

HOBSON'S CHOICE

BY
DUTTON COOK



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JAMES H. GRAFF,

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“HOBSON’S CHOICE.”

A Story.

BY

DUTTON COOK,

AUTHOR OF “SIR FELIX FOY, BART.,” “LEO,” “PAUL FOSTER’S
DAUGHTER,” ETC.

“ Mr. Hobson kept a stable of forty good cattle, always ready and fit for travelling ; but, when a man came for a horse, he was led into the stable, where there was great choice ; but he obliged him to take the horse which stood next to the stable door ; so that every customer was alike well served according to his chance, and every horse ridden with the same justice ; from whence it became a proverb, when what ought to be your election was forced upon you, to say, ‘Hobson’s choice.’”—*The Spectator*, No. 509, Tuesday October 14, 1712.

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TO

F S. C.

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“HOBSON’S CHOICE.”

CHAPTER I.

“THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS AND BACK FOR
FIVE POUNDS.”

PARTICULAR individuals, as we all know, are now and then privileged to wake up on special mornings, and find themselves famous. The majority of us, however, as we all likewise know, are permitted to rise from our couches, day after day, uncheered and unstartled by so grand a discovery. We should labour vainly if we sought to persuade ourselves that we were a whit more distinguished on opening our eyes at daybreak, than when we closed them in slumber on the preceding evening. Now a man may be contented and unambitious enough; but still I think it must occur at intervals, even to the most satisfied, to take stock, as it were, of himself and

his progress: and rather with the view of detecting some deficiencies in those matters; to hold inquest concerning his lack of fame; to ask himself whether he is really so resigned to his state of obscurity as he has all along been believing, or seeming to believe, and persuading others to believe also. Just as one sometimes gazes in the glass with a little keener self-scrutiny than ordinary, and finds suddenly that one has grown to look considerably older than one was quite aware of or prepared for: so it may happen in a meditative quarter of an hour that we may recognise somewhat too distinctly the fact that our position in the world is in some measure more removed from public notice than is altogether satisfactory. We appreciate peace and quiet, of course. Without doubt, many disadvantages are attendant upon fame. Certainly we don't all want to be distinguished individuals. The thing would never do. For in fact no one could be celebrated if every one was celebrated. Still the thought occasionally strikes one that, if a little less obscurity than at present pertains to one, if but a small slice of the eminence enjoyed—quite deservedly, of course—by other people, could be one's own portion, just for a short time, or at any rate upon trial, it would really, you know, be rather

a pleasant thing than not. Wouldn't it now? And then, too, in the minds of so many people, somehow, fame seems to stand for and signify, *money*. The man whose reputation is in the world's mouth is generally, it is noteworthy, in possession of a respectable amount of property. And, of course, the idea of becoming famous is not the less agreeable to one on that account. Fame, with a golden trumpet at her lips, and gold in her pockets besides, is decidedly a desirable person to become acquainted with; the more intimately the better perhaps.

Some such reflections as these occurred to Mr. Francis Hobson, barrister-at-law, as he passed, one autumn morning, down the area-steps, and entered a set of chambers on the basement-floor of a house in New Square, Lincoln's Inn. The chambers were apparently occupied by a sort of firm or company (limited) of barristers. Mr. Hobson was tenant in common with some three or four others. There was almost a difficulty in finding sufficiently conspicuous places for all their names on the door posts: Mr. F. Hobson, Mr. Blackstone Jones, Mr. Verulam Tomkisson, &c. Not only to a fourth or fifth part of this basement-floor was Mr. F. Hobson entitled, but also to a fourth or fifth part or share of and in a young

man—(to be candid, there is some flattery in designating him a *man*; but it would perhaps not be agreeable to him or his employers to describe him as a *boy* simply)—who acted in the capacity of clerk to all the gentlemen on the basement-floor, and was their joint and several assistant in that respect. Still, in spite of this multiplicity of masters, the young person—(you see I evade the difficulty this time)—was not severely tasked or unremittingly occupied. For, indeed, to speak plainly, Mr. F. Hobson and the other members of the firm or company, had not much business. And it was in relation to that fact, so far as his individual interests were affected by it, that Mr. F. Hobson, on the morning under mention, was induced to meditate upon the minimum of fame attaching to him; upon the small beneficial effect upon his reputation, arrived at either by his going to bed at night, or his getting up in the morning; upon the little notice the world was taking of him, and, as a consequence, his profession being considered, the inconsiderable amount of his annual income derived from his legal labours; and, generally, to trouble himself with the large brood of involved thoughts born of those simple circumstances. .

Mr. F. Hobson had awoke that morning, and found

himself by no means famous. He had, moreover, looked into the glass, with unwonted particularity, and discovered a grey hair in his left whisker. He had then discussed the subject with himself, and decided that he was "getting on,"—in one sense, but not in another. His advance in years had much exceeded his progress towards prosperity. Not that he was an old man. He was thirty-five only. He had arrived at middle age; that "half-way house" sort of period which is regarded by the very young as being very old, and by the very old as being still very young. Now there is an old thirty-five—a bald, pursy, uncomely, dining-out ball-shunning thirty-five: careless of dress, negligent of appearances, indifferent to ladies' society, bent upon money-making, and selfish gratification; and a young thirty-five: with its flowers of youth still in tolerable preservation, with the character of *gracilis puer* not wholly surrendered; still a good candle-light sort of Adonis; a thirty-five that dresses daintily, dances, flirts, can talk evening-party vapidly, without yawning in the middle of its own speeches; a pleasant, presentable, socially useful and ornamental thirty-five. It was to this last described and more admirable category that Mr. F. Hobson belonged.

To those who are inclined to think that there is no such "old thirty-five" as above mentioned, and that I must, in an erroneous view of the case, be referring to a greater age, say forty-five or fifty, I have only to state my conviction that now, in our time, all ages are much older than they used to be; that children come into the world more advanced and wiser than formerly; that, as a consequence, boyhood and girlhood are now abolished; that years of discretion date from the period of weaning, while maturity sets in on emergence from the nursery; and that, of course, a result of this modern condition of things is to push on "thirty-five" considerably beyond its old boundaries. But I believe it to be thoroughly understood that, having once arrived at "thirty-five," you are at liberty to remain there as long as you like. Indeed, I have, myself, seen some "thirty-fives" whom I have felt inclined to class as "fifties," or even as "sixties," supposing there to be such things. Of course, however, I kept my views upon the subject entirely to myself.

Mr. Hobson did not feel the better for his reflections. He even permitted himself to be depressed by them. He was not, by nature, of a gloomy temperament; on the contrary, he was a lively

pleasant gentleman enough as a general rule, and though not famous, as I have already stated, was certainly popular among a chosen band of friends and associates. He had not absolutely high spirits; which was quite as well for him, perhaps; for in these times of ours, I notice "high spirits" are voted rather a nuisance; but he had an agreeable flow of cheerfulness, possessed a pleasant smile, was given to friendly speech with his fellows, was much "liked" by the world about him. Dejection was rather new to him; and for the moment he hardly knew what to make of it.

"I must be bilious, I suppose," he said, as he entered his chambers.

He found there a small, rotund gentleman, red in the face, and breathing very hard, the result of severe wrestling with the fastenings of a portmanteau.

"Hullo, Tommy! What, going away?" said Mr. Hobson. The person he addressed was Mr. Verulam Tomkisson, who, only in private and among intimates, it should be stated, condescended to answer to the name of "Tommy."

"Yes, Franky, my lad," answered Mr. Tomkisson, briskly. "I really cannot stop in town all the vacation. I thought I could; but I find I can't. The

way men bully you and cross-examine you about your going out of town is really quite awful! If it wasn't for that, I really would have stayed in town. I really would."

"I certainly understood you were going to stay in town all the autumn."

"Did you, though?"

"Well, you know you said so, Tommy."

"Did I, though? Well, perhaps I did. But you see, Franky, the more I've thought over the matter, and the more I've looked into the matter, the more I'm driven to the conclusion that—in short—the thing can't be done. And so I've packed up. Would you mind standing on the portmanteau, and letting me try once more to get it locked? I've had Cuffy on the lid," (Cuffy was the young person who acted as clerk,) "but he's such a light weight, there was no doing anything with him. Thank you, a pressure of twelve stone to the half-inch was about the weight required. You're about twelve stone, I should say, Franky?"

"I thought you said you'd no money, Tommy?" Hobson was not to be led away by digressions about weight.

"Well, you know 'the Carpathian Mountains and

back for Five Pounds'—it really amounts to no money at all. And I don't intend to spend a farthing more—I don't indeed."

"And how long shall you be away?"

"Oh! under a month; or certainly not more than a month."

"Now, upon my word," said Mr. Hobson, rather bitterly, "you're a pretty set of fellows, *you* are! You were all solemnly pledged to stay in town during the vacation. We all agreed that we would stand by each other; that going abroad was humbug; especially when one had no money to go with. We were to stop here and play whist, and so get through 'the long' very pleasantly. And yet you one by one sneak off, and leave me in the lurch. It's really too bad."

"There's Green——"

"He's gone. Started last night for Homburg. There never was any dependence to be placed on Green."

"Ah, but we mustn't be hard upon Green, poor fellow," urged Mr. Tomkisson. "You see he's had bad luck with his time-bargains. He's rather given to time-bargains, is Green. And he's gone over to try and make up his losses at the tables at Homburg."

Certainly, there’s every excuse to be made for Green. But there’s Topwood, Franky. Topwood will be in town, won’t he?”

Thereupon Mr. Hobson said unpleasant things of Topwood. Who was Topwood? What was the good of Topwood? Who wanted Topwood? What was the use of Topwood staying in town? and so on. Other names were then mentioned. But it always seemed that the men who were wanted to stay had all gone away; while the men who might have gone away without a shadow of regret at their departure dwelling upon the bosom of Mr. Hobson, had all persisted in staying in town.

“It’s most unfortunate,” said Mr. Tomkisson, with simulated sadness. “Really if I hadn’t made all my arrangements, I wouldn’t leave you, Franky. I wouldn’t, indeed.” And thereupon Mr. Tomkisson pulled his whiskers and tried to look sympathetic.

“Yes you would, Tommy.”

“But you know you’ll go somewhere yourself, after all. Men are always saying they don’t intend to go anywhere; but they always *do* go somewhere.”

“No, I shan’t. In fact, I can’t afford it.”

“I don’t know that that signifies much,” said Mr. Tomkisson, with an air of reflection. “*I* can’t afford

it. Still I'm going. 'Carpathian Mountains and back for Five Pounds.' You know that's awfully tempting to a fellow. And you see, I never really thought that my going away would make so much difference to you, Franky."

"Oh, as to *that*," said Mr. Hobson—he did not complete the sentence. But his looks seemed to imply that Mr. Tomkisson need not exaggerate the importance of his going away, or its effects upon Mr. Hobson's comfort.

"I'd have stayed, I really would," Mr. Tomkisson went on, blind to all hints of aspersion upon 'his sincerity or the value of his society; "if I thought you'd have made such a point of it, you know."

"Don't talk bosh, Tommy," exclaimed Mr. Hobson, impatiently.

"Why, you must be ill, old man!" Mr. Tomkisson was struck by the unusual severity of his friend's manner.

"I'm well enough," said Frank Hobson.

"You're not looking well; indeed you're not." Mr. Tomkisson seemed desirous to avail himself of this change of topic. "I've been noticing for some time past that you haven't been looking quite the thing—not yourself, you know. The fact is, Franky,"

and Mr. Tomkisson spoke as one thoroughly convinced of the truth of his statement, "the fact is, Franky, you overwork yourself."

This was simply so absurd that Frank Hobson could do nothing but laugh out loudly at it. Overwork himself? Why, he'd never had the chance! But Mr. Tomkisson wouldn't see anything ridiculous in the idea.

"At any rate," he went on gravely, but somewhat illogically, "I've no doubt you'll find a great deal of work to do if you decide to stay in town during the whole of 'the long.' There's always something going on in Chancery matters. A lot of little odd jobs come in the way of the man who stops in town, and make it well worth his while to do without a holiday for one year. As the seniors are away, to a man, what work there is to be done *must* come to the juniors, you know."

"'And the little ones picked his bones, O! his bones, O!'" Frank Hobson began to sing. Tomkisson's grave plausibility had always struck him as rather ludicrous. Tomkisson would not permit himself to be disturbed by this interruption, however.

"And of course you'll have all *my* business while I'm away," he said, with a lofty air: "and Green's,

and Jones's, and the other men's. It's really a judicious move of yours, Franky, this stopping in town. I shouldn't wonder if you were to make quite a pot of money by it."

"You old humbug!" Hobson interjected, laughing.

"It's the best thing you could do, if you won't come with me to the Carpathian Mountains." Seeing that his friend was restored to good humour, Mr. Tomkisson thought he might venture to allude again to his own proceedings. "'The Carpathian Mountains and back for Five Pounds!' Think of that! Send and get your passport *visé*, and come with me. We'll have no end of fun for our money, and write a book about our travels afterwards."

"No, as I said before, I really can't afford it, Tommy."

"Ah, but a man doesn't know what he can afford, till he tries."

"I shall stop in town. Though I may run down to Beachville for a day or two, perhaps."

"Beachville?"

"An aunt of mine lives there—a maiden lady, who's given me an invitation to run down there whenever I like, and stay from Saturday till Monday."

"Go. It will do you good."

"It will be frightfully slow."

"Always cultivate maiden aunts, old fellow. Make it a rule of your life. I do; or rather I should do so, if I had any maiden aunts to cultivate. But I haven't. Fate has not been kind to me in that respect."

"Cultivation will be thrown away in this case."

"You don't mean to say that she hasn't got any money?" cried Tomkisson. "A maiden aunt without money! Why it sounds quite sinful. It's almost a case for which a Court of Equity would supply a remedy."

"Well, she's got *some* money, for that matter." "

"I knew she had!"

"But she chooses to think that I'm provided for—that all barristers are immensely rich, and are certain eventually to reach the Woolsack, and die Lord Chancellors—and then she holds that money is much more necessary to women than to men."

"A preposterous fallacy."

"And so she's determined to leave all she possesses to a niece of hers—my Cousin Matilda—who, by the way, doesn't in the least want it, for she happens to have a sufficient fortune of her own."

"Marry your cousin Matilda, then. Ah! you

scoundrel! That's your plan, is it? You've arranged the thing already. That's the meaning of your stopping in town! That's why you won't go with me to the Carpathian Mountains!"

"Confound the Carpathian Mountains. By-the-bye, Tommy, where are the Carpathian Mountains?"

"Oh—well—they're somewhere in Murray, or in the Foreign Bradshaw. You start from Ludgate Hill and show your ticket at every station, and you get there at last. That's all I know. And when there, of course you enjoy yourself immensely, and then you make haste to get back to Ludgate Hill again. It seems to me quite the perfection of a foreign tour."

"It strikes me, Tommy, that your Carpathian Mountains are somewhere in the neighbourhood of Margate!"

Mr. Tomkisson laughed. But he declined to continue the discussion concerning his intended tour and his geographical information.

CHAPTER II.

AGED THIRTY-FIVE.

It was all very well to laugh at and with Mr. Tomkisson; but removed from the presence of that eminent advocate, Frank Hobson laughed no more. His feeling of depression returned to him. He pondered again over his want of fame, and consequent lack of money. The thing quite haunted him; he could no way get quit of it. For days and days he found himself engaged in ceaseless contemplation of his unfortunate condition. And he had abundance of time now for this melancholy sort of occupation. The vacation had set in; his friends had one by one taken their departure; he seemed to be almost alone in London; and he had never before felt loneliness to be so utterly miserable. Certainly his despondency about his career had come upon him most inopportunistly. At any other time in the cheerful society of his fellows he might have shaken him-

self free of his gloom. Now it obtained absolute possession of him.

“I do think,” he said one day, “that there is nothing so sad in this world as the position of a poor gentleman. It is, without exception, the most wretched and barren sham going. Why should I, for instance, affect to be a ‘swell’ without adequate means to keep up the delusion? Really the world’s very kind not to laugh outright in one’s face for attempting so shallow an imposture. I’m poor, and every one knows it, for all the airs I give myself. The man I buy cigars of; the tailor who tries on my coat; the bootmaker who measures me for boots; the hairdresser who cuts my hair; nay, I do believe, the crossing-sweeper to whom I sometimes give a half-penny, all of them are better off than I am. They could buy me up over and over again, not a doubt of it, for all I order them about as though I were a lord. I wonder they don’t pluck up spirit and insult me, thrash me, some day when I’m particularly grand with them. Upon my word they must be very good Christian kind of men not to have it out with me now and then. Certainly they’d have right on their side. I wish I could change places with them. It must be a thousand times better to

be a rich cad than a poor gentleman. Why wasn't I made a tradesman? I should have been a rich man by this time. What was the good of my going to the University and keeping my terms, and getting called to the bar, if *this* sort of thing was to be the end of it? Genteel pauperism: that's about what it comes to; or rather worse: pauperism that the state won't assist, and the world shuts its eyes to and pretends not to see. I'd better have gone behind a counter when I was a lad. It can't be worse drudgery than this make-believe of getting one's living at the bar. I'd better have been a tinker, or a tailor, or a candlestick-maker. I'm sure I should be very happy and comfortable as a tradesman. And after the day's work was done, how jolly to take off one's apron—by Jove though, I don't think I should much like the apron!—and go in for intellectual pursuits, if one cared for that kind of thing: perhaps a pipe and a glass of grog would be more desirable and appropriate under the circumstances. But as it is, I seem to grow poorer and poorer every year. Of course I do: for my income doesn't increase, and my debts do. And really I don't see much prospect of any change for the better. No wonder I've got the blue-devils. It's enough to give a fellow the blue-devils for life.”

And then he began to regret that he hadn't thrown care and prudence to the winds, and gone away with Verulam Tomkisson "to the Carpathian Mountains and back for Five Pounds." Of course the state of his purse did not justify even that small outlay; a nominal sum by-the-bye, as he was well aware, that stood to represent a much larger amount; for Tomkisson was by no means a thrifty traveller, and once bent upon enjoying himself, seldom paused to count the cost. And, of course, Mr. Hobson was also well aware that had he gone on the journey in question, he would only have come back poorer; to face his debts with smaller ability to discharge them. But then, as he argued: "One would be in first-rate condition, freshened up, with one's liver all right, and bilious attacks things of the past; one's troubles would seem ever so much the more easy to bear. I'm not sure that Tomkisson's isn't the truer philosophy, though upon a *primâ facie* view, it doesn't look so much like honesty."

Perhaps, in the excess of his dejection, Mr. Hobson was somewhat inclined to exaggerate his ill-fortune. Rightly considered, his position was not so very lamentable; only, as we have seen, he was not at all in a hopeful mood, was disposed to unpleasant

views, fancying them the more truthful, as men *will* fancy in cynical and malcontent humours. And then it was quite true he was obscure, was thirty-five, and had discovered a grey hair in his whiskers. These might be legitimate reasons for, at least, seriousness. Otherwise fate had not been so wholly unkind to him. He was possessed of fair ability; had spoken in court on the few occasions when he had been blessed with a brief, fluently and lucidly—much more is not wanted in equity tribunals, where the “orator” is rather looked upon as an imbecile, and eloquence a sort of outrage upon common sense. He was not without professional learning; if only a larger connection among the solicitor class had enabled him to make more available his acquirements in that respect. He was a well-looking gentleman enough; with whiskers remarkable for their luxuriance even in those sort of flower-shows of luxuriant whiskers, the Chancery Courts; broad-shouldered and high of his hands; a corporal in the Inns of Court Rifle Corps, wearing an eye-glass in his right eye, as is *de rigueur* with the Inns of Court volunteers. He had, unfortunately, lost both parents, of whom he was the only son. He had been much indulged by the old people: perhaps over indulged,

when it is considered that their decease left him in possession of only a small annuity of one hundred and thirty pounds or so ; whereas their fondness had accustomed him to habits of ease quite beyond the reach of his means : any excess in his expenditure having now to be supplied by his own exertions, and at present these had not been highly remunerated. Still, altogether, it will be seen that extreme despondency on Mr. Hobson's part was hardly justifiable. Surely he ought to have recollected the number of rising juniors at the bar numbering sixty years or so, and refrained from regret that he was not a distinguished leader at thirty-five.

This last consideration may have occurred to him at length, as he said again, by way of accounting for his unreasonable gloominess : “ I must be bilious, I suppose ; ” and presently he added, “ I really think I *will* go down to Beachville from Saturday to Monday, and see how old aunt Fanny's getting on. It's a long time since I've seen anything of her. And perhaps, ” — he stopped, and although thirty-five and a barrister, he blushed, resuming, — “ well, if Matilda *should* happen to be there, of course I can't help it. And if she *should* happen to take a fancy to me — well, of course I can't help that either. ” The signi-

fication of which remark probably amounted very nearly to admission of the charge Mr. Tomkisson had brought against him : that he was going to stop in town for the purpose of wooing and wedding his rich cousin, Miss Matilda Milner.

He blushed because he felt some shame about the business. It seemed to him that even if he carried out this design, it would be rather a shabby proceeding at the best. Because he had never yet taken up the position of a lover with regard to Miss Milner ; he had never been at any pains to secure her favour. In truth, he had never greatly cared about her at all ; and even now, with this matrimonial project half formed in his head, he could not persuade himself that his feelings towards the lady were of a very ardent kind. He liked her, as any man might like a nice-looking, accomplished girl, without further views upon the subject. But he had never looked upon her with a lover's eyes ; he had never thought about her with a lover's thoughts. Veritably she was nothing more to him than were thousands of other nice-looking and accomplished girls. And now he designed that she should be, or should seem to be something very different indeed ; now he would be called upon to say to her things he

had never before dreamt of saying to her : which, a little time ago, it would have seemed to him quite impossible that he should ever say to her. He was to play the lover in a social comedy : and he didn't like the part ; he wasn't suited to it ; it was too elaborate for him ; made far too great demands upon his histrionic powers, which were decidedly limited. He was required, or thought he was required, to affect rapture and fervour and passion he was far from feeling ; and he avowed himself by no means equal to the task, self-imposed as it undoubtedly was. This hesitation was creditable to him, perhaps, if it wasn't more than anything else a part of his general despondency and self-distrust. And, of course, there were moments when he took very different views of the case ; threw away his diffidence, and assumed rather a swaggering bravado air. " After all," he would say in such moods, " suppose that I carry this thing out, it would be no more than heaps of other fellows would be only too glad to do. Doesn't all the world applaud a man who secures to himself a rich wife ? Where's the harm in it, or the shame of it ? It's hard to see any. Of course I'm not over head and ears in love with Matilda. There's no reason why I should be. Is *that* an objection ? I'm

no longer a boy. The time has rather gone by for my falling over head and ears in love with any and everybody. I must assume a certain devotion of manner, perhaps: a sort of quiet tenderness. A woman has no doubt a right to expect *that* homage from the man who proposes to become her husband. But any melo-dramatic ecstasy would be out of the question. Matilda can hardly be looking out for that sort of thing. She's not a child. I should think she must be quite six-and-twenty, and I'm by no means sure that she isn't eight-and-twenty. I wonder she never married before; only, to be sure, it's only quite recently that she's come in for her money. I'm sure I should make her a very good husband. I don't see at all why we shouldn't get on very comfortably together as man and wife. I don't see that she could do much better. She will at least have married a gentleman. And, by George! *that's* something in these times, with the sort of men that are going about in society and getting married. Of course I know I'm not a good match in a pecuniary sense—I don't pretend to be that. But the girl had a thousand times better marry a poor professional gentleman than a rich mercantile snob."

Having arrived at this conviction he looked in the

glass over his mantel-shelf, and might have contemplated, one would have thought, with some satisfaction, the reflection there to be seen of his intelligent, well-featured, though rather long and pale face ; but whether intimate acquaintance with it had resulted in too precise a knowledge of its weak points, or that his eye suddenly detected some incipient wrinkles in his forehead, a suspicious thinning of his hair about the temples, or fell upon that thread of grey in the waves of his whiskers, he turned away precipitately, and with an air of weary disgust flung himself into an easy-chair, and abandoned himself again to melancholy thoughts.

“ It will be a horrid nuisance. ‘ If I tell her I love her—and of course I must do that—I shall do it in such an idiotic, bungling way, that she’ll know by the very sound of my voice that I’m telling her a most wretched lie. If she had any humour—only I don’t think she has any—at least I know she never used to have any—she’d laugh and ask me if it wasn’t her banker’s account I was in love with more than herself. And, by George! she’d be about right. For it *is* her banker’s account and her money in the funds that I’m in love with, and that’s the truth. It’s deuced hard to make love to a woman

who's got money. And women now-a-days seem to be so precious keen about the value of their money. If it wasn't for her fortune I could ask Matilda to marry me easily enough ; only in that case I shouldn't want to marry her at all, very likely. However, in any case I may as well go down to Beachville. After all, Matilda may not be there : she may be visiting about among her friends. Of course, she's plenty of friends—very dear friends too—now she's come in for her money. I'm sure I hope the poor girl mayn't fall a victim to some rascally fortune-hunter.” And then he coloured a little, and laughed rather grimly, because he thought that indirectly he was passing a sort of condemnation upon himself. For was he not something of a fortune-hunter ? It is true he further proposed to make his cousin a “good husband.” But most men in marrying so purpose towards their wives, I think ; unfortunately they now and then fail dismally in carrying out their intentions.

He journeyed to Beachville to stay from Saturday to Monday, therefore. But, as he had not previously written to his aunt, Miss Hobson, to apprise her of his coming, he thought it prudent, instead of proceeding directly to her residence, to secure a room in the first instance at the Royal Hotel. Miss Hobson

was a maiden lady of rather precise habits, and she would probably regard an unexpected visit unfavourably: as a very informal proceeding indeed, if not positively disrespectful. "I fancy I can hear her severe tones," Frank Hobson said to himself: "'It was just as easy to have written, Frank. We have three posts a day at Beachville, besides the telegraph. I'm too old-fashioned for these off-hand ways.' Certainly I'd better put up at the Royal—they've a decent smoking-room there. At Aunt Fanny's I must put my pipe out, I suppose. I half hope she won't be able to give me a bed. It won't be so economical—but it will be ever so much more comfortable at the Royal."

CHAPTER III.

DOWN AT BEACHVILLE.

I SUPPOSE, in time, the demand for English watering-places being so on the increase, we shall have one long Marine Parade, of smooth asphaltum, stretching all the way from Dover Castle to the Land's End, and our southern coast will be fringed by marine cities, united in one unbroken line. At present, the parade is somewhat intermittent, and there are missing links in the chain of neat white houses running parallel to it. Beachville, as every one knows, is a very substantial present link. In respectability, and even in "gentility," it yields to none of its sister sea-side places. If not so large as some of the better known, it is more select. If not so courted by excursionists and holiday trains, Beachville flatters itself that an air of more aristocratic distinction pervades it than is possessed by rival towns. Royalty has whilom visited Beachville. Ex-royalty (foreign) has

made Beachville its residence for a considerable period, even of late years. And the soles of members of the "upper ten" are perpetually pressing the yielding asphaltum of its breezy parade.

Why describe an English watering-place? One is like to another—as pea to pea—and they are all well known to all. It pleases some people each recurring autumn to affect difficulties as to choice, and to ask their friends absurdly, "Where shall we go? Please *do* advise us. It's really, you know, so hard to decide." Surely not so, good but inane people. There is, in truth, no choice. One British watering-place is the fac-simile of every other British watering-place. The one sole charm that draws us to them, with a potency impossible to resist, all possess equally. Of course I mean the sea. What matter all the other attractions?

"How jolly the sea looks!" cried Mr. Hobson. "Upon my word, the very sight of it makes a fellow feel better."

He had come down to Beachville by an early train. He was now No. 63 at the Royal Hotel. A little attic bed-room that looked on to the roofs of the stables, (one of the incommodious apartments dedicated to generation after generation of single gentle-

men visiting the Royal,) had been apportioned to him; and the ringleted young lady, who kept the books in the bar, was now entering to the debit of No. 63 a charge in respect to that luncheon of cold beef and pale ale, with which he was refreshing himself after his journey from town; his breakfast, by reason of the earliness of his departure, having been a somewhat unsatisfactory meal. He was only known to the Royal at present as No. 63. But, of course, the Royal, in some mysterious way, would soon ascertain his real name, and the "Beachville Gazette, and Sandyland, Shrimpton, and Prawnford Courier and Visitors' list," in its next edition, would contain some such paragraph as:—

"ROYAL HOTEL.—*Arrivals*: The Earl and Countess of Hardcastle, Sir F. Muffler, Hon. Brabazon Blink, Mr. Higg, M.P., Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and family, Mr. Jobson, Mr. Dobson, *Mr. Hobson*, &c. *Departure*: Mr. Jones."

"Very jolly the sea looks," said Mr. Hobson, "dancing and smirking, curtsyng and smiling, the deceitful old creature, as though it were quite glad to see one. Very jolly. And what I like about the sea is its size. I love its bigness."

Certainly it was a pleasant change from New Square, Lincoln's Inn, and the limited view from its area windows, to the pebbly shore of Beachville, and the expanse of "the green one:" with, just visible on its far-distant horizon, a little white-sailed brigantine, rocking gently, making her way down channel. And there were agreeable objects closer at hand, were there not, Mr. Hobson? For instance, this mermaid in lavender muslin, drying her sheen brown tresses in the sun while she dips no longer in the sea, but into one of three volumes she has borrowed from the library; let us hope she finds it not much drier than the waves from which she has not long emerged. Is she not worthy of your admiring gaze also?

"What a pretty little girl," quoth Mr. Hobson, in reply, as it were, to this inquiry. "What a pert little nose! what arch brown eyes!" The lady had lifted them from her book for a moment to note Mr. Hobson—the latest arrival at Beachville. A main amusement of the visitors at Beachville—and at a good many other places—consists in looking at each other; a harmless pastime enough—quite as intellectual and as exhilarating upon the whole as croquet or lawn billiards. Time out of mind it has been the pri-

vilege of oldest inhabitants to gaze curiously at newcomers. And it was evident that Mr. Hobson was a new-comer. His pallor proclaimed the fact. He was like a joint newly put down to the fire. At present he was not in the least embrowned; whereas here were others who had been down a long time and were thoroughly roasted a good deep colour—some of them even decidedly scorched and over-done.

Mr. Hobson looked at the mermaid, and the mermaid looked at Mr. Hobson. Then the mermaid looked at her book again, and Mr. Hobson passed quietly on his way down the parade.

"Decidedly a pretty little girl," he repeated; adding, "I don't know how it is, but women seem to look prettier at the sea-side than anywhere else. I wonder how Matilda Milner's looking."

Miss Hobson lived in one of a row of neat white houses, called Belle Vue Lawn, running at a right-angle with the sea, and fronted by a small arid grassplot.

"Why, Frank, who would have thought of seeing you—wherever have you sprung from?" So the lady greeted her nephew. Not an old lady, be it understood, though Mr. Hobson out of her hearing thought fit to describe her as "old Aunt Fanny;"

but a handsome portly spinster—numbering some fifty-five summers it may be, with scarcely a tinge of grey in her dark glossy braids; bearing herself very upright, her manner dignified—solemn even, and nothing very cordial about her tones; her features handsome, the lower part of the face a little too full, perhaps, and the whole countenance distinguished by an excess of length which was rather a facial characteristic of the Hobson family. She shook hands with Mr. Hobson or rather gave him her hand, unresisting and motionless, at the end of an outstretched stiff arm, to shake if he would, and let go when he had quite done with it. It was not a very effusive greeting between the aunt and the nephew.

“You didn’t write to say you were coming down,” said Miss Hobson, half by way of accusation, half inquiringly.

“I didn’t know I could get away,” explained the nephew, fibbing, it is to be feared, “until last night—too late for the post.”

“I am very glad to see you, I’m sure, Frank,” Miss Hobson went on, more pleasantly; “only it’s most unfortunate your coming just now—I haven’t a room to offer you.”

“Oh! you’re very kind, aunt.” It doesn’t really

matter. I couldn't expect it, you know, taking you by surprise in this way. I shall do very well at the Royal. They make one very comfortable there. I'm only down from Saturday to Monday."

"Still I would, of course, have given you a room if I possibly could. But just now, I've visitors with me—your cousin Matilda—she's out on the beach somewhere at present, I believe—she's come down to stay with me for a few weeks."

"Oh, indeed! I didn't know. Matilda Milner—she's here, is she?" said Mr. Hobson. (The impostor!)

"Yes; and I've another young person here—a sort of distant connection, I suppose she must be called—a member of the family into which my poor sister—your aunt Mary Ann—married. The girl had not been well, and it was a charity to offer her a change of air. So you see, both my spare rooms are occupied. I might certainly put the two girls together, and so make room for you. But you see as Matilda is at present circumstanced I am bound to consider her comfort, and I don't quite think she would like it. Of course, her wishes must be considered *now*."

"Of course," assented Mr. Hobson. And he

made a mental note to the effect that Miss Milner, since she had become possessed of her fortune, was evidently a person of far greater consequence than formerly in his aunt's estimation.

"You'll dine here to-day, Frank? At six o'clock—quite a family-dinner. You haven't of course brought your dress things with you; and, indeed, there would be no occasion for them. We shall be by ourselves—with except, perhaps, Mr. Barlow."

"Barlow?"

"Yes, a very charming young man—curate at the new Gothic church near the station. You perhaps noticed it as you passed in the train. I've a high opinion of Mr. Barlow. I won't keep you, Frank. You'll be glad, no doubt, to make the most of your time. The band plays at four on the pier. Only don't forget dinner at six o'clock. If you like to go and look for Matilda, I've no doubt you'll find her on the beach. At low-water she sometimes goes out quite far on the wet sand in search of objects for her aquarium. It's quite a hobby of hers; but I don't laugh at it, for there's no harm in it, and I daresay it's really interesting. Besides, Frank, we musn't forget now," and Miss Hobson looked severe, and spoke in solemn accents, "*that Matilda has money.*"

Mr. Hobson quitted Belle Vue Lawn, repeating, as though it were the burthen of a song, “*Matilda has money—Matilda has money!*” And then he stopped to muse: “I wonder whether Aunt Fanny meant anything particular by telling me that?”

CHAPTER IV.

MR. HOBSON'S AUNT.

OF most maiden ladies of long standing, one hears it reported that there is a story of some sadness to be told in explanation of their celibacy. Generally, death has deprived them of their lovers on the eve of their nuptials, or some equally cruel misfortune has come between them and matrimony—matrimony, from a woman's point of view, being understood to mean happiness. Of course the world is never so rude as to cast any doubt upon these stories. That a woman has never been wed is to be deplored perhaps; but to believe that the fact arises from her never having been wooed, is to impeach her charms and to underrate the sensibility of mankind. It is more desirable to attribute her singleness to youthful caprice and perverseness: her own doing, in fact. So, failing the melancholy explanation above referred to, we hear it constantly said of some advanced

spinster, "Oh, Miss N. M. might have been married over and over again, but she never knew her own mind, and threw away all her chances." It being understood that it is more agreeable to Miss N. M. to be charged with want of discretion of this kind, than to be regarded as unmarried by reason of the utter neglect of her by the male sex; just as among men we find sometimes a preference for the condition of a bankrupt who has failed for many thousands, to the status of a poor man who has never had the chance of failing for such an amount. It is something to have possessed a pearl richer than all our tribe, even though we may have made no better use of it than the base Indian referred to by Othello.

Of Miss Hobson's single life there was, of course, an explanatory narrative; but it will not be necessary to discuss this particularly. She had been the victim of a disappointment, which, her friends went on to say, she had taken very deeply to heart. They even alleged that she had never been seen to smile since. But then it must be said for her that she had at no time been a very smiling sort of woman; so that total abstinence in that respect was, after all, but a small sacrifice on her part. Certainly, at one period of her life she had, herself, spoken somewhat roman-

tically about her gradually sinking of a broken heart. It was perhaps rather contradictory of that statement, that her appearance should be found the while to be healthy quite to robustness: the contour of her figure beginning to assume a portly character that was as unlike fading away as could well be conceived. So Miss Hobson, having regard for consistency, soon gave up talking about the state of her heart, and thenceforward limited her complaints to the condition of her digestion. She proclaimed herself a "martyr to dyspepsia," and took to pills and draughts, as other maiden ladies take to parrots. To be a "patient" became the pastime of her life. She gloried at being perpetually "in the hands" of her medical man. She was fond of running through the list of things which Dr. This or Mr. That "would not allow her to do" on any account whatever; of enumerating the forbidden fruit she dared not touch at peril of her life. It was with hygienic views she had first arrived at Beachville, when, charmed with the place, which she avowed agreed with her better than any other place in England, and, captivated by a bland but acute general practitioner in gold spectacles, she determined upon residing there thenceforth; and with that object purchased the freehold

of her house in Belle Vue Lawn. Although not absolutely rich, she was understood to be, in popular parlance, "comfortably off;" living an easy life from year's end to year's end, retaining in her service a sober middle-aged man-servant, a sober middle-aged maid-servant, and a cook with a "thorough understanding of her business," as the advertisements have it; for Miss Hobson, in spite of her dyspepsia, possessed an appetite, and though she might be coy about owning it, thoroughly enjoyed a nice and skillfully prepared meal. In the spring she generally spent some six weeks in London, availing herself of the opportunity to consult her favourite metropolitan physician; and occasionally in the autumn she let her house at Beachville, furnished (carefully locking up the choice china, the cut glass, and the best plate), and went for a little tour on the Continent. Altogether, Miss Hobson's might be considered a dreary kind of life; tiresome and monotonous. Yet, in her way, she enjoyed herself. She did not read; she did not sew; she did not play the piano; she did not draw; indeed she was entirely without what are generally known as "pursuits;" and, after the manner of permanent residents of watering-places, she hardly ever availed herself of Beachville's ad-

vantages. She seldom paced its pier, or promenaded upon its parade; never dipped in its sea; and cared not at all for "the common objects of the shore," which were a source of attraction to Miss Milner. Now and then, pursuant to medical counsel, she took a gentle drive inland: hiring an easy-going barouche and a steady coachman from the livery-stable; but for whole days together she never stirred out of the house. She was not a great talker, and did not go much into such society as was obtainable among the residents at Beachville. She received visits from a clergyman or two, (for she was a regular church-woman, as it behoves an English maiden lady to be,) and from her faithful general practitioner; but, content with these, she seemed by no means desirous of extending her acquaintance. Now and then she had a guest staying with her, as in the present instance we find her entertaining Miss Milner and another young lady; but the greater part of the year she passed in solitude, and, so far from complaining of it, had been heard to describe the departure of a visitor as "quite a relief," although it relegated her to utter loneliness once more.

And how did she pass her time? Well, she liked, as she expressed it, "to see things nice about her."

And this liking brought with it, in some sort, occupation: incessant inquests touching the fading of the curtains, the soiling of the blinds, the wearing out of the carpets, the state of the ceilings and the paint, the polish of the furniture, and the dusting of the chimney-piece. Yet she was not one of those fidgety housewives who are for ever running up and down stairs, eager about their domestic duties, to the wearing and wearying out of themselves and of everybody about them. Miss Hobson took things very quietly; she moved to and fro in a calm, dignified way, casting grave investigatory glances hither and thither. She never scolded her servants, far less wrangled with them; but she gave her orders with a firm, serene, impassive way that was infinitely more formidable; and she was invariably obeyed. In other respects she was considerate of her servants, who, for once in a way knowing when they were well off, gave no thought about "bettering themselves," but were well content with their situations in Miss Hobson's household. And this "liking to see things nice about her" of course comprised care for her own toilet. She was indeed very particular about her dress: spending much money upon it; and her taste was really very good. A better-dressed woman

than Miss Hobson was seldom to be seen : and she had a due regard for her years in the selection of her attire. She never appeared in colours, or patterns, or materials, that the most censorious could charge with being "too young for her." These cares, capable of much amplification, with the addition of a nice attention to what she ate and drank, and rigorous punctuality in swallowing her pills and draughts, filled up Miss Hobson's time very sufficiently.

To her nephew Frank, Miss Hobson had been kind after her own rather tepid fashion. She had stood godmother at his christening, on which occasion she had duly presented him with a silver knife, spoon, and fork ; while at the same time she expressed her regret that the child had not been born a girl instead of a boy, as she infinitely preferred girls to boys ; the expression of which preference resulted in a life-long quarrel with the child's mother ; the late Mrs. Hobson never forgetting or forgiving what in her anger at the slighting of her son she designated "the wickedness" of Miss Hobson. As the boy grew, his aunt made him various presents : money when he went to school, a watch when he left school, and a sum of one hundred pounds when he quitted the university—a contribution, for many reasons, singu-

larly useful to Mr. Hobson at the time. After this, Miss Hobson had not greatly troubled herself concerning her nephew. She possibly reverted to her old wish that he had been born of a different sex; certainly she bestowed greater attention upon her niece, Miss Matilda Milner. Frank Hobson called to the bar, and, as it were, launched in a profession, his aunt chose to think his success in life was now quite secured to him, and further consideration of him on her part altogether supererogatory. They met now and then on those occasions when families are usually brought together—weddings, funerals, and Christmas dinners; and sometimes, but not very often, Frank had gone down to Beachville to pay brief visits. Perhaps he had not "cultivated" his aunt as Mr. Verulam Tomkisson understood that process. But then Miss Hobson was not so very easy a person to cultivate. She might at intervals put forth sprouts of affection or bud with generosity; but then these would be entirely of spontaneous growth, and not at all the result of any extraneous tending or watchfulness; and it was by no means clear that any course of action adopted by Mr. Hobson would have promoted in any remarkable degree his advance in his aunt's favour. Her bearing to-

wards him was one rather of toleration than any warmer sort of regard. She admitted his legitimate claims upon her in right of his being a member of the same family—her deceased brother's child, in fact; but any excessive claims on that account she had declined to acknowledge. And she had thought it right to intimate to him that he was not to indulge in unreasonable expectations as to the disposition of her property. From what had then been said to him he had understood that Miss Hobson's money would be left to the daughter of her favourite sister—to Miss Matilda Milner.

It had occurred to Frank Hobson that this was a little unjust, perhaps, seeing that Matilda Milner was already handsomely provided for: but to do him justice he had not given much thought to the matter. In the first place he had hardly, until the morning of his introduction to the reader, bestowed any attention upon his pecuniary prospects; and in the second place, his aunt's health appeared to be in so excellent a condition that any distribution of money which was to occur only upon her demise, seemed to be postponed so indefinitely that it was hardly worth while taking it into consideration at all. Now that he had become more careful about the future—more mer-

cenary, if you will have it so—his aim was rather turned towards the obtaining of Miss Milner's hand in marriage, and of course with her hand her fortune, than to effecting any change in his relation towards his aunt, and securing in such wise a distribution of her property more favourable to his own interests. At the same time his views in regard to his cousin were not very distinct; he declined to admit to himself that he had come down to carry her by assault, as it were; he preferred to think that at present he did not know his own mind upon the matter, and that he had journeyed to Beachville for a change; because he couldn't afford to go abroad; to see his aunt; well, yes, and to glance at Matilda; and generally and vaguely to look about him and see which way the wind was blowing. Nothing much more definite than that.

CHAPTER V

“COMMON OBJECTS.”

AT the head of Beachville pier the Beachville German band, in blue military frock coats, with braid upon their breasts, and with broad gold-lace upon their forage-caps, played the overture to “Zampa.” The visitors circled round the band, or promenaded up and down the neat little iron pier. Beachville was given to smart raiment in the afternoon, although the rigour of London fashions was not absolutely insisted on : you might as it were, infuse a dash of salt water into your toilet. The bonnet was not indispensable to the lady visitors, nor the chimney-pot hat of civilisation to the gentlemen ; fancy and taste were allowed play in these matters. Still it was understood that you would not, after mid-day, condescend to the *dégagé* nature of your dress in the early morning as you lounged on the beach, or loitered on the sands. Afternoon Beachville did not want to be exacting ;

still it required to be recognised; and to have some degree of attention paid to it.

Mr. Hobson had not sought his cousin on the sands and amid the sea-weed and surf and "common objects" at low tide. "I'm not up to that sort of thing," he freely admitted. "Besides, I hate to see a woman with her feet wet and her petticoats dragged." So he had waited for the band playing on the pier; and then, with his glass in his eye, might have been seen scrutinising various groups of ladies and gentlemen, in search of Matilda Milner. The band had finished the overture to "Zampa," and the conductor was just glancing round at his comrades to see if all were ready to start off with the valse from "Faust," when Mr. Hobson felt himself gently touched on the shoulder.

"How do you do, Frank?" asked a feminine voice.

"Ah, Matilda, how do you do?"

"I'm *very* glad to see you. Aunt told me you'd come down. I thought we should find you on the pier. What a *lovely* breeze, is there not? Do you like Beachville? I think it's charming; and *so* healthy. What train did you come by? and how long do you stay? What, *only* till Monday! Dear,

me, that *is* a short stay. But I ought to have introduced you: Miss Brown, Mr. Barlow,—my cousin, Mr. Hobson.”

Mr. Hobson found himself lifting his hat and bowing, yes, to the mermaid he had seen drying her hair and dipping into a novel on the parade, before he had called upon his aunt. Miss Brown, for so it seemed the mermaid was called,—doubtless, also, as Mr. Hobson judged, the young person spoken of with rather contemptuous pity by Miss Hobson, as a distant sort of connection—a member of the family into which her poor sister Mary Ann had married,—Miss Brown, I say, smiled recognition of Mr. Hobson, as the new arrival she had noticed on the parade; and then demurely lowered long lashes as a veil over her arch brown eyes. Mr. Barlow was a Roman-nosed, thin-faced clergyman, who showed a splendid array of teeth when he smiled; and he smiled a good deal. Customary greetings over, Mr. Hobson continued his promenade by the side of his cousin; the mermaid falling to the lot of the curate.

“Barlow—who’s Barlow, I wonder?” Mr. Hobson muttered. “I’ve seen Barlow before, somewhere, I think. How deuced well Matilda looks; and she’s uncommonly ‘affable.’ She never used to

talk so much. I suppose her money's given her confidence."

Miss Matilda Milner was certainly handsome. A placid blonde on rather a large and substantial scale, with well-defined regular features that might have been cut on a cameo, their outline was so classically perfect; viewed directly in front, perhaps the face was a little too massive; the profile, however, was really grand; and her head was splendidly placed upon her shoulders. Her eyes were cold blue, large, but not brilliant; the irids not very mobile. Her complexion was a sort of pallid fairness, rather waxen-looking by day, but very brilliant at night; not very sensitive to the action of the sun: deepening in general hue a little, but not submitting to be scorched perceptibly, or to be freckled. Her smile was very winning; it was dignified, yet so gracious; it seemed a sort of condescension in so grand a person to smile at all; and the looker-on felt proportionately grateful.

"Uncommonly well she looks to be sure," Mr. Hobson said to himself. "I'd no notion she was so handsome. She's wonderfully improved: filled up somehow. I remember I used to think her rather scraggy. She's really a very fine woman; and ever so much more pleasant than she used to be."

And then he began to think that, after all, it would be no such very difficult thing to make love to, even ^{to} to fall in love with, Miss Matilda Milner. His only doubt now was as to whether the lady was not by far too gorgeous a creature to consent to become the wife of a poor barrister of New Square, Lincoln’s Inn. “Why, she might marry a nobleman,” thought Mr. Hobson. “And she walks along with quite the air of a duchess.”

“What a *long* time it is since we met, Frank. I declare it must be nearly two years; for you know you wouldn’t—you said you *couldn’t*—go down to Uncle George’s last Christmas. Well, it *was* rather dull, I must say. Of course, I was in wretched spirits; poor papa’s loss was then so very recent. But I think one’s bound to keep up family connections as much as possible; and it’s really right for relations to do all they can to meet together at Christmas, at any rate. No doubt your professional duties make great demands upon your time. I gather from what Aunt Fanny says that you are *getting on wonderfully* at the bar.”

“Not so very wonderfully,” admits Mr. Hobson. “Success at the bar is never very rapid.”

“Still you’ve been called—don’t you call it?—

some years now, and *of course* that gives you an advantage over younger men, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, in a measure, perhaps," Mr. Hobson says, not very fervently.

"Oh, I haven't a *doubt* of your ultimate success."

It was gratifying of course to Mr. Hobson to find his cousin without doubts on such a subject. At least, it was something to set against his own uneasy suspicions.

"And you're to dine with us to-day? I'm so glad."

Mr. Hobson began to think he was getting on very nicely with his cousin; that he must on some former occasion have made a highly favourable impression upon her; her manner to him now was so unexpectedly kindly and cordial.

"Really, I haven't done her justice," he said to himself. "I used to think her as cold as a stone. I remember once calling her 'the marble maiden;' but she can make herself uncommonly pleasant when she likes."

"It's *very* charming meeting in this way," observed Miss Milner.

"Very much so, indeed," Mr. Hobson agreed.

"I *quite* enjoy it. (How pretty that 'Faust'

valse is!) One really wonders why one doesn't meet oftener. But relations, I think, seem always rather bent upon avoiding each other. I don't know, *I'm sure*, why they should.”

Mr. Hobson owned that he also did not know why they should.

“At any rate, I *hope* we shall meet oftener for the future, Frank.”

Mr. Hobson could not but hope so too. And he congratulated himself upon finding such favour in Miss Milner's eyes. Her manner was not enthusiastic exactly; she was too calm and composed and conscious for absolute enthusiasm. She was not given to warmth of tone or accent. Her voice was always very calm, and clear, and steady; apparently she was perfectly well aware of what she was saying. But she had a way of supplying any want of fervour, by the deliberate use of emphasis upon particular words. Thus weighted, her sentences acquired almost the effect of enthusiasm. And another characteristic of her conversation consisted in her habit of rapidly changing and, as it were, interweaving her topics. This might be by way of precaution: lest any of her speeches might seem too emphatically ardent, she followed it up by a remark

of a totally different character. Thus she would say, "I *do* think there is *no* pleasure like talking to an *old* friend, as I feel *you* to be, Frank;" and then she would quickly add, "How charming that distant headland looks with the sun upon it!"

"Charming, indeed. That's Puffin Head, is it not?"

"Yes. Prawnford's on the other side; but I don't think it's *nearly* such a nice place as Beachville. I *do* hope, Frank, you will be able to come down *very* often while I—while the fine weather lasts. (They're playing the gipsy music from the 'Trovatore' now, I think.) It will do you so *much* good. And *can't* you contrive to make a *little* longer holiday? Beachville is *so* interesting. Perhaps we had better secure these seats while we can."

And accordingly the party sat down and listened to the gipsy music from the "Trovatore."

"Are you learned about *Anthozoa*, Frank?" asked Miss Milner.

Mr. Hobson had to admit that he was not learned about *Anthozoa*. And then he said to himself, rather idiomatically, "Now we shall get on to the 'common objects,' and I shall be put into a hole."

The mention of *Anthozoa* seemed to be the cue for

the Reverend Mr. Barlow to strike into the conversation.

“Beachville is not perhaps so good a place for finding the rarer kinds of *Anthozoa* as some other parts of the coast. But of the commoner classes we have plenty; the *Actinia mesembryanthemum* abounds here.”

“Yes, and the *Bunodes crassicornis*. I found some lovely specimens this morning.”

“Then we have the *Caryophyllia Smithii* in great abundance.”

“And the *Alcyonium digitatum*. You must tell me if I’m wrong in my quantities, Frank.”

“Our *Algæ* are remarkably fine, too; though the variety is not great.”

“Still, the Beachville *Melanosperms* are charming.”

The curate began to discuss at some length the *Polysiphonia urceolata*. Mr. Hobson sighed. He addressed himself to Miss Brown.

“Do you collect the ‘common objects,’ Miss Brown?” he inquired.

“I hate them,” said the mermaid. “I think they’re horrid.”

Mr. Hobson was inclined to agree with the mermaid.

"And Matilda keeps some of them till they smell really quite dreadful. She dries them on the window-sills, and this warm weather it really isn't good for one, you know."

Mr. Hobson quite acquiesced. But for especial reasons he didn't want to be talking treason against Miss Milner: even with the mermaid.

The curate had proceeded to the *Chlorosperms*. Mr. Hobson yawned.

"I fear this is *very* tiresome to you, Frank. But if you once begin the study you'll find it *so* engrossing," said Miss Milner. ;

"Now the *Furcellaria fastigiata*——" began the curate.

"Perhaps we had better take another turn now," Miss Milner interposed. "How pretty this music from 'Linda' is! I'm *so* fond of the air they are playing now." Then she whispered, "Poor Mr. Barlow! He's full of information; but he doesn't quite know when to stop."

Mr. Hobson smiled. To himself he said, "Things are going on very nicely. She's actually snubbed the curate. Now when a woman snubs a curate something tremendous must be going to happen."

CHAPTER VI.

A PLAIN FAMILY-DINNER.

“YOU take Matilda, Frank,” said Miss Hobson. Mr. Barlow meanwhile made an acute angle of his arm: his hostess rested a plump white hand upon his coat-sleeve. “I’m sorry there is not another gentleman for you, Sophy, my dear,” said Miss Hobson to the mermaid. The mermaid—Sophy Brown, it appeared, was her proper name—smiled meekly, by way of signifying indifference as to being left to follow alone. Frank Hobson looked back, as though desirous to offer his disengaged arm to Miss Brown; but Miss Milner apparently did not perceive his intention, and made steadily for the staircase, drawing him with her. So they descended from the drawing to the dining-room.

“She’s such a *sweet* girl, Sophy Brown,” said Miss Milner, in a low voice to her cousin. “I’m *so* fond of her. Quite a *charming* little creature, I call her.”

It was rather patronisingly spoken. And Miss Milner, it must be said, during dinner did not go

out of her way to demonstrate her fondness for Miss Brown. She seldom addressed her, and often seemed, indeed, to have lost sight altogether of the fact of her existence.

"Hush! Mr. Barlow, will you——?"

The curate understood the inchoate appeal of his hostess, and said a brief grace. He sat on Miss Hobson's right hand, with Miss Brown beside him. Frank Hobson faced his aunt. Miss Milner had the remaining side of the table to herself. It was deemed desirable that a young lady of her property should not be inconvenienced by want of room.

"I've only a plain family-dinner to offer you, Frank," said Miss Hobson, with a grave but dignified air of apology.

Frank bowed to signify his absolute contentment with the food provided by his aunt. And certainly it needed no apology. Miss Hobson's dinners were always excellent of their kind.

"The fish is not quite what I should like it to be," said Miss Hobson. "But it's difficult to obtain good fish at Beachville. The best is sent up to London. Mogford, the sherry."

Mogford was the sober middle-aged serving-man. He went round the table distributing sherry rather

as though the guests were objects of charity, and he was Miss Hobson's grand almoner charged with regard for their welfare. He was a solemn person. I think, if he hadn't been Miss Hobson's serving-man, he would have been a churchwarden or a chairman of a board of guardians somewhere.

Miss Hobson did not speak much during dinner. She did not view the meal as a thing to be trifled, much less hurried over. She deemed it rather the chief event of the day—to be considered with seriousness, almost with awe, indeed. Besides, any tampering with its integrity might have dire results, in the form of her old foe—*dyspepsia*. She carved herself—declining Mr. Barlow's proffered aid—and carved well, sitting very upright, her brows somewhat knit, and her lips tightened: with outstretching, firm, commanding arms. Her severity relaxed a little when she perceived with what adroitness she had dismembered her boiled fowls.

“Very nice,” said Frank Hobson to himself; “only I could suggest an amendment in the sherry. Not that it would be any use. The old lady sticks to this brown stuff. Not that it's bad for brown sherry. But then brown sherry is exploded now, and one oughtn't to be doomed to drink it. And I've no

doubt she's got some good pale and dry in her cellar."

Ungrateful Mr. Hobson! Had you stayed in town, sir, would you not have been perforce content with your chop and chop to follow, and your pint of stout at a Fleet-street hostelry?

After dinner Miss Hobson made her way slowly but steadily through her three glasses of port. Miss Matilda was content with one and a half. "No, *really*, Frank, I mean it; *only* a half-glass." Miss Brown took none at all. It perhaps not being in the nature of mermaids to drink port-wine. Miss Brown announced herself to be a water-drinker.

"It's the only thing that Sophy and I don't agree about," said Miss Hobson, rather severely. "*I'm* quite sure that a glass or two of port-wine would do her all the good in the world. Indeed, my doctor tells me as much. But she's obstinate; so I say no more about it."

Miss Brown blushed at this exposure of her obstinacy. She murmured something about "not being accustomed to wine, and it making her head ache."

Miss Milner smiled with a sort of gracious pity for Miss Brown's weak head.

CHAPTER VII.

THE REVEREND MR. BARLOW.

PRESENTLY the ladies withdrew—Frank Hobson springing up with alacrity, swinging his dinner-napkin, to open the door for them, rewarded by a grave bow from his aunt, a gracious smile from his cousin, and a demure glance of thanksgiving from the mermaid. Generally—it's a shameful confession—there is an irrepressible feeling of relief among the gentlemen when the ladies withdraw from their society after dinner. They draw together, with a sense of breathing more freely, fill their glasses and prepare for a half-hour of quiet unrestrained pleasure.

There was little of this feeling on the present occasion. Frank did not promise himself much enjoyment from the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with the Reverend Mr. Barlow. He moved up, however, in pursuance of convention, from his seat at the end of

the table, and assumed the place his aunt had vacated.

"I've got my work cut out for me," he said to himself. "I've got to talk to Barlow. What on earth am I to say to him? I hope he won't begin again about the 'common objects.' One thing, there's plenty of port. Mogford has had the decency to put on another bottle; and it is not bad port." (Your barrister always affects knowingness about wines.) "A little heady, perhaps. Ladies, I notice, always go in for heady port."

"Lovely weather," began Mr. Barlow.

"Lovely, indeed."

"The farmers have been very fortunate this year in getting in their crops," continued the clergyman.

("Barlow will be one too many for me if he's going on like this," muttered Frank Hobson.) He gazed at his companion more closely as he passed the decanter, and said, suddenly, "May I ask, are you not Barlow of St. Benedict's Hall?"

"To be sure I am."

"You took your degree in 185—?"

"Yes, I did. But——"

"You don't remember me, I dare say. Hobson, of St. Mungo's."

“ Well, really——”

“ No, I dare say not ; but I’ve a recollection of meeting you in some man’s rooms. Men were fond of talking about you at one time.”

“ I’m afraid,” said the clergyman, uneasily, “ one’s early follies at the University are too well remembered. Youth is very heedless,” he went on, sententiously. “ If one could only live one’s college life over again ! ”

“ If I recollect right, you used to be known as ‘ Betting Barlow,’ ” said Frank Hobson, laughing.

“ I should be extremely obliged if you would try and forget that such was the case—supposing that such *was* the case,” said Mr. Barlow, earnestly, blushing, and emptying his glass, perhaps to conceal his confusion.

“ Oh ! but it’s quite true. You must surely remember it.”

“ I admit it, I admit it. But I *do* beg, in regard for my present position——”

“ Not another word about it,” said Frank Hobson, heartily. “ Let us have a glass of wine together. It’s very curious our meeting here in this way.”

“ Very curious indeed. I have had the pleasure

of knowing Miss Hobson some time now. I had no conception of her being the relation of—of a college friend." Mr. Barlow seemed rather to hesitate as to whether he might or not claim friendship of Mr. Hobson.

"Hobson's a common name enough. Of course it never occurred to you. And you could hardly have recollected me, for our meetings were not very frequent. I didn't know you at first; though I felt sure I had seen your face somewhere before. And you haven't altered much." And then he said, with a change of topic, "Men always said that you lost very heavily—what year was it?—when Pentapolis won the Leger. You put your money on the mare—what was her name?—Polly Peachum."

"Hush," said Mr. Barlow, lowering his voice, looking round nervously, and talking with a sort of timid interest in the subject of discussion. "Yes, I lost more than I could afford, I admit it. I backed the mare for a place. There were some iniquitous proceedings. I feel sure she was tampered with."

Mr. Hobson suggested the usual sporting expressions: "Got at; nobbled."

"Got at; nobbled," Mr. Barlow feebly assented. "It was a shameful fraud, and I was——"

“ You were regularly let in.”

“ Yes, let in.” The curate reluctantly availed himself of the phrase suggested by his companion; then he hastened to add: “ But that’s all past and gone now. And it cured me. I needn’t say that I have long ceased to be interested in such matters. I have of course now ample duties to fulfil; my life is wholly changed; my pursuits are simple——”

“ Common objects of the sea-shore,” suggested Mr. Hobson, with a grin.

“ Yes, those among others,” said Mr. Barlow, declining to see any reason for mirth in the suggestion. He pushed back his chair. “ Perhaps we had better join the ladies.”

“ Oh, come, we must finish this bottle.”

“ Well, really, I have already rather exceeded.” And indeed Mr. Barlow, what with the heady port and the interest of the reminiscences that had been forced upon him, looked a little flushed.

“ My aunt will quite expect us to finish this.”

“ Miss Hobson is always most hospitable;” and Mr. Barlow refilled his glass.

The two men then found that they had plenty to say to each other. Mr. Barlow became most cordially talkative. What had become of all the men? he

asked. He knew but few of them. Yes, he knew Dobbs. Dobbs had got a capital living in Lincolnshire. But Todd now, what was Todd doing? And Dodd, what had become of Dodd? And that curious fellow Bigg? and Figg? and Higg? Snigg he *had* heard of; only heard of. Yes, he was afraid it was a very sad business about poor Snigg. But, if all was true, it was not too much to say that Snigg had only got his deserts.

At last Mogford's announcements that tea was quite ready became urgent; and the two gentlemen, genial with wine and talk, ascended to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

“ MUSIC HATH CHARMS.”

MISS HOBSON was a lady of old-fashioned notions ; she did not object to the gentlemen lingering a little over their wine after dinner ; and regarded their subsequent appearance in the drawing-room with a suffusion of port on their faces as a fact decidedly creditable to her hospitality. She liked her guests to do justice to the meals she set before them, and to finish the wine she placed upon the table. In her young days, men who did not empty their glasses were accounted milksops, and she was still inclined to join in that estimation of them ; occasional inebriety had in her time been considered as quite consistent with perfect gentlemanliness. And then it must be said for her that, without any conventional spinster prudery, she had not a high opinion of men generally ; regarding them as a distinct species, a sort of outer barbarians, whom it was expedient to humour to the top of their bent, indulging to the full their follies and over-

looking their failings, of which a little intemperance was, perhaps, the most harmless and venial. They must be soothed and conciliated, and kept in good temper even at the price of a little toleration of their vices ; as though they were savage creatures, capable, upon contradiction or provocation, of breaking out into the very wildest excesses. Miss Hobson, seated before a tall brown urn, making tea, bowed and smiled to her male guests as they entered the drawing-room.

" Well, Frank, you and Mr. Barlow must have found a great deal to say to each other," said Miss Milner, with a sort of stately archness.

" We found upon examination that we were already acquaintances of some standing," explained Frank.

" You take milk, Frank, *and* sugar?" inquired his aunt. " But I ought not to have asked ; all the Hobsons are fond of sugar in their tea."

" Mr. Barlow is an *exceedingly* charming person," said Miss Milner, in a low voice, to her cousin ; " he is *quite* a favourite in Beachville. They say he will be rich some day. He is nephew to Lord Stoneacre." Miss Milner went on in a still lower tone. " How do you think poor aunt is looking ? Now, *candidly*, Frank."

“Well, I think she’s looking very well,” replied Mr. Hobson, simply.

“Ah,” and Miss Milner shook her head reproachfully, “you have not got sufficient confidence in me to say what you really think.”

“Is she not very well?” asked Mr. Hobson, in some surprise.

“Poor thing, no,” replied Matilda, “and I fear it’s really serious. To my eyes it really seems as though she were breaking fast.”

“Surely not; it seems to me she’s looking uncommonly well for her time of life.” And Frank glanced at the portly form of his aunt as she sat placidly at the tea-table.

“Men are not quick at seeing these kind of things, I notice;” and Miss Milner sighed. “Poor aunt! the doctor comes to her *regularly* three times a week. Sometimes I think her symptoms are quite alarming.”

“Odd,” thought Mr. Hobson. “I can’t make Matilda out. When one woman makes believe to be ill, do all the rest of the sex band themselves together to live and die in upholding the sham? Or, for the better deceiving of us, do they begin by deceiving themselves? Can Matilda have persuaded herself that old Aunt Fanny is really ill?”

Mr. Barlow handed about tea-cups and thin bread-and-butter and muffins with great industry. Alacrity at tea-tables is a sort of parish duty with curates. Then he sat himself down beside the mermaid.

"It will be quite low water at ten on Monday morning, Miss Brown," he remarked, smilingly, as though some joke lay hidden in the fact.

Miss Brown said simply that she was sorry for it; it was so much nicer to bathe at high water.

"Ah, but we hope to secure some perfect specimens of the *Bryopsis plumosa*; such a pretty delicate little plant, bright green in colour, and of a feathery, fan-like form. It is generally to be found adhering to the rocky walls of the pools left by the retiring tide. I am quite sure you would be interested in searching for it, Miss Brown; only, you know, you mustn't mind getting your feet a little wet. Cork soles are the things. I am a great advocate for cork soles. You're sure not to take cold if you wear cork soles."

More, perhaps, in favour of cork soles Mr. Barlow might have added, but Miss Milner approached; she took Miss Brown by the hand.

"Don't you think, dear, we might try over that duet from 'Semiramide'?"

The mermaid was carried away to the piano. Mr.

Barlow was left to his solitary reflections upon his favourite cork soles, the state of the tide on Monday, the *Bryopsis plumosa*, and other “common objects.”

Miss Hobson quitted the tea-table, and made room on the sofa for her nephew to sit beside her.

“Do you find Matilda improved, Frank?” she inquired. Apparently her three glasses of port and three cups of tea had thawed and warmed her; she was quite smiling and genial.

“I find her very much improved,” replied Frank Hobson.

“I thought you would,” said his aunt. She nodded her head significantly, as she whispered, “You know you might do worse, Frank.”

Frank Hobson was quite aware that he might do worse. He was not sure though that he needed his aunt’s prompting—he was sufficiently prompted by his own self-interest—to marry Matilda Milner; presuming that she would have him.

“You know *she has money*,” Miss Hobson repeated.

“Yes, *she has money*,” Frank echoed, mechanically.

“And you’re getting on, Frank.”

“Yes. Certainly I’m getting on.”

“And she’s very good-looking; and she sings capitally.”

Frank wearied a little of this laudation of his cousin. Even if he *did* entertain a design to marry her, it was decidedly objectionable that such design should be advertised prematurely and perpetually.

"Miss Brown sings very well, too, I think," he said. It didn't seem to him quite fair that Matilda Milner should have all the credit of the duet.

"Oh! poor Sophy. Yes. Very prettily, indeed; a nice little voice, poor child!"

Frank Hobson felt this to be rather faint praise; it was evident that justice was not being done to the mermaid. Sophy Brown was a skilful musician, and her mezzo-soprano voice—(it did duty on this occasion as a contralto)—if it did not possess any great power, was charming in quality, while her intonation was perfect. Whereas Matilda Milner frequently sang sharp, in spite of the efforts of Miss Brown, who played the accompaniment, to give her the right note and keep her in tune. She possessed a brilliant, loud, slightly harsh, and wholly unsympathetic soprano; had been well taught, and sang with supreme confidence and self-possession.

"I'm glad you think Sophy sings well," Miss Hobson said, presently. "It's really important to her. For I hardly know what's to become of the

poor child. We must try and find her a situation as governess, I suppose. Your aunt Mary Ann has interested herself about the girl. Of course her claim upon me is small enough. She's Mary Ann's husband's sister's child. The poor thing's lost both father and mother. Brown—the father—was a medical man; in the New North Road, I think it was. Some dreadful part of London, I know. She'd been ailing; and so, to oblige Mary Ann, I asked the girl down here. She's a nice quiet little thing; gives no trouble; and fortunately Matilda seems to fancy her.”

“And I think Mr. Barlow seems to fancy her,” said Frank Hobson. The clergyman was rendering profuse thanks for the duet. In the midst of these Miss Milner had wandered off to the window. So that Miss Brown seemed for the moment to have Mr. Barlow's gratitude all to herself.

“Well, if Mr. Barlow *did* take a fancy to her,” said Miss Hobson, apathetically, as though the matter wasn't really worth discussing, “I'm sure it would be a very good thing for her. The poor child hasn't much to look forward to, except marriage. And in these times I fear her chance of marriage is not a very good one.”

Frank Hobson seemed to ponder over his aunt's words. Somehow, Miss Brown's situation a good deal resembled his own. Except marriage—marriage with a young lady possessed of property, like Matilda Milner—had *he* much to look forward to? And what, after all, were *his* chances of marriage?

"It was really exquisite. I'm sure we owe you a thousand thanks." The curate was reiterating his gratitude to Miss Brown.

"O, Frank! Mr. Barlow!" Matilda Milner cried from the balcony; "pray *do* come and look at the moon. It's *so* lovely."

Of course, Frank Hobson thereupon quitted his aunt, and Mr. Barlow the mermaid, to view the moon from the balcony, and to agree with Miss Milner that it was lovely indeed.

"I quite *adore* the moon!" cried Miss Milner, with placid enthusiasm. "Don't you, Frank?"

Mr. Hobson conceded that he thought the moon was—yes, really—very jolly.

"Won't you come and look at the moon, too, Miss Brown?" he asked.

"Go, Sophy dear, and look at the moon," said Miss Hobson to the mermaid. For the moon was a cheap sort of exhibition, to the contemplation of

which Miss Brown might be admitted, without, as Miss Hobson opined, any danger of its unfitting her for the duties of her future life as a governess.

Miss Brown stepped into the balcony, her brown eyes beaming gratitude.

“It’s very beautiful,” she said, simply.

“Some day, Mr. Barlow,” observed Miss Milner, “we must get you to tell us *all about* the moon. It’s *so* improving to know all about things.”

Frank Hobson hoped, silently, that he might not be present when Mr. Barlow told all about the moon. He was just then contemplating the effect of the bright rays falling upon the mermaid’s waving tresses. Certainly the effect was very pretty; and the mermaid was a nice, quiet, graceful little creature. Yes; and Matilda’s profile looked very grand, and classical, and marble-hewn in the moonlight.

Just then a trio of glee-singers, such as haunt Beachville and other sea-side places during the season, commenced a part-song, with a tinkling guitar accompaniment. What with the moonlight, and the view from the balcony, the fresh evening air, and the distant caressing of the sea and the shingle, the music sounded very pleasantly. The party at Miss Hobson’s ceased talking the better to listen to it.

It pleased Miss Brown especially, as it appeared. She was the first to throw out money to the performers.

"What did you give them, Sophy?" asked Miss Milner, with superfluous earnestness.

"Sixpence. I'm sure they well deserve it."

"My dear, how extravagant!" said Miss Milner, with some severity. "A halfpenny would have been quite sufficient."

"I'm afraid Matilda is a screw," Mr. Hobson said to himself.

Presently the party broke up. "Good-nights" were being interchanged.

"We attend service at St. Jude's, Frank," said Miss Hobson, to her nephew, "at eleven o'clock to-morrow. If you like to come with us, I'll take care the pew-opener finds you a seat. Of course you'll dine with us to-morrow, at half-past five. We dine earlier on Sunday to allow of the servants going to church. I'm seldom equal to it myself in the evening. Good-night. Very glad to have seen you, Frank. Good-night, Mr. Barlow."

What a white, rather large, well-shaped, cool, plump hand had Matilda Milner, thought Frank Hobson, as he pressed it, bidding her adieu. "Good-

night!” she said, in her calm emphatic way, with her gracious, self-possessed smile. Yet it seemed to him there was more fervour in her manner of parting with him than she demonstrated with regard to the clergyman.

“I think if it comes to be a question between us, I shall get the pull of Barlow,” thought Frank Hobson; and then he bade adieu to the mermaid, pressing her warmer, smaller, suppler fingers. “Poor Miss Brown; she’s a nice little creature,” he said to himself. “Why doesn’t Barlow go in like a man and marry her? Of all ‘common objects’ of the shore, I’m sure mermaids are out-and-out the nicest.”

They were out on the parade by this time.

“Have a cigar, Barlow?” asked Mr. Hobson.

“No, thank you. I’m much obliged. But I never smoke now; that is, hardly ever. A lovely night, is it not?”

CHAPTER IX.

“CASTLES IN THE AIR.”

“I WONDER whether Barlow has any views?” thought Frank Hobson, as he walked with the clergyman along the parade towards the Royal Hotel. And then he said aloud, “Handsome-looking girl, my cousin Matilda, isn’t she?”

“Oh yes. I should say decidedly handsome,” assented Mr. Barlow.

“That Miss Brown’s a nice-looking little girl, too, isn’t she?”

“Oh yes; undoubtedly very nice-looking,” Mr. Barlow further assented.

“Well, which do you admire the most?” asked Frank Hobson, desperately. But the clergyman shrank from pronouncing a distinct preference. “You see their styles of beauty are so different,” he pleaded.

“You’d be puzzled which to choose?”

“Well—yes—perhaps so.”

And Frank Hobson began to think that he had not elicited much from Mr. Barlow concerning his “views,” if he entertained any. The “views” in question, of course, having relation to the hand of Miss Matilda Milner.

“If he were the ‘Betting Barlow’ of old,” Frank Hobson said to himself, “I’d offer to back myself at five to three to win Matilda in a month, and he’d take me; that is to say, he would have taken me in the old times. Perhaps it would be rather too strong to make such a proposal now. I’m not fond of clergymen, but I don’t care about affronting them. I’d sooner keep out of their way. Only of course they ought to keep out of my way, too. I really think I have a stronger claim to Matilda Milner than he has.”

“I think I’ll say good-night now. I turn off here; my lodgings are up the hill near the church. We shall meet again, I dare say, before you leave Beachville.”

“Come into the Royal and have something. It’s really quite early.”

“Not anything, thank you.”

“Not a little soda and something?”

"No, thank you." And they parted.

The coffee-room at the Royal was deserted, except by one or two old gentlemen who sat and sipped brandy-and-water while they read the evening paper. It was rather hot and close from the gaslights and the fumes of recent dinners. Mr. Hobson consumed a "soda and something," and then went for another stroll along the parade in front of the hotel.

"The night's too fine, and it's too early to go to bed," he said; though he owned that the fresh sea-breeze and the events of the day had fatigued him a little. He sauntered to and fro—meditating.

"I wish I knew my own mind. Do I care enough about Matilda Milner to marry her? I think I do. Does she care about me? I think she does—a little. I'm not sure that she's the sort of girl to care very much about anybody. I can't really see that there would be anything so very shabby about the business. My aunt evidently wishes it. She almost recommended me to go in for it. And really it doesn't seem to be so very difficult. I could but try it on. If I was to be rejected, I don't suppose I should break my heart. It would be unlucky, that's all; but I should get over it. The difficulty is to make up one's mind to begin. Matilda's such a curious

kind of girl. One feels rather awed by her tremendous self-possession. I was never so much struck by it before. It's easy to make an offer to a woman who's nervous, and shy, and blushing; too confused herself to appreciate the absurdities of one's own confusion. But when a cool matter-of-fact woman like Matilda's in the case, it becomes rather a different matter; she'd weigh one's every word—detect all the defects in grammar, all the incoherences of one's speech—wait patiently till one had got into a hopeless mash of sentences—look at one with her large cold blue eyes—and then—what would she say? Heaven only knows what she would say!”

He yawned—“I suppose I may as well go in and go to bed,” he said; “I seem to be getting sleepy. I wonder what old Tommy's doing now, and how near he's got to the Carpathian Mountains. I almost wish I was with him; for I don't see my way quite clearly to winning Matilda Milner. Still Beachville is certainly pleasant. And what a lovely night it is!”

He mounted to his bachelor bed-room on the top-most floor of the Royal, looking on to the roofs of the stables. But he did not get to sleep for some time. He felt feverish and restless: perhaps by reason of his aunt's heady port, or the unaccustomed softness

of his couch. “They *will* make one sleep on these suffocating billowy beds at all hotels,” he said. “When will they learn to know people’s real wants and likings, and give up the absurd traditions and conventions which make life at an inn so very intolerable?” He mused a good deal over hotel grievances, and in a drowsy sort of way composed the first half of a letter to The Times on the subject. Then he found himself drifting back to the Matilda Milner business again, asking himself the same questions with most determined iteration. Did she care for him? Did he care for her? Would she have him if he asked her? Should he ask her to have him? Had “Betting Barlow” any views? Was *he* making up to Matilda? or to Sophy Brown? And then the soft brown eyes of the mermaid seemed to gleam through the darkness of the night, and he thought what a quiet, comely, graceful little body she was. Too good for Barlow, he decided. For he didn’t like Barlow—he decided *that* also. Barlow was a humbug—there was something sly about Barlow—all wasn’t open and above board with Barlow; and he took a malignant pleasure in picturing to himself the effect of a public announcement that, for all Barlow’s present decorous demeanour, he was known

as “*Betting Barlow*” at the University. He proceeded, however, to decide that, after all, Sophy Brown was nothing to him, Frank Hobson—she had no money, poor girl! If he liked her ever so much—and of course he only admired her just a very little, as any man might admire any girl he had met once or twice, and was little likely to meet again—but if he liked her ever so much, it would still be an utterly preposterous business. For of course he could not marry a girl without a penny. It would be simply ruin to both of them. No, he must marry Matilda Milner—and none other—and in that case, he supposed Barlow must marry Sophy Brown, if he was so determined. There was no help for it. Though still Mr. Hobson was of opinion that Barlow had done nothing to deserve the happiness of possessing so charming a little wife as Sophy Brown; and that she was in every way a great deal too good for him, and would, indeed, be utterly thrown away upon such a husband.

Then he began to think about what his own future life would be, supposing him safely married to Matilda Milner. Well, of course, in the first place there would be his debts to be paid. But they were not considerable. It would be a little awkward, perhaps, revealing

the fact of their existence to his bride. Still he thought the disclosure might be made in a tender little scene; and it seemed to him he could so manage matters as to make this rather interesting and pleasing than otherwise. "After all," he said, "women like to come forward sometimes in a guardian-angel sort of way, and help a fellow when he's down, and set him on his legs again. It invests them with a sort of superiority—gives them a sense of power—and they like power. I don't think they object to a little bit of the spendthrift about a fellow. It enables them to use their influence for his good. Women have a great notion of exerting their influence for a man's good. They like to think that they've had the bringing-round—been the saving of a fellow. Well, Matilda shall have the credit, if she likes, of reforming and redeeming me—not that I'm much of a spendthrift after all. I think we'll live at South Kensington somewhere. Of course I shall keep up the notion of practising at the bar, and retain my chambers. I suppose I must give Tommy and those fellows a dinner before I get married. Not that I intend to lose sight—as some fellows do when they marry—of all my bachelor friends. No, I don't care what Matilda may say—she must learn to like the

people I do. I'm not going to hedge myself round with a lot of dull priggish family friends. No; fellows shall find good wine and a good dinner—as often as they like to come for it—at Frank Hobson's table. I don't quite know how Matilda's money is invested. If it is in those old Three per Cents. I'll soon have it out, and put it into Indian Railway stock, or something that pays better interest. And we must help poor Sophy Brown; of course we shan't want a governess for the children immediately. I suppose Tommy would rather object to be a godfather because of the silver mug business; but Aunt Fanny I should think would come down with something handsome." Here he got incoherent, more and more drowsy, and finally he fell asleep.

CHAPTER X.

PUFFIN HEAD.

HE rose in good time on the following morning, and refreshed himself with a swim before breakfast. He returned to the hotel ruddy, invigorated, with dank hair, and saline bubbles in his whiskers. He began to think that Beachville was doing him good, and that there really were some pleasant things in life: sea-bathing being one of them. The sun was warm and bright, and was already beginning to tint with a healthful brown Mr. Hobson's cheeks. He felt no ill effects from the "heady port," and his cares seemed to sit more lightly upon him than on the previous evening. His depression had vanished; he felt elated and confident; and as he stood upon the beach in his slippers, filling his lungs with the glorious sea-breeze, emptying them, as it were, of the London smoke and the close atmosphere of the basement floor in New Square, and taking in clean honest

air instead, it seemed to him that if Matilda Milner had been close at hand he was man enough then and there to propose to her, and to persuade her to be his. Then a prodigious hunger seized him, and he ran back to the Royal to complete his toilet and commence breakfast operations.

He devoted ample time to the meal, enjoying it and doing it justice. "Upon my word," he said, "they give one a very good breakfast at the Royal. They seem to understand it." And it occurred to him that possibly he had been a little too severe upon the Royal arrangements overnight, and when he could not get to sleep, and had contemplated writing a stinging letter to *The Times* about hotel grievances. After all, he now thought, the Royal was a creditably managed establishment. The waiters were very attentive, and things were very nicely served. And after breakfast, it must be owned, he glanced over a sporting paper handed him by a waiter, who seemed to have taken him especially into favour and under protection.

"I wonder whether old Barlow reads his 'Bell' as diligently as he used to do," he said. "In his betting days, I remember, it used to be one of the necessaries of his life. I wonder whether he takes

any interest in the 'odds' now." And he derived some amusement from "Bell," considered in relation with the early proceedings of Mr. Barlow.

He found time for a quiet pipe after breakfast, and before the arrival of the hour for church-going: "The sea-breeze will carry off the smell of the smoke," he said.

Beachville is a little dull on Sundays. The visitors who entertain notions about propriety have decided that, although when dusk arrives you may slightly unbend, you must be guarded even to primness in your demeanour during the greater portion of the day. You must conduct yourself with quite London staidness and rigour. No sauntering upon the beach; that is handed over to the excursionists. No promenading upon the pier; the pier on Sundays is placed at the disposal of the Beachville tradespeople. A little walk up and down the parade is permissible between morning and afternoon service; but it is rather preferred that you should sit quietly in your balcony, in your best clothes, gazing placidly at the ocean: not through a telescope, mind you—telescopes are voted rather wicked on Sundays—adult toys, to be locked up with the children's dolls, spades, and buckets. Investigations into "common objects"

must be wholly suspended on Sundays. You must do nothing, for fear anything you might do should be improper. Better suspended animation, holds Beachville, then indecorous activity. And you must not be comfortable. There are Sabbath-breaking tendencies about billicocks or wideawakes, canvas shoes, and light-hued lounging-jackets. Your chimney-pot hat, please; your tightest gloves, your black frock-coat, and shiny black boots. Never mind about black attracting the sun, and entailing upon you exceeding feverishness. Consider your reputation in the eyes of Beachville! Do you want to be accounted an excursionist? In the cool of the evening a little relaxation is allowed; the holiday train has then departed. There is less chance of a misconception concerning you, or the misconception will be of less consequence. But during the heat of the day, Beachville exacts of you that you be Sabbatarian and uncomfortable.

Mr. Hobson, with some little difficulty and a shilling, obtained a seat in the crowded aisle of St. Jude's Church, a distant view of the officiating minister and of Matilda Milner's white lace bonnet with blue strings. The incumbent preached. Mr. Barlow, the curate, read prayers. "Barlow looks rather

grand in his surplice," thought Mr. Hobson. He was able to enjoy a good look at him, for it was during the Litany, and the congregation had sunk down low in their pews, uttering their responses in stifled drowsy tones from among their hassocks. "Barlow really looks very grand in his surplice." Of course at such a time he ought not to have been thinking of such a thing; but people's thoughts, it is well known, *do* occasionally wander during the Litany. "No doubt the surplice has a wonderful effect upon women. I wonder what Matilda thinks of it. I'm afraid my wig and gown would not have a chance by the side of it. I'd bring my wig and gown down to Beachville, if I thought it would produce any good effect upon Matilda."

Mr. Blenkinsop, the incumbent, preached. His sermon lasted five-and-thirty minutes. It was hardly, perhaps, proportionately edifying. Condensation would doubtless have improved it. But then condensation is generally held to be somehow unclerical.

"How do you do, Frank? A charming discourse from dear Mr. Blenkinsop," said Miss Hobson.

Frank Hobson met his aunt and cousin and Miss Brown at the church-porch.

"Charming, indeed," he agreed, though his tone

was not very fervent. But his sincerity was not questioned, though he fancied he perceived a little incredulous smile run along the lips of Miss Brown.

“It was very warm in church. Didn’t you find it so, Frank? I thought at one time I should have been obliged to go out,” continued Miss Hobson.

“Well, I thought once of going out,” observed Frank Hobson. He did not add that his going would have been due to other causes than the warmth of the church.

“Did you like Mr. Barlow’s reading?”

“Yes; he reads very well, I think,” said Mr. Hobson.

“I think he reads *admirably*,” interjected Matilda Milner.

“Just a trifle too much through his nose, though, I fancy.”

Miss Matilda Milner did not perceive that Mr. Barlow read *at all* through his nose. Mr. Hobson appealed to Miss Brown. Miss Brown was of opinion—timidly—that Mr. Barlow’s reading *was* a little nasal.

“How can you say so, Sophy?” demanded Miss Milner. Then she turned to Frank: “But *men* are so fond of disparaging clergymen!”

"Women rather overdo it the other way, don't they?" said Frank. Miss Milner made no reply. Frank Hobson began to think that his position as a suitor was not improving. Had he offended his cousin? Did she really care for Barlow as a man, and apart from his being a clergyman? Or did she simply, as a matter of principle, object to all criticisms upon curates: especially on Sundays?

"What are you going to do with yourself until dinner-time, Frank?" asked Miss Hobson. "There's no afternoon service at St. Jude's; but there *is* at St. Michael's."

"Thank you," said Frank, "I was thinking of taking a walk along the cliff; perhaps I may get as far as Puffin Head. Will you come, Matilda?"

Did he think to find an opportunity for putting an important question to his cousin during the walk to Puffin Head?

"I never walk on Sundays," said Matilda, rather severely.

"It would never do for Matilda to be walking to Puffin Head on a Sunday," observed Miss Hobson; "people would think it so odd. We are obliged to be rather particular at Beachville as to what we do on Sundays. Of course, it doesn't matter for *you*,

Frank ; and if Sophy likes to go, there would not be the same objection in her case."

This was perhaps not altogether complimentary to Miss Brown : for it seemed to imply that she was somehow of inferior nature ; a person of no consequence ; about whom, for good or evil, Beachville would not trouble itself to make remarks ; that she pertained in a measure to those classes with whom Sabbath-breaking is innate, and from whom nothing very different is to be expected. Frank felt that this view of the case was not very kind to Miss Brown,—was indeed distinctly unjust towards her.

"Will *you* walk to Puffin Head, Miss Brown?" he inquired.

"I shall be very pleased to go," Miss Brown replied, quite simply.

"I fear you'll find the walk too much for you, Sophy," said Matilda Milner ; "the sun is very scorching along the cliff ; it will really do you more harm than good."

But Miss Brown was firm. Frank Hobson supported her with the assurance that they should find a lovely breeze on the top of Puffin Head.

"But to go there on Sunday of all days!" Miss Milner said, somewhat scornfully. She appeared to

be of opinion that Puffin Head on Sunday was a scene of vulgar riot and desperate iniquity, which it was contamination to approach. Frank Hobson, however, reminded her that Sunday was his only day: his stay in Beachville was from Saturday to Monday only; which reminder brought the discussion to a close. And Mr. Hobson and Miss Brown set forth upon their afternoon walk to Puffin Head.

A brave, tall, chalky, turf-crowned promontory is Puffin Head: the highest point of the coast about Beachville. There is a coastguard station on the top, with a flag-staff, signals, and a wooden house. Sailors ("of the 'Black-eyed Susan' type," Mr. Hobson remarked) in blue jackets with gilt buttons, white ducks very loose about the ancles, pumps, and straw hats, patrol the height, and, armed with long telescopes, protect the British shore from the evil designs of the smuggler and the invader. It was hot and hard-breathing work mounting the headland; but to rest on the summit was delightful, the air was so keenly exhilarating; while, of course, you gained that excuse and reward of all climbing, a high horizon. A tall, vast blue wall of sea rose up in front of you, puckered with numberless wavelets, freckled with incessant patches of foam; now glittering like a crumpled

mirror in the sun ; now pleasantly dappled with the shadows of the clouds high above it ; and shot with various tints as the waters coursed over yellow sand, or brown shingle, or purple seaweed, or black rock, or as the depths below varied in their deepness. Then what toys were the big ships steadily ploughing along their way ! What pale ghosts of toys were those more distant ships, shadowy and vague, far off on the dim line where sky and sea joined each other ! And oh, what a mere mite, what a speck, was that man—a man was it ? could it be ? nearer the shore ; yes, wading slowly along, shrimping ! What a height above him we are on the crest of Puffin Head !

“ Now I call this very stunning ! ” exclaimed Mr. Hobson. Nature might perhaps have had tribute paid to her charms in choicer form, yet the tribute could hardly have been more heartily rendered. Miss Brown looked round her without speaking, smiling a little, sighing gently, with perhaps rather a tearful tendency about her eyes. It was a way she had when she was moved or greatly pleased ; so she proffered her homage to nature on this occasion.

“ Very, very stunning,” Mr. Hobson repeated ;
“ is it not, Miss Brown ? ”

“ Beautiful, indeed.” And presently she added,

"I have so longed to be up here; but I never could persuade Matilda to undertake the walk."

"She prefers the beach," said Mr. Hobson. "Puffin Head is not sufficiently a 'common object' for Matilda." And then he felt, especially when he saw Miss Brown's smile, that he had been guilty of the indiscretion of sneering at Matilda Milner. Might not Miss Brown be her confidante, and reveal to her his slight of her? Where then would be his chance of a prosperous marriage?

"But of course people's tastes differ," he said, hoping the platitude might be accepted by the Fates in the way of amends.

"Oh, of course," assented Miss Brown.

He then quickly changed the subject.

"How very pretty that bark looks out there, with all her sails set! Not that one, Miss Brown, that's only a brig; but here, to the right, just beyond that screw steamer. One wants a telescope up here sadly. I must bring my telescope with me—I've got a very decent Dollond—next time I come down to Beachville. A telescope is indispensable on Puffin Head."

Then, of course, the trim coastguard, call him Black-eyed Susan's William, or Ben Brace, or Rattlin the Reefer, or Long Tom Coffin; call him which you

will, he could have stepped on any stage in either of those characters and won a round of applause, so doing, from any audience,—of course, I say, he advanced to Mr. Hobson and proffered the loan of his glass : not being too proud to accept the compliment of a shilling by way of acknowledgment of the accommodation. And then Mr. Hobson, who rather prided himself on his general information, fell into conversation with the coastguard concerning ship-matters, and talked about tonnage, and rigs, and staysails, and stun-sails, and double top-sails and spanker-booms, as though he knew as much about it all as the coastguard ; which wasn't the case ; though perhaps Miss Brown might be excused for thinking it was. And then the telescope had to be adjusted for Miss Brown to look through, and Miss Brown found herself in difficulties customary with her sex in relation to telescopes. She couldn't get the focus right, or, the focus being adjusted, could not find the object she desired to look at, or indeed any object, save the sea and the sky, the ground at her feet, and the straw hat of the coastguard,—things that scarcely needed to be examined through a telescope. Then it would “ wabble ” about so much, in spite of all the assistance rendered by Mr. Hobson and the coastguard.

"I'm afraid you'll think me very stupid," said Miss Brown, confused.

"Not at all," avowed Mr. Hobson. The coast-guard smiled a gallant deprecation of any such notion, and looked as though he longed to say something about his lee-scuppers, or to start off with a naval hornpipe, and only stayed himself with difficulty from entering on those proceedings.

"Oh, *now* I see. Oh, everything so distinct. It's wonderful!" Miss Brown had accomplished the feat of looking through a telescope.

Indeed Mr. Hobson did not think Miss Brown at all stupid, but quite the contrary; for, as they descended Puffin Head she plucked up heart, and discoursed very pleasantly; a simple, gentle, intelligent kind of prattle. She owned at last to being a little tired, and accepted the help of Mr. Hobson's often-offered arm.

"She's a very nice little creature," said Frank Hobson to himself, as they reached his aunt's door, ten minutes before dinner-time; "she's a quiet sort of way with her that's really very taking. There's a sort of brave helplessness about her that I like. I hope some really good fellow will take a fancy to her and marry her. No, I don't mean Barlow. She's

too good for Barlow. In fact I don't know any fellow who's good enough for her, except myself; one always excepts one's self. And of course I'm out of the question. I'm booked. I marry Matilda, whom I love—to distraction.” Thereupon he grimaced.

After a while he assumed a moralising tone: “Poor little Sophy Brown, what a contrast she is to Matilda! Upon my word,” he said, “the influence of woman's weakness is a good deal more effective than the influence of woman's strength. And Miss Brown is certainly pretty; not so pretty as Matilda, perhaps; and yet I don't know whether she wouldn't be as pretty as Matilda if she happened to possess Matilda's banker's account!”

CHAPTER XI.

EVENING SERVICE.

MISS HOBSON, from the heights of propriety and civilisation looking down upon men generally as “outer barbarians,” addicted to disorderly views on most subjects, and as to religious matters, very thinly partitioned from a distressing paganism, — Miss Hobson, possessed with these views, deemed that there was cause for self-congratulation when very slight concessions were made by the other sex on her account. She had long since, as it were, written off man as a thoroughly bad debt, and considered that she had reason to be both satisfied and surprised when she found him tendering a small payment on account of the large sums owing to herself and society in the way of decorous demeanour. She had been thoroughly prepared for her nephew, Frank Hobson, — in his carrying into action the corruptness and indelicacy natural, as she held, to male methods of

thinking—posing himself at Beachville as a Sabbath-breaker and excursionist : markedly avoiding attendance at church, among many other malefactions and short-comings.

In this respect, however, she had been agreeably disappointed. Frank Hobson had appeared at morning service at St. Jude's. Miss Hobson regarded his conduct in such wise as a compliment to herself, and was proportionately grateful. But her views upon the worthlessness and culpability of man's nature were in no way changed or displaced. His good deeds were, in her eyes, matters of accident and eccentricity—by no means part of a system ; upon their recurrence it was not possible for any one to rely ; whereas his evil doings were regular and concentric, and constituted the economy of his existence. She was not, therefore, disposed to overrate the importance of Mr. Hobson's attendance at St. Jude's ; was, indeed, careful to demonstrate that she did not desire to regard that single act of duty at all in the light of a precedent, or as justifying expectation that a new career of exemplary conduct was thereby instituted. It was gratifying for the moment, and there was an end of it. It was not to be considered as hopeful or promising for the future. Men only

behaved well fitfully, and invariably backslided. Frank Hobson had attended divine service in the morning; but Miss Hobson did not view that as a reason for expecting that he would go to St. Jude's again in the evening; but rather the contrary. She did not even permit herself to count upon his attendance in the morning at St. Jude's in the event of his paying any future visits to Beachville. "There's no knowing for certain what men will do," Miss Hobson argued; "but it's pretty safe to rely upon their doing whatever's most improper and outrageous."

"If you want any more wine, Frank, you know you've only to ring for it," said Miss Hobson, as she rose from the dinner-table. "Mogford will bring you what you want; and when you're tired of sitting here you'll find me up-stairs in the drawing-room. I'm seldom equal to going to church in the evening." This was of course said upon the assumption that her nephew would not go again to St. Jude's. Then, lest she might be considered to have proceeded too completely upon that assumption, Miss Hobson added, "The girls generally attend evening service. There is seldom any difficulty about obtaining seats at St. Jude's in the evening, if you like to accompany them."

Miss Hobson, her prejudices against mankind apart, was disposed to be equitable and just in her dealings. She would not have it said that, by taking too much for granted the heathenism of her nephew in common with the rest of his sex, she had thereby hindered or nipped in the bud any inclinations towards a right line of conduct he might otherwise have developed.

“Oh, thank you,” said Mr. Hobson, simply; and Miss Hobson understood without surprise or sorrow—because the event chimed in so completely with her own anticipations in that respect—that her nephew did not purpose to accompany his cousin and Miss Brown to evening service at St. Jude’s.

“Mr. Barlow generally preaches in the evening,” observed Miss Milner. The ladies lingered a little at the door before finally withdrawing from the dining-room.

“Oh, indeed!” remarked Mr. Hobson. “I must really go some evening and hear Barlow.” It was spoken without any very vivid interest in, or deep respect for, the clergyman in question, and it manifested that even the probability of Mr. Barlow preaching was not sufficient attraction to draw Mr. Hobson to St. Jude’s that evening.

Matilda Milner turned to Miss Brown and said, somewhat tartly :

"I hope, dear, *you* are not too tired with your walk to Puffin Head to go to church this evening."

Sophy Brown responded meekly that she was not too tired, and that she intended to go to church.

"Only don't go on *my* account, that's all, dear," urged Miss Milner; "I can go very well by myself."

"Sophy always goes to church on Sunday evenings," said Miss Hobson, bringing the discussion to a close. Then she repeated, "I shall be in the drawing-room, Frank, whenever you are tired of sitting by yourself," and the ladies quitted the room. Mr. Hobson was left alone with the decanters.

He filled his glass. "Rather brutal of me letting those girls go by themselves," he meditated. "But I really cannot undertake to listen to Barlow this evening. I require to go into training for it. I must have a month at Beachville and plenty of sea-bathing and exercise before I can get my nervous system sufficiently braced up to enable me to sit still under a sermon from 'Betting Barlow.' I'm afraid I've offended Matilda. She did not make herself very pleasant at dinner; was inclined to come down rather heavy upon poor Miss Brown, who, I am sure,

poor child, had done nothing to deserve her wrath. I suppose I ought not to have gone to Puffin Head, and I ought to have gone and sat under—*sat under* is the phrase, I think—‘Betting Barlow’ this evening. But I’m not in a hurry to give Barlow a chance of sitting upon me; and it’s no use Matilda expecting to have everything her own way either before marriage or after. She’ll require a little breaking in, I can see; but she’ll respect me all the more by-and-by for having an opinion of my own. Snubbing, in moderation, does women a world of good; they’re so apt to get conceited; to set too high a value upon themselves; especially women with money. I’ll drink Matilda’s very good health. ’Pon my word, it’s rather too bad my sitting here all by myself on a Sunday evening drinking Aunt Fanny’s port—her best port, I dare say it is—I’ll ask Mogford about that some day. It’s by no means bad port; I wonder what she gave a dozen for it, and whether she’s got much of it left. Now I’ll drink Miss Brown’s very good health, and then I don’t think I’ll have any more. I’ve a sort of guilty feeling about drinking port in this way; I feel almost as though I were a burglar who had broken into a cellar, or a dishonest butler. I wish some one were here to share it with

me; even Barlow would be some one. How that old villain Tommy would enjoy it! He'd soon be ringing up Mogford for more. By the bye, I wonder how near he's got to the Carpathian Mountains by this time. I've a great mind to drink his very good health. I will, too, in half a glass; no—a whole glass; I know if he were here he'd object strongly to having his health drunk in a half-glass. There—now I've finished. I wonder whether I've taken more than a decent allowance. Does Aunt Fanny ever examine the state of the decanters? I shouldn't like her to be setting me down as a young man of intemperate habits. She doesn't think highly of me as it is; but *that* would be rather too awful. I suppose I mustn't go out and smoke a cigar upon the parade. I'd give anything to be allowed to go out and smoke a cigar upon the parade. No; they'll say I might just as well have gone to church as do that. I must postpone my cigar. I'll put the stoppers in the decanters, and ring for Mogford to take away the things. Then I'll go and see what old Aunt Fanny's doing up-stairs."

Miss Hobson was dozing a little in the drawing-room, reclining upon the sofa. She quickly resumed a sitting posture as her nephew entered the room.

She had too strong a sense of self-respect to permit herself to be seen by one of the opposite sex in what she would consider a position of disadvantage.

“Well, Frank,” she said; “I think I’ve had a nap. I don’t know how it is, but I always find myself rather sleepy on Sunday evenings. No, you didn’t disturb me. I hardly expected that you’d so soon get tired of your own company. But I’m very glad to see you. Ring the bell, and Mogford will bring up the tea. The girls will soon be home now, I dare say.”

Thereupon Miss Hobson roused herself and became communicative; praised Matilda Milner; pitied Sophy Brown; spoke of her own ill-health: extolling the zeal and intelligence of her medical attendant, and enumerating the different medicines he had prescribed for her, the various articles of food he had bidden her not to touch on any account, the things she might do, and the things she might not do, at peril of her life. Then she congratulated her nephew upon his successes at the bar—Mr. Hobson wincing a little, and hardly knowing how to deal with congratulations that seemed to be so little justified by the real state of the case. Miss Hobson concluded: “Though I must say, Frank, the things you said and did a little time back, to get that wicked wretch off for the

murder of his wife—and there can be no doubt whatever that he *did* murder her—seemed to me to be dreadfully improper; though of course I know I've no right to set myself up for a judge in such a matter; and women ought to hold their tongues about what they don't understand."

Then Mr. Hobson for the first time perceived that there had been some misconception in his aunt's mind touching his position at the bar. It always seems somehow to be a barrister's doom to be mistaken by the lay public for some other barrister. Now there was a barrister practising for the most part at the Quarter Sessions and the Old Bailey, who on that account, and probably from his initials being C. C. Hobson, was very generally known to his fellows as "Central Criminal" Hobson; a powerful advocate, with a large *clientèle* among the culprit classes, persistent rather than scrupulous in his oratory, with a reputation in regard to his line of life, both professional and private, that was not altogether nice or unblemished. It was apparently the fate of Mr. Frank Hobson—an equity draughtsman of refined ingenuity and skilled in the subtleties of Chancery practice—to have his identity confused with that of his namesake, the tempestuous orator of the Old Bailey.

“To think that I should be mistaken for that tremendous ruffian !” he murmured ; and he took pains to put the matter on a proper footing before his aunt. It was not at all clear that she understood him. The feminine mind does not readily appreciate distinctions concerning courts of justice and law-officers—does not clearly comprehend the specialities of tribunals. Women generally have a confused notion that the Lord Chancellor occasionally deals with cases of petty larceny, and sends impudent cabmen to prison ; that the Master of the Rolls sentences pickpockets, and punishes tradespeople who give short weight ; and that if you desire to bring a civil action against anybody, the first thing to do is to send for a policeman. Miss Hobson was at a loss to perceive why a gentleman who practised in the equity courts should presume to speak contemptuously of the dispensation of justice at the Old Bailey. So far as Miss Hobson could perceive, the latter was by far the more important tribunal of the two. She was quite positive that she saw a great deal more about it in the newspapers. Besides, people in society occasionally conversed about the man or woman on trial in the criminal courts. She had no recollection of a case before the Chancellor having been of sufficient im-

portance to become a topic of general discussion. She had noticed that a Mr. Hobson very frequently “appeared for the prisoner” at the Old Bailey, had read many of his speeches, and thought them clever and interesting, though not invariably, she felt bound to state, quite “right-minded.” And of course she decided in her own mind that *that* Mr. Hobson was *her* Mr. Hobson—her nephew Frank. Undeceived and enlightened in this respect, it must be admitted that she was also—somewhat disappointed.

“Then it seems you’re not at all celebrated, Frank,” she observed in conclusion.

“Well, no, aunt, not in that way. I don’t practise at the Old Bailey.”

“In what part of the paper, then, am I to look for mention of your name, Frank?”

“Well, in the reports of cases in the Courts of Chancery; and, of course, before the Privy Council and the House of Lords.” Mr. Hobson did not think it necessary to state that his appearances in the courts mentioned were not of incessant occurrence.

“But are you sure, Frank? I always thought that no one could speak in the House of Lords who wasn’t a peer.”

Mr. Hobson endeavoured to make his aunt understand the appellate jurisdiction of the House of Lords, as distinguished from its legislative functions.

“I’m afraid you’ll think me very stupid, Frank; but I was never very quick at understanding those kind of things. Dear me! And to think that you’re not the Mr. Hobson who’s so often mentioned in the Times. Do you know I feel quite sorry about it. I suppose he makes a great deal of money, that Mr. Hobson?”

Yes. Mr. Hobson believed that the income of the other Mr. Hobson was very considerable.

“Then I’m sure I wish you were he, Frank.” But Mr. Hobson did not echo his aunt’s wish. He was not a Pharisee in other respects. Yet in this he was Pharisaically inclined to thank Heaven that he was not as the other Mr. Hobson was; presuming, of course, that all the stories told about him were true.

Miss Milner and Miss Brown returned from church.

“You are rather late, are you not?” said Miss Hobson.

“We are, a little; we rather waited for Mr. Barlow,” explained Sophy Brown, simply.

“How can you say so, Sophy?” demanded Matilda Milner, somewhat indignantly; “Mr. Barlow overtook

us, and insisted upon walking home with us. Of course, we did not wait for him."

Miss Brown was silenced, and lowered her eyelids.

("My private impression is," Frank Hobson said to himself, "that they *did* wait for Mr. Barlow; or at least Matilda did. Oh, these women! Oh, these curates!")

"I hope you asked Mr. Barlow in to tea?" said Miss Hobson.

"You know he never *will* come in to tea on Sunday evening," explained Matilda Milner.

"I hope you had a nice sermon. Mr. Barlow preached?"

"Yes, an excellent discourse."

"Rather long," Sophy Brown presumed to murmur.

"I can't say I thought so. You were tired with your walk in the afternoon, I dare say, dear." Miss Milner addressed Miss Brown with a sort of affectionate acidity. "I thought Mr. Barlow really eloquent. His subject was—more especially—Sabbath-breaking."

("Lucky I didn't go," Frank Hobson mused. "Barlow might have pointed me out as a frightful example. The moral teacher always likes to point to the frightful example.")

“Matilda,” said Miss Hobson; “Frank’s been telling me that he is not the Mr. Hobson whose name appears so often in the paper. It seems it’s some other Mr. Hobson, who practises in some different court.”

Miss Matilda Milner said, “Oh, indeed!” to this lucid statement. It seemed that if she did not understand it altogether, it led her to the conclusion that her cousin was a less meritorious and distinguished person than she had been at one time inclined to imagine.

Frank Hobson soon after took leave of his aunt and the young ladies.

“I suppose you feel bound to return to town to-morrow, Frank?” said Miss Hobson.

“Well, yes, some time to-morrow I think I must be off. By an early train, most likely. So if I shouldn’t see you again——”

“Well, good-bye; but, try and come down next Saturday again. We shall be delighted to see you.”

“Delighted!” echoed Miss Milner. Miss Brown also said, “Delighted!” but with her eyes, not her lips. And Frank Hobson departed.

“Now for a cigar on the parade,” he said, gleefully. “I feel like an escaped prisoner. I’ve been

dying for a cigar all the evening. How women do bore one! What on earth made Matilda so stiff and artificial with me? I can't make it out at all. I'm afraid that villain Barlow's been prejudicing her mind against me. Her good-bye and shake of the hand gave me a chill all up my arm. Nice, neat little thing, that Sophy Brown!”

CHAPTER XII.

POLITICS AND BRANDY-AND-WATER.

It was not late ; and upon the parade there still lingered a good many people. The townsfolk had joined the visitors, swelling the numbers of the promenaders, as was customary upon Sunday evenings at Beachville ; a final walk on moonlight nights, after evening church and before supper and going to bed, being esteemed a proceeding not inconsistent with the severe Sabbatarianism that prevailed in the place. Indeed, there was considerable relaxing on Sunday nights, after the duties of the day had been satisfactorily accomplished ; a sort of reaction occurred ; people became light-hearted, almost merry, during their final stroll ; the prattle of vivacious voices was heard above the throb and moan of the waves beating upon the beach ; escaped from the silence and confined attitude of its pews, Beachville became loquacious and mercurial in movement upon its parade.

Miss Beachville (of the Fancy Repository) paced blithely along, giggling somewhat as young Mr. Beachville (of the Library and News-room, the chemist's or the haberdasher's), spoke to her jocosely, yet plainly, of his admiration. The love-passages between them were doubtless tender, yet were certainly somewhat noisily conducted. There were perils besetting the pathway to Miss Beachville's affections. She subjected her suitors to somewhat of an ordeal. Young Mr. Beachville, in the course of his wooing, was told many times to "be off!" and to "go along!" was called a "great stupid," and "a softy," and "a sammy,"—whatever that may mean,—was pinched, and thumped, possibly even scratched. Yet, persevering, he triumphed; being permitted to keep company; accepted on approval; eventually, of course, leading Miss Beachville, in tears and a new bonnet, to Beachville church, and making her his for ever.

"It's quite a lesson in love-making," quoth Mr. Hobson, meditating upon what he saw; "but, somehow, I'm afraid the system can hardly be applied to Matilda."

He entered the Royal. The only occupant of the coffee-room was a crimson-faced old gentleman, busily

stirring a tumbler of brandy-and-water. The old gentleman's restless black beady eyes brightened upon Mr. Hobson's entrance; for the old gentleman was a hater of solitude, a lover of society; to talk loudly and longly, no matter with whom, was a joy to him; and soon he opened conversational fire. He was a holder of strong opinions, to which he gave free utterance; a man of vehement emotions, which he never troubled himself to curb. He seemed to live, as it were, upon the verge of vertigo, the threshold of apoplexy. As he talked, the veins in his forehead swelled, the crimson of his face grew more intense in hue, his voice, a rich snuffy bass, gained in volume and reverberated through the room. He was an old gentleman of an explosive and pyrotechnic organisation. He involved Mr. Hobson speedily in the meshes of a tumultuous discussion; he bombarded him, as it were, with red-hot arguments.

The barrister never shrinks from controversy; at least the young barrister does not. He has a habit—and it is not a good habit—of regarding society as a hone upon which he may whet his argumentative abilities; he delights, upon all occasions, in knocking up a discussion for discussion's sake—as children build a house of cards, only to knock it down again.

Mr. Hobson was amused by the old gentleman in the coffee-room ; humoured him ; conversed with him ; and soon found himself up to the neck in the troubled depths of a political dispute. Mr. Hobson had in the first instance, as it were, put on the gloves for his own pleasure ; soon he was compelled to avail himself of them for his own preservation. For the old gentleman was a hard hitter ; he was not scientific in his warfare, but, as he struck about fiercely in all directions, he could hardly fail to land a blow upon his opponent now and then. He was of an old school of political disputants ; an example rarely to be met with in these days of lukewarm difference of opinion and hybrid partisanship. He was fierily combative ; possessed with extreme views ; and prepared, if need were, to die in defence of them. Ministers, for instance, were not simply persons with whom he did not agree ; statesmen whose proceedings met with his disapproval. He proclaimed them boldly to be a " pack of scoundrels," and their conduct to be " steeped in infamy." He charged them with the most heinous malefactions, and gave credit and support to the most astounding accusations that could be brought against them. Many members of Parliament were, in his eyes, criminals who ought to be at

once marched off to the most ignominious form of execution. *This* man had sold himself to Austria or Russia (as the case might be). The old gentleman was prepared to state the precise sum paid on the occasion. *That* man had betrayed his country to Prussia (or some other power). The old gentleman was acquainted intimately with the whole facts of the case. "I'd hang them all, sir, every man Jack of them!" cried the old gentleman, bringing down a sinewy, tawny, hairy fist, with a noisy bang upon the table; and then he sat for a moment, swaying to and fro, as though preparing himself for another burst of excitement, so soon as Mr. Hobson by further observation, should apply a light and explode him.

The old gentleman consumed much and strong mahogany-coloured brandy, with hot water and sugar. His arguments did not wax cooler or gentler as the alcohol permeated and possessed his organisation. Perhaps it was by way of keeping pace with him in warmth of system and argument, that Mr. Hobson also ordered and consumed much and strong mahogany-coloured brandy, with hot water and sugar, also. Their discussion lasted some time. Finally, the old gentleman rose, a little unsteadily, and with a closing declaration, a shot at parting, to

the effect that we were governed by a gang of thieves, and that the country was going to the dogs, he lighted his chamber-candle and went to bed; leaving Mr. Hobson alone—feverish, not to say inebriated, and very wakeful.

"Amusing old fellow that," observed Mr. Hobson, not too respectfully, after his adversary in argument had departed. "If he can sleep after all that brown brandy, why, bless his old nerves, that's all I've got to say! I feel quite on fire with it. I don't believe there ever was such brandy. A nice, sleepless night I shall have after it. I must really go out and have another cigar on the parade—a soother and a cooler—or life will be a burthen to me."

The parade was now deserted. A fresh breeze from the sea made the gas-lamps flicker, and sprinkled the spray hither and thither. Mr. Hobson felt a pleasant saline moisture upon his face and whiskers. All was very quiet, save the ceaselessly murmuring sea. Mr. Hobson paced the parade; his cigar apt to blaze too fiercely and emit sparks as he breasted the wind. Beachville had retired for the night. Here and there a dim light was to be seen burning in an upper chamber; but, one by one, the windows closed their eyes, as it were, and Beachville went to sleep.

Mr. Hobson approached the angle of Belle Vue Lawn and glanced for a moment at his aunt's house. All was darkness. "They've been in bed for hours and hours, at old Aunt Fanny's," he observed. "It's time I was back at the Royal, or I shall get locked out."

Just then he saw the light of a cigar a little way in front of him. He wasn't sure that it wasn't the light of two cigars. He advanced towards it.

"Who's on the other side of that cigar, I wonder?" He stood under a lamp-post and let the other smoker pass him.

"By Jingo!" he cried, "who'd have thought it! Why, it's Barlow!" and he laughed noisily and immoderately.

CHAPTER XIII.

“A PROPER UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN GENTLEMEN.”

“WHY, Barlow, I thought you never smoked?”
said Mr. Hobson.

“Dear me; is it you, Hobson? Well, I hardly ever smoke—very seldom indeed,” answered Mr. Barlow.

“Who’d have thought of seeing you out at this time of night?”

“Well, it may seem odd; but you see, Hobson, after the fatigues of the day, I think a little walk does one good. And it’s so very fresh and pleasant now in the evening; and the gas at St. Jude’s makes the church almost unbearably hot. I find a little stroll at this time, with sometimes—not very often—a cigar, is really very enjoyable. Of course I don’t smoke much—that is, I don’t make a habit of it. The people here are rather censorious, and given to

misunderstanding one; and they might say things about one, which would of course be disagreeable, considering my situation here. Otherwise I see no harm in smoking; provided, of course, that it isn't carried to excess—no harm whatever."

"It's very kind of you to say so," observed Mr. Hobson, rather derisively. And then he discovered that, although he could walk in a tolerably straight line, deporting himself the while respectably enough, when he came to stand still there was a disposition about his legs to give way beneath him, and about his body to sway to and fro, to the endangerment of his equilibrium. In plain truth, the painful fact must be admitted: Mr. Hobson was far from sober.

"I've been having some brandy-and-water at the Royal," he said, with a fatuous air of explaining to Mr. Barlow any irregularity that might be perceptible in his demeanour. His articulation was not very distinct—his pronunciation was somewhat clipped and mutilated. "Branny-and-warrer at the Roy'l," he repeated.

"So I should imagine," remarked Mr. Barlow, gravely.

"I was just thinking of going back to bed."

"The very best thing you could do. Here, I'll

turn back with you. Take my arm, Hobson; lean on me."

"You don't think I'm drunk, Barlow?" demanded Mr. Hobson, with tipsy stateliness, and an attempt at a look of indignation.

"Oh dear, no; nothing of the kind."

"Quite right, Barlow; nothing of the kind."

"Only it's getting late, you know; and we're early people at Beachville."

"Quite right, Barlow. Getting late; and early people at Beachville," repeated Mr. Hobson, his articulation slurred and confused.

So they passed down the parade towards the Royal Hotel.

"You're a good fellow, Barlow, good fellow," murmured Mr. Hobson, with a somewhat maudlin air of affection for his companion. "I've a great respect for you—very great respect." After which he was silent for some little time.

Suddenly he stopped, disengaged himself, folded his arms, and assumed an angry, accusing air.

"That's enough, Barlow," he said. "We'll have no humbug, you know. We'll have everything fair and above board, Barlow. I'm not a man to be trifled with, you know."

“No, no. Of course not. Nobody’s going to trifle with you. Come; this is the way to your hotel.”

“I know the way to my hotel, Barlow. I can make allowances for you, Barlow, because—because you’re not so sober as I should like to see you, Barlow. Only, let’s have everything fair and above board. I’m a plain man, Barlow. So are you, for that matter; uncommonly plain, ain’t you, Barlow? Where was I? I know. We’ll have everything plain and above board. Now, let’s come to an understanding—a proper understanding. There’s nothing like a proper understanding—between gentlemen—between gentlemen.” (Mr. Hobson repeated the close of his sentences after the manner of a jumbled echo.)

“I think I’ll say good night,” said Mr. Barlow.

“No you don’t, Barlow. Nothing of the kind,” and Mr. Hobson caught his companion by the sleeve, hindering his departure. “Can’t let you go away yet, till we’ve come to a proper understanding. Now’s the day, and now’s the hour. Isn’t that what the song says? Now then, look here, Barlow. To put the thing plain, and make it all square and regular between us—what’s your little game? That’s what I want to know. What’s your little game?”

"I don't understand you."

"Oh yes you do, Barlow. Don't tell *me*. You understand me fast enough. What's your little game?"

"Really, Mr. Hobson——"

"Answer my question, sir," and Mr. Hobson assumed a severely forensic voice and attitude, but was apparently forgetful that he had devoted his abilities to the courts of Chancery; his manners certainly pertained to less dignified tribunals—seemed indeed to be founded upon the style adopted by his namesake, "Central Criminal" Hobson, in dealing with a reluctant witness. "Don't trifle with the patience of the jury. I intend to have an answer if I stop here all day—I mean all night. Come, sir, answer the question; yes or no. What's your little game?"

"I really cannot permit——" began Mr. Barlow.

"You object to the form of the question? Very well. I'll put it differently. Now, then, is it old Aunt Fanny?" and Mr. Hobson winked with tipsy knowingness.

"Pray, Mr. Hobson——"

"What do you say? Oh, it isn't old Aunt Fanny? I'll take a note of that—note of that. No, it isn't old Aunt Fanny. No, Barlow, I'll

say *that* for you. I never supposed it *was* old Aunt Fanny.”

“And now good night. You can’t miss the Royal.”

“Stop, stop; I haven’t done with you yet. No, I’m not going to miss the Royal. But if it isn’t old Aunt Fanny, Barlow, what I want to know is—is—who the devil is it? Excuse my plain but forcible language—forcible language. Who is it? Come. We intend to have it out of you, you know. Is it Sophy Brown?”

“Let me go, sir,” said Mr. Barlow, losing patience.

“What do you say, Barlow? *No*? It *isn’t* Sophy Brown? Glad to hear it. She’s a great deal too good for you—too good for you. But if it isn’t Sophy Brown—you see, Barlow, it was no use your fencing with the question; we get at the answer at last by a sort of exhaustive process—exhaustive process—(I wonder whether we could get any soda-water at the Royal?)—if it isn’t Sophy Brown, I say, it stands to reason that it must be Matilda Milner. Doesn’t it, now? Ah, Barlow, you’re a sly dog. So you’re after Matilda Milner, are you?”

Mr. Barlow made no reply, and abandoned further

attempts at escape. Either he had determined to humour his inebriated companion to the top of his bent, or else the mention of the name of Miss Milner had over him (Barlow) in some sort the effect of a spell, and hindered his departure.

"I dare say you happen to have heard, Barlow, that Matilda Milner's got money?"

Still Mr. Barlow held his peace. Yet he listened with evident interest.

"Quite right, Barlow; don't commit yourself. And what you happen to have heard isn't evidence to go to the jury. No more it is, Barlow. Quite right. But you see, Barlow, two can play at that game. I say two can play at that game. Do you hear? Then, why don't the man answer?" (Mr. Hobson turned and put this final question to an adjacent lamp-post, as though it were a disinterested bystander that could furnish information on the subject.)

"Well, sir," said Mr. Barlow, seeing that speech of some kind was necessary.

"Well, sir," repeated Frank Hobson. "*I love Matilda Milner. Do you hear? I say I love Matilda Milner.*"

"Oh, indeed."

"Yes, indeed. And she loves me—that is, I think

she does—a little. You see, Barlow, a little love and lots of money; that’s quite enough to marry upon—quite enough. Now it comes to this, Barlow—we both love Matilda Milner. You love her; you’ve said as much.”

“I’ve said nothing of the kind.”

“Yes, you have, Barlow. Don’t equivocate —equivocate. We both love her. Now, we can’t both marry her. That would be bigamy. Barlow, for shame of you, for suggesting such a thing! Bigamy, punishable by law; sentence, transportation; that kind of thing. We can’t both marry her. How shall we settle it, then? What do you say? You’re a sporting man—‘Betting Barlow,’ that’s your name. I know well enough who you are. Bless you, there’s no deceiving me! What money will you put on the event, now? Have you made up your book? Do you back yourself to win? We’re friends, you know, Barlow, and of course we can settle the thing in a friendly way—friendly way. Now, look here; how’s it to be settled? Will you run a race for her?—on foot or on horseback? We can hire nags, and race along the sands at low tide to Puffin Head and back; or shall we make it a walking-match—five miles within the hour, regular toe and heel; or a cricket-

match, or billiards,—there, or I'll even play chess with you for her! I'm not up to the game of knurr and spell," Mr. Hobson confessed sadly, "or I'd go in for that with you. But I'll do anything to be accommodating—that I will, Barlow; because you're a good fellow, and I respect you. Single stick, or fencing, or sparring, or wrestling. A fair field and no favour, that's what I say; and may the best man win Matilda Milner," and he repeated at the top of his voice, waving his arms wildly, "May the best man win Matilda Milner!"

"I am surprised, Mr. Hobson——" began Mr. Barlow; "but it's useless talking to you. You're not in a condition to understand what's said to you."

"Don't say that, Barlow, don't say that, or else you'll hurt my feelings, you really will. No, Barlow, you're not going—can't allow it—not until this little matter's settled. You're not going, my dear old Betting Barlow, until we've brought this little affair to a satisfactory conclusion—satisfactory conclusion. But we'll make short work of it if you're in a hurry; only I thought you might be in the humour for a little sport. Given up sport, I see,—all right. I know all about you, Barlow—white tie, clerical position, that kind of thing; no more betting—very

proper. Look here, we'll settle it in a moment—we'll toss. The winner shall marry Matilda Milner." And Mr. Hobson produced a coin from his pocket.

"You cry to me, Barlow."

"I distinctly decline."

"The winner marries Matilda Milner."

"I say I——"

"It's as fair for one as the other."

"Mr. Hobson—I'm surprised—I say I——"

"You say 'heads.'"

"I say nothing of the kind."

"Then you say 'tails.' All right, Barlow. There—you've lost, for it's 'heads.' Matilda Milner's mine! Wish me joy, Barlow."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

"Come, come, Barlow, don't lose your temper. It was all fair and above-board. I've won and you've lost. But there's Sophy Brown left. I can't marry them both, or else perhaps I would. Take her, Barlow, and be happy. God bless you both!"

"How dare you, sir——"

"Oh, don't talk about daring, Barlow, don't now. With your experience in betting you ought to bear your losses with more fortitude—you ought, indeed. And your loss is a positive gain—positive gain.

You've won Sophy Brown; that is, if she'll have you. About which I have doubts."

"You're not sober, Mr. Hobson, I fear, and——"

"Don't try to get out of it that way, Barlow. I won't have it. It was all fair. We tossed, and I won. Matilda Milner's mine. There's nothing more to be said. Only do what's right, Barlow. No interference with another gentleman's property. I put it to you as a man of honour; withdraw all claim to Matilda Milner, or—or—to be plain, you'll catch it. But I don't want to threaten you; there's no occasion for that. You're a good fellow, Barlow, and I've the greatest respect for you—greatest respect. We're friends, and we've settled our differences in a friendly way. I don't threaten you, and I waive all such remedy as the Court might give me. I rely upon your honour, Barlow; and I won't, though of course I might, file a bill against you for specific performance—specific performance." He had considerable difficulty with the articulation of these words. "Good night, Barlow. Make Sophy Brown Mrs. Barlow, and you'll be a happy man. Good night."

And Mr. Hobson staggered off to rouse the night porter of the Royal, and obtain admission to his hotel.

It was quite as well that Beachville slept while the extraordinary scene above narrated was taking place upon its parade.

"He must be mad," said Mr. Barlow, as he watched the retreating figure of Frank Hobson. "Certainly he's drunk." And the curate retreated to his lodgings.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NEXT MORNING.

It has been a matter of some pain and anxiety to the narrator that, in the interests of truth and his narrative, he has been compelled to exhibit to the reader, Mr. Frank Hobson in the reprehensible situation and guilty of the shameful behaviour last described. That a man should venture to decide his choice of a wife upon the turning of a coin, is of course monstrous enough; and the circumstance of his inebriety the while can in no way be urged as excusing his wrong-doing. Wine is supposed to stimulate the development of truth; to induce a return to a natural tone of heart and feeling; an abandonment of those cautions and calculations with which an artificial civilisation has wrapped and fettered the healthy and honest instincts of humanity. And the attributes of wine, it is presumable, are not wholly absent in the case of brown brandy and water. Yet, under the influence of that stimulant, Mr. Hobson

was guilty of demeanour singularly gross and indecorous; such as he would surely have shrunk from in his moments of sobriety. At least *that* may be said for him.

I abstain, however, from putting forth trite apologies, as to the fact of no man being wise at all hours; as to the occasionally nodding even of Homer, and the drowsiness of the bard being possibly due to incautious libations. I prefer to point to the fact, that if Mr. Hobson sinned, he consequentially suffered. Excess is its own Nemesis. Violent political discussions with vehement elderly gentlemen, stimulated by over-indulgence in brown brandy and water, are errors that carry their own punishment along with them. Mr. Hobson awoke the next morning with a distressing headache; but what was even more distressing to him was the vague yet irresistible conviction that he had over-night,—to put the matter plainly, if coarsely,—in some way made a tremendous donkey of himself.

“I remember meeting Barlow on the parade,” he said, pressing both hands upon his brow, as though there was some danger of his head coming in half. “Did I insult him, I wonder? No, I think we were rather friendly than otherwise. And we came to some arrangement, I fancy. Surely, we did. We

tossed: and I won. And it was settled I was to marry Matilda Milner. I'm almost certain that some such arrangement was come to. What a fool I was to take all that brandy!"

He went down stairs to the coffee-room. He found the crimson-faced old gentleman devouring his breakfast with great appetite: heaping upon his plate some very savoury-smelling preparation of kidneys, drinking his tea with noisy avidity, and storming at the waiters for supplying him so tardily with dry toast. For his own part Mr. Hobson did not find himself particularly hungry. The old gentleman greeted him heartily.

"How are you?" he cried. "Fine morning. The sea lovely. I had my dip an hour ago. It's given me a prodigious appetite. Waiter, when *are* those eggs coming?" This was demanded most fiercely. The waiters dispersed in a panic.

Mr. Hobson was reflecting moodily as to whether the ocean hissed and steamed very much when the fiery old gentleman plunged amid its waves.

He deferred his breakfast, and went out, his head throbbing badly. But after a bathe and a swim—though he confessed to himself that he had never before felt so nervous about getting out of his depth (that terrible brown brandy!)—he became more himself, and his appetite awoke faintly within him.

Returning to his hotel, he encountered Miss Sophy Brown. She had tripped out early to exchange books at the library, and looked very fresh, and pure, and pretty in the morning sun.

“What a feverish beast I feel by the side of her,” thought Mr. Hobson, as he greeted Miss Sophy Brown.

“And you’re really going away this morning?” asked Miss Brown. Frank Hobson explained that he must tear himself away from Beachville by the first train after breakfast.

“But I suppose we shall see you next Saturday?”

This was so prettily said, seeming to convey so genuine a desire to see him again on the following Saturday, that Mr. Hobson was nearly betrayed into needless enthusiasm, to the effect that he should certainly come down on the following Saturday; that he should look forward to the following Saturday all the week, and to the hope of seeing Miss Brown again; nay more, that if Miss Brown would hint a wish in that respect, he wouldn’t leave Beachville at all, but would take up his abode there for an indefinite period. But he checked himself—he did not deliver so chivalrous an outburst. He said simply that he hoped to be there again on Saturday; and took leave of Miss Brown in a way that was rather subdued and quiescent than ardent or exuberant

"What happened last night?" he asked himself sadly, endeavouring to pierce a fog of intoxication, and arrive at the real outline of events. "Something was said about Sophy Brown, I know. Didn't I hand her over to Barlow? I believe I did. I was capable of any crime last night. She's a dear little creature, is Sophy Brown!"

The old gentleman was just completing his breakfast.

"You don't look quite yourself this morning," he said to Frank Hobson. "A little overdid it last night, I fancy. Don't be persuaded to have any soda-water or nonsense of that kind. It's a mistake young men are always falling into. Have something devilled for breakfast, and a tumbler of hot grog with your lunch. The best thing in the world for an ailing stomach. I find it does me a world of good."

"The old salamander!" murmured Mr. Hobson.

But he rather shrank from the prescription. He made a decent breakfast, however. The pure exhilarating wind and waters of Beachville had had a good effect upon him.

"I'm going up by the 10·40," observed the old gentleman. "Are you?"

Mr. Hobson said he contemplated leaving Beachville by that train.

“You’re going to London, of course? We’ll go together,” said the old gentleman.

“Am I Sindbad the Sailor, and is this the Old Man of the Sea?” Frank Hobson began to ask himself.

It must be said for the old gentleman, however, that he seemed far less polemically inclined in the morning than overnight. He was, upon the whole, sufficiently good-humoured and cheerful, though about him might be traced, as in the neighbourhood of a passive volcano, the embers of former explosions. He was something of an object of terror to waiters; an authority to be obeyed implicitly and instantly. And he occasionally flickered with anger when cabmen or railway porters failed in their duty, or what he held to be their duty, towards him. But, altogether, he was less what we may call apoplectically violent than Mr. Hobson was quite prepared for. And he avoided politics. Possibly, he felt himself bound in such wise to follow the example set by the Houses of Parliament, and only gave his attention to the affairs of the British nation and the state of its government after he had dined and completed his ordinary avocations.

“You talked a precious lot of nonsense last night,”

he said to Frank Hobson as they journeyed towards town. Frank Hobson laughed: he was inclined to think that, so far as he could recollect anything about it, he *had* talked a good deal of nonsense on the preceding evening.

"But you're a barrister, ain't you? I thought so. I said as much to myself directly I saw you. 'That's a barrister,' I said. I'd have bet any money on it. And barristers are bound to talk a lot of nonsense. That's what they're for. Nonsense is their stock-in-trade."

And at this the old gentleman laughed tempestuously.

Arrived at the London terminus, the old gentleman called a cab. "Can I put you down anywhere?" he asked. "I'm going into the City—Austin Friars. My name's Blatherwick. By-the-by, what's your name?"

Frank Hobson duly informed him.

"Oh! then you're going to Lincoln's Inn. I can't be of any use to you, then. Well, good-by. I dare say we shall meet again some day." And they parted.

CHAPTER XV

MR. TOMKISSON ON HIS TRAVELS.

IF it afforded Mr. Hobson any pleasure to imagine that important professional duties necessitated his return to town on the Monday morning, and that prolonged stay at Beachville would result in detriment to himself and inconvenience to the general public; if, I say, he thus derived any sort of gratification, why, of course, the harmless hallucination he laboured under in such respect, it was worth no one's while to dissipate or explain away. Satisfaction obtained on the cheap terms of self-delusion concerns the self-deluder only. There was in truth, I need hardly state, no real reason why Mr. Hobson should have hastened back to his chambers on Monday morning. No clamorous crowd of clients there awaited him. There had been no heavy shower of briefs or "cases for the opinion of counsel" in his absence. On the contrary, not a single drop of that kind had fallen.

"Any one called?" he inquired of Mr. Cuffy, as he entered the chambers on the basement-floor in New Square.

"Not a soul," replied that functionary: finding, I fear, some sort of malignant enjoyment in his employer's lack of good-fortune. Mr. Hobson flung his carpet-bag into a corner of his private room and himself into an easy-chair.

He was back again in town. And for all the good effected by that proceeding of his, he might as well, so far as he could see, have remained at Beachville. Nobody had called; nothing had happened. The long-looked-for client had not arrived; the ship freighted with good luck had not come in. He was no better off than when he had quitted town on the preceding Saturday.

He tried to think that it was all exactly as he had anticipated. "I knew perfectly well," he said to himself, "that no one would call; that nothing would happen. Although I put that question to Cuffy I did not really expect that anybody *had* called, or that anything *had* happened." And yet he might, nevertheless, have entertained some such notions. Does not hope spring eternal in the human breast? At least, we've been told so often enough. And the

comfort of fancying oneself the object of sudden good-fortune is so extremely inexpensive a luxury that one can hardly help indulging in it now and then. If there is any sort of pleasure procurable from that line of conduct, known proverbially as counting one's chickens before they are hatched, why, on earth, shouldn't a man have the benefit of it? Perhaps, unconsciously, Mr. Hobson had been counting his chickens before they were hatched. While he had been absent from London, might his luck not have taken a favourable turn? Inveterate gamblers sometimes shift their chairs to induce a change of fortune. Well, Mr. Hobson had changed his address for two nights. The result, however, was not very hopeful. He had counted his chickens; but alas! the eggs were addled.

He was back again in town. He was on the spot: if any one should require the services of an accomplished equity draughtsman and conveyancer at a short notice. Why didn't some one want assistance, such as he could furnish, and knock at his door forthwith, pour gold into his hand, and thrust papers before him? He was willing enough to work. He only wanted the chance. But, unhappily the chance wasn't forthcoming on this occasion. It was small

consolation to reflect that there were plenty more men as badly off as himself. Undoubtedly that sort of consolation was open to him. There were others, not merely of his own profession, who wouldn't quit London, or, quitting it, were in a hurry to be back again in it: making believe that their presence was indispensable; that somehow the world of town couldn't turn round comfortably if they were not at hand looking on; that their fellows could in no way get along without them. A desperate delusion, of course. For is it not true that, absent or dead, no one is so much missed, or found to be so indispensable as he had once fondly conjectured would be the case? The king dies. Long live the king! Jones is gathered to his fathers; and Smith reigns in his stead. And neither in the case of the king nor of Jones has the change been found to be of so very vital a description after all. The universe goes on, to all appearances, just as well without as with them.

Mr. Cuffy reappeared. He had forgotten. Something *had* happened. A letter had come for Mr. Hobson.

"From old Tommy," said Mr. Hobson, as he glanced at the superscription. "Let's see how old

Tommy is getting on." And he tore open the thin foreign paper.

"MY DEAR FRANKY," he read, "I've got as far as this place on my way to the Carpathian Mountains——"

Mr. Hobson interrupted himself to ascertain what place his friend Tomkisson referred to. He found that the letter was written from an hotel at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

"Well, he hasn't got very far, at any rate," Mr. Hobson noted; and he resumed perusal of the letter.

"All has gone very pleasantly, hitherto. The weather has been particularly stunning. They have a decent *table d'hôte* here, and the wines are decidedly drinkable, if a little high in price. I didn't contemplate stopping here, however, and purpose to move on almost immediately. But—would you believe it?—an absurd difficulty hinders me. Owing to some curious want of forethought, or some mismanagement, or some miscalculation—I find great difficulty in accounting for the fact—I have discovered that I am singularly short of money. Indeed, I may own to you that I made this discovery very soon after leaving the Ludgate-Hill station; and, to be candid, I am now in a position of serious embarrassment.

Things are, of late, a good deal changed on the Continent. Money doesn't go nearly so far, or last as long, as it used to. It's very true that *vin ordinaire* is cheap enough. But then one doesn't come abroad to drink *vin ordinaire*, but rather to enjoy oneself; and I find that, practically, that means much the same thing as spending money. Now, I am really without money. Of course, therefore, I cannot enjoy myself at all. I needn't say that my expenses will be at an end when I once reach the Carpathians. Things are so cheap there, I'm given to understand, that the cost of living is merely nominal. But, meanwhile, what am I to do? I cannot move on for lack of funds, and for the same ridiculous reason, I cannot go back. Indeed, it would be too absurd, having come abroad for a holiday journey to the Carpathians, to return to town after a few days' stay at Boulogne. I feel sure, my dear Franky, that you will quite agree with me in that respect. But what am I to do? Each moment I am in dread of receiving my bill, and I am wholly unable to meet it. In this extreme emergency, of course I rely upon your kind assistance. Your friendship has never failed me. I feel convinced it will not fail me now. Send me ten pounds, there's a dear fellow. If you could

make it twenty it would be all the more acceptable. But I'll make ten do. Rigid economy shall be the order of the day, henceforth. I'm sure you entertain no desire to have me marched to prison by a file of the little soldiers that abound here—a beast of a drummer tattooing all the while. Debtors are treated as criminals on the Continent. It would be a disgrace to the whole Chancery bar if I were to be locked up. Think of that, and send the money! Imprisonment for debt ought really to be abolished all over Europe. They may do as they like about it in America, as I never intend to go there. I shall write a pamphlet on the subject when I come back, and will assign you the copyright as a security for the advance you're going to send. Now, pray let me urge you to let no small difficulties stand in the way of your sending this money, my dear Franky. Above all, don't write and tell me that you haven't got ten pounds to send. That would be too cruel. Think what it is to be a captive in a foreign land. 'England, with all thy faults, I love thee still.' Send the money by return of post, there's a dear boy. I met the landlord of the hotel just now in the hall. There's a hard, cannibal sort of look stealing over his face. He was all smiles once. I feel sure he would prove

a most desperate and merciless creditor. Beg, borrow, or steal the money somehow—I'm not particular—and send it over to me by return. You can pay yourself out of the next fees you receive on my account. If the worst comes to the worst, there's valuable property of mine in the chambers which you can"—(the word was rather blotted, but it looked like *spout*—probably a Chancery term, although it is not given in the last edition of the "Law Dictionary," signifying *hypothecation* of some kind)—
 "a double-barrelled opera-glass and a dressing-case—the tops of the bottles in which are real silver—among other things. If you feel any shame as to doing it yourself, why, send Cuffy. ²²/₂ But I never, myself, give way to scruples of that kind about what is after all a simple matter of business. Relying upon your prompt kindness, my dear Franky,

"Believe me, ever thine,

"VERULAM TOMKISSON.

"P.S.—There is a pretty widow staying here, to whom I flatter myself I am rather agreeable. She *seems* to have money; but seeming is very little guide in these cases. Possibly some deluded people here fancy *I* have money. Her name is SMITH. I wish the next time you go near Doctors' Commons (per-

haps you wouldn't mind going on purpose, I dare say you're not overwhelmed with business just now), you'd turn to the wills of recently deceased Smiths, and see if you can make out how her late husband's provided for her. Unfortunately I don't know his Christian name nor the date of his death, but to judge by her crape that must have been no long time since. Her name is *Mary*. I was always very fond of the name of *Mary*. She's blue eyes: pretty ones. As for her feet, you should see them on the pier here when the breeze is a little fresh! If the late Smith was a man of decent feeling he must have left her uncommonly well provided for. I suppose you haven't heard anything of Jones or Green? Those fellows never write unless they want something. Send the money, Franky. I have said *ten* pounds, because I find it is always better in these cases to specify a figure; but of course I'll take *fifteen* if you can manage it. Good-bye. I suppose you've quite settled to marry your cousin by this time.—V T."

"That's Tommy all over," mused Mr. Hobson, as he concluded the letter; "it's really too bad of him. He must have known that he hadn't money enough when he went away."

And yet Mr. Hobson forthwith stirred himself to provide his friend with funds. It was occupation for one thing; and he was moved also by a sort of regard for the absent one: a regard that was altogether independent of respect. He really liked the improvident Tomkisson; had benefited by his imperturbable good humour; had been often exhilarated by his irrepresible vivacity. And now he was to pay the price, as he had often paid it on previous occasions, of his friendship for Tomkisson, and make efforts to furnish that gentleman with pecuniary assistance.

There is a large class of men who never hesitate to apply to and avail themselves of their friends to the utmost; whose conduct is always pronounced on all sides to be "too bad;" and yet who invariably receive the succour they stand in need of, however little they may deserve it. "It's poor So-and-so, all over," we say, and dip our hands in our pockets. In such wise, for a long time at any rate, recklessness and improvidence seem to answer just as well as prudence and frugality. Probably a day of reckoning arrives at last, and poor So-and-so's draft upon the Bank of Friendship is one day dishonoured; returned to him marked "no effects;" and he has then to proceed on his way unassisted as best he may.

Our friend Mr. Verulam Tomkisson was very much of this class; only hitherto he had possessed sufficient forbearance and acuteness to restrain within tolerably decent bounds his dependence upon his fellows. And it must be said for him that, had fortune permitted, he would have been in no way behindhand in assisting such of his friends as had assisted him, or stood in need of his assistance.'

He now applied for ten pounds to assist him on his way to the Carpathian Mountains, or to bring him home again. Well, in the depressed condition of Mr. Hobson's finances, ten pounds represented a good deal of money. But still he valued his friend at more than ten pounds; that was the simple way of putting it; and so he somehow found that amount. It is not necessary to descend to ignominious details, or to state whether the valuables left by Mr. Tomkisson in his chambers—the double-barrelled opera-glass, or the dressing-case with the real silver-topped bottles—were the subjects of negotiation in raising the money. Ten pounds were forthcoming at last, and duly dispatched to Mr. Tomkisson at Boulogne-sur-Mer.

But Mr. Hobson did not go to Doctors' Commons.
“Tomkisson must find out about Mrs. Smith's money

for himself. I can't go into that. I'm sure, if she's got any money and will have him, the best thing he can do is to marry her. What's this he says about me?" And Mr. Hobson read the last line of the letter again: "I suppose you've quite settled to marry your cousin by this time." And then he fell to brooding once more over the Matilda-Milner question.

"Tommy's right," he said, at length; "it's the only thing for me to do. I really *must* marry Matilda Milner: it seems to be the only way out of my troubles." And he quite made up his mind that the next time he went down to Beachville he would certainly ask his cousin to accept his hand and heart. "Perhaps there's more hand than heart about it," he confessed to himself, "but still I must follow the conventional method; I must put it in that way. Matilda won't fail to understand me; and if she be a woman of any sense or right feeling, of course she'll say 'yes.' She may not get such a chance again. As for Barlow—" and he laughed; "but I came to an understanding with Barlow; it was settled between us that he should take Sophy Brown, and that Matilda Milner should fall to my share."

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS BROWN SEES A PORPOISE.

MR. HOBSON did not pass a very pleasant week. He constantly found himself longing to be down at Beachville again, pacing its breezy parade. There was nothing for him to do in London. Business did not come to him; his friends were absent; his time hung heavily on his hands; the theatres were playing old pieces to crowded audiences from the provinces; other places of amusement seemed to be rather more unamusing than ever; he was at a loss to know what to do with himself. "I must certainly marry," he kept saying over and over again; "life with Matilda Milner in a comfortable house at South Kensington will be a great deal better than this kind of thing. I will certainly propose to Matilda directly I get down to Beachville again." For, somehow, while he was in London it seemed to him a tolerably easy task to propose to Miss Milner at Beachville. He was able to take a broad business-like view of

the matter: contemplating it from a distance, and losing sight of minute details, which on the spot assumed the proportions of substantial obstacles to the progress of his suit. And in London, moreover, he was without the distracting influence of Sophy Brown's soft beaming eyes; at least they were not actually at hand as at Beachville to divert his attention from Miss Milner. Or was it that in London selfish considerations, regard for his own interests, came more home to him: gathered more strongly about him, occupying and holding him more absolutely? Whereas, at Beachville, the pure sea air blowing about him freely and freshly dispersed such notions, and benefited at once his physical and his moral constitution.

On the Saturday he was proceeding by a morning train to Beachville again. Entering a railway carriage, he had been greeted by a rich bass voice crying out, "Oh, here you are again!" and he found himself in the presence of the violent old gentleman, his friend of the previous Sunday—Mr. Blatherwick of Austin Friars.

"Glad to see you," said Mr. Blatherwick, heartily shaking hands with him. "Seen the morning paper? The infamous speech that scoundrel has been making at Shuttlecombe! The *Times* gives two pages of it!

I should like to have it burnt by the common hang-man!" These stringent observations, it may be noted, referred to a great oration—an "extra-parliamentary utterance" the papers called it—delivered by a leading member of the House of Commons, and for the time a great public idol in the north of England.

Mr. Hobson had not had time to read the speech.

"Then don't read it," cried Mr. Blatherwick; "it will only make you ill. The man's an infamous traitor. They'd have hanged, drawn, and quartered him in the good old times, for less than he's been saying and doing at Shuttlecombe. They ought to serve him in the same way now. And they should, too, if I had my way."

But in spite of these vindictive views on political questions, Mr. Blatherwick was soon laughing and talking good-humouredly enough upon other topics.

"You're going to the Royal again, I suppose?" he inquired of Frank Hobson. "They treat one very fairly at the Royal. I've taken rather a fancy to Beachville. Uncommon healthy place it seems to me. I went there first of all quite by chance. I had business down there. Since then I've run down once or twice; but only from Saturday to Monday; can't spare more time. I'm in business—a solicitor,

as you know, I dare say. I went to Beachville to see a client—a wonderful woman of business—shrewd and sharp, with a keen eye for her own interests. I never knew a woman with such a knowledge of 'what's what,' so far as money matters are concerned. And she wasn't an old woman either. But I mustn't mention names, of course."

Soon the fellow-travellers were at Beachville; had secured their rooms at the Royal, and refreshed themselves with luncheon. Afterwards Mr. Hobson found himself following the routine of his conduct of the previous Saturday. He walked along the parade, called upon his aunt, was graciously received and invited to dinner. Then he went upon the pier to encounter his cousin, with her young friend Sophy Brown, and the curate, the Rev. Mr. Barlow. The band appeared to be working, or playing rather, through the same programme of music they had performed on the last occasion of Mr. Hobson's presence on the pier. It was an understood thing at Beachville that its pleasures were to be pursued methodically and by rule. A list of recreations was provided, and it was expected of visitors that they would adhere to this list: enjoying themselves systematically and regularly. For instance, among the appointed amusements of the morning, were

bathing, sitting on the beach, and searching for "common objects;" for the afternoon were reserved the delights of the pier, the parade, and the band. Departure from this system of things was a serious offence in the eyes of Beachville. If you preferred the pier to the beach in the morning, you would be generally looked upon as a lunatic; and if you attempted to bathe in the afternoon, you would probably be locked up. This may seem severe; but practically the plan suited the habit of mind of the visitors. The English are inclined to order and precision; and even elect to enjoy their pleasures as they take their physic: punctually and according to prescription.

Mr. Hobson was greeted by Miss Milner with emphatic cordiality; by Miss Brown with a sort of timid regard. About Mr. Barlow's manner there was a little constraint. It might mean that he was on such intimate terms with Mr. Hobson that all ceremony was by consent waived between them; or, that he knew Mr. Hobson very slightly, and did not care greatly to know him more closely, and, therefore, that any parade of courtesy towards him was unadvisable.

Mr. Hobson soon found himself promenading by the side of his cousin. They were saying much the

same things as they had said on the previous Saturday. How charming the valse from "Faust" was; how nice the gipsy music from the "Trovatore;" how pretty Puffin Head looked with the sun upon it; and so on.

"I'm *so* glad you were able to come down to-day, Frank," said Miss Milner.

Mr. Hobson glanced back. They were separated from their companions. They had left the head of the pier. There were but few promenaders near them. It seemed to Mr. Hobson a good opportunity for saying something tender to his cousin—in pursuance of the plans concerning her he had formed in London—if he could only decide upon something tender to say. But he couldn't. Nothing occurred but the commonplace :

"I was only too happy to come, I assure you, Matilda."

"I hope you're growing *fond* of Beachville, Frank."

Mr. Hobson thought to himself, "O, if I possessed the impudence of some men! If I dared to say, 'I'm growing fond of *you*, Matilda!'" He wasn't equal to that. Still he made a fair advance; if he spoke with some confusion and something of a stammer.

"The pleasure of seeing *you* must count for something in attracting me here, Matilda," he said.

“You’re very kind, Frank,” the lady answered, not in the least disturbed. “Of course, it would be *very dull* if you did not know *anybody* in the place. To be *quite alone* in a place must always be tiresome and depressing.”

“But when I find a cousin here, for whom I have a—a warm regard—” Mr. Hobson continued, growing bolder.

“I’m *very* pleased that we should be such good friends, Frank. I think it’s so sad, and so wrong, too, when relations fall out, and keep each other at a distance. Isn’t that the overture to ‘William Tell,’ they’re playing now?”

“And we *are* good friends, Matilda, are we not?” Mr. Hobson had no ears for the band.

“Oh, yes; *of course* we are, Frank. How can you ask?”

Mr. Hobson felt that his love-making must be got over, if at all, with a rush. When your shy or reluctant man plucks up heart, he plucks up plenty of it. Something of the courage of despair comes to his aid.

“I’ll do it,” said Frank Hobson to himself, and he grasped his cousin’s hand.

“My dear Matilda!” he said.

But Miss Milner’s heart was not to be captured by

a *coup de main*. The lady was not to be taken by surprise. She was equal to the occasion. To ignore utterly a lover's intentions is to rebuff him very effectually. Miss Milner would not perceive that her cousin was making love to her. Yet she could hardly help feeling that he was grasping her hand very tightly.

"What nice gloves you always wear, Frank," she observed, quite calmly. "Where do you get them? And they're very nearly the same colour as mine: only a shade darker. I'm *very* fond of that sort of pale dove colour."

Mr. Hobson quietly released his cousin's hand. Just then Miss Brown approached, accompanied by Mr. Barlow. Miss Brown was a little excited.

"Matilda!" she said. "We've seen a porpoise! It came quite close to the pier-head. Such a size! I saw it distinctly. It dived and dived, and turned right over in the water. I wish you'd seen it. Such an enormous fish."

"A porpoise can hardly be said to be a fish," interposed the Rev. Mr. Barlow, blandly explanatory; "it pertains to the mammalia, and breathes atmospheric air, although it permanently resides in the sea. It carries with it, as it were, a reservoir of blood, which is renovated by the atmospheric air,

and is passed into the system as required. Hence it is able to dive and remain a long time under water."

"Thank you, Mr. Barlow," said Miss Milner. "How interesting! I've never seen a porpoise. I'm *so* sorry I missed it. But I was busy chatting to Frank. I should *so* like to have seen it."

"She saw something more rare," Mr. Hobson said to himself; "something better worth looking at. She saw me making love, or making a fool of myself. It's the same thing. I wish Barlow was a porpoise, and would dive, and would stay a long time under water; a very long time. In fact, till I gave him leave to come up again."

Just then a gentleman passed the group, and took off his hat politely to Miss Milner. Frank Hobson recognised the gentleman; it was his elderly friend of the Royal and the railway.

"I didn't know that you knew Mr. Blatherwick, Matilda," he said.

"Do *you* know him? But, of course, lawyers all know each other. He was poor papa's solicitor, and has been very kind and attentive. But I don't know what brings him down to Beachville."

It might have been fancy. But it seemed to Mr. Hobson that his cousin was somewhat disconcerted at

the appearance of Mr. Blatherwick at Beachville. Was *she* the wonderful woman of business of whom the old solicitor had been speaking? Was *she* the lady-client who was stated to possess such a keen eye for her own interests, and to know so well “what was what” in money matters?

“Let us take another turn up the pier,” she said. “I’m so fond of this march from the ‘Prophète.’ Sophy dear, I don’t know whether you know it, but your hair’s dreadfully untidy at the back.”

Thereupon Miss Milner busied herself in remedying her friend’s untidiness. The gentlemen stood apart meanwhile, with vague notions as to what it behoved them to say to each other.

“Well, Barlow,” said Mr. Hobson.

“Well, Hobson,” said Mr. Barlow.

Then there was a pause. “Now we’re ready,” said Miss Milner. And they walked again up the pier. This time Mr. Hobson found himself by the side of Miss Brown. He had a great deal to say to her about—the porpoise and other matters.

They again met Mr. Blatherwick, who again bowed to Miss Milner, nodding to Mr. Hobson. Then they left the pier, and went towards Miss Hobson’s in Belle Vue Lawn.

CHAPTER XVII.

MR. BARLOW IS WANTED.

MR. BARLOW was engaged to dine at Miss Hobson's; as he approached Belle Vue Lawn, however, a letter was presented to him. In the bearer of the missive Frank Hobson recognised the "boots" of the Royal Hotel. Mr. Barlow stopped to open and read the letter: he had been informed that an answer was expected. His face flushed a little as he read. He turned to the messenger: "Say, *I'll come*," he said; "that's the answer: *I'll come*." And then he turned to Miss Milner and begged her to convey his sincere apologies to her aunt; he was suddenly prevented from availing himself of Miss Hobson's kind invitation to dinner; he was most unexpectedly summoned to attend to a matter of business; he was very sorry to be compelled, so abruptly too, to deny himself the pleasure of dining at Miss Hobson's, but he had really no alternative; the circumstances were pecu-

liar, and so—Mr. Barlow, bowing, lifted his hat to the ladies—Mr. Hobson's presence he seemed to lose sight of altogether—and went his way somewhat hurriedly.

"What *can* have happened?" exclaimed Miss Milner; and then she tried to look as if she were not in the least curious on the subject of Mr. Barlow's sudden departure. "Some sick person has probably sent for him," she added, with a grave air; "a clergyman's time is *never* his own: he has to hold himself *altogether* at the disposal of his parishioners."

Mr. Hobson had his own views: but these he forebore to express openly. "It's my belief Barlow arranged this beforehand; the thing's a plant; he wanted to shirk the talk with me after dinner." So thought Frank Hobson.

Miss Hobson notified quietly and composedly her regret that they were deprived of the pleasure of Mr. Barlow's company at dinner. But, of course, the thing could not be helped. Ministers of the Gospel were liable to be sent for in that sudden way. Altogether they had been fortunate in having so frequently enjoyed Mr. Barlow's society without interruption. And Miss Hobson repeated her convictions that Mr. Barlow was a very charming young man,

and that she had a high opinion of him. She then dismissed the topic, and took her seat at the dinner-table.

Miss Milner ventured to hope that they might yet see Mr. Barlow in the course of the evening: probably about tea time. She felt sure that he would rejoin them if he possibly could; he was always so kind and considerate—was he not, Sophy? Miss Brown, meekly acquiescent, said, “Oh, yes; certainly he was—very kind and considerate.”

Mr. Hobson held his peace. It seemed to him that quite enough had been said in laudation of Barlow, and in lamentation over his absence.

Miss Hobson, her chaplain non-attending, said grace, without appealing to Mr. Hobson to perform that duty. It was in keeping with her sentiments concerning the corrupt and benighted nature of man generally, that she should hold that only women and the clergy (whom she regarded—unconsciously adopting Sidney Smith’s principle—as a sort of distinct species) were acquainted with appropriate forms of prayer before meat, and that reference on such a subject to her nephew, a male, a barrister, and of course, therefore, a pagan and an outer barbarian, would be painfully absurd and supererogatory. During dinner

Miss Milner was somewhat silent and abstracted. Miss Brown was more than ordinarily lively and talkative. She furnished Miss Hobson with information concerning the porpoise seen from the pier-head. Miss Hobson condescended to take a mild interest in the porpoise; and felt in some measure indebted to that creature for having kindly exhibited itself, without charge, for the amusement and edification of her visitor.

"How very much better Sophy's looking for her stay at Beachville," Miss Hobson exclaimed. "I never saw a girl so much improved. The air of Beachville is certainly very restorative. She's really wonderfully improved."

Matilda Milner said "wonderfully;" somewhat vaguely echoing her aunt's opinion. In truth she had not been listening very attentively. Mr. Hobson, although he sincerely thought Miss Brown looked very nice, hardly felt at liberty to say so. Upon the question of improvement he was not qualified to speak. He had not seen Miss Brown on her first appearance at Beachville. Since he had enjoyed the pleasure of seeing her, he held that there had really been no room for improvement; except in this respect: that the charm of her aspect was certainly

enhanced when she blushed. And she was blushing now; what else could she do, as the eyes of the company fell upon her to appraise, as it were, the benefits she had derived from the sun and sea-breezes of Beachville? It seemed to Frank Hobson that he had never contemplated a prettier object than Sophy Brown blushing.

Dinner over, Mogford placed dessert upon the table; and presently the ladies withdrew, and left Mr. Hobson alone with the decanters. After a glass or two taken in solitude, and with self-communing, he went up into the drawing-room. Then came tea, and the opening of the piano. Miss Brown performed *Il bacio* very deftly. An attempt was made at the duet from "Semiramide;" but Miss Milner stopped in the middle of it with petulant abruptness: so Mr. Hobson deemed. "Certainly Matilda has got a temper," he said to himself.

"I can't sing to night; I'm quite out of voice," she explained, somewhat snappishly. "It's no use asking me." Mr. Hobson had been urging her to a new effort. At his solicitation Miss Brown then sang alone, a simple ballad of the pattern dear to Madame Sainton-Dolby, and which that charming artiste has therefore made beloved by a large public.

Miss Brown acquitted herself very happily, and earned well-merited plaudits from Mr. Hobson and his aunt. Thereupon Matilda Milner suddenly found her voice, and without waiting to be asked, sat down to the piano and screamed off a showy, shrill, brilliant bravura by Verdi. She looked very grand at the piano, with her massive white throat thrown well back for the effectual ejaculation of her high notes.

"She's a fine woman is Matilda," thought Frank Hobson. "There's a good deal of the peacock about her, though: especially in regard to her voice; and when she gets to the top of the scale, I can't help thinking of the express train whistling at the tunnels." Still he proffered his cousin profuse thanks.

"Mr. Barlow won't be here now," observed Miss Hobson.

"Perhaps he's been obliged to go to the Rectory," suggested Miss Brown. "Mrs. Blenkinsop may have wanted him to audit the accounts of the Dorcas Fund."

How *can* you say so, Sophy?" demanded Matilda Milner; "you know he *never* goes to the Rectory on Saturday nights."

“ Putting the finishing touches to his sermon for to-morrow, perhaps,” said Frank Hobson.

“ Mr. Barlow makes it a rule to complete his sermon by Friday night *invariably*,” Miss Milner explained, tartly.

“ Very proper of Barlow,” said Frank Hobson, with perhaps needless levity of tone. And then he bade the ladies good night and departed. He lighted a cigar and strolled upon the parade.

“ Somehow I don’t make way with Matilda,” he meditated. And he could not help contrasting the activity of his resolutions in town with the torpor of his sentiments at Beachville. “ I seem to like her ever so much better when I’m away from her,” he said to himself. “ I suppose ‘ absence makes my heart grow fonder,’ as the song says. When I’m in New Square it seems a comparatively easy thing to make love to Matilda, and marry her, and share her fortune ; but down here it’s ever so much more difficult ; and I’m always saying things I oughtn’t to, and rather snubbing her than not. Certainly, I don’t make way with her. That was a creditable attempt of mine on the pier ; though, of course it failed miserably. She doesn’t care for me, that’s the fact. Surely I made my meaning clear enough.

But she wouldn't see it; turned the thing off; stopped me very neatly, I must own. And then Barlow and Sophy Brown came up, and my chance was over. Ah! if Sophy Brown only stood in Matilda Milner's shoes, how very much more easy the whole business would be! I could make love to Sophy Brown with the greatest pleasure in life. I could go down on my knees to her. I really believe I could commit any folly for that girl. But, of course, I mustn't do any thing of the sort; it would be sheer madness. And I don't yet despair of winning Matilda. It's unlucky my not liking her a little more than I do: it would help me on ever so much more. But I'll have another shy at the thing. I won't give in yet. And I'll take care that she doesn't misunderstand me next time. There shall be no escape for her; no mistake about my meaning. I'll write to her, a plain and deliberate declaration; and I'll find an opportunity of slipping the letter into her hand. That's what I'll do. She *must* give me an answer then; and I shall get the business settled and off my mind. I'll go to the Royal, and write the letter at once."

The coffee-room was empty. Mr. Hobson called for pen, ink, and paper, and set to work upon his

letter. He made two or three attempts before he could satisfy himself as to the best form to be adopted. "It must be very plain and simple; and yet there must be a dash of sentiment about it, too. Women always like a dash of sentiment," mused Mr. Hobson. "Even though they may not quite believe in its sincerity, still they like to see it in a letter offering marriage. It's due to their sex. Business is business, and marriage is business; but still they hold that sentiment, or a semblance of sentiment, ought to preface marriage. I mustn't overdo it in the sentimental line, either, or Matilda will be bound to see through it; the sham will be too palpable. She's a very sensible woman, is Matilda. But, then, it is always so difficult to make love to these very sensible women. One never quite knows where their sensibleness ends and their-folly begins; how far to give them credit for being matter-of-fact; how much to rely upon that matter-of-fiction which they all possess somewhere *au fond*. Come, I think this is reasonably tender, and yet good common sense, too," and he read over to himself a rough draft of his letter; made a few verbal changes, and then neatly copied and folded it up. "I'll give her this some time to morrow," he said. And then he

added, after a pause, "I wish to goodness that I loved her a little more than I do—and than I've said that I do—I shouldn't feel such an impostor and swindler. However, I don't suppose I'm any worse than hundreds of other men who make love and get married." And he contented himself with that customary consolation of the sinner—that if he was doing wrong, plenty of his fellows had done the same before him, and plenty more would do the same after him.

"I wonder what's become of old Blatherwick tonight?" he said. "I haven't seen him since he bowed to Matilda on the pier." And then he went to bed.

He was late on the following morning. He entered the coffee-room for breakfast as Mr. Blatherwick was going forth, having completed that meal. The two gentlemen simply interchanged greetings, and parted.

After breakfast, Mr. Hobson attended service at St. Jude's. As was usual on Sunday mornings, Mr. Barlow, the curate, read prayers; Mr. Blenkinsop, the incumbent, preached. Coming out of church, Mr. Hobson met his aunt, his cousin, and Miss Brown.

"Good morning, Frank; I'm glad you've found your way to St. Jude's again," said Miss Hobson.

She could not resist a feeling of satisfaction at the unlooked-for propriety of her nephew's conduct. "It was very warm in church." Miss Hobson always found it warm in church, and resorted to her smelling-salts constantly throughout the service. "I think poor Mr. Barlow suffered from the heat."

Frank Hobson said it had struck him that Barlow was more subdued than ordinary.

Miss Brown thought he had looked decidedly pale.

Miss Milner was silent. Her manner was dignified, but cold. She seemed disinclined for conversation, and her brows were lowered, as though oppressed by thought or ill-humour.

Frank Hobson addressed her once or twice tentatively, to draw her into conversation. Her answers were monosyllabic, discouraging. "Certainly," he said to himself, "I mustn't hand her my offer of marriage in her present mood. I must wait until she's in a better temper." He had in his breast-pocket the letter he had written over-night.

"I don't think you'll be able to get so far as Puffin Head this afternoon, Frank," said Miss Hobson, contemplating the skies. "It looks very threatening."

"Oh, we must manage a walk of some kind before dinner," said Frank, cheerily. "It will hold up until

night, I think. What do you say, Matilda? Will you venture?"

"No, thank you. It's certain to rain. Besides, I never walk on Sundays."

"Matilda needn't be quite so waspish about it, at any rate," thought Frank Hobson. He turned to Miss Brown.

"What do you say to a walk, Miss Brown?"

Miss Brown said simply that she should like it of all things; and she didn't think the weather looked so very bad; and they needn't go so very far, and could take an umbrella.

"Oh, certainly," said Frank Hobson, "we'll take an umbrella."

"That light dress of yours will spot dreadfully in the rain, Sophy dear," observed Miss Milner.

Miss Brown said that, if that was all, she could easily change her dress. "Very well parried, Sophy Brown," thought Mr. Hobson.

"Go, if you wish it, Sophy dear, by all means," said Miss Hobson, amiably, "if you're really not afraid of the weather. I daresay you would like to make the most of your time at Beachville. With Matilda, of course, it's different. For myself, as you know, I'm at all times a very poor walker; and on

Sunday I make it a rule not to leave the house except to go to church. Not that I think there's any harm in walking on a Sunday: of course not. But at a place like Beachville one is obliged to be so particular. It's so very important that a good example should be set by the residents. I wouldn't venture so far as Puffin Head to-day, I think, Frank. If it *should* rain, you know, there's no shelter whatever to be obtained on Puffin Head; and the wind will be too high up there to hold an umbrella, and you'll get wet through. But it's very pretty along the Prawnford Road, and you'll be sheltered by the cliff a great part of the way. It's a very nice walk, you'll find, if you've never been there. It's rather a favourite drive of mine: along the Prawnford Road as far as the turnpike, and then home."

So, having changed her dress, Sophy Brown, the lowering sky notwithstanding, set forth with Mr. Hobson for a walk along the pleasant road towards Prawnford. Miss Milner had looked disapproval of the plan in the first instance. Afterwards she appeared to have dismissed the subject from her mind—washed her hands of her cousin and Miss Brown. Still she went now and then to the drawing-room window of the house in Belle Vue Lawn and con-

sidered the weather: with an inclination, perhaps, to pray inwardly for rain.

"I think the wind will keep the rain off," Frank Hobson said to his companion, as they walked on.

Miss Brown was breasting the wind gallantly; and it was blowing strongly down the Prawnford Road. There was a bright colour in her cheeks, in her eyes; and the brown tresses were growing mutinous, breaking away from their moorings, as it were, and straying wantonly hither and thither in the breeze. Still she struggled on determinedly. She wouldn't succumb to the frolicsome, turbulent gale.

"It's quite as well we didn't attempt Puffin Head," she said, laughingly. "The wind's so high I really think I should have been blown over the cliff out to sea."

"We shall find it more sheltered round the next headland," observed Mr. Hobson. And then he said to himself, "Tommy may say as much as he likes about the feet of the Widow Smith on the pier at Boulogne. It strikes me it would be difficult to find a neater ankle than Sophy Brown's." Of course the wind was disturbing Miss Brown's skirts; and Mr. Hobson was a man of observation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALONG THE PRAWNFORD ROAD.

A PRETTY woman, healthily flushed with struggling against the wind, is an agreeable and interesting object. She is possessed by a good-humoured sense of affording, against her will, some measure of amusement to the bystander: the while she wears a charming deprecatory expression, which seems to say, plagiarising from Sterne a little, "Don't laugh at me. Yet if you will, you may." She enjoys being the source of entertainment: yet is conscious that it is a little too much at her own expense. She occasions the diversion: yet altogether has a less share in its pleasure than the inactive lookers-on.

Frank Hobson shielded Miss Brown as well as he could from the wind. "I'm afraid it's almost too high to be pleasant to you," he said.

"Oh, I quite enjoy it," she answered, bravely, with a charming glow in her face.

Round the headland, as Mr. Hobson had foreseen, they found their way more sheltered—could proceed at their ease, talk with more comfort, without fear of half their words being carried out to sea by the wind.

"Do you return to town to-morrow, Mr. Hobson?" asked Miss Brown.

Mr. Hobson was afraid he must quit Beachville by an early train on the morrow.

"I'm going back on Wednesday by the twelve o'clock train," said Sophy Brown.

"What! are you already tired of Beachville?" he inquired.

"Oh, no; but Beachville may grow tired of me. I've been here some weeks now, and, of course, I mustn't outstay my welcome. Miss Hobson has been very good to me; but still I feel that I've no right to tax her kindness too severely."

"Oh, I'm sure my aunt doesn't feel it in the least as a tax," said Mr. Hobson. "I'm sure she'll not permit you to hurry away." Possibly in the confusion of the moment Mr. Hobson attributed his own views to his aunt—credited her with more enthusiasm on the subject of Miss Brown's sojourn in Beachville than strictly pertained to her. Clearly he was acting without warrant on her behalf. "My aunt must be

only too pleased at having you with her. How can she help being so?"

Sophy Brown laughed and blushed a little at this. "Miss Hobson is kindness itself; but still, you know, I can't stop at Beachville for ever; and I've been talking it over with Matilda, and she quite agrees with me——"

("Oh! Matilda's at the bottom of this, is she?" Frank Hobson said to himself.)

——"That for many reasons," Miss Brown continued, "it is advisable I should bring my visit to a close shortly. You see I've my own way to make in the world; and of course that makes me a little anxious. Not that I'm at all frightened; but I shall feel more satisfied when I've broken the ice and made a beginning. The sooner the first step's taken, you know, the sooner it will be over, and the better I shall be pleased. And Matilda is going to give me a letter to present in Harley Street.

"What's Harley Street got to do with it?"

"Oh, the Governesses' Institution is in Harley Street. They keep a list of vacant situations there; they require letters of introduction and recommendation. I daresay I shall find something to suit me there. Of course, I shall not be very difficult to

please. In fact, I mustn't be: for it will be my first situation, and there is generally some little trouble about a first situation. People lay so much stress upon experience, and object to engage a governess who hasn't been out before."

"A governess has rather a hard time of it, though, hasn't she?" asked Mr. Hobson, with a meditative air.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Miss Brown answered, cheerfully. "I suppose we all have our troubles. Perhaps a governess is no worse off than plenty of others. At any rate, that's the best view to take of it. Of course, she has her duty to do, and the more thoroughly she does it, why the happier she is. And it must be better to have one's duty clearly defined for one, as a governess has, than to have to make it out for one's self—as happens to people who have plenty of money and nothing to do. I don't think happiness depends much upon station in life; and I'm sure occupation's as good for women as for men. I never could bear to sit idle with my hands before me; it's quite as well, perhaps; for now I've to stir myself and earn my living; and so, I go out as a governess. I shall be happy enough. Of course, children are often very tiresome and trouble-

some; but then, again, they're often very good; and always amusing. I'm very fond of children; and somehow I always manage to make friends with them. I've no doubt I shall get on well enough. But I declare I've been making quite a long speech about myself; I forgot how uninteresting it must all be to you, Mr. Hobson." And Miss Brown looked a little confused and apologetic, and prettier than ever.

Frank Hobson assured her that he found it all exceedingly interesting. So she was induced to prattle a little more—not much—about her future plans: her companion listening the while, and admiring, with exceeding respect. "What a brave little soul it is!" he said to himself. He was impressed by the contrast between Miss Brown's timidity of manner,—which was every now and then compelling her to hesitate and pause in her speech, setting her heart beating quickly, or bringing a flush of colour into her cheeks,—and the real courage which seemed to animate her in regard to the most important transactions of life. "She's going forth to fight a hard fight with that big giant, the world, and she isn't a bit afraid!" And then his own despondency and doubt concerning his future well-doing seemed to him a little shameful by the

side of Miss Brown's bravery. "Great hulking beast that I am!" he said. "I'm a coward, and not fit to hold a candle to this little girl at my side. I want to skulk out of the battle of life and shelter myself behind the petticoats of an heiress. To get out of the way of risk I want to sell myself to Matilda Milner. I ought to be ashamed of myself!" For a moment it occurred to him that possibly Miss Brown's courage might in some measure be due to want of knowledge: that she wasn't afraid of the world because in truth her acquaintance with it was very limited. But he declined to derive consolation so unworthily: he preferred to regard himself contemptuously rather than to rescind in any way his admiration of Sophy Brown's fortitude.

"Dear me! I'm afraid it's coming on to rain."

"What a nuisance!" said Mr. Hobson. "Yes; the wind's going down. We shall hardly get back without a shower."

Presently it was necessary for him to unfurl the umbrella, and to hold it, in spite of her protests, at an angle that afforded as much protection as possible to Miss Brown.

"You'll get dreadfully wet," she said.

"I rather like getting wet," he replied, extravagantly.

Yet the rain, notwithstanding Mr. Hobson's situation, was by no means disagreeable. Sophy Brown's arm was under his. They kept close together, so that each might have all advantage possible of the shelter of the umbrella. He had, of course, offered to abandon it altogether to her. But this she had declined resolutely. It was only fair, she said, that they should share it between them. Besides, she alleged, the wind was still was so high that she could not hold up the umbrella without assistance; she was always rather weak in the wrists. So they advanced: above them the dome of the umbrella, tremulous from the wind, the rain pattering upon its silken sides. The shelter was ineffectual; yet in a way it seemed sufficiently to sever them from the rest of the world—to set them apart. They were as fellow-sufferers, brought together by a common misfortune. Sympathy was established between them; and that sort of fellow-feeling which we are told makes us wondrous kind. Mr. Hobson was conscious that he had never liked Miss Brown so much as when she took his arm, and they struggled on together against the bad weather under the umbrella. At one moment, indeed, he found himself possessed by an inclination to speak to her confidentially on

the subject of his liking for her; but as he pressed his arm against his side, of course pressing her hand with it unavoidably, he felt and heard something crackling. He then remembered that in his breast-pocket he had placed the letter he had written overnight, offering marriage to Matilda Milner. He was somewhat ashamed. The sentiments he entertained in regard to Miss Brown were strikingly inconsistent with the expressions of affection for Miss Milner contained in the undelivered letter. He did not press his arm against his side any more; his manner changed a little; lost its air of tenderness and incipient devotion; and he began to converse with his companion in rather a cowed sort of way, upon quite indifferent topics. If Miss Brown perceived this alteration she refrained from making any comment concerning it.

"I was *quite sure* it was going to rain. You must have got *dreadfully* wet, Sophy. It was really *very* imprudent of you to go. And you'll *never* be able to wear that bonnet any more. How *could* you, Frank, think of going so far?" It was thus Miss Milner received them on their return to Belle Vue Lawn.

(“What an acidulated style of speaking Matilda’s

taken up with. Positively, I'm beginning to hate the woman.")

But, of course, Mr. Hobson kept that observation to himself. And, moreover, he didn't choose that moment for tendering to Miss Milner the letter he had in his pocket, offering his hand and heart.

Miss Hobson expressed some apprehension lest her guest should have caught cold from her walk in the rain from the Prawnford Road. Sophy Brown, however, changed her dress, and seemed none the worse for her wetting. Contrary to advice, indeed, she persisted in accompanying Matilda Milner to church in the evening: Miss Milner remonstrating with her somewhat warmly on the imprudence of so doing. "I really think it's quite foolish of you, Sophy," said Miss Milner, "after getting so *very* wet in the afternoon. I can't *think* what makes you so obstinate about it." It almost seemed as though Miss Milner had some pressing reason for desiring that her friend should *not* go to church. Sophy Brown answered simply, however, that she always liked to go to church on Sunday evenings, and intended to go on the present occasion. After that there was nothing more to be said.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCERNING MATRIMONY AND OTHER MATTERS.

LATER in the evening Mr. Hobson was in the coffee-room of the Royal Hotel. There he found Mr. Blatherwick, stirring up a strong tumbler of brown brandy-and-water.

“How are you?” quoth Mr. Blatherwick. “I got caught in the rain this afternoon; wet to the skin, sir; obliged to take a little of *this* by way of precaution.” As Mr. Blatherwick said *this*, he raised his tumbler to his lips, retaining it there some time. This sort of apology for recourse to his favourite form of stimulant, was perhaps rather a superfluous proceeding on the part of Mr. Blatherwick. Probably he would have been found similarly occupied even if he had not been caught in the rain. It was not his wont to find excuses for his glass; for he held, doubtless, that just as good wine proverbially needs no bush, so hot brown brandy-and-water requires no excuse. But greater men than Mr. Blatherwic

have their moments of weakness, when, however steadfast in their opinions and principles, they yield to the force of antagonistic views, and condescend to vindication and apology.

“ Won’t you do as I do?” said Mr. Blatherwick. “ I’m not a leveller generally ; but I rather like equality in drinking. I find I can’t get on with a man who loiters and gets behind with his tumbler. Let’s have even drinking, that’s what I say ; and plenty of it.”

Thus urged, Frank Hobson gave orders for a supply of brandy-and-water : Mr. Blatherwick nodding approval of that arrangement. For a few moments they stirred their glasses in concert and in silence.

“ That was a pretty-looking girl I saw you walking with,” said Mr. Blatherwick suddenly, winking his eye.

“ Do you mean yesterday, on the pier ? That was my cousin, Miss Milner.”

“ I don’t mean *her*. I know Miss Milner ; and a fine woman she is too ; and a clever one ; though I didn’t know she was your cousin. No ; I mean the little girl you were walking with along the Prawnford Road this afternoon.”

"Were you walking that way? I didn't see you."

"Too busily occupied," and Mr. Blatherwick winked again, and smiled cunningly. "You'd got your heads very close together under that umbrella. I wouldn't swear you weren't kissing."

"No, I assure you——"

"More fool you, then. It's my belief, speaking as a single man however—still as one who's lived a good many years in the world and seen something of life,—that in certain situations,—especially in such a one as I saw you in this afternoon,—a woman expects to be kissed, and takes it rather hard if she isn't. That's my view of it; and at your age I know I should have acted accordingly. Not a doubt about it. Particularly if I'd been in your place; under the same umbrella with that trim little wench." And Mr. Blatherwick looked very roguish indeed.

Frank Hobson didn't altogether approve of his admired Sophy Brown being designated a "trim little wench;" but finally consented to accept the observation as being inoffensive in intention, and pertaining legitimately to that old school of thought and conduct favoured by Mr. Blatherwick.

“ A very trim little wench,” repeated Mr. Blatherwick, musingly, wholly unconscious that his phrase was in any way exceptionable; “ with a remarkably neat ankle. Thank heaven I’m not too old a man to admire a neat ankle when I see one! I find, indeed, something very satisfactory and comforting about the sight of a neat ankle. In my young days the women wore sandals, and showed a good deal of stocking. I remember I used to think it a very elegant sort of arrangement; and yet I like, too, the neat boots and high heels of the present day: they’re sensible, and lift a woman well out of the mud. And one doesn’t see the splashed stockings one used to. They were certainly a dreadful exhibition. Yes, that was a very trim little wench you had with you under the umbrella.” And then, after a pause, he resumed: “ Am I to congratulate you? You know what I mean. Did you come to a right understanding with her? Is the thing all settled between you?”

“ Well, really——” began Frank Hobson.

“ I see, I see; I ought not to ask such questions—not parliamentary without giving notice—no business of mine, and so on. You’re not a witness undergoing examination, are you? No, of course not. You may fairly decline to answer such questions as

that? Of course you may. I offer my apologies. Only this I will say: I think if I were in your place *I'd risk it*. That's the advice of an old bachelor of advanced age. If my time were to come over again, I should do differently to what I have done. I should risk it. I always think of the advice the sage in the story is said to have given to the young man who asked him whether he counselled marriage or celibacy. 'Whichever you choose,' said the sage, 'you'll regret it.' The story isn't true, I daresay; and yet there's something in it. Only I don't quite agree with the sage. My advice is: '*risk it*.' That's what I should have told the young man. I wish I'd risked it myself. But I let the chance go. My advice to you is to 'risk it,' and don't let all your chances go. In other words: don't be too particular. You won't—at least *I* never did—meet the kind of woman who'll suit you *exactly*. There's always something about them you don't quite like, and would rather have altered if you could; only of course you can't. Well, then, I say: you must give way a little, and not be too particular. Take the nearest you can get to the sort of thing you want, and be satisfied. Did you ever see a woman at a shop trying to match wools? It's a lesson. She

never finds the precise shade she wants; it's not to be got. So she takes the nearest. 'It will work in very well with the rest, I dare say,' she says, 'and no one will be able to detect the difference.' It's just the same with choosing a wife. You see a number of married couples about in the world who seem to rub on together very fairly. Depend upon it, however, they didn't match very fairly together in the first instance. Between some of them I should say there were many shades of difference to begin with. Still they've been worked in together, and worn alike, and agree together very tolerably upon the whole. Depend upon it, it all comes right in the end. In fact, I notice things generally do come right in the end, if you only give them fair play. May I trouble you to ring the bell? It's in the corner, close behind you. Thank you. Waiter! some more brandy."

Having expressed his sentiments concerning marriage, Mr. Blatherwick proceeded to discuss other topics.

"I suppose you know that chap Barlow?" he said, later in the evening. "George Barlow his name is; he's curate at St. Jude's—I think that's the name of the church. I saw he was with your party on the pier yesterday."

"Oh yes, I know Barlow very well," said Frank Hobson. "I knew him a little, years ago, at the university. But I lost sight of him afterwards, until I came down here the other day, found he'd taken orders, and renewed my acquaintance with him."

"Ah! he's a queer card, is the Reverend George Barlow," said Mr. Blatherwick. Frank Hobson laughed. He was not indisposed to admit that the Reverend George Barlow was "a queer card."

"I don't mind telling you, quite between ourselves, that my coming down to Beachville this time had something to do with the Reverend George Barlow."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You see I don't like to deal too severely with a parson. They haven't a very lively time of it altogether, parsons haven't. And I've an enormous respect for the Church; enormous, by Jove! Church and State—that's what I go in for, hot and strong. (Won't you have another tumbler?) I'd always rather go out of my way than not, to serve a clergyman. But still, of course, a lawyer must obey his instructions; and he's bound to look sharply after his clients' interests. So with all my desire to do

the best for Barlow, I was compelled to press him, and to keep him rather tightly in hand. I represent one of his principal creditors. He's a good many of them, I'm afraid, poor fellow. I thought it best therefore to see Barlow for myself, and have it out with him. Writing's no good in these cases. A fellow when he's pressed will promise anything; we all know that. And Barlow's rather a good hand at promising, and writing long rigmarole appealing letters, which, of course, are not a bit of good in a matter of business. Parsons and women never seem to be able to understand that. So I had Barlow down here in a private room last night, and we went all through his affairs. I'm bound to say they're in a tremendous mess. It seems to me he's never been clear since he came of age. He must certainly have 'gone the pace' at the university."

"Yes; he was always *in* with rather an expensive set, I remember."

"However, he's a changed man, *now*, he tells me—turned over quite a new leaf. Men generally do turn over new leaves, I notice, when all their money's gone. He talked rather grand at first; spoke of his uncle, Lord Stoneacre, and of his expectations in that quarter. But I wouldn't have *that* at any price.

I knew *that* was all rubbish. I know all about Lord Stoneacre; no one knows more about him. He's not worth a rap; and if he was, Barlow wouldn't have it. Stoneacre's got children of his own; and after all, Barlow is only his nephew by marriage. I soon shut him up about Lord Stoneacre. He was quieter after that; and grew quite humble and penitent before I'd done with him. It's not a very bright look-out altogether. Still, I should be sorry to deal severely with Barlow. I don't believe there's any real harm in the fellow; he'd pay if he could; but if he hasn't got the money why of course he can't. I don't at all want to press him: but the danger is, of course, that his other creditors may be less forbearing. He says he can make it all right if we only give him *time*; it's only *time* he wants, he says; but then that's what they all say. And then—he was very plain and frank with me altogether, I must say—he spoke of an advantageous match he was on the point of making."

"He spoke of that, did he?"

"What! You've heard of it, then? Curates make very lucky marriages sometimes. And, altogether, it would be about the very best thing Barlow could do. It would be the making of him; and

would be exceedingly satisfactory to his creditors.”

“Did he mention the lady’s name?” Frank Hobson asked, somewhat eagerly.

“Well, no, he didn’t,” Mr. Blatherwick replied rather drily. He waited a moment or two, sipping his brandy-and-water; then he resumed. “Of course, strictly speaking, I ought not to be letting out the secrets of the prison-house in this way. But I look upon you as a kind of brother professional man. I know I’m safe with you. And I had another motive—I may as well be plain with you—I’ll tell you what I wanted to know: you can give me information or not, just as you please. It happens I’ve another client down here—I mentioned the fact to you once before. That client is a lady. You know her.”

“Miss Milner?”

“Precisely; Miss Milner—your cousin as it turns out. Now it has occurred to me, from one or two things that have come to my knowledge—“from ‘information I’ve received,’ as the policemen say—that the advantageous match referred to by our friend Barlow has something to do with——”

“Miss Milner?” Frank Hobson suggested again.

“Exactly; your cousin and my client. Now what

do you think of it? that's what I want to know. You're behind the scenes a little; you know both parties—so do I, for that matter, but not as *you* do. Miss Milner is my client only; she isn't my cousin. You're likely to be well-informed, if you care to give information. Don't, if you don't like to. I'm speaking to a man of business and a barrister, who knows his way about without requiring anybody to lead or drive him. Now then, what do you say?—is there anything in it?"

"If Barlow marries Matilda Milner——" Frank Hobson began—and then he paused.

"He'll catch a Tartar. I know that very well. But that isn't what I want to know. Is he likely to marry her? Has he any chance? Would she have him if he asked her to? Has he asked her to? Do you know anything about it at all? Is there anything in it?"

Frank Hobson mused a little before he answered. He couldn't help considering the matter in question in its relation to himself.

"Suppose I were to say, I didn't think there was anything in it?" he suggested at last.

"You want to know the effect of your answer?" said Mr. Blatherwick, winking. "Well, that seems

only fair and prudent. But I can't tell you exactly what would happen in such a case. But probably—mind, I only say *probably*—if I were to find that Barlow wasn't dealing fairly with me—was attempting to put me off with a fabulous story about an advantageous match—I think I should be justified in recommending his creditor, my client,—in point of fact—to *lock him up!*”

Was there anything in it? Frank Hobson asked himself. And as to his own views in regard to Matilda Milner—had he yet abandoned them? Well, he could hardly be said to have abandoned them; seeing that it was only on the previous evening he had penned a letter to his cousin, proposing marriage; seeing that although he had not yet found an opportunity for handing her that letter, he still carried it about him in his breast pocket ready for delivery—could even now hear it crackle as he pressed his arm against it. No; clearly he had not abandoned his views in the least in regard to Matilda Milner.

Was there anything in it? he asked himself again. Rather was there not something in it? something mysterious about Matilda's manner—something curious about Barlow's? There was no distinct

evidence in the case, certainly. But might there not be a reasonable suspicion that some sort of understanding had been arrived at between them? Might not Barlow have good grounds for speaking of his "advantageous match," arising out of occurrences beyond the knowledge of Mr. Hobson? And then he thought, smiling as he did so, of the night when, after an excessive consumption of brandy-and-water in the company of Mr. Blatherwick, he had, in his inebriety, compelled Mr. Barlow to decide by tossing which of them should marry Matilda Milner. "She fell to my share," thought Mr. Hobson; "and Sophy Brown fell to Barlow's. What an insane business it was! What must he have thought of me! I suppose he hasn't let that stand in his way: with all his old love of sport, and betting, and fair play. For that matter I am afraid I haven't let it stand much in *my* way either. For if Sophy Brown is to be considered as Barlow's property, it strikes me that he may consider I have been a trifle too attentive to her." And then it occurred to him that, still entertaining views in regard to Miss Milner, it was decidedly inconvenient to him to have Barlow also paying his addresses in the same quarter. "He's on the spot all the week; while I can only come down from Saturday

to Monday. That gives him an enormous advantage. And now I can put him out of the way. I've only to tell Blatherwick that I don't believe there's anything in it, and he'd have 'betting Barlow' locked up! It would be a grand *coup*; though I'm afraid it would be rather shabby." He pondered over the notion for a few moments.

"Well, what do you say?" inquired Mr. Blatherwick.

"I can't quite make up my mind," Frank Hobson answered evasively. "I think I must defer giving an answer. I should like to consider the matter well first."

"What! *you want time*, too, do you?" and Mr. Blatherwick laughed loudly. "Very well. There's no hurry. Are you going back to town to-morrow?"

"Well, I've some notion this week of staying until Wednesday morning."

"Stay by all means. Do you good. Wish I could stay too. Saturday to Monday is hardly enough change for a man. And you'll have that charming young lady to walk about with."

"Miss Milner?" She was the lady last spoken of, and she occupied a prominent place in Frank Hobson's thoughts just at that moment.

"No, not Miss Milner. Not by any means. But the young lady you were walking with along the Prawnford Road, under the umbrella, this afternoon."

"Oh!" said Mr. Hobson. He had actually forgotten all about Sophy Brown!

"What! *You've* never been thinking of Miss Milner, too, have you?" inquired Mr. Blatherwick. And then he laughed exceedingly. "I do believe you have! And you don't know whether she prefers you or Barlow. It's a toss-up between you, in fact!"

This random shot came so dangerously near the mark, that Frank Hobson hastened to change the conversation, and start a new topic. "I see your friend What's-his-name has been making a second speech at Shuttlecombe," he said.

"If you ask my advice—which of course you won't, by the way—you won't have much to say to Miss Milner, while you've a chance of winning that other trim little wench." Having delivered himself of which dictum, Mr. Blatherwick duly rose to the bait his companion had held out to him. "What's that you say about the man What's-his-name? Yes, I see he made another speech yesterday. It's in the Sunday paper. The infamous scoundrel—" and then the old gentleman was fairly launched in a raging

sea of political discussion. He flung about hard names and strong sayings with his customary impetuosity and recklessness. He got regularly into his polemical stride, as it were, and went a-head amazingly: charging his foes, beating down their resistance, giving no quarter and seeking none. He had little notion of compromise. The man who didn't think as he did was an idiot or a villain, and so that matter was settled. He was certainly a despotic old gentleman. But Frank Hobson humoured him; gave him "plenty of line," as he phrased it; permitted him to have his own way; and altogether got on very well with him. They finished their brandy-and-water.

"We'll bring you into the House some day," Mr. Blatherwick said, as he lighted their chamber candles. "I know you'd always be found in the right lobby. Good night. God bless you." And they separated.

CHAPTER XX.

“ I THINK THERE’S SOMETHING IN IT.”

FRANK HOBSON had breakfasted and sauntered out. The morning was very lovely. A blue sky, and a warm sun, and a gentle breeze that crimped and curdled the sea over so tenderly. In tiny breakers the waves broke upon the shore, almost noiselessly : as though it had fallen asleep in the sunshine, and they were loth to disturb its rest. A very day for indolent enjoyment ; for the neglect of what the world might call duty ; for putting care far from one, and leaving business to take care of itself. A day to devote to the goddess Nature ; to bow before her benefactions ; to bask in her beauty ; to repose happily and gratefully at her feet with a sort of animal confidence and fidelity. “ Certainly I can’t go up to town such a day as this ! ” said Frank Hobson ; and he seemed to drink deeply of the glory of the day ; the delights of the draught mounting to his brain. “ New Square, Lincoln’s Inn, was never so hateful to

me as at this moment. What I should like would be to sit on the beach all day, and lazily pitch pebbles into the sea, with a lazy arm round——" he hesitated for a moment, and then added, "round Sophy Brown's waist!" The Sybarite! I really can't forbear calling him names.

Just then Sophy Brown appeared upon the parade. She had books under her arm, and was making her way to the Circulating Library.

"You surely haven't the heart to quit Beachville such a morning as this, Mr. Hobson?" said Sophy Brown.

"No, I haven't the heart." He spoke very deliberately; and held the while the hand Miss Brown had proffered him; held it after he had finished, indeed; altogether a much longer time than there was any occasion for; until Miss Brown seemed to be somewhat inconvenienced by the proceeding.

"Have you seen Matilda this morning?" she asked; probably by way of saying something.

Mr. Hobson said he had not seen Matilda that morning; and said it in a tone that seemed to imply that he had no desire to see Matilda that morning.

"She's somewhere on the parade, or on the beach."

"Looking for 'common objects?'"

"Very likely. Perhaps with Mr. Barlow. Look

through your telescope, and see if you can see anything of her."

Mr. Hobson had brought his telescope with him to Beachville on this occasion—a neat Dollond in a leathern sling case; rather becoming to a morning-suited gentleman at the sea-side. At Miss Brown's bidding he brought his telescope to bear upon Beachville, its neighbourhood and visitors; and swept the horizon and the beach.

"I see nothing of her," he said.

Just then he turned his glass towards Beachville pier—a gracefully-proportioned, light, iron structure, stretching out across the shingle and sand into the sea. At low water it was possible to reach the stone and composition blocks upon which the pier was founded, and to seek there for the curiosities and treasures dear to the collectors of "common objects." Generally, therefore, busy little groups of such collectors were to be seen haunting the foundations of Beachville pier at low water, searching about industriously, with bent frames, reckless concerning the wetting of shoe-leather and the display of hose. It seemed to Mr. Hobson that beneath Beachville pier, a long way off, as near to the sea as she could possibly get, he could perceive Matilda Milner. Yes, certainly that was Matilda Milner's figure! And

close to her was the Reverend Mr. Barlow ! He was assisting her assiduously as she stepped from stone to stone—perhaps too assiduously : for now his arm was round her waist for quite a protracted period, and now—yes !—Mr. Hobson through his Dollond distinctly perceived the Reverend George Barlow kiss Miss Matilda Milner !

Mr. Hobson closed his telescope abruptly, noisily.

“She’s under the pier,” he said to Miss Brown, “and Barlow’s with her. I don’t think they want to be disturbed.”

“I daresay not,” Miss Brown said, with a quiet smile.

Frank Hobson hurried to the Royal Hotel. In the coffee-room he found Mr. Blatherwick.

“I’m off by the 10·40,” said Mr. Blatherwick.

“*I think there’s something in it,*” said Frank Hobson, significantly. “You remember what we were talking about last night ?” Mr. Blatherwick understood him perfectly

“Poor Barlow !” said Mr. Blatherwick. “Let him make his ‘advantageous match.’ I hope all his creditors may follow my example and give him time. But I expect he’ll have to depend upon his wife’s clemency, after all. She’ll hold the purse-strings ;

not a doubt of it. Still, I don't suppose she'll allow him to go to prison—not just yet, at all events. What do you think—I don't mind telling *you*—in strict confidence, of course—what do you think she wanted of me the other day—a month ago—and had of me, too? A form of marriage settlement, in which all the wife's money is settled strictly upon herself—left absolutely at her own control and disposal; and in which, moreover, every penny that may ever come into possession of the husband is to be brought into settlement, too, for the wife's benefit! Depend upon it, if Miss Milner marries Barlow, she'll tie him up hand and foot; and she'll prevent him from ever touching a halfpenny of her money without her consent. Not an enviable position for a husband; is it? To be obliged to ask his wife for half-a-crown if he wants to buy a pair of gloves! Better far to marry a nice woman without a rap. Poor Barlow! What are you tearing up?"

"Only a letter I thought of sending. But I shan't now."

Mr. Hobson was rending into very small pieces the letter he had retained for so many hours in his breast-pocket.

CHAPTER XXI.

DISCLOSURES.

MR. BLATHERWICK duly departed for London. Frank Hobson presently rejoined Miss Brown on the parade. She looked very charming. She had resumed her mermaid aspect. She was fresh from the kiss of the ocean: her hair down streaming, drying in the sun. She had been successful at the Circulating Library, and was deep in a very admirable novel.

“What sort of novels do you like, Miss Brown?” inquired Mr. Hobson. “Novels with love in them?”

“With plenty of love in them,” she answered, laughing.

“Yes, I must say,” remarked Frank Hobson, after a musing pause, “that love is very interesting; especially on such a day as this.”

In the course of the afternoon he found himself

calling her "Sophy" in lieu of Miss Brown as theretofore. And he found himself unrebuked for this change in his method of addressing the lady. It seemed to come naturally to both that he should call her "Sophy." She did not, however, style him "Frank"—as yet.

On the Wednesday Miss Brown brought to an end her stay at Beachville. On the same day Mr. Hobson found it imperatively necessary that he should return to London. Of course they journeyed together: in the second class. "Because it's cheaper," said Sophy Brown, simply.

Mr. Hobson began to wish that they had gone by the Parliamentary train, so that they might have been longer on the road. "The worst of Beachville is, that it's too near London," he said. And presently he added, "I never before thought traveling such a delightful occupation. And I never knew before that the second-class carriages upon this line were so exquisitely comfortable. I'll never go first-class again. As for a light in the carriage, it's quite a mistake."

Quite so, Mr. Hobson, when you have at hand such brilliant lamps as Sophy Brown's eyes.

Mr. Hobson entered his chambers on the base-

ment-floor in New Square, Lincoln's Inn. Somewhat to his surprise he there encountered his friend, Verulam Tomkisson. The two gentlemen interchanged greetings of the simple, informal nature favoured by Englishmen generally.

"Hullo, Tommy! Who'd have thought of seeing you?"

"Hullo, Franky! How *are* you?"

"So you've come back?"

"Yes, I've come back."

"You didn't get so far as the Carpathians, then?"

"No, I didn't get so far as the Carpathians. The fact was, I found it couldn't be done; not for the price."

"Well, you're looking all right. Very brown."

"Yes, thanks. I'm all right. Boulogne's the deuce of a place for getting sun-burnt. *You* don't look much amiss."

"No, I'm not much amiss."

"You've been away, of course?"

"Only to Beachville—off and on—for a few days at a time." And then it did not seem for the moment that the two friends had much more to say to each other. "Well," Frank Hobson resumed, after a pause, "any news?"

"Not much. Only this," said Mr. Tomkisson, somewhat lugubriously: "that I've gone and been and done it this time."

"You don't mean that, Tommy? What—that widow—Smith?"

"The lady whom you are pleased to describe as that widow Smith has consented to become the wife of yours truly." After which important announcement Mr. Tomkisson sighed.

"Well, you don't seem over-cheerful about it, Tommy," remarked Frank Hobson.

"You ought to know—if you don't, you will some day,—that marriage is no joke, Franky. In fact, the more I consider it, the less like a joke it seems to be. Altogether I'm inclined to consider it a deuced responsible business."

"I thought you were equal to any responsibility, Tommy."

"Once I thought so too. That was before I had the pleasure of meeting with Mary Smith." And Mr. Tomkisson sighed again.

"Why, there's nothing wrong, is there? You're not sorry you ever met with Mary Smith?"

"No, there's nothing wrong; not exactly what one would call *wrong*. I'm not sorry that I went to

Boulogne and there met with Mary Smith, if you mean that. Because, of course, I love her." It was not very fervidly spoken, however.

"Then what's the matter? You don't seem yourself."

"I'm not myself. I don't belong to myself. I'm Mary Smith's. Very happy and all that sort of thing. But there are drawbacks even to happiness. You'll find it out yourself, old fellow, some day."

"But what's the particular drawback in the present case?"

"There's more than one drawback," said Mr. Tomkisson, shaking his head with an air of solemnity.

"Has Mary Smith got a temper?" Frank Hobson's thoughts probably recurred to Matilda Milner.

"Well, for that matter, she *has* a temper; most women have, in fact. But I don't refer to that. I don't object to temper. In fact, I rather like it; in moderation, of course."

"There's nothing unpleasant as to the money part of the transaction, is there?"

"Don't call it a transaction, please. It doesn't sound nice. Because it's strictly a love match, if you come to that." At this announcement Frank Hobson

could not restrain his laughter. Mr. Tomkisson, however, preserved the gravity of his demeanour.

"Of course a mercenary wretch like you, Franky, can't understand a marriage of pure affection."

"There *is* something wrong about the money," Frank Hobson said, confidently.

"I own to a slight disappointment in that respect."

"She hasn't as much as you expected?"

"Well, no, she hasn't; and part of what she *has* got she loses on a second marriage. Smith must have been a horrid tyrant. To think of his putting a sort of prohibitive duty on his widow's marrying again—the vindictive beast! And what gross ignorance of the true principles of political economy! He never could have deserved to have had such a pretty woman for his wife. To think of his persecuting her after his death in so merciless a way! Didn't he sufficiently afflict her while he was alive? Of course he did. But his brutality in robbing the poor thing of her money doesn't make any difference to me; that is, of course, it makes a difference in point of income; but not in any other respect. It rather increases my love for her."

"Bravo, Tommy!" and Mr. Hobson clapped his

hands as they do at the theatre after the enunciation of a striking sentiment.

“ And fortunately she has other means which her late scoundrel of a husband couldn't touch, or else he would have laid violent hands upon them, never fear. It seems he was a dry-salter, whatever that may be. I shall always hate dry-salters henceforward, for his sake. She's a very charming woman ; a man of your taste, Franky, will admire her extremely. I've got a photograph of her somewhere. I'll show it to you. Only, of course, it doesn't do her any sort of justice.” Mr. Tomkisson produced a *carte-de-visite*. Frank Hobson examined it carefully.

“ Rather stout, isn't she ? ” he inquired.

“ You must allow for the horrible exaggeration of photography. I don't myself think she's a bit *too* stout. I hate your skinny women. She's what I should call ' comfortable ' in point of figure.”

“ And about her age ? ”

“ She's not so old-looking as that portrait makes her. Of course she isn't a child ; or a school-girl. I'm not so very juvenile myself ; nor you either, Franky, if you come to that. She owns to eight-and-twenty ; and really I don't believe she's more ; she doesn't look more. And she's a remarkably

candid and simple-minded woman; very truth-speaking. I think she'd be above any deception about her age. I shouldn't say she was more than eight, or say nine-and-twenty."

"Somewhere between that and nine-and-thirty, no doubt," and Mr. Hobson returned the photograph to his friend. "I daresay she's better looking than that makes her out." And he muttered, "She may well be without being a beauty either."

"I'm sure you'll admire her, Franky," said Mr. Tomkisson; "and I think we shall be no end of happy together." But there was a curious air of want of confidence about this expression of opinion. Mr. Tomkisson's manner was certainly less light-hearted than usual.

"There's no other drawback besides this little disappointment about the money, I hope, Tommy?" said Frank Hobson.

Mr. Tomkisson hesitated for a moment. Then he said musingly: "There's a horrid word. I don't know how it got into use, or came to mean what it does. But it's always turning up: especially in the advertisements of the Times about situations wanted. I refer to the word 'incumbrances.'"

"Meaning children?"

“ Yes ; meaning children. There are such incumbrances in the present case, I rather regret to say.”

“ How many ? ”

“ There are two little girls, I understand—very delightful children, and the image of their mother—who bear the name of Smith, and are at present the inmates of a Seminary for Young Ladies at Clapham. My darling Mary wants very much to have them at home with her ; and I’ve promised to be a father to them ; but I rather think, *as a father*, I shall keep them at school for the present.” ;

“ I suppose you didn’t know about these children when you wrote to me from Boulogne ? ”

“ Well, I didn’t. Mary is a peculiarly delicate-minded woman. She’s rather reticent about her domestic affairs. It wasn’t, indeed, until some days after I had informed her of my love for her, and she had accepted my suit, that I was made acquainted with the existence of these—I don’t like the word although I use it—‘ incumbrances.’ Of course it was too late then to make any objection, if I’d been ever so much inclined to make objection ; and I wasn’t so inclined. You can’t get children out of the way by simply objecting to them.”

“ But, perhaps, if you’d known about them, you

wouldn't have been in such a hurry to propose to the widow Smith?"

"I might or might not. I don't really see any good putting supposititious cases of that sort. I don't want to argue. The case hasn't come on for hearing; and you're not the Vice-Chancellor. I didn't know about the children, and I *did* propose. And I'm prepared to stand by that arrangement, and to convert the widow Smith into the wife of Verulam Tomkisson, Esquire, Barrister-at-Law, as soon as ever she likes."

"Well, you know, I offer you my sincerest congratulations, and all that kind of thing."

"You're very good."

"At the same time I should rather like to see you looking a little less gloomy over the business."

"You're an unreasonable person. I don't see that a man's bound to take a comic view of marriage. Perhaps I'm not, and never have been, the giddy trifier that you, with your shallow method of judging people and things, may have weakly imagined me to be. It may be news to you to learn that your friend Tomkisson is, *au fond*, a good deal of the philosopher, with no small infusion of the sage. That sounds rather like a receipt for stuffing: but never mind. I

am at heart a serious man. While I do not shrink from, I yet do not fail to appreciate, the responsibilities of life. I may bear my burthens gracefully, but that doesn't prevent them from being as heavy as other people's. As for marriage, I have already informed you, I take grave views concerning it. If it's a joke, I can only say I don't see it—it does not occur to me in that light." After delivery of these observations with an air of pomp which had about it a tinge of burlesque, Mr. Tomkisson dropped into his more ordinary unrestrained style of talking. "You see, Franky, the man who marries has to make sacrifices," he said. "That's what it comes to."

"I don't see any especial sacrifices *you* are called upon to make."

"If I cared to be rude, I might say that I should have to give *you* up, you unconnubial pagan; you know you're not fit for the society of respectable married people. However, I'll hold on to you as long as I can. But I daresay Mrs. T. won't tolerate you as I have. Wives, you know, always make a point of hating their husband's bachelor friends. They're jealous of them, I suppose. But the man who marries has to make other sacrifices at the altar of Hymen, besides his bachelor friends. His youth

for one thing. You grow ten years older immediately after you've said 'I will,' and slid the ring on the third finger of your bride's left hand. And then the change in your life in other respects is enormous. You can't look at things in the same way, or think, or dress, or move about, or live in the same way. You're altogether an altered creature. You're not yourself; you're somebody else. You've lost your old happy-go-lucky style of proceeding. You've put away your old don't-care-ness, as though it were a worn-out coat. And you're tied up tightly in a *do-care-ness* instead; a new sort of garment that is very glossy outside, but isn't nearly so comfortable altogether. And then—but bless my heart alive!"

Mr. Tomkisson suddenly interrupted himself. "Why, what am I thinking about? What a selfish creature is man! Why, surely, *you* went down to Beachville to marry your aunt, or your cousin, or some one, didn't you? I'm positive about it, now I come to think of it. Come, tell us all about it. How did you prosper?"

Frank Hobson hesitated a little; then blushed; then said evasively,—

"Well, I've come back; and I'm not going to marry my aunt or my cousin."

“But there’s some one else in the case?” cried Mr. Tomkisson. “I can see it in your face. I’d bet any money on it. (No more betting after I’m married—another sacrifice!) Come, tell us all about it, Franky. It’s only fair. You’ve wormed everything out of me. Make a clean breast of it.”

Thus urged, Frank Hobson could only speak out.

“I met a young lady at my aunt’s. Her name was Miss Brown. I journeyed with her up to town this morning in a second-class carriage. We were alone. Half way I proposed to her. She accepted me. I’m an engaged man, therefore. The affianced husband of Miss Brown. She’s——”

“Everything that’s admirable, of course,” cried Mr. Tomkisson, anxious to hinder any over-elaborate eulogium of the lady. “I congratulate you, Franky. Has she got any money?”

“She hasn’t got a halfpenny so far as I know or care,” said Frank Hobson, stoutly.

“Don’t say so far as you care, because that sounds Quixotic,” observed Tomkisson, quietly. “We all *care* about such things; although, at the same time, if we can’t have them, we’re prepared to do without them. At least some of us are. I congratulate you, Franky. It’s a wonderful relief to my mind to find

that you're in the same boat as myself. Not that I'm especially selfish; quite the contrary. The feeling arises from a desire that every one should be as happy as I am, and more so, if possible. After all, you know, in spite of what I've been saying, perhaps marriage *is* the best thing for us, and will do us a world of good if we only give it a fair trial. At the same time,—though this is entirely between ourselves, mind,—I can't help thinking that it would have been more desirable if the widow Smith had been without incumbrances, and if the spinster Brown—don't frown, she *is* a spinster, you know—if she had possessed a fortune, though it had been ever so small a one."

"Mine will be what's called 'a frugal marriage'," said Frank Hobson.

"Awfully frugal. Never mind. That's the modern way of doing things. You commence trading, now-a-days, without owning a farthing of capital, and you leave off with a fortune. I wish you luck, Franky! What a pity we haven't got something to drink one another's health in!"

Mr. Tomkisson seemed quite restored to his wonted good spirits by the thought of his friend's purposed marriage.

“Can't we dine together, Franky?” he inquired, “and talk over the whole business? And toast the future Mrs. Hobson, and the designate Mrs. Tomkisson, in bumpers?”

“Well, you see, I've promised to go as far as Islington in the evening. Sophy has gone to stay there a few days with a sort of aunt of hers; and I undertook to go and take tea there this evening and be introduced.”

“Tea with a ‘sort of aunt’ at Islington doesn't sound very promising,” remarked Mr. Tomkisson. “But, I've no doubt it's the proper thing to do. We must be weaned from bachelor ways gradually; broken into matrimony by degrees. Yes, unquestionably; tea with a ‘sort of aunt’ at Islington must be uncommonly good training.”

CHAPTER XXII.

ENGAGED.

CONCERNING the important facts communicated by Frank Hobson to his friend Tomkisson, it is not necessary that much more should be said. Certain events, by their own plain significance, seem to render comment or dilatation altogether superfluous. Frank Hobson had proposed to Miss Brown, and been accepted. People are proposing, and other people are accepting every day. There was nothing in Frank Hobson's mode of proposal, or in Sophy Brown's mode of acceptance, that varied much from the prescribed formulæ in use on such occasions. Although this purports to be but a commonplace sort of chronicle, still there are circumstances too obviously ordinary to merit further notice at our hands, beyond that of simple mention.

The proposal and acceptance completed, and Miss Brown a little recovered from the emotion natural to

the situation,—though still somewhat flushed from the lover's ardour with which Mr. Hobson had signalled her acceptance of him—and still breathless: he had been circling her small waist with a mercilessly tight arm,—she said, gently:—

“ I never thought you cared much for me, Mr. Hobson——”

“ You must say ‘ Frank ’ now,” he interrupted.

“ Well, Frank, then. I always thought it was Matilda you liked best.”

Frank Hobson hastened to state, perhaps not quite ingenuously, that he had never liked Matilda; indeed, that he had rather abominated her from the first.

“ I mean when you first came down to Beachville. And she's so good-looking ” (this he denied flatly) “ and so accomplished ” (“ Fiddlestick,” he interposed), “ and altogether so attractive ” (but he wouldn't admit it for a moment); “ and then she's so handsomely provided for——”

“ Let her keep her money,” he said. “ Who wants it? I don't.”

“ And I'm so poor,” continued Sophy Brown. Frank Hobson contradicted. She was anything but poor. She was prodigiously rich. She was worth

her weight in gold. She was a treasure in herself—a pearl of great price—a diamond—a duck of diamonds—(whatever that may be)—and so on.

"I couldn't have wondered if you had liked her best," said Sophy Brown, at last bringing her sentence to a close.

"But I didn't like her best. I couldn't have liked her best while you were there, my own, my darling, my"—&c., &c., &c. "She may go to Hong-Kong for me! She may marry Barlow, or whom she will! Let her marry Barlow, and be—happy with him!" He concluded the remark with some appearance of effort.

"Do you know," said Sophy Brown, "I think she really likes Mr. Barlow. I can't help thinking she's really engaged to Mr. Barlow. I shouldn't wonder if there was some private understanding between her and Mr. Barlow from the first. And all that talk about 'common objects' of the seashore meant——"

"Meant that they had objects in common—courtship and matrimony," said Frank Hobson, sharply.

Sophy thought him wonderfully clever. And he was prepared to maintain that she was the most delightful little woman in the world.

He was introduced to Miss Brown's "sort of aunt" at Islington, and was recognised by a small circle of tea-drinking relatives as the accepted lover of Miss Brown.

He heard himself spoken of in association with that lady as the "engaged couple;" and he didn't wink, or wince, or shrink, or shudder, as he thought he should have done,—as he once would have done.

Love is a magician.

"Though how the young people are to live, my dear, is more than I can tell you!" Fortunately, perhaps, he did not hear the doubts as to his future involved in those words, whispered to her gossips by the "sort of aunt" at Islington.

"But what *will* Miss Hobson think? what *will* she say of me?" demanded Miss Brown anxiously of her lover.

"What does it matter what Miss Hobson thinks or says? She can't eat us."

After a time Miss Brown began to think it didn't matter, provided her Frank in truth loved her.

"And you *do*, Frank? — really — *really* — REALLY?"

He answered her effectually, without speaking.

Those doubts and cares and scruples vanish soonest that are kissed away.

"Well, I'm an engaged man," said Frank Hobson, as he went to bed; "but I feel pretty jolly under the circumstances altogether; for I do believe I'm engaged to the most charming little creature that could be found anywhere. And I don't care a bit for her not having any money. Only perhaps I *do* wish that I was a little richer myself. But it's for her sake far more than my own; and if *she* isn't afraid of poverty, why, certainly, *I'm* not. I don't suppose we shall starve. I'll take care that *she* doesn't, at any rate. We shall get on fairly enough, I dare say. Something may turn up. I must make great efforts. I'll work like a horse, if necessary. And who knows? Perhaps old Aunt Fanny may do something for us. By-the-by, I must write to her to-morrow, and tell her all about it. It will be only proper to do that, for Sophy's sake—and my own."

On the morrow, accordingly, Frank Hobson despatched a letter to his Aunt Fanny at Beachville, informing her of all that had occurred. He wrote in a simple straightforward style, without disguise or excuse of any kind. "If she doesn't

like it, I can't help it," he said, to himself: "the thing's done now and can't be undone; and I wouldn't undo it if I could."

After formally announcing his intended marriage, he went on: "The event will probably not be long delayed. There are many reasons why a long engagement should be avoided. Sophy is, in fact, without a home until I can give her one, however humble. I cannot bear the idea of her going out as a governess. I am most anxious that she should be spared the many trials and vexations she would certainly have to endure in a career so altogether new to her. She has plenty of courage, and is, indeed, anxious to undertake a situation for a time, rather than subject me to any embarrassment or inconvenience, and rather, she bids me state, than give occasion for any displeasure or charge of precipitancy on your part. But, my dear aunt, if this marriage is to be—and most certainly it will be: on that head I am quite determined—it is most advisable that it should take place as soon as possible. The sanction of such few relatives as remain to my future wife I have already obtained; you will, I trust, not defer yours. Sophy is very desirous to avoid displeasing you in any way, and requests me to add that she is

very sensible of the great kindnesses she has received at your hands. You will, I trust, therefore, not withhold your approval; to do so would be simply to give us unnecessary pain. We shall for some time, I fear, be very poor; the fact, however, does not scare us. My small income must be adroitly managed and made to go as far as it will; for the rest I must look to an improvement in my professional position. I only know that no exertion shall be wanting on my part to increase my resources and so add to the happiness and comfort of my home."

"There; I don't think I can say any more than that," remarked Frank Hobson. "If the old lady persists in 'cutting up rough,' why she must. I've done all I know, for Sophy's sake more than my own, to make things pleasant between us. After all, it doesn't signify very much either way. Old Aunt Fanny's told me often enough that she means her money to go to Matilda—Matilda having more than she knows what to do with already! But gold's a magnet that attracts other gold to it. And such is life!" After which philosophical, if somewhat trite remark, he folded up his letter and posted it to Belle Vue Lawn, Beachville.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OLD BLATHERWICK.

THE day after he had thus addressed his aunt, Frank Hobson, entering his chambers in New Square, found himself welcomed by his friend Tomkisson with extraordinary enthusiasm—with clappings of hands, the waving of a hat, of a handkerchief tied flag-wise to a walking-stick, and noisy shouts of applause.

“What is the matter?” he very naturally inquired.

“Bravo! Hurrah! See the conquering hero comes! Three cheers for Hobson!” cried Mr. Tomkisson, in a state of great excitement.

“What *do* you mean? Are you mad, Tommy?”

“I wish you joy, old fellow!”

“Is *that* all? You wished me joy the other day; and I wished *you* joy too. Why this absurd ebullition of excitement? What have you been drinking?”

“Bah!” cried Mr. Tomkisson; “my congratulations of the other day were folly compared to my

present rejoicings. A man can get a wife when he will—sooner than he wants, sometimes. There are millions of wives about in the world. To get a wife is one thing; but to get a BRIEF!—what am I saying, *brief?* BRIEFS!—they're vastly different affairs. What do you think of this—and this—and this?" and Mr. Tomkisson lifted up, one by one, large legal-looking blocks of foolscap paper, neatly folded, and endorsed in legible round-hand.

Frank Hobson turned quite pale; then said, suddenly,—

"Oh, they can't be for me! It's some mistake; they must be meant for the other Hobson—'Central Criminal' Hobson—confound the fellow's luck!"

"There's no mistake, my Francisco!" cried Tomkisson. "It's all right. Here's your name in full—'Mr. Francis Hobson. With you Mr. Windybag, Q.C. *Jibb v. Jossy*. Brief for the Infant Defendants. In the Vice-Chancellor's Court.' Catch 'Central Criminal' Hobson in the Vice-Chancellor's Court!"

"It does really seem as if it was meant for me," said Frank Hobson, breathing quickly.

"It's all right, Franky. The luck's turned at last. I always said it would. And here's a cheque for the

fees—that's what I call business!—for the fees, including the clerk. I begin to wish I was your clerk. You're a wonderful fellow, Franky; you'll prosper prodigiously. The eyes of England are upon you. You'll be Lord Chancellor. At any rate you'll get a County Court, directly there's a change of Government. Your fortune's made!"

"What, because I've got a brief after an awful interval?" Frank Hobson began to think his friend's excitement somewhat exaggerated.

"Away with this idiotic affectation of *sang froid!*" shouted Mr. Tomkisson. "Look where the brief comes from—look where they all come from! Read the name at the bottom of them, and then—stand on your head, or turn a summersault, or do credit in some way to the startling importance of the occasion!"

"'Blatherwick, Austin Friars,'" Frank Hobson read. "Upon my word, it's really very kind of old Blatherwick," and he sat down in his arm-chair.

Mr. Tomkisson stamped on the floor.

"Is *that* all you're going to say? Is *that* all you're going to do?" he demanded vehemently. "I'm really ashamed of you, Mr. Francis Hobson. At your age to be affecting this swell, haw-haw, dreary-drawly un-

demonstrativeness! Or can it be that you don't really know who Blatherwick of Austin Friars is?"

"Yes, I know him well enough; and a very jolly old fellow he is, too. I met him down at Beachville, and we got on together capitally."

"And you never said a word about it! You can't be in your right senses; or you can't really know who old Blatherwick is. The audacity of speaking of him as a jolly old cock! As though he were the conventional sort of old man to be picked up in every public-house!"

"What do you mean? Why all this fuss about him?"

"What atrocious ignorance! You think he's merely a common-place attorney who's taken a fancy to you. Francisco, I blush for you! Blatherwick is a power—an influence—an engine—an organ—a centre upon which a whole system revolves—the fly-wheel in a vast political machinery! Blatherwick is the agent and representative of the great True Blue Party! Blatherwick can do anything. He can bring *you* into Parliament; he can bring *me* into Parliament; he can bring Brown, Jones, and Robinson, one and all into Parliament. He has capital at command, interest, authority. All the business of the True Blue Party

passes through his hands. He transacts all their affairs. He is the True Blue Party when anybody has got anything to say to it, or wants anything from it, or to do anything for it. If any borough wants a True Blue candidate, Blatherwick is sent for, and produces one forthwith. If any True Blue candidate wants a seat he goes to Blatherwick, and Blatherwick finds him one. Perhaps it costs money; perhaps it's a very close shave, a sharp contest; perhaps there may be here and there a ten-pounder, whose political convictions are so nicely balanced that unless something weighty is slipped into his palm he has no bias towards either candidate, and can't, therefore, find his way to the polling-booth anyhow. Blatherwick manages to secure that hesitating ten-pounder—Blatherwick manages it all. Blatherwick makes everything smooth and pleasant: without troubling anyone, or committing anyone, or appearing himself to take any more active share in the business than that of steadily consuming hot brown brandy-and-water at every available opportunity."

"Yes, that's the man!" said Frank Hobson.

"And yet you'd never heard of his political importance! The luck—sheer luck—that some men have! Ah! if old Blatherwick had but met with

me! I flatter myself he would have received appreciation at *my* hands; he would have found himself in the presence of a congenial spirit; he would have obtained recognition of his singular merits; and would, I fancy, have found pleasure in the society of one hardly less fertile in ingenuity than himself—hardly less ready in resources and prompt in action. But it was not to be! Still, as he didn't meet with me, I'm glad he met with you, my Franky. Your fortune's made. Blatherwick's a sure card. The game is with you. Business will crowd in upon you. Briefs will fall in cartloads at your feet. Parliamentary practice will be yours. Enormous fees and endless refreshers. The barrister's heaven opens before you. Step in and enjoy yourself! Again I wish you joy, Franky. Long life and prosperity to you! Such is the prayer of your humble servant and affectionate friend, Verulam Tomkisson! How dry one gets with talking! Couldn't we possibly have something to drink?—I should really like to do honour to old Blatherwick and the occasion."

"I hope your notions about him are not extravagant."

"Of course they're not. Ask anyone. Consult whom you will, you'll hear the same story about him."

“I’d no notion of his importance. But then I’ve never taken much interest in political matters.”

“Always take interest in political matters. It’s the bounden duty of a barrister to do so. Let him choose his party and stick to it, and his party will stick to him, and give him a place some day. I’m thoroughly True Blue myself, though I admit I haven’t got much by it at present. All in good time. Tomkisson is great, and will prevail. May his triumph be fixed for as early a date as possible!”

Frank Hobson duly informed Sophy Brown of the bright hopes he entertained arising out of Mr. Blatherwick’s briefs. Sophy did not quite understand the matter. But she was pleased: for a very good reason; she saw that *he* was pleased.

“We only want now a letter from Miss Hobson. I wonder she hasn’t written. I’m afraid she’s very angry with us.”

“No matter if she is,” said Frank Hobson.

Still, he thought it rather curious that his Aunt had not written. What could old Aunt Fanny be about?

CHAPTER XXIV

MISS HOBSON'S LETTER.

A LETTER from "old Aunt Fanny"—as Miss Hobson was somewhat irreverently designated by her nephew—was received at last, after the delay of a few posts. Like most things, however, which, by tardiness in arrival, have over-excited expectation, the letter when it did come was found to be less satisfactory in effect than had been anticipated.

"It's neither one thing nor the other," remarked Frank Hobson, as he read and re-read the missive. "She doesn't say whether she approves or not. I suppose she hasn't made up her mind. I like people to make up their minds at once, one way or the other; and then one knows how to deal with them. And there's an air of mystery about the whole thing I don't at all understand. What can have happened at Beachville to make her write in this curious way?" And he handed the letter to Sophy Brown,

to see if her feminine acumen could extract from it more information and satisfaction than were permitted to his masculine obtuseness.

“We really ought to be grateful, Frank,” said Miss Brown, having completed perusal of the letter. “It is clear, for one thing, that Miss Hobson doesn’t *dis*-approve of our engagement.”

“Why doesn’t she say so then distinctly? I hate being left to guess at people’s meanings.”

“Wasn’t *I* left to guess at your meaning at Beachville, sir? And I guessed wrong. I thought that Matilda——”

“I don’t want to hear anything about Matilda. If my meaning wasn’t clear to you at first, probably it arose from that bashfulness or confusion in the presence of his heart’s idol, which is natural to man.”

“Oh, Frank!”

“And I spoke out pretty plainly at last in the railway carriage. Didn’t I?”

“You took advantage of an unprotected female! And in the surprise of the moment I was weak enough to say ‘yes’—if I did say ‘yes.’ I’m sure I don’t know now what I did say.”

“You said and did everything that was right, and

proper, and charming, and graceful. How could such a darling say or do anything that was otherwise ? ”

After this, there was much absurd conduct and speech of a fond and fatuous nature—it is the privilege of lovers to be preposterous—which it is wholly unnecessary for me to particularise. Study the next pair of enamoured persons you may happen to fall in with. Very much after the manner of their going on did Frank Hobson and his Sophy talk and demean themselves. So occupied were they with each other that they permitted Miss Hobson's letter to be crumpled up into a pipe-light, and to fall upon the floor at their feet.

Its contents were as follows :—

“*MY DEAR FRANK,*—I have received your letter, and it has occasioned me, I must own, some surprise. But certain circumstances that have occurred here have so disturbed and distressed me, that I am in no fit state now to discuss with you your plans for the future. I will only say that I firmly trust all may be ordered for the best. More I cannot now write. My hand shakes too much. I am altogether too unnerved and upset. It is really quite a painful effort to me to put pen to paper. I am far more fit for my bed than to be sitting at my desk, writing—

scrawling, rather—this note. Presently I trust I may be calmer and better. Meanwhile, I am waiting the arrival of my good friend Dr. Robinson, for whom I have sent. I have also to prepare myself for an interview with dear Mr. Blenkinsop. You must, therefore, excuse my adding more just now. And I cannot promise to resume my pen very immediately. Still, I have many things to say to you. I don't know, however, that I can trust myself to write about these. It would be very much better if I could see you. I know how valuable your time is—how much engaged you must be just now; but I should really esteem it a favour if you could run down here, if only for a few hours; or perhaps it would be better if you came again to stay from Saturday to Monday. In that case, you must come here *direct*, without going to the Royal. I have a spare room now at your service. Hoping soon to see you, I remain, my dear Frank,

“Your affectionate aunt,

“FANNY HOBSON.”

A brief postscript was added—one of some importance, all things considered. It ran thus simply: “*Kind love to Sophy!*”

Presently the lovers—refreshed apparently by

their inane proceedings—resumed discussion of Miss Hobson's letter.

"It's very strange that there's not a word in it about Matilda," Miss Brown remarked.

"Well, I don't see that," said Frank Hobson. "Matilda's got nothing to do with it."

"She might have sent a message: a few words of congratulation. People generally do send congratulations when they learn of an engagement. But perhaps, she expected a formal letter from me, announcing the fact to her. I wish now I'd written to her. She was really kind to me, in her way, at Beachville."

"*In her way!*" Frank Hobson repeated. "Yes. I know Matilda's way. I expect she's in an awful rage. I dare say she can't bear the notion of my having preferred anyone to herself."

"What vain creatures men are!" exclaimed Sophy. "Depend upon it she's never given a thought to the matter. You don't suppose, sir, she ever cared a bit about *you*? Not the least tiny bit. Why should she?"

"Perhaps not. All the same, I'll be bound to say, she doesn't approve of your caring about me."

"As if I did!" interjected Sophy.

“ Or of my caring about you,” pursued Mr. Hobson.

“ I don't believe you do.”

“ Don't you, Mrs. Saucebox? Very likely she doesn't care the least tiny bit, as you say, about me, and would have rejected me if I had made her an offer; not that I ever dreamt of doing so.” (Oh! Mr. Hobson! Mr. Hobson! How about that letter you wrote and afterwards destroyed?) “ But that's no reason why she should approve of my making an offer to you. That's always the way with women.”

“ Is it, indeed, sir?” quoth Miss Sophy, mockingly. “ Much you know about them.”

“ Though they mayn't care for a man themselves, they highly disapprove of his caring for any but them. I haven't a doubt that, as I said before, Matilda's in an awful rage. She's pacing about, talking in her emphatic way, and wondering what Frank can *possibly* see in Sophy, and what Sophy can *possibly* see in Frank, and declaring to everybody that the poor creatures must *starve*, having *absolutely* no means whatever—*none whatever!*”

This was a passable imitation of Miss Milner's manner, and Sophy Brown could not but honour it with her laughter and applause.

“But *must* you go to Beachville, Frank?” she inquired soon afterwards.

“Well, Aunt Fanny seems to wish it. I suppose I must.”

“Well, I suppose so, too; though I can't bear the thought of your going away. The idea of our being separated makes me quite sad. You'll come back as soon as ever you can?”

“I shall stay from the Saturday to the Monday only.”

“And I wanted you to take me to the Temple Church on Sunday! How provoking! But it can't be helped. Oh! if there were to be an accident on the railway!” And at the mere thought Miss Brown turned quite pale.

“You silly darling!” And in some fond way he succeeded in allaying her fears.

CHAPTER XXV

FIVE MINUTES' TALK.

It was mid-day. Frank Hobson, somehow, found himself walking in the Strand. Suddenly he discovered in front of him a familiar figure. He quickened his steps. Yes. There could be no mistake about it. The man before him, and now beside him, though he had exchanged his white cravat for a black silk handkerchief with little white spots upon it, was the Reverend George Barlow.

Without much thinking what he was doing, Frank Hobson tapped his friend on the shoulder. You should have seen how the clergyman started! he seemed rather to spring away some three feet, uttering a cry of alarm.

It's an unfair practical joke to tap a man unexpectedly on the shoulder. Suppose he happens, from peculiar circumstances, to be apprehensive of taps on the shoulder of an unfriendly and formal character.

The thing is then really cruel; goes beyond jesting, far.

"Hullo, Barlow!"

"What, is it you, Hobson?" The clergyman looked rather white in the face: was panting for breath. Yet it was evidently a relief to him to find he had been tapped on the shoulder by Frank Hobson, rather than by any other person less amicably disposed.

"Why, what do you do here? I thought you were at Beachville," said Frank Hobson.

"I'm up in town for a day or two only; that is to say, perhaps I shall not return to Beachville very immediately," Mr. Barlow explained, with some hesitation.

"Indeed! By the way, Barlow, I've a word or two to say to you. There's a sort of an explanation due to you. It ought to have been made before, perhaps. But it isn't too late, now."

"Well—I rather wanted to have five minutes' talk with *you*, if we could manage it. But I don't much like standing about here—for many reasons."

Mr. Hobson thereupon led the way through Bell Yard and across Serle Street to his chambers in New Square.

“ There’s little chance of interruption here,” he said. So they sat down and made themselves comfortable.

“ You remember one night my meeting you on the parade at Beachville, Barlow ?” Frank Hobson commenced. “ It was on a Sunday night, I rather think. You were smoking, and I had been—well, we’ll say refreshing myself with brandy-and-water at the Royal.”

“ Yes. I remember it distinctly,” said Mr. Barlow, wondering what was to follow this prelude.

“ Perhaps I had taken more brandy-and-water than was good for me ”

“ I think there can be no doubt about that.”

“ Well, I avow the thing frankly. Don’t make an ungenerous use of the admission. I *had* taken more brandy-and-water than was good for me. Still, I knew what I was about.”

“ Possibly.”

“ We had some talk together.”

“ Well, *you* talked a good deal.”

“ Mention was made, among other things, of the names of Miss Milner and of Miss Brown, then staying at Beachville with my aunt, Miss Hobson. Some sort of admiration was expressed—by both of us,

rather think—for those ladies; but for one of them more especially. You stated plainly that you had views in regard to Matilda Milner and her fortune."

"I should be sorry to contradict you, Hobson. But I can't say that I recollect making any statement of the kind."

"You *must* have said it, Barlow. I couldn't have invented it, could I?"

To this question Mr. Barlow made no reply.

"And I," resumed Frank Hobson, "ventured to make a similar statement. I also, at that time, entertained, or thought I entertained, views in regard to Matilda Milner and her fortune. There thus arose between us a disagreeable collision of views: the more disagreeable by reason of our old acquaintance, and the friendly footing upon which we stood with regard to each other. We resolved to settle the matter in a perfectly amicable and simple manner. We tossed."

"That is to say *you* tossed."

"However that may be, *you* lost. Matilda Milner fell to my share. You were to console yourself with the other lady, or as might seem good to you."

"I remember something of this. You settled everything your own way. I was to do *this*, and you

were to do *that*. But you don't suppose I ever gave another thought to your absurd conduct on that occasion?"

"It's as to that I have desired to be informed, Barlow. I remembered your old sporting propensities at the University——"

"I must entreat that you will not again refer to to them."

"And it seemed to me possible that, with your well-known sportsman-like love of fair-play and straight-forward conduct, you might have thought of carrying out that arrangement in its integrity."

"I never thought of anything so monstrous."

"You haven't considered—you don't consider yourself bound by it?"

"Most certainly not."

"Nor in any way affected by it?"

"Not in the remotest degree."

"Then, if it wasn't binding upon you, Barlow, it naturally follows that it wasn't binding upon me."

"That is my view of it. I regard it as a tipsy frolic of which you ought to be quite ashamed."

"It *was* a tipsy frolic; there is no other term for it; and I *am* ashamed of it."

"And which ought, therefore, to be forgotten,"

said Mr. Barlow, with an air of generosity, "like any other indiscretion a man may have committed and afterwards repented of and atoned for."

"Your sporting propensities, for instance? I am very glad to hear you say so, Barlow. That was very much my own opinion of it. I am happy to find we are agreed. And, now, let it be a bargain between us. Henceforth you will forbear all mention of that absurd evening, and I will undertake to forget that you were ever known as 'Betting Barlow' at the University."

"That's a bargain between us." Thereupon they shook hands formally.

"I was especially anxious to see you on this subject, because I have seen reason to alter my plans considerably," said Mr. Hobson.

"Indeed."

"Yes. I have absolutely renounced all views in regard to Miss Milner."

"Well, perhaps that's only what might be expected, all things considered."

"My affections are now wholly fixed upon Miss Brown. I am, in point of fact, engaged to be married to Miss Brown."

"I congratulate you sincerely, I'm sure. I wish you both happiness."

“There’s no doubt we shall be enormously happy, Barlow. I weighed carefully the merits of Miss Matilda Milner with her fortune and Sophy Brown without any. I decided at last in favour of the latter.”

“Miss Brown is a very charming young lady.”

“Quite right. Now, frankly, Barlow, between friends, did you ever, before or after the night of the tipsy frolic and the tossing, did you ever entertain views in that quarter?”

“Frankly, I never did.”

“And you approve wholly of my choice?”

Mr. Barlow laughed curiously. Then he said: “I approve wholly. Not that my approval can matter much. As for your choice, I suppose we may call it *HOBSON’S CHOICE!*” And he laughed again.

“I hate any jokes that involve playing upon a man’s surname. They always seem to me exceedingly bad taste,” said Frank Hobson, rather angrily.

“What I mean is,” Mr. Barlow explained, “that you couldn’t have chosen Miss Milner, because, the truth is, she was already chosen.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look here. This is what I wanted to show you, and to talk to you about.”

Mr. Barlow took from his pocket-book an oblong slip of paper, partly printed, partly written upon. It purported to be an extract from the Registry of Marriages in the Parish of Prawnford, and set forth the marriage of George Barlow, bachelor, of full age, and Matilda Milner, spinster, also of full age. The marriage, it appeared, had been solemnised at Prawnford Church some weeks earlier than the date to which we have now brought this narrative.

"You don't mean that?" said Frank Hobson in a low voice, after a pause.

Mr. Barlow, by way of reply, simply nodded his head.

"Then when I went down to Beachville for the first time," Frank Hobson began—

"This marriage had already taken place."

Frank Hobson whistled; then laughed. "Certainly, as you say, HOBSON'S CHOICE was all that was left to me. You managed it very quietly between you, I must say."

"Very quietly. We thought it best to do so. We went over one morning to Prawnford Church ——"

"When you were supposed to be searching for common objects!"

"Precisely. That was how it was managed."

“ I confess I never dreamt of anything of that kind. But what occasion was there for so much secrecy? What need was there for your being so mysterious?”

“ It was Matilda's wish,” said Mr. Barlow. “ Of course I could but comply. Her will is my law.”

“ No doubt of it,” observed Frank Hobson, drily. “ Still, I don't quite understand. Have you left Matilda at Beachville?”

“ No; she's now at the Grosvenor Hotel. To tell you the truth, I was obliged to quit Beachville. I had been discovered there—I don't mind your knowing, Hobson, by, in fact, certain people to whom I owe money. They have quite persecuted me. They evince a curious distrust of me. Though, of course, they will receive what is due to them—eventually—all in good time; I don't see that there's any particular occasion for hurry. So, to avoid their importunities, it became imperatively necessary for me to quit Beachville. Matilda was very unwilling that I should go alone. She couldn't endure the notion of our being separated. So we came up to town together. Otherwise it had been our intention to preserve the secret of our union some little time longer.”

“ But why?”

"I can only tell you that Matilda thought it best to do so."

"And what does my aunt—Miss Hobson—think of it all?"

"Ah, that's just what we want to know. That's what I want you to tell me. That's why I was so anxious to have a talk with you. I don't know at all what Miss Hobson will think of our proceedings. Matilda is inclined to imagine that she will be very angry—in the first instance, at any rate. Now, what's your notion, Hobson?"

"Candidly, I don't think my aunt will like it much."

"Just so. That's Matilda's notion. She fancies Miss Hobson will be greatly disappointed."

"And yet, I know Miss Hobson entertains a high opinion of you."

"It's more than I deserve, I fear." To this Frank Hobson assented with rather ungracious alacrity. Mr. Barlow continued: "Miss Hobson was always most kind; yet I believe she was in favour of a very different plan for the disposal of Matilda's hand. Indeed, I'm given to understand she was anxious to arrange a marriage between you and your cousin."

"Well, I remember she said something about it

one day. But of course that's altogether out of the question now."

"Of course, of course. Are you likely to see your aunt soon?"

"I think of running down to Beachville again next Saturday."

"Would it be too much to ask you, on Matilda's account not less than my own—in fact, it is by her desire I make this application to you—to do what you can for us with Miss Hobson? Help us to regain her favour, and make what excuses for us you can?"

"Well, Barlow," said Frank Hobson, promptly, "if a good word from me will do any good, it shall certainly be spoken."

"Thank you, thank you. We shall be really much indebted to you, Hobson."

"But you must remember I've got my own peace to make. My aunt knows of my engagement with Sophy Brown; but it remains to be seen what she thinks of it."

"Matilda will be so pleased to hear of your prospect of happiness."

"No doubt." But Mr. Hobson did not look quite convinced.

“She will, of course, write to congratulate Miss Brown. I know she entertains an extreme affection for her. And if you should be going near the Grosvenor—especially *after* you have been to Beachville—will you kindly look in? Matilda will be so pleased. We lunch between one and two generally; and we shall expect you anxiously, my dear Hobson—*after* you have been to Beachville. You will give us a long account of your interview with Miss Hobson. Matilda will be delighted. And now I must really say good-bye. Good-bye, Hobson. Cousin Hobson, in fact, I may say, for we're cousins now by marriage. How very fortunate I happened to meet you to-day!” And then Barlow took his leave.

“And so Barlow's actually married to Matilda,” mused Mr. Hobson. “Well, I'm sure I wish him joy of her. It's the natural result, I suppose, of ‘common objects.’ Still, I can't understand why they were so awfully sly about it. Matilda's doing, evidently. I've no doubt she orders Barlow about as though he were a poodle. I suppose a poor man married to a rich wife has to be very humble and obedient. Altogether, I think I'm well out of the business. Some women seem to be inherently sly,

and cunning, and secret in their goings-on. Matilda must be a woman of that sort. It isn't a romantic love of mystery in her case. She's not given to sentiment, I'm sure. It arises from a cat-like fondness for stealthiness and concealment. If I believed in the doctrine of metempsychosis—which I don't—I should maintain that Matilda was a cat before she was a woman, and will eventually transmigrate into her feline form again. Barlow will wake up some fine morning and find himself married to a tigress. Poor Barlow!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MISS HOBSON SPEAKS HER MIND.

“WHAT do you think has happened?” said Frank Hobson to Sophy Brown. “But you’ll never guess.” And then he informed her of the marriage of Mr. Barlow and Miss Milner. “Doesn’t that astonish you?” he asked, in conclusion.

But Miss Brown protested that she was not in the least astonished. “In fact, it’s rather what I expected,” she said. “Nothing Matilda could do would surprise me. I believe her to be capable of anything. Of course,” she hastened to add, “I don’t mean anything that was downright wicked.”

“I always thought that Matilda rather venerated the proprieties,” interposed Frank Hobson.

“But anything that was odd or mysterious I’m sure she wouldn’t shrink from if she had a motive to serve.”

“I begin to suspect, from your abusing her, that you’re jealous of her.”

“At any rate I never was in love, or thought myself in love with her,” said Miss Brown, with roguish quickness.

“Nor I,” said Frank Hobson, with perhaps more courage than veracity.

“Oh! Frank!”

On Saturday morning Frank Hobson started for Beachville. On the preceding evening he had taken leave of Sophy Brown. You would have thought by the effusiveness of their farewells, that he had been going to Australia for three years at least, instead of to Beachville for three days only.

“I wonder how old Aunt Fanny will receive me,” Mr. Hobson said to himself as he journeyed down to Beachville. “I suppose I must be prepared for a long lecture about my imprudence and rashness, and all that. I shall be regarded no doubt as having committed a sort of criminal offence. That’s the world’s view of a fellow’s marrying a girl without any money. Aunt Fanny will shake her head, and look very solemn, and deplore my folly, and tell me I ought to have done ever so much better. And then I shall be asked severely how I intend to live? and what I expect will become of me in the probable event of a family resulting from my marriage?”

Really, I think people might defer regarding one as a pauper until one begins to beg of them. There's one thing in my favour, however : Matilda's strange proceedings will have given my aunt something else to think about. I shall not have undivided attention attracted to my misdeeds."

As the reader has been apprised, it was rather Miss Hobson's way to be formal, and stately, and unbending; she moved about slowly and somewhat rigidly; with a full consciousness of her own importance. She did not so much greet her guests and visitors as permit them to greet her: graciously accepting their salutations. It can hardly be said that she shook hands with them; but she graciously extended her hand at the end of a rather stiff arm, and permitted them to shake it if they so insisted or were in such way disposed. Mr. Hobson was in possession of ample experience of his aunt's majesty of demeanour. He prepared himself for a reception more than ordinarily chilling in its nature: all the circumstances of the case being considered.

He was shown into the drawing-room of the house in Belle Vue Lawn. A few moments' pause. Then was heard the noisy rustling of silken skirts, and Miss Hobson entered the room.

“My dear Frank, how good of you to come! How glad I am to see you!” said the lady, with unexpected cordiality, and she shook hands with her nephew warmly; more than that, she actually drew him towards her, and kissed him on the cheek: very greatly to his amazement. (“I don’t believe Aunt Fanny’s done such a thing since I first went to school!” he said to himself.)

“And how is dear little Sophy?” Miss Hobson inquired, with an air of tender interest.

“She’s very well, thank you. She charged me to convey to you all sorts of affectionate and appropriate messages. Pray imagine them to be delivered.” Miss Hobson smiled and nodded her head.

“I congratulate you, Frank, on your choice. At least you’ve chosen a very nice, and good, and pretty little woman for your wife. Of course, so far as money is concerned, you can’t be said to have done very well.”

(“Now it’s coming,” thought Frank Hobson; “now for a show-up of my indiscretion!”)

“But it’s far better,” Miss Hobson went on, sententiously, “to marry a woman whom you can love, let her be ever so poor, than to tie yourself to a

creature whom it would be impossible to respect, though she possessed all the money in the world!"

Frank Hobson looked a little amazed. This statement coming from the lips of Miss Hobson sounded very new, and strange, and violent.

"You've heard about Matilda?" she asked.

"Yes; I met Barlow. He told me."

"Were you not very much astonished?"

"I confess I was, rather. They were certainly very sly and quiet about their proceedings."

"Sly? Quiet? I call their conduct singularly treacherous and disgraceful! I can use no other words. They ought to be ashamed of themselves! Certainly they were, both of them, old enough to know better. Why, Matilda must be thirty, if she's a day! It's not as if they were boy and girl. They haven't the excuse of youth. They ought to be ashamed of themselves," Miss Hobson repeated, solemnly.

"No doubt they took you very much by surprise."

"Surprise, my dear Frank? I was shocked—disgusted! I would have given a thousand pounds rather than that such a thing should have happened. Think of the scandal! Think of the talking there's been throughout Beachville! Of course it doesn't so

much matter about the visitors. But the residents! I shall never dare to hold up my head amongst them again. I haven't yet dared to show my face out of doors. Of course it will be said that I was privy to the whole thing. I—who hadn't the slightest conception of what was going on! Never was woman more shamefully tricked and deceived than I have been! I grow quite mad when I think of it! But you've had no lunch, of course." Miss Hobson interrupted herself, and she rang the bell, and desired Mogford to bring the tray into the dining-room.

"I never saw Aunt Fanny so 'worked up' before," thought Mr. Hobson, as he helped himself to sherry. Then he said, "I always fancied Mr. Barlow was rather a favourite of yours, aunt."

"I have always considered him a man of ability, Frank," Miss Hobson replied, gravely. "And I still think him so. Certainly he was one of the finest readers we have ever had in Beachville. It was really a treat to hear him read the Lessons. Mr. Blenkinsop is a dear good man—a really excellent person; but I have never gone so far as to admire his delivery. It has always seemed to me a great deal too monotonous: what people generally call *humdrum*. Now, Mr. Barlow really read well;

and his sermons were certainly clever; though his manner in the pulpit, I must say, was occasionally somewhat affected and theatrical. No: I have never questioned his ability. I admit I have derived much satisfaction from his discourses. In that respect, indeed, he has satisfied the Beachville people generally. He was much admired and followed. During the season, St. Jude's was exceedingly well attended whenever he preached. That he should have behaved as he has behaved, I must say, has grievously disappointed me. Especially after the attentions he received in this house. He was always welcomed. He dined here regularly once a week. And I was always careful to provide a nice dinner for him. He can't say he was ever treated unhand-somely. I have gone myself, often and often, at considerable inconvenience, round to the poulterer's and the fishmonger's to make sure that everything was nice, and as it should be, and fit for him to sit down to. I can't bear that men should have a bad dinner in my house; because I know how particular they are about what they eat,—especially clergymen. I must say, though I say it with reluctance, that he has not behaved well towards me. He has indeed been very ungrateful and treacherous."

(“ Can the old lady have entertained a notion that Barlow came to see *her*? With views as to *her* hand and fortune?” Frank Hobson asked himself. “ It almost looks like it. She’s not so old but what she might have thought of changing her name if a clergyman made a point of requesting it. Perhaps he began in that way; and then, on the arrival of Matilda, transferred his affections from the aunt to the niece. Decidedly, I’m afraid Barlow hasn’t behaved well.”)

“ Of course, it’s been the talk of the place,” Miss Hobson resumed; “ and will be so for a long time to come. And some of the tradespeople are very angry about it. I understand Mr. Barlow owes a great deal of money in Beachville. Why, he actually borrowed ten pounds of Mogford! Goodness knows whether the man will ever see his money again. I don’t suppose Mr. Barlow will dare to show his face here for a long time to come. I told Mogford that he was a fool for his pains; that it’s no part of a servant’s business to be lending money, let who will ask him. But of course I shall not let the poor fellow suffer in the end for his good nature. Mr. Barlow managed to take in wiser people than poor Mogford. The town is very angry about it. They

talk of an Indignation Meeting in the Assembly Rooms, and writing to the Bishop,—and I don't know what all. Mr. Blenkinsop, I need hardly say, is deeply distressed. He's now been here for more than thirty years, and never recollects such a scandalous thing happening in the place before. He's been most kind and unremitting in his attention to me since the affair came out. He's been a real comfort to me. I don't know what I should have done without him."

("There's a Mrs. Blenkinsop, I know," meditated Frank Hobson, "or else I should begin to suspect Blenkinsop of entertaining 'views.'")

"Still, much as I blame Mr. Barlow," Miss Hobson continued; "ungratefully and unhandsomely as I think he has behaved, the conduct of Matilda seems to me ten times worse. For I always maintain that wickedness is so much more reprehensible in a woman than in a man." Miss Hobson did not proceed to explain her real sentiments on the subject, which were to the effect that whereas evil-doing was in some sort the special mission of man—the coarseness and ill-disposition of his nature, inevitably so resulting,—the lapses of the gentler sex had always about them elements of surprise and sudden-

ness, requiring explanation before they could be comprehended. To err, according to Miss Hobson's way of thinking, was, not so much human, as masculine,—and therefore unwomanly. The failings of her own sex were to her more unintelligible,—and consequently more unpardonable. She was much inclined, therefore, to lay stress upon the misdoings of Miss Milner.

“To think that I should have cherished such a serpent in my bosom!” said Miss Hobson, dramatically; “and that all the kindness I lavished upon her should be met in this shameful way! It makes me quite ill to think of it! But there—I believe that woman to be capable of anything. She's quite steeped in cunning and treachery! And bold? My dear Frank, Matilda's absolutely brazen-faced. It's all *her* doing, depend upon it. She was at the bottom of it all. Poor Mr. Barlow,—I look upon him with pity, comparatively, when I consider the grossness of Matilda's conduct. He was a mere puppet in her hands. He only moved as she bade him. He had no voice of his own. He was surrendered altogether to her. Poor man! I suppose, being in embarrassed circumstances, he was tempted by her fortune. But if I'd been a man—I thank heaven I'm not, however

—but if I *had* been, I wouldn’t have married Matilda Milner,—not if she’d possessed untold gold: that I wouldn’t! Millions of money wouldn’t have tempted me. And, after all, she’s not nearly so rich as many people imagine. Comfortably provided for, of course; but not much more than that.”

“And yet, I fancied, aunt, at one time,” said Frank Hobson, with hesitation, “you rather wished me to——”

“And if I did, Frank,” Miss Hobson interrupted, quickly, “I’m pretty certain the idea had already occurred to you. But of course I did not know Matilda’s real character at that time. We neither of us did. There’s *that* to be said for us. I only thought that, all things being considered—her money and your limited means—and supposing that you fancied each other—the match might not be undesirable upon the whole. You ought to be thankful, however, that you’ve been spared such an entanglement. You would have been wretched for life. Happily it has been so ordered that you have chosen very differently: a dear, good, amiable girl, who, I am sure, will make you happy. Money she hasn’t got, it’s true. But a sweet disposition is far above money, Frank.”

“I think so, too, aunt. We shall not be well off;

but still, I daresay we shall manage to get on tolerably well. We intend to be very economical; and I'm going to work very hard."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Miss Hobson; "and some day,—not immediately,—but some day, I may be able to be of use to you. I say I *may*. You mustn't consider it in the light of a promise. I haven't much money; but such as I have, I shall take care is properly disposed of. I've already been talking to my lawyer about a new will. When I'm gone there will be many little valuables left, which perhaps will be worth having. I shall take care that everything is clearly settled and arranged. And of one thing I'm very certain: Matilda Milner—Matilda Barlow I suppose I must now call her—shall not be one penny the richer by my death!"

Mr. Hobson was silent. Beyond a slight murmur of gratitude when his aunt hinted at a testamentary disposition in his favour, he forbore all expression of opinion as to the arrangements proposed to the disadvantage of Mrs. Barlow.

"I shall feel more at ease," said Miss Hobson, "when I've duly signed and sealed, and made sure that that odious woman will not be the gainer by my death. And as I said before, Frank, I may then be

able to be of more use to you than I have yet been,—or than I at one time ever intended to be."

"Well, aunt, I'm sure you'll do what's right, and kind, and proper, under all the circumstances," said Frank Hobson. (He felt it was necessary for him to say something upon this expression of Miss Hobson's kindly intentions in regard to him.) "We'll consider all that settled, please, and not say any more about such melancholy subjects as wills and deaths. I'm sure I hope you'll live long and happily, to see perhaps—who knows? a host of little grand nieces and nephews, playing about at Beachville. Don't talk about your dying, aunt. You'll be with us many a year yet, I trust. At any rate, I don't want to be building or speculating upon any such sad event. It will be bad enough when it comes."

This was heartily spoken, and Miss Hobson was touched by it. There came even a glister, as of tears, about her eyes. She pressed his hand as she said: "You're a good fellow, Frank. There's no meanness about you. The Hobsons haven't generally been mean. I don't know, I'm sure, how Matilda came to be so grasping. She didn't get it from the Hobsons. I suppose the Milners were grasping. As for my living long, I hope it may be as you say. But

I'm little better than an invalid. I have to be very careful. I can't trust myself out of Dr. Robinson's hands for many days together. Still, I may drag on a little time yet; longer perhaps than Matilda fancied. She made sure I was going. And—would you believe it?—she actually called on Dr. Robinson privately to ascertain from him the real state of my health, and as to the probabilities of my surviving! Did you ever know anything so heartless? I found it out quite by chance, in the course of conversation with Dr. Robinson. And not content with that, she actually went to my lawyer here, Mr. Feetham, and tried to extract from him particulars as to my property, and the real nature of the will he had made for me: coolly asked him, indeed, for a copy of the will! But of course Feetham was a match for her—wouldn't listen to her. I never knew anything so disgraceful! And it wasn't as if she was poor. She's comfortably provided for, as I've already said—as you very well know. It wasn't as if I didn't treat her well. I made her quite at home in this house. She had the best spare bed-room. I even took the large *cheval* glass out of my own room, and put it in her's to make her comfortable—girls like a large glass, you know. And she had my best port-wine every day after dinner.

I quite put myself out of the way to do honour to her. If she'd been my own daughter, I couldn't have treated her with more affectionate care. I took a seat at church expressly for her, and my bill at Harness's the livery-stables, is just double, during the last two months, what it usually is: I was for ever taking her drives, and was really anxious that she should see all that there is to be seen about Beachville and its neighbourhood. And this is the return for all the trouble I've taken, and the expense I've been put to! I may well feel angry and indignant at being so shamefully tricked. She gets privately married to Barlow at Prawnford church! She knew I should not approve of such a match. I suppose the truth wouldn't have come out at all if Barlow hadn't been compelled to quit the place. His London creditors had found him out, and come down after him. So he goes away,—and she goes with him, and leaves me a note, informing me of her marriage, and asking me to forgive her 'little deception,' as she calls it. But—forgive her, I never will!"

"Not immediately, perhaps," said Mr. Hobson. (He remembered he had promised Barlow to do something in the way of pleading his cause, though he had not found Miss Hobson very disposed to listen to

any such pleading.) “Not immediately perhaps. You are, just now—naturally, I must say—indignant at Matilda’s want of candour. But by-and-by——”

“Don’t ask me, Frank. I will never see her again. *Never!*” And Miss Hobson said this so solemnly, that her nephew felt it was quite useless, at such a moment, for him to urge anything more on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Barlow.

“I read Matilda’s note five times over. I couldn’t believe my eyes at first. Then I ordered a fly, and drove over to Prawnford church, and saw the entry in the books. It was most scandalous. I was very angry, as you may suppose. The first thing I did when I got home was to send away Matilda’s aquarium. I couldn’t bear the sight of it. I told Mogford he might have it in his pantry if he liked; or cook might keep it in the kitchen: but let it remain in the drawing-room, *I would not!* I was quite determined as to that. I don’t know what became of it. I haven’t asked, and don’t want to know. I shall be just as well pleased if they’ve thrown it into the sea. Of course, afterwards I saw Mr. Blenkinsop, and Dr. Robinson, and Mr. Feetham. And so I became acquainted with all I’ve been telling you. It’s a most shameful story. How a woman

who's had anything like a decent bringing-up could act in such a way, is more than I can tell you. But Matilda was all treachery and deceit. She did everything she could to deceive me. Even to pretending to be pleased at certain little attentions *you* seemed to be paying her."

"She pretended *that*, did she?"

"Yes, to throw me off my guard. She suspected probably that I had thought once of a match between you and her. And she even had the audacity to say on one occasion, in her patronising way, that it would be an excellent thing for Sophy Brown, if Mr. Barlow would take a fancy to her. And at that very time she was herself married to Mr. Barlow! Did you ever know anything so shameless? It's quite shocking to me to think that she ever remained a night under my roof. I don't know when I shall get over it. It puts me all of a tremble. Thank you, Frank. It must be only half a glass." (Mr. Hobson had been pressing sherry, as a remedy, upon his aunt). "You know if people were to read in a book of such a thing happening, they wouldn't believe it. I'm quite sure they wouldn't. Her meanness and cunning seem to me to be beyond anything I ever heard of. Why, do you know—of

course I never interfere in such matters, and I wouldn't mention it now, except to one of the family—she was so shabby as to go away without giving anything to the servants! Don't tell me that she forgot it. People don't forget those sort of things. It was her meanness,—downright meanness. She was too stingy to give Mogford even a shilling. And she never spared the servants. She wasn't at all that sort of woman. She gave a great deal of trouble in a house. She was for ever ringing her bell; required a great deal of attention; far more than I do myself. But there, she's gone now! I wash my hands of her. I'll take good care she never darkens my door again. I'm afraid you'll think me very tiresome with my long story. But it really does me good to speak my mind out about Matilda. I feel ever so much the better for having had my say out. Still I won't keep you any longer. Your time is but short at the seaside, and I dare say you'll like to make the most of it. You'll like to get a blow on the pier before dinner, I've no doubt. Men generally like a walk before dinner.

“Won't you be persuaded to take a turn, aunt? It would do you good,” said Frank Hobson.

“Well I really think a turn in the fresh air

would do me good, Frank. I'll put on my bonnet."

Mr. Hobson must have been high in favour to have enjoyed the privilege of his aunt's company during his promenade upon Beachville pier. Such a distinction was conferred upon few. It was a sedate sort of saunter they enjoyed. But Miss Hobson had talked away her wrath for the time. She said little more about Matilda Milner's malefactions. She discussed rather her nephew's future plans, and discoursed upon house-rent and furnishing, and was urgent in recommending an ironmonger at whose establishment kitchen-utensils could be procured at little more than wholesale prices.

"As for the trousseau, you know, Frank," said Miss Hobson, "I intend to see about that. And I'll take care that little Sophy has a nice one. You may depend upon that."

"I think if Mr. Tomkisson could have seen his friend thus engaged, he would have applauded and approved vehemently; for it decidedly looked as though Mr. Hobson "was cultivating his aunt" very effectually.

They returned from their walk to a very nicely chosen dinner. It seemed almost as though the

cares hitherto lavished upon the tastes of Mr. Barlow were in future to be placed at the service of Frank Hobson.

After dinner Miss Hobson withdrew to the drawing-room. She declared herself a little tired with her walk: she so seldom walked: and frankly avowed she should take a nap before tea. "So you needn't hurry, Frank," she said; "and if you want any more wine, or it isn't quite the sort you like, you've only to ring. Mogford will get you whatever you want."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MOGFORD AND MADEIRA.

SHORTLY after the withdrawal of Miss Hobson, Mogford entered, although the bell had not been rung. There was an important and confidential air about Mogford as he placed a pint decanter on the table.

“I thought you might perhaps like to try *this*, sir,” he said persuasively, in a voice little above a whisper. “It’s Madeiry—prime and old. We’ve only a few pints of it left. I know gentlemen are fond of Madeiry generally; so I ventured upon decanting it. Missus values it; but I think, for her own drinking, she prefers the brown sherry. Ladies do, mostly; it’s stronger and sweeter; and they don’t care for dryness; they think it’s acidity. I *know* this is the real thing, sir, if you’re at all fond of Madeiry.”

Mogford lingered with an expression of deep interest while the wine was tasted and approved.

“Excellent,” quoth Mr. Hobson; “very choice

and delicate." He spoke as one deeply learned in wines. His connoisseur manner as he sipped, and swallowed, and smacked his lips, was really impressive. It would have done good to the heart of any butler who took an interest in the cellar under his charge.

"I thought it would about suit you," said Mogford smiling; and still he lingered, while Frank Hobson refilled his glass.

"We've had some queer doings in Beachville since you was here last, sir," Mogford ventured to observe.

"Ah! So I hear."

"Wonderful queer doings—quite the talk of the place. I suppose you was rather surprised, sir, when you heard that Mr. Barlow and Miss Milner had made a match of it on the quiet?"

"Well, I own I *was* surprised, Mogford."

"Took us all by surprise, sir; that's the fact. I don't mind saying that I thought there was a *something* going on. But I didn't think it was *that*; not quite that." Then after a moment's hesitation Mogford continued: "Mr. Barlow was a friend of yours, was he not, sir?"

"Well, Mogford, I knew something of him a long time ago. But I hadn't met him for years until I found him down here the other day."

"Just so, sir. And might I be so bold as to ask, sir, if you think him *safe*?"

"*Safe*? How do you mean, Mogford?"

"Well, the fact is, sir, there was a little money transaction between Mr. Barlow and me. I hold his IOU for ten pounds, in fact. It isn't a thing I'd have mentioned, sir, only that Mr. Barlow went away so sudden, and there's so much talk in the place about his owing a good bit of money, and not daring to show his face here again. You see, sir, a man don't like to lose ten pounds, if he can help it; and I own I'm a little anxious about it. I hope you don't think I'm taking a liberty in speaking to you on the subject."

"Oh dear no, Mogford." And then it occurred to Frank Hobson that possibly Mogford's chances of obtaining repayment of his loan were not particularly good. Barlow was not very likely to be at Beachville again for some little time to come; and it was pretty clear that he was in a somewhat embarrassed state. Probably there were many creditors whose claims upon him were of a more urgent nature than Mogford's. It would be rather hard to omit to pay the butler his ten pounds. Still, it was on the cards that Mr. Barlow might be guilty of such an omission.

"I should think that eventually you'll get your

money, Mogford," Frank Hobson said, with hesitation, as though he had not much confidence in the opinion he expressed. Mogford looked rather lugubrious.

"Of course, I shouldn't have lent it to Mr. Barlow if I had known about him—what I know now, sir. But I was rather took by surprise. Still, I didn't think there was anything so very strange about it. Any gentleman may run short occasionally, you see, sir."

"No doubt, Mogford, no doubt." At the same time Mr. Hobson tried to look as though he had himself no personal experience of the "run short" condition.

"And Mr. Barlow was then, you see, sir, well-established in the place; Mr. Blenkinsop's curate, and much admired and run after. He preached an excellent sermon. I went to hear him once or twice myself, sir. And he was a good judge of a glass of wine; a very good judge, sir; especially port, sir; clergymen mostly like port, I think, sir. He was made a great deal of in Beachville, sir; dined at the best houses; and then—you'll excuse me for mentioning it, sir—but others noticed it besides me, sir; and it was certainly talked about at one time as if here was something in it,—I did think at one time,"

Mr. Mogford bent down his head and spoke in a whisper, "that there was a chance of his coming to be *master* in this house."

"Indeed!" said Frank Hobson, rather uneasily, for he felt that to be talking scandal of the lady of the house—not to mention her being his aunt—in her own dining-room with her own servant was a proceeding of an unpleasantly treacherous character.

"Yes," Mogford continued; "it was before Miss Milner come, sir. And his attentions to Missus was decidedly what you may call *marked*, sir. And it didn't seem to me as if she objected, sir. Quite the contrary. Indeed——"

But Frank Hobson hindered the further flow of Mr. Mogford's opinions and revelations.

"You know, Mogford, I can't listen to any stories of that kind about my aunt," he said, rather stiffly.

"No, of course not, sir," Mogford acquiesced.

"No offence, I hope, sir."

"Oh dear no."

"If you would like a little more Madeiry, sir—?"

"Not to day, Mogford, thank you."

And so Mr. Hobson's interview with his aunt's butler was brought to a close.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. AND MRS. BARLOW.

FRANK HOBSON'S brief sojourn at Beachville passed off pleasantly enough. His aunt made much of him : was disposed to parade her approval of him and his proceedings by way of demonstrating her censure of the evil deeds of Miss Milner. In vain, however, did he seek to obtain any relaxation of Miss Hobson's severity in regard to that young lady and her husband. "Don't speak of them, Frank," Miss Hobson would say. "Pray don't. I'd rather not even think of them. I've quite done with them. And I should prefer never to hear their names mentioned again. I don't want to be reminded of unpleasant things. And I'm only sorry that I should be in any way connected with people who can conduct themselves so disgracefully. I say 'people,' but of course I more especially refer to Matilda. I attribute everything to her, and I entertain quite a horror of her. As for poor Mr. Barlow, I look upon

him rather with contempt and pity than anything else. How could he consent to be a puppet in the hands of that woman?"

Now when a lady permits herself to speak of another lady as "that woman," it is pretty clear that a desperate feeling of animosity has arisen between them. The only way then is to keep the twain as far asunder as possible, and to avoid mention of the name of one in the presence of the other, unless you particularly desire to fire a train and to occasion a great fulmination. So Mr. Hobson threw up his brief in the matter of Mr. and Mrs. Barlow; it was quite hopeless for him to continue his pleadings on their behalf; for the court—in which Miss Hobson represented the presiding judge—was too insuperably prejudiced against them. Thenceforward it was evident there was to be a feud between his aunt and his cousin; and to exert himself further in favour of the latter would be to forfeit altogether the good opinion of the former. If he was bound to choose with which party he would side, Mr. Hobson came to the conclusion that, for many reasons, it was expedient for him to espouse the cause of his aunt rather than that of Mrs. Barlow. "After all," he said to himself, "Matilda has no sort of claim upon me. I don't see that she behaved particularly well

to me. Certainly, at one time, for purposes of her own, she held out a sort of encouragement to me. She was nearly trifling with my young affections” (here he grinned), “only a happier kind of fate was reserved for me. No; the Barlows must go their own ways. I stand by old Aunt Fanny—for Sophy’s sake as well as my own. And so that matter’s settled.” After which reflection he sought no more to mitigate the asperity of his aunt’s sentiments in relation to Matilda and her husband.

Returning to London on the Monday morning he was charged to convey to his affianced bride a present from Miss Hobson, consisting of a bracelet of Beachville agates and pebbles set in gold. This, with many expressions of his aunt’s love and good wishes, he was bidden to hand to Miss Brown, who declared herself charmed with the gift—most grateful for Miss Hobson’s kindness. For his own part, Mr. Hobson was inclined to regard the bracelet with rather disparaging eyes. “I never find I care much for sea-side jewels,” he said.

“Oh, Frank, they’re sweetly pretty,” avowed Sophy.

“But they’re in the nature of ‘common objects;’ and ‘common objects’ always remind me of Matilda.”

"I declare you're for ever thinking of Matilda, Frank. I shall grow quite jealous."

"Shall you? I'm going to call on her at the Grosvenor Hotel. You'd better come with me. Will you? She'll be *so* delighted to see us. *So* full of congratulations to *dear* Sophy." (Here followed a little mimicry of Mrs. Barlow's staccato manner.) "Besides, she'll want to know all that Aunt Fanny says about her. But I think she'll find a little of that will be quite enough for her. I haven't a very favourable account to give her."

"Don't stay longer than you can help, Frank."

"You may be sure I shan't."

"May I? I've a great mind to go with you."

"You want to see Barlow. I think you always had a sort of quiet tenderness for Barlow."

"You may go by yourself, then. You'll have a dreadful long mercenary sort of talk, I know—about Miss Hobson's money, and Matilda's money. Fortunately you can't talk about mine, for I haven't got any. And you really don't admire my bracelet? How ungrateful! I feel quite ashamed of you."

"It isn't half good enough. Now, if it had been diamonds instead of Beachville pebbles, it would have been about the thing."

"The idea of my wearing diamonds! You ex-

travagant creature! The wife of a poor barrister wearing diamonds, and dining on hashed mutton! It would be too absurd!”

“We’ll consider it as an instalment on account: a tolerable beginning—old Aunt Fanny will do better next time, perhaps; she’ll advance by easy stages from Beachville pebbles to precious stones. Why shouldn’t you wear diamonds? Could they adorn a more fascinating young person—a fairer brow—a slenderer wrist—a daintier neck?”

“Don’t be a goose, Frank.”

“I should think the hashed mutton prime venison, and the dinner sherry real nectar——”

“We shan’t be able to afford sherry, sir.”

“Not even *dinner* sherry? Well, then, the Chiswick ale. I suppose *that* will be within our means, you little screw. But let me complete my observation. I should regard the hashed mutton as prime venison, and the Chiswick ale as genuine nectar, if I could see you on the other side of the table adorned with diamonds. I should feel myself quite up in the clouds, hobnobbing with a goddess—one of the best behaved in the heathen mythology—and immensely enjoying the occupation.”

After a little more nonsensical talk of this kind with Miss Brown, Frank Hobson went forth to call upon the Barlows at the Grosvenor Hotel.

He paced up and down the palatial hall of that establishment, marvelling, as people do marvel, pacing the halls of large hotels, at the splendid proportions and gorgeous fitting-up of everything about, and asking himself, as Englishmen invariably do ask themselves on such occasions, whether, considered as a speculation, the undertaking could ever be remunerative to its proprietors. A messenger had been despatched—or an inquiry had been whispered up a pipe—to ascertain whether the Barlows were within the precincts of the hotel. After a pause, Mr. Hobson was informed that Mr. Barlow was out, but that Mrs. Barlow was at home. Then Mr. Hobson sent up his card, and finally was led up-stairs to a neat sitting-room on the second floor, and admitted to the presence of Mrs. Barlow.

That lady—she has been known to us hitherto as Miss Milner—we have now formally to recognise her promotion to be the wife of the Reverend George Barlow, late curate of St. Jude's, Beachville—that lady, I say, was discovered sitting at an open writing-desk, with a huddle of loose papers before her. She appeared to be busily engaged in arranging and annotating bills, letters, and other documents. She rose from her seat as Mr. Hobson entered. "My dear Frank," she said; *how* do you do? And *how's dear*

little Sophy?" And then, without waiting or appearing greatly to care for the answers he might think fit to give to these inquiries, she continued: "*Pray* take a chair. *Pray* put down your hat. I am *so* pleased to see you!"

She smiled upon him with a gracious calmness. Her cool white fingers pressed his hand, sedately welcoming him. She seemed perfectly undisturbed—thoroughly collected and self-possessed. She spoke in her old precisely-articulate way. The confusion that sometimes prettily suffuses the brow and flushes the cheek, and incommodes the utterance of the newly-married, did not trouble Matilda Barlow in any way. But it must be said for her that she looked very handsome: a massive statuesque blonde, most tastefully attired in rich blue silk, very ample in its folds, with a simple blue ribbon twisted among the bands of her fair hair; while about the solid repose of her manner there was a certain charm which Mr. Hobson did not fail to appreciate.

"She's really a remarkably fine woman," he said to himself. She smiled upon him. Perhaps she perceived and was not displeased by his admiring contemplation. She liked admiration. Most women do. And men, too, for that matter.

"It's *very* good of you, Frank, occupied as you

must be just now, to find time for visiting a *poor parson's wife*," she said. ("She doesn't look much like a poor parson's wife, however," thought Frank Hobson.) To the peculiar circumstances attending her marriage, Mrs. Barlow did not allude.

"I am *so* sorry George should be out," she continued. And then she asked, a little abruptly, "You've just come from Beachville, haven't you?"

"Yes. I went down on Saturday, and have just come back."

"And *how* did you leave Aunt Fanny? But I need hardly ask. She's *very* angry with George and myself, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid I must say that she is very angry."

"Yes. I feared she would find the little deception we practised upon her *very* hard to forgive. But it was done for the best. I suppose you had your own peace to make. She knows, of course, of your engagement to Sophy. Was she angry about that, also?"

"No. I am bound to say she has taken a very favourable view of the case altogether. She expressed herself very kindly in regard to Sophy." Mrs. Barlow looked a little disappointed.

"Naturally you were too full of your own business to be able to think *much* about ours. George

told me you had promised to exert yourself on our behalf. But I explained to him that we could *hardly* expect it. *Naturally* you had to think in the first instance about yourself and Sophy."

"Well, I said what I could for you, Matilda. But it wasn't of much avail."

"And *of course* you couldn't help bearing in mind that every word you said for us was, in a measure, spoken against your own interests."

"I don't quite understand."

"It's pretty clear, too, Frank," Mrs. Barlow explained, rather tartly. If *we've* offended Aunt Fanny, *of course* she'll leave her money to *you*. If *we're* restored to favour, I suppose we shall receive a share of whatever she leaves behind her. By so much, then, in that case, *you* will be a sufferer."

This cut and dried plan for disposing of Miss Hobson's property did not sound very pleasantly in her nephew's ears.

"Surely it will be time enough, by-and-by, Matilda," he said, "to think about the division of Aunt Fanny's money."

"That's all very well for you, Frank, who are now high in her favour,"—and Mrs. Barlow laughed acidly. "But Aunt Fanny's health is very pre-

carious. It's really the *duty* of her relatives to concern themselves about the disposal of her property."

"I don't see that her health is so very precarious," Frank Hobson said, bluntly. "I think there's a good deal of fancy about her delicate health. It's my belief that she's as hearty a woman for her years as one's likely to see anywhere."

Mrs. Barlow shook her head. "I'm of a different opinion," she said.

"You heard nothing from Dr. Robinson to justify you in that opinion."

"Does *she* know I went to Dr. Robinson? How *very* provoking. It must have seemed *so* strange."

"Yes. She thought it strange, and rather worse, perhaps. For my part, I maintain she's just as likely to live to be a hundred as any one I know. And I'm sure I hope she may."

Mrs. Barlow mused for a little while.

"I may have been wrong," she said. "But I confess I thought her sinking. It was for that reason I impressed upon George the importance of our marriage being kept a secret. For I knew she wouldn't like it. To tell you the plain truth, Frank, I believe she really wanted George herself."

“Well, I don’t know anything about that, Matilda,” said Frank Hobson.

“But when George left Beachville we were necessarily obliged to disclose the fact of our marriage. He *would* have me go with him. We almost quarrelled about the thing. It was very unfortunate. And I suppose we have offended her now quite past forgiveness. However, it’s all happened very luckily *for you*, Frank. I know she intended to leave everything *to me* at one time. But *now* it will all go to you.” And Mrs. Barlow sighed deeply.

“You seem to think a good deal about money, Matilda. Surely you’ve got enough of your own.” Frank Hobson began to weary of his “mercenary sort of talk” with his cousin, as Sophy Brown had described it by anticipation. It had proved more mercenary in its nature than he had quite been prepared for.

“Frank, it’s my belief,” said Mrs. Barlow,—and she spoke with the air of one wholly convinced,—“it’s my belief that one can’t have too much money.”

After this, there seemed little more to be said—at any rate in that respect. Frank Hobson rose.

“I’m afraid I’ve been detaining you?”

"Not at all. I was very busy with these papers when you came in. But they can wait."

"I suppose there's little chance of my seeing Barlow?"

"Very little, I fear."

"You don't expect him home immediately?"

"Well, no. To tell you the truth, Frank, he's not staying at the Grosvenor at present."

"Not staying here? Where is he, then?"

"Well, he's away for a few days." And Mrs. Barlow looked a little disturbed.

"Why, you've not quarrelled—you're not separated already?" demanded Frank Hobson, in an explosion of surprise.

"Hush, Frank. Not quite so loud. Waiters and people are always going to and fro in the corridor here. No. We're not separated. That is to say, we're not separated in the way you mean. But probably you are aware that George is a good deal in debt?"

"Well—yes. I have heard as much."

"I was not aware of it at the time of our marriage, or else——" But Mrs. Barlow did not complete her sentence. "George was certainly wanting in candour in that respect, as in some others—for

instance, his expectations from Lord Stoneacre. I now know that he is not so nearly related—I have looked in the Peerage—as he at one time led me to believe.”

(“Can she ever have fancied that she had a chance of becoming Lady Stoneacre?” Frank Hobson asked himself.)

“However,” she resumed, “I won’t dwell upon that now. I was saying that *Georgé* is a good deal in debt. He owes money at Beachville and in London. His creditors have been very pertinacious in following him. And, in point of fact, he was arrested on Saturday.”

Frank Hobson whistled. “And he’s not been released? He’s still locked up?”

“He’s still locked up. He’s in some dreadful place near Chancery Lane.”

“Cursitor Street?”

“Yes. That’s the name of the street, I believe.”

“You haven’t been to see him, then?”

“How *could* I go to such a place, Frank?” demanded Mrs. Barlow, surprised that anything of the kind should be expected of her. “No, I sent down to him yesterday his dressing-case and some clean things. And he sends word that, altogether,

he's pretty comfortable. And meanwhile I'm endeavouring to come to some arrangement with his creditors."

"Well, I should say that the sooner you can come to some such arrangement the happier it will be for poor Barlow."

"Yes; of course. I was going carefully through the accounts when you came in. I think I've got a pretty accurate list of his liabilities made out now. But I find it doesn't do to be in too great a hurry in these cases."

"Well. Probably Barlow will think the more hurry the better. It can't be very pleasant for him to be locked up in Cursitor Street."

"That's very true. But I must consider myself as well as George. You know he hasn't treated me quite fairly. He insisted on our marriage being disclosed; and really that's done all the mischief. The creditors are very grasping; but they may overreach themselves. They think because I'm George's wife, and happen to have some money of my own—it's *entirely* under my own control, Frank—that I shall at once pay all his debts in full, in order to obtain his release. But they may find themselves mistaken; they don't know whom they've got to

deal with." ("They don't, indeed," murmured Frank Hobson.) "They may find that I can be as obstinate as *they* can. I shall offer them a moderate sum—a fair composition—and if they don't choose to take it—they may do their worst. I'm in no hurry. They shall not tire *me* out."

"But all this time, poor Barlow will be locked up!"

"There's no help for it, Frank. And he's only himself to thank for it. Why did he get into debt? Is it fair that his creditors should be paid out of *my* money? But fair or not, they certainly shall not be so paid. I offer them a fair composition: say two shillings in the pound, or something like that. They may take that or nothing. If they decline my offer, I wash my hands of the whole business. I've done with it; and George may go through the court."

"Poor George!"

"But he's brought it entirely on himself. If there's anybody to be pitied, I'm sure it should be *me* rather than George. The trouble and annoyance and anxiety this business has been to me, you've no notion, Frank!"

"Well, if you were locked up I should pity you, Matilda. But you see you're not. So I can't help giving all my pity to George, poor fellow!"

"I'm willing to do all I can for him. More than many women would do, I'm sure."

"I don't know about that, Matilda."

"What else *could* I do, short of paying his debts in full? *That*, of course, is out of the question."

"I do believe that if it were my case, and I were to be locked up, Sophy would never rest till she had me out. She'd sell the clothes off her back, and the shoes off her feet, aye, and the hair off her head, I do believe, but she would have me out!"

"Oh, yes. We all know that Sophy is——" she checked herself; then said, "a dear, good little girl." Probably she had at first contemplated a less flattering description of Mr. Hobson's choice.

"And I love her with all my soul! Bless her!" cried Frank Hobson, with unaccustomed fervour.

"You're to be congratulated, I'm sure, on having won such a treasure!" said Mrs. Barlow, rather drily. "Are you *sure* you won't take any lunch?" This was her first hint of an offer of that refection.

"Not any, thank you," and he rose to go. "Well, Matilda," he said, as he stood at the door, "as you hold the purse-strings, and it all seems to rest with you, I do hope you'll do all you can to get Barlow out of prison."

“Of course I shall, Frank: short of anything foolish. I don’t see that there’s any occasion for my making an absurd sacrifice. George can hardly expect me to do that.”

“I don’t think Sophy, in such a case, would consider any sacrifice absurd.”

“Poor, dear Sophy. She’s no notion of the value of money, I’m afraid.”

“I’m afraid not. At any rate, she thinks there are some things of more value than money.”

“Yes, but then she’s never known, poor child, what it is to have any money.”

“If the knowledge is to make much change in her, I hope she may never know what it is to have any money. But we won’t discuss it any more, Matilda. I’ll only say I shall be very glad to see George free again. And I shall be very happy to serve him if I can. Will it be any use my going round and talking to the creditors?”

“Thank you, Frank. But I don’t think I need trouble you. Mr. Blatherwick, my solicitor, happens to be concerned for one of George’s chief creditors. I’ve great confidence in Mr. Blatherwick; and I’m sure he’ll do all that’s right in the matter.”

“I’m sure he will,” said Frank Hobson. “Good-by.”

"Good-by, Frank. I shall be *always* glad to see you. You'll be *sure* to give my kind love to Sophy, will you? Couldn't you bring her to call with you some day? I'm afraid I can't get so far as Hoxton. She lives at Hoxton, doesn't she?"

"She's staying at Islington at present."

"Just so. But Islington and Hoxton are the same kind of thing—so very far off. I fear I can't undertake to call upon her, so occupied as I am just now with poor George's affairs. And then I shall be moving into lodgings soon; of course this place is too expensive to remain in for long. But I suppose your marriage will not be very immediately."

"It will take place as soon as possible, Matilda."

"Indeed! I didn't know, to speak plainly, that you, either of you, had the means to marry at once."

"We're going,—frightful as it may appear to you, Matilda,—we're going to marry without means."

"Dear me! It *does* sound rather rash. But of course you know your own business best. I'm sure I wish you every happiness, Frank; and I shall venture, if you'll allow me, to send poor dear Sophy a little offering on the occasion, which I hope she'll be good enough to accept."

Frank Hobson had it on the tip of his tongue to

say, "Don't trouble yourself;" but he murmured, instead, "Thank you, you're very kind, Matilda. Good-by," and departed.

It may be mentioned here, lest a more favourable opportunity for reporting the fact may not arise, that in due course Miss Brown received Mrs. Barlow's little offering. It was of no great value; but of course as people say, "the feeling which prompts the gift is everything." It consisted of a photographic album; a very cheap one, with an imitation morocco cover and very shaky clasps; the binding of the book gave way altogether after it had been opened a few times.

Sophy Brown was not an exacting person: by no means inclined to run counter to the proverb which bids one not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Still, with all her amiable disposition to think the best of Mrs. Barlow and her offering, she found it impossible to set a very high value upon the photographic album, or the feeling which prompted its presentation to her.

"Throw it out of the window," said Mr. Hobson.

"No, Frank, I won't do that. Because, after all, it's a present. I tell you what I'll do with it: I'll make it a sort of 'hospital for incurables'—I'll keep it for the photographs of unpleasant people. One's obliged to have their *cartes* sometimes, and one never

knows what to do with them. I can't bear to see them in my regular album—I'll put them in Matilda's book!”

“And put Matilda's own portrait on the first page, by way of frontispiece. I'm sure she's the chief of incurables. I do believe she's out-and-out the most unpleasant woman I know.”

“You did not think so always, Frank,” Miss Brown said, shaking her head.

“Didn't I?”

“No, certainly not. When you first came down to Beachville you didn't think Matilda so very unpleasant.”

“Perhaps not. But then I didn't know her as I know her now.”

“You only knew——” and then Sophy Brown stopped.

“That she had money, and that I had none, and so I was drawn towards her? Is that what you mean to say, Sophy?”

“No, Frank, no.”

“Would you like to hear a confession, Sophy? Would you like to know to what shabbiness I could stoop? Perhaps it's only right that you should know: it's only just that you should be informed with

how mean a motive I first went down to Beachville——”

“ I want to know nothing of the kind. I won't listen to anything of the kind. Who am I that you should be confessing to me? What does it matter what you thought about, or what you did, when you first went down to Beachville? Didn't the manner of your leaving Beachville make amends for all? Do you forget our talk in the railway carriage? Nothing that happened before that is worth remembering. Up to that point bygones are bygones. If you cared about Matilda before, you care about me now, and [a great deal more. Isn't that very certain?”

“ Very certain. Then you forgive——”

“ You silly Frank, don't you see that I have nothing to forgive?” She had spoken with such earnestness that she had brought tears into her eyes. The tears were soon stayed, however—kissed away, possibly.

But this little scene has been taken out of its turn.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CURTAIN FALLS UPON A TABLEAU.

“ I’M thankful to be in the open air again,” Mr. Hobson said to himself, as he left his cousin and the Grosvenor Hotel behind him, and bent his steps eastward. “ Talking to Matilda is like being in a stuffy bank-parlour, where they think of nothing but about money. How different it is to be in the presence of Sophy! One breathes there a purer atmosphere; one contemplates one of the most charming of Heaven’s creations—a fair and good woman; one listens to the music of the prettiest of voices, every note of it pure and sound, and every thought to which it gives expression, honest and true. I’m sure that dear little girl couldn’t do an unworthy thing—couldn’t think an unworthy thought. It’s only wonderful that she should care at all for such a selfish humbug as I feel myself to be compared to her. Why doesn’t she see through me, and express at

once her utter contempt for me? Perhaps she does see through me; but sees also that I intend to be better henceforward, and to become every day more and more worthy of the happiness of possessing her. In time I shall become leavened with her goodness, and altogether an altered and a better sort of person——I beg your pardon!”

Further he might have pursued his vein of rhapsody in relation to Miss Brown and the bliss of his projected union with that young person, but that he happened to run against a passer-by, seriously to the endangerment of his equilibrium.

“Hullo! Confound you! Where are you coming to? Why don't you look where you're going to? What! is it *you*, Hobson? My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you.” And then Frank Hobson found himself cordially shaking hands with Mr. Blatherwick.

“What, so you've been up to the Grosvenor, have you? To see your cousin, Mrs. Barlow? I thought as much. Yes; they've settled it between them on the quiet. Barlow's made his 'advantageous match.' Much good may it do him! A nice kettle of fish it seems likely to turn out altogether. He's locked up; *that*, I suppose, you know. And he'll probably

remain locked up, it appears, for all his wife's likely to do to get him out. She's a wonderful woman of business! Wonderful! She swears—that is to say, she declares—she won't offer more than two shillings in the pound. But it isn't to be supposed the creditors will accept *that*. They *know* she's plenty of money to pay them all in full twice over, if she thought proper. They argue: here's a husband locked up—here's a young wife with plenty of money—why doesn't she come down with it and set her husband free? It would be only natural, they say. It isn't as if they were an old married couple, and rather preferred to part, as some old married couples do, you know."

"But they don't find that that argument has much weight with Matilda?"

"Well, they don't. And they can't understand it at all. And they're getting quite savage about it. They vow they won't give in, and that they'll stand out for the last halfpenny."

"It's rather a bad look out for Barlow."

"Well, it *is*. A clergyman, too! I'm sure I'd do anything I could to assist him. I've an enormous respect for the Church. But these clever women with money! They're the deuce and all, that's the

fact. They are so uncommon hard and sharp. And I'm afraid Barlow wasn't quite open and above board. Perhaps he deserves a little locking up: in moderation, I mean. I think he took her in a little. I think he put his relationship to Lord Stoneacre a little too forward; and she's found him out, and she's paying him off for it."

"What will be the end of it? Will he have to go through the Court?"

"It will be a thousand pities if it comes to that. It wouldn't so much matter if he were a layman. He'd slip through easy enough then. But being a clergyman, you see, you have to get his cassock and his surplice through with him, and they've a way of *catching*, and getting torn and pulled about a good deal in the Bankruptcy Court. We must try and compromise the thing, if we can—that's what we must try and do."

Mr. Hobson shook his head. "I don't think you'll find Matilda give in," he said. "I've just been talking to her. She's very firm about it."

"Well, there's just this chance, you see," explained Mr. Blatherwick. "She managed that settlement business all by herself. She got a form from me to look at, and adapted it to her own case.

Wonderfully clever woman. But sometimes these wonderfully clever women are a little too clever. I suspect there may be some informality about the business. I'm not sure that she's handed over everything to her trustees. She's just the sort of woman who'd think it clever to keep something back: for fear of accidents, as she'd put it. It's not impossible but that we might pick a hole in that settlement, if we gave our minds to it. Or perhaps we might plunge the whole thing into Chancery. Even the threat of doing that might influence her, and bring her to terms. She's an awful screw, you know. She wouldn't like the notion of any of her money being spent in costs—your fees and mine, you know," laughed Mr. Blatherwick.

"Poor Barlow!" said Frank Hobson.

"Take my advice, my dear Hobson," quoth Mr. Blatherwick, "and don't be persuaded to marry a woman with money, let her be ever so clever and charming."

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind. Quite the contrary. I'm going to marry a girl who hasn't a halfpenny."

"What! The trim little wench I saw you with under the umbrella? I congratulate you. A man may well be proud of such a wife. Never mind her not

having a halfpenny. She's the neatest ankles I ever saw, and I am an elderly man now, and I've seen a good many. When is it to come off?"

"Very soon."

"The sooner the better. And, mind, I'm good for a tea-pot—none of your electro rubbish; a good, substantial, old-fashioned, True-Blue, silver tea-pot. And I'll come and have many a cup of tea with you and Mrs. H. out of it. I liked the girl directly I saw her. God bless you, Hobson! You're a lucky dog."

"We shall be rather poorly off to begin with," said Frank Hobson.

"Not a bit of it. No infernal affectation. You're a rising junior, sir, that's what you are. You'll make your mark at the bar, if you haven't made it already. 'With you, Mr. Hobson,' shall appear on a good many briefs, or my name isn't Blatherwick. We shall have a dissolution in the spring. After that, look out for petitions and election committees. You're all right, Hobson, my boy. Good-by. God bless you! And give my best regards to the trim little wench—I forget her name, if you ever told it to me, and I don't think you ever did. Good-by."

And Mr. Blatherwick shook hands and hurried away.

Mr. Hobson, of course, put Sophy Brown in possession of the particulars of his interview with Mrs. Barlow.

"And she lets her husband remain in prison, rather than part with her money!" exclaimed Miss Brown. "Was there ever such a woman!"

"She certainly is a remarkably cool hand, is Matilda," said Frank Hobson.

"Why she can't be ordinary flesh and blood! She must be something of a fish! A mermaid, perhaps."

"Nothing half so nice." For it occurred to Mr. Hobson that on his first meeting with his betrothed on the parade at Beachville, he had, in his own mind, likened her to a mermaid.

"Well, then, what was that thing I saw from the top of Beachville pier, that bobbed about and dived, and then came up again?"

"A porpoise, do you mean?"

"Yes, a porpoise. Mr. Barlow explained all about it, and seemed quite learned on the subject. And now he's actually married a porpoise! Matilda's a porpoise! I believe she could dive and stay any time under water; no matter who might want her to come to the surface. As for feelings—she can't pos-

sess any! She belongs to the sea, rather than to the land, though she isn't exactly a fish, either. Has a porpoise any feelings, do you think, Frank? Does the female porpoise lock up her husband, and then go bobbing and diving about for her own amusement?"

"You must ask Barlow. He's learned about porpoises."

"Poor Mr. Barlow! Can't we do anything for him, Frank? Do you think it would be any comfort to him if we were to go and call upon him, and try and cheer him up? Fancy, Matilda not even going to see him! She *is* a porpoise, Frank. Suppose we go and see him. Shall we, Frank?"

"I don't think it's quite the place for you to go to, my dear. Cursitor Street isn't the most pleasant of places. But *I'll* go if you like."

"Yes; do go, Frank. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you. And—be *nice* with him, will you? You know what I mean. Don't tease him; but speak properly and kindly to him. Don't—as men seem to be so fond of doing—don't *chaff* him. It would be too cruel. Talk to him, and cheer him up. You can talk very nicely, and behave very properly when you like, you know, Frank."

"Thank you," said Frank.

And straightway he went to find out Mr. Barlow in Cursitor Street.

Mr. Barlow was not in the best of spirits: but he was very glad to see Frank Hobson. The incarcerated in Cursitor Street generally rejoice at the sight of a friendly face.

"I hope this isn't going to last very long, Barlow."

Mr. Barlow shook his head solemnly.

"Mrs. Barlow is a remarkable woman," he said. "I can't say how long it will last. Mrs. Barlow is settling my affairs. She's what is called a good manager. She knows the value of money. I'm afraid she won't allow herself to be brought to terms very easily."

"You must do all you can to make her listen to reason."

"It's easy to say that," observed Mr. Barlow, rather despondingly; "but Mrs. Barlow is not a woman to be driven—and, in point of fact, I can hardly say that she's a woman to be led, either. As to listening to reason, if that means paying more than two shillings in the pound, I'm afraid it can't be done. I have nothing to do but to wait patiently, Hobson. There's no help for it. It all rests with

Matilda. And I'm bound to add that Blatherwick's doing all *he* can to help me."

"It's rather a dreary look out for you, though."

"It *is* a dreary look out, Hobson. But if I *must* go through the Court, why I must; and there's no more to be said about it. And I'm afraid it will come to that. For the fact is—but this entirely between ourselves?"

"Oh, of course; of course."

"Well, then. Matilda doesn't know of *all* my debts. Somehow I shrank from telling her all. It was bad enough to have to tell her what I did. She only knows of the most pressing. There are other debts outstanding, amounting to a good deal, I'm afraid, altogether. What she'll say, what she'll do, when she comes to learn of *them*, is more than I can say."

"So that even if she settles with the present lot——?"

"There'll be another lot to deal with on some future occasion."

Frank Hobson whistled — a prolonged, solemn, significant whistle.

We will treat it if you please, as the conventional signal to the stage carpenters, and close the scene.

What more is there to tell?

A very few words will suffice to complete our chronicle.

Mr. Barlow was not obliged to resort to the Court of Bankruptcy. Mr. Blatherwick managed the matter cleverly. Mrs. Barlow was ultimately persuaded to yield a good deal; and the creditors were induced to meet her half way. She untied her purse-strings—not very willingly, but still sufficiently—and the validity and security of her marriage-settlement were not impeached. She maintained control over her dearly beloved funded property.

And did they—the Barlows—live happily together ever after?

Let us quote Mr. Blatherwick. "They're not what I call a very good match," he said, in discussing some such question with Frank Hobson. "In fact, there are, what you may call, a good many shades of difference between them. You remember what I said once about matrimony being like choosing Berlin wools? That's precisely the Barlows' case. They'll *wear* alike; they'll agree more and more as time goes on; they'll turn up a very tidy sort of match in the long run; you won't

suspect *then* that things were not quite so pleasant to begin with. But altogether, my dear boy, between ourselves, I think it's quite as well for you that Barlow married the woman with money; and that you didn't."

For Frank Hobson?

He is thriving at the bar. He has really distinguished himself. His name, much to his aunt's satisfaction, appears now quite as often in the newspapers as his old enemy's, "Central Criminal" Hobson. He is more than a rising junior now; he is a risen junior. And in a few years' time it will probably be worth his while to "take silk," and rustle into court a full-blown Q.C.

At Mr. Hobson's dinner-table you may frequently find yourself in the company of a most respectable and exemplary couple, by name Mr. and Mrs. Verulam Tomkisson. They are looked upon in society as well-to-do people. The gentleman announces that he has ceased to practise at the bar. It is probable that no great monetary sacrifice was involved in such cessation. He avows, moreover, that he is devoting himself to the education and bringing up of his wife's daughters by her first husband; and there is a rumour that he is in some mysterious way con-

nected with a dry-salting business in the City. But that may be merely a rumour : and worthless.

"And to think," said Frank Hobson to his wife, one day, in a sentimental moment—the Hobsons are rather given to sentimental moments—"to think that I first went down to Beachville with a notion of marrying Matilda Milner !"

"But it couldn't be, Frank, you know," Mrs. Hobson observed ; and then added, roguishly, "Are you not very sorry ?"

"Sorry? No! Not a bit of it," he observed. "HOBSON doesn't regret his CHOICE."

And he kissed her as he spoke.

And so we drop the curtain upon the Hobsons, and the pretty picture they composed of domestic bliss.

THE END.

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