—a woman who had known love and bereavement, struggle and rest, but who was childless, and in whom, therefore, that subtlest instinct which gives comprehension to the dullest had never been awakened—felt about it all much

as Helen did; but she expressed less, and the little she permitted herself to say was cold and vague. Coldness and vagueness characterised Mrs. Chisholm, because sorrow had early chilled her heart, and no one whom she loved had ever addressed himself to the awakening of her intellect. The curate had not had time, poor fellow; he had had too much to do in persuading people to go to church who would not be persuaded; and his Sophy had been so pretty in the brief old time, so cheerful, so notable, so lovable and beloved, that it had never occurred to him that her mind might have been a little larger and a little stronger with advantage. The time was brief, and the curate died in the simple old faith, leaving his pretty Sophy to outlive him, his love, and her prettiness, but never to outlive his memory, or to cease to glory in that unutterably-precious recollection, that her husband had never found fault with her in his life. On the whole, then, Laurence Alsager was gently judged and mildly handled by the worthy people who had the best right to criticise his conduct; and perhaps the knowledge that this was the

case added keenness to the pang of self-reproach, which made his self-inflicted punishment, with which he read the brief but terrible news flashed to his conscious heart along the marvellous electric wire.

Evening had fallen over stream and meadow, over upland and forest, at Knockholt. It had come with the restless and depressing influence which contrasts so strangely with the calm and peace it brings to the fulness of life and health, into the lofty and spacious chamber where Sir Peregrine lay, prostrate under the victorious hand of paralysis. The mysterious influence of serious illness, the shadow of the wings of the Angel of Death, rested heavily upon the whole of that decorously-ordered house; and the watchers in the chamber of helplessness, it may be of pain,—who can tell? who can interpret the enforced stillness, the inexorable dumbness of that dread disease?—succumbed to its gloom. Mrs. Chisholm and Helen were there, not, indeed, close by the bed, not watching eagerly the motionless form, but gazing alternately at each other and at the doctor,

who kept a vigilant watch over the patient. This watch had, if possible, increased in intensity since sunset, at which time Dr. Galton had perceived a change, visible at first to the eye of science alone. The dreadful immobility had certainly relaxed; the rigidity of the features, blended with an indescribable but wofully-perceptible distortion of the habitual expression, had softened; the plum-like blueness of the lips had faded to a hue less startlingly contrasted with that of the shrunken and ashy features.

“He will recover from this attack, I hope—I think,” said the doctor, in answer to a mute question which he read in Helen’s eyes, as he stood upright after a long and close investigation of the patient. “Yes, he will outlive this. I wish Colonel Alsager were here.”

“We may expect him very soon,” Mrs. Chisholm said; “he would start immediately of course, and we know the telegraph-message would reach in time for him to catch the up-train.”

As she spoke, wheels were heard on the distant carriage-drive. Sir Peregrine’s room was on

the north side, that farthest from the approach; and immediately afterwards a servant gently opened the door—ah, with what needless caution!—and told Mrs. Chisholm that the Colonel had arrived, and desired to see her. There was more awkwardness than agitation in Mrs. Chisholm's manner as she hurriedly rose to comply with this request, but was interrupted by Dr. Galton, who said:

“No, no, my dear madam,—I had better see him myself; I can make him understand the necessary care and caution better than you can.”

Mrs. Chisholm returned to her seat in silent acquiescence; and for the ensuing half-hour she and Helen sat sadly looking at the helpless form upon the bed, and occasionally whispering to one another their several impressions of how Laurence Alsager “would bear it.”

What Laurence Alsager had to bear, and how he bore it, was not for any one to see. He held himself aloof even from the gentle scrutiny he had so little reason to dread. In half-an-hour Dr. Galton reëntered Sir Peregrine's room, looking

very grave, and requested Mrs. Chisholm and Helen to withdraw.

“I am going to let Colonel Alsager see his father,” he said; “and I think there should be no one else by. We can never know exactly how much or how little the patient feels, or knows, or is affected, in cases like these; but one at a time is an admirable rule.”

“He will find us in the long drawing-room when he wishes to see us,” said Mrs. Chisholm; and then she and Helen left the room, and went in silence along the wide corridor, and down the broad flat staircase of fine white stone, with its narrow strip of velvet-pile carpeting and its heavy carved balustrade, terminated by a fierce figure in armour holding a glittering spear, with a mimic banderol blazoned with the device of the Alsagers. The wide stone hall, at the opposite extremity of which the door of the long drawing-room stood open, the heavy velvet *portière* withdrawn, was hung with trophies of the chase and of war. Tiger-skins, buffalo-horns, the *dépouilles* of the greater and the lesser animals which man so loves to destroy, adorned

its walls, diversified by several handsome specimens of Indian arms, and a French helmet, pistol, and sabretache. Four splendid wood-carvings, representing such scenes as Snyder has painted, were conspicuous among the orthodox ornaments of the hall. They were great favourites with Sir Peregrine, who had bought them in one of the old Belgian cities on the one only occasion when he had visited foreign parts—an awful experience, to which he had been wont to allude with mingled pride and repugnance. Helen glanced at them sadly as she crossed the hall; then turned her head carelessly in the direction of the great door, which stood open, and before which a huge black Newfoundland lay at full length upon the marble steps. At the same moment the dog, whose name was Faust, rose, wagged his tail, twitched his ears, and cantered down the steps, and across the terrace in an oblique direction.

“Who is that, Helen?” asked Mrs. Chisholm, as she caught sight of Faust’s swift-vanishing form. “Some one is coming whom the dog knows.”

“It is only Mr. Farleigh,” answered Helen; but her reply must have been made quite at random, for she had not advanced another step in the direction of the door, and could not possibly have seen, from her position in the hall, who was approaching the house at that moment.

Mrs. Chisholm had a natural and spontaneous inclination towards curates. She respected—indeed, she admired—all the ranks of the hierarchy and all their members, and she never could be induced to regard them as in any way divided in spirit or opinions. They were all sacred creatures in her eyes, from the most sucking of curates to the most soapy of bishops; but the curates had the pre-eminence in the order of this remarkably unworldly woman’s estimation. Her Augustine had been a curate; he might, indeed, have become a bishop in the fulness of time, and supposing the order of merit to have been attended to by the prime-minister *in posse*; but fate had otherwise decreed, and his apotheosis had occurred at the curate-stage of his career. For this perfectly laudable and appreciable reason Mrs. Chisholm liked the

Reverend Cuthbert Farleigh, and would have liked him had he been the silliest, most commonplace, most priggish young parson in existence—had he had weak eyes and a weak mind, Low-Church opinions, and a talent for playing the flute. But the Reverend Cuthbert had none of these things. On the contrary, he was a handsome manly young fellow, who looked as if he possessed an intellect and a conscience, and was in the habit of using both; who had a tall well-built figure, fine expressive dark eyes, and an independent, sensible, cheerful manner, which few people could have resisted. Helen Manningtree had never made any attempt at resisting it. She had known Cuthbert Farleigh for eighteen months, and she had been in love with him just twelve out of the number. She was not aware of the circumstance at first, for she had had no experience of similar feelings; she had had none of the preliminary feints and make-believes which frequently precede the great passion of such persons as are calculated to feel a great passion, and the tepid sincerity of such as are not. Helen had never

experienced a sensation of preference for any one of the limited and not very varied number of young country gentlemen whom she had met since she "came out" (the term had a restricted significance in her case); and when she did experience and avow to herself such a sentiment in the instance of the Reverend Cuthbert Farleigh, she readily accounted for it to herself by impressing on her own memory that, however young he might look and be, he was her spiritual pastor and master—and, of course, that occult influence affected her very deeply—and by making up her mind that he preached beautifully. And Cuthbert? What was the young lady with the brown eyes, and the brown curls, and the fresh healthful complexion; the young lady who was not indeed strictly beautiful, nor, perhaps, exactly pretty, but who was so charming, so graceful, so thoroughly well-bred; such an innate lady in thought, word, and deed, in accent, in gesture, in manner;—what was she to him? He had asked himself that same question many a time; he asked it now, as he came up to the open door—rarely shut at Knock-

holt Park, save in the rigorous depths of winter—and he came to the conclusion, as he thought of the manifest luxury and elegance in whose enjoyment Helen had been reared, and of the probable fortune which she would possess, that he had better postpone answering it until he should have become a bishop.

Helen, who did not try to analyse her own perturbations, and was wholly unconscious of Cuthbert's, received him with her accustomed gentle sweetness, but with a sedate and mournful gravity adapted to the circumstances. When the ladies had brought their lengthy and minute narrative to a close—a narrative which embraced only the history of twenty-four hours, for Cuthbert was a regular and attentive visitor—he inquired about Colonel Alsager. Had he been informed? had he been sent for? had he come?

“Yes, to all your questions, Mr. Farleigh. Colonel Alsager is now in the house, in Sir Peregrine's room; but as yet we have not seen him.”

The sensitive and expressive face of the curate was clouded by a look of pain and regret. He

and Colonel Alsager had never met; but the young clergyman knew Sir Peregrine better, perhaps, than any other person knew him, and respected him deeply. He could not regard Laurence's conduct so lightly, he could not acquit him as easily, as others did. He blamed him heavily, as he sat and listened to the women's talk; and with the blame keen compassion mingled; for he knew, with the mysterious insight of a sympathetic nature, all that he must suffer in realising that regret must be in vain, must be wasted now, must be *too late*.

The occasion was too solemn to admit of so trivial a feeling as curiosity; but had it not been so, that feminine sentiment would undoubtedly have predominated among the emotions with which Mrs. Chisholm and Helen Manningtree received Colonel Alsager, when, after a lengthened interval, he made his appearance in the long drawing-room. As it was, their mutual greetings were kindly but subdued. The presence of illness and danger in the house superseded all minor considerations, and Colonel Alsager might have been a guest as fa-

miliar as he was in reality strange, for all the emotion his presence excited. Mrs. Chisholm introduced Cuthbert Farleigh, and added to the usual formula a few words to the effect that he was a favoured guest with Sir Peregrine, which led Alsager to receive the introduction warmly, and to prosecute the acquaintance with zeal. The curate thawed under the influence of the Colonel's genial manner,—so warm and attractive, with all its solemn impress of regret, fear, and uncertainty. After a little while the women went away again to resume their dreary watch; and Dr. Galton came down to make his report, and to join Alsager at his late and much-needed dinner. A telegraphic message had been sent to London to seek further medical assistance; but the great man, who could do so little, could not reach Knockholt before the morning. In the mean time there was little change in the state of the patient; but Dr. Galton adhered to the hopeful opinion he had formed at sunset. Cuthbert Farleigh went away from the Park, and sat down to the preparation of his Sunday's sermon with a troubled mind.

“What a capital, good fellow Alsager is,” he thought, “with all his faults! What a number of questions he asked about *her*! He takes a great interest in her. Well, *it* would be a very natural and a very nice thing.” It is granted, is it not, on all hands, that the abandonment of proper names and the substitution of pronouns—which, whether personal or impersonal, are at all events demonstrative—is a very suspicious circumstance in certain cases?

Sir Peregrine Alsager did not die, as Laurence had thought, and dreaded that he was to die, with the silence between them unbroken, the estrangement unremoved. Nothing could undo the past, indeed; but the present was given to the father and son; and its preciousness was valued duly by them both. In a few days after Laurence’s arrival the paralysis loosened its grasp of his father’s faculties; and though he still lay in his bed shrunk, shrivelled, and helpless, he could see, and hear, and speak. Sometimes his words were a little confused, and a slight but distressing lapse

of memory caused him to pause and try painfully first to recall the word he wanted, and next to accomplish its utterance ; but gradually this difficulty wore away, and the old man spoke freely, though little. He was greatly changed by his illness,—was most pathetically patient ; and his face, a little distorted by the shock, and never more to wear the healthy hue of his vigorous age, assumed an expression of tranquil waiting. The supremacy of his will was gone with the practical abolition of his authority. He let it slip unnoticed. He cared little for any thing now but the presence of his son and the progress of the mornings and the evenings which were making the week-days of his life, and wearing towards the dawn of the eternal Sabbath. He liked to have Helen with him, and would regard her with unwonted interest and tenderness,—keenest when she and Laurence met beside his couch, and talked together, as they came gradually to do, very often at first for his sake, and afterwards, as he hoped, as he never doubted, for their own. Yes, the keen anxiety, the foresight, the intensifying of former mental

attributes which characterise some kinds of physical decay in persons of a certain intellectual and moral constitution and calibre, showed themselves strongly in Sir Peregrine Alsager, and centred themselves in his son. He had asked nothing, and had heard little of his wandering and purposeless life; but that little had made the old man—held back now, on the brink of the eternal verity, by no scruples of coldness, of pride, of pique, or of scrupulosity—very anxious that his son should marry, and settle down to live at Knockholt Park at least a fair proportion of the year. With that considerate, but perhaps, after all, beautiful, simplicity which restores to age the faith of youth, and builds her shrines for all the long-shattered idols, Sir Peregrine reasoned of his own life and his own experience, and applied his deductions to his son's far different case. He was, however, too wise to put his wishes into words, or even to make them evident without words, to their objects. But there were two persons in the small group who tenanted Knockholt Park who knew that the dearest wish of Sir Peregrine's heart, that desire which

overpassed the present and projected itself into the inscrutable future, when its fruition might perchance never be known to him, was that Laurence Alsager, his son, should marry Helen Manningtree, his ward. The two who had penetrated the innermost feelings of the old man were Cuthbert Farleigh and Mrs. Chisholm.

How sped the days with Colonel Alsager in the old home? Heavily, to say the least of it. He had undergone strong excitement of various kinds; and now reaction had set in, with the unspeakable relief of his father's reprieve from immediate death. During his journey from Redmoor to Knockholt he had been an unresisting prey to bitter and confused regrets; so bitter, they seemed almost like remorse; so unavailing, they touched the confines of despair. The scenes in which he had lately played a part, the problems he had been endeavouring to solve, rushed from his view, and retired to the recesses of his memory,—to come out again, and occupy him more closely, more anxiously than ever, when the cruel grasp of suspense and terror was removed from his heart;

when the monotony of the quiet house, and the life regulated by the exigencies of that of an invalid, had fairly settled down upon him ; when all the past seemed distant, and all the future had more than the ordinary uncertainty of human existence. There was no estrangement between Laurence and his father now ; but the son knew that there was no more similarity than before. Their relative positions had altered, and with the change old things had passed away. The pale and shrunken old man who lay patiently on his couch beside the large window of the library at Knockholt, at which the peacocks had now learned to tap and the dogs to sniff, was not the silent though urbane, the hale and *arriéré* country gentleman to whom his Guardsman's life had been an unattractive mystery, and all his ways distasteful. That Guardsman's life, those London ways, the shibboleth of his set, even the distinctive peculiarities of his own individuality, had all been laid aside, almost obliterated, by the dread reality which had drawn so near, and still, as they both knew, was unobtrusively ever nigh at hand.

Father and son were much together at certain regulated times ; and Laurence was unfailing in his scrupulous observance of all the wishes, his intuitive perception of all the fancies of the invalid. Still there were many hours of solitude to be got through in every day ; and Laurence Alsager held stricter and truer commune with his own heart, while they passed over the dial, than he had ever been used to hold. The quiet of the house ; the seclusion of the Park, in which he walked and rode ; the formal beauty of the garden, where he strolled with Helen Manningtree, and listened to her enthusiastic expectations of what its appearance would be when the time of flowers should have fully arrived ; the regularity of the household ; the few and trivial interruptions from without ;—all these things had a strong influence on the sensitive temperament of Laurence Alsager, and gradually isolated him within himself. There was nothing to disturb the retrospective and introspective current of his thoughts ; and in those quiet weeks of waiting he learned much of himself, of life, and of truth—knowledge which other-

wise might never have come to him. It was not very long before his mind recurred painfully to Redmoor and its mistress, whom he had left in a position of difficulty and danger. He remembered the counsel he had given her, and he wondered whether it might avail. He pondered on all the eventualities which the *triste sagesse* of a man of the world taught him to anticipate, and longed for power to avert them or to alter their character. He learned some wholesome lessons in these vain aspirations, and looked deeper into the stream of life than he had ever looked before.

He looked at Lady Mitford's position from every point of view; he weighed and measured her trials, and then he began to speculate upon her temptations. All at once it struck him that he had ceased to fear Lord Dollamore; that that distinguished personage had somehow dropped out of his calculations; that he was occupying himself rather with her sentimental griefs than with the serious danger which he had believed, a little while ago, menaced her reputation and her position. He feared Laura Hammond, and he ar-

dently desired to penetrate the full meaning of Miss Gillespie's warning. He perfectly understood the difficulty of conveying to a mind so innocent as that of Lady Mitford the full force and meaning of the counsel he had given her, the hopelessness of inducing her to arm herself with a woman's legitimate weapon—the strong desire to please,—and getting her to use it against her husband. She did not lack intelligence, but she did not possess tact; and her nature was too refined and straightforward to give her any chance in so unequal a contest as that into which her husband's worthlessness had forced her.

And now another truth came steadily up from the abyss into which Alsager was always gazing, and confronted him. That truth was the motive which animated his thoughts and inspired his perceptions; which gave him so clear an insight into Lady Mitford's position, and enabled him to read her heart with more distinctness than she herself could have interpreted it. One day Laurence Alsager knew, and acknowledged to himself what this motive was, whence came this intuition. He

loved Georgie Mitford. Yes: the idle speculation, the indignation of a true gentleman at beholding the innocent wronged and the trusting deceived; the loyal instinct of protection; the contemptuous anger which had led him to detest Laura Hammond and to desire her discomfiture; the tender and true sympathy of a world-worn man with a pure and simple woman, to whom the world and its ways are all unknown and unsuspected; the shrinking from beholding the suffering which experience must inflict,—all these had been evident—they had existed in utter integrity and vitality. Alsager had not deceived himself then, neither did he deceive himself now; and though they still existed, they had receded from their prominence,—they did but supplement another, a more powerful, a more vital reality. He loved her—he never doubted the fact, never questioned it more. He loved her with a love as much superior to, as much stronger, holier, truer, and more vital than, any love which he had ever before felt or fancied—as his present self-commune was more candid, searching, and complete than

any counsel ever previously held in the secret chambers of his brain and heart. He had settled this point with himself, and was moodily pondering on the possible consequences of the fact, and on the alteration in his own position towards Lady Mitford which it implied, when he received a letter from Georgie. It was not the first,—several notes had passed between them in the easy intimacy of their acquaintance; but it was the first since that acquaintance had strengthened into friendship. And now, for him, friendship too had passed away, and in its place stood love—dangerous, delicious, entrancing, bewildering love. So Georgie's letter had altogether a different value and significance for him now. This was the letter :

“Redmoor, — March 18—.

“DEAR COLONEL ALSAGER,—Sir Charles received your kind note, but has been too busy to write; so he has asked me to do so, and I comply with very great pleasure. I need hardly say how truly glad we were to hear of the improvement in Sir Peregrine's state, and how earnestly we hope

he may completely rally. All things are going on here much as usual. Poor Mr. Hammond is very ill,—failing rapidly, I am sure; this week he is suffering fearfully from bronchitis. They talked of going away, but that is of course impossible. I am a good deal with him, and I think he likes me. Lord Dollamore has come back from town, and is staying here,—doing nothing but lounge about and watch every body. Is there any chance that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you again if we are detained here much longer? I hoped Charley would have taken me to see my father, who has been ailing this cold spring weather; but I fear the long delay here will prevent that,—he will be impatient to get to town as soon as possible. Pray let us hear from you how Sir Peregrine is. Charley is out, but I know I may add his kindest regards to my own.—Yours, dear Colonel Alsager, always sincerely,

“GEORGINA MITFORD.

“P.S. I have not forgotten your advice for a minute, nor ceased to act upon it, and to thank you for it from my heart. But—it is so difficult to

write upon this subject—difficult to me to write on any, for, as you know, I am not clever, unfortunately for me. Could you not come?”

Laurence read and re-read this simple letter with unspeakable pain and keen irrepressible delight. She trusted him; she thought of him; she wished for his presence! Could he not come? she asked. No; he could not. But supposing he could—ought he? Well, he was a brave man and a true, and he faced that question also. How he answered it remains to be seen.

The days passed at Knockholt Park, and resembled each other very closely. Laurence saw a good deal of Cuthbert Farleigh, and liked him much. He wondered a little, after the manner of men, at the content yielded by a life so unlike his own, or any that his fancy had ever painted; but if he and the curate did not sympathise, they coalesced. Laurence wrote again to, and heard again from, Lady Mitford.

There was not much in her letter apart from her kind and sympathising comments upon his;

but he gathered a good deal from the tone which unconsciously pervaded it. He learned that she had not succeeded in breaking up the party at Redmoor; that Sir Charles had invited a fresh relay of county guests; that Mr. Hammond's health was very precarious; and that Georgie had not been gratified in her wish to see her father. The letter made him more uneasy, more sad, by its reticence than by its revelations. If he could but have returned to Redmoor!—but it was impossible. If he could have left his father, how was he to have accounted for an uninvited return to Sir Charles Mitford's house? He did not choose, for many reasons, to assume or cultivate such relations with the worthy Baronet as going there in an informal manner would imply.

So March and April slipped away, and Laurence Alsager was still at Knockholt, in close attendance upon his father. One day in the last week of April, Laurence was returning from a solitary ramble in the park, intending to read to his father for a while, if he should find that Sir Peregrine (sensibly feebler, and much inclined to

slumber through the brightest hours of sunshine) could bear the exertion of listening. As he emerged from the shade of a thick plantation on the north side of the house and approached the terrace, he observed with alarm that several servants were assembled on the steps, and that two came running towards him, with evident signs of agitation and distress. He advanced quickly to meet them, and exclaimed, "Is any thing wrong? Is my father worse?"

"I am sorry to tell you, Sir Laurence—" began the foremost of the two servants. And so Laurence Alsager learned that his father had gone to his rest, and that he had come to his kingdom.

CHAPTER X.

LORD DOLLAMORE'S COUNSEL.

LADY MITFORD remained in the library, where Colonel Alsager had bidden her farewell, for a long time after he had departed. She was sorely perplexed in spirit and depressed in mind. She was heartily grieved for Alsager, whom she had learned long ago to distinguish from the crowd of casual acquaintance by whom she had been surrounded as soon as her "brilliant marriage" had introduced her to the London world. Implicit confidence in him had come to reconcile her to the novel feeling of distrust towards others, which had gradually, under the deteriorating influence of her recent experiences, taken possession of her. He represented to her a great exception to a rule whose extent she had not yet thoroughly learned

to estimate, and whose existence pained and disgusted her. His conversation with her just before his departure had ratified the tacit bond between them; and as Lady Mitford sat gazing idly from the wide window down the broad carriage-drive by which the riding-party had departed, she dwelt with grateful warmth upon every detail of Alsager's words, every variation of his manner and inflection of his voice.

“At least he is my friend,” she thought; “and what a comfort it is to know that! what a support in the state of wretched uncertainty I seem doomed to!” Anon she ceased to think of Colonel Alsager at all, and her fancy strayed, as fancy always does, to scenes and subjects whence pain is to be extracted. If any stranger could have looked into that handsome and luxurious room just then, and seen its tenant, he would have recoiled from the contrast and contradictions of the picture. She sat, as Alsager had left her sitting, on a low brown-morocco couch, facing the deep bay-window; her hands lay idly in her lap, her small head was bent listlessly forward; but the gaze of the lustrous and

thoughtful eyes was fixed and troubled. The soft tempered light touched her hair, her quiet hands, the graceful outlines of her figure, and the rich folds of her dress with a tender brilliance, but no sunshine from within lighted up the pale brow or brightened the calm sorrowful lips. Time passed on, and still she sat absorbed in her thoughts, until at length the loud chiming of the clocks aroused her. She threw off her preoccupation by an effort, and saying half aloud, "At least they shall not return and find me moping here," she passed out of the library. She paused a moment in the hall, debating with herself whether she would betake herself at once to the piano in her dressing-room, or go and inquire for poor old Mr. Hammond, to whom she had not yet made her customary daily visit. Lady Mitford was in the mood just then to do a kindness; her heart was full of Alsager's kindness to herself, and she sent for Mr. Hammond's man, and bade him tell his master she requested admittance to his room if he felt able to see her.

"I suppose if he had not been," she added

mentally, "his wife would have been afraid to have left him to-day."

Lady Mitford had made considerable progress in the science of life since the friend who had left her presence that morning had seen her for the first time at the Parthenium, but she had need to make a great deal more before she could be qualified to comprehend Laura Hammond.

Georgie found Mr. Hammond pretty well, and tolerably cheerful. The feeble old man liked his gentle and considerate hostess. He had liked her when he was in health; and he liked her still better now that the languor of illness rendered him liable to being fatigued by ordinarily dull or extraordinarily brilliant people. Georgie was neither,—she was only a gentle, refined, humble-minded, pure-hearted lady; and the old man, though of course he did not admire her at all in comparison with his own brilliant and bewitching Laura, and had considered her (under Laura's instructions) rather vapid and commonplace the preceding season, was in a position just then to appreciate these tamely admirable qualities to their

fullest extent. She remained with Mr. Hammond until the sound of the horses' hoofs upon the avenue warned her that the cavalcade was returning. She then went hastily down the great staircase, and reached the hall just in time to see Mrs. Hammond lifted from her saddle by Sir Charles with demonstrative gallantry, and to observe that he looked into her face as he placed her upon the ground with an expression which rendered words wholly superfluous. The unborn strength which had been created by Alsager's counsel was too weak to bear this sharp trial. Georgie shrunk as if she had been stung, and abandoning her brave purpose of giving her guests a cheerful greeting at the door, she took refuge in her own room.

On this day Sir Charles for the first time departed from the custom he had maintained since their marriage, of seeking Georgie on his return home after any absence. It was a significant omission; and as she took her place at the dinner-table, Lady Mitford felt that the few hours which had elapsed since Colonel Alsager had given her that counsel, which every hour became more diffi-

cult for her to follow, had made a disastrous difference in her position. She would make a great effort—she would do all that Laurence had advised, but how if Sir Charles estranged himself from her altogether?—and even to her inexperience there was something ominous in any marked departure from his accustomed habits,—what should she do then? He might either persist in a tacit estrangement, which would place her at a hopeless disadvantage, or he might quarrel with her, and end all by an open rupture. Georgie was beginning to understand the man she had married, without as yet ceasing to love him; and it is wonderful what rapid progress the dullest of women will make in such knowledge when they are once set on its right track.

Lord Dollamore took Lady Mitford to dinner, as usual, on that day, and Sir Charles gave his arm to Mrs. Hammond. He had entered the drawing-room only a moment before dinner was announced, and had not exchanged a word with his wife. Among the first topics of conversation was Colonel Alsager's departure, which Sir Charles

treated with much indifference, and to whose cause Mrs. Hammond adverted with a pert flippancy, so much at variance with her customary adherence to the rules of good taste that the circumstance attracted Lord Dollamore's attention. He made no remark when she had concluded her lively sallies upon the inconvenience of fathers in general, the inconsiderateness of fathers who had paralytic strokes in particular, and the generic detestability of all old people; but he watched her closely, and when her exclusive attention was once more claimed by Sir Charles, whose undisguised devotion almost reached the point of insult to the remainder of the company, he smiled a satisfied smile, like that of a man who has been somewhat puzzled by an enigma, and who finds the key to it all of a sudden. A little was said about Miss Gillespie, but not much; she was speedily relegated to the category of "creatures" by Mrs. Hammond, and then she was forgotten. The general conversation was perhaps a little flat, as general conversation is apt to be under such inharmonious circumstances; and Lady Mitford's

assumed spirits flagged suddenly and desperately. A feeling of weariness, of exhaustion, which quenched pride and put bitterness aside, came over her; a dreary loathing of the scene and its surroundings; a swift passing vision of the dear old home she had left so cheerfully—abandoned so heartlessly, she would now have said—of the dear old father of whom she had thought so little latterly, whose advice would be so precious to her now,—only that she would not tell him for the world; a horrid sense of powerlessness in the hands of a pitiless enemy—all these rushed over her in one cold wave of trouble. Another moment and she would have burst into hysterical tears, when a low firm whisper recalled her to herself.

“Command yourself,” it said; “she is looking at you, though you cannot perceive it. Drink some wine, and smile.”

It was Lord Dollamore who spoke, and Lady Mitford obeyed him. He did not give her time to feel surprise or anger at his interpretation of her feelings, or his interposition to save her from

betraying them; but instantly, with the utmost ease and readiness, he applied himself to the task of enlivening the company, and that so effectually, that he soon gained even the attention of the pre-occupied pair at the other end of the table, and turned a dinner-party which had threatened to become a lamentable failure into a success. It was a bold stroke; but he played it with coolness and judgment, and it told admirably. Lady Mitford lifted her candid eyes to his as she left the dining-room, and there was neither anger nor reproach in them; but there was gratitude, and the dawn of confidence.

“Just so,” thought Lord Dollamore, as he drew his chair up to the table again; “she’s the sort of woman who must trust somebody; and she has found out that her reclaimed Charley is not to be trusted. I’ll see if I can’t make her trust me.”

It suited Laura Hammond’s humour to exert her powers of pleasing on this evening, or perhaps even her audacious spirit quailed before the ordeal of the female after-dinner conclave, and she

was forced to cover her fear by bravado. At any rate, she appeared in an entirely new character. The insolent indolence, the *ennui* which usually characterised her demeanour when there were no men present, were thrown aside, and she deliberately set herself to carry the women by storm. She talked, she laughed, she admired their dresses, and made suggestions respecting their *coiffures*. She offered one a copy of a song unpurchasable for money and unprocurable for love; she promised another that her maid should perform certain miracles of millinery on her behalf; she sat down at the piano and played and sang brilliantly. Lady Mitford watched her in silent amazement, in growing consternation. The witchery of her beauty was irresistible; the power of an evil purpose lent her the subtlest seductive charm. The dark-gray eyes flashed fire, and glowed with triumph; the wanton mouth trembled with irrepressible fun.

It was an easy and a common thing for Laura Hammond to captivate men, and she really thought nothing about it, unless some deeper

purpose, some remoter end happened, as in the present instance, to be in view ; but women, to tell the simple truth, always feared, generally envied, and frequently hated her ; and she enjoyed her triumph over the “feminine clique,” as she disdainfully called them, at Redmoor thoroughly, and with keen cynical appreciation. She played her game steadily all that evening. When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room she almost ignored their presence ; she was innocently, ingenuously polite, but she admitted no exclusive attentions ; she never relapsed for a moment in her wheedling, but never overdone, civilities to the women. She brought forward the bashful young ladies ; she actually played a perfect accompaniment, full of the most enchanting trills and shakes, to a feeble bleat which one of them believed to be a song ; and when Sir Charles Mitford, whose ungoverned temper and natural ill-breeding invariably got the better of the conventional restraints which were even yet strange to him, endeavoured to interrupt her proceedings, she stopped him with a stealthy uplifted finger, and a

warning glance directed towards his wife. Her victim was persuaded that he fully understood her ; he rendered her admirable *ruse*, in his feeble way, the warmest tribute of admiration ; and he left the room with a vague consciousness that the indifference which had been for some time his only feeling towards his wife was rapidly turning into hatred.

Laura Hammond's own game was not the only one she played that night. Lord Dollamore had watched her quite as closely as Lady Mitford, and to more purpose. He saw that—whether from mere sheer recklessness or from some deeper motive, which he thought he could dimly discern—she was hurrying matters to a crisis, and that he might take advantage of the position which she had created. They were dainty jewelled claws with which he proposed to snatch the fruit he coveted from the fire ; but what of that ? they were cruel also ; and when they had done his work he cared little what became of them. Let them be scorched and burnt ; let the sharp talons be torn out from their roots ;—what

cares he? So he watched the feline skill, the deft, supple, graceful dexterity of the woman, with a new interest—personal this time; any he had previously felt had been mere connoisseurship, mere cynical curiosity, in a marked and somewhat rare specimen.

Every evidence of this observation, every sign of this new interest, was carefully and successfully suppressed. When all other eyes were turned on Mrs. Hammond, his never rested on her even by accident. She sang; and while the greater part of the company gathered round the piano, and those who could not obtain places near the singer kept profound silence, and listened with eager intensity, Dollamore ostentatiously suppressed a yawn, turned over the upholstery-books which ornamented the useless tables, scrutinised the chimney-decorations, and finally strolled into the adjoining room. Equally artistic was his demeanour towards Lady Mitford. He was delicately deferential and frankly cordial; but neither by word or look did he remind her of the service he had rendered her at dinner. Georgie might have

been slow to comprehend genius and appreciate wit, but she recognised delicacy and good taste at a glance; and so it fell out that when she received Lord Dollamore's "good-night" she thought, as she returned the valediction, "There is one man besides Colonel Alsager over whom she has no power. Lord Dollamore holds her in contempt."

The next morning at breakfast Lord Dollamore announced regretfully that he must leave Redmoor for a few days, but hoped to return by the end of the week. He addressed this announcement to Sir Charles Mitford, who was gazing intently on Mrs. Hammond as she broke the seals of several notes, and tossed them down one after another, half read, with a most reassuring air of indifference. Lady Mitford was not present; breakfast was a free and unceremonious meal at Redmoor, to which every body came when every body liked, and nobody was surprised if any body stayed away. Sir Charles expressed polite regret.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Hammond, "how very sorry Lady Mitford will be! Bereft

of her two courtiers, she will be bereaved indeed. First Colonel Alsager, and now Lord Dollamore! She will be quite *au désespoir*."

"I wish I could hope to make so deep an impression by my absence, Mrs. Hammond," he answered, in the careless tone in which one replies to a silly observation made by a petted child. "Mitford, can you come with me into the library a minute?" And he moved away, taking with him a parcel of letters.—"When you are spiteful, and show it, you grow vulgar, madame," he muttered under his breath—"after the manner of your kind—and a trifle coarse; but Mitford is not the man to see that, or to mind it if he did."

Half an hour later Lord Dollamore had left Redmoor; and as he leant back in the railway carriage which bore him towards town, he quietly reviewed all that had taken place during his visit, and arrived at a conclusion perfectly satisfactory to himself. Then he resolved to think no more of the matter till his return; and dismissed it with the reflection that "Mitford was a regular beast,—low, and all that;" but that she "was a

devilish nice woman;—no fool, but not clever enough to bore one, and pretty enough for any thing.”

Matters continued pretty much in the same state at Redmoor during the week which followed Lord Dollamore's departure. Lady Mitford wrote to Colonel Alsager, and heard from him; but her letter—that which we have seen him receive at Knockholt—said as little as possible of the real state of affairs. The truth made a faint attempt to struggle out in the postscript; but pride, reserve, an instinct of propriety, the numberless obstacles to a woman in such a position as that of Lady Mitford telling it in its entirety to any man, rendered the attempt abortive. Could he not come? she had asked him. Could he not come? she asked herself, in the weary days through which she was passing—days of which each one was wearier and more hopeless than its predecessor; for things were becoming desperate now. The other guests had taken their leave, but still the Hammonds remained at Redmoor. Not a woman of the party but had known Laura's

hollowness and falsehood well—had known that the powers of fascination she had employed were mere tricks of cunning art; but they were all fascinated for all that. Laura had made the close of the time at Redmoor incomparably pleasant, whereas its opening had been undeniably dull; and there was another reason for their letting Mrs. Hammond down easily. They had remained as long as they could in the same house with her; and how were they to excuse or account for their having done so, if they disclosed their real opinion of her character and conduct? It was a keen privation, no doubt, not to be able to descant upon the “doings” at Redmoor, but they had to bear it; and the only alleviation within their reach was an occasional compassionate mention of Lady Mitford as “hardly up to the mark for her position and fortune, and sadly jealous, poor thing!”

It would have been impossible, in common decency, to have avoided all mention of the departure of the Hammonds; and accordingly Sir Charles Mitford told his wife, as curtly and sullenly as possible, that she might make her pre-

parations for going to town, as he supposed they would be moving off in a few days. Georgie had suffered dreadfully, but the worst was over. The keen agony of outraged love had died out, and the sense of shame, humiliation, terrible apprehension, and uncertainty, was uppermost now. In her distress and perplexity she was quite alone; she had no female friend at all in any real sense of the word. It was not likely Sir Charles Mitford's wife should have any; and the only friend she could rely upon was away, and hopelessly detained. The only friend she could rely on—As she repeated the lamentation over and over again in the solitude of her room, and in the bitterness of her heart, did it ever occur to her that the only friend she could rely on might be a dangerous, though not a treacherous, one;—that she was crying peace, peace, where there was no peace?

“When we know what the Hammonds are going to do, I shall write to Dollamore,” said Sir Charles. He spoke to Georgie.

She felt an eager longing to see her old home,

and to breathe a purer moral atmosphere than that of Redmoor. "I can only suffer and be perplexed here," she thought. "Let me get away, and I can think freely, and make up my mind to some line of action. Out of her sight, I should be easier, even in town; and how much easier at home!—once more in the old place, and among the old people, where I used to be before I knew there were such women as this one in the world." So she thought she would do a courageous thing, and ask Sir Charles to take her home for a little, as soon as the Hammonds should have left Redmoor.

She came to this resolution one morning before she went down to breakfast,—before she had to encounter Mrs. Hammond, who brought a fresh supply of ammunition to the attack on each such occasion; whose beauty was never brighter or more alluring than when she arrayed it in the elaborate simplicity of Parisian morning-dress; who was not sufficiently sensitive to be *journalière*, and who might always cherish a well-founded confidence in her own good looks, and the perfect

efficiency of her weapons. Not that Georgie was fighting her any longer on the old *terrain*; she has retreated from that, and had no other object now than to shield herself from the perpetual sharp fire of Laura's polished impertinence, her epigrammatic sarcasms, her contemptuous pity. Lady Mitford, whose good sense was apt to do its proper office in spite of the tumult of feeling constantly striving to overpower it, wondered sometimes why Laura took so much trouble to wound her. "She has made sure of Sir Charles," the pure simple lady would say to herself, when some sharp arrow had been shot at her, and she felt the smart, not quite so keenly as the archer thought perhaps, but keenly still. "She does not need to turn me into ridicule before him, to expose my defects and *gaucheries*; she does not need to test his devotion to her by the strength and impenetrability of his indifference to me,—at least not now. She is clever enough to know that wit and humour, sarcasm and finesse, are all thrown away upon *him*, if she is showing them off for her own sake." Of a surety Lady Mit-

ford was rapidly learning to estimate Sir Charles aright. "Her beauty and her unscrupulousness have fascinated him, and all the rest is more likely to bore him than otherwise. If she were in love with him she might not understand this; but she is not in love with him—not even after her fashion and his own; and I am sure she does understand it perfectly. What does she throw so much vigilance away for, then?—for she never loses a chance. Why does she waste so much energy on *me*? Of course, I know she hates me; and if she be as good a hater as such a woman should be, she would not be satisfied with the one grand injury she has done me: hatred might be pacified by so large a sop, but spite would crave for more. Yes, that must be the explanation—she is feeding spite."

If the old clergyman who had cried over Georgie Stanfield on her wedding-day, and uttered that futile blessing on the marriage which was so unblest, could have heard her speak thus to her own heart, how utterly confounded and astonished that good, but not "knowledgable,"

individual would have been! A few months in the great world to have turned Georgie into this woman, who seeks for motives, who reads character, who has all the dreary cunning in interpretation of the human heart which his life-long experience had failed to impart to him, though he had passed half a century in professional proclamation that "the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." But it was not her short experience of the great world in any general sense which had so far forwarded her education in the science of life as to enable her thus to analyse conduct and motives,—she had had a surer, subtler teacher; she had loved, and been betrayed she had hoped, and been deceived. She had dreamed a young girl's dream, and one by no means so exaggerated and exalted as most young girls indulge in; and the awakening had come, not only with such rudeness and bitterness as seldom accompany the inevitable disillusionment, but with such startling rapidity, that the lasting of her vision had borne no more proportion to the usual duration of "love's young

dream," than the forty winks of an after-dinner nap bear to the dimensions of "a good night's rest." Experience had not tapped at the sleeper's door, and lingered softly near the couch, and insinuated a gently-remonstrative remark that really it was time to rise—tenderly letting in the garish light by tempered degrees the while—cheerfully impressing, without hurry or severity, the truth that a work-day world—busy, stirring, dutiful, and real—lay beyond the glorified realms of slumber, and awaited the passing of the foot going forth to the appointed task over the enchanted threshold. The summary process of awakening by which the sleeper has a basin full of cold water flung on his face, and is pulled out of bed by his feet, bears a stricter metaphorical analogy to that by which Lady Mitford had been roused from her delusion; and though she had reeled and staggered under it at first, the shock had effectually done its work. - Georgie Mitford was a wiser woman than Georgie Stanfield could ever have been made by any more considerate process.

All Lady Mitford's newly-sprung wisdom, all the acuteness she had gained by being sharpened on the grindstone of suffering, did not enable her to reach a complete comprehension of Mrs. Hammond's motives. She had not the key to the enigma; she knew nothing of Laura's former relations with Colonel Alsager. If she had ever heard the story, or any garbled version of it, at all, it was before she had any distinct knowledge of, or interest in, either of the parties concerned,—when she was confused and harassed with the crowd of new names and unfamiliar faces,—and she had forgotten it. Even that advantage was her enemy's. Mrs. Hammond had been peculiarly bewitching to Sir Charles, and preternaturally impertinent to Lady Mitford, at the breakfast-table, on the morning when Colonel Alsager's first letter had arrived; indeed, she had a little overdone her part, which was not altogether unnatural. Fierce passions, a violent temper, and a cold heart, form a powerful but occasionally troublesome combination, and imperatively demand a cool brain and steady judgment to control and utilise them.

Laura Hammond had as cool a brain and as steady a judgment as even a very bad woman could reasonably be expected to possess; but they were not invariably dominant. The cold heart did not always aid them successfully in subduing the violent temper; and when it failed to do so, the combination was apt to be mischievous. On the occasion in question, Mrs. Hammond had been, to begin with, out of sorts, as the best-regulated natures, and the most intent on their purposes in their worst sense, will occasionally be. Sir Charles bored her, and she was on the point of letting him perceive the fact, and thus giving her temper its head, when the cool brain interposed and curbed it in time. She exerted herself then to bewitch and enslave the Baronet, even beyond his usual condition of enchantment and subjugation. Her success was complete; but its enjoyment was mitigated by her perception that it had failed to affect Lady Mitford. The husband whom she had undoubtedly loved, and of whom she had been undeniably jealous, slighted her more openly than ever, and offered to her rival before her face un-

disguised and passionate homage; and yet Lady Mitford maintained perfect composure; and though she was occasionally *distracte*, the expression of her face indicated any thing but painful thoughts as the cause of her abstraction. Her serene beauty was particularly impressive, and there was an indefinable added attraction in the calm unconscious grace of her manner. The quick instinct of hate warned her enemy that she was losing ground, and she listened eagerly, while she never interrupted her conversation with Sir Charles, for an indication of the cause. It came quickly. Alsager's letter was mentioned, and Lady Mitford imparted its contents to Captain Bligh, who had dropped in late, and had not heard her communication to Sir Charles. She looked away from Mrs. Hammond while she spoke, and while she and Bligh discussed the letter, Sir Peregrine's state, Laurence's detention at Knockholt, and other topics connected with the subject. It was fortunate that she did not see Laura's face; the sight would have enlightened her probably, but at the cost of infinite perplexity and distress, deep-

ening and darkening a coming sorrow, swooping now very near to her unconscious head. The look, which would have been a revelation, lasted only a moment. It did not deform the beauty of the face, which it lighted up with a lurid glare of baffled passion and raging jealousy; for that beauty owed nothing to expression—its charm, its power were entirely sensuous; but it changed it from the seductive loveliness of a wicked woman to the evil splendour of a remorseless devil. If Lady Mitford had seen it, the light which its lurid fury would have flashed upon her might have been vivid enough to show her that in the rage and torment whence it sprung, she was avenged; but Georgie was not the sort of woman to be comforted by that view of the subject.

Lady Mitford made her request of Sir Charles, and was refused more peremptorily than her letter to Laurence Alsager had implied. The increasing rudeness of Mitford to his wife was characteristic of the man. He had neither courage, tact, nor breeding; and when he went wrong, he did so doggedly, and without making any attempt

to mitigate or disguise the ugliness of the aberration. His demeanour to his wife at this juncture exhibited a pleasing combination of viciousness and stupidity. He was maddened by the near inevitability of Laura's departure. The Hammonds must leave Redmoor, and there was no possibility of their going to town. Mr. Hammond's physicians had prescribed Devonshire air, and in Devonshire he must be permitted to remain. Sir Charles heartily cursed the poor old gentleman for the ill-health by which he and Laura had so largely profited; but curses could do nothing,—the Hammonds must go. He must be separated from Laura for a time, unless indeed Hammond would be kind enough to die, or she would be devoted enough to elope with him. The latter alternative presented itself to Sir Charles only in the vaguest and remotest manner, and but for a moment. He had become very much of a brute, and he had always been somewhat of a fool; but he had not reached the point of folly at which he could have supposed that Laura Hammond would forfeit the wealth for which she had

sold herself, and which in the course of nature must soon fall into her hands, for any inducement of sentiment or passion. He had been brooding over these grievances alone in the library, when Georgie, with whom he had not exchanged a dozen words for as many days, came in, and spoke to him, with a miserable affectation of unconsciousness, about a wish to visit her old home before their return to town for the season. He refused with curt incivility and obstinacy; and it is probable that the ensuing few minutes might have brought about a decided quarrel between the husband and wife, had not Captain Bligh entered the room abruptly, and called out, apparently without noticing Lady Mitford's presence :

“I say, Mitford, you're wanted. Hammond is ever so much worse. Gifford has been round to the stables, to get a groom sent off for Dr. Wilkinson.—I beg your pardon, Lady Mitford,—I ought to have mentioned that Mrs. Hammond's maid is looking for *you*.”

Confusion reigned at Redmoor all that day,

which seemed likely, during many hours, to have been the last of Mr. Hammond's life. Sir Charles felt that his morning meditation had had something prophetic in it; here was the other alternative almost within his grasp. At all events, whether he died a little sooner or lingered a little longer, Mr. Hammond must remain at Redmoor. The evil day was postponed. Lady Mitford simply devoted herself to the invalid, and behaved towards Mrs. Hammond with magnanimous kindness and consideration, which might have disarmed even Laura, had her inveterate coquetry and love of intrigue been the only animating motives of her conduct. She might have sacrificed the lesser passions to an impulse of the kind, but the greater—no. So she accepted all the delicate kindnesses which poor Georgie did her, she accepted the *rôle* of devoted and afflicted wife assigned to her before the household, and she hardened her heart against every appeal of her feebly-speaking conscience. With the following day the aspect of things changed a little. Mr. Hammond rallied; the doctors considered him

likely to get over the attack; and Lord Dollamore arrived at Redmoor.

“I didn't hear any thing from any body, Mitford, and so I came on according to previous arrangement,” said his lordship, as he greeted his host and looked about for Lady Mitford.

Lord Dollamore had strictly adhered to his programme. He never burdened his mind with the pursuit of two objects at the same time. He had completely disposed of the business which had called him away, and with which the present narrative has no concern; and he had come back to Redmoor as a kind of *divertissement* before the serious business of the season should commence. He entertained no doubt that he could resume his relation with Lady Mitford precisely at the point which it had attained when he left Redmoor. Georgie was not a fickle woman in any thing; rather methodical, he had observed, in trifles. The impression he had made was likely to have been aided rather than lessened by the intermediate course of events at Redmoor. On the whole he felt tolerably confident; besides, he did not

very much care. Lord Dollamore's was a happy temperament—a fortunate constitution, in fact—always supposing that life on this planet was *tout potage*, and nothing to follow. He could be pleasantly excited by the ardour of pursuit, and moderately elated by success; but failure had no terrors for him; he never fell into the weakness of caring sufficiently about any thing to furnish fate with the gratification of disappointing him, in the heart-sickening or enraging sense of that elastic expression.

The Hammonds and Lord Dollamore were the only people now at Redmoor who could be strictly called guests. Captain Bligh was rather more at home than Sir Charles; and one or two stragglers, who had remained after the general break-up, addicted themselves to the versatile and good-humoured *vaurien*, and were generally to be found in his company. Accordingly, and as he anticipated, Lord Dollamore found Lady Mitford alone in the drawing-room when he quitted the delectable society of the gentlemen. Mrs. Hammond had left the dinner-table, proclaiming her inten-

tion of at once resuming her place by her husband's side—a declaration by which she secured two purposes: one, the avoidance of a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Mitford; the other, the prevention of a visit by her hostess to the sick-room, on any supposition that Mr. Hammond might require extra attention. During dinner she had been quiet and subdued; her manner, in short, had been perfectly *comme-il-faut*, and she was dressed for her part to perfection. She had kept alive Lady Mitford's gentler feelings towards her; she had forged a fresh chain for Sir Charles, who, like "Joey B.," had great admiration for proceedings which he considered "devilish sly;" and she had afforded Dollamore much amusement of the kind which he peculiarly appreciated—quiet, ill-natured, and philosophical.

It does not much signify whether Laura went to her husband's sick-room at all, or how long she remained there; but there was some significance in the fact, which Lord Dollamore found eminently convenient and agreeable, that Sir Charles sent a footman to tell my lady that he had business to

attend to in the library, and requested she would send his coffee thither; and there was a fortunate coincidence in the adjournment of Captain Bligh and his companions to the smoking-room, without any embarrassing drawing-room parade at all.

As Lord Dollamore entered the room, Lady Mitford was bidding good-night to Mr. Hammond's little daughter, to whom she had been uniformly kind since the mysterious departure of Miss Gillespie. Lord Dollamore had hardly ever seen the child, whom her stepmother wholly neglected, leaving her to the care of her maid, if the foreign damsel who officiated in that enviable capacity chose to take care of her,—and to chance, if she did not. Laura Hammond hardly knew that Lady Mitford had taken the child under her kindly protection, and had kept her with her during many of the hours of each day which she was not obliged to devote to her social duties; but the child's father knew the fact, and felt grateful to the one woman, after his senile fashion, without daring to express or even to feel any condemnation of the other. As the child left

the room, Lord Dollamore, looked after her for a moment before he closed the door; then he went up to Lady Mitford's sofa by the fireplace, and said quietly:

“Mrs. Hammond is as admirable as a step-mother as in all the other relations of life, I fancy.”

Georgie made no reply, and he did not appear to expect any. Then came Sir Charles's message; and Dollamore watched Lady Mitford closely during its delivery, and until the servant had left the room, carrying a single cup of coffee on a salver.

“Does Mrs. Hammond disdain that celestial beverage?” he asked then, in a voice so full of meaning that Lady Mitford started and blushed crimson. This symptom of anger did not disconcert Lord Dollamore in the least. He had made up his mind to use the first opportunity which should present itself, and it had come. Of course she would start and blush, no matter how he phrased his meaning; but the start was rather graceful, and the blush was decidedly becoming.

“I don't know. I—what do you mean, Lord

Dollamore? Mrs. Hammond has gone to her room; you heard what she said?"

"I did; and I don't believe a word of it. 'My poor dear Hammond' will have very little of her society this evening. Lady Mitford," he said, with a sudden change of tone, "how long do you intend to endure this kind of thing? Now I know what you are going to say;"—he put up his hand with a deferential but decided gesture, to prevent her speaking;—"I am quite aware that I have no business to talk to you about Mitford and Mrs. Hammond. I could repeat all that conventional catechism about the whole duty of men and women without a blunder; but it's all nonsense—all hypocrisy, which is worse. I am a man of the world, and you are a woman of the world, or nearly: you will very soon be completely so. Allow me to anticipate the period at which your education will be finished, and to speak to you with perfect frankness."

Georgie looked at him in complete bewilderment. What did this new tone which he had assumed mean?—To insult her? No; she had no

reason to think, to fear any thing of that kind. Had he not done her at least one substantial service—had he not saved her from ridicule, from affording her enemy a triumph? Had not his manner been always respectful, and, in his indolent way, kind? Even while he spoke of her as “nearly” a woman of the world, she knew that he was thinking of her newness, her ignorance of that very world, and of life. Perhaps she should only expose herself to ridicule on his part now, if she shrank from hearing him. It was certain that things had gone too far—the state of affairs had become too evident—for her to affect indignation or assume prudery, without making herself supremely ridiculous; besides, there was already a tacit confidence between them, which she could neither ignore nor recall. She wished vaguely that Colonel Alsager had been there; then, that some one might come into the room; but she felt, amid her perplexity and perturbation, a strong desire to hear what he had to say to her—to learn what was the view which a man so completely of society, and so capable of interpreting

its judgment, took of her position and prospects. Nervously, yet not unreadily, she assented; and Lord Dollamore, standing on the hearth-rug and looking down at her bent head and drooping eyelids, spoke in a low tone :

“ You are no match for Mrs. Hammond, Lady Mitford. You would not be, even if you did not labour under the insurmountable disadvantage of being Sir Charles’s wife. That must be as evident to yourself—for you are wonderfully sensible and free from vanity—as it is to the lookers-on, who proverbially see most of the game. You have feeling and delicacy, and she is encumbered by no such obstacles to the attainment of any purpose she may set before her. But because you can’t fight her on any ground, that’s no reason why you should let her make you wretched, and, above all, ridiculous.”

“ She cannot. I—”

Georgie had looked up with an angry beautiful flush on her cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes, which Mrs. Hammond’s could not have managed by any contrivance to excel. But when she saw

the look that was fixed on her, her eyes fell, and she covered her face with her hands. It was not a bold glance; it was quiet, powerful, and pitying—pitying from Dollamore's point of view, not of her grief, but of her "greenness."

"She *can*, and she *has*, Lady Mitford; but it will be your own fault, and a very silly fault too, if she has that power much longer. Look the truth in the face; don't be afraid of it. You have lost Mitford's affections, I suppose you will say; and there never was any one so miserable; and so forth. It's quite a mistake. Mitford never had any affections—he had, and has, passions; and they will be won and lost many and many a time, long after you will have ceased even to notice in what direction they may happen to be straying. Because your reign was short, you fancy Mrs. Hammond's will be eternal. Pooh! It will come to a timely end with the beginning of the opera-season; and nothing will remain to her of it but a rent in her reputation—which even that endurable material will hardly bear—and much mortification. Your reign is

over, as you believe ; and we will grant, for the sake of argument, that you are right. Well, what remains to you after this terrible imaginary bereavement of Mitford's affections? Why, Mitford's fortune, Mitford's rank, and a position which, if you were under his influence, might very possibly come to grief ; but which you, free and blameless,—a very pleasant combination, let me tell you, and one that many a woman would gladly purchase at the price of a little sentimental blighting,—will elevate and dignify. If you will only realise your position, Lady Mitford, and act with good sense, you have as brilliant a destiny before you as any woman not afflicted with a mission could possibly desire."

The dream she had dreamed—the home-life her fancy had pictured—came back in a moment to Georgie's mental vision ; and she said, in a tone of keen distress :

"Don't say these things, Lord Dollamore. I know you don't mean them ; but they sound cold and wicked. How could I care for any position ? and what is wealth to me ?"

“Pretty much what it is to every rational being, Lady Mitford—happiness; or if not quite the real sterling thing, the very best plated or paste imitation of it procurable in this state of existence. But you have not only wealth, rank, position, and a career of fashion and pleasure to look forward to; there are other things in your future. Think of your youth, estimate your beauty;—stay—no, you cannot do that; you never could conceive the effect it must produce on men who are gentlemen and have taste. If you ever learn to use its full power, you will be as dangerous as Helen or Cleopatra.”

He had spoken in a calm business-like manner, which disguised the real freedom of his speech; but he lingered just a little over the last few words, and then went on hurriedly:

“What charm do you think Mrs. Hammond, or all the women like her—who swarm like vipers in society—will have against you? I am not flattering you, Lady Mitford,—you know that; I am merely telling you the simple truth. Your experience has been narrow, and you think all,

or most men, are like Mitford. Because she has beaten you in this inglorious strife, do you think she could rival you in a grander and higher warfare?"

"Inglorious!" she said, amazed. "Oh, Lord Dollamore, he is my husband!"

Dollamore smiled—not at all a pleasant smile; there was too much contemptuous toleration in it.

"Your husband! Yes, he is your husband; but is he therefore any the less a commonplace and vulgar-minded person? You are too clever, Lady Mitford" (he understood the art of praising a woman for those qualities which she does *not* possess), "to believe in or repeat the stupid methodistical cant which would limit a woman's perceptions, sympathies, and associations, to her husband only,—a worse than Eastern bondage; for it does not involve indulgence, and it sins against knowledge. You are not going to 'live forgotten and die forlorn,' because you have married a man who is certainly not much better than his neighbours, but who is really no worse. Of course he does not suit you, and he never

would have suited you, if Mrs. Hammond had never existed. You would have found that out a little later, and rather less unpleasantly, perhaps; but why not make the best of the early date of the discovery, which, after all, has its advantages? Mitford does not 'understand' you—that's the phrase, I think. Well, it's no worse because he does 'understand' some one of a lower calibre, which is wonderfully like his own. He won't annoy you in any way, I daresay; he is ill at ease in society at the best, and he will keep out of it,—out of good society, I mean—*your* set. He will find resources at his own level, I daresay. Then do not trouble yourself about him; by and by, I mean, when the Hammond will be nowhere. Of course that business vexes you now; people always are vexed in the country by things they would never care about in town. It's the trees and the moon and the boredom, I suppose. Make up your mind not to trouble yourself about him: study the advantages of your position well, and determine to take the fullest possible enjoyment of them all."

He paused and looked at her, with a covert anxiety in his gaze. She sat quite still, and she was very pale; but she did not say a word. Her thoughts were painful and confused. Only one thing was clear to her: this man's counsel was very different from that which Colonel Alsager had given her. Which of the two would be the easier to follow? Georgie had strayed—at least a little way—into a dangerous path, when she acknowledged the possibility that it might be a struggle to act upon Alsager's, and might be even possible to follow Lord Dollamore's counsel. The pale face was very still; but Dollamore thought he could read indecision in it. He drew a little nearer to her, and bent a little more towards her, as he said:

“Do you really believe—do you even make-believe—that love is never more to be yours? Put such a cruel delusion far from you. You find it hard to live without love now; you grieve because you cannot keep the old feeling alive in your own heart, as keenly as you grieve because it has died in your husband's. You will find it

impossible in the time to come. Then, when the tribute of passionate devotion is offered to you, you will not always refuse to accept it. Then, if one who has seen you in these dark days, radiant in beauty and unequalled in goodness,—one whom you have taught to believe in the reality of—”

A servant entered the room, and handed Lady Mitford a small twisted note. It was from Sir Charles, and merely said, “Come to me at once—to the library.”

CHAPTER XI.

MR. EFFINGHAM'S PROGRESS.

WHEN Mr. Effingham returned to town after his signal discomfiture at Redmoor by Miss Gillespie, he had only two objects in view: one to prevent Griffiths finding out that he had gone so near to achieving success, but yet had failed; the other, to find out whither the young woman, who had so cunningly betrayed him, had betaken herself. The first was not very difficult. The meeting with the object of his search down at a country-house far away in Devon was too improbable to present itself to a far more brilliantly gifted person than Mr. Griffiths; while the receipt of five sovereigns (Sir Charles's donation had this time been represented at twenty-five pounds only) gave that

gentleman an increased opinion of his friend's powers of persuasion, and rendered him hopeful for the future.

The accomplishment of the second object was, however, a different matter. Mr. Effingham's innate cunning taught him that after all he had said to Miss Gillespie—or Lizzie Ponsford—about the source of his instructions, the company of her old acquaintances—Messrs. Lyons, Griffiths, Crockett, and Dunks—was about the last she would be likely to affect; and yet in their society only would he have opportunities of seeking her. Through the oft-threaded mazes of that tangled web, in and out, from haunt to haunt, Mr. Effingham once more wended his way,—asking every one, prying into every corner, listening to every conversation,—all to no purpose. He began to think that the object of his search must have departed from her original intention, and instead of coming up to London, have halted on the way; but then, what could she have done alone, unaided, without resources, in any provincial town? Mr. Effingham took to frequenting

the Devonshire public-houses and coffee-shops,—queer London holes kept by Devonshire people, who yet preserved a little clannish spirit, who took in a Devon paper, and whose houses were houses-of-call for stray children of the far West, sojourning for business or pleasure in London. Many a long talk was there in Long Acre or Smithfield, surrounded by the fœtid atmosphere and the dull rumblings of metropolitan life, of the Exe and the Dart, of the wooded coast of Dawlish and the lovely bay of Babbicombe, of purple moor and flashing cataract, of wrestling-matches and pony-fairs. The cads who dropped in for an accidental half-pint stared with wonder at the brown countrymen, on whom the sun-tan yet remained, who talked a language they had never heard, in an accent they could not understand; who had their own jokes and their own allusions, in which the jolly landlord and his wife bore their part, but which were utterly unintelligible to the Cockney portion of the customers. In these houses, among the big burly shoulders of the assembled Devonians, Mr. Effingham's perky little head was now

constantly seen. They did not know who he was ; but as he was invariably polite and good-natured, took the somewhat ponderous provincial badinage with perfect suavity, and was always ready to drink or smoke with any of them, they tolerated his presence and answered his questions respecting the most recent arrivals from their native county civilly enough. But all was unavailing ; to none of them was the personal appearance of Miss Gillespie known. The presence of any stranger in their neighbourhoods would not have passed unnoticed ; but of the few sojourners who were described to him, none corresponded in the least to that person whom he sought so anxiously.

Would she not attempt to persevere in the new line of life which she had filled at Redmoor and succeeded in so admirably ? As governess and companion she had been seemingly happy and comfortable ; as governess and companion she would probably again try her fortune. Forthwith Mr. Effingham had a wild desire to secure the services of a desirable young person to superintend the studies of his supposititious niece ; and Mrs. Bar-

bauldson, who kept a "governess agency," and Messrs. Chasuble and Rotchet, who combined the providing of governesses and tutors with "scholastic transfers," vulgarly known as "swopping schools," the engagement of curates, and the sale of clerical vestments and ecclesiastical brass-ware, were soon familiarised with Mr. Effingham's frequent presence. He dropped in constantly at their establishments, and took the liveliest interest in the registers, looking through not merely the actual list of candidates for employment, but searching the books for the past three months. He paid his half-crown fees with great liberality, or else the manner in which he used to bounce in and out the waiting-room and examine the features of the ladies there taking their turn to detail the list of their accomplishments to the clerk, was, to say the least of it, irregular, and contrary to the regulations of the establishment. But all to no purpose,—he could learn nothing of any one in the remotest degree resembling Miss Gillespie: his search among the governess-agencies had been as futile as his visits to the Devonshire public-houses,

and all Mr. Effingham's time and trouble had been spent in vain.

What should he try next? He really did not know. He had, ever since his visit to Redmoor, been rather shy of Mr. Griffiths, fearing lest that worthy person might learn more than it was necessary, in Mr. Effingham's opinion, he should know. Griffiths was to him a very useful jackal, and it was not meet that the jackal's opinion of the lion's sagacity and strength should be in any way diminished. Chance had so far favoured him that Mr. Griffiths had recently been absent from town, having accepted a temporary engagement of an important character, as occasional croupier, occasional door-keeper, to a travelling band of gamblers, who were importing the amusing games of French hazard and roulette into some of the most promising towns in the Midland Counties.

One night Mr. Effingham was sitting in a very moody state at "Johnson's," sipping his grog and wondering vaguely what would be the next best move to make in his pursuit of Miss Gillespie, when raising his eyes, they encountered Mr. Grif-

fiths,—Mr. Griffiths, and not Mr. Griffiths. Gone was the tall shiny hat, its place occupied by a knowing billycock; gone were the rusty old clothes, while in their place were garments of provincial cut indeed, but obviously costly material: a slouch poncho greatcoat kept Mr. Griffiths's body warm, while Mr. Griffiths's boots, very much contrary to their usual custom, were sound and whole, and hid Mr. Griffiths's feet from the garish eye of day. Moreover, Mr. Griffiths's manner, usually a pleasing compound of the bearing of Ugolino and the demeanour of the Banished Lord, was, for him, remarkably sprightly. He threw open the swing-door, and brought in his body squarely, instead of butting vaguely in with the tall hat, as was his usual custom; he walked down the centre of the room, instead of shuffling round by the wall; and advancing to the box in which Mr. Effingham was seated in solitary misery, he clapped him on the back and said, "D'Ossay, my buck, how are you?"

The appearance, the manner, and the swaggering speech had a great effect on Mr. Effingham.

He looked up, and after shaking hands with his friend, remarked, "You've been doin' it up brown, Griffiths,—you have. They must have suffered for this down about Hull and Grimsby, I should think?" And with a comprehensive sweep of his fore-finger he took in Griffiths's outer man from his hat to his boots.

"Well, it warn't bad," said Mr. Griffiths, with a bland smile. "The yokels bled wonderful, and the traps kept off very well, considerin'. I'm pretty full of ochre, I am; and so far as a skiv or two goes, I'm ready to stand friend to them as stood friend to me, D'Ossay, my boy. No? Not hard up? Have a drink then, and tell us what's been going on."

The drink wás ordered, and Mr. Effingham began to dilate on the various phases of his pursuit of Lizzie Ponsford. As he proceeded, Mr. Griffiths went through a series of pantomimic gestures, which with him were significant of attempts to arouse a dormant memory. He rubbed his head, he scratched his ear, he looked up with a singularly vacant air at the pendent gas-light, he re-

garded his boots as though they were strange objects come for the first time within his ken. At length, when Mr. Effingham ceased, he spoke.

“It must have been her!” said he, ungrammatically but emphatically, at the same time bringing his fist down heavily on the table to express his assertion.

“What must have been her, Griffiths?” inquired Mr. Effingham, who was growing irritated by the extremely independent tone of his usually deferential subordinate,—“why don’t you talk out, instead of snuffing to yourself and makin’ those faces at me? What must have been her?”

Successful though he was for the time being, Mr. Griffiths had been too long subservient to the angry little man who addressed him to be able to shake off his bonds. He fell back into his old state of submission, grumbling submission, as he said:

“You’re a naggin’ me as usual, D’Ossay, you are! Can’t let a cove think for a minute and try and recollect what he’d ’eard,—you can’t. What I was tryin’ to bring back was this—there’s a cove

as I know, a theatrical gent, gets engagements for lakers and that, and provides managers of provincial gaffs with companies and so on. He was down at Hull, he was, and he come into our place one night with Mr. Munmorency of the T. R. there, as often give us a look up; and when business was over—we was rather slack that night—we went round to his 'otel to have a glass. And while we was drinkin' it and talkin' over old times, he says to me, 'Wasn't you in a swim with old Lyons and Tony Butler once?' he says. 'Not once,' I says, 'but a good many times,' I says. 'I thought so,' he says; 'and wasn't there a handsome gal named Ponsford, did a lot of business for them?' he says. 'There was,' I says; 'fortune-tellin' and Mysterious-Lady business, and all that gaff,' I says. 'That's it,' he says; 'I couldn't think where I'd seen her before.' 'When did you see her last?' I says. 'About three weeks ago,' he says, 'she come to me on a matter of business, and claimed acquaintance with me; and though I knew the face and the name, I could not think where I had seen her before.'"

“Didn’t you ask him any thing more about her?” said Mr. Effingham.

“No, I didn’t. ’Twas odd, wasn’t it? but I didn’t. You see I wasn’t on your lay then, D’Ossay, my boy, and I was rather tired with hookin’ in the ’arf-crowns and calc’latin’ the bettin’ on the ins and outs, and I was enjoyin’ my smoke and lookin’ forward to my night’s rest.”

“What a sleepy-headed cove you are, Griffiths!” said Mr. Effingham with great contempt. “What do you tell me this for, if this is to be the end?”

“But this ain’t to be the end, D’Ossay dear! Mr. Trapman’s come back by this time, I dessay, and we’ll go and look him up to-morrow and see whether he can tell us any thing of any real good about this gal. He’s a first-rate hand is Trapman, as knowin’ as a ferret; and it won’t do to let him know what our game is, else he might go in and spoil it and work it for himself. So just you hold your tongue, if we see him, D’Ossay, and leave me to manage the palaver with him.”

Mr. Effingham gave an ungracious assent to

his companion's suggestion, and, practical always, asked him to name a time for this meeting on the next day. Mr. Griffiths suggested twelve o'clock as convenient for a glass of ale and a biscuit, and for finding Mr. Trapman at home. So the appointment was made for that hour; and after a little chat on subjects irrelevant to the theme of this story, the worthy pair parted.

The biscuit and the—several—glasses of ale had been discussed the next day, and Mr. Griffiths was maunderingly hinting his desire to remain at Johnson's for some time longer, when Mr. Effingham, burning with impatience, and with the semblance of authority in him, insisted upon his quondam parasite, but present equal, conveying him to the interview with Mr. Trapman. Mr. Trapman's Dramatic Agency Office, so notified in blue letters on a black board, was held at the Pizarro Coffee-house in Beak Street, Drury Lane. A dirty, by-gone, greasy, used-up little place the Pizarro Coffee-house, with its fly-blown playbills hanging over its wire-blind, its greasy coffee-stained lithograph of Signor Poleno, the celebrated clown, with his

performing dogs; its moss-covered basket, which looked as if it had been made in a property-room, containing two obviously fictitious eggs. The supporters of the Pizarro were Mr. Trapman's clients, and Mr. Trapman's clients became perforce supporters of the Pizarro. When an actor was, as he described it, "out of collar," he haunted Beak Street, took "one of coffee and a rasher" at the Pizarro, and entered his name on Mr. Trapman's books. The mere fact of undergoing that process seemed to revivify him at once. He was on Trapman's books, and would probably be summoned at an hour's notice to give 'em his Hamlet at South Shields: a capital fellow, Trapman!—safe to get something through him; and then the candidate for provincial histrionic honour would poodle his hair under his hat and take a glance at himself in the strip of looking-glass that adorned the window of the Roscius' Head, and would wonder when that heiress who should see him from the stage-box O.P., and faint on her mother's neck, exclaiming, "Fitzroy Bellville for my husband, or immediate suicide for me!" would arrive.

There was a strange *clientèle* always gathered round Mr. Trapman's door so long as the great agent was visible, viz.: from ten till five; old men in seedy camlet cloaks with red noses and bleared eyes—"heavy fathers" these—and cruel misers and villanous stewards and hard-swearing admirals and libertine peers; dark sunken-eyed gray men, with cheeks so blue from constant shaving that they look as if they had been stained by woad; virtuous and vicious lovers; heroes of romance and single walking-gentlemen; comic men with funny faces and funny figures, ready to play the whole night through from six till twelve in four pieces and to interpolate a "variety of singing and dancing" between each; portly matrons—Emilias and Belvideras now—who have passed their entire life upon the stage, and who at five years of age first made their appearance as flying fairies; sharp wizen-faced little old ladies, who can still "make-up young at night," and who are on the look-out for the smart *soubrette* and singing-chambermaid's line; and heavy tragedians—these most difficult of all to provide for—with books full of testimonials

extracted from the potential criticisms of provincial journals. The ladies looked in, made their inquiries as to "any news," and went away to their homes again; but the gentlemen remained about all day long, lounging in Beak Street, leaning against posts, amicably fencing together with their ashen sticks, gazing at the playbills of the metropolitan theatres, and wondering when their names will appear there.

Through a little knot of these upholders of the mirror, Mr. Effingham and Mr. Griffiths made their way up the dark dirty staircase past the crowded landing, until they came into the sanctuary of the office. Here was a dirty-faced boy acting as clerk, who exhibited a strong desire to enter their names and requirements in a large leather-covered book before him; but Griffiths caught sight of Mr. Trapman engaged in deep and apparently interesting conversation with a short dark man in a braided overcoat, and a telegraphic wink of recognition passed between them. As it was the boy's duty to notice every thing, he saw the wink, and left them without further molestation, until

Mr. Trapman had got rid of his interlocutor, and had come over to talk to them.

“Well, and how are you?” said he, slapping Mr. Griffiths on the back.—“Servant, sir,” to Mr. Effingham.—“And how *are* you?” Slaps repeated.

“Fust rate,” said Mr. Griffiths, poking him in the ribs. “This is Mr. Effingham, friend of mine, and a re-markably downy card!”

“Wouldn’t be a friend of yours if he wasn’t,” said Mr. Trapman, with another bow to D’Ossay. “Well, and what’s up? Given up the gaff, I suppose. Seven to nine! all equal!—no more of that just now, eh?”

“No; not in town. Sir Charles Rowan and Colonel Mayne at Scotland Yard, they know too much,—they do. No; I ain’t here on business.”

“No?” said Mr. Trapman, playfully. “I thought you might be goin’ in for the heavy father, Griffiths, or the comic countryman, since your tour in the provinces.”

Mr. Griffiths grinned, and declared that Mr. Trapman was “a chaffin’ him.” “My friend,

Mr. D'Ossay—Effingham is more in that line,” he said; “a neat figure, and a smart way he’s got.”

“Charles Surface, Mercushow, Roderigo,—touch-and-go comedy,—that’s his line,” said Mr. Trapman, glancing at Mr. Effingham. “One fi-pun-note of the Bank of England, and he opens at Sunderland next week.”

Mr. Effingham had been staring in mute wonder at this professional conversation; but he understood the last sentence, and thought enough time had been spent in discussing what they didn’t want to know. So he put on his impetuous air, and said to Griffiths, “Go in at him now!”

Thus urged, and taking his cue at once, Mr. Griffiths said, “No, no; you’ve mistaken our line. What we want of you is a little information. Oh, we’re prepared to pay the fee!” he added, seeing Mr. Trapman’s face grow grave under a rapid impression of wasted time; “only—no fakement; let’s have it gospel, or not at all.”

“Fire away!” said Mr. Trapman. “I’m here to be pumped—for a sovereign!”

The coin was produced, and handed over.

“Now,” said Mr. Trapman, having tested it with his teeth, and then being satisfied, stretched out his arm in imitation of a pump-handle, “go to work!”

“You recollect,” said Griffiths, “telling me, when we met down at Hull, that one of our old lot had been to see you lately—a girl called Lizzie Ponsford.”

“I do perfectly.”

“It’s about her we want to know—that’s all.”

“It ain’t much to tell, but it was curious,—that it was. It’s six weeks ago now, as I was a-sittin’ in this old shop, finishin’ some letters for the post, when I looked up and saw a female in the doorway with a veil on. I was goin’ on with my letters, takin’ no notice, for there’s *always* somebody here, in and out all day they are, when the female lifted up her finger first warning-like, like the ghosts on the stage, and then pointin’ to Tom, the boy there, motioned that he should go out of the room. I was a little surprised; for though I had enough of that sort of thing many years ago, I’ve got out of

it now. I thought it was a case of smite; I did indeed. However, I sealed up the letters, and told Tom to take 'em to the post; and then the female came in, shuttin' the door behind her. When she lifted her veil, I thought I knew the face, but couldn't tell where; however, she soon reminded me of that first-rate gaff, in—where was it?—out Oxford Street way, where she did the Mysterious Lady, and Seenor Cocqualiqui the conjurin', and Ted Spicer sung comic songs. I remembered her at once then, and asked her what she wanted. 'An engagement,' she says. 'All right,' I says; 'what for?' 'Singin'-chambermaid, walkin'-lady, utility, any thing,' she says. 'Walkin'-lady, to grow into leadin' high comedy, 's your line, my dear,' I says: 'you're too tall for chambermaids, and too good for utility. Now, let's look up a place for you.' I was goin' to my books, but she stopped me. 'I don't want a place,' she says: 'I ain't goin' to stop in England; all I want from you,' she says, 'is two or three letters of introduction to managers in New York. You've seen me before the public; and though you've

never seen me act, you could tell I wasn't likely to be nervous or stammer, or forget my words.' 'No fear of that,' I says. 'Very well then,' she says, 'as I don't want to hang about when I get there, but want them to give me an appearance at once, just you write me the letters, and'—puttin' two sovereigns on the table—'make 'em as strong as you can for the money.' Oh, a clever girl she is! I sat down to write the letters, and in the middle of the first I looked up, and I says 'The bearer, Miss ——, what name shall I say?' 'Leave it blank, Mr. Trapman, please,' says she, burstin' out laughin'; 'I haven't decided what my name's to be,' she says; 'and when I have, I think I can fill it in so that no one will know it ain't your writin'.' So I gave her the letters and she went away; and that's my story."

Mr. Griffiths looked downhearted, and was apparently afraid that his patron would imagine he had not had his money's worth; but Mr. Effingham, on the contrary, seemed in much better spirits, and thanked Mr. Trapman, and proposed an adjournment to the Rougepot close by in Salad

Yard, where they had their amicable glasses of ale, and discussed the state of the theatrical profession generally.

When they had bidden adieu to Mr. Trapman and were walking away together, Mr. Griffiths reverted to the subject of Miss Ponsford.

“There’s an end of that little game, I s’pose,” said he; “that document’s lost to us for ever.”

“Wait!” said Mr. Effingham, with a grin; “I ain’t so sure of that. She’s gone to New York, you see; now, I know every hole and corner in New York, and I’m known every where there, as well as any Yankee among them. I could hunt her up there fifty times easier than I could in London.”

“I daresay,” said Mr. Griffiths; “but you see there’s one thing a trifle against that; you ain’t in New York.”

“But I could go there, I s’pose, stoopid!”

“Yes; but how, stoopid? You can’t pad the hoof over the sea; and them steamers lay it on pretty thick, even in the steerage.”

“I’m goin’ to America within the next week,

Griffiths, and I intend a friend of mine to pay for my passage."

"What! the Bart. again?"

"Exactly. The Bart. again!"

"And what game are you goin' to try on with him now?"

"Ah, Griffiths, that's my business, my boy. All you've got to do is to say good-bye to your D'Ossay to-night, for he's got to journey down to that thunderin' old Devonshire again to-morrow; and before a week's out he intends to be on the briny sea."

For the second time Mr. Effingham travelled down to Redmoor, and obtained an interview with Sir Charles Mitford. He found that gentleman very stern and haughty on this occasion; so Mr. Effingham comported himself with great humility.

"Now, sir," said Sir Charles, "you've broken your word for the second time. What do you want now?"

"I'm very sorry, Sir Charles—no intention of givin' offence, Sir Charles; but—"

“ You’ve not got that—that horrible bill ?”

“ N-no, Sir Charles, I haven’t ; but—”

“ Then what brings you here, sir ? more extortion ?—a further attempt to obtain money under false pretences ?”

“ No, no ; don’t say that, Sir Charles. I’ll tell you right off. I may as well make a clean breast of it. I can’t find that document any where. I don’t know where it is ; and I’m sick of cadgin’ about and spongin’ on you. You know when I first saw you up in town I told you I’d come from America. I was a fool to leave it. I did very well there ; and I want to go back.”

“ Well, sir ?”

“ Well, just as a last chance, do that for me. I’ve been true to you ; all that business of the young woman I managed first-rate—”

“ I paid you for it.”

“ So you did ; but try me once again.”

“ Tell me exactly what you want now.”

“ Pay my passage out. Don’t even give me the money ; send some cove to pay it, and bring the ticket to me ; and he can come and see me off,

if he likes, and give me a trifle to start with on the other side of the water; and you'll never hear of me again."

Sir Charles reflected a few moments; then said, "Will you go at once?"

"At once—this week; sooner the better."

"Have you made any inquiries about ships?"

"There's one sails from Liverpool on Friday."

"On Friday—and to-day is Saturday; just a week. I sha'n't trust you in the matter, Mr. Butler," said Sir Charles, taking up a letter lying on the table. "I shall adopt that precaution which you yourself suggested. A friend of mine, coming through from Scotland, will be in Liverpool on Wednesday night. Yes," he added, referring to the letter, "Wednesday night. I'll ask him to stop there a day, to take your ticket and to see you sail; and with the ticket he shall give you twenty pounds."

Mr. Effingham was delighted; he had succeeded better even than he had hoped, and he commenced pouring out his thanks. But Sir Charles cut him very short, saying:

“You will ask for Captain Bligh at the Adelphi Hotel; and recollect, Mr. Butler, this is the last transaction between us;” and he left the room.

“For the present, dear sir,” said Mr. Effingham, taking up his hat; “the last transaction for the present; but if our little New-York expedition turns up trumps, you and I will meet again on a different footing.”

On the Friday morning Mr. Effingham sailed from Liverpool for New York in the fast screw-steamer Pocalontas, his ticket having been taken and the twenty pounds paid to him on board by Captain Bligh, who stood by leaning against a capstan while the vessel cleared out of dock.

END OF VOL. II.

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