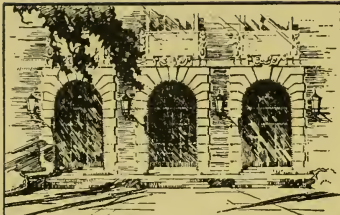


RONALD

BY

May Crommelin



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1896

BAY RONALD.

VOL. III.

BAY RONALD

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF

'QUEENIE,' 'ORANGE LILY,' 'MISS DAISY DIMITY,'
'IN THE WEST COUNTRIE,' ETC., ETC.

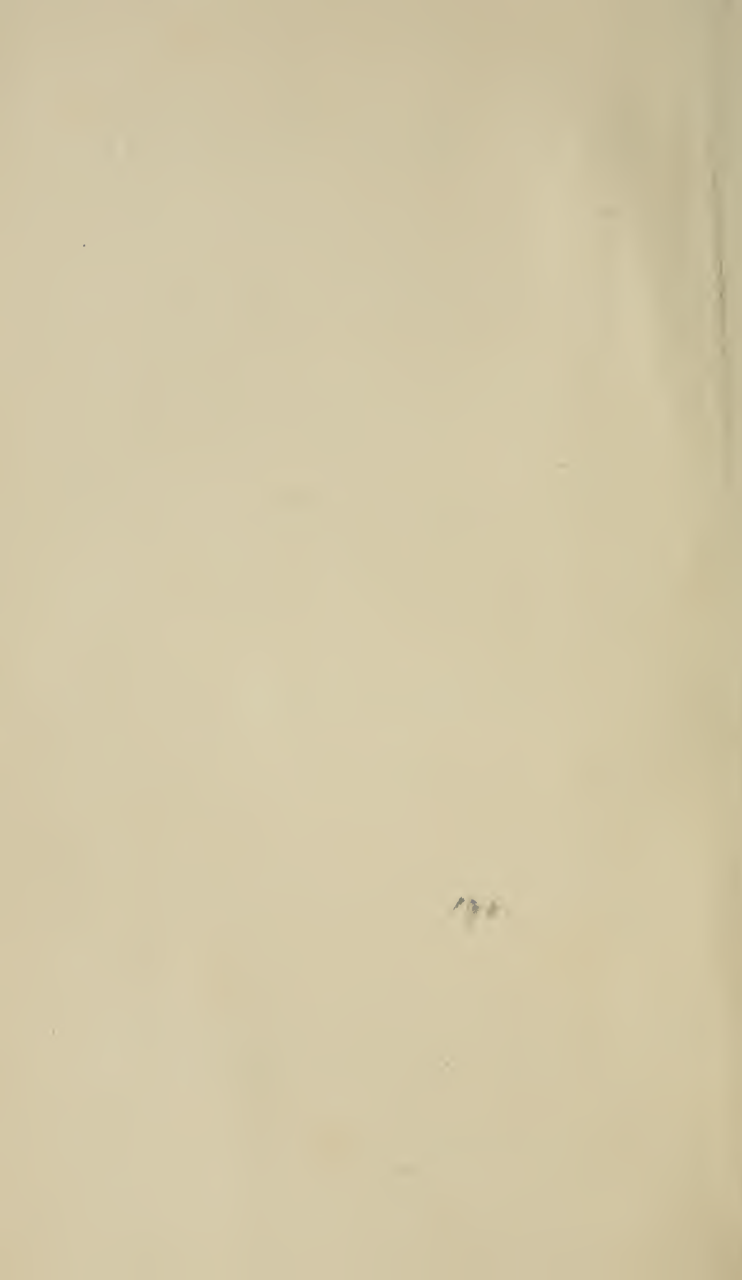
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1893.

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BAY RONALD.

CHAPTER I.

SOMEHOW it seems to many of us that the tenth commandment does not concern us so much as the other nine. Certainly we seem to break it more often. 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house,' is forgotten when our own chimneys smoke and Jones in the next square explains how much better his are built, or how incomparably superior is the system of drainage in their block. As to coveting another's 'ox or his ass,' who cares to do so? But substitute 'horse' and the envious wish takes a different complexion immediately.

Now Richie Saxby, as he was driven from the scene of his late catastrophe, coveted Dick Saxby's bay with all the strength of his very soul. Talk of Naboth's vineyard! the longing to possess *it*, he could have believed, was verily nothing in comparison with this desire that overmastered him. He had long admired Bay Ronald; wished to have him; then, indeed, paid heavy prices which the neighbours stared to hear of, in order to give himself the triumph of believing he had a better hunter than his cousin at last; all to no purpose. Richie *hated* his horse Starlight with exceeding disgust; and he actually felt a sickness of craving to call that bright bay, now disappearing down the lane, his own. He wanted to stable the beautiful animal at Rookhurst; to feel that he, Richie Saxby, could be mounted on the best hunter in Kent; for Bay Ronald *was*

the best. Oh! to think how that brown brute had blundered (Richie never blamed himself where it was possible to blame others). Then, as man and horse lay dazed on the ground, seeing Bay Ronald coming over the fence above, Richie's heart's blood turning to water for dread of those terrible hoofs crashing down, how the wise animal had twisted in the very act of descending, and—spared his life!

‘Deuce take it, that’s a clever beast of Dick Saxby’s, and I must make him a bid for it,’ he broke out, native caution forgotten in the impulse to relieve his mind.

‘Oh!’ breathed Lucy, ‘but Dick—Mr. Saxby—would surely never sell his favourite?’

‘Money will buy pretty nearly everything in this world, Miss Lucy,’ sniggered Richie, trying to peep round the edge of her bonnet. He thought in his heart: ‘It

will buy *you* too, my pretty maid, whenever I choose to make the offer. Ha! ha! ha! isn't old Rat on thorns till I do, just!

But Miss Jennings kept her face averted, and if Rat was on thorns, at least he sat also on most of the gig seat, quite forgetting how poor Lucy was being crushed in his dogged resolve not to yield Richie an inch more room than was necessary.

The captain drove slowly now to spare his mare, and, perhaps confused by his ill-temper, took a wrong turning. This delayed their return home, so that after a time the gig party chanced to meet with some stragglers from the hunt. Presently Falconer himself came in sight with the muddy pack at his heels, bound to draw another cover before it grew too late. Richie was now let in for a good deal of banter on his situation, while, to the youth's secret dudgeon, his second horse

and groom appeared, as everyone told him, in the very nick of time. Above all things, Richie hated ridicule, so vanity and a certain doggedness of character helped him to put the best face possible upon the matter and mount once more. He was heart-lazy and self-indulgent, but still he could ride fairly well when he pleased; just now he *did* please, feeling that Lucy otherwise would think him a molly coddle.

‘You are not really much hurt, I believe, Mr. Saxby?’ she said, saucily, as the chaff of the little assemblage flew about Richie’s ears, and he vowed in his heart to pay off the chit for that some day.

Meanwhile, what of our friend Dick? Slowly he had jogged on after the gig, feeling that the consciousness of virtue may be a very poor reward sometimes for having striven to do one’s duty. He had done his best for that insufferable cox-

comb, whom honest Dick disliked instinctively, much as a rough terrier does a sleek lap-dog. Thus he lost the finish of the last run of the season, and—and how could Lucy look so pleased to have that conceited puppy sitting in her pocket? It has never been supposed that Dick was clever; on the contrary, his mind, though steady, was slow of comprehension, so that Miss Jennings' explanations were much needed to show this dense fellow her bright meaning. Thus, with his shoulders up to his ears, Dick looked savage and moody, and felt he hated Richie in a refreshingly primitive fashion.

‘Confound him! I could almost believe old Amos was right, who said that he had the evil eye,’ muttered Dick. ‘And when he stares at Bay Ronald I feel as if he would like to steal or poison you, my beauty.’

By-and-by the young man's face cleared slightly; for, taking the right turn which the gig had missed, he met Falconer and the hounds. So he relieved himself by pouring out all his woes that were not too private. But, bless the boy! old Falconer guessed the rest, and was properly furious and virtuously sanguine that the wretched Rookhurst robber would come to no good, as he was pleased to term Richie.

'A poor creature who might cast sheep's-eyes at Lucy Jennings, and be hanged to him! for such a monstrous fine girl would choose a very different young fellow,' or so Falconer hoped.

Whereupon they also came in sight of the waiting gig, as also of the rest of the field. Then followed a short run, with which the present history need not concern itself.

When the day was over, Squire Falconer

pressed everyone hospitably to return with him for a last hunt dinner. It was always his custom to bring back as many guests as he could collect, and to keep them as late as they would stay. This last day of the season he would take a refusal from no one.

‘Come on ; come all of you. Tally ho ! Let’s get forrard to dinner. And Miss Lucy Jennings first and foremost of all. O, we’re not going to let our only lady slip home, not a bit of it !’

He carried his point. Lucy was a little weary after her long day in the open air, and by no means eager to be the only lady present at this impromptu fox-hunter’s feast ; still, *Dick would be there*. So they all trooped into Squire Falconer’s house, where the dinner was already being prepared, suited to most capacious appetites.

‘I drink sound old October myself,’ an-

nounced the host. 'My father and grandfather used to find it good enough for them, and so it is for me. But there's port and madeira for those who please, and claret for the ladies;' which was a sly hit at what he thought the effeminacy of the younger men.

Dick took a place befitting his age and position at the lower end of the table, Bill Butler sitting next to him. These two played David and Jonathan to each other; or rather, Bill had the most ardent admiration for his friend, and believed there was not such another good fellow as Dick in the whole kingdom. Squire Falconer, of course, placed Lucy on his right at the head of the table, with her uncle and the other older men near. Richie had tried to push in amongst the latter, but his host drily hinted he would enjoy himself more among the younger fellows; so the master

of Rookhurst was obliged to content himself with a seat lower down. Everyone was gloriously hungry after the long day. And after a while, when knives and forks were first well plied and glasses replenished, tongues began to be loosened. Of course the day's first run was ridden again, every yard of it, and, when the discussion was over, everyone agreed that no horse out that day or season was equal to Bay Ronald.

'The best horse in Kent, bar none! Yours that you gave such a pot of guineas for is not worth naming in comparison,' declared Bill Butler, with a riling grin at Richie.

The latter felt still more pricked with covetous pangs as he thought how, in boyhood, he had envied Dick the heirship of Rookhurst till he remembered being sick with spleen. Later on, his chief gratifi-

cation in their reversed positions arose from the secret joy of triumph. And now to think that Dick was still his rival, had been graciously smiled on by that impudent minx, Lucy, this very morning; while, curse him! the fellow was getting all the praise now from these rustics. Richie could not endure his feeling of mortification a second longer, so called out, trying to assume a careless tone,

‘I say, Saxby, dash it all! I’ll give you five hundred guineas for your mount.’

‘I do not want to part with my horse,’ answered Dick, quiet, though surprised.

‘Hear, hear! a very proper spirit,’ applauded Falconer from the top of the table, rapping with the handle of his fork. ‘It’s a golden rule that you young fellows should lay to heart, “When you have a good hunter, stick to him.”’

‘Why,’ said Richie, with a jeering laugh,

looking insolently down the table at Dick Saxby from under his drooping eyelids, 'for my part, although you farmers have made a lot by your wheat, these past years, still I thought the money might be useful in improving your ancestral acres at Forge Farm.'

'They were *your* father's acres, I believe,' answered Dick, turning quite pale.

Several of the older squires muttered 'Shame!' Squire Falconer grew red as any turkey-cock with anger. There was universal sympathy felt round the table for Dick. As to Lucy, the tears actually rose in her velvety black eyes; but they were quickly dried by the flame of anger that followed.

Richie felt that he had made a serious mistake. No one spoke to him for the next twenty minutes; his neighbours on either side pointedly turning away their conver-

sation. He sat sulky, annoyed with himself, furious with them all, and kept draining his glass continually.

After the cloth was taken away began the full pleasure of the evening, in the host's opinion.

'Now then, gentlemen,' cried he, jollily waving his glass, 'fill, everyone of you, and drink to "All the brushes in England."'

This was the worthy master's habitual speech at such ceremonies, and was received with hearty unfailing cheers. Then the squire gave gallantly the health of 'the prettiest girl in Kent,' bowing to his fair neighbour. Whereupon there was vociferous acclamation, and they all raised their glasses in Lucy's honour, who smiled and blushed and bridled in a way which fairly stole the heart of everyone present who had not already laid this gift at her little feet.

‘And may she choose a husband out of the company present before the year is out,’ added old Falconer, in still more jovial, stentorian tones.

There followed thunders of applause.

‘Who is he to be; eh, my beauty?’ pursued the squire, as much intoxicated with the success of his own joke as by the madeira to which he treated himself at dessert. ‘Come now, your uncle there’s not listening. Just whisper the name in my ear. I’ll give a helping hand, and when you want to elope, see if I don’t clap my best horses in a chaise and whisk you both off to London before Uncle Pierce has got wind of the matter. All I bargain for is that the bridegroom shall be some young fellow that I like.’

Growing rather too merry, he bent down his ear to catch her maidenly avowal.

‘He will be some one, I hope, sir, of whom

my uncle also will approve,' said Lucy, gaily plucking up spirit. 'I could never wish to run away from so kind a guardian,' and the look of loving hope and perfect confidence she turned upon Rat's hard-bitten features made the latter relax into an indulgent expression, and set several hearts beating more eagerly than ever, inside their gay, red-striped, or sprigged waistcoats.

'Upon my honour, that's pretty. It makes me quite wish I had a daughter just like her,' cried the squire, knowingly. 'You're a lucky dog, Ratcliffe; but who is *your* choice, eh? Of whom do you approve? come—tell us! The young fellows are all on thorns.'

'*I?* Why, the best sportsman among 'em, of course,' smiled Rat, uneasily.

The discussion was growing rather too serious. Eager covert glances were being

directed towards the guardian of this second Fair Maid of Kent up and down both sides of the table; even by Bill Butler, who had not a penny to bless himself with.

‘Lads,’ pursued the jovial host, ‘who is the best sportsman among ye? Gad, I say my young friend Dick Saxby there. Who’s in his favour? Let’s have a show of hands.’

Lucy felt inclined to sink into the ground with confusion. Dick reddened to his very ears, yet held his head high, proud at the overwhelming honour. Bill Butler alone raised a great hairy paw.

Not a man of all the rest of the company but was taken aback.

CHAPTER II.

‘ONLY one! why, plague upon it, what better man?’ stuttered Falconer, vexed at the apparent failure of what he had considered a master-stroke of strategy.

‘But, sir,’ put in Colonel Folliot, the dashing cavalry officer once before mentioned as calling upon Miss Jennings at The Laurels, ‘when we all wish to enter the race for such a prize, you cannot in fairness ask us to leave the course clear for any one gentleman to walk over it.’

‘That’s it; we are each and all Miss Jennings’ devoted admirers,’ echoed Lord John de Voeux, eagerly. ‘We ask a fair field and no favour.’

Ratcliffe shot a keen look at the last speaker from under his foxy eyebrows. A new thought darted through his mind.

(‘ My Lord John, too, never thought of him ; and the elder brother, Lord Weald, is sickly, unmarried. This one may be the heir—better than Rookhurst.’)

Colonel Folliot, too, was reputed to have a fine place in Bucks. Ratcliffe likewise looked amiably towards him ; the old weather-cock was veering about giddily to every breath of admiration for his niece.

‘ Well, but to come back to the point once more,’ resumed the host, bent upon pursuing his tortures. Then slapping his hand upon the table, and turning a broad, red, and shiny face upon the gallant fox-hunters. ‘ How the deuce will ye all settle who *is* the best sportsman among ye ?’

‘O, please, Mr. Falconer, the joke has gone far enough. Pray don’t drive it to death, poor thing,’ whispered Lucy, laying her hand upon his red sleeve, while pretending to laugh, though in reality she was trembling with confusion.

‘Eh? why not? Upon my soul, I believe you are afraid that these sportsmen will name *me*,’ retorted the M.F.H., turning upon her.

Fresh roars of laughter resounded at his comic grin, as Falconer deprecatingly held his head on one side seemingly overcome with modesty; for his aldermanic proportions showed in ridiculous contrast to this bashful demeanour.

‘Well, putting me out of the question (though I make no rash promises, Miss Lucy), why should we not all agree who is the best man that has hunted with us this season?’

‘Stop, sir,’ interrupted Richie, with a quick sharpness that was impudent as addressed to his elder, ‘pray remember that some of us may have been unable to hunt frequently from illness and—and proper feeling. Demme, I believe it isn’t decent to show oneself in the field when a man has just lost a near member of his family.’

‘A-HEM!’ sniffed the terrible old squire, who was in a plaguing mood and as obstinate as Richie himself. ‘Well, let us take a day when *you* were out too. Hang it all! take this day, what man showed us all the way? Why, I say it again. My young friend, Dick Saxby there.’

Dick was in secret terror all the while that his ally’s convivial but misguided efforts might irritate Ratcliffe and spoil everything. Besides this, he hardly knew

how to demean himself during such a public wooing on his behalf; still he did look manly and modest under the fire of glances directed on him by all around. Naturally, neither he nor Lucy dared to meet each other's eyes.

He was the handsomest man by far of all those present, although Colonel Folliot ran him close for good looks, being a fine-looking, upstanding soldier, with the reputation, too, of a lady-killer. Beside the colonel's dark, well-shaped head, Dick's golden poll looked quite boyish, though he was two inches the taller. But it was not alone by his muscles as of a giant, nor his bloom of youth and fine features, that 'Handsome Dick' had won his nickname. It was still more by the inexpressible charm of his merry smile that reminded the elders of George Hasledene, his father, and the straightforward, manly guileless-

ness shown in every look of his face and tone of his fresh pleasant voice. Dick now raised his hitherto downcast blue eyes, and said, frankly,

‘ I was not alone with the hounds when we got to Long Shaw Lane, sir ; my neighbour, Mr. Richard Saxby, was—*not far from me.*’

For the life of him, Dick could not resist the slightly sarcastic tone of the last words. It was hard enough to give the devil—the fellow, that is to say—his due ; but Dick liked to be fair above all things, and was very proud of taking no mean advantage of any man.

‘ Lord ! Dick ! you are a good chap. I’ll be hanged if I’d have said that,’ whispered Bill Butler, admiringly.

‘ If that worthless screw of mine hadn’t fell, I’d a beaten you,’ put in Richie, sharp as a needle. ‘ But I’ll ride against you

any day you like, and show which of us two is the better man. I have as good cattle in my stables as your bay hunter. Damme, what was I thinking of to offer you so high for him? I'll ride against you, I say, and let the winner take the loser's horse—there! Will you take the offer?'

'No,' said Dick, with slight scorn. 'I prize my horse more than all your string. You have nothing valuable enough in my eyes to wager against Bay Ronald.'

'*Nothing?*' Richie stared, then slowly sucked down a glass of port.

He was tipsy already, and Lucy, seeing that the men were likely to make a 'wet night' of it, would have retired now but for the fascination of devouring curiosity. She longed to know how the matter would end.

'Lord!' exclaimed Richie, slowly rolling

his eyes round the table, with affected astonishment, 'that's a good one. Ho, ho, ho! I've got nothing good enough to wager, haven't I? And I could buy up your beggarly farm fifty times over, not that it's even yours, sir, for it's your mother's.'

'It is mine, Mr. Saxby,' returned Dick, quietly, although inwardly choking with passion. 'When I came of age my mother was good enough to put me in possession. And if you *could* buy it fifty times running, as you say, that is perhaps not much for you to boast of.'

For the second time soothing murmurs addressed to Dick, muttered, or even outspoken sentences of disgust and remonstrance meant for Richie, passed round the table. Only Lucy's presence, perhaps, prevented the outbreak of a quarrel. Both cousins were pale with hate as they

glowered at each other across the squire's mahogany.

Richie, whose eyes glittered very suddenly on hearing Dick's declaration of his tenancy, had sense enough to feel that the tide of popular feeling was setting strongly against him. For all his tipsiness he controlled himself to stammer with remarkable humility, whilst hiccupping at times,

‘ If I've given you offence, Dick, I—I beg your pardon. We are of the same stock, hang it all! and there's nothing like old blood. I'm a gentleman, I am. And all I want to prove is which of us two is the better man. Look here, old fellow, I'll race you next season—in autumn, I mean; mush give me time to pick up a good horse, y' know. And as these gentlemen think I shpoke in a way I shouldn't, I'm devilish sorry. *And I'll race you for Rookhurst—there!*’

There fell an intense silence upon all in the room. Each one of those present drew a long breath, and, bending forward, waited what should follow.

‘Is that a shporting offer, gen’lemen?’ asked Richie, turning his pale face slowly with a contemptuously amused look on all the spectators.

He was the most composed of all present, which was curious, considering he was so tipsy a few minutes back. Dick grew fairly purple, the blood surged to his face; then he felt choking, and tugged at his neckcloth to loosen it, while his fingers were shaking like those of a paralytic man. All were waiting for him to speak.

‘Say done! quick, Dick, quick!’ breathed Bill Butler, in an agony, jogging his friend’s elbow.

Dick gasped twice, then back rushed the blood to his heart, leaving him deadly

pale. He gazed, disbelieving his own senses, at Richie's mocking eyes looking so scornfully from under their white lashes; next he faced round slowly to the elder men.

'Squire Falconer—Captain Ratcliffe—and you, Mr. Hodges, are all old neighbours; you were all three my father's friends. Can I honourably accept this offer?'

The three men at the head of the table consulted each other first by glances, then they solemnly whispered together.

Said Mr. Hodges, who was the oldest present:

'We are of opinion that Mr. Saxby, the present owner of Rookhurst, ought to think over his offer for five' (muttered 'No, no's,' from Ratcliffe and Falconer) 'for two minutes by the clock, and then say whether he chooses to abide by it.'

A whisper passed round the table like a

wave. 'Too bad! why give him time? He will back out of it. What was lost by wagers might fairly be got back by one. That was how *his* father ever came to have Rookhurst.' If Richie did not actually catch these words, he felt that all were watching malevolently with intense eagerness to see if he had real grit in him or not. He bowed with a faint smirk, then ostentatiously played with his shirt frills.

The three judges had drawn out their large watches and laid them on the table; a clock ticked upon the mantelshelf.

Were ever two minutes so long? Dick was in actual torture. A cold perspiration broke out on his forehead, while he stared at a dish of oranges before him. To all the spectators of the scene, in the hush that followed, it did seem as if the seconds were longer than any they had ever known. Lucy sat very pale with

parted lips, a look of strained intensity on her face.

‘Time’s up!’ announced the three judges solemnly.

Richie cleared his throat, hemmed twice, and then drawled out slowly, never taking his eyes off Dick’s face,

‘Gentlemen, I abide by my decision.’

Dick sprang to his feet, and smote his hand on the table.

‘And I accept it, Richard Saxby!’

‘Then in fairness you will lay your farm against my estate,’ said Richie, quite coolly. ‘If my father was unhandsome about Rookhurst, I’m not.’

‘Not only my farm, but I will lay every stick and stone, everything I own, except the brooch in my shirt.’ Dick touched a pearl circlet with Hasledene’s hair in the centre. Richie’s own shirt-brooch was a handsome diamond one. ‘I only ask

enough clothes to stand up in. What's more,' added Dick, glowing-eyed, 'though I do not wish to be profane, I'll ride, dead or alive, if I may be permitted to come back, and sit on Bay Ronald in my bones.'

Great rapping on the table from the younger men. Richie sneered, but shivered as if a goose had walked over his grave.

'And if ever I thought you were not so good a chap as I now see you are, Richie, I'm heartily sorry for it.'

Still more tremendous applause at this in which all present joined, both old and young. Hardly anyone noticed that Miss Jennings, under cover of the uproar, burst out crying. The strain of poor Lucy's emotions, and now her gladness for Dick's sake, were too much for her self-control. Captain Ratcliffe hurried his niece out of the room quite kindly, and the old man's

voice was almost tender as he bid the 'silly child' wrap up and come home. They were not missed; for in the dining-room the terms of the forthcoming match were being fixed for the following autumn.

These were as follows:—To ride catch weights, four miles over a hunting country, on the opening day of the season, the course to be named at the meet by the Master, Squire Falconer.

When all the company dispersed, and Dick found himself riding home by moonlight in company of his faithful Jonathan, he only waited till they two were alone to burst out:

'O, Bill, Bill, it's too good to be true!'

'It is,' said Bill, nearly crying in sympathy. 'Dear old Dick! I'm somehow almost frightened though, old chap! There was a fishy look in that fellow's eye and a sort of diabolical sneer about him that

gave me a mighty disagreeable turn as if he was up to some ugly trick. Well, heaven grant it comes off all right.'

If these two honest fellows could have heard Richie at this moment, they would have doubted it. Every now and then he broke the silence of the night by bursting out into spasms of silent laughter, while slapping his breeches. His own man, Fitch, was driving him home in a buggy. Fitch was a confidential valet; indeed, wished to be considered a kind of companion, and he liked driving. Now, seeing his master doubled up with mirth and stuffing a silk handkerchief into his mouth, Fitch begged respectfully to know the joke. Richie told him of the wager.

'He! he! he! they think, the fools, that they've got me in a corner.'

'But what is your game?' asked the valet, familiarly.

‘You want to know too much, Fitch; you want to know as much as myself;’ and Richie relapsed into a state of suspicious and sullen silence, a mood which Mr. Fitch perfectly well knew, and did not interfere with.

‘He *is* a close un,’ thought the valet to himself.

At Forge Farm the two friends who stopped there wrung each other’s hands, as if Dick had already won his wager. A little later, Dick knocked at his mother’s door; he could not help wakening her to hear the news.

‘*What? what? what?*’ stammered the poor woman, sitting up in bed and staring at her son with wild incredulity.

‘Yes, Rookhurst, mother!’

‘O, my boy! my boy!’ and they two embraced each other and embraced again.

When Catherine partly recovered her

wits, though still half laughing and crying, nothing would serve her but that she must rise herself and go to see after Bay Ronald.

Was Dick certain the horse was not tired or lame after such a long day? No! she could not rest till her own sight was convinced. Henceforth Bay Ronald represented the future fortunes of the Saxbys. Oh! if anything should happen to him! As Catherine crept out of doors, in her slippers, huddled in some petticoats and a furred cloak, Dick laughed gloriously at her while he held up the stable-lantern that she might feast her eyes on the good horse. Then he clapped her lovingly on the back, and threatened to carry her indoors if she did not go at once.

Neither mother nor son slept a wink that night, although after another farewell em-

brace they retired, urging each other to rest. Catherine's last words were quite solemn.

‘The Lord has delivered our enemy into our hand.’

CHAPTER III.

ANOTHER person was much of Mrs. Saxby's opinion concerning Richie's wager, although his thought was not biblically expressed. Ratcliffe, as he went the following evening to dine at Rookhurst, muttered to himself:

'Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat.
Who would have thought the fool was so drunk?'

When alone with his host, the mentor expressed himself pretty freely upon the subject.

Richie affected sarcasm.

'Afraid to lose the chance of Rookhurst for your charming niece? Eh, old fox?'

‘Not I, young man. I don’t care a pinch of snuff so far as that goes. Dick Saxby would be only too glad to supplant you in her favour, and you know it. No, I tell you; *I* stand to lose nothing, but *you!* What madness possessed you?’

‘Dick Saxby is my tenant, remember; and—the heriot custom is in force on this estate.’

‘Heriot custom? What’s that? I never heard of it.’

‘Heriot custom, my good sir,’ and Richie settled himself in his chair, with an enjoyable look, crossing his legs, ‘is in the nature of a rent due to the lord of the manor by virtue of an immemorial usage on the death of every tenant on certain estates. Rookhurst estate, at present belonging to your humble servant, happens to be one where this is luckily in vogue. Heriot was originally a tribute to

the lord of the manor of the horse or habiliments of a deceased tenant, in order that the *militiæ apparatus* might continue to be used for the purpose of national defence by each succeeding tenant. Now, sir, as you are probably aware, military tenures have declined, but, thank the Lord! the old custom still holds. And heriot now means the dead tenant's best beast. *Do you perceive?*'

'Oh-h!' was all that came from Ratcliffe's lips; his jaw dropped at the news. Then he pulled his wits together. 'But supposing Dick Saxby lives to ride this wager *against* you, my fine fellow, what then? I'd not give a rap for your chance.'

'Supposing he what?—Come, come, captain' (this reproachfully, in a mildly injured tone), 'don't I trust you to see to that?'

'What?' roared Ratcliffe, pulling out

his bandana and mopping his face excitedly, while relieving his feelings by two or three tremendous oaths. 'Look ye here, Richie, your cousin's a fine young fellow, I like him! by heaven, *I like him!* And he's so head-over-ears in love with my Lucy, that he would go down on his knees to kiss the ground under her feet. If he rides and wins, he'll be my nephew-in-law, of that you may take your oath!'

'In that case,' said Richie, slowly, in mincing accents, 'I'm afraid I must trouble you, captain, for the little sum you owe me. A man can't afford to be entirely ruined, you know, and if I had it beforehand my nerves might be steadier. I'm sorry to ask it, but you aren't lucky at hazard, you know.'

It was a pitiful sight to see Ratcliffe's hard, ageing face trying to assume a deprecating smile towards his younger tormentor.

‘Come, Richie, you know that things have been pretty shaky with me of late. Gad, who was to know that Buonaparte would have collapsed so quickly after the battle of Leipzig? Besides, what I owe you is merely a trifle.’

‘It is a trifle that I should like before . . . next . . . month . . . is . . . out.’

There was no mistaking the cruelly malicious tone in which the last words were dropped with slow emphasis. For a short time Captain Ratcliffe sat staring into the fire, thinking hard; then, without changing his position, he answered,

‘All right.’

Neither spoke again for a few moments. Then Ratcliffe suddenly rose and frowning ominously down upon his host, who still lolled back in his big chair, burst out,

‘Upon my life, Richard Saxby, you are so lucky yourself at play that if you were

not a gentleman, I'd—I'd be tempted to suspect you.'

'I trust you do not, captain, although, if so, there is a remedy.' Richie rose now, and standing with one hand on the mantelshelf looked his old friend straight in the face, pale, but dignified. Then the young man added, with singular sweetness: 'I hope, sir, that you do not really accuse my father's son. This has cut me to the heart from *you*. You were his friend.'

'Lord bless you, no; no, I tell you, lad! Why, it was only a joke,' protested Ratcliffe, feeling mightily ashamed.

He had not the faintest respect for Richie's morals. He knew him capable of depths of villainy from which his senior shrank back; but then to lay his own guilt upon Dick Saxby, tempted thereto by Rat himself, was merely self-preservation, or the first law of nature; even to plan put-

ting Dick out of the way was likewise the same instinct of self-protection. Call these deeds the result of a fatal necessity if you like. But to cheat at cards, and to cheat a guest, and that guest an old and confidential friend!—no, of such baseness, Ratcliffe would not, could not, even to himself, accuse the young man. He repeated:

‘All I meant to say was that you had wonderful luck; and so you had, Richie, amazing luck!’

‘Luck may change, sir, I’ll give you your revenge,’ returned Richie, smoothly, laying a constraining hand upon Ratcliffe’s shoulder. ‘Come, let’s have a turn, just to show you bear me no malice.’

‘All right, boy.’

After an hour Ratcliffe flung down his cards and rose, almost upsetting the small table, while using bad language not fitting to repeat. He had lost heavily.

‘That servant of yours spoilt my play,’ he grumbled. ‘The fellow came creeping round with coffee and stood spying over the back of my chair, looking at my hand ; it put me off my play.’

‘Yes, I noticed him. He made me nervous too, when he came near me,’ quoth Richie, in a consoling tone. ‘The rascal has grown quite impudently familiar lately. I must speak to him. Upon my word, I must speak to Fitch sharply. What plagues these old servants are ! The fellow has been with me some while, and begins to fancy I can’t get on without him.’

When Ratcliffe took his leave immediately afterwards, cramming his hat on his head, and buttoning his riding-cloak awry, he that was generally so neat in his dress, the said valet Fitch was helping him. The rascal, as he stood behind the departing guest, put his tongue in his cheek and

threw a sly look over one shoulder at his master. Holding the door open, he waited until the captain had crossed the bridge, and was no longer in need of the light streaming from the hall. Then once bolts were shot, and the house-key turned in the lock, both master and man went into hysterics of suppressed mirth, rocking themselves to and fro, holding their sides as if fearing to split, and putting their hands to their mouths lest the stifled guffaws should reach too far.

‘I’m such a fool, ain’t I? I’m such a fool,’ gasped Richie, in paroxysms of cacchination, raising one leg after the other as if afflicted with St. Vitus’s dance. ‘I’m such a soft fellow, ain’t I, Fitch? that they all would get the better of me only for my luck. He thought if I was not a gentleman he’d a suspected my play. Oh, he, he, he! I thought I’d have fell

on the ground, it so tickled me to hear him.'

Uphill in the darkness Ratcliffe went home with a gloomy mind. Whatever his faults, however many his sins, 'Turncoat' had preserved a code of honour of his own, and made the mistake of imagining that others of his own calibre acted up to the same. Never yet had he cheated at cards, never, excepting, alas! once had he betrayed a friend. And *then*, as he tried to persuade himself, as he had inwardly repeated a thousand times since, when remorse gnawed like the worm that never dieth, 'It was to save my own life. A man may be excused much when his life is at stake; and, besides—the end to him would have been the same! He was dying; he was all but dead.' In spite of that black stain on his soul, Rat told himself virtuously that he was a man of honour.

Now he was troubled, suspicious. 'It's too mean, by gad! he couldn't——' and, standing still on the hill slope, the captain struck the ground heavily with his stick. After a short reflection, he added: 'But he *did* do it; he did! . . . What a mean, skulking, cowardly young devil have I allowed to get the upper hand of me! . . . Is this old age creeping on?'

For now, as he passed through the Rookhurst sweep-gate into the high-road, Ratcliffe was conscious of being life-weary, humiliated; even the man's gait was affected, for he was dragging himself heavily. The weight on his mind weakened his muscles.

'I, who have had the mastery over so many men in my life, who led his father by the nose, to be cheated by this wretched puppy! But wait, sirrah! Pierce Ratcliffe shall make you dance yet when

he pulls the string. I have a hold over you, I have.'

All the same the old man, for such he felt, although he was barely sixty, having lived as much as some two men already in his years—all the same Rat knew in his heart that, for the present, Richie was the evil genius whom, groaning, he must obey.

'I can't pay the money without being sold up. It's too late to save myself, Lucy, Suzanne, from ruin. I must keep The Laurels, as that cur knows,' Rat sighed. Then, striving to rouse himself to anger, he muttered, fiercely, 'It must be done. Poor Dick, I would gladly have spared you, my boy—*but it must be done!* And what thou hast to do, do quickly.' Where had he heard or read some such words as those?

With a heavy heart, the unlucky gambler turned in through his scroll-ironwork

gates. He often looked up at nights on coming home late, to see if Lucy's light still burned in her boudoir. To-night he did not do so.

CHAPTER IV.

ALTHOUGH Captain Ratcliffe had made a vow we wot of to do a certain deed quickly, he did not keep it with his usual punctuality. For February is a short month ; and, a few days later, there came news that seemed to show this Mr. Facing-both-ways a possible chance of escape from being urged on to commit an act of treachery.

‘ Boney was loose ! ’ The tyrant had escaped from Elba ; landed at Cannes with some of his guard ; and was now reported at Lyons with an army, swelling every day like the proverbial snowball. He was on his way to Paris ; Louis XVIII. had fled

again. The Rocket coach brought the bad news, scattering dismay through the villages as it passed; and this quiet corner of the Weald we are describing thrilled in sympathy with all Europe.

‘It is terrible! Just as we had begun folding our hands in peace,’ uttered Catherine. ‘What a man of blood he is! To think of the numbers of widows and orphans on earth who owe their unhappiness to his ambition. For my part, I believe he is Antichrist.’

The good lady was busy darning fine linen when Dick burst in with the startling intelligence, so that her hands, at all events, had not been folded in peace or idleness. Indeed they never were so, except at her prayers or in sleep; and sometimes when she pretended to doze by the fire, but was in reality enjoying herself watching her son. Dick eagerly told his

tale, affirming that all London was in greater excitement than any time during the last fifteen years, so the guard of the coach had told him.

‘The rector and Captain Ratcliffe say there is sure to be war immediately. The allies will make common cause. Buona-parté has broke his promises, and will be treated as an enemy to mankind. Captain Rat is going up to London to-morrow. You never saw the old fellow so flustered, mother, though he looks as pleased as a king all the same. He is quite blood-thirsty, as Lucy told him, and is sniffing carnage like an old war-horse.’

Dick little guessed how painfully interested the tough veteran was in this coming battle of nations for the young man’s own sake. The money market was wildly affected. Stocks and shares were falling, or in a few cases rising, with alarming

rapidity. There were fortunes to be made or lost. Now, now, maybe, was a chance of redeeming Rat's own fortunes; of paying off Richie Saxby. Then hurrah for Dick's life! The captain's affairs had been sadly depressed of late years by some unfortunate speculations into which he, like many others, was tempted in those stirring times. Then he had believed implicitly in Napoleon's luck, and backed it. The Russian retreat was a terrible blow; the allies' entrance into Paris worse. But now at last his instinct seemed right; the Emperor was back from banishment; all France was rising to a man at the little corporal's summons. So Ratcliffe stayed in town till March was nearly over, trying to blow fresh bubbles, and to raise mortgages, so to speak, on castles in the air. Inwardly he held himself a follower of those Elizabethan worthies such as Drake,

Hawkins, Frobisher, who were not above some freebooting, while yet good men and true. So he suffered severe ill-luck last year also in—well, private business, which concerned likewise a good many other humbler persons in the Weald of Kent.

Like a lion, mad March blustered loudly, blowing in strong winds over the land till the roads were white with many a king's ransom of dust; then towards April he calmed down into sunny smiles and genial weather. It was an early spring, and the wooded country around Rookhurst and Forge Farm was a sight to woo shepherds and shepherdesses of old out afield in jocund play. In honour of April the beech-trees were bursting out in a cascade of light-green young leaves that seemed thrown into spray from a parent fountain, of which the silvered trunk and wide-spread branches formed the column and

jets. All the inanimate world rejoiced.

Lucy Jennings, too, was gay in heart, and her beautiful face rippled over with smiles. What matter that a million men were to be gathered together in an army meant to crush Napoleon at last? *Her* lover was safe; he was a farmer, neither soldier nor sailor, and oh! but she was glad of it! Standing by her uncle's gate under the big elm-tree, she looked up at its green buds dotting the sky, and hailed the sunlight shining through. Then she saw Dick riding past, gently exercising Bay Ronald along the grass-edged lane, and waved her hand at him with a dazzling smile. And he answered it back with as glorious another. Smile on, poor young mortals! unguessing what to-morrow may bring forth; blinded by love to the snares and pitfalls surrounding you. Even Captain Rat, pacing the quarter-deck up and

down a raised gravelled path ending in a stone seat that overlooked the lane, saw this meeting of glances but had not the heart to interfere. On rode Dick full of happiness under the Rookhurst woods. And Lucy, her heart brimming with joyous hope, turned down past the stables to the quiet wooded quarry where she and her lover once held so many stolen meetings. Now, Ratcliffe had put them both upon their honour to meet no more in private; and the threat of his severe displeasure, still more the promise of his kindest consideration, had secured obedience to the guardian's wishes.

It was so secluded here, and every tree edging the rocks above, and the martins' holes in the cliff-side, and the bushes beneath, each and all reminded her of Dick.

Lucy stood under a sycamore where they two were wont to stand in the eternal

lovers' attitude, her head on his shoulder, his lips on her brow. Below, the ground under her feet was carpeted with fallen bud-caps of rosy brown; but soft pinkish ones were still clinging to the beeches, covering every tiny leaf, while here and there little piles of similar rejected wraps were whirled into various nooks by the eddying spring breezes. Ferns, with their heads still curled into helmets, were springing from brown, withered roots, and expanding and unrolling every day. Besides, all manner of faint scents came wafted to Lucy's face from various corners near the garden, while primrose stars were beginning to peep in cosily-sheltered spots.

It was the morning after Captain Rat had come home by the afternoon coach from London. It was also, had they but known it, the last morning that Dick and

Lucy should see each other's faces possibly for ever ; the last smile, the last signal between these two lovers had been, perhaps, interchanged on earth.

‘ How ill you look, dear Uncle Pierce ! Is anything the matter ? ’ asked Lucy, an hour later, laying her hand affectionately on her uncle's arm. She was studying his face, which was almost as yellow as a guinea, with much concern.

‘ Pshaw ! child, I'm all right ; fit as a fiddle. Still I think a bit of a blow would do me good. I'm just stepping over to Forge Farm to ask Dick Saxby if he will come down to the coast for a sail with me, one of these fine days. ’

So saying, the captain turned away rather gruffly, he that was hardly ever crusty with his pet Lucy.

‘ He must have gout flying about him, ’ thought the girl, with an indulgent smile,

and lightly tripped into the house. Ratcliffe, on the other hand, went heavily down the lane, slightly dragging one leg after him, as was beginning to be his gait lately.

‘I’ve tried my best to save the lad, but it’s no use,’ he muttered to himself, ‘*no use!* Fate seems against me, or rather against him. He must be thrown overboard like Jonah, unless a miracle happens to deliver him. It’s a sad pity.’

Nevertheless, the old salt brisked up and paid his visit with a cheery air.

‘Eh, Farmer Dick, how is the world wagging with you these days? And what agricultural matters have you on hand? Not much, I’ll be bound. What say you to taking a sail with an old fellow like me the day after to-morrow? My mare and gig will rattle you down to the coast in no time. Come along, my boy. This spring

weather stirs my old blood, and sets me fairly longing for a sight of salt water and a whiff of sea-breeze.'

'The day after to-morrow, captain? Thank you very much. I think I can. That is to say I *will* come.'

In a trice Dick threw to the winds half-a-dozen trifling engagements. To be invited by his darling's uncle in this familiar, friendly fashion!—why, it was returning to the old days when Dick was always in high favour, before Captain Rat had begun to grudge him Lucy's smiles. Then to spend some hours with her guardian, perhaps they two alone in the boat, with a wide, sunny sky overhead and the glad free sea tossing around them,—surely that should be a situation to make an old friend's heart expand in kindness. Man to man, they would speak of matters dear to Dick's soul; he would have his chance. The young lover's

heart leaped up within him at the prospect.

‘That’s a bargain then, young landsman. Wait till I teach you how to sail a boat. It will not be the first thing old Rat has taught you, eh?’

Although Ratcliffe’s words were jovial, he looked with a curious wistfulness at his pupil; so poor Catherine afterwards remembered. It must have been a foreboding on his part, she thought. Now he went on, turning to the latter,

‘I’ve got a boat of my own, you know, Mrs. Saxby, that a fisherman keeps for me in a quiet little nook. Did you never hear of her? How was that? Not indeed that I go out in her often enough to please me; perhaps only two or three times in the summer, still I like to know she’s waiting all ready down there. I call her the *Lively Lucy*, and she’s as trim a little craft of her size as ever you saw.’

So the trip was finally settled. The day but one following, Dick was to drive the captain's gig down to the coast where the latter would join him, being obliged to go to Hastings about some business on the morrow.

'Don't keep me waiting, my boy, that's all! Lord! when I'm down by the water-side, I'm as keen to be afloat as a child is to sail his toy boat in a pond.'

On the appointed morning, therefore, Dick duly set off behind Rat's wicked fast mare. Nearly half-an-hour after they had rattled away there rides up a messenger to Forge Farm with a note in Ratcliffe's sprawling hand, addressed to 'Dick Saxby, Esquire,' marked 'Haste.' Mrs. Saxby took it upon herself to open the missive, and found it contained a short but hearty apology.

'It is most disappointing, dear lad, that I

am detained by business all day and must sleep here. Ask Bill Butler to take my place if you like, you can drive instead of my groom. It's beastly luck, but I don't want to spoil your day's fun, so make any use of the *Lively Lucy* you please. My respects to Madam Saxby.

‘ Your old friend, .

‘ PIERCE RATCLIFFE.

‘ P.S.—The mare pulls like mischief. Don't trust her to Bill.’

Mrs. Saxby looked regretfully down the road whence the gig had long vanished.

‘ It is a pity, such a chance as he had to speak for Lucy, poor boy. Well, well, there's no hurry after all.’

In her heart Catherine could not really sorrow greatly over the delay. After all, your son's your own till he gets him a wife, there's no denying that! So she

turned away, little thinking how many a day she would look in vain down that same road waiting for her son who should not return. Meanwhile, she was happy and went her household rounds; and you may be sure she entered the stable twice or more and patted Bay Ronald, who loved her as he loved carrots.

‘How are you, my bonny bay?’ she would say, stroking the good horse’s glossy neck. Then murmuring, ‘Keep well, Bay Ronald, don’t fail us, my pet,’ she stooped her tall figure and grey-streaked head to kiss his velvet muzzle.

Merrily Dick drove down seawards that bright April morning in high glee. It was the finest day of the year as yet, and all nature was bursting into leaf or early blossom. The ashes were tufted with tiny bunches of black keys, black as Lucy’s hair though without its sheen. The ten-

der oak foliage showed in bright bronze hue against the blue of the sky; but the infant sycamore leaves were copper. At the 'Who'd a thought it' inn, her vicious ladyship, the mare, who had been tearing along the hard roads at a spanking pace, suddenly pulled up of her own accord.

'Don't stop. Let us go on,' Dick ordered the groom.

'Black Jim has left, sir, you won't see him. He is said to be out of the country,' replied the man.

At this hint, implying that Mr. Saxby might not wish to meet again his supposed assailant in the lane, Dick felt ashamed, which was foolish. He gave the required permission to bait the mare; and as, truly enough, the landlord had left the inn for its good, no harm resulted from the delay. Out came Mike Lee, Saxby's former stable-lad, who had now taken his brother's place

as inn-keeper. Mike looked extremely sheepish but touched his hat respectfully enough, while a curious hang-dog expression lurked in his downcast eyes.

‘I hope Bay Ronald is well, sir,’ said the bay’s whilom groom and worshipper.

‘He’s all right,’ returned Dick, thinking to himself, ‘and the better for your absence.’ Dick was fair, however, in his own mind to Mike, who likely enough had no share in Black Jim’s night-attack in the lane,—that was plainly dictated by revenge for his supposed wrong. So, though he would not enter the inn, and looked Mike somewhat hard in the face, his cheery voice was unaltered.

Mike Lee shaded his eyes to watch the gig after it started, and muttered to himself,

‘He’s a gentleman, sure enough! Gawd help him!’

The sea was sparkling, the sun riding high in the sky, and the *Lively Lucy* lay drawn up ready on the shingle, but no Captain Ratcliffe appeared. Dick cooled his heels up and down the beach for an hour or two. Then he and the fisherman who had charge of the boat agreed the skipper could not be coming.

‘I’d go out with you myself, but my missis is ill in the cottage there,’ said the sailor, with a wistful glance at the joyous little waves in the bay. ‘If the captain had been here I’d not ’a been wanted, for *he* knows how to handle the boat as well as two men. He goes out in her alone mostly; but you’d be afraid, I suppose, sir, not being used to sailing?’

‘Afraid!’ Ah! good Dick, like many better men, had his pet vanity. This was, of course, that what he was not accustomed to doing was what he could do best.

Dick had been often enough out at sea, and got a fair notion of managing a boat,—he himself believed that seamanship was his strong, if undeveloped, point. A little discussion arose, then the wily fisherman, who had a strong reason for wishing to be rid of him, gave way with affected reluctance. Dick sprang gaily into the boat, and was shoved off.

He spent a pleasant afternoon out on the water. After all, though alone, it was a rare treat to feel the brisk breeze in his face and the motion of the *Lively Lucy*. It was next best to a day's hunting. Dick enjoyed his sail so vastly that it was growing evening before he bethought himself of the long drive homeward, and that it was time to steer round the headland hiding the near bay. For some while he had been lazily dividing his attention between some sea-gulls riding on the water and a

fishing-smack that was hovering not far off without apparent reason. Once she had passed and now again re-passed him, drawing nearer. Dick noticed there seemed a rather big crew on board, but took no great heed, for his mind was running on far different matters, on Lucy and Rookhurst—and how best to ride Bay Ronald in the great event of next autumn; to keep behind Richie nearly all the way till nearing home; then to creep up stride after stride; to race his rival; to pass him; and hooray for Rook——!

A loud shout from the smack across the waves startled Dick out of his dream. What did the fellows want? They were a rough-looking set. Now the smack had tacked again, she was coming too close! By heavens! she would run him down!

Dick sang out loudly, and put his helm hard to starboard. The smack, however, likewise changed its course.

In another half-minute she bore down upon the *Lively Lucy*, and—Dick was just conscious of struggling in the water and catching at a rope that was flung out. Luckily for him he was a fairish swimmer, besides well used to keeping his head in emergencies. A few seconds later he clambered upon the deck of the vessel, dripping wet, and slightly bewildered.

‘That was a close shave, my lads. How did it come about? You nearly did for me.’

‘Only nearly, but we’ll do the job now,’ roared a maniacal voice from behind.

Dick turned sharply and saw Jim Lee. The man’s face was distorted with passion, and his arm raised to strike. Dick warded off the attack, and sprang to one side, but only to be set upon instantly by two more sailors. Seeing treachery, he struggled hard, for he now guessed his life was at

stake. But he was one to six ; meanwhile a black-bearded man, who seemed the captain, called out directions to the others.

Dick's arms were pinned from behind, he felt a dizzying blow—this delivered by Jim.

Alas ! Dick Saxby ! One wild look around at the darkening coast, at the sea which lay in shadow under the coast-line, but was still sunlit further out. He could descry with failing senses his capsized boat drifting away ; close at hand, surely the black-visaged skipper was striking a cutlass out of Jim Lee's hand, beating the latter back with the flat of the blade.

'Hold hard, Staymaker. Fair play, I say. Am I captain or not ?'

Then Dick reeled, all grew dark, darker still, and, feeling bitterly this was his end, he fell unconscious on the deck.

CHAPTER V.

‘DICK is very late ; what can be delaying him?’

This was from Dick’s mother after the hour that she expected her son home, and when the supper seemed likely to spoil in the oven.

‘Really, Dick is *very* late.’ This was said at midnight. ‘Well, it’s a long drive back, and possibly enough he stayed out fishing till dark. Then he will have had supper at some inn on the coast ; poached eggs and fried fish most likely. That pie will be burnt up if I leave it longer. After all, he can eat some cold beef.’

Thus Mrs. Saxby consoled herself as

she sat up waiting into the small hours. The afternoon had passed pleasantly for her owing to a visit from Lucy, this permitted by Madame Dupré, in all likelihood, because of Dick's absence. The merry though watchful duenna as usual accompanied her charge. Nevertheless, they all enjoyed themselves, dear Lucy was so sprightly. Why, Catherine had positively laughed at the child's liveliness. They two had not actually *spoken* of Dick—Madame Dupré being present, that were unwise—still, they had smiled in each other's face, given a secret pressure of hands. They understood one another; that was enough.

‘It is provoking about to-day's sail. No doubt Captain Ratcliffe will settle it another time. He seemed so fatherly towards Dick—my own boy!’

When two o'clock struck wheezingly by

the tall kitchen time-keeper, Molly came, sleepy-eyed, to persuade her mistress with stolid pertinacity to go to bed.

‘ Dear madam, I’ll warrant Master Dick has stayed out by moonlight. He’ll sleep down there for certain. Captain Ratcliffe does many a time, so I’ve heard say.’

And Molly, being like unto those whose strength is to sit still, would not leave the parlour till she had gained her point.

Next morning, if Mrs. Saxby went once, she at least went eight times to the garden front, overlooking the road below the low farm wall. No sign of the gig coming round the distant corner! Yet again another lane led more directly to The Laurels, joining the high-road to the coast lower down. Dick might have driven straight to Captain Ratcliffe’s house and stayed to breakfast.

Presently, growing uneasy, though pre-

tending a cheerful aspect, Mrs. Saxby put on her bonnet and went up to The Laurels. But there was no news there, neither had Captain Ratcliffe yet returned from Hastings. Back went the good lady, and strove to busy herself, as a farm mistress ought, holding a consultation with the shepherd upon the lambs. It was pleasant to see these frisking in the hill meadow, their long-drawn baas to the mother ewes rising from the green pasture and mingling in sound with the cawing of a black cloud of rooks flying overhead. Mrs. Saxby wiled away twenty more minutes watching them; picked some early cowslips, asking herself how much cowslip wine should be made this year. 'If Dick marries, as I trust and pray, it will be better to lay in a larger stock than usual.'

It was a full hour since she had been to The Laurels.

Catherine suddenly faced round, looked at the farm chimneys, and set off as it were in shame-faced haste under the adjoining fresh-bursting hedge and on into the lane. She had secretly been fighting nervousness for three-quarters-of-an-hour back ; now it had over-mastered her.

Thus Molly missed her mistress, when a few minutes later the worthy soul came out in search, with her apron up to her face, and one hand pressed hard against her ribs, while she gasped as if preparing to sob outright. Beyond the next gate Mrs. Saxby saw Giles at a short distance, and called out a question to him concerning a calf. But he seemed oddly deaf, and only trudged hastily into the oast-house. Yet he could have no manner of business about the hops this day, one would think. Two village women were in the lane talking eagerly with wagging sun-bonnets, as

Mrs. Saxby stepped into it. They started at her sight; looked over their shoulders guiltily, and hurried homewards as if the lady of the farm was afflicted with the plague.

‘How strange! What can be the matter with them?’ was her passing thought.

So, hurrying forward, she presently came in sight of The Laurels, and there actually beheld the captain’s gig and groom, though without Dick, just in front of her, turning very slowly in at the gate. A gang of Rookhurst labourers going home to dinner had apparently retraced their steps to a man, and were walking eagerly back, discussing some question of apparently engrossing interest with Captain Ratcliffe’s servant. But, when one perceived Mrs. Saxby behind them, they all stopped, drawing on either side with quite singularly humble and dutiful looks to-

wards their former mistress. Hearing the sound of wheels, down ran Lucy Jennings from the raised terrace overlooking the lane.

‘Dear Mrs. Saxby, has he returned safe? I have really been rather uneasy,’ softly whispered she, clasping Catherine’s arm with both hands while, with an engaging, don’t-think-me-silly look on her blithe visage, her soft black eyes smiled winningly into the grave face of her hoped-for mother-in-law. ‘How glad you must be that the gig is back; I am. But how did you miss Dick? Here, William,’ (they had now reached The Laurels’ door, where the groom, who had alighted, eyed Mrs. Saxby with a very dismayed expression,) ‘did you leave Mr. Dick Saxby at the Forge Farm?’

‘No, miss, I did not.’

‘Where did you leave him?’

‘ I—I cannot say.’ The man moistened his lips and made signs of trying to draw his young mistress aside.

‘ What does he mean?’ broke in Catherine, with sudden terror. ‘ Oh, dear Lucy, make him speak.’

‘ Answer me at once, William. Did he not go out sailing? When did he come back?’

‘ He went out, sure enough. I waited for him to come back, miss, till late this morning. But only the boat came in when the tide turned, madam—she was floating bottom upward, empty, and that’s Heaven’s truth!’

Two agonized outcries! Two voices mingled together in a scream of horror, wild incredulity, sharpest woe. By instinct both women, mother and sweetheart, tottered towards each other; bowed their heads on one another’s neck moaning.

The groom looked, hesitated, then sprang into the gig, and, making the whip sing over the jaded mare, rattled at 'hell's own pace,' as he afterwards called it, towards the rectory to fetch Dr. Butler and Miss Anne.

These two arrived in haste, themselves in deepest distress. They found both afflicted women still outside The Laurels' door. Strangely enough, no one in the house yet knew of the ill tidings.

Lucy lay half-prostrate on the upper step, her head against the door-jamb. All life seemed wellnigh gone out of the stricken young creature who so lately had been buoyant with vitality. Her face was so white she seemed almost dead, but for wide-opened agonized eyes; her poor little fingers outspread on the threshold were feebly stirring. Mrs. Saxby still stood upright, staring at vacancy, both hands

fallen by her side ; she was opening and shutting her mouth as if vainly trying to scream. It was a terrible sight. At that precise moment, Captain Ratcliffe appeared from the interior of the house, having shortly before returned from Hastings. Madame Dupré, and the female domestics too, came running with great agitation and much loquacity. Compassion, wonder, dismay, filled the surrounding air. On seeing Captain Ratcliffe, Mrs. Saxby was moved to recovered speech.

‘I trusted him to you! Where were you? Oh! my son!—my son!—my son!’

The despair in her face was frightful to witness. Some of those looking on felt their hair rise with the horror of pity that overcame them.

‘Lord help us! I can’t stand this!’ faltered Ratcliffe, as the mother’s deep eyes, like wells of misery, were fixed with

terrible reproach on his face. He had disregarded even Lucy, carried past him a limp burden with hanging head and arms, but Catherine's gaze seemed to mesmerize her old neighbour.

‘Dear madam, sure he is not dead. *Not he!* Why, our Dick, who can swim like a duck, and is as active as a wild-cat? I'll take my oath he's alive. *You'll see . . .* Nonsense, he's been picked up by some passing boat, maybe a French one for aught we can tell. But he'll come back all right! you'll see . . . I'll not believe it. I'll never believe it. Bless my soul! he'll come home to you sooner or later.’

Mrs. Saxby stared hard at the speaker. Though silent, the poor woman seemed impressed. Slowly her features changed as this new idea took hold of her mind.

‘That will do, Captain Ratcliffe, leave her to us, pray; my daughter and I will

take her to Forge Farm. (For pity's sake, raise no more false hopes,') whispered Dr. Butler.

So he and Anne drove the poor mother home in Captain Ratcliffe's chaise. All the way she sat gaunt and upright, a stricken figure, yet desperately resolved to cling to the spar of hope which Ratcliffe had flung her. At moments they could overhear her murmuring to herself the same words: 'He can't be dead, no! He would have come back in spirit to say farewell. It has been so in my family several times before . . . *He is not dead!*'

Hardly had they arrived at the Forge Farm and led Mrs. Saxby tenderly into the sitting-room before a clattering of hoofs sounded outside in the paved yard. Their nerves strung to highest tension, all three looked out of the back window, expecting they knew not what. Richie

Saxby had just arrived, accompanied by his bailiff, who was also on horseback, and both were dismounting in hot haste.

‘ It is Mr. Richie. See, he has come to help, too——’ began Anne.

But Catherine threw up her arms wildly, and shrieking, ‘ No ; no !’ rushed out of the back door, while Dr. Butler strode after, bareheaded and flushed of face, guessing her apprehension.

Out in the yard Giles had already thrown himself against the stable door, which he was defending. Richie, flourishing a whip, was calling out imperatively that Giles was an insolent rascal, and must instantly stand back and let them by. The bailiff having tied up their horses to a ring, now joined his master, and, squaring up at Giles, a fight began. As Catherine ran out, her honest, elderly servitor had just been knocked half senseless, though

he still struggled valiantly to keep the door. The bailiff tried to drag Giles aside, Richie himself giving the final victorious shove; but before the latter could turn to lift the stable latch, Mrs. Saxby passed in like a blast of wind.

‘No, no! you shall not,’ she panted, clutching the door-bolt of the loose box in which Bay Ronald was standing.

Richie had scuttled after Mrs. Saxby in undignified fashion, his hat on the back of his head and his whip still upraised. Then he stopped short, not liking to scuffle with a woman, or at least with this one, who looked so terrible in her grief. A coil of Catherine’s long grey hair had fallen down her back, and as she faced him, desperate as a she-bear robbed of her cub, the craven young squire fell back before the childless mother’s outstretched arm with a superstitious fear that she was calling down a curse.

The noise and outcries accompanying this sudden entrance had alarmed Bay Ronald, who was now stamping furiously round, then putting his head over the partition and as suddenly starting back.

‘Mrs. Saxby, this is very painful, but you must understand that I am in my rights. No one can regret more—that is, I regret deeply, the unfortunate news that has reached me; but I—I—I, demme, madam, I am lord of the manor,’ (Richie swaggered closer, trying to look dignified,) ‘and I claim Bay Ronald as heriot.’

By this time the bailiff and Giles had stumbled in, both striving to throttle each other. They fell apart as Dr. Butler, in spite of his cloth and powdered white hair, intervened with a muscular Christianity there was no gainsaying. At his words of rebuke the bailiff stood cowed, for the rector was both loved and dreaded. Now Richie, who had hardly noticed this in-

cident in his own excitement, appealed mistakenly to the towering black figure who thrust in between him and Mrs. Saxby.

‘Dr. Butler, you are a man of sense, of—of justice. Pray use your authority with Mrs. Saxby here. Am I not in my right as lord of the manor?’

‘You are over-hasty in asserting it,’ thundered the rector. ‘Young man, this conduct is unseemly—worse, it is heartless. What! can you not let this stricken woman, your own cousin, mourn one hour before you swoop down like a vulture on the prey? Be still, sir, be respectful, if you will not begone.’

‘It is the custom from time immemorial that when a tenant dies,’—sullenly retorted Richie, lashing his boot with his whip, as if to give himself courage.

‘He is not dead,’ screamed Catherine,

gripping the bolt tighter with her poor trembling hands. 'You cannot claim the best beast from a living tenant. What proof have you that my boy is drowned?'

'What proof *as yet*, alas!' murmured the rector. 'You must control your impatience, Mr. Saxby; that is but legal, I believe.'

Bay Ronald, who had begun calming down since he recognised his mistress, just now approached nearer; stretching out his neck, he put his head caressingly close to Catherine's cheek. In an instant Richie seized the chance, clapped his hand upon the horse's neck, then held his ear fast, although the bay started angrily.

'I claim this horse as heriot. He is my lawful property. Say what you please in the pulpit, Dr. Butler, but, by the living jingo, I'll stand no interference with my rights. They would stop us

women and parsons, but we've got him and we'll brand him.'

'Yes, and spoil his market value. For, though you may own him, how do you know you will care to ride him?' sneered a cynical voice; and Ratcliffe appeared through the doorway. Then, drawing nearer, 'If I might presume to offer advice, this matter would be best dropped for the present. We all, and you too, Mr. Saxby,' (this pointedly to Richie, who dubiously consulted the new-comer's eye), 'we all hope and trust that the worst has not happened. There is no need to further aggravate sorrow till we know more. Should the sad surmise *be true*, you have made your claim; and I can answer that my friend Mrs. Saxby will not then hinder your enforcing it.'

'If it is true that I am left alone and childless,' said Catherine, hoarsely, 'I

swear you may claim your right without interference; nothing will ever signify more to me.'

Then her mood changed, and, sinking down on a truss of straw, she rocked herself to and fro, wringing her hands, wailing and sobbing.

'But it is not true. Oh! Captain Ratcliffe, Dr. Butler, send that wretch out of my sight! My darling Dick . . . my boy! . . . O God, my boy!'

At that Richie slunk out of the stable, followed by his bailiff. Baffled and abashed, they mounted as quickly as possible and rode away.

By this time the news that Dick Saxby was supposed drowned had spread like a hue and cry through the country. More riders came galloping now into the farmyard; but these were friends indeed. Bill Butler on his father's stout cob, young

Pollock, and three more of Dick's comrades were bent on riding down to the coast as fast as possible, to gain any fresh news.

'Trust me, Mrs. Saxby, trust me,' wept poor Bill, his lower lip quivering like that of a sobbing school-child in his grief. 'We'll do our best. We'll not come back till we know what has happened. Keep up your heart. Good-bye, God bless you.'

Half-an-hour later Squire Falconer was hard on their heels, accompanied by two of the hunt servants and some neighbours of position. Search-parties were organised along the coast; boats went out; rewards were offered. All through that night, and the next day and into the following evening, they waited and watched. At last some of the others came back empty of news; but still Bill Butler, like a faithful dog, wandered for miles up and down the

coast seeking the dead body of his friend. Hope was gone out of the poor boy now. His promise could hardly be kept ; but he lingered on. And inland at the Forge Farm an unhappy mother sat for hours at the dais end of the parlour, looking down the road to the corner round which she had last seen her darling disappear.

At The Laurels blinds were drawn down in a bed-room upstairs where Lucy Jennings lay ill, babbling incoherently at times of Dick and of the quarry, calling on him not to slip, but to plant his feet firmly in the martins' holes ; all her love secrets now known.

Downstairs Captain Ratcliffe reclined in a big arm-chair with his foot raised before him, taken with an attack of gout ; this prevented him from aiding in the search for his young neighbour and favourite. It also made him so unbearable in temper

that hardly anyone but Madame Dupré dared go near him. Even she the servants pitied, wagging their heads when the door opened and blasts of the captain's temper, he that used to be so amiable and courteous, were emitted into the vestibule.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Dick Saxby stood fighting for dear life on board the fishing-smack, just before he fell upon the deck, he believed his last hour had come ; therefore it behoved him to die as a brave man ought. Nevertheless he was wrong, luckily for himself and for the continuation of this story.

Slowly returning consciousness crept back into Dick's prostrate form, struggled to reanimate his flaccid muscles and heavy, aching head. Presently he became aware that he was alive, and could even feebly think ; though as yet his body hardly seemed to belong to himself, and his limbs were numbed and strangely weak. Some-

how he fancied that he was lying upon the rectory sofa; that he was a small boy; that Anne was somewhere near in the background; and his father—what had happened to his father?

A few more minutes, and Dick grew better aware of the objects that surrounded him. Straw rasped his face; tickled his neck; he was lying upon a heap of it. All around reigned partial gloom, except for the faint light given by a candle-end that was stuck in a bottle on the top of a barrel close by. *Where was he?*

Presently Dick's sight travelled around, striving to pierce the shadows. He was lying in what seemed partly a cellar, partly a natural cave. Small casks were piled on either side, ready roped as if for transit by pack-horses. Smaller kegs stood on the floor beside foreign looking boxes, light enough to contain fragile materials.

‘ Brandy ; lace. - A smuggler’s den,’ thought Dick—oddly, not surprised.

At first he believed himself utterly alone in this damp and dismal spot. Scurry, scurry, a troop of rats rushed behind the barrels with a noise as of a squadron of small cavalry. Dick squirmed and wished for his terriers. He guessed that the Hawkhurst smugglers had seized him; also that Jim Lee was one of them. But—what *was* their object?

In vain he bewildered his aching head asking himself this question; for, as he was alive, what could they do with him? Perhaps, indeed, they believed him dead. If so, why not have flung his body overboard? He could not reason; his senses were still confused, his lips were parched with thirst.

Presently a door opened, so it seemed, for sudden sounds reached him as of a

crowd of men noisily drinking and wrangling. Then there fell a comparative hush, in which a quieter, lower voice seemed speaking with authority. The other voices became subdued. Now shuffling steps sounded in the cellar itself, nearing Dick, and a slight thrill of expectation passed unpleasantly through the latter. A shock-headed face peered over the barrels investigatively. With a rush of disgust, as their eyes met, the captive recognised his old enemy, Weasel Joey.

Forcing himself to disguise his repugnance, Dick spoke fairly to the rascal; asked, even begged him to explain the matter. But the wretched Weasel only chuckled with such cold-blooded enjoyment as might occasionally stir a reptile, and slunk back into the darkness. He must have reported the prisoner recovered, for immediately afterwards a firm, authoritative tread approached in turn.

As Dick turned his head to inspect the new-comer, the black-bearded skipper he remembered seeing on the smack bent over him. Then this visitor nodded, rolled a small cask near, and sat down upon it in friendly fashion.

‘You are better? That’s right. How are you feeling, eh?’

The voice sounded strangely familiar, even kind.

‘Who, in heaven’s name, are you?’

Dick struggled to raise himself on one elbow. The man removed his sailor’s cap, pulled off his black hair and beard with one sweep of the hand, and revealed the familiar face of—Captain Ratcliffe.

He sat calmly eyeing the young man.

A cry of amazement burst from Dick. He stared—till, as some faint inkling of the truth dawned upon him, he gave a sudden shout, struggling to rise. No use.

His ankles were tightly strapped together, and he fell back in impotent weakness.

‘You here, of all men!! . . . Captain Rat—cliffe . . . our friend and neighbour. *You* disguised among this smuggling crew. Great heavens! what does it mean?’

‘It means that you should never trust appearances, my young friend.’ And Ratcliffe, speaking in his usual quiet voice, took out a pipe and began filling it, pressing down the tobacco carefully with his little finger. ‘Also, to be brief, it means that you are in my power.’

‘Yours? Are *you*, then, the head of these men? Ah! yes, I remember . . . But, sir, you have always been my friend till now. Why did you set upon me? . . . It is a rough joke, I suppose, just to show me that I am only a landlubber after all. Eh? what?’ for Ratcliffe slowly, regretfully shook his head. ‘Come,

captain, you are trying to frighten me ; that game won't do. I have heard tales of the pranks you sailors play on green-horns when crossing the line. You wanted to see what mettle I was made of, did you not ?'

'No, lad ; put any such idea out of your mind. You were too nearly drowned for that when we ran you down, and again you were all but done for when Jim knocked you silly on the deck. Egad, I thought myself you were dead. And right glad I was to find you were not ; although I hardly know whether it is best, after all, for your own sake.'

Ratcliffe spoke with such a ring of truth that Dick, however stupefied, did not disbelieve him.

'Unfortunately you are wanted out of the way for several reasons, Dick Saxby. And hard work we have had to take you.'

‘*What!!* Do you mean to tell me to my face that you in sheer villainy enticed me into having a sail with you, meaning treachery in your heart? You smiling dissembler! after pretending friendship for my mother and for me all these years!’ Dick shook his fist in Rat’s face. He raved in his powerlessness, saying the strongest words in his fury with which an honest man may consign a rascal to shame and perdition. ‘*Hypocrite!—devil!*’ he ended, exhausted.

Rat’s face had not stirred a muscle; he smoked on steadily. Now he opened his mouth, and said,

‘Hypocrite if you like, young man, but a villain, no! I have saved your life, my lad, or rather I mean to do my best endeavours in that direction. Between you and me, had a certain person had his way, you would have been food for fishes by now.’

‘ And you, a gentleman, can coolly tell me you would listen to the urgings of one of your former grooms ; for I suppose Jim is the man you mean. Ah ! no, no ; fool that I am ! I see it all now ! You promised me that you would try to think well of my marriage with your niece, knowing all the while that you meant to get rid of me, so that she might make—as you hope—a richer match ! Ha ! ha ! ha ! And you told us that in church too. Upon my soul, I wonder such a falsehood did not blister your tongue ! ’

‘ Don’t be angry, dear lad. It cut me to the heart to see you two ; it did, indeed. It would have pained me to refuse my niece ; for, believe me or not, I am very deeply attached to my little girl. ’

Dick snarled in intense rage.

‘ A fig for your liking ! You used to declare that you felt true friendship and

ttachment for me and my mother.'

'And so I did; and for your father too, who was a fine fellow. Do be calm, Dick; try to be a philosopher as I am. You and your family I admire. You are all dear fools, unfortunately, for it is the fools in this world who are the most lovable mortals and who keep us clever ones from finding this planet too great a hell to live in. Without you we should all be like rats in a cage. You yourself are all that is good and manly, Dick, so much I grant willingly. But as to your ever being either lucky or rich—it is unlikely with your nature. And to be rich is the best thing in life, therefore I desire wealth for my adopted child . . . Now be calm—be calm. Believe me, my lad, Lucy is not the wife for you.'

'She loves me in spite of you. She will always love me best. You may knock me

on the head and bury me in a ditch, but she will never forget me. She and I have been like two halves of a whole ever since we were children,' uttered Dick, in a white heat of rage.

' Ah! ah! There it is! You are both of you too tender-hearted for this work-a-day world, and she is much too dainty to make a good farmer's wife. Now, Dick, I have really your interest at heart as well as hers; believe me or not. If you were not blind there is some one else—only it is not fair to betray a lady's secret—who loves you as well as even Lucy, and who would make a noble, devoted wife.'

' Some one who loves me? Some other woman! She is wasting her kindness,' retorted Dick, bitterly. ' And fancy making *you* her confidant—capital!'

' She has never made any living soul that.' Captain Ratcliffe frowned for the

first time, and his voice took a tone of pitying interest. ‘Anne Butler is not a woman to be lightly spoken of.’

‘Who? Anne?’ Dick started, then dismissing the matter in hasty disbelief—‘Another of your white lies! Of course she is fond of me; she has been like an elder sister to me always.’

‘It is too late now, anyway,’ mused Ratcliffe aloud, thoughtfully. ‘Either this is your last night on earth, or you leave the country to-morrow morning for some years. There is no alternative.’

‘May I ask what you propose to do with me?’

‘To give you your life on one condition—that you swear to be silent as to this evening’s work. You will have the chance of serving the king at sea.’

‘What—pressed? My poor mother—Lucy!’

Dick writhed on the straw in his first feeling of agony. The paroxysm over, he implored his captor to relent; attempted persuasion, reasoning; finally entreated him by the memory of their friendship from Dick's childhood, by the future loneliness of a childless widow.

In vain. Ratcliffe's face remained quietly impassive. Dick felt at last that he might as well try to hurt water by stabs as move this man by pleading. He ceased to speak.

'I give it up, captain,' he said, after a long silence only interrupted twice by an especially noisy rat which seemed dragging some booty among the barrels. 'If I go to sea, I suppose you will force Lucy to marry my cousin Richie by foul means or fair. It is of no use asking you to be tender with her, as you will not stop at murdering me to gain your ends.'

'You young fool!' And for the first

time Ratcliffe showed anger, his eyes sparkling and his face flushing. 'Do you not understand that all this is at the instigation of another person? Why, it is your precious cousin, Richie, who has paid these men heavily to put you out of his way. He is the head; he thinks me merely his tool. If I have consented to carry out this scheme, it was mainly with the hope of saving the life of a foolish scatterbrains whom, somehow, I have always liked.'

'Richie! My cousin! This cannot possibly be true. Why should he hate me so greatly?'

'It is simple truth. He hates you for more reasons than one. First, you are named in his father's will to succeed him, should he die childless, and men of his kidney hate their heirs with bitter jealousy. Then you are his rival with Lucy, and a

successful one. He has no chance so long as she thinks you are alive. Altogether, you surpass him. You are *the* Richard Saxby—Handsome Dick—a general favourite. Last, but not least Well, as it is my fate to betray my friends, I may as well betray him to you. I will tell you this secret. His life is not safe whilst you are supposed alive, because of a girl! Hallo! What was that noise?’

‘Only a rat. Go on, captain, for pity’s sake. What girl?’

‘Patty Bird. It is believed by some of the country folk, Jim Lee in particular, that you brought her to ruin. And Jim, being a gipsy, has sworn to be revenged upon you.’

‘Before heaven, Captain Ratcliffe, I am innocent! Why, you believe me; I see by your face you know it. What then?’

—Ah! Richie is the man, I see. By the powers above, I see! This hell-rake lays his sins at my door, and so gets rid of Jim Lee's vengeance which he dreads.'

'As you are either a dying or an exiled man, under oath of secrecy, you may as well know the truth. It is so,' was Ratcliffe's quiet answer.

Another sound!—a human roar of rage, hideous as that of a wild animal, burst next instant upon their astonished ears. Out from behind some barrels clambered Jim Lee foaming with passion, and shook his fists in the captain's face.

'But I will have the other d——d Saxby's blood yet! He shall pay me for this trick, and you too. Ay! Defend yourself, old rat, you are no longer a captain of mine. Man to man, you've got to reckon with Jim Lee.'

Ratcliffe sprang with wonderful activity

back against the wall, standing on the defensive. The sudden report of a pistol resounded in the cellar, and even as Jim hurled himself forward to strike at his former master he fell with a groan. Ratcliffe gave a shrill whistle, which was instantly obeyed by the trampling of a crowd of men running down the passage. By the light of dark lanterns, they looked in dismay at the body of their wounded comrade.

‘This is how I serve mutineers. Clap the irons on him,’ was their leader’s quiet command. ‘Here, Weasel Joey, and you, Bill, you were placed in guard over this man who was under arrest, and you have been drinking while he followed me in here. You know the punishment.’

A few words followed in a gibberish unintelligible to Dick’s ears; but Weasel Joey crouched under his sentence like a

whipped mongrel. Meanwhile, two of the men lifted the unfortunate Jim, who was alive though bleeding severely. As the rebel regained consciousness, Ratcliffe sternly addressed him.

‘You have been my lieutenant, Stay-maker.’ (Dick started at the name; it flashed upon him how as a boy he had heard it addressed to Jim by Weasel Joey. So this man had been for years the leader of the Hawkhurst gang of smugglers, and he, Dick, never guessed it.) ‘Before that you were my faithful servant for some years. On account of this, I will be merciful. The punishment of your mutiny is death, but if you will take the same oath of secrecy as has been offered to the other prisoner there you shall have the same chance of life.’

A hoarse stream of black curses began slowly to trickle from Jim’s lips, but was

cut short by a gag. Then he was clapped in irons, after which his wound was rudely bandaged. The smugglers laid their comrade on the straw beside Dick, and left both fellow-sufferers together.

Towards morning Dick said to his companion, 'After all, Jim, life may be worth having. Who knows what may turn up? I'll take the offer if only to be revenged some day. If you say "yes," press my hand twice.' For they were in darkness, and Dick groped till he gripped hold of his companion's fist.

Jim Lee pressed Dick's hand twice.

As the next day broke, the same smack which ran down the *Lively Lucy* might have been seen putting off from the bay, manned by several of the crew acting under Ratcliffe's orders, though Rat himself stayed ashore. Two figures lay

upon the deck partly bound. These were Dick Saxby in rough sailor's clothes, and Jim Lee, who looked ashen grey and suffering. A man-of-war was making her way slowly down the Channel, all her sails spread to catch the faint morning breeze which yet helped her but little on her course.

The fishing-smack approached as near as possible to the towering wooden walls of the *Ajax*. Then two stolid-looking constables, who were sitting over the prisoners in odd companionship with the smugglers, hailed the ship in the King's name.

Clambering with difficulty upon deck, these worthies produced a warrant signed by two magistrates on shore—Richard Saxby of Rookhurst Park, and Pierce Ratcliffe of The Laurels. This precious document set forth that the couple of

prisoners then in custody of the constables had been apprehended for poaching and trespass, but were liberated on their offer to serve His Majesty as volunteers. Recruits were scarce with the navy and army in those days, so the captain, a brisk, black-eyed man, spent no time in considering the offer. The prisoners were helped on board in the twinkling of an eye and sent forward; the one to be taught his duties as an able-bodied seaman, the other put temporarily on the sick-list.

Then the smack sheered off, making for the shore. Dick watched it with dull haggard eyes until it became a mere dancing blot upon the glittering sea as the sun rose up.

In his heart he bade a long, bitter farewell to his native land; the girl he loved; his widowed mother; and all else on earth he held dear.

CHAPTER VII.

‘THE pity of it!’ was the universal feeling in the country-side far and near, when the news of Dick Saxby’s disappearance and undoubted death became fully known.

If Dick had been a favourite before, now that he was believed drowned his character seemed flawless. He was spoken of as a gallant lad; a devoted son; a fine sportsman; but as one doomed to ill-luck from his cradle. His father’s sins had truly been visited on him. Ah! but for poor Hasledene’s mad extravagance Dick might have lived at Rookhurst Park, as did his ancestors before him. ‘The pity of it!’

Dick's mother waited, haggard-eyed, six long weary weeks, watching for hours the road down which he had gone; mutely questioning every passer-by who came up from the coast. After that time she put on mourning.

When the childless widow thus appeared in church, looking suddenly aged by many years, hollow-eyed and thin, like one who had passed through a severe illness, many were the glances of deep pity stolen towards the Saxby chapel. Giles, who played the bassoon in the choir, was so overcome that during the first psalm, given in the old metrical fashion, he lost his head and time completely. The blacksmith from beside Forge Farm, who had charge of the big bass viol, and of the performers in general, turned to remonstrate, but thought better of it. As to the clarionet and flute, they wavered wildly between

sympathy for Giles and respect for the blacksmith's frown.

When the service was over, a double line of villagers waited outside from the Saxby chapel to the side gate to see madam pass; and many a hand-clasp, condoling look, or even smothered sob greeted the still upright but most melancholy, black-gowned figure.

Of late years Catherine had always leaned proudly on Dick's arm after service, and looked about her smiling. Now she drew down her crape veil to hide rising tears, for such universal sympathy unsealed the dried springs of emotion in the desert of her heart.

'It's sad to walk the world alone when you're getting old,' said one peasant woman as the mourner passed.

'It's worse when child'er turn out badly,' answered another from bitter experi-

ence. 'Mr. Dick was a good son; Madam Saxby can hold up her head when she thinks of him.'

Catherine heard this, and did raise her bowed head at the words. Praise of her lost dear one was soothing balm to the bereaved mother's soul.

At the small gate Anne Butler was waiting, having hastened thither by the path from the church porch. She brought a message from her father, backed up by her own entreaties, begging their dear friend to stay and dine with them at the rectory.

All the neighbours felt deeply for Mrs. Saxby. But the Butlers were her oldest and best friends, so they undertook, naturally, the charge of attempting to minister consolation to this widow like unto her of Nain, anxious to rouse Catherine, if possible, to some faint interest in others' lives,

which was all that could henceforth be expected of her.

This was the first day she had been well enough to attend divine service since her loss.

‘She will feel it terribly going home alone,’ they said to each other.

But Catherine refused, and would not be shaken from her ‘no.’

‘I should spoil the children’s dinners with my melancholy face. No, no, my dear Anne, come and see me yourself whenever you can; but I will not be a black raven croaking in other people’s happy homes.’

‘At least allow *me* to escort you back. Nay, please, please, dear madam, do accept my arm. It will vex me vastly, upon my life, if you refuse me.’

Bill Butler urged this request with awkward but truly devoted friendliness, red-

dening in anxiety lest his lost David's mother should contrast him with her Dick as escort, and be grieved the more. Still it hurt him to think of her loneliness; and Catherine understood the good fellow's feeling, so leaned on his proffered arm.

Bill, indeed, was a wonderful comforter to Mrs. Saxby during those sad days of hopeless suspense. He took on his own shoulders the entire care of the farm till she should have recovered from her shock. He rose early every morning and came down, as Dick would have done, to see that the work-folk began labour betimes; and, although farming the rectory fields for his father, he managed never to neglect his own duties, while overseeing Forge Farm matters twice a day.

This lasted for some weeks, then being wet through one evening in a thunder-storm, yet anxious to stay at Forge Farm

because a plough-horse was taken ill, and that 'poor Dick,' as the lost man was now called, used to distrust Giles's old-fashioned ideas as to drenching and bleeding of the farm stock, Mrs. Saxby was stirred by gratitude to ask her self-made steward to stay for the night. It was a wrench to know that even this friend was occupying Dick's bed-room; but there was no alternative between that and gross inhospitality, for Bill had offered to sit up all night by the kitchen fire.

Such an incident having happened once, a second visit did not matter so greatly: therefore presently the occasional arrangement became a permanent one for the kind fellow's convenience. In the summer evenings Bill had his supper with Mrs. Saxby, and then generally sat and talked awhile before strolling up to the rectory, or the Pollocks' house, for a little diversion.

During these talks it was a sorrowful pleasure to the mother to hear many small anecdotes of her Dick's renown among his fellows; of how on this occasion he had surpassed all his friends at shooting partridges, and on that braved ridicule by refusing to play cards for money because of a boyish promise to his mother. On Shrove Tuesday last did he not pay five shillings to release an old hen at which the village lads, and even Richie Saxby and some others, were shying sticks, according to immemorial custom on that day? The hen was worthless, so its owner, a wrinkled beldame, willingly sold it. But her little granddaughter cried later because the old fowl was a favourite, so Dick paid its value five times over.

Again, a horse having fallen down on Badger's Hill one day because of an overweighty load, Dick and Bill rode up just

as a fire of straw was being lighted by the waggoner and some idlers under the poor beast's belly. Dick's wrath was magnificent, so Bill declared, trying to describe how his friend's eyes had flashed as he jumped off his horse and rated the savages soundly. With his own hands he had helped to unload half the cart, then set his shoulder first to help push the waggon uphill, an example followed by the shame-faced yokels to their credit.

Of these things Catherine had never heard before, her boy having been dumb upon his own merits.

Before the summer was over, the busy-bodies around began to gossip that Mrs. Saxby intended to leave all she possessed to Bill. There are folk who will speculate thus in public, before a corpse is cold, upon its probable heir. It is but human, maybe, to do so in private; but, even so,

those of us who have a right feeling pay a small tribute to virtue by affecting not to be too deeply interested in the disposal of our dead acquaintances' moth-eaten and rust-worn earthly treasures.

Bay Ronald still stood in the loose box at Forge Farm, and often pricked his ears in vain listening for his master's step. He was only left there because Richie's indecent haste in claiming heriot, while it was possible that his cousin was yet living, had raised such strong indignation in the neighbourhood that the grasping lord of the manor judged it best, as the Scotch say, to 'jouk and let the storm gae by.'

Ratcliffe also urged Richie strongly to take a change of air, so that young evil genius was persuaded to journey to Cheltenham, Tunbridge being too near home for any certainty of a flattering reception.

Only then Rat breathed freely ; the old schemer having trembled lest Richie might learn how ill Lucy really was. Her jealous yet wavering wooer would have felt irremediably affronted on learning her intense grief, and her devotion to his rival's memory.

Besides, even when better and' downstairs again, Lucy Jennings was a changed girl. All the carnation bloom had fled from her cheeks, the deep coral colour from her dewy lips, which had acquired a pathetic droop at the corners. She was like a white bindweed ; as fragile and clinging ; seeming unable to support herself, yet wayward too. Sometimes she was fretful because weak in body. Then, if crossed, she showed petulance ; to the surprise of those who knew her best, even gave way to bursts of ill temper, that, however short and slight, made her uncle and Madame

Dupré look at each other with raised eyebrows, amazed.

‘From a baby she has been as sweet as candy; but yesterday she cried out sharply, only because I chid Mrs. Saxby’s terrier Spark (Dick’s dog, you know). He followed Bill here, who came to speak to me, and the dog jumped up dirtying my coat. I only pushed him down, and, gad, her eyes blazed like those of a little ter-magant. I hardly know her these days, Suzanne,’ complained Rat.

‘You never did know women,’ replied his counsellor, gloomily.

Captain Ratcliffe stared at her.

‘Don’t you turn against me too,’ said he, rather piteously. ‘I have not too many friends left who care for such a battered old hulk. Either you are playing with me, Sue, or you are cross.’

‘It is too late for me to turn; but it

might have been better if I had done so long ago,' said she, with some bitterness.

Rat looked sharply again, then put out his hand and took hold of her pretty white ear. Madame Dupré was vain of her ears.

'Pooh! You dear, foolish, little woman. Only help me to carry this affair through successfully, then you shall have your reward.'

The action was much from a man so impassive though courteous towards the gentler sex. His significant tone had a wonderful effect on the Frenchwoman, who was thought so designing and unscrupulous by the Rookhurst matrons and spinsters. A sigh of faintly reviving hope swelled her ample bosom. She looked up at her master like a fawning spaniel that has been mutinous because of neglect, but which is now easily coaxed back into submission.

Some of her detractors, especially Miss Murdoch, were so bitter tongued they accused madame of having been a *tricoteuse* under the guillotine ; an impostor now ; a light-mannered baggage. They discussed her age ; they doubted her teeth. No one would have believed the truth for a moment, that Madame Dupré's past was irreproachable, except for a long devotion to Pierce Ratcliffe, at which she herself wondered. The reserved Englishman from the first showed himself commanding, and self-possessed in demeanour, and perhaps herein lay the attraction to her fervid nature. In her own way she was a kind hearted woman ; weak, as regarded her passion for him ; strong, in that for his sake she was capable of either wickedness or heroism.

Ratcliffe went on, satisfied.

‘ Lucy is drawing attention by her sor-

rowful looks ; you must try to persuade her that this is hardly decorous. If other means fail, could you not give her a hint about Patty's disappearance from the neighbourhood being due to Dick Saxby.'

'No, but no!' Madame looked distressed at the suggestion. 'That would be unheard of, ignoble! *Ma foi!* I have a conscience, after all. He died, you see, and it would be very ugly to blacken his memory when our *pauvre petite* was so fond of him. Besides, Patty might come back and tell the truth any day.'

'She shall not. Miss Murdoch must see to that. The old hag is devoted to Richie, and will take good care to keep the girl out of the way at her brother's farm-house in Suffolk. If the brother is like the sister, he won't let a mouse out of his claws.'

So saying the captain left the room in

some displeasure. Madame gazed after him, gesticulating with her hands.

‘There! gone in a huff and thinks me ridiculously fastidious. Bah! what hard-hearted wretches all men are. Look at him! so insensible to the softer feelings, yet capable of real friendship. So obstinate sometimes, yet veering this way and that at others. See how he forgot me after he left Paris; what a fool was I ever to follow him! But there—he is my fate! and after all he does like me, and would miss me were I to go away.’

This last was true, for Ratcliffe’s intimacy with Madame Dupré had grown all the closer since Lucy’s illness. The unhappy beauty of the Weald loved solitude these days, and Ratcliffe, although moody, disliked to be alone. The neighbours had now grown to suppose the existence of a platonic attachment between Captain

Ratcliffe and madame; and their tongues had even ceased to wag thereupon. Miss Murdoch still sneered, but no one expected figs from that old thistle. Lucy, if warily questioned on the subject, always honestly replied that her uncle and chaperon were great friends, and that, for her part, she was glad of it.

(Inwardly, she now felt especially grateful that madame relieved her from the strain of keeping up continually in her uncle's company.)

Soon after the first search for Dick's body was over, Captain Ratcliffe announced that he was called to town upon urgent business. The truth was, that, as even madame honestly believed Dick drowned, he felt it would be a relief to escape from the universal regrets and accounts of Mrs. Saxby's sorrow which kept vexing his ears.

In Ratcliffe's absence, Bill Butler was reluctantly persuaded to drive Mrs. Saxby down to the shore one day, with his sister Anne. On learning they meant to visit the sad spot where Dick was last seen, Lucy mournfully begged leave to go too. She and Catherine had been both too ill to meet much hitherto; indeed, Anne and Madame Dupré mutually endeavoured to keep them apart. It was strange to find these two agreeing at last on any point, but madame's real kindness of feeling towards Lucy had moved Anne's sense of justice in the foreigner's favour; besides, the French lady, if commonplace, was sensible.

What a mournful drive it was! The whole May landscape was so fresh and flowery, so green and sweet-smelling; but the bright rays of the spring sun-god seemed to mock at the mourners. Upon

reaching the shore, the few fisher-folk belonging to the two or three cottages in the bay looked at the visitors askance, and gave them only sullen greetings.

Putting up the horse and chaise, they went down to see the ill-fated *Lively Lucy*, which was sunning itself on the shingle. How the three women shuddered as they touched the boat's timbers with reluctant fingers. Ah! if it could but speak! Then they three wandered along the sands, stepping cautiously over black reefs of rock, whence the tide had receded; climbing down cliff paths into further bays. Still their eyes kept staring seawards, except when by some other impulse they searched rock crannies with their glances as if vainly hoping to see some relic—they knew not what—of him they had held so dear. Bill following them, but keeping aloof, divined their thought, and was

piously thankful there was no likelihood of its terrible fulfilment.

Not till it grew almost dark could he persuade them to the homeward drive, finding them seated like three lone sea-birds on a patch of salt-washed grass that crowned a promontory.

When Ratcliffe returned and heard of this expedition, he scolded madame finely. She shrugged her shoulders in a huff.

‘What do you want? I am a woman, and have been a mother. If you let the *pauvre fille’s* grief flow naturally, it will dry up all the quicker. Do I not know? Bah! I wept as if my eyes were fountains when my son died, although he was only a child, and crippled too. If people had tried to make me forget him, I should have hated them.’

So it will be seen that madame on the whole was not a bad soul. She looked

good-humouredly on Lucy, with whom she had never had the faintest cause for jealousy, or quarrel of any kind. The elder woman was fond of pretty faces, she was wont to say truthfully, and really enjoyed the charge of the formerly bright, lively girl whose friends and relations were bound to see Lucy well married.

Madame herself had married in her youth as her family bade her. Her *grande passion* for Ratcliffe only followed in later years. As she had done, it seemed to her natural that Lucy should do likewise.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a lovely evening in the beginning of June; the western sky was of a pale amber hue, across which lay dark violet bars of cloud. So sweetly the twilight fell that its influences moved even Captain Ratcliffe's mind, often insensible to the beauties of nature, into inviting Lucy to come out for an after-supper stroll. Madame Dupré did not hold with the adage, 'After supper walk a mile.' On the contrary, though sitting in the parlour with a volume of Jean Jacques in her lap, she had lightly closed her eyes for a short doze such as she averred kept women's

eyes from wrinkling into crow's-feet too early.

Outside, the captain and his niece wandered round the grounds, then were tempted down the lane towards Rookhurst lodge. Ratcliffe loved going this way, and expatiating on the beauties of the trees and the lovely distant peeps here and there of sunlit high pastures across the valley. In this way he thought he was cleverly imbuing Lucy's mind with the precious advantages of being mistress of this beautiful old estate and mansion.

Where the lane was widened by the sweep approaching the Rookhurst lodge, there was gathered a noisy ring of men and lads, and among them was Richie Saxby himself, just returned from drinking his Cheltenham waters. They were preparing for a cock-fight, the combatants straining in the arms of two stable-boys,

though they had not yet been pitted against each other.

Perceiving the new-comers, Richie swaggered up to them, assuring the captain that it would be well worth his while staying to see the fun, 'although you, dear miss,' this to Lucy in a mincing tone, 'do not care for such men's sports. If you would prefer to wander down to Rookhurst, we will join you presently. It would be a rare pity for your uncle to miss this bout.'

Ratcliffe would have remained willingly, but that his niece hurried him away. It would be so lonely down among the Rookhurst trees, where it was already dark in the valley. Mr. Richie must excuse her. No, she was not afraid of bogies or ghosts, only—Oh! oh!—

For the cocks were set down and began to fight. Upon this Miss Jennings in-

stantly took to flight and hastened towards the rectory, this being the quickest way of avoiding the horrid spectacle. Ratcliffe, not liking to leave his niece alone, as tramps were not infrequent hereabouts, and bethinking himself that Miss Anne would probably keep her company, followed with the private intention of returning as soon as possible.

Lucy, however, turned into the churchyard, whence a field-path led by a shorter way to The Laurels. Hearing her uncle's voice calling to her to stop, she waited among the tombstones till he came up. As she stood in the evening silence, the noise of the cock-fighting crowd softened by distance, nearer sounds of distress struck painfully on her ear.

'Listen, Uncle Pierce; please listen,' she whispered, laying hold of his arm. 'I hear some poor soul moaning over in that

corner, as if very ill or in great sorrow. Let us come and see. I was frightened at going till you came up.'

Truly enough, as they approached the spot where was old Amos Bird's grave, the groans, which had ceased for some minutes, began afresh in such agony that Lucy's blood turned cold. Then they discerned a woman's figure stretched upon the swelling turf, with a bundle lying just beyond her outstretched arms.

'Poor soul, poor soul! Can we help you?' asked Lucy, pityingly, bending down. Then with a little cry she started back. 'What? Patty!' Her eyes fell upon the supposed bundle. It was a dead baby of some two or three months old: the small waxen face upturned in the twilight, the tiny hands quite stiff.

Captain Ratcliffe, standing behind his niece, made an astonished gesture, then

nodded significantly to himself. This was a master-stroke of fate, if only Patty would look up and notice his signs. But at all risks she must not betray herself.

‘Go away, child; do pray go away. I will stay myself and see to this,’ he now urged, as Patty, raising herself on the palms of her hands, looked at Lucy with awful upturned eyes and a mouth drawn to one side with terrible pain.

‘Oh!—oh!—oh!’ hoarsely breathed the unhappy girl, writhing in torture.

‘Lucy, do you hear? This is no sight for you. Patty is—well, my dear, you know what,’ he whispered.

‘She is a woman, and is ill. And surely that is a more fit sight for me than you, Uncle Pierce.’

Lucy retorted this with all her old spirit as of her uncle’s assured pet who had hardly ever known contradiction in her

life. She was too bright, too tender in manner, to be called wilful or pert; it was impossible to be angered with her eager persistence.

Next minute Patty horrified them by rolling on the grass in strong convulsions.

‘Water, water,’ she moaned, ‘for mercy’s sake! I am on fire.’

‘Oh! Uncle Pierce, run quick to the rectory; don’t wait! Ask Anne to hurry here . . . Patty, you know me; can’t you tell me what is the matter? Poor, poor girl; what ails you?’

‘Rat poison. I took it awhile back,’ gasped Patty, the hoarse words escaping her with difficulty, her eyes rolling so far upwards she could hardly see the sweet face bending over her in sympathy. ‘I wanted to die . . . my baby is dead, and there is no place on earth for me.’

Then her pains took the unhappy girl so severely she could say no more, while Lucy hung over her striving to give what help she could.

Soon Captain Ratcliffe came hurrying back from the rectory close by.

‘They are coming immediately. She hasn’t told you? She hasn’t said anything, has she?’

‘She has taken poison,’ whispered Lucy mournfully; then pillowing the dying girl’s head upon her lap, she asked, soothingly, ‘Can I do anything for you? Poor, poor Patty! Don’t think of the little baby, it will be happy in heaven, and I’ll buy a tomb-stone for it.’

‘It’s not baptized. It’s a lost soul, they’ll say. Oh, Miss Lucy, when they bury me at the cross-roads ask them to put the baby with me.’

‘But you are not going to die. Cheer

up, my poor Patty. The rector and Miss Anne are coming to help you.'

'I see them,' interrupted her uncle. 'They will be here in a minute. There, Lucy, don't torment the unfortunate creature to speak; it is bad for her.'

'It will be worse for Miss Lucy if I don't,' and Patty seemed gathering up the last remains of her failing strength to fight her inward pangs. Although the cold damp of death was on her face, and that she felt devoured by inward burning, her gipsy blood helped her to die hard. 'Listen, Miss Lucy—listen. Put your ear near.' (Ratcliffe could not catch distinctly what followed, for Patty's voice was grown thin, as if it came from a distance.) 'You were always good to me; I want to warn you. For your own sake don't . . . marry Mr. Saxby when he comes back. He was a false villain to me and—Oh, Lord, help——'

‘But which Mr. Saxby? Which one?’ cried Lucy, in sharp dismay, as Patty’s meaning penetrated into her mind.

It was too late. Patty stretched herself; and, though Dr. Butler with Anne and some domestics hurried up at that moment bringing assistance, she never recovered consciousness.

While they bore the unhappy girl to the rectory, Ratcliffe gently drew his niece away, insisting so strongly that she had gone through enough of this painful scene that Lucy could not rebel against his authority.

‘Oh! if only Patty had spoken one word more!’ she murmured aloud, in terrible distress of mind, standing still at the lych-gate and looking up at the church.

Ratcliffe answered soothingly, as if divining her thought,

‘Don’t blame Dick too much, my dear.

Young men will be young men, you know ; and now it is all over, and the less thought about it the better.'

Even his conscience smote him, however, as Lucy turned a ghastly face round in sudden inquiry. He was glad of the growing darkness not to see it clearer, but by her quivering voice he guessed her new agony of doubt.

'*So it was Dick!* You know?'

'I know.'

Lucy covered her face with both hands, and turning away walked alone unsteadily along the field-path.

Her uncle followed a few steps behind, not daring to intrude on the sacredness of the maiden's feelings. He ought to have been jubilant at this unexpected turn of affairs, instead of which his eyebrows met in one shaggy perturbed line, and he hated himself for the lie that he had just spoken.

CHAPTER IX.

EVENTS that made England's great heart beat quick, importing life or death in the humblest households that had bred a soldier, caused poor Patty Bird's tragic end to seem a matter of small moment, even in her native village. The thunder of Waterloo echoed across the Channel, and for weeks the lists of wounded and dead were fearfully and eagerly scanned. Then there was news of Boney's second abdication—the entry of the Allies into Paris. Truly those were stirring times!

The month of July was drawing to its end, and the weather was hot, so that in the heat of the day folk felt inclined to

slumber, failing which they were snappish in temper and languid in body.

Madame Dupré was going to London for a few days, wishing to meet some old friends who were to cross the Channel on business, so she explained. She looked forward with unfailing liveliness to the delights of town sights after long burial in the country; yet it vexed her that Captain Ratcliffe would not be persuaded to come up also, when she would have hugely more enjoyed the diversions of supper at Vauxhall, and a drive in a hired chaise in the Hyde Park ring. She was the more vexed on her return to find that the captain seemed to have been quite gay in her absence.

Lucy, who was still very sad at heart and subdued in spirits, only cared to visit the rectory now. There was a new grief in going to Forge Farm and hearing Mrs. Saxby speak of Dick, which the childless

mother could not guess. So Uncle Pierce also visited often at the rectory, taking upon himself the charge and companionship of his niece in madame's absence. They supped there; they played whist; and Anne doctored him for his little ailments. For ever since his fall in the hunting-field the master of The Laurels was not his former self.

Anne took pride in her skill in administering home-made lotions and dried simples. Madame equally piqued herself on tisanes and experience; besides, she looked upon Ratcliffe as her particular patient, and Gallie wrath inwardly boiled against Miss Butler for trespassing in so jealously guarded a domain.

The misguided captain went on to praise Anne, calmly supposing that madame shared all his passing sympathies.

‘Upon my life, I wonder what all the

young fellows are about to leave such a monstrous fine girl single?' says he.

'Perhaps you think she would suit *you*,' says she, growing jealous.

At the speaker's tone, Ratcliffe looked up and chuckled out of pure mischief.

'Gad! I should not mind marrying her myself; you are right there. Any man would be glad to own so comely a young woman.'

'What! marry her!' shrieked madame. 'Monster! Infamous, perfidious deceiver. Ah! I suffocate——'

They two were standing in the hot-house at the time of this colloquy, whither they had gone to inspect some new plants; for the captain took a great interest in his garden. In her rage the fair fury caught up a flower-pot, sent it shivering through the glass with all the strength of a comely arm; then another, and another.

A gardener came up running at hearing these crashes, and stared round-eyed at sight of the wilful damage.

His master observed coolly, as if it was an everyday occurrence,

‘Madame was faint and wanted air. Are you better?’ this to the lady. ‘Allow me to offer you my arm.’

The angry woman was crimson still from passion, her breath came with difficulty; but she yielded to the implied command of him who had so long been the master of her passionate nature.

Together they paced arm in arm through the flower-beds, till at last the late virago recovered her voice.

‘I must speak to you. Yes—*I will!*’

‘Certainly, madame; but pray wait till we reach a more secluded spot.’

They passed next along a gravel walk, commonly called the captain’s quarter-

deck, which was raised some fourteen feet above the lane, because the hill where Mrs. Saxby's black ox had once fallen was now cut away. There was a stone seat built at the end into the parapet of the wall, on which they sat down.

'You know,' burst out the woman, as if giving vent to important tidings hitherto pent in her bosom, 'you know that I went to London last week to see some old friends.'

'So you informed us; and I trust that the meeting was both a satisfactory and agreeable one.'

'As for my business, yes; my money affairs are good, flourishing. But as regards another matter—*no!*'

'May one enquire what that is?' politely.

'Yes, m'sieur. It concerns you; perhaps dangerously.'

'Ha!' Ratcliffe leaned back, crossed his

legs and took a pinch of snuff. 'Pray proceed; I am all attention.'

'You remember the year 1793, when you came to my boarding-house in Paris as Mr. Felix——?'

'Hush, not so loud.'

Madame was speaking in a cautiously lowered tone, yet the captain looked round and over into the lane with apprehension.

'As Mr. F. then, an agent for wine, though you were in reality what I should have abhorred in any other man—a secret agent for Government. Pah! If I had known, it would have been odious to me. But there! no one guessed. And so you saw how useful I should be to you, therefore you made yourself my friend, and right hand, and when Monsieur Dupré nearly brought us into danger by meddling with the Jacobins, so that I was bound to you by gratitude and true at-

tachment before ever I found out that you were—a spy.'

She paused, breathing hard.

But no answer came. Ratcliffe's features betrayed no more expression than those of an Egyptian rock-hewn statue.

'Alas!' madame added, with a sort of desperation, revealing her real weakness. 'You made me believe you actually cared for me. *Mais voilà*—it was your trade to pretend. You were consummate in hypocrisy; prodigious.'

'Not quite so in those days. I do, I always did, care for you, Suzanne,' was Ratcliffe's calmly impressive answer. 'Love, in my opinion, is mere moonshine; marriage, a bond for which I have never had much relish; unless indeed both men and women have assured themselves by long observation that they are not likely to grow too wearied of each other's society.'

Since I left France and took up my life here, have I not been always the same? If I had wished, there are plenty of ladies in the country round about who would not have slighted me; though I say it who should not.'

His listener mused over this, and was struck by the truth of his argument. She was softened.

'If you stayed single for my sake,' she faltered, with hesitation, 'then, now that I am free and here——'

'Now I have grown so used to bachelor liberty that I have stayed single for my own sake, I suppose,' returned Ratcliffe, affecting a lazy smile while speaking courteously. 'Also it has not seemed to me fair to put anyone over my niece's head in this house. Once she is married, it will be different.'

'Always Lucy, Lucy. She is first all

the time, and I am sick of it. You showed less devotion to her father, although he came at the risk of his life to find you in Paris, believing you ill and in danger.'

Ratcliffe's face changed for the first time, growing reddish brown.

'That was a simple-minded, foolish act of his, just like a sailor. I am not answerable for his Quixotism. Besides, he was urged to come by my sister's fears. She was always fond of me, poor soul.'

'But you were answerable for helping yourself to his passport, when he was hurt in that street fight and was carried back bleeding to my house,' sneered madame, her black eyes glittering.

This brought a look on her companion's face not many men and still fewer women would have cared to meet; but madame had the courage of recklessness. She felt anything was better than indifference, it

was her wish to wound and stab this pachydermatous being out of the callousness she felt powerless to influence.

‘It was evident the poor fellow was dying,’ so Ratcliffe excused himself with gloomy bitterness. ‘His passport could, and did, save my life, for I was being tracked down, as you know. As events proved, it could not have done poor Frank any good. The journey to the other world requires no papers. Why rake all this up, Suzanne?’ (in growing passion). ‘You know you advised me yourself to do it. You said he could not live beyond a few hours.’

‘True. I wished to save you above all else. Your life was dearer to me than the lives of a hundred other men. But I thought you would be so grateful afterwards—come back for me some day. You could imagine—you knew—how desolate

I must feel without my one friend; my child crippled; M. Dupré so old, exacting, a gambler, a spendthrift. Then I found out that you had given me a false address! *Ah!* At that moment I hated you!' and she ground her teeth at the recollection.

'How did you know?' briefly asked the other.

'Through *him*, the Lieutenant Jennings. He was very simple, and told me all I asked.'

'But *how?*' Ratcliffe moistened his lips, which were dry, and brought out his questions with difficulty. 'How could he tell you? Surely he never recovered consciousness?'

The speaker rose, and, supporting himself on the wall, stared at his interlocutor.

'But, yes, he did,' coolly returned madame, secretly gloating over her tyrant's dismay. 'We both thought he would not,

but he did for some days—many days, in fact.’

‘Great heavens!’ Ratcliffe turned pale, and his fingers clenched and opened nervously. ‘And I told Lucilla, my poor sister, that I left him dead—dead! The dear unhappy creature never recovered the shock. Well, well, I believed it at the time; and of course it was true soon afterwards.’

‘One believes so easily what one thinks best for oneself,’ scoffed madame. ‘*Bien!* your supposition had the effect that your sister handed over all her own and her husband’s money to you to keep for their child, little Lucy. And you have done so very well; I make you my compliments.’

‘The devil! I had money of my own. Who told you this pack of lies?’

‘My own reason. Pierce, calm yourself; listen to common sense. See you!’

you had very little money; but the Lieutenant Jennings had a good deal. He told me so. Now,' she waved her hand towards the red-brick house, its handsome garden and out-buildings, 'now you have much, and your niece Lucy is dependent upon your bounty. She has nothing. Pouf!' Madame snapped her fingers at the easy elucidation of the problem.

'But tell me . . . How long . . .? How long did he live afterwards?' Ratcliffe was shaking. 'Why keep this from me until now?'

'He lived some time. There was no use to distress you by saying so. When we met at Tunbridge Wells, when *I found you* at last, after a long search, I said that he died soon after you left; did I not?'

'Woman! you are keeping something back. Do not put me in a frenzy; you are torturing me.'

‘And did not you torture me? Ah! *mon ami, mon ami*, remember all I did for you. How I risked hiding a spy, and helping him to escape. Then I took the chance of being possibly blamed for the lieutenant’s death, had it happened in my house. You never sent me a letter, not one word of gratitude. Oh, there! say nothing; you could have done it. Trust one of your profession to send a message anywhere; besides, I understood the cipher,’ cried madame, all the repressed soreness rankling in her mind these many years escaping now in a passionate torrent. ‘Well, I waited and waited, till my old husband died several years later. He grew more tipsy and nearly ruined me at play, in spite of my efforts to save some money for myself and my son. Ah!’ At the latter thought, madame’s voice grew wistful, the mother in her yearned for the

weakly deformed infant that had been her idol. 'Well, I lived for my *petit cheri*, I could always have lived on alone with him, but then, after four years, he left me too. As soon as I had laid him in Père la Chaise I hated my house. My one thought was to go away, and the only person to whom my poor empty heart turned was you. Though you had never come back to me, never written, Pierce, a strong wish took hold of me to go to England, and perhaps find you in the end. I was so many, many months searching before I came upon you! There you were standing in the Pump Room, with your hands behind your back, smiling, while a pretty girl made grimaces over a glass of water she was drinking. For a moment I felt jealous of her, I had suffered so long in vain; I have never forgotten you.'

'You seemed to be enjoying yourself

remarkably well when we met,' observed Ratcliffe, sarcastically. 'You had two or three admirers in your train, I remember.'

Madame bit her lips and tossed her head.

Ratcliffe went on musingly,

'So he died soon, you say. Poor Frank, poor fellow! If I had known he would even have recovered partially——'

'You would have escaped all the same from the guillotine,' interrupted madame, with terrible earnestness, 'or from his fate—a living death.'

Ratcliffe started forward.

'What d'ye mean? Speak, I adjure you; speak.' A terrible presentiment of what was coming had fallen upon him in horror.

Slowly came the answer he dreaded.

'Frank Jennings recovered before going to prison as a convict for life.'

Ratcliffe felt as if the hair of his head stood up; his heart turned sick within him; his breast laboured as he breathed with difficulty.

‘*Pauvre ami*; how it grieves you,’ murmured the woman, pityingly, as she looked at him, and a feeling of gladness that he was not altogether hardened crept about her heart. ‘Naturally I concealed it from you. You see, it was the same thing as dying; or, at least, I so regarded it. Think what pain I have spared you these years. But—but—I have heard this last week in London something you ought to know. Lieutenant Jennings had a companion in prison whom I have just met, and he says the Englishman was liberated after the Peace in 1802. I feared—no, no—I apprehended it might be so, therefore I made enquiries——’

‘What!!!’ Twice Ratcliffe had tried to

speak, but his mouth was too dry; now his voice sounded husky and thin. The whole man was prostrated at this news; all his nerves quivering. ‘*He is—free!*’

‘Yes. He crossed over to England at the time, I say. You must be cautious; therefore I warn you. Why not get Lucy married soon? Then—hear me, Pierce, for your own sake—let us leave this country. Come back to France with me; he will never find you there, and you always liked our sunshine and gayer life and ways. Besides, I am well off, and what is mine is yours.’

Madame was trembling, too, as she rose supporting herself on the back of the bench and looking with wistful, timid gaze at her guilty friend.

Ratcliffe stood beside the low parapet, which was there but a foot high, and all the lines that age and illness, since his

accident a year ago, had graven on his face showed more deeply furrowed than ever before. His eyelids were drooped; his head hung on his contracted chest; the lower part of his face was drawn downwards, while deep sighs escaped his labouring breast.

‘ Oh, Pierce, Pierce !’ pleaded the woman once more, low.

But he neither heard nor heeded her. Feeling collapsed in his despair, and believing he was still beside the stone-backed seat, the unhappy man let himself drop heavily on the low wall, leaning blindly back for expected support. Next instant he had fallen down into the roadway below, without even having time to utter a cry.

But a woman’s shriek rang piercingly across the flower-beds into the house, startling the servants, who came rushing out in affright. They followed madame,

who was running like a frenzied woman, to the gate, and out into the lane, where with horror all recognized their master in an inert, prostrate mass. The captain only groaned heavily on being raised from where he lay in the thick dust of the road.

His grooms carried Ratcliffe indoors a human wreck; for when Dr. Twigge was summoned in terrified haste he pronounced that his old friend had received injuries which would probably shatter him for the remainder of his life.

All through August, and into September's mellow, pleasant days, madame and Lucy nursed their patient night and day with unremitting devotion. With joy they saw the sick man recover sufficiently to be lifted from his bed to a sofa; carried to another room; at last came a morning when he was wheeled outside in a chair to feel the autumn sunshine:

Yet all their care was unavailing to restore the captain any further. Pierce Ratcliffe remained a mere crushed husk of his former self, much of his reason fled. He looked like an aged man ; wizen-faced, with a white, bristling beard that had been suffered to grow during his illness.

Lucy would feed him with bread-and-milk, for at this she was more deft than madame, who nevertheless sat by, watching the girl's attentions with something like jealousy. Otherwise, the older woman took the lead in matters appertaining to his nursing ; and Lucy, recognising the fact that such unselfishness ought not to be opposed, gently allowed madame to have her own way.

CHAPTER X.

RICHIE had returned, as we know, but his wooing was long a-doing. Perhaps Captain Ratcliffe had himself advised a Fabian policy, which would give time for the poison to work that Patty had unwittingly dropped into Lucy's mind. This was in June. Then our gay buck, to be fashionable, must needs go to town; Cheltenham having been poisonously dull, he declared.

So the summer passed until Captain Ratcliffe's accident; after which, for two long months, Lucy was much too engaged with sick-room cares to think of wooers. Still they sought her, on foot and on horseback. She had refused Colonel Fol-

liot and Lord John early last spring, when fresh from her sorrow for Dick's death. They came riding together, being fast friends; for, after tossing for first chance, both resolved to try their luck in company, each believing that, if not accepted himself, his friend must win the prize. Since then, Lucy had said nay to some lesser admirers; for the formerly wilful beauty, being now sweetly pale, gentle, and subdued in her manner by sorrow, seemed in need to them all of a man's strong arm to lean upon; and each hastened to offer his own.

On Richie's return from London, soon after the captain's accident, his eyes were suddenly opened to the increased value of his old friend's niece.

'Ratcliffe is very shaky, poor old fellow. Can't last long. What luck!' he soliloquised, gazing abstractedly with

somewhat bloodshot eyes, as he stood on the Rookhurst bowling-green, his thin, tightly-breeched legs placed wide apart; for Richie lately affected horsey manners and a sporting cut in clothes. He had always cherished a secret vanity on this subject, and now that Dick lay 'forty fathoms deep,' as he supposed, among seaweeds and shells, he dared indulge his foible without the daily fear of ridicule from his cousin. 'The Laurels estate just fits nicely on to Rookhurst; it will be a dower-house, he, he, he! for Miss Lucy.—Dash it all, no; that won't do, for I mean to live longest.' This sage and frigid lover now began balancing pros and cons. 'Precious nuisance to have the old gentleman and his wheel-chair tripping one up in the corridors; and my delightful bride, I suppose, would weep at the idea of forsaking him, because he cries after her at meal

times like a baby. Ugh! it's a devil of a nuisance. But, if I don't hurry matters, he'll drop off the bough pretty soon.'

So Richie took a middle course; calling almost daily upon his neighbours at The Laurels, asking sympathisingly after the invalid, and pleasing Lucy by these thoughtful attentions, while not tormenting her with passionate selfishness in his wooing like most of her other admirers. Richie's composure in a manner soothed her sick mind. But the memory of poor Patty was a haunting terror that visited Lucy many a night in stillness by the sick man's bedside. Her ears echoed with the dying girl's screams; Patty's convulsed features rose yet again before the lonely watcher's vision.

No wonder Lucy grew strange in manner, so that Anne Butler claimed the privilege of her dearest friend and questioned her

on the subject. But, even to Anne, Lucy would not disburthen her mind of the dreadful secret. Anne sighed; and looked with puzzled brain at the dark curling head that stored so closely thoughts at which she vainly hazarded guesses.

‘My dearest creature,’ she murmured, ‘you have indeed been sorely tried this year. Tell me—at least Madame Dupré is pleasant towards you?’

‘Yes, yes. It is not that which troubles me. She is a comfort; she is so good to Uncle Pierce.’

‘And Mr. Richard Saxby?’ queried Anne.

‘He is good too,’ replied Lucy, indifferently. ‘He comes every day. Uncle Pierce used to be so fond of him.’ Then, as an after-thought, ‘Poor uncle cannot endure the sight of him now, but such whims are frequent, madame says, in an

illness like his, and we try not to let Mr. Saxby notice it, or he would be hurt.'

Anne nodded to herself. She judged her friend's nature with indulgent, slightly contemptuous pity in those days. Lucy had such a warm plastic heart, too open to influence from those whom she loved or who were brought into daily domestic intercourse with her.

(' Captain Ratcliffe will most likely last for a year or two. When he is gone, Lucy may be persuaded to live at Rookhurst,' decided Anne, with a passing pang. Had *she* been Dick's chosen love, would she not have mourned for him all the days of her life?')

It was not wholly unpleasant to good Anne to contrast her own superiority of character with Lucy's weakness. What a strange ascendancy madame seemed to have got over the household at The Laurels! Doubtless she was insidiously doing her

best in favour of Richie's courtship; and Anne, now hating the latter for his shameless attempted seizure of Dick's bay horse, wondered at Lucy for condoning that action. She did not understand how cleverly Captain Ratcliffe explained and glossed over the matter to his niece; besides, Lucy had not been present at the scene like Anne herself.

There was another person besides Lucy Jennings whose manner was somewhat inexplicable during those autumn days. Madame Dupré, while all devotion to her querulous patient—besides turning to Lucy for affection and comfort, which was a new phase—had a frightened look in her eyes as of a hunted animal. If the doctor's hired chaise drove up to the door, she visibly trembled; the sound of a strange voice in the vestibule made her start.

‘What is best to do! what is best?’ she

sometimes asked herself in despair, even while blandly smiling in Ratcliffe's hollowed yellow visage, as she strove to amuse him with childish games. 'If that man Jennings comes back, my poor Pierce will be a beggar. Once turned out of The Laurels, he will miss the familiar objects about him; will cry and pine. He would not live a week.' A deep sigh escaped her.

'How feeling madame is,' thought Lucy.

Meanwhile, Bay Ronald no longer stood in the loose box at Forge Farm. In summer when it was gossiped that Richie would soon be returning from town, Catherine Saxby thought the matter out in her own mind, then spoke to young Butler.

'Bill; the horse ought to go to Rookhurst.'

Her voice was sepulchral. It gave Bill a shiver of pity.

‘ All right, ma’am.’

‘ It would be best for us to send him,’ went on Catherine, in the same tragic tone. ‘ I would not set eyes on that strange bailiff again.’

However, when Bill told Giles of what was decided, the latter bluntly asked to be excused doing the job. So did the other work-folk, one by one.

Bill said no more about it, but rose very early the next morning and himself saddled the bay. Yet, although he led out the horse as quietly as possible into the yard, next moment he heard the click of a hasp being unfastened. Mrs. Saxby was looking out, night-capped, from an upper passage window. Bill swore under his breath—he was so vexed that she should have known what was happening. Silently he waited below in the yard; from above she looked out, silent too. Only

Bay Ronald chafed and wondered why he was not allowed to start for a rousing morning canter before the heat of the day came on. Then the sad face framed in its night-cap disappeared; the window clicked to again. Bill mounted heavily, and rode down the lane.

It was the last scene in the tragedy to the mother upstairs; naught indeed in life mattered, henceforth, to her.

When it was known that the heriot claimed had been sent to Rookhurst, all the womenkind in the neighbourhood were angry, saying that Richie should have taken another and less valuable horse when this one might have been sold for the widow's benefit. She would miss her strong son so sorely as it was in overlooking her farm affairs. But the masculine minds, gentle and simple, argued the matter on both sides. Some said that

heriot was a barbarous survival and ought in all cases to be compounded; others replied that law is law, and that so long as such a custom exists Richie was in his rights.

As for Bay Ronald, he fretted mightily at first and often tried to stop at his old home when taken to the forge to be shod. Except on those occasions, however, he was never ridden past the farm, Richie having sufficient shame to give orders to this effect.

So October came, almost as bright and warm as September, although stirred by gales. Is there not a German saying that such an October is an 'old woman's summer'? The mornings were sunny; calves stood deep in red clover whisking their tails; trees took on autumn tints. At nights the hunter's moon, a great

burnished globe, hung low in the dusky blue sky; beneath its rays the roads were like a white net-work intersecting the dark, thickly-wooded weald.

CHAPTER XI.

As October advanced, hunting-men began to talk of the prospects of the coming season. One day at Petty Sessions, when business was despatched, and the brother magistrates had laid aside judicial armour and were refreshing themselves with social intercourse, a neighbour well known for inquisitiveness inquired of Richard Saxby, during a pause,

‘What about that match of yours that was to have come off on the first of November? The bet, you know, between your poor cousin—ahem!—and yourself? Is it void?’

‘That is a point upon which I wish to

ask the opinion of Mr. Hodges and Squire Falconer,' replied Saxby, with apparent humility, raising his eyes, with their pale lashes, to consult the faces of the two remaining judges.

'Why, Mr. Saxby will walk over, I suppose,' gravely returned old Mr. Hodges, while questioning his colleague Falconer by a look.

'I suppose so,' returned Falconer, sourly. He added, with a look of disgust delivered straight at Richie, 'Only I'd advise you, young chap, to be sharp to time, for I'm not going to wait half-a-second. We can't have the first day's hunting delayed for you—or even a better man.' Then, in a loud aside, 'Who the devil cares what he does?'

Richie's generally cold eyes gleamed as he caught the words, which Falconer intended he should do.

‘ You’ve got your cousin’s horse, but not his sweetheart,’ went on the M.F.H. He hated Richie, and he was a terrible personage to offend.

Knowing nothing of the fashionable blood’s insidious advances to Lucy, Dick’s stout quondam ally had heard of the young lady’s obduracy towards many suitors, and supposed her still faithful to his ‘ dear boy.’ But now Richie favoured him with a queer smile.

‘ For all the world so like the side twist old Philip used to give his mouth,’ as the squire said afterwards, ‘ that—Lordy! it turned me quite sick; it did, upon my soul.’

Richie, driving his curriole home that afternoon, vowed to himself that just to spite old Falconer he would go and settle the matter with Lucy straight away.

‘ By Jove! it will be glorious to see the

old fellow's face purple with passion when he hears the news.'

Our friend chuckled to himself, and flicked his horses so sharply in his joy that one thoroughbred nearly bolted, which promptly sobered him. Notwithstanding, his malice was as a sweet morsel under his tongue that he turned over and over during the drive. By George! to appear on the 1st of November on Bay Ronald before the eyes of all the neighbourhood; and to have his engagement to Lucy Jennings announced at the same time, to the gnashing of teeth, envy, and hatred of her numerous admirers——

'What a hit; what a famous hit! I must clinch the matter.'

Accordingly, on reaching The Laurels, he drove in—with some hesitancy as regarded the sharp turn by the tall brick gate-posts.

While his groom sprang to the horses' heads, our buck daintily stepped down and into the garden, where he saw Lucy walking demurely beside her uncle's chair, which was wheeled by a boy. Throwing even more than usual solicitude into his voice, the cunning hypocrite enquired after his dear old friend's health!

On seeing him, even at a distance, the sufferer's face twitched all over with dislike; and inarticulate grumblings, pishing and pshawing, reached Richie, though he was still some steps away, when Lucy hurried up to intercept him.

'Uncle Pierce is rather fretful to-day; he slept badly last night,' she apologised, with woman's readiness to fib when playing peacemaker. 'Let us take a turn up and down by the hollyhocks, so that I can keep him in sight if he needs me.'

'How I feel for your anxiety, dear miss,'

sighed Richie. 'I wish—I have often deeply wished of late—that I could share the care of our dear invalid, and so partly relieve you of your burden.'

'You are very good, but Madame Dupré does all that,' replied Lucy, calmly.

Richie's wooing moved her not a wit, although, from much experience, she perfectly understood his meaning.

He sighed once more significantly.

'Still, even with two such devoted nurses, my dear creature, a man's help may be of some small service; and a three-fold cord, as you know Scripture says, cannot be broken.'

Lucy was silent, bethinking herself that her uncle's grooms and many stable-helpers were indeed absolutely idle these days. How Uncle Pierce contrived to employ them all she could not imagine. Their wages, likewise, seemed to be extraordi-

narily high, as she had found upon quarter-day. Richie took courage.

‘Dearest miss, beloved Lucy, you know how I adore you——’

He stopped abashed. Lucy raised her liquid dark gaze to his face with sweet calm; not the faintest colour warmed her soft white cheek as he had confidently expected. But then—more than two dozen others had told her the same thing before.

‘I have lately supposed you admired me,’ was her reply given with calm directness. ‘You have always liked me, I believe, since we were children.’

‘Liked! divinest creature, sweetest girl.’

Richie raised his eyes heavenward, in shocked protest against so icy a phrase. Then, in a polished peroration, he pleaded his cause, the finished dissembler, with a warmth and even sincerity that

surprised himself, being piqued into the semblance of passion by the little minx's artful coyness, as he supposed it. He reminded Lucy, almost with tears in his eyes, certainly a sob in his voice, of how her dear uncle had wished for this union, spoken to him on the subject. Surely Captain Ratcliffe would recover; it might brighten the sufferer's last days, when his mind should grow clearer and stronger.

‘It might——’

Actually tears rose into the beautiful black orbs at which Richie was gazing.

‘Then——’

Richie gallantly took Lucy's little hand. She left it like a snowflake in his limp grasp.

He kissed it; murmured his happiness; would have drawn nearer. Hey, presto! his lady-love had escaped him! Not with a blush, which would have pleased his

vanity, but with an apparently unconcerned yet quick turn towards the beech-grove, beside which her uncle's chair was being slowly dragged.

‘Uncle Pierce will be vexed if I stay longer; you will excuse me?’ She waved her hand, and flitted away.

Richie looked after her, and swore most wickedly to himself.

‘I’ll take it out of you, you little minx—just wait and see.’

Still he was fairly satisfied on the whole.

Next day the accepted suitor appeared, not feeling too sure of his conquest, therefore resolved to be circumspect in his behaviour and attentions.

‘Pray do not say anything about this—I mean our engagement—yet,’ pleaded his *fiancée*, who winced at his approach and had dark circles of sleeplessness under her eyes.

Yet she met him with the accustomed frankness of their childish friendship, of which she had never lost sight.

Poor Dick, out of generosity and certitude of his own chief place in his sweetheart's mind, had often forborne to tell her of his cousin's jealousy and smaller misdeeds. Richie's real admiration for herself, besides her uncle's approval of the young man, all helped now to lend him favour in her eyes.

Lucy went on with a winning manner,

'There are so many gossips round here, you know, there always seem so many in the country; and I do not want to have their tongues busied with our concerns.'

Richie was flattered at the word 'our,' but meant to drive a bargain.

'Then do me a kindness, dearest angel, in return. Turn and turn about, you know. Say you will come to the first meet this

season, and drive in my curricle. Miss Murdoch will play chaperon. I want you to see me ride.'

So he urged, looking with an evil eye at his victim, for at his first words Lucy had turned her head aside, feeling cold and sick in heart. Still no idea that he meant to keep his wager by riding over the course entered her mind. There followed a silence of some seconds.

'Oh—no,' she breathed at last.

'But oh—yes,' he insisted. 'We are engaged remember, Lucy. Come, you would not be proclaimed as a jilt. Why not—tell me—why not?'

Still she was silent for a few moments, then answered with sudden effort,

'I will go.'

Anne, a few days later, noticing Richie's daily visits at The Laurels, taxed her friend Lucy on the subject.

‘He wants to marry you, my dear. People are beginning to say that you are engaged; although, of course, I contradict it.’

‘Why should it not be true? One must marry some one,’ murmured Lucy.

‘What a strange way of speaking,’ replied Anne, taking a severe tone. ‘I don’t see why any woman should marry against her conscience.’ Then, in a lowered voice, ‘Have you forgotten Dick?’

‘No, never,’ answered Lucy, with a burst of tears. ‘But he—he forgot me.’

Then she closed her lips tightly, looked somewhat wild about the eyes, but would not utter one syllable more upon the subject. In vain Anne questioned her; tried soothing, caressing, expostulation; she could make out nothing of what her friend meant.

CHAPTER XII.

Scene : the cabin of the 'Ajax' on the West Indian station.

The captain was entertaining his first lieutenant and the doctor at dinner. A sailor stood in attendance upon them, and the dessert had just been placed on the table.

'Phew, how hot!' said the first lieutenant, making a breeze with his handkerchief. 'To think it is the first of September to-day at home, and they are popping after birds in the stubble fields, with the sun overhead and an autumn freshness in the air, I'll be bound. And see us frizzling here, with Yellow Jack

ready to make sport among us any day like death scattering a covey of partridges.'

His captain's lip curled at such uncalled-for grumbling.

'Hot, do you say? Pooh, man! If you had known, as I do, what it is to be inside a French prison in August, packed with a hellish crew as tight as sardines in a barrel; stench, foul air, foul smells, and language. Ah!' he drew a long breath, 'you'd think twice before complaining once you felt yourself *free*.'

'You must have had a terrible experience, sir. I did hear something of your imprisonment before I joined the *Ajax*,' said the lieutenant, in a subdued voice, who had but newly arrived.

The captain nodded, put his elbow on the table, sank his head on his hand, and with a frowning brow stared at the cloth in silence. The doctor and the lieutenant

exchanged glances. Then the former made a sign to the sailor, standing behind the captain's chair, who promptly filled up his master's glass and those of the guests. The lieutenant broke the silence in a forced tone of cheeriness which he supposed calculated to rouse his superior.

'Well, anyway, we will soon be homeward bound. Boney's in safe keeping now, and honest men are free, Providence be thanked! and we'll all see our wives and sweethearts again. Here's to those at home.'

The doctor made a gesture of despairing warning. The late speaker stared at him mystified, for he had only joined within the last week, replacing a victim to West Indian fever. He now looked as who should ask, 'What have I said wrong this time?'

Captain Jennings raised his head, and

he was a comely man with a sprinkling of silver-white in his thick, dark hair. Both his ruddy face and roving black eye seemed made for jollity and frank kindness. The lieutenant had thought his skipper a king of good fellows till this evening, when dark fits of gloom had twice or thrice settled down upon the host during the meal, alternating with bursts of boisterous gaiety. Now the latter spoke, and it was in a lower tone, almost a whisper of bitterness.

‘*I have none at home.* I had as true and dear a wife as man could wish. I had a baby daughter, too, whom I called my sweetheart, and she used to crow in my face when I tossed her in the air, and clap her little hands for joy. Where are they now? answer me that.’

‘Both dead: sad, very sad,’ murmured the lieutenant.

‘Both dead! How do you know, sir?’ answered the captain, starting, and looking full at the lieutenant, as if the latter had made an assertion instead of merely hazarding a supposition. ‘My wife is dead; I know that, for I saw her grave and read the inscription over it with my own eyes, “Lucilla Jennings; died of grief for the loss of her husband.” But my daughter, my little Lucy; there was no memorial to her in that churchyard, no mention of her name on her mother’s tombstone. Why should she be dead, man? Why, I say?’

The sailor in attendance started on hearing the name of Lucy. In the very act of putting down two decanters of wine on the sideboard he paused, holding them in his hand, and listened. The captain had, as it were, hurled his question with violence at the last speaker. Plainly he grew so excited on this subject that self-control

almost deserted him. The lieutenant for his part looked discomposed; felt indeed guilty, though he had only tried to say the best he could in consolation.

‘I am sorry,’ he murmured. ‘I did not know.’

Captain Jennings sighed; drew his broad palm over his forehead and recovered himself.

‘Don’t apologize, my dear fellow. You didn’t know, of course. How should you?’ Then turning with a poor smile, which made both his guests feel for him, ‘Gentlemen, you will think this a strange way of treating you both, but to tell the truth, this is the anniversary of my wedding-day, and so I invited you here to help me forget Well, well, if my bereavement had come about by God’s will and in a natural way, I hope I should have tried to bear it with humility and resigna-

tion as would be my duty. But at times it verily seems to me that what happened was of the devil's doing; for an infernal villain, my own brother-in-law, was the cause of my being taken prisoner instead of himself. He returned me evil for good, the scoundrel. Yes, Pierce Ratcliffe was the man who betrayed me to save his own carcass. I have to thank him for my wasted years and desolate home.'

At that name the sailor started; made a step forward, his mouth opening as if about to speak. Then, remembering his menial position, he softly set down the decanters and stepped behind a curtain that hung before the door of the inner cabin where the captain slept. The man's duties lay here. He had only come on board last spring as a volunteer when the *Ajax* left England; then, suffering from depression at the time, he succumbed to a West Indian

fever which kept him some weeks on the sick-list. Owing to this accident, and his good manners, he owed his present situation where the work was light. Often in the evening, whilst seeing to his master's uniform, he overheard the officers talking when dining with the captain. He listened now.

‘What a thundering rascal!’ cried the lieutenant.

‘How did it happen, sir?’ asked the doctor, ‘if you don't mind telling us.’

Said Captain Frank Jennings, ‘If you really wish to hear my story, gentlemen, I am willing to tell it. It relieves one's mind, as perhaps you have both felt, when one has a bitter grievance, to let it out once in a way; though I trust you may never know yourselves what it is to suffer as I have done through the treachery, as King David says, of my own familiar friend—

for he was that. You see, I believed in the fellow; he had such a pleasant way with him. As to my wife, poor soul!—she thought there was no one equal to her brother. To begin my story :

‘ We had only been some three years married, and I was a second lieutenant then, and home on leave for awhile. My poor wife was troubled about this elder brother, her only living relation. He was a roving ne’er-do-weel, who gave her a great deal of anxiety, and she was all the fonder of him for it—just like her sex. Pierce was a black sheep, but the chap had such polished manners, d’ye see, and a soft voice with women—though towards men he could be as hard as nails—that he had the gift of making himself a general favourite. I think still he might have had a fine career if only he would have used his wits to work rightly. Anyway, Lucilla

adored him, and for her sake as well as his own I felt towards him like a brother. Well, it was the year '93, and he had gone to Paris some time before the Declaration of War, on private business of his own, he said; though that later proved to be falsehood. And there he stayed afterwards for some weeks, till poor Lucilla, knowing him in danger, fretted herself quite ill and melancholy. The end of it was, I resolved in my own mind that it might be easy enough for a smart fellow to make his way to Paris and back, and find out if Pierce was really alive or dead. I had been a good deal in Mexico and the Brazils, so managed to get a passport as a southern planter. There is a strain of foreign blood in my family, which helped me to look the part; besides, I knew all the tricks of the language.'

'What! you ventured yourself into

the den of lions, into the jaws of death ! But your wife ? Did she not try to keep you back ?' asked the listeners, astonished.

'The dear lass never knew my intention till I was gone. You see, I felt so cocksure I could do the job ; bring him back and myself as well ; then how pleased the little woman would be ! Well, I got there all right, and found Pierce so disguised that it took me some time before I recognised him. And he was thankful enough to see me, for I offered to pay up some debts of his in England that had been keeping him from showing his face there ; also I promised him if he would only start fair I would stick by him. That very evening I just went for a stroll outside our boarding-house, and found myself hemmed in a street-row that was going on between two political parties. What it was all about I never rightly knew. Any-

way, while trying to escape quietly, I was spied and set upon by some half-dozen fellows, who supposed I belonged to the enemy, and left me for dead. Well, Pierce had seen the whole business, but kept his own skin sound; trust him for that. However, he got me carried home, insensible; and when I came to after a day or two, what d'ye think——?

‘ My precious brother-in-law was gone! —escaped on my passport, sirs! fled to England. And they seized me in his stead as a spy, and clapped me in prison! *There!*’

Captain Jennings smote his fist on the table with a mighty sea-oath, then breathed heavily, while the veins swelled in his sunburnt forehead and his usually pleasant face darkened with grief and rage at remembrance of the treachery he had endured.

‘By heaven! I should like to swing that fellow as high as Haman,’ shouted the lieutenant.

The doctor asked more quietly, still with deep and excited interest,

‘But what followed, sir? You were liberated after the Peace of Amiens. Could you not find him? Is he dead or alive?’

‘I could never discover a trace of the rascal. When I made my way to our little home on Wandsworth Common, a pretty house covered with creepers, where I had left *her*, my wife, there were strangers in the cottage. They must have supposed me tipsy, for I held by the garden-gate, fairly dizzy, and stared. Such a thought had never struck me before. You see, I had pictured to myself that she would be alive and well and waiting for me, with the child growing up.

‘When my mind cleared a bit, they an-

swered my questions civilly enough, but none of them knew my wife's name, though they had been there four or five years. At that I wandered away heart-sick, and somehow strayed into the churchyard.

‘There a few minutes later her tombstone met my eyes !

‘The shock after the hopes I had been cherishing, fairly clinging to, during those prison years, nearly drove me mad. What would have become of me I cannot say, but that some kind Samaritans living near found me in the churchyard, and took me to their own house for some days till I recovered myself. They had made out my story in the meantime, and were pursuing all the enquiries they could in the parish. But Lucilla had lived so quietly while I was at sea, that few or none of the neighbours knew her ; the late clergyman was dead. At last they found a girl who had

formerly been a servant in the next villa to ours. She remembered my wife's funeral, and said that a gentleman attended it who gave out that he was my child's guardian and her uncle. So he took little Lucy away with him.'

'But what uncle? Do you not know where he lives?'

'He was the same fellow; our only relative; and he left no trace behind him. *The same*, I tell you! He's got her; he carried off my child, and her fortune as well, for I had laid by a tidy nest-egg. God knows where my daughter is, and whether she is now alive or dead!'

'I can tell you, sir. She is alive; or she was so last spring. Lucy—Miss Lucy Jennings, is living in Kent with her uncle, Captain Ratcliffe, as he is called,' cried out a new voice from the background.

The three men at table started, and the

captain turned round like a lion; but he did not disconcert the speaker.

The sailor who had been waiting upon them stood eager-eyed by the door. He was a fine young fellow with yellow hair and a handsome face all aglow from excitement.

‘ You, Dick Saxby! what do you mean by this?’ thundered the captain. ‘ What do you know? Speak, man; quick.’

CHAPTER XIII.

It was the night of the last day of October.

Some fisher-folk were standing in the black shadows cast by two cottages on a shingle beach, and were looking seawards with wrinkled brows, eager eyes, and mutterings of apprehension. They were watching a man-of-war lying near the coast, from which, in spite of the twilight, they had seen a boat put off a quarter-of-an-hour ago, making for the shore. The moon was up, and threw a path of almost electric radiance on the water, upon which now and again the dark outline of the nearing boat was thrown in relief.

‘Time for us to be off,’ the men agreed among themselves, and disappeared promptly in the darkness, scattering in various directions.

Presently the cottage lights were put out, and only women and children would have been found apparently sleeping had His Majesty’s men knocked for admittance.

Now the boat approached the shore, and three or four figures might have been descried therein, besides the crew who were rowing. In the stern, near two ship’s-officers, sat a fair-haired young sailor and a black-bearded, middle-aged one, although both these were merely able-bodied seamen. The elder sailor was acting as pilot, and from time to time he gave instructions as to the best point to land, while the younger explained in a low voice to the officer in command, who was none other than Captain Jennings, the direction of

the nearest high-roads and the general lie of the country.

Presently the boat gravelled, and after a hearty farewell to each of the crew, Dick Saxby and Black Jim, for these were the sailors, jumped ashore. Captain Jennings had already landed, and was making his way over the rough beach towards a lane running inland. There he waited for the others to join him.

‘Now, Jim Lee, if you can’t get the loan of this horse and gig by your own means, I’ll knock in the door in the King’s name.’

(The sailors in the boat were waiting ready for his signal.)

‘If you want to do this job quietly, captain, my way is best,’ said Jim, gravely. ‘I was lieutenant, you see, axing your pardon; and though Captain Rat shipped me to sea, still there are several of them

will be glad enough to have me back ; or so I think.'

Thus saying, he led them up the lane to a farm-house not far distant, where lights could be seen and sounds of voices were audible in the kitchen. Jim stole some yards forward to the door, bent down, and apparently gave some signal heard by those within. Instantly the door was unbolted, opened a few inches, then low outcries of 'Staymaker,' in feminine tones of astonished welcome, heralded the visitor's free admittance.

Ten minutes later Jim re-appeared in the lane leading a horse and gig, with a gleam of satisfaction perceptible upon his countenance that had been sullen for months past with brooding over his late wrongs.

'It's all right,' he whispered. 'They've asked no questions. All they said was

business had gone to the dogs, and the captain has been ill these two months past. Serve him right! Oh, he's at The Laurels safe enough, sir,' this to Captain Jennings, 'we'll all have our revenge.'

Ill since two months! Dick wondered what had happened to his old ally, for whom, in spite of all Rat's treachery, he felt a kind of lurking pity. Thoughts of Lucy and of his mother, however, longing and exultation, swept all lesser considerations out of his mind; and as they drove along the moonlit road, the hedges spinning past on either side, and the coast receding behind, the hearts of all three were too full for speech.

Not a word passed between them till they reached the 'Who'd ha' thought it' inn; then Dick, who had been driving furiously, like Jehu, pulled up short. Again Jim knocked at the door, and was

met by his brother Mike with a friendly growl of surprise.

‘I thought you’d give the service the slip before long. You’ll find things pretty much as you left ’em here. *I ain’t made any profit by your absence,*’ he hastened to explain.

There were brief enquiries; short answers and explanations. Ten minutes later Jim’s own horse, a stout cob that had seen much smuggling service, replaced the borrowed one in the shafts of the gig.

‘Don’t spare him, sir,’ said Jim, handing the reins to Dick. ‘Remember, I’ll come with you now, if you like.’

‘Thanks, Jim, but we can manage without you, and you’ve got your own affairs to see after.’

‘All right, sir. But you’ll see me at Badger’s Hill to-morrow morning. Good luck to you, Mr. Dick, and to you, Captain

Jennings, and may you both find Miss Lucy well.'

Again they were speeding forward along the moonlit road between black, shadowy banks; on and on, Dick's heart swelling bigger within him, till at last village lights gleamed to the right ahead, and towards their left rose the gables of Forge Farm by the road-side, sharply defined against the sky.

'My turn now,' said Dick, with a lump in his throat from excitement.

Flinging the reins to his companion, he pushed open the arched door above the steps, which was not yet locked for the night. A rush; a canine whimper; and next instant he was confronted by a bulldog in the darkness. Two suspicious sniffs, then at a whispered word from Dick the animal fawned upon him with subdued sounds of joy, licking his hand

and impeding his steps with demonstrations of affection.

Dick peeped in at the dais window, catching a glimpse past the curtains of piled logs blazing below in the big parlour fireplace. Bill Butler reposed with outstretched legs in his, Dick's, chair; Anne was ensconced in the further ingle-nook of the hearth; while by the carved table, dating from Jacobean days, sat Catherine Saxby herself, tall and stern, with an open Bible before her.

Captain Jennings, after tying the horse's reins to an iron ring at the gate, now followed his guide, and stood peeping over Dick's shoulder.

'They are at prayers,' murmured Dick, under his breath. 'Look at her. Isn't she a picture?'

He was gazing rapturously on his mother's figure and the dear head he loved

so well, of which the tresses were far, far whiter than six months ago.

‘ You mean the girl by the fireside ? She is, indeed, very handsome. Is she your sister ? ’ asked the captain, whose eyes were fixed admiringly on Anne.

When Catherine had ended reading, she turned round for prayer ; so did the others with her, their backs being to the door. Therefore none of them noticed that it now opened softly a few inches—then wider, while shuffling footsteps might have been heard in the passage.

As Mrs. Saxby’s mournful voice concluded with the accustomed blessing, a strong-voiced, jubilant ‘ Amen ’ echoed from the doorway. All three started and turned round. There knelt Dick upon a deer-skin mat, while behind him was the figure of a stranger rising from the devotions in which he also had been taking part.

Catherine Saxby uttered a great cry. It was such a cry as the widow woman may have given when Elisha brought down her late dead son from the prophet's chamber alive and well. Mother and son rushed together; fell upon each other's necks; Dick hugging her, while Catherine laughed and wept, disbelieving her own exceeding joy.

While they embraced again and again, and held back from each other to study the dear face each gazed at to make sure all was well, Catherine kept repeating with happy sobs and questioning clasps of her hands, as if doubting her senses that her son stood there in flesh and blood verily,

‘You are safe, Dick—you are really alive, my own boy. What happened? How did it all come about?’

‘I am all right, mother; right as a

trivet, you see. And Lucy; how is *she?*'

This question had been trembling on his lips ever since Dick entered the room. With eager ears he drank in his mother's rapid assurances, and smiled ecstatically at her present expressions of distress on recalling the poignant anguish she and Lucy had suffered during the past summer months when thinking him dead.

Bill Butler, who had meanwhile been clapping Dick's shoulder violently whenever he could get the chance, now nodded and winked from behind, intimating that Mrs. Saxby should change the subject. Then, getting hold of Dick's fist, the two friends shook hands, and shook again, with a warmth surpassing that of brother's love. O, it was a good sight to see them.

Anne waited apart, her comely face all lit up with emotion. Then, being a woman,

she could bear her curiosity for no more than a few seconds.

‘Do tell me, sir,’ she entreated, turning to Captain Jennings, ‘how did it all happen? Was Dick a cast-away at sea? You are a King’s officer; perhaps you picked him up when drowning. Pray tell us—pray tell me, I mean—what happened.’

Upon which Jennings, nothing loath to claim the attention of so handsome a girl, especially as the stranger was outside this happy home-circle, and felt a passing envy of the lad who was receiving such a loving welcome—Frank Jennings, who was still a fine-looking man, be it remembered, made the most of his chance. While the others could hardly make sense of Dick’s boyish raptures and outbursts of anger, intermingled with repeated questions concerning those he had left behind, Anne soon gathered an outline of the whole his-

tory. Captain Jennings and she had by mute consent moved aside into the big chimney embrasure; there while the sailor's dark bright eyes were fixed on her face, in a pleasant voice that seemed strangely familiar to his listener, he described Dick's adventures in brief downright words. His own part of the story he withheld—for the present.

Just then Dr. Butler's voice was heard as he entered the porch, for the house-door stood open.

'I have come to fetch Anne home, Mrs. Saxby. You have visitors, I see. There is a gig outside. *Bless my soul!*'—as he caught sight of Dick. Then he fervently added, with a big dry sob, 'Is this a miracle? Thank God, anyway . . . *Nunc dimittis!*'

Perhaps the good pastor was the most deeply moved of all those present when

he heard the tale of their trusted neighbour Ratcliffe's treachery. The women's eyes turned to him much as did those of old to the judges and teachers of Israel. The men too expected a wrathful denunciation, one of those outbursts of which they knew his strong nature capable, and that would have especially warmed the old Adam in their hearts coming from so good and mild a man.

But Dr. Butler only bowed his white head sadly.

'It is terrible; terrible indeed! And the man's mind is decayed too far for repentance.' Thus he broke silence after a painful pause. 'Let us all think of it. Captain Ratcliffe was our friend, yet he has betrayed this widow and her son—others as well. And now he can never turn back on earth and say, "I have sinned a grievous sin; forgive me as you

hope to be forgiven." Truly, "in the hand of the Lord there is a cup and the wine is red; as for the dregs thereof, all the ungodly of the earth shall drink them."

Captain Jennings started forward from the fireplace.

'Sir,' said the seaman, in a slightly trembling voice, 'I came here thinking only of vengeance on the man you speak of, but what you say is very solemn. He has done ill to the chief persons in this room, yet worst of all to me. For Dick Saxby finds his home as he left it, while I, alas——!'

Captain Jennings turned his head away, and, leaning his arm on the mantel-piece, covered his face with his hand for a minute in deep agitation.

He was a fine, up-standing man, as all present thought. But, when Dick sketch-

ed his friend's story in a few passionately nervous words, Anne felt deepest pity of all for the solitary individual whose emotion she guessed at, while they listened to the tale of that ruined home after eight terrible years of imprisonment.

‘ And so Lucy—our dearest Lucy—the prettiest creature in the world, is your daughter?’ uttered Catherine, with all a mother's sympathy.

And Dr. Butler added,

‘ She is indeed a sweet girl; one for any father to be proud of.’

‘ Ah,’ said Captain Jennings, ‘ but I left her a little child; and now all the years between are lost to me’

‘ Cheer up, captain,’ replied Dick, with a young, strong voice that rang joyously round the low-raftered ceiling. ‘ You have still many good years left, and, please God,

you'll see me ride a race to-morrow that may win back Rookhurst estate, as fine a one as any in the country. And, if I do gain it, all I ask is leave to make your daughter its mistress. But that you have already given me.'

'I have, my lad; I have.'

'And how is Bay Ronald? Where is the stable-key? Let us have a lantern and look at him.'

Almost a guilty silence fell upon those around as they eyed each other.

'Oh, Dick—my dear!' murmured Catherine, in apologetic tones, 'he was claimed for heriot. He is in the Rookhurst stables. They say Richie means to ride him to-morrow himself.'

'What! ride my horse!' and Dick's voice, though low and quiet, thrilled them all with a feeling that here was a determined man, no boy, come back among

them. 'Not if I can prevent it. Has he tried to steal Lucy from me too?'

'He has,' said Anne's voice, quietly; 'but it is not yet too late.'

'We must have supper,' interrupted Catherine, hastily. 'Anne, come and help me to forage in the larder. I must rouse up Molly; she will be so glad! Come, my dear, these poor, dear men must be as hungry as hunters.'

While the supper was being brought, David and Jonathan placed themselves side by side on an oaken settle, talking eagerly and fast. Dr. Butler, in the opposite ingle-nook, was meantime speaking gently with Captain Jennings, as a physician of souls long used to probing men's hearts and seeing deeply into human suffering and weakness.

The honest sailor listened attentively, and was soothed by the good rector's words

of ripe experience who, like St. Chrysostom of old, owned 'a golden mouth.' These two seemed to have already struck up quite a friendship for each other.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was not much sleep at Forge Farm that night.

After an anxious council of war between Dick and Bill Butler, they hit off a vague plan towards the small hours of the morning. This was first to see what was going on at the Rookhurst stables; next to steal Bay Ronald somehow, if even by waylaying his rider. Then Dick braced himself with a cold bath, and exchanged his sailor's garb for his old hunting habiliments.

It was yet dark when he and Bill Butler left the farm together, and made their way into Rookhurst demesne by the cart-road. Only that Dick knew every yard of the

grounds as well as he loved them, the friends might have lost the path now and again among the trees, for they had taken the neglected track that old Amos's feet so long made through the copse down to the ox-shed.

Although it was the 1st of November, brown leaves still clung to the boughs in sheltered places. The autumn had been mild, and the beeches still showed red and orange bravery by daylight. Softly the conspirators' feet fell on yellow carpets of fallen horse-chestnut leaves; the ash-trees were bare poles, but the oaks fought bravely to retain their dead-brown foliage. Once in the darkness both men stopped short as a sharp ping sounded overhead. Then Dick gave a smothered laugh; it was only a ripe chestnut hurtling down through the wintry twigs.

Approaching the stables, they waited in

the thicket close by, consulting once again as to the best means of obtaining possession of Bay Ronald.

‘If I show myself and openly demand him, the horse *is* mine,’ Dick urged, feeling too eager for finessing.

‘No use, old chap, without a dozen legal formalities,’ Bill Butler repeated, obstinately. ‘What you want is to ride this race, and win it. What Richie wants is to stop your doing so by fair means or foul. The groom dare not deliver you the horse without leave. If we ring up the Rookhurst establishment, and stand parley-voing with Richie, the brute will only keep on jawing about the law, or declare point-blank he does not believe it is you; and refuse to even see you.’

‘True enough; and if we don’t appear at eight o’clock on Badger’s Hill this morning, I shall have lost Rookhurst twice over.’

‘ Good,’ whispered Bill, ‘ now you talk sense. Stay here, my boy ; you must keep as fresh as you can, and I’ll creep forward and take a survey of what’s going on.’

As Bill cautiously made his way through the trees and into the shrubbery surrounding the stables, a light was visible in one of the boxes. However early, plainly the grooms were about and busy. Creeping quietly near, he listened and heard voices in a particular box at the end of the row of stables. The eavesdropper advanced into the yard, although not relishing the situation, and espied a window that was slightly open for ventilation. It was too high overhead for him to see in, but with the assistance of a stable pail close by he raised his head to a level with the ledge. The first words that struck his ear were spoken in tones which he recognized as those of Richie’s head-man in the stables.

‘It was a lucky job for the squire that young Dick Saxby disappeared when he did. For, although the mare is a’most a certainty, Bay Ronald has always had the best of the pace whenever they two have been tried in a gallop.’

Bill, raising himself on tiptoe, peeped over very cautiously. Now he could just see into the box. There stood Bay Ronald good as gold, his youthful irritability having lately sobered down, but looking round with some surprise at being so early awakened. Grimstone, the head-groom, was putting the finishing touches to the toilet of the stable favourite, and wetting his mane preparatory to plaiting it.

‘There, you’re a beauty, and you look it!’ he exclaimed, patting the bay’s glossy neck. ‘Now, Bob, give me the ribbon.’

Bob, who was his helper, obeyed by going to a small cupboard in the corner of

the box. The watcher overhead saw the boy wrinkling his brow in perplexity while turning out some bandages, combs, a picker, and so forth. No ribbon could he apparently find.

‘I’m hanged if I know where it is, Mr. Grimstone,’ he apologized, ‘I feel sure I put it there when I fetched it from the shop this afternoon.’

‘Confound you, you stupid devil! Don’t stand there scratching your head like a jack-ass, but find out what has become of it. I promised the squire I would plait the mane with blue to surprise Miss Jennings; for he says to me, he says, “It’s her favourite colour and she’ll be pleased to see it, for she’s coming out to see me ride over the course.” To disappoint him will just about put him out.’

In spite of this exordium, and a fresh ransacking of the cupboard, no ribbon was

forthcoming. Grimstone growled, but then thought better of it.

(‘It’s been that pretty little slut of a chamber-maid. Thought to smoke old Grim, did she? I’ll teach Miss Impudence not to poke her nose in my stables when I’m away!’)

‘All right, Bob. You must just run down to the village and knock up Mother Hopkins. Tell her not to mind her nightcap and shift, but to hand you a piece of blue ribbon from the shop, if even she adds two-pence to the price. While you’re away, I’m just going in to have a bit of breakfast, for my missus’ll have it ready by this time. So look sharp here and get finished.’

The watcher overhead, whose eye peered over the ledge, now saw Grimstone ending operations. He placed a clean rubber over Bay Ronald’s saddle, which was already

on, adding a rug on the top and buckling a surcingle loosely above both. The horse was then put on the pillar-reins, and Grimstone and the boy were about to leave the box, when Bill thought it high time to slip down from his post of observation.

Rejoining Dick in the copse with all haste on tiptoe, in another minute he was eagerly whispering all that had passed. Dick, who had meanwhile been waiting on thorns, now felt burning for immediate action. But how best to seize the horse, as soon as the stable-boy had started and old Grimstone gone in to his breakfast? How? That was the question.

Hotly they debated for some seconds, then a brilliant idea shot meteor-like into Dick's brain. Advancing softly, they heard the boy start off whistling up the cart-road to the village. Next Grimstone's footsteps clattered noisily over the brick-paved yard

towards his own home where fire, breakfast, and a bustling wife awaited him. No sooner had the door of this connubial paradise clicked, than Dick and Bill boldly advanced into the yard. Making straight towards the lighted box, in another moment they were patting the coveted prize—Bay Ronald.

‘It is all very fine,’ grumbled Dick, gripping his friend’s arm, ‘of course we can change Bayadère for Bay Ronald, but who’s to know which box she’s in? This lamp is a fixture.’

‘Luck will help us,’ Bill muttered back. ‘We must strike a light. Richie’s sure to have her name painted up.’

True enough! luck did help them, for in Box 10 in the same row they found the bay mare they were searching for. She was Richie’s luckiest purchase; he had bought her from Squire Falconer, she being

half-sister to Bay Ronald. As Grimstone had said, she was very nearly as good as the latter, and a bright bay likewise. It was knowing this fact that had suddenly inspired Dick with the brilliant notion of taking Bay Ronald out of his box and replacing the mare, saddling and bridling her in the horse's stead, and trusting to darkness to favour the trick.

‘Why not bring the horse straight out?’ asked Bill. ‘Ride him to Badger’s Hill, and there you are.’

‘But there Richie won’t be, if he smells a rat,’ was Dick’s ready rejoinder. ‘No; no; let us both appear before the eyes of the hunt. If he stayed away, I should lose all the sweetness of my revenge.’

It was quickly done. Dick put his arms then about his favourite’s neck, and fairly hugged him, the horse whinnying gently in surprised recognition.

‘That’ll do,’ put in Bill, gruffly, ‘they’ll be back in a trice. Plenty of time later on to make a fool of yourself, but not now.’

While talking, the good fellow was saddling and bridling the mare and putting her hood on. Then they promptly led the horses each into the other’s box, fastening the mare to the pillar-reins where Bay Ronald had lately stood. Next Dick turned out the lamp, wetting the wick well with water in order to make as much delay as possible so as to prevent Grimstone’s discovery of the trick; for time was drawing on, and Badger’s Hill where the meet was to be held at eight o’clock was a long way off. The harness-room door was unlocked, so that they hoped to have time not only to finish the mare’s toilet, but also to find a fresh saddle and bridle for Bay Ronald. Unluckily

this last stroke of business was not completed when they heard old Grimstone's cottage-door open. He shouted out sharply for Bob, his lad, but getting no answer came across the yard grumbling. In a trice Dick and Bill disappeared into the darkness of No. 10 box, where they waited with Bay Ronald.

Grimstone stumbled towards No. 8 box, in which he so lately left the horse, and swore terribly at finding it in total darkness. Fumbling about in his pockets for tinder, he struck a light after several attempts that fairly maddened him, for (as he muttered to himself after many self-questionings principally beginning with a D) it was not to be understood why the lamp should first go out of its own accord, and secondly refuse to light.

'Therefore,' he soliloquized, stumping out into the yard, 'there is barely time

enough to walk the horse over to Badger's Hill, let alone plait his mane. I'll warm that boy's skin for him, I will. Drat him! why don't he come from the village? Suppose I'll have to fetch him.'

So saying, Grimstone started off in a shuffling run, for much as the head-groom hated exertion of his own legs he dreaded still more the short swift dismissal with which Richie Saxby punished the least disobedience to his imperious orders.

Not a moment was to be lost. There was no time to saddle Bay Ronald; he must be got away just as he was. So while Dick undid the log at the end of the head-stall reins, Bill Butler slipped out of the stable to see that the coast was clear. Going at his best speed up the farm-road, the faithful scout reconnoitred, then hastened back in high glee.

'It's all right. Old Grimstone is wait-

ing at the village gate, walking up and down like a madman. He'll break that boy's bones to a certainty.'

Dick immediately led out his bonny bay, thankful that owing to the early hour there were no more stable helpers yet about. Turning sharply to the left they entered the wood behind the ox-shed, where Dick once more dived into its recesses with the sure instinct of one who knew the path blindfold. On they hurried; and before old Grimstone had returned in a towering fury with the whimpering boy, who declared that Mother Hopkins only scolded him out of the window and said she had sold him the last piece of blue ribbon in her shop yesterday, they were leaving Rook-hurst park by the workmen's gate, near Amos Bird's cottage.

Another half-mile, and Bay Ronald pricked his ears joyfully, and went fairly

dancing with delight as he was led along the Forge Farm cart-way into his well-beloved, old stable.

Behind them a short colloquy was taking place in the Rookhurst stable-yard.

‘Here, get on the horse, you young varmint; and take him slowly to Badger’s Hill; no tricks,’ scolded Grimstone. ‘There will just be time for me to ride round by Cranbrook myself and buy some ribbon. If we can find a quiet spot, I may be able to fix up the mane yet before the squire raises the devil’s own row.’

CHAPTER XV.

A QUARTER to eight o'clock in the morning ; and the first day of November.

All round Badger's Hill eager knots of work-folk, peasants, and loungers were gathering together to see the morning's sight.

Groups of sportsmen, mostly in scarlet coats, though here and there some displayed green or black, were exchanging the first greetings of the season. Yonder waited the hounds, an eager, moving, white and dappled crowd of beauties. Falconer's big form towered conspicuously above them, as he stayed aloof, sitting his crop-tailed brown horse, Achilles, with a gloomy face,

which even the loving blandishments of old Bellman, his favourite hound, that kept trying to spring up at him, could not divert into his usual hunting morning's jollity. The M.F.H. was alternately consulting an enormous gold watch and his old friend Mr. Hodges, at his side, who was mounted to-day despite his seventy-eight years.

Seeing the depression on the faces of both these gentlemen, a respectful regret characterized the good-mornings of those who capped or touched hats to the judges of the coming event. Almost everyone present remembered well the circumstances which had brought about the Rookhurst Match, as it was called; though none now took the slightest interest in the once much-talked-of race. All the excitement concerning it had long subsided, for everyone supposed it would be a walk-over, believing Dick Saxby, poor fellow! to be

drowned. Not one of those who knew him but felt their old regrets for their dead favourite³ revive on seeing the gathered assemblage.

Yet what a delightful autumn scene! Overhead the sky had the intensity of winter's blue, while a bright sun warmed the morning air, in which just enough frost lingered to brisk up all muscles and send young blood dancing cheerily through every vein. The upward slope of the hill was crowned by a wood, still mottled with russet leafage, while one great beech in front of its brethren showed a glory of dead gold in a suspended Danæ's shower, and its neighbour glowed orange red in grand relief against the more sober background.

‘What it is to be home again!’ uttered a young man, in tones of deep feeling, as he waited higher up on the outskirts of the

said wood behind a hedge. Through an open gateway near he could see the scene below for some distance without being himself observed. 'Steady, Bay Ronald; quietly, old man! Bill, I have not been on a horse since last spring. Think of it. I am not in training, and if I don't last the course, it's all up.'

'You're none the worse. Keep up your heart, Dick,' replied his comrade, who was such a friend as sticketh closer than a brother. The latter continued, eyeing the first speaker anxiously, 'See how quiet Bay Ronald is; he knows your hand well, and looks very fit.'

Hullo! Here comes Richie driving a pair of thoroughbreds in a fine new phaeton along the road skirting the hill base. Beside him sits the slight figure of a lady whose features are as yet hidden by her large bonnet and waving veil.

‘Who is that with him?’ asked Bill, curiously. Then in haste, ‘Never mind, Dick, it means nothing I’ll be sworn, although she seems strangely like——’

‘*It is Lucy!*’ replied Dick, quietly, who with set face had been looking hard at the advancing carriage in the distance. ‘I should know her as far off as my sight will serve me.’

He grew so pale that his fidus Achates hastily pressed a flask of Hollands and water upon him, but the gallant lad refused.

‘No Dutch courage for me. I am riding to-day to win *Rookhurst*. If Lucy mourned for me as deeply as my mother tells me, and your sister Anne too, why, she is not yet married; if even that villain there has persuaded her to accept him. So if I win to-day I will ask her to keep her first promise to me; if I lose—I will not ask

her anything. Only, by heaven! she shall know the truth about that false-hearted scoundrel.'

Meanwhile, among the throng of sportsmen and expectant spectators lower down the hill-side, some incidents were taking place which excited the interest of the populace. Shortly before a buzz of whispered surprise had gone round, followed by an observant hush, as those present noticed a sober gig entering the field from the lane. In this sat Mrs. Saxby of Forge Farm, accompanied by a handsome, evidently sea-faring gentleman, who was driving her. He was apparently unused to handling the reins, for his near wheel grazed the gate-post as he drove in. But the widow never flinched, and sat upright, looking round with a resolute keen glance unlike her late mournful self; while her driver, in a pilot coat and blue naval cap,

scrutinised all the fair occupants of the carriages with such an eager searching gaze, that these smiled, bridled, or tossed their heads under his keen, dark glance.

Now the whispers began afresh. What can bring Mrs. Saxby here ; and to-day of all days ? See, she is not in mourning either ! How strange ! Who can the man be with her ? Look, there are the rector and Miss Anne Butler nodding to them both. And what brings *them* to a hunting-meet ?

Just then Richie turned in at the gate in workmanlike style, for he had always been a fair whip, and drew up his dashing pair of blood-bays close beside the Forge Farm gig, not observing these neighbours, and in full view of the whole field. Instantly general attention was concentrated upon this point, conjectures eagerly whispered under all the bonnets. The latter clustered together like bees as they saw

Lucy Jennings seated beside the owner of Rookhurst in his phaeton.

The womenkind perhaps experienced a sense of relief that Lucy had at last made up her mind; for till now many girls felt really hopeless of captivating the attentions of any neighbouring swain whilst the fair Miss Jennings was still to be had. Among the young men, however, of whom were Lord John and Colonel Folliot, sorrowful disgust, black looks, and muttered words of indignant desperation prevailed.

Lucy herself was very pale, and leaned back, as if either too languid to take much interest in the scene, or wishful to avoid the curious glances levelled in her direction. Richie was annoyed at this impassive demeanour; for, though he looked round with an air of triumph as he pulled up, on turning to the listless figure beside him, he frowned, and muttered, sharply,

‘You’re not in looks this morning, Lucy, just when I wanted you to show at your best as my affianced bride. Pray smile, and seem livelier. Women can always do that much when they please.’

He had sat up late the night before in a carousal with some of his usual companions, and was suffering from headache and ill-temper in consequence.

‘My looks are natural, and not put on or off to order,’ returned Lucy, with some of her old bright spirit. ‘They are good enough still, I believe, for most of these gentlemen, who are nearly all my friends. If you do not admire them, it is not yet too late to say so.’

The colour rose to her face in two round spots. All the way hither, the poor girl had felt heart-sick. As her engagement was not yet made known to any save the rector’s family, Richie’s urgent request

that she should appear with him this morning seemed indecorous, although she had yielded to it. With every mile her dislike to so public an exhibition had deepened, so that at last she felt downrightly inclined to jump out of the phaeton and walk home. Besides, she was goaded to desperation by hearing Richie's triumphant remarks upon his coming 'show-off' across country : how he meant to ride Bay Ronald at such a fence as this one, or that one, with veiled sneering allusions to his vanished rival.

At last she could bear it no longer, and said, bitterly,

'Have you no regard for your cousin's memory? Surely you might think of him a little, and not be quite so cheerful to-day.'

'I do think of him ; more than you guess, perhaps,' returned Richie, just giving her

a lowering glance out of the corner of his eye, while a frown settled on his face.

With a sudden faintness of heart, Lucy recognized that this former playmate, who had used to be so docile until lately to her slightest wishes, now looked sullen, ill-tempered, and—ugly. She had seen much of him all her life, and yet till this morning did not seem ever to have rightly known him.

Meanwhile, with care for his boots, Richie was stepping daintily out of the phaeton. At Lucy's roused manner and hot speech, a cruel smile came on his face.

'I am not going to give you the opportunity of playing the jilt, madam,' he threw back at the girl in a hissing undertone. Then, raising his eyes, he started.

'What! Mrs. Saxby!' Taking off his hat, Richie fairly stammered, 'I . . . we . . . did not expect the pleasure . . .

hum . . . of seeing you out to-day.'

'Most likely not,' came in clear tones from Catherine, as she bent forward, raising her voice so that all near her could hear distinctly. 'I am not the only person whose appearance will surprise you this morning.'

Richie sneered and turned to mount his hunter, that was being coaxed close up by Grimstone with an apprehensive look. He stared and scowled.

'What, Bayadère! What do you mean by bringing out the mare to-day?'

'Please, sir, Bay Ronald has ricked himself. He got cast in his box last night,' faltered the man. 'So, thinks I, it is best to bring out Bayadère instead, as she will carry your honour as well, if not better.'

This was hardly true, for Richie had given orders that no pains should be spared to get Bay Ronald into condition; there-

fore the mare had been neglected. But old Grimstone was hard up for an excuse. His amazement on arriving half-an-hour ago and finding the boy, Bob, on the mare may be more fitly imagined than told, considering the language in which he expressed himself. And Bob, equally taken aback, could only reply,

‘You saw me get up yourself, Mr. Grimstone. Yes. I found pretty quick I was riding the mare, for she threw her head up and hit me on the face before we left the Park gate; besides, I knew her paces. But you had bidden me be sharp and move on, so, thinks I, Mr. Grimstone has changed his mind at his brekfess while I was in the village, and he’s saddled Bayadère hisself, instead of Bay Ronald. In course I supposed *you knew*, so I durstn’t turn back.’

Then Grimstone vainly scratched his head, trying to recollect whether he had

been tipsy overnight; or could some one have played a trick upon him? Some of his master's Lunnon friends who were now mounted on various nags from Rookhurst stables, and mostly looking like monkeys tied on pony-back in a circus. He did not know; so to gain time he lied.

Richie was displeased; still, concluding Grimstone was speaking the truth, and that the matter could not be helped, he mounted the mare, after delicately flicking his boots with a cambric handkerchief.

Old Mr. Hodges and Falconer now moved nearer. The terms of the race having been already decided, namely, to ride catch weights four miles over a hunting country, the course fixed upon by these two old fellows was a stiff one; for, as the Master and the Patriarch of the Hunt both agreed, they would make it worth Richie's trouble coming out that morning, although

he was to have a walk-over. Now Falconer was about to start the solitary rider of the match, when there came a sudden interruption.

Outcries and hurrahs from the loungers and peasants, who were streaming up-hill to get higher ground for seeing the sight, now surprised everyone. All heads turned in that direction.

A young man in a scarlet coat was riding down the hill on a bright bay horse.

There ensued a momentary lull; then a hundred voices sent up such a cheer as made the welkin ring.

'*Dick Saxby!*' yelled the young fellows fit to split their throats. 'By heaven!!! By all that's glorious! 'Tis himself! Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! dear old Dick, he's come back again!'

The women rose in their carriages, waving their handkerchiefs and adding their

trebles to the din. The hounds gave tongue, joining in the general excitement, unrated by the whips, who were huzzahing as madly as the rest. Old Squire Falconer pressed his horse forward with tears running down his broad face, his eyes nearly starting out of their sockets.

Dick rode straight forward to the starting-point, unswerving in spite of the tumult of rapturous greeting on all sides. He looked pale and determined, although his blue eyes were bright, and there was a proud smile on his face.

He raised his cap to the field, saying, 'Good-morning, gentlemen.' Then, addressing Squire Falconer with courteous deference, 'I am quite ready, sir.'

The uproar that followed baffles description. Questions were showered upon Mrs. Saxby; on her unknown companion; upon Dr. Butler and his daughter Anne, who

nodding and laughing out of sheer happiness only confirmed the apparent fact that Dick was there, alive and well, but avoided any clear replies.

Meanwhile, Dick urged Bay Ronald forward, exchanging a running fire of handshakes with all who barred his progress, till he reached the side of Lucy's phaeton.

Lucy was half kneeling on the cushions and bending forward to see the better ; her eyes strained, her small mouth quivering piteously, while her look of rapturous joy, yet appealing wistfulness, betrayed, had any noticed her, how her poor little heart was beating to suffocation. Dick raised his hat, and looked her straight and steadily in the face. She rose to her feet trembling, holding by the carriage, and gazed back at him hardly knowing where she was, her very soul looking out of her velvety black eyes.

‘I am alive, you see, Lucy. Perhaps you can’t wish me luck, but at least will you give me a word of welcome?’

‘Yes,’ she uttered, with bloodless lips. But now her eyes shone like dark suns, and her whisper was thrilling. ‘Whether you win or lose, the happiness of seeing you alive will be enough for your true friends.’

Dick put on his hat again, which he had held upraised, and turned away lighter-hearted. But Lucy’s strength gave way, she sank back among the cushions, and, hiding her face in her muff, sobbed low and bitterly.

As for Richie, meanwhile, his was the only voice mute on seeing Dick ride down the hill. His joints seemed to have turned to water, his mouth opened, but his lips were dry and parched. He looked like Lot’s wife *turning*, as Lady Althea later

remarked. Presently, with a great effort, he pulled himself together forcing a smile. No finger of scorn pointed at him ; his ears, though alert, caught no sound of his own name in the eager reports from lip to lip, that Dick, when near drowned, had the luck to be picked up at sea, was but just landed.

‘ *They don’t know—the fools!* They need never know,’ his lips murmured. ‘ Now to ride for Rookhurst! O, idiot that I have been!’ Next his glance fell on old Grimstone, who still stood holding the mare’s head, and a look of malignant devilishness came over the master’s features. ‘ So this was how Bay Ronald cast himself, was it?’ he hissed, bending lower. ‘ If I don’t pay you out for this trick, may I die.’

The man started back as if shot, and hastily lost himself in the crowd.

His mind now recovering its usual acute-

ness, Richie, after some fruitless efforts, claimed the judges' attention. Dick had just rejoined them at the starting-point.

'Gentlemen,' Richie deprecatingly began with a wave of his hand, 'glad as all present here must be to see Mr. Dick Saxby back, yet, as regards this race, I have an objection to make. The horse he is riding, Bay Ronald, was stolen out of my stables last night, and I am not prepared to ride this mare to-day. Is that fair?'

All looked at Dick, whose answer came sternly.

'You obtained my horse, Richie Saxby, as heriot, under the false impression that I was dead. I have only taken back what is mine by right. As to how and why I was thought drowned, I shall have more to say presently to these gentlemen. Now, as time is almost up, I suppose this wager is the first consideration. What say

you, Mr. Falconer, and you, Mr. Hodges?’

Richie turned white as ashes. ‘The game is up. Dick knows!’ shot through his brain. Then he set his mouth obstinately with a look of his father. Rookhurst was still to be run for, whatever followed.

Richie’s objection was instantly overruled by the judges, as he had partly expected. But Bayadère, thought the unhappy wretch, might still win if he could only ride her.

The mare stood about fifteen hands three and was a wiry, rakish-looking animal, of rather a nervous disposition. Never would she walk when hounds were drawing covert; an animal with which it were better to take one’s own line of country than to wait while the field made a gap, for stand still she would not. On the contrary, she would turn round and give

two or three leaps in the air as if to get rid of some of her extra spirits, and when her turn did come she would go tail first to within a few yards of the fence, and then jump into the middle of the next field and bolt for the following four hundred yards. Richie knew, with inward quaking, that a rider must be very full of go, or very young, thoroughly to appreciate the mount.

Bay Ronald, on the contrary, was a real gentleman and looked it. When he tossed himself into a canter it was with that smartness which, as you pressed him on to the gallop, was only an increase of pace of perfect clock-work regularity. He seemed fairly to grip the earth, and owned that crack of the nostril which always indicates a stayer.

The M.F.H. next gave the necessary directions and pointed out the course.

This was to be round Rookhurst steeple, keeping various landmarks upon the right when starting and on the left in returning, then to finish in the big grass field below where they were all standing.

It was a fair hunting country but with little grass, and not one in which to take liberties with horses; for, although the fences were mostly fair and sound, there was a good deal of ploughed land ahead, and the ridge and furrow after heavy rains was heavy going.

Now Squire Falconer, riding a little away from the waiting pair of sportsmen, held his handkerchief high over his head and gave the word.

‘Are you ready?—*Off!*’

Away they went across the wintry landscape, Richie very quickly going to the front, for the mare was pulling him. It was soon evident to the spectators who

eagerly watched, many of the peasants having climbed into the trees, that Bayadère was making the pace too hot to last. At first she fenced splendidly, however; and as Richie not only felt the courage of desperation, but also a growing consciousness that after all he might yet win, for Dick must be out of training, and also looked beat, his spirits revived. Wild hopes zig-zagged through his brain as they thundered along, of keeping Rookhurst yet, and laughing at them all. Should Dick's story leak out, egad! he would sell the place to the Jews, live in London, and snap his fingers at his cousin in spite of everything.

So Bayadère, racing ahead at her own sweet will, was at her best.

Dick, keeping in the background, was striving his utmost to ride Bay Ronald with coolness and his old judgment, al-

though at times the blood surging to his brain, with the memory of all that depended upon these flying minutes, nearly unnerved him. But it was glorious to feel the good horse under him once more, and Bay Ronald knew his master's voice and hand almost as if they had never parted. As the gallant bay neared his fences, it was not necessary for Dick to 'sit down and ride'; for he could feel by Bay Ronald's increase of pace that his heart was on the other side. No running a baulk ever entered this good hunter's head. He took off in perfect time at each fence and landed well into the next field flat, without pitch or dwell, gaining rather than losing ground every time.

Now Rookhurst steeple rises near above its wintry environing trees. They round it. They are on the homeward track.

And now, now! Dick, who has been holding Bay Ronald back, draws nearer Richie and yet nearer. Still the mare is ahead; still Richie feels her going strong under him, and laughs in his heart.

Then, when about half-a-mile from home, the wretch exchanged this hysterical joy for sudden fear. The mare seemed slackening; surely enough the heavy ground was beginning to tell upon her wind and want of condition. Dick, who was riding only half-a-length behind, now came creeping up inch by inch till he was level with his cousin. A sick terror at the nearness of this deadly foe—as he believed the man must be, who had barely escaped murder at his hands—for the first time seemed to make Richie lose his head.

The now decisive moment was nearing fast; and yonder, heavens! was the last

fence ahead into the big grass field where was the winning-post. This fence was a newly-made stake and bound one, with a nasty ditch on the take-off side. Richie stuck in his spurs, lifted his whip, and with a despairing look on his face thrust the mare at her top speed at the obstacle.

Bay Ronald was slightly ahead, and, Dick steadying his game animal, the latter took off exactly at the right moment and landed well in the next field.

Alas ! not so poor Bayadère.

She made an eager effort, but it was hardly enough, as her rider gave her no assistance. The fence on either side was lined thick with a row of tremendously excited spectators, who had run down thither to watch the end. They saw the mare rise in the air, strike the top rail hard, and fall 'all of a heap,' as Bob later expressed it. Richie was thrown ! But

to the horror of the onlookers, when the mare recovered herself and galloped on, the unfortunate rider's foot was caught in the stirrup.

All above on the hillside saw the mare's empty saddle as she bounded forward for a few strides; saw too a dark object dragging for those sickening seconds on the ground behind her shining hoofs.

'God! he's killed! *She'll dash his brains out!*' was the cry.

Then from either side of the hedge two living waves of humanity, that had surged forward on seeing the accident, now closed in.

Ahead, Dick, unwitting what had occurred, thundered past the winning-point with face aglow, and a wild tumult of rapture and pride in his heart. Behind him was a sadly different spectacle. Several hands were catching at Bayadère's

bridle ; others as hastily unloosed her wretched rider, whose face was battered and disfigured almost beyond recognition.

He was still breathing ; that was all.

CHAPTER XVI.

UPON the excitement of the crowd on Badger's Hill there fell a sudden calm.

Many of those round the winning-post, whose eyes were fixed exultingly on Dick as he galloped in in triumph, were not yet fully aware of the catastrophe to his rival. But even as Dick shot past the post, and pulled up some yards further, an awed horror had already settled blankly on all the faces that met him as he returned.

Bill Butler eagerly hastened to lead in Bay Ronald, and was the first after a breathless 'God bless you, Dickie!' to whisper the news to his excited friend. Instantly Dick rode back down-hill; then

throwing himself off Bay Ronald he was among the foremost of those who helped to carry his cousin's insensible form to a small farm near by. The evergreen Dr. Twigge was as usual present at the opening meet of the season, but from the puckered look of the little man's face after examining Richie Saxby the worst was augured. Unheeding this, Dick was heartiest in urging and suggesting every possible measure that could be taken for the restoration of the insensible sufferer. He was horror-struck at the awful punishment that had fallen upon his namesake and former play-fellow; and his generous nature at once forgot all private wrongs in awe at the presence of death. Even as those around waited and watched, many turning away feeling faint from the spectacle of that disfigured face, life was pronounced extinct by the doctor.

Meanwhile, let us return to Lucy Jennings.

Her emotion and faintness after speaking to Dick were only noticed by her unknown father. All other eyes were too much occupied following the riders who were just then starting down-hill. But Captain Jennings felt verily drawn by his heart-strings towards the weeping girl. The impulsive sailor jumped out of Mrs. Saxby's gig and made a few steps towards the Rookhurst phaeton; then he turned to Anne Butler, whose chaise was close by. Laying his hand on hers, a familiarity that startled this dear prude, but which she was too sensible to resent, seeing that the good fellow was somewhat beside himself, he pointed out to her hurriedly his daughter's painful distress.

Anne promptly hastened to her friend, and seating herself beside the latter

shielded Lucy from observation as far as possible ; for no sooner were the two riders out of sight some fields off than the attention of the spectators naturally turned to Miss Jennings as the chief object of interest. When Richie fell at the last fence, Lucy's eyes were eagerly fastened upon Dick's gallant figure as Bay Ronald carried his beloved master nearer and nearer to victory. But once she became aware that an accident—and that a dreadful one—must have happened to the man to whom she was, after all, recently engaged, she sank back horrified in the carriage.

Dr. Butler, who had hastened to the farm-house to soothe if possible Richie's dying moments, returned when he saw that the unhappy spirit had fled its house of clay. Going with hasty strides to the phaeton, he broke the news to its occupants that all was over.

‘ Take me away, quick ! . . . Oh, Anne ; dear Anne ! take me away in your own chaise,’ besought Lucy, clinging to her friend.

The rector and Anne understood, and promptly acquiesced.

Next instant the poor girl found herself lifted tenderly to the ground, and supported by a stranger whom she had hardly hitherto noticed. This was Captain Jennings, who, whispering a few words of entreaty to Dr. Butler, received a cordial assent, and the two men exchanged places. The rector prepared to escort Mrs. Saxby home, who was indeed much shaken by the morning’s events, and turned thankfully to her old and trusted friend.

Captain Jennings, meanwhile, eagerly took the back seat in the rectory chaise, trying to keep his gaze and unfamiliar presence from troubling the lovely tearful

girl opposite, in whose sweet face he could still trace the baby features of his formerly idolised little one. Poor man! it was hard that this should be their first meeting; when he was forced to keep back the emotions of love and pity filling his heart, while his daughter so long lost to him, and now quite unwitting his near presence, was overwhelmed with the varied shocks she had undergone, and the conflicting emotions battling in her mind.

Yet Lucy vaguely wondered who this sunburnt, dark, and seafaring personage might be, whose manner was so gentle, so full of solicitude. Looks of commiseration and sympathy from the various gentry present followed the country beauty, as the chaise quickly drove out of the field. Lucy's feelings were fairly well guessed at, if not actually known; and it must be owned that many present either whispered

or silently reflected, that after all everything might be for the best so far as Miss Jennings was concerned. Then Mrs. Saxby's gig departed also hurriedly in another direction.

Dick was soon surrounded by his many friends, whose late hurrahs and jubilant feelings had been so suddenly arrested, and who now strove to veil their congratulations under an air of decently humane regret for the late fatal occurrence.

The hounds were now promptly ordered home by Squire Falconer.

Then Dick, with silent but hearty handshakes all round, mounted once more, and made his way to Forge Farm; Falconer, old Mr. Hodges, and the faithful Bill, riding all three along with him. Several young men followed in the background, urged by friendship to form a guard of honour, so to speak, though as yet it

seemed indecorous to betray their secret feelings of rejoicing.

Arrived at Forge Farm, this latter cavalcade quietly departed. However, Mr. Hodges and Squire Falconer were invited to come in and refresh themselves as a matter of course, seeing they were amongst the oldest friends of the Saxby family, and were naturally full of curiosity to learn the details of Dick's strange disappearance. These he had promised to tell them in private.

It is true that Saxby had sworn secrecy to the smuggler gang who captured him. All the same an oath taken under penalty of death is not held binding in honour. Also Dick felt strongly he owed an explanation for his own sake to some few, lest otherwise strange rumours might be circulated as to his disappearance.

Only one name never passed his lips—

that of Ratcliffe. For Lucy's dear peace, he would not breathe upon her uncle's reputation. And the Butlers, who alone knew this part of the matter besides Mrs. Saxby, had promised to keep their counsel. So would Captain Jennings.

If either of his astonished hearers during the tale expressed anger or condemnation, Dick raised his hand in gentle protest.

'I only tell you these facts, gentlemen, because you are my friends as you were those of my father. You have promised me secrecy for the sake of the Saxby family. Remember, Richie was my cousin, and he is dead.'

So thenceforth these two worthy squires kept silence faithfully, and most folk believed that Dick Saxby had been picked up at sea while clinging to an oar.

Only Squire Falconer relieved his mind after the next hunt dinner, when the won-

drous tale was discussed, by this mysterious utterance,

‘ Well ; Richie Saxby has gone the way of all flesh now, so there is no use in judging the poor devil. But if you only knew as much as *some of us do* !—why, your verdict would be, “ Serve him right ! ” Anyway, charge your glasses, gentlemen, to Dick Saxby’s health ; for he is a jolly good fellow.’

To return to the scene of the meet. All the gentry dispersed rapidly from Badger’s Hill, after the departure of the principal personages in the morning’s events. Only a crowd of peasants lingered for some time, taking an inquisitive interest in surveying the scene of Richie’s fall, or hanging about the farm-yard until his body was removed. Presently they all ceased gloating over the details which had broken in almost pleasurably upon the monotony of their

dull lives, and departed about their daily work. By noon Badger's Hill was utterly deserted, save for a fine dog-fox in the covert, who, with all his keenness, could not guess what the unusually noisy meet of his enemies had meant.

Lucy grew calmer after half-an-hour, as the scene of the recent accident was left behind, and they drove through the quiet of the November lanes. Reviving presently, she could not forbear putting a few questions to Anne, as to *where* Dick had been all these months?—*why* he had disappeared? Her friend soothingly gave the vague answers with which all who enquired of the Butlers that morning were obliged to content themselves. Dick was picked up at sea; had ever since remained on board the *Ajax*, one of His Majesty's ships, which was commanded by this kind gentleman opposite, himself one of Dick's best friends.

Lucy held out a small trembling hand at that. Her father took it between his own two strong ones with an inward emotion which he concealed with difficulty.

The simple sailor's feelings were indeed so deeply stirred that, as the carriage turned in at The Laurels, he took a sudden resolution whilst he looked round. Then, helping out his charge, he accompanied her to the door.

'Will you come in, sir, and have a glass of wine?' asked Lucy, hesitatingly, who was a hospitable hostess by that second nature of habit. 'My uncle is too weak to see you, but the lady who acts as my chaperon, Madame Dupré, will thank you heartily for your kindness to me this morning.'

'Dupré, Dupré,' murmured the captain, with a troubled look. Drawing his daughter's hand through his arm, as he promptly

accepted her invitation, they entered the sitting-room in this manner.

Madame Dupré had not seen them arrive, as the morning-room windows looked out at the side of the house; she was also busily occupied at her desk examining the household accounts with true French economy and minuteness of inspection. Now, supposing that Richie had returned, she rose and turned to greet the incomers with a joyous air; but the welcoming words froze on her lips, her outstretched hands fell limply by her side, and her face turned yellow as she looked at Frank Jennings.

‘Who is this gentleman, my dear Lucy?’ she asked, dropping her French accent as much as possible and attempting to appear calm, although every muscle in her plump person quivered.

Jennings stepped forward and looked her sternly in the face.

‘This young lady does not know, as yet, who I am ; *but you do.*’

Madame quailed at this blunt declaration of war ; moving back instinctively she sank quaking into a chair with terror clearly written on her face.

‘What is the matter ? Oh, sir, what does this mean ?’ exclaimed Lucy, looking at them both with fresh alarm.

Anne also attempted to intervene, fearing that Captain Jennings was making too great a call on Lucy’s strength this morning. But women’s looks and whispered remonstrances are useless to stop a man whose mind is made up. Jennings only remembered that his daughter was restored to him ; that he stood in the house of his enemy ; that his leave was short on land ; therefore he would not forego this present advantage. Putting his arm about Lucy’s slender waist, he drew her forward to the mantelpiece.

‘Do not be frightened, dear child, although I am unfortunately a stranger to you since you were only an infant. Look in the glass here at my face—now at your own—and tell me, can you not trace some resemblance there?’

‘You are like a miniature—upstairs—of my dead father,’ faltered Lucy, submitting to the air of authority of this unknown guest; whilst strange feelings as of recognition of his voice and presence, a dull upstirring of memories, long overlaid by the crowded experiences of later years, came surging on her tired brain.

‘Not dead, my dearest daughter, my own lost pet. Not dead! though I was supposed so these many years. I am your father—and alive!’

So saying, Captain Jennings folded the astonished girl in his arms, imprinting a grave kiss on her forehead, while the tears that rose to his eyes left no doubt

that he was deeply agitated by the mingled regrets and happiness of a long bereaved parent.

‘Is it possible? You are really alive? Madame, you knew my father—are you not glad? Why are you so silent? Come, say you are rejoiced to see him again! you know you have always praised him to me,’ gasped Lucy, faint and bewildered, turning to her duenna.

‘Did she, though?’ broke in the captain. ‘Well, madam, I shall not forget it to you. That is one good turn at least you have done me, besides nursing me back to life that time in Paris.’

‘Dear Anne, is it not astonishing?’ faltered Lucy, brokenly. ‘Not alone Dick Saxby, but my own father come back as from the grave. What! you knew this, too? Ah, if only poor Uncle Pierce could understand it! How very, very happy it would have made him a few months ago.

Still, sir, he may recognise you—it will give him pleasure.’

‘Not on any account. It will kill him,’ interrupted madame, hoarsely.

‘Believe us, dear sir, it may be better to wait a little while,’ Anne at last found an opportunity of urging. ‘Remember, Madame Dupré does not even yet know the painful events of this very morning. Indeed it all seems—too much!’

‘I have waited, Miss Butler, for eight years in prison. I have waited thirteen more years since, and life is brief at best. Look’ye, Madame Dupré; I have come to this house where my brother-in-law has been playing the master, and which I consider my lawful property and home. My daughter is here, as his ward—right enough! but, ye see, I’m alive. So I take charge of her and command of the ship, unless Lucy wishes to turn out her own daddy.’

‘O, no, no, father! don’t think of such a thing. But pray understand that poor dear Uncle Pierce is very feeble and easily excited. Naturally, we must consider him too; you don’t know how good he has always been to me.’

‘Ha! Has he, though? Well, that all goes to his reckoning on the right side. Yes, child, I promise you I will remember.’

So saying, Jennings held fondly in their place the two hands which Lucy had clasped about his neck in pleading.

The dear girl went on, with a smile faintly quivering on her white face,

‘Then remember too, father, how good he was to you. Did he not go to Paris to find you when you were there and in danger, on private business of your own.’

‘Lord! What lies you must have heard, my girl,’ groaned Jennings. ‘I there on that kind of business? Never! . . . But your uncle was, and I tried to pull him out

of danger, like the fool that I was, for which I got caught and clapped in French irons in his stead. Yes ; possibly enough Pierce thought me dead. Heaven knows, it might have been a happier fate, than to lose my dear wife of grief and to find myself now lonely and middle-aged, and a stranger even to my only child !

At that moment the door slowly opened, and a very wreck of humanity appeared on the threshold—the spectacle of a tottering, decrepit old man in a wheel-chair which he was urging forward. There was a look of childish cunning on his face, from which the light of full intelligence had fled ; but as he saw those inside the room he half drew back with a whimper, as if aware he had done wrong.

The fact was that, finding himself unaccountably neglected by both Madame and Lucy for the last half-hour, yet pleased to escape from their continual

supervision, Pierce Ratcliffe had started from the next room on a voyage of private discovery, though what he wished to find goodness alone knows. Now he waited, looking at Captain Jennings with bleared eyes, in which some of his former keenness seemed momentarily revived.

‘*Dear old Frank,*’ he mumbled, with a gleam of pleasure.

All present waited, holding their breath, to hear what would follow.

‘I thought I heard his voice when the door opened. Who is this, eh?’ (He wheeled his chair forward, and peered curiously at the strong man who stood like a rock.) ‘Why, why, you are . . . Frank’s father . . . I remember . . . saw you at Lucilla’s wedding last year.’ Then the gleam of momentary intellect died on Ratcliffe’s face, and, in a piping voice, he reiterated feebly, ‘I want my bread and milk. Where is my bread and

milk? Where is Lucy? I used to call her Lucilla. Go away; you sha'n't feed me,' as madame anxiously approached his chair. 'Go away, woman! I want Lucy; Lucilla, I mean. Give me my bread and milk and sugar; plenty of sugar.'

Jennings drew a great breath, which all present heard, as Ratcliffe's quavering voice ceased.

'Now may the Lord have mercy upon us all! To think that I, when in prison, believed I was suffering death in life; that I rebelled, even though my strength and senses were left, yes, and even later when I got my liberty at last and my promotion. I was wrong; very wrong! . . . Hark ye, Madame Dupré, you need have no fears of me. Lucy, my child, you see that my presence here does not hurt this unhappy man. Cruelly as he has injured me I forgive him, as may God forgive me. I would not harm a hair of his head.'

As this eventful day ended, perhaps the only one of those most concerned therein who was perfectly at ease in his mind was Bay Ronald. A victor he had proudly stepped back home to Forge Farm; there when Giles rubbed him down and brought an extra feed of oats, with lavish praise and admiration, he was satisfied. And when late that night Dick and his mother came, as of old, into the loose-box, he whinnied in expectation of carrots or sugar. He got these and more; for Catherine Saxby kissed him, and Dick fairly hugged the good horse putting both arms round his neck.

‘You have won us Rookhurst; you have won us back our old home. Please goodness! you and I will never part, Bay Ronald,’ repeated Dick, somewhat incoherently. ‘When you get too old to carry me, my boy, you shall take your ease like a gentleman: that I promise you.’

CHAPTER XVII.

Now the inquest upon Richie's death was ended; the funeral properly carried out. And wild rumours that had been floated as to who his personal heir might be—for some of his disreputable friends, and even Fitch, his valet, had boasted promises in this respect—were laid at rest. Dick Saxby was the dead man's nearest of kin, and besides having gained Rookhurst by his wager he inherited all over and above the estate.

Nevertheless, although Dick rode over to Rookhurst the day after the funeral, feeling that he had regained possession of his own property by the events of the race,

he made no sign of installing himself as master there for some weeks. Both mother and son only walked quietly through the woods, or hand in hand entered the rooms which each remembered from childhood, and that were associated with some of Catherine Saxby's happiest, as well as her most troubled days. And Captain Jennings also visited Rookhurst once before leaving to rejoin his ship, and wrung Dick's hand heartily wishing his hoped-for son-in-law, God-speed.

But as yet Dick had never seen his dear love since the day of the Badger's Hill meet. The events of that morning were all too much for her strength, which had scarcely recovered from her severe illness after Dick's supposed death. Lucy kept her room for some time, prostrated by an attack on the nerves, and, when she was able to come downstairs, begged earnestly that Anne Butler alone should be admitted

to see her. Mrs. Saxby overcame this whim once, but could only report to her son that Lucy seemed either too weak for conversation, or too reserved.

‘She is a dear girl, but I am too old for her to open her heart to me,’ confessed the widow. ‘Young people get on best together, so it is only natural that she should turn more to Anne.’

Captain Jennings had short time to stay at The Laurels, which he regretted the less that Madame Dupré was the only companion left him during Lucy’s sick-room seclusion. So he took a fond leave of his daughter, promising that as soon as his ship was paid off, which would take place in a few weeks, he would return and spend some months with her before accepting another command which he had been promised.

‘Get well, my pet, to please your old father,’ said the handsome sailor (who

looked indeed far from old in Anne's private opinion, who overheard this parting). 'You will please some one else, too. Young Dick Saxby is a fine fellow, Lucy. I grew to respect and like him with all my heart on board the *Ajax*.'

But Lucy, while she embraced her father tenderly, turned away her face at the mention of Dick's name, while an evident tremor ran through her slight frame.

Now Anne had taken it on her own shoulders that Dick and Lucy should meet, and that fairly soon. Having once unselfishly put aside her own feelings of affection, the good girl found it a great relief to urge matters forward speedily, leaving herself no time for useless regrets. Some may doubt whether her attachment to Dick ever signified more than the highest degree of friendship; but to her mind it was real love which reason had helped

her to subdue in a way that more passionate natures would have declared impossible. So now, seeing that Dick went about with a sorrowful mien and sad heart in spite of his bettered fortunes, she expostulated with Lucy in the latter's darkened room upstairs.

‘It is not fair to him. Send him some message at least. My dear, if you grieved so greatly when you supposed him dead, why can you not rejoice a little now that he is alive?’

‘Dear Anne, it is all so different.’

‘Your engagement to Richie Saxby need not trouble you so much,’ went on Lucy’s mentor, with a matter-of-fact air. ‘Remember, you accepted him because of your uncle’s wish, and also believing yourself freed from a former promise. If that is what burdens your mind, rest assured that no one will blame you for your loyalty to Dick.’

‘It is not that; although that grieves me too.’

‘Not that! My dear Lucy, I guessed as much. Come, some one has tried to poison your mind against Dick; of that I feel sure. Your whole manner has betrayed it to me since last summer. Can you not confide in me? Surely we are true friends.’

For some time Anne urged in vain, until at last her sympathy and tenderness prevailed. In a broken voice Lucy confessed what had embittered her gentle heart, whispering the tale with injunctions of most solemn secrecy. Anne started back, giving a cry of indignant refutation.

‘No, he never meant to bring about Patty Bird’s death, I know,’ murmured Lucy, shading her eyes. ‘But when I remember that poor girl’s anguish of mind and dying tortures it wrings my heart.’

Anne, Anne! it was a terrible sight to see her when we two were alone in the churchyard.'

Up rose Anne, and spoke then in a thrilling voice, feeling the weight of her words.

'I tell you this, Lucy, that Dick Saxby was innocent in this matter; that a very different person was to blame. It was Richie Saxby; and only that he is dead I should say so even more bitterly. When Patty was carried dead to the rectory, a letter fell from the bosom of her dress. I myself picked it up, and supposing it contained some explanation of why the unhappy girl was driven to take poison, I read it; then I thought it my duty to show it to my father. He taxed Richie very severely with his cruel conduct; they were never good friends afterwards. Oh, my dear, I ought not to repeat the contents—but—he promised marriage to Patty. He must

have misled that poor girl by the most flattering promises ; then he deserted her.'

Lucy started upright on her couch and stared at Anne with wide, black eyes and pallid lips.

'What! and I never guessed it? All the time I was thinking hard things of Dick—my dear, dear Dick.'

'I am afraid, dear, that Richie had more sins than this on his soul,' went on Anne, screwing her courage to the sticking-point. For until now no one had ventured to tell the gentle sufferer the true story of Dick's disappearance.

They all feared, as did also Dick himself and his mother, that such a shock to Lucy's tender and affectionate nature would most likely upset her nerves and depress her spirits seriously. At all times it pained Lucy to think ill of anyone, but especially to have her good opinion of

friends lowered was an actual grief. Her health, too, was shaken by the various trials and surprises she had undergone. A longer concealment was, however, no longer kind or advisable, therefore Anne asked,

‘ Can you bear, now, to hear how it really came about that Dick was away at sea all last summer? You don’t know the whole truth?’

Could she? O, yes; yes! She was not so weak as Anne supposed, cried Lucy, whose curiosity was raised to fever pitch at once.

What woman but can bear to hear all that concerns the man she loves? Delay, Lucy declared, was just what she could not endure.

Thereupon, with revived excitement, Anne told the story.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was two days before Christmas, in this memorable year of 1815, when Captain Frank Jennings entered the drawing-room at Rookhurst Rectory.

Anne evidently expected him, for the fire was piled high ; and there was a blue ribbon in her hair and another round her neck, which made the grey gown of this comely rectory maiden less severely simple in adornment than usual. Indeed, she met the visitor's hearty hand-shake with secret pleasure, that brought a slight blush of consciousness to her cheek.

' It is cheering, indeed, to see you again,

Miss Butler,' said the sailor, in his mellow voice.

Good Anne, who had risen from an afternoon's occupation of overlooking parish lists concerning Christmas coals and blankets, which was uninteresting, even wearying, felt a glad thrill, to which emotion she had long been a stranger, at her guest's warm sympathy.

With a conscious, deprecating smile, she replied,

'I am almost ashamed, nevertheless, to meet you, Captain Jennings; for my task has been ill-performed. When you went away in November, you asked me to see after Lucy to the best of my ability.'

'And who else has done so much? Why, my daughter tells me you have been to her like a sister.'

'But still she has been very low-spirited. Indeed, she seemed so likely to have a

relapse of nervousness after hearing the story of Richie's treachery that my father and I were slightly uneasy. Had it lasted longer, we should have written to you.'

'She has a tender heart, my little girl; she takes after her mother.'

'Yes? It was an even more terrible shock, a crushing blow, to her when she learned her uncle's lifelong deception and desertion of you. She believed in him so implicitly, you see; her faith in human nature seemed tottering. Captain Rat, as we called him, was valued by us all as a true friend and old neighbour. But will you not warm yourself, sir?'

A noble fire was burning in the well-polished, large brass grate. Anne's face was pleasant-looking and rosy as she faced the guest; and his eyes dwelt on her with frank admiration, while both seated themselves on either side of the hospitable fireplace.

If Anne was aware of his gaze, she did not betray herself. She kept staring at the fireglow, while her expression became regretful as she told of her friend Lucy's continued melancholy.

'I hoped that the sight of Dick Saxby would have set her right again,' ruefully remarked the sailor, whose own mind was secretly bent on Christmas jollity, if others could but attune themselves to the like pitch. 'How have matters gone in that quarter? I would not ask Madame Dupré; and Lucy shrank so evidently from the topic just now, dear child, that I could not find it in my heart to torment her.'

'She has not yet seen Dick. It seemed too early after Richie's death, she thought; and we agreed she was right.'

'Life is short,' briefly remarked the captain, disappointed. 'Then I must be going to sea in spring.'

‘So soon?’ And Anne, to her own surprise, felt distinctly disappointed in turn.

Captain Jennings hemmed, after which both stared quite energetically into the fire.

Truly enough, still Lucy shrank whenever her best friend, Anne, suggested that a meeting with Dick must take place some day.

‘How can I face him after having been disloyal to his memory?’ asked Dick’s sweetheart, mournfully. ‘He will never forget now, that after all I was engaged to Richie; never! If even he forgives me, he can never feel quite the same.’

In vain Anne pictured Dick’s steadfast devotion; his perfect understanding of the motives that had swayed his sorrowing little love. Lucy either could not, or would not, be roused from her distressful apathy. Her mind had lost for the time being both its former buoyancy and excellent common-sense.

For three weeks the suffering girl remained ill in her room upstairs, after the meet at Badger's Hill. It was only towards December that she began to get out of doors again, and that a faint colour came back to her cheeks. Just then, however, Dick's new affairs called him to London for some time, which further prevented these lovers seeing each other. Although Dick took Lucy's depression to heart, he told himself, reasonably, that, as they two could not possibly meet as mere friends with pretended indifference, it would be wiser and better to delay the moment of doing so until Lucy's nervousness had somewhat abated.

She, poor child, was haunted by the dread that she must have fallen in her true love's opinion. Ah! she would know it, although no one else might be the wiser. Dick in his goodness pitied her; cared for

her still ; but it could not be quite in the same degree as of old. No ! and the assurance of this loss of his esteem would be a daily, hourly torture Lucy shrank from inflicting upon herself.

Now Captain Jennings cleared his throat and spoke out.

‘ I’ll tell you what it is, Miss Butler. I would gladly see my daughter happily married, for then I should feel she was safe, before I go out alone myself into the world once more.’

‘ It will be more lonely for you than for her,’ murmured Anne ; some feeling within her rising up and taking his part—this man who had suffered such ill-usage, betrayal ; who now seemed to have so little selfish thought for his own remaining future. ‘ Lucy has so many to love her ; it has been so all her life. She is one of those fortunate beings who attract devotion and

admiration from all men—yes, and women too.’

The captain looked up eagerly at Anne as if some declaration was on his lips; then checked himself.

‘Who d’ye think came down on the coach with me yesterday? Young Saxby, no less. He tells me that he and his mother are moving into Rookhurst to-morrow, Christmas Eve, and he has set his heart on it that we all shall dine with him on Christmas Day. I mean all your family as well—down to the small fry.’

Anne brisked up.

‘Does he, indeed? Dear Dick. It will be a pleasure to see him and Mrs. Saxby in their old home again. Why, if Dick wants it, we must try to arrange matters, sir, you and I.’

The captain, by way of preliminary, hitched his heavy chair closer to that of

Mistress Anne. She bent her fair head a little nearer his. So these two conspirators grew even more confidential, as with sentiment stealing into their tones they discussed the future happiness of those other two for whom they were plotting. While the captain pictured the married bliss of this young couple he unconsciously sighed, and Anne felt deep pity for him.

But, so far as Dick was concerned, these two friendly mediators at the rectory might have spared their trouble.

This young man, as we know, owned a slightly masterful turn of mind, and always liked doing his courting for himself. If he had hitherto quietly acquiesced in being shut out from the sight of the girl he loved so fondly, it was only because he would not for worlds hurt her feelings by

invading the privacy she sought to keep. He understood Lucy better than did anyone else, so he told himself with a sagacious nod of the head. For a while it was best to let his poor pet have her own way to recover her mental balance in quiet; but as soon as this seclusion threatened to last too long Dick judged himself more capable than anyone to urge Lucy to renewed cheerfulness.

Meanwhile, he busied himself with hourly growing satisfaction supervising the park, farm, gardens, stables, and game preserves at Rookhurst, while his mother daily employed all the energy and habits of management which she had acquired at Forge Farm in restoring the moated house to as nearly as possible its former handsome arrangements.

Catherine was so joyfully busy in this occupation that she had scarcely time left

to feel concerned at Lucy's temporary retirement from the neighbours' society.

So now Dick had returned from London, after winding up fairly well his late cousin's affairs; and to-morrow, please God, he and his mother would move into Rookhurst once more! The team of black oxen was already ordered to come over to Forge Farm to remove the heaviest of their household stuff. All was ready.

Just at the time therefore when Captain Frank Jennings and Miss Anne Butler sat hobnobbing, like old cronies, in the rectory drawing-room, Bay Ronald's hoofs were crunching the gravel outside The Laurels' door. The hounds had met that day, and Dick's boots and breeches showed splashes of mud; but his face was beaming after a good day's sport, which now cheered him with confidence in his own coming luck.

Lucy did not hear his ring. She was standing alone in the drawing-room where the curtains were drawn and a large fire glowed redly. The servant had offered to bring the lamps, but this the young mistress refused, saying she preferred to stay yet awhile without more light. The semi-darkness indeed suited better her twilight frame of mind. To please her father's eye she had dressed herself with even more than her usual neatness this evening, having put on her prettiest sprigged muslin gown, and drawn her hair high in a becoming mass of curls, instead of the loose knot she had worn of late.

Hearing a man's step across the black and white stone flooring of the vestibule, Lucy languidly raised her head as the door opened.

'Is that you, father?' But she did not turn as yet, being too apathetic.

The door closed; steps came nearer; and still the incomer did not speak.

Dick's heart was thumping loudly as he saw the white, sylph-like figure outlined against the glowing bank of coals; saw, too, the bowed dark head he loved so dearly, with its cluster of curls. He came close behind her.

‘Why, father——’

Lucy half-turned as two arms encircled her waist. Then she gave a tremulous cry, and found herself gathered to Dick's breast.

‘Why, what is this I hear?’ he murmured in her shell-like ear, soothing her fears with caresses. ‘Surely you cannot have turned unkind to me, my pet. Anne tells me that you have been doubting somewhat my long love for you. Don't, Lucy. My love is myself; the whole of me. Have I ever changed towards you

since we were little children? Speak, darling. It will be the first time you or I have ever had a harsh thought of each other.'

'I was wrong, Dick;—dear, dear Dick; I was very wrong,' answered Lucy, half-distracted between tears over what now seemed her wicked doubts of Dick's devotion and smiles of joy as all troubles vanished from her mind like shadows that flee away at sunrise. 'Forgive me, my dear love, pray forgive me.'

And Dick did.

So next night there took place such a gathering of good-fellowship, such a merry Christmas dinner, as Rookhurst had not seen for many years.

Dick's heart swelled with exceeding thankfulness as he sat in the old dining-room with his ancestors' pictures lining

the walls and the faces of those he best loved assembled around the noble big table, which he remembered from his earliest years. Tears of happiness rose to Catherine Saxby's eyes as she fondly looked at her handsome son. She had asked to sit on one side of him this night; Lucy was on the other, her charming face like an April day on which sunlight plays hide-and-seek with passing spring clouds.

They all drank each other's healths: Dick's first when the cloth was removed; why, and then Bay Ronald's, of course, the pride of his master's heart. Last came a hearty toast to the new owner of Forge Farm, Bill Butler, no less; for Dick had given his staunch ally a Christmas gift that morning of its tenancy, adding with a merry laugh as he slapped him on the shoulder,

'And we'll compound for heriot, old

chap. I have had enough of it; and so have you, eh?’

What remains to be told?

Though Madame Dupré was not of the guests at Rookhurst that night, she was treated with consideration and even kindness by them all; her sins, whatever they were, being overlooked for sake of her late good-nature to Lucy, and present extraordinary devotion to the pitiful human wreck that bore the name of Pierce Ratcliffe.

For some years following he still lingered on in existence at The Laurels, his intelligence decaying more and more, though the toughness of his constitution kept him alive. Madame, who, in truth, owned a comfortable income of her own in France, put aside the temptation of her own freedom, and refused to leave him.

At times he took a dislike to the poor woman, and often vexed her. Even Lucy he often failed to recognise; but oddly enough he grew to like Anne's visits, seeming to think she was Catherine Saxby of former days, and murmuring to himself,

‘Monstrous fine woman!’

Then madame would say, with jealousy gnawing like a worm,

‘Ah! she is young; I say she is young,’
(shouting in his ear).

Although he was deaf, the unusual noise invariably vexed the old invalid into turning peevish and trying feebly to push her away. At that tears of rage would start into madame's once vivacious black eyes, and, while restraining any retaliation, she murmured to herself,

‘*La vie; la vie! What injustice!*’

Yet she preferred having Captain Rat-

cliffe thus in her own keeping, than not to be near him at all. And if down in the village Miss Murdoch gibed, as she sometimes did, on meeting madame, hey presto! the latter tossed her handsome white head, and with a biting answer would worst her continual enemy.

Dick and Lucy were married quite privately early in January. So quiet was the event kept that few or none of the neighbours were supposed to know of the ceremony which was taking place in Rookhurst church. Yet when Dick Saxby, with Lucy leaning on his arm, appeared in the church porch, bridegroom and bride—lo and behold! Squire Falconer's hounds, and nearly all the gentry and farmers who hunted far or near, were assembled in the road outside.

"Twas as gallant a meeting as ever was

seen of scarlet coats, black and green, with the hounds in the centre, Falconer's jolly face beaming with satisfaction as he raised his hat. At the signal such cheers burst forth as would have greeted Dick at the Badger's Hill winning-post had decorum permitted. They rang up round the church-steeple where the jackdaws screamed and fluttered, and were heard over brown fields far away.

This explained why Squire Falconer had, to Dick's surprise, excused himself from attending the wedding ceremony, protesting that he had rheumatism, and could not kneel with comfort. He had arranged a bye-day for the hunt for this purpose, who all kept the secret faithfully in high glee.

'If I'd known,' uttered Dick, 'I'd have been married in my pink coat.'

Mr. and Mrs. Saxby only remained a

brief fortnight on their honeymoon, for another wedding claimed their presence. This was equally quiet, and, though not attended by the hunt, met with universal good wishes; for Captain Jennings stood before the altar side by side with Anne Butler. The match was suddenly made, and quickly brought to a happy conclusion by the bluff sailor. He acted on his favourite adage, 'Life is short;' so, considering that he must go to sea again in May, wished to have a taste of happiness, he declared, in the time intervening.

With characteristic candour, the captain sought Lucy's sympathy on his behalf, who, surprised and delighted, urged her friend with every possible argument and caress to consent. The rector, though regretful, was well-pleased; but Anne demurely held out.

'How can I leave the young ones at

home? Who will look after the boys' Latin exercises?' said this careful elder sister.

'Why, that will just do,' returned the sailor, when Frank Jennings heard her answer, 'for I am bound to go to sea again, and I'd like to know my wife was well occupied in my absence. It would be lonely for her not to have good company.'

Then Dr. Butler's heart rejoiced that Anne, his right hand and long companion, would still sit, for some years at least, at the foot of his table, and Anne gave way with reluctant gladness. So she and the captain were also married.

As to Catherine Saxby, she remained installed at Rookhurst, by Lucy's special desire, as its queen dowager, so to speak. No one listened for a moment to her faint suggestion of leaving the young people to themselves.

What ! cried Dick and his bride ; She who had been born heiress and mistress of Rookhurst, to give it up in her old age ? The idea was monstrous !

So Catherine Saxby kept the housekeeping keys, and looked after the dairy with all her acquired experience ; and Lucy's nature was so gay and sweet that when sometimes another young wife might have been ruffled by a mother-in-law's interference, her happy disposition felt no displeasure.

With such a wife it may be safely said that if Dick Saxby did not live happy ever after, he came as near doing so as any human being can, likewise equalling those of whom it is said, that they survived to a green old age, and left an honoured memory to their children's children.

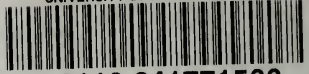
And to this day there stands a polished granite pillar in the park at Rookhurst.

It is in the pleasantest glade to be found there, where the grass is short and sweet, and a clear stream flows through the meadow, while giant fir-trees under the hill-slope give a grateful shade in summer-time.

The name 'Bay Ronald' is deeply cut in the polished stone, for this is the spot where, after a long and happy life, that good horse ended his days.

THE END.

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